

Spiritual Essay

CHURCH AND THE SEA OF LIFE Ship or Lifeboat?

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It is the summer of 1978. One Saturday evening, in the Canadian cottage country of Northern Ontario, three Catholic sisters are holidaying. Susan remarks to her two companions, 'Tomorrow is Sunday and the nearest Mass is 70 miles from here. I don't know about you, but I am not going to drive that distance to be present with a parish I don't know, with a priest who talks endlessly from the top of his head!' After a few initial rash remarks, the three women discuss this comment. Unsure of themselves, they reluctantly agree to have their own prayer and communal faith-sharing instead of going to church. The next morning they gather for prayer and faith-sharing on the Sunday readings. Two hours later, as the communal prayer and sharing close, Jenny observes, 'You know what? We just took two hours and it was more powerful than most of the Sunday liturgies I've attended in a long time.' Cherylee answers, 'I think I could say that too!' And then, with hesitancy, she adds, 'Why can't we break bread here?' And so, that Sunday morning they break bread together.

It is 1990. In a small northern community, a woman is hired as a campus minister on the local college campus. She is excited about the position and is working for the Church after long years of training. However, she soon discovers that eucharistic liturgies are not possible owing to the shortage of priests. To prevent a needed ministry from disappearing from campus, the minister calls together people from various ranks in the academic community interested in forming a liturgy committee. The group begins to meet. They pray together, educate themselves, and seriously consider options to meet their needs as a believing, priestless community on a secular campus. In the meantime, they often eat together and socialize on a regular basis. A sense of closeness and mission set in. Soon, they take courage and decide to construct liturgies that would be meaningful to students. They accept responsibility for celebrating Jesus in their midst.

TODAY, MANY CATHOLICS FROM A DIVERSITY of backgrounds and needs come together as the three women and college students did but with much less hesitancy. In a variety of settings, they gather in numerous small groups to celebrate the presence of Christ with remarkably different images of church. They have been doing this without any revolutionary intentions other than their desire to be faithful to their struggle with the gospel.

Images and metaphors may not be accurate in a scientific and mathematical sense. They do help us, however, to reflect upon human situations that cannot be grasped easily. In order to understand certain transitions going on in the Roman Catholic Church in Canada and in the United States, we offer two images. The image with which you sympathize will depend on where you think you stand, or more importantly, where you choose to stand with regard to the Roman Catholic Church.

First, for some believers, the Church is imaged as a large, sturdy, but ponderous ship. It slowly but reliably moves through the waters of change and time. It gives the impression of knowing its destination. It is basically certain of its destination and hence definite about its navigational strategies. On the bridge there is a recognized authority, with able navigators who have pored over the ancient maps of the heart. They know something of the horizon and its promised land. There is an order which the whole crew follows. In times of troubled waters, the captain, navigators and crew operate in harmony. The ship manifests a type of indifference to the elements, an impression of impregnability that comes from having weathered far worse storms in previous times.

The captain and navigators recognize that their ship has remained afloat for a very long time and has managed to retain its elegance. The crew, along with a large number of passengers, agree that the ship is a sacred vessel and, therefore, neither should its internal structures be tampered with nor should its theological charts be revised.

The instructions to the passengers are clear. Each one is issued a life-jacket. A crew member is present to give instructions on how to wear it. He spells out in detail rules for keeping it spotless, safe at all times and regularly inspected. Do this, the passengers are told, and all will be well.

There is another image. For other believers, the ship is not as sturdy or reliable as it seems. The captain and crew are perceived as having become overbearing in their command. These believers have come to judge that the captain and navigators read the ancient maps idiosyncratically. They experience that the ship is governed with only particular groups of passengers in mind. Consequently, many of these believers have been taking to the lifeboats. Equipped with the Gospels, some training in reading the ancient charts, and as much faith as they can muster, they are setting out into the tumultuous sea of postmodern society.

As the multifaced monsters from the deep arise, the 'lifeboaters' soon find that the dark night of doubt is everywhere. It often becomes hard to discern whether or not they are in collusion with the monsters that surround them. Persons in the boats, surrounded by the perils of life, ask many questions. They wonder if the small lamps, lit in resistance, illumine the correct course. As they reassure one another, they call out to God in recognition of their common fears; and they praise God in celebration of their common hope.

While the mother ship is never too far off and the possibility of returning to it remains, the 'lifeboaters' have learned there is something vitalizing in their

plight. In working with one another in desperate times, they find something that sustains their human yearnings. As a result, they discover quite often that they are neither rudderless nor weak. God has not abandoned them for their seemingly mutinous behaviour.

