

COMMUNITY: COMMUNION IN CHRIST

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IF WE WOULD understand how an evangelical community comes into being, it seems above all relevant to explore the gospel accounts of Christ's calling of his disciples: how he brought them gradually to the fulness of their faith in him, to the sharing of his life, his ways and his mission, and so to their becoming a community. Accordingly, we shall consider the development of the twelve not so much in terms of their 'institutional' function as of their existential discipleship. We shall observe the formation of the Lord's first apostolic community.

No doubt contemporaries assumed that the discipleship of Christ's followers was patterned on the customs of their time and place. Students gathered around rabbis, the teachers of the law. According to rabbinical tradition these students chose their teachers, offering themselves as disciples. In fact, some did offer themselves to Christ in this way. 'As he was stepping into the boat, the man who had been possessed begged to go with him'.¹ Similarly we read in Luke: 'As they were going along the road a man said to him, I will follow you wherever you go'.² But these offers were never accepted. Jesus always kept the initiative. 'He called the men he wanted'.³ 'You did not choose me; I chose you'.⁴

One becomes a disciple of Jesus only on the basis of a call which the master freely communicates to those whom he freely chooses. We can never insist sufficiently on this indispensable condition of discipleship. At the same time, the invitation is such that once Christ has called the response must be radical and immediate – a whole-hearted engagement. An invitation to total love must be accepted or rejected. This profoundly personal appeal demands an entirely personal response, one which must be unconditional. There can be no question of qualification or compromise. Christ asks his disciples to leave all, to follow him for the kingdom of God. At the

¹ Mk 5, 18. All scriptural citations are from the *New English Bible*.

² Lk 9, 57; cf 9, 61.

³ Mk 3, 13.

⁴ Jn 15, 16.

word of Jesus the fishermen abandon their nets;⁵ Matthew gives up his tax-collecting;⁶ the disciples of John the Baptist leave their teacher.⁷

The imperative nature of Christ's call derives from the fact that he is not merely a rabbi; he is the Messiah, the Lord, who calls. God enters into the lives of men to transform them, to make them his disciples. And so each disciple enters into a communion of life with Jesus, irrevocably and for always. He becomes a man touched by the final and decisive word of the Lord, the word of the Son who was sent by the Father. The disciple's response is an unconditional obedience. This total abandonment, this complete yielding up of one's self to the person of Christ, supposes an illimitable confidence in him. The first disciples could not see where the call would lead them; the risk was enormous; it was a leap in the dark. The fact that the apostles decided to take the risk immediately and unconditionally showed clearly the extraordinary ascendancy which Christ exercised over them at the first encounter. This ascendancy was not merely the effect of a powerful personality. Christ is God made man, and the apostles, incapable of recognizing his divinity in a conscious and explicit fashion, nevertheless perceived something of the divine presence. They were vaguely conscious of being confronted by a supernatural invitation. Seen in this light, their prompt decision to follow Christ without knowing clearly where this would lead them was not only a courageous act, but also one which was highly reasonable and profoundly human. God can ask ever more and more of his creatures; and yet, the only reasonable response to whatever he asks is a 'yes' of the heart, which expands in an unlimited confidence in his power, his wisdom and his goodness.

To be a disciple of Jesus meant not only to share his daily, itinerant life, with 'nowhere to lay his head',⁸ but also to be ready for martyrdom, because 'a pupil does not rank above his teacher, or a servant above his master'.⁹ To be a disciple of Jesus one must be ready to 'leave self behind',¹⁰ 'to take up his cross',¹¹ to love as he has loved,¹² even to the point that a man 'lay down his life for his friends'.

⁵ Mt 4, 20.

⁶ Mt 9, 9.

⁷ Jn 1, 37.

⁸ Lk 9, 58.

⁹ Mt 10, 24; cf Lk 6, 40.

¹⁰ Mk 8, 34.

¹¹ Mk 8, 35.

¹² Jn 15, 13. For a more detailed analysis of these ideas on discipleship, see Schürmann, H.: 'Der Jüngerkreis Jesu als Zeichen für Israel (und als Urbild des Kirchlichen Rätestandes)', in *Geist und Leben*, 36 (1963), pp 21-35.

This giving of oneself in absolute availability is certainly the most basic and typical aspect of the consecrated life as the Lord wishes it to be, as well as the indispensable condition for forming religious community, a community of those who are given to God. We touch here the very substance of the act of faith: the mystery of God's love for man and the loving response of man to the invitation of his Lord, master and creator. This act of faith and its consequences is an exchange of love, a love that is stronger than death, which produces a complete transformation of those whom Christ has invited, so that they may form the community of believers.

But this transformation, then as now, was a slow process, requiring of Christ an infinite patience. The process was not completed until the day of Pentecost, when the fulness of the Spirit renewed the apostles. Until then, though they were full of good will, they were slow to understand and weak.

In the formation of persons so well disposed and yet so limited in strength and vision, how did Christ proceed? What kind of relationship did he establish with his disciples as they shared his life and learned to share his values, thus forming the evangelical community of his followers?

Quite simply he drew them to himself, so that they were impelled by an interior attraction ever more urgent, constant and intimate. Then, as now, what Christ developed in his followers was the comprehension of the heart, in the scriptural sense of the whole man. The evangelical revelation is given us, not to enrich our knowledge but to transform us in Christ, a transformation which results from listening to what he tells us about our bonds with him and with our neighbour. To accept his invitation in faith means to run the risk of letting ourselves encounter Christ where he is, permitting him to reveal himself and to share his views with us, his manner of living, of thinking, of loving. An ancient proverb expresses this very well: 'Give me your heart and I will give you my eyes'. To accept the invitation of Christ – God made man – is to allow his glance, full of affection, to penetrate our hearts. It means abandoning ourselves to the interior attraction which impels us to search for him, which makes us feel the need to be with him, to remain with him. This intimate contact of friendship means approaching him with all defences down.

