On joining the wrong family

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IT IS BEYOND DISPUTE THAT NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS (NRMs) flourish in our time. One attractive feature of the 'sects and cults', as they are popularly known, is that they usually provide small and secure communities to which people can belong.

It has been part of my ministry over the past fifteen years to provide pastoral counselling to individuals and their families who become entangled with NRMs. From my own observations and from reading about the cult phenomenon, I have come to the conclusion that present-day society deprives people of the normal benefits of human belonging and that this is one of the main reasons why people join NRMs. For convenience's sake I will subdivide the lack of community into six separate elements, though these are in actual fact closely intertwined and interrelated:

lack of proper family support;
lack of affirmation;
lack of intimacy;
lack of a meaningful purpose to live for;
lack of security within a hostile environment;
lack of identity-giving ritual.

I will expand on these six elements before offering some thought on what we, as a Church, should offer in response.

Support

It is natural for a human being to be part of a family. With marriages breaking down all the time and with youngsters being left more and more to their own devices, real family support has become for many people a luxury they no longer enjoy.

The clinical psychologist Desmond O'Donnell has characterized the general picture in this way:

> Alienation is fast becoming the pathology of our age; loneliness is increasing in the developed world, especially in cities. Thus the need for companionship and permanent community is seriously felt, as depersonalisation continues to grow. The Churches are failing

> badly here despite many serious efforts. Perhaps the failure is due to the difficulty of building up a lasting community, as well as to the inaction of pastoral leaders. Here the sects come rushing in and they offer what looks like instant community to lonely young people who are healthily resisting the impersonal nature of schools, Churches and work situations.[1]

It is not far-fetched to see NRMs as substitute families. The presence of authority figures, hostility against a member's natural family, the tendency to restrict friendship and marriage to within the movement are all too frequent phenomena that point in this direction.

Affirmation

Strange as it may seem, many young people crave for parental support. It is true that the younger generation, on its path to personal maturity and independence, is often known for its opposition to parental authority. This may make us overlook the important function parents exercise by *affirming* their children. A good parent imposes an ideal on a child, while affirming it as lovable and while creating a secure space in which the child can grow up and become himself or herself. This is required all the more in the kind of world we live in.

Urbanization and technology have revolutionized the way we live. One unfortunate side effect is that the free and happy development of persons is often sacrificed to the demands of physical survival in an impersonal world. It frequently creates in our go-go westernized world an ugly 'frustration neurosis'. It shows itself in psychological disturbances: in loneliness, in feelings of uncertainty about one's own worth, in an inability to relate happily to other people, in a breakdown of marriages by lack of in-depth communication, in painful conflicts between the generations.

The root cause underlying many such symptoms is a deep inner frustration in people because they have not been *affirmed* by their parents. They do not feel appreciated and loved. Their parents have failed to give them a sense of their own worth.[2]

Affirmation means allowing another person to be true to himself or herself. It is a gift of respect and love by which we tell the other person that he or she is good and beautiful and lovable. Affirmation seeks not to control or to manipulate. In a relationship of affirmation the other person is allowed to be as he or she is, so that he or she

can grow to become the person he or she is but cannot be as yet. The other is allowed to become himself or herself in his or her personal way and to follow his or her own pace. The source and mode of all affirmation lies in God himself: in God creating us lovingly, wishing us to be who we are; in God inviting us respectfully and caringly to become his own children; in God who, in spite of his omnipotent majesty, tenderly respects our free will and self-esteem and allows us to love him in return with true human generosity.

Members of NRMs often find in their new community the affirmation denied by family and society. A leader guides and sets ideals. Co-members pay attention and applaud. The loving support of their new brothers and sisters, more often than not offered in a spiritual context, becomes for many an individual the first tangible revelation of God's love.

Intimacy

Society thrives on competition. Children learn they have to fight for their existence: at home, at school, during leisure hours, and, when they grow up, at work. But human beings need *intimacy*, that wonderful experience of sharing thoughts and feelings on a really deep level. Because of the hardening in society, people even begin to lack intimacy in the immediate bonds between husband and wife, between personal friends and close colleagues at work. This means that they can never be true to themselves, that they always have to pretend, that they feel vulnerable at all times of the day.