Twenty-five years ago, the first image of the Church was held by most believers. Today many believers understand the Church with the second image. This is becoming a common phenomenon in both Canada and the United States. It is not uncommon to find Catholics of various backgrounds who have come together, outside a parish structure, to participate in some form of recognizable celebrations. Also, there are informed discussions and education on how to respond in a Christian manner to the society in which they live. All of this, as the lifeboat image indicates, goes on outside the direct blessing of the institutional Church.

In what follows, we explore briefly two significant dynamics that supply the energy for these new communities. We do it not to disparage one image over the other, since we believe both images are necessary for an appreciation of the Church at the end of this millennium. The 'lifeboaters' have been a recurring phenomenon in the history of the Church. Their boats are neither sinking nor disappearing. Is there something prophetic in what the 'lifeboaters' are doing? If there is, what is worth learning from their adventure?

When we use the lifeboat image, we are not referring to self-help groups or groups who gather for weekly faith-sharing within a traditional parish structure. Rather, we are reflecting upon those groups who understand themselves operating independently, both pastorally and sacramentally. It is hard to comment objectively on this aspect of our present Roman Catholic culture because it is neither an organized movement nor one that wants to be identified with a power structure. However, its traits can be identified in those conferences and gatherings that 'lifeboaters' attend. There are as many reasons for 'lifeboaters' grouping together as there are lifeboats.

Despite the diversity of these small communities, what they do hold in common are a fierce recognition of their Roman Catholic roots and the desire to actualize those roots in light of their experience of God. Despite the misconception of many, these small communities build themselves on the essentials of theological education, scriptural discernment of justice, prayer, reflection and liturgical celebration. This is not in simple defiance of the institutional Church. These elements are precisely what the notion of *ecclesia* embodies and demands. While there might be the odd group that gathers simply to vent its anger by focusing on the institutional Church to mediate its wrath, these are not the communal experiences being addressed here.

Structure versus community

It is 1991. A suburban parish of a thousand families is functioning well with the participation of many of its members at all levels of parish life. This includes the traditional responsibilities of fulfilling roles of eucharistic ministers, ushers, lectors and council members. In addition, lay persons play

significant roles in pastoral ministry, spiritual direction, leadership in RCIA programmes and other adult education ventures. As well, there is much room for participation, creativity and decision-making in the planning of sacramental liturgies. Then the pastor is transferred and a new pastor is named. Within months, the facilitative model that was used disappears. People begin to feel that their talents and gifts are disregarded. Many feel that their primary source of spiritual sustenance has been taken away from them. They no longer have a context in which they perceive themselves to be authentically related to one another. With this shift, eucharist is experienced as divorced from a once thriving interpersonal community.

A year later, during a barbecue party, several friends from the same parish spontaneously talk about their frustrations with life in general, and their present alienation from their parish. One person says that, ever since the shift in parish administration, he is thinking of going to another parish. Two others reveal that they feel little desire to go to church at all. The others disclose that they, too, are beginning to lack connection to anything meaningful in their lives and that this is being aggravated by the devastation they have been feeling during the past year with the parish. In the midst of this interchange, someone mentions how a group of about five families has been meeting, praying and breaking bread together for the past fifteen years elsewhere in the city. Maybe, he suggests, they could do the same.

In our culture we are all aware of the increasing levels of technocracy and bureaucracy. We must participate in these complexities simply to earn a living. As a result, many believers experience their lives being trivialized. They experience themselves becoming more and more insignificant, regardless of their membership in a parish church and the larger institutional Church.

Admirably, many individuals have fought back and travelled the long path of Cursillo movements, Enneagram workshops, Prayer Companion seminars, silent retreats, spiritual counselling and even theological education. The inner drive that lies behind these activities is the deep need in all of us to be 'healed'. This profound sense of our personal 'lostness', with the need to be healed and become whole, is the first important dynamic that draws people together into small community formation.

In the Christian tradition, healing the spirit is ultimately not a matter of good counselling and therapeutic techniques. It is finding the self engaged in a relationship with God through our encounter with the gospel story of Christ. While the need to be healed might be recognized and understood cognitively, the actual process is neither rational nor programmatic. Healing has more to do with learning to tell our own life stories, thus re-establishing them in light of the gospel, and opening ourselves for the acceptance of mystery into our lives through the rituals and symbols of Christian sacraments.

The institutional Church has always had these goals. However, the traditional parish structure, with its large numbers, anonymous membership, buildings designed for spectators and ineffective roles of participation, holds

little attraction for those who possess this deep sense of healing as central to their lives. On the other hand, small Christian communities emphasize personal dialogue, intimate liturgical participation and theological education. They serve as a counterpoint to the forces of alienation within institutional structures and society. Small communities are much more adept in bringing individuals together, breaking through the barriers of anonymity and providing their members with a sense of unconditional presence that is the very salve of human healing.

Small communities facilitate our need to dialogue and share our story with others; they allow us to penetrate more deeply into the significance of our Catholic tradition and its vast resources of literature, symbol and ritual. In providing opportunities for healing and spiritual growth, community members at times go beyond the point of experiencing themselves as isolated and marginalized. Hence the individual stories of the community members become part of the greater drama of salvation history with all of its challenges, failures and subtle triumphs. As members continue to share their faith struggles with others, to celebrate the journey and to work for the reign of God, they eventually come to observe their existence in a new manner: that is, they learn to become witnesses to the mystery of the Spirit in the world. As a result, some members find the strength to enter into apostolic action in the wider community. As individuals, they would never undertake such action either on their own or in the more institutionalized setting.

In small communities, where there is a strong respect for prayer, liturgy and participation in various activities, individuals often discover new gifts and activate dormant talents that contribute to the reign of God. These new talents surface as small communities tap a vital energy that erupts when individual members assume responsibility for the quality of their spiritual lives and learn to nurture the quality of Christian healing amongst themselves. Small communities understand this energy as precious regardless of marital status, gender, class or race.

Presently the typical large parish structure, with the separation between ordained and lay, does not necessarily evoke this type of energetic involvement. Rather, in many cases, people's responses issue from the sense of unreflected obligation and not from the Christian healing experience that moves the believer deeper into the mystery of Christ.

Honest sacrament versus devotional piety

It is 1976. A colourless notice is posted on the parish bulletin board. It announces a forthcoming meeting for victims of domestic violence. The organizer, Peggy, a victim of domestic violence herself, is a single mother who feels a need to reach out to women in the parish. She has no particular plan in mind other than to connect. At this time, domestic violence is still not perceived as an important issue. The pastor feels that such meetings have no relevance to parish life. Peggy tries to explain to the pastor the need for women to have a safe place, outside the realm of social agencies, to talk about

this problem. However, since there is no comfortable room on church property, Peggy decides to hold the meeting in her own home.

Four women attend the first meeting. All suffer from having been abused in varying degrees. Peggy opens the meeting with a prayer. Most of the time is taken up with sharing of stories. There is no 'male-bashing' – just the deep sense that each of their isolated voices is finally being heard. They close with a prayer. They decide to meet every two weeks.

During the initial meetings, the prayer period becomes longer. Over time, the women begin to see the meetings as a source of spiritual nourishment. Some take courage and begin to be more vocal in public concerning domestic violence. One year later, there are six women in the group. Three are active volunteers in trying to have the police and government acknowledge the pervasive incidence of domestic violence. They advocate the need for safe shelters.

The bonds among the women grow. Each feels committed to one another, not just because of their history of abuse, but because of a growing sense of mission. One woman introduces the group to her reading of liberation theology. One night suddenly, everyone feels a communal recognition of their identity with the Gospels in a new way. They no longer see themselves as a mere group of people meeting but as community bonded together by a common sense of compassion for others and a need to respond.

Much later, a woman from Latin America visits, shares, prays with them and closes the gathering with a ritual of breaking bread. It is as if a charge of lightning strikes each member at the same moment.

Breaking bread together was the symbolic act that universalized their experience of brokenness and extended a new hope to them. It wove an invisible thread of identity globally with the suffering of their sisters. Shortly, the community began to ritualize their gatherings with water, oil, prayer-shawls, candle-light, clay and breaking bread. There were various arguments that arose about what this meant for their relationship with the parish and the institutional Church, since these small group rituals were more expressive of their communal bonding.

Eventually, as they continued with these rituals, a strange conversion took place. These symbolic actions became a focus for their public actions. The community realized the breaking of bread in the name of Christ was not marginal to their lives as mothers, wives, women, and as victims. Rather, it was *the very wellspring* of a deep source of compassion, forgiveness and courage from which they carried out their call to be signs of Christ crucified at all levels of society. As they prayed to be healed and to heal, these women educated themselves. In time, they came to appreciate how men were themselves victimized in ways that encouraged domestic violence. They began to understand society in a more differentiated way; for example, how family models have been traditionally considered as economic units, and not channels of humanization and caring relationships. They came to understand that a

commercial world-view was destructive of Christ's call to love one another and to act justly.