Here again, one of the great attractions of an NRM can be that it pulls down walls and allows people to share and communicate at a previously unknown depth. Real intimacy is an intoxicating privilege.

A purpose to live for

Most people in western society are becoming 'fulfilment seekers'. They want self-realization and quality of life. In marriage they prefer a satisfying relationship to stability. At work they prefer interesting, responsible, imaginative jobs rather than security. At home they value active involvement rather than passive entertainment.[3]

Studies on labour relations indicate that the deepest causes of industrial unrest do not lie in unsatisfactory wages, hygiene or work conditions. The real reason for unhappiness and revolt lies in the

fact that in industry many people are simply used as tools. Their 'Adam nature' may be satisfied with food, drink, dress and other material benefits that can be bought with money; their 'Abraham nature' (their desire to be called out to a country of promise) will only be fulfilled if they are given a chance to be creative, to discover new things, to experience growth. Workers will only be happy if they are treated and challenged as persons.[4]

Contrast this trend with the utter boredom and emptiness of life many individuals actually experience: dreary nine-to-five jobs, endless commuting in overcrowded trains and buses, petty rows at home, viewing of mindless soaps. Small wonder that they jump at the opportunity of joining small groups that offer a challenge to live for, even if it means selling flowers on street corners to finance a Moonie campaign. I remember Douglas Hyde, the former Communist activist, telling us at a conference in Rome how deflated and bored he had felt after becoming a Catholic. 'Suddenly the thrill of agitation, intrigue and challenge collapsed. Life was dull.'

A secure environment

For many people, the environment presents dangers. Sometimes these are physical dangers of mugging or break-ins. At other times they are the dangers of ridicule, discrimination and exclusion. NRMs offer the attraction of protection within a space walled off from the outside world. It is significant that children of immigrant families seem more at risk, unless these families throw up their own walls of protection.

Leaders of NRMs frequently exploit the need of security and protection by exaggerating the hostility of the outside world. Many Christian sects portray non-members as sinful and doomed. The Church of Scientology indoctrinates its members through a complex web of secret code that blocks easy communication with normal persons. Contact with one's family or former friends is discouraged. Sects and cults can be most easily recognized by the artificial fences they erect between 'them' and 'us'.

The other side of the coin is that a clear distinction between 'them' and 'us' strengthens a much needed sense of identity. Our accommodating and tolerant attitude has made Christians almost indistinguishable from the general population. Our salt has lost its taste so that, as Christ warns us, it risks being trodden underfoot (Mt 5:13).

Identity-giving ritual

Communities express belonging also through group-specific ritual. At international football matches we recognize a player as a Catholic when he makes the sign of the cross after scoring a goal. But much of our common ritual has become verbal, lifeless and impersonal. Harvey Cox summarizes the testimony of a Christian who has joined an Eastern sect as follows:

> All I got at any church I ever went to were sermons or homilies about God, about 'the peace that passes understanding'. Words, words, words. It was all up here [pointing to the head]. I never really felt it. It was all abstract, never direct, always somebody else's account of it. It was dull, boring, cold coffee. I'd sit or kneel or stand. I'd listen or read prayers. But it seemed lifeless. It was like reading the label instead of eating the contents. But here it happened to me. I experienced it myself.[5]

Eastern religions provide new rituals. Almost all the neo-Oriental movements include instruction in some form of spiritual discipline. Leaders show initiates oriental techniques of prayer, contemplation or meditation. Recruits learn to breathe or dance or chant. They are introduced to archery or sword play or acupuncture or massage. The added bonus is that such practices involve the person directly. Teachers do not rely so much on words but move recruits quickly into the actual techniques. Unlike many of the currently available western religious options which stress beliefs or codes of ethics, most of the neo-Oriental groups begin right away at the level of practice.[6]

Customs and practices in the NRMs may seem strange and bizarre to outsiders. The counter-intuitive fact is that they draw initiates more closely into the group.

Community in a secular world

Members of NRMs thus find in their movements the sense of belonging they so badly need. They are affirmed by the leader and other group members. They find excitement and enthusiasm in the common cause. They have something worthwhile to live for. They feel secure against a hostile and alien world. They enjoy sharing secrets and spiritual experiences through community rituals.