Over the years, many members in that community learned that their Catholic heritage was a rich source of vision and examples of how to pursue justice. They came to appreciate how this pursuit is connected with all aspects of human living! This call to pursue justice was heard, not when the women simply shared their vulnerability with one another, but when they began to celebrate their own personal brokenness and deeper aspirations with the breaking of bread. At this point justice became embodied and healing was effected.

A second active dynamic behind the small community phenomenon is found in the distinction between devotional piety and honest sacrament. Small communities are often charged with the complaint that their members simply desire the power of cultic leadership and prefer to consecrate the bread and wine in their own eccentric manner. What we have witnessed is the contrary. The need 'to play' priest is not the central issue. What is central is the struggle to maintain a healthy relationship between sacrament and action in the world.

Over the decades, the institutional Church exercised a very important role in the education of children. But in taking on that responsibility, it contributed to the secularization of families by unwittingly usurping from them the symbols and rituals they needed to foster familial and communal identity in the face of impersonal institutions. Consequently, many cradle Catholics, often through no fault of their own, have made Sunday eucharist an end in itself and understand it as an obligation necessary for private purity and future reward.

For small community members, traditional devotional habits and external faith gestures are not necessarily the signs of trying to realize the gospel message in the world. Rather, small community members measure their spiritual stature through their serious struggles for integrity in terms of trying to avoid collusion with exploitive social and commercial structures.

For example, in a typical institutional church setting, it is unlikely that there would be plausible platforms for the entire congregation to ask such questions as: why does the Vatican recognize illegitimate political regimes, and should we? Why are people who are married outside the Church denied communion, when Catholics who promote the carrying, ownership and export of hand-guns are not? As a community why can't we, *en masse*, boycott manufacturers who refuse to abide by zero-tolerance regulations for pollution emissions within our cities?

Small Christian communities demand that these very hard questions be asked, not as side issues, but as fundamental questions of one's Christian identity rooted in the gospel. In this sense, small communities are instrumental in challenging our older theologies of personal sin. They demand that we acknowledge our collective sins in terms of neglecting social injustices, as central to the significance of religious praxis.

In many cases, small communities try to respect the necessity of keeping the vital connection between co-operative action and worship. We know that

neither relevant liturgies nor well-orchestrated eucharistic celebrations guarantee a sustaining, humanizing and Christian community. Eucharist, celebrated honestly, must reflect what that community says and does in its daily habits of existence. This type of honesty can only be evaluated when members have the courage to sit down, face one another, and be challenged on some of these very difficult questions.

Through much trial and error, small communities discover that symbols and rituals can be empty; that they become emblematic of Christian sacrament only when there is a consistency of just human behaviour. From the private to the collective, from the kitchen to the corporate boardroom, they help to re-weave this fabric of daily life and honest sacrament. Thus, some small communities are becoming centres of renewed vision and hope for some believers.

Undoubtedly, there are other dynamics that operate behind the phenomenon of small communities now flourishing on the periphery of the Church. We have tried to describe only two that seem to have captured the attention and allegiance of many. The popularity of small communities does not seem to be a mere fad. The calibre of community we have been addressing is beyond the level of social meetings and organizations. As we have already stated, these communities are coming into being not from some need to be fashionable or to exercise power but from an affective need in the here and now. Many of their members are just tending to what the popular writer Thomas Moore has called *care of the soul*.

What drives small healthy communities is the fact that they are transformative processes operating where the human necessity for healing through symbol, reasonable dialogue and celebration converge. In being sources of both healing and growth, communities 'de-centre' and 're-centre' individuals with their personal stories and allow these individuals to see their possible role in salvation history.

What small communities are teaching their members is that the Word is still alive today. The Word can still penetrate our souls, make us ask questions about who we are, and motivate our actions in the world. Such communities are as basic to the Christian heritage as the gospel itself. They provide their members with the means to overcome together the nihilistic tendency of our postmodern mass culture. They help them to discover, through one another, the presence of God which is joy.

If some people find small communities threatening, it may very well be because such communities are reminding them that the title 'Catholic' has a price to be paid for its use. That price means vulnerability. This vulnerability is synonymous with stepping into a lifeboat on the high seas, being splashed by the brine, and discovering both the joy and the agony of being called *the salt of the earth*.