One important observation is appropriate here: critics of the NRMs often speak as if NRMs demonstrate the 'wrong reasons for belonging'. These critics obviously think of much-publicized defects in NRMs, such as a pathological dependency on the leader and a corresponding abuse of power. Such anomalies do occur, but they do not reflect the general situation. It is much truer to say that the vast majority of recruits to the NRMs join *for the right reasons of belonging*, although unfortunately they may join the wrong family in the process. It is like children on a housing estate joining a street gang because they find nowhere else to belong.

Can seekers belong *in our Church?*

In our pastoral counselling at Housetop we occasionally have the privilege of helping an individual adjust to his or her new situation after a spell in a New Religious Movement.

The person typically needs to go through a process of assessment: of recognizing what was wrong in the cult experience and of isolating the good elements he or she should retain.

More often than not, the dynamic, intimate, enthusiastic aspect of community is singled out as a positive element to be kept and cultivated. But if the ex-member then attempts to re-insert him- or herself into the Church, the lack of comparable community support becomes painfully apparent.

In a number of cases I have desperately looked for sympathetic parishes and co-operative parish priests, hoping they would provide the caring community these seekers so badly needed. Usually my efforts have failed, for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps the main one is that, as a Church, we focus on organization rather than on building or being community. How can we offer belonging if the infrastructure is not there? Could all this be related to the fact that house churches are the only Christian churches in the UK that are increasing in membership?

Rather than blaming the NRMs we should examine our consciences and see if we, as a parish or group, offer people the exciting, affirming, intimate and secure community we should be as a church. Rather than glorying in vast numbers and assigning priority to efficient organization, we should assess the quality of the church as community. And to be a supportive, loving, intimate community it needs to be small.

In this context it is worth studying the Gospel of Mark. Mark presents the Church as a new family of brothers and sisters gathered around Christ.

> His mother and relatives arrived. Standing outside the house, they sent a message asking him to come out. A lot of people were sitting around him. They told him: 'Your mother and your relatives are outside, asking for you'.
>
> He replied: 'Who is my mother? Who are my relatives?' Looking around at those who sat there, he said: 'These are my mother and relatives. For whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother.' (Mk 3:31–35)

We are so used to our large parishes and sacramental relationship to the church body that Mark's images should make us stop in our tracks. Those who give up everything to follow Jesus, including their physical families, will receive a multitude of brothers, sisters, parents and children in the end-time family of Jesus (Mk 10:29–31). Jesus' family is a community of mutual service (Mk 10:42–45) and a watchful community (Mk 13:32–37). The community is open and egalitarian in nature.[7]

Mark's Gospel describes 'house churches', that is, communities meeting in residential homes.[8] They were close-knit, small groups who would mirror themselves in such images as a flock of sheep (Mk 6:34; 14:27) or a party travelling in a boat (Mk 4:35–41; 6:46–52; 8:14–21).[9] Though the early Christian communities Mark wrote for would tend to adopt the strategies of persecuted minorities: shunning political involvement, guarding community rituals from intruders and recruiting new converts through personal contact,[10] they did form 'families of faith' to which believers could happily belong. In many respects the church community envisaged in Mark's Gospel is what we call nowadays *a basic Christian community.*

Back to a grassroots church

I believe that we can learn from what the Church is doing in other parts of the world. In many places church leaders are actively promoting the formation of natural local churches, the so-called 'basic Christian communities'. The Second General Latin American Bishops' Conference (Medellin, 1968) characterized them as follows:

> The basic community forms the primary and fundamental core reality of the Church.
>
> On her own level, she should take responsibility for the deposit of faith and its propagation, and also for worship which expresses faith.
>
> She is the embryo of the Church's structure, the focus of evangelisation and, in our own days, nerve centre for human progress.[11]

In 1975 bishops came together in Rome for a Synod on evangelization. One of their conclusions was that the Christian communities at grassroots level should be strengthened at all costs. This objective was repeated by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975). The Pope defines basic communities in this way:

> A basic Christian community is a focal point of Gospel preaching and living. It supports the wider community, i.e. the local Church, and is a sign of hope for the universal Church.[12]

The Bishops' Conferences of East Africa also endorsed the need for rediscovering and strengthening the local communities of faith.

> The Christian communities we are trying to build up are nothing else than the grassroots incarnations of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church . . . The universal Church must also be present to Christians as a reality in their own local surroundings. It must be a local reality as much as a universal one. The small Christian communities are the means through which the Church reaches out to the every-day life and needs of the people. In these communities the Church shares deeply the life situations people undergo. In these communities believers can have a realistic experience of the Church as a new way of being together.[13]

The European Bishops' Conferences too have studied the problem which focuses on the Church's division into parishes. The parish fulfils some of the functions of a local community – preaching, common worship, local apostolate – but often falls short in other respects. It may not provide, for instance, the support of a small group to which one can 'belong' and with which one can share one's spiritual search or apostolate, a function eminently fulfilled in the basic community.

Many pastoral initiatives have been started and I believe they merit our full support. The parish structure is often supplemented with additional subdivisions; neighbourhood groups, pastoral groups,

prayer and action groups, Bible study circles. In the gathering of each of these groups the *ekklesia* comes alive in a special way.[14]

Gordon Melton, the author of the world's only encyclopaedia on New Religious Movements, gives us room for thought:

> I have found that the person who had a bad experience in a traditional church as a teenager joins cults. Frequently a Roman Catholic priest has been insensitive. Couple an insensitive minister with the doctrine that yours is the only true church, and you get a young person likely to join a non-Christian cult. I've seen this especially with Roman Catholics . . .
>
> To a seeker, the teaching of a group is not nearly as important as the fellowship. Anybody who has been in one of the Eastern groups knows how warm their friendship is. When you have been connected nominally to a congregation of 400 or more members where you don't know half the people, the contrast is so strong that it can't help but influence a person's decision.[15]

I am not suggesting that we should become more exciting, affirming, intimate and secure communities for no other purpose than to keep people from joining the NRMs. That would be falling into the trap of recommending the right action for the wrong, or at least inadequate, reasons. Rather, the experience of the NRMs should shame us into making our church communities again the 'families of faith' in which people can really feel at home.

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NOTES

1 D. O'Donnell, 'The success of the sects', *The Furrow* 55 (1983), p 634.

2 I am greatly indebted for this insight to the excellent books by A. A. A. Terruwe: *Neurosis in the light of rational psychology* (New York: Kennedy, 1968); *De Liefde bouwt een Woning* (Roermond: Romen, 1968); *Geloven Zonder Angst en Vrees* (Roermond: Romen, 1969); *Geef Mij je Hand* (Lochem: Tijdstroom, 1972).

3 Read about this trend in N. Timms, *Family and citizenship: values in contemporary Britain* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1992); S. Ashford and N. Timms, *What Europe thinks: a study of western European values* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1992).
4 F. Herzberg, *Work and the nature of man* (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1968).
5 H. Cox, *Turning east* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977), p 96.
6 See also H. Cox, *The seduction of the spirit* (New York, 1973); *Many mansions* (Boston, 1988).
7 J. R. Donahue, *The theology and setting of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Marquette, 1981), esp. pp 31–56.
8 E. Trocmé, *The formation of the Gospel according to Mark* (Philadelphia, 1975), pp 162–163.
9 E. Best, *Following Jesus: discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield, 1981), pp 208–245.
10 H. C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (London, 1977), esp pp 78–96, 106–115.
11 Council of Medellin 1968, *Integrated ministry*, no 10.
12 Pope Paul VI, *On evangelisation in the modern world* (London, 1975).
13 Statement by AMECEA in *African Ecclesiastical Review* 5 (1979), pp 265–272. For French-speaking Africa, see P. Lefebre, *Une Église qui nait de nouveau* (Kinshasa, 1981); J. B. Cappellaro, *La Paroisse communion de communautés* (Kinshasa, 1982); E de Schrevel, *Servir la communauté Chrétienne* (Kinshasa, 1984).
14 Helpful books in English are: A. Hope and S. Timmel, *Training for transformation: a handbook for community workers* (Gweru, Zimbabwe, 1984); P. Brennan, *The evangelising parish* (Allen, Texas, 1987; J. Marins, *The Church from the roots* (London, 1989).
15 J. E. Melton, 'Why cults succeed where the Church fails', *Christianity Today* 9 (1984), p 18.