To respond to the words, 'come and see', is to embark on an adventure which transforms our whole existence; it is to run the risk of an interior revolution more profound than any other; it is to

abandon ourselves to his love in order to let him lead us where he will. The indispensable condition for this total abandonment to him is to understand that if he has invited us, it is because he loves us. It is to walk through strange paths to encounter the Lord in a new light, the light of a living faith in which one sees oneself as the object of his love. This is what creates the disposition of vulnerability, of confidence, of abandon. From that moment on, one allows oneself to be led where one never expected to go.

When one accepts this invitation, ever more pressing and constantly renewed, one ratifies a pact of love. To go in this way to the Lord is to set out on the road with a heart already changed by his coming. If one dares to accept this kind of compact, one will never cease to discover him who has brought it about, and to move forward in the light which one receives from his eyes. One must be willing to withhold nothing, to allow one's whole self to be unmasked; at once to live in the joy of this light and to accept the obligations which result from travelling a new road; to say yes to the risks of a love which must grow stronger at every turn; to the work of being possessed by his love and abandoning oneself to it; led to an ever deeper sharing in his life, in his ways, in his views.

One is then introduced to a life which exceeds all one's fondest hopes, to an involvement with him for the service of others such as one has never dared expect. To see that the response given in faith to a call of the Lord is a response to the invitation to establish a personal relationship of friendship and love with his person; this is to come to know the value of that prayer which is an attitude of life – contemplation.

The whole intention of Christ was to change his disciples in such a way that, spontaneously, they would act as he wished to see them act, that is, as he did. As they loved him more and more intensely, they attached themselves to all that was his and accepted his manner of life more and more completely. Christ was not concerned merely to teach his apostles the 'content of faith'; he worked constantly to lead them to an ever more perfect relationship with himself and his Father, taking into account at every turn their individual temperaments, accommodating himself lovingly to the personality of each one. In so doing he drew them closer to each other, so that they might be one as he is with the Father.¹³ The

¹³ Jn 17, 11. 20-21. See Molinari, P. S.J.: *Comment enseigner à répondre à Dieu dans la foi*, in *Conférence Religieuse Canadienne, Publications, Document 605, I* (19 October 1970), pp 18-31. The same document carries an English translation, pp 19-32.

evangelical narratives show, in a vivid and existential way, how the Lord, by drawing the disciples to himself, created a living community, a community of believers.

A fact which emerges from the gospel narrative with absolute clarity is that Christ requires those who are called by him as his disciples to be with him, to listen to him and to open themselves entirely to his influence. Only as a second step will they be sent out as his collaborators in the proclamation of the kingdom of God, and to witness to him by the strength of their works. The first requirement can never be relegated to the second place. If we do not learn of Christ interiorly, if we do not know him as St Paul, St Peter and the other apostles did, we shall betray our mission, which is simply his. We shall preach nothing but ourselves.

It is true that the first requirement – the being with Christ and gradually transformed by him – has essentially an apostolic objective. In fact, it is of its very nature apostolic. Christ's being with the Father, his listening to him in profound prayer, was intrinsically apostolic because his praise and his prayer is apostolic. Apostolic activity requires in the apostle interior dispositions which are to be found only in those who, like the twelve, have sat for a long time at the feet of the Lord, and have listened to his word. In silence and in prayer with and in him they have become men who are willing to take up their cross and follow him unconditionally, supported by a love which is stronger than themselves. In this way, the twelve whom Jesus called became in a highly exemplary sense the *familia Dei*, his community, because they had accepted the invitation to follow Christ, had listened to his word and so had become his brothers, his sisters and his mother.¹⁴ Because Christ had become for each of them the one thing necessary, they were one in mind and heart; so they formed an evangelical community. They could communicate with one another because Christ was their living bond. If Christ had not been the centre of their lives, there would have been no community life, there would have been no communion. He was the one source of their unity.

Those who responded to the call of the Lord, in spite of weakness and failure, who listened to him, understanding him and his ways ever more intimately, by that very experience grew close to one another. Even in the dark period between his passion and his resurrection, desolate and discouraged as they certainly were, his

¹⁴ Mk 3, 35.

disciples clung together and together searched for their Lord. Peter and John ran together to his tomb;¹⁵ Mary hastened, in her distress, to confide in the disciples; 'They have taken the Lord out of his tomb'.¹⁶ When she encountered the glorious Christ, he bade her, 'Go to my *brothers*, and tell them that I am now ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God'.¹⁷ In their weariness and even disillusionment, the two disciples en route to Emmaus spoke together, their search implicit in their longing. And their love, stronger than their faith, was rewarded by the unexpected companion whose words made them feel their 'hearts on fire'.¹⁸

When the Lord came to the still fearful disciples, who were 'together behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews',¹⁹ he found practically all of them together: at least they were not seeking the anonymity of those who hide alone. Only Thomas, torn apart by the conflict between his deep love and his native scepticism, seems to have searched and agonized apart from the others. Yet he too found the Lord when he returned to his brethren.²⁰ Still later, when Peter proposed a fishing expedition,²¹ the others joined him; and, in consequence, the Lord manifested himself to them all in the intimacy of the breakfast by the lakeside.²²

Gradually they realized what he had meant when he said, 'I am the vine; you are the branches'.²³ They saw that his call to each one had created a profound unity within the group. They understood that they would share his life and mission, not only as individuals, as free-lances, but as members of the community which his love had gathered together, a community whose vitality depended wholly on its communion in him. And they came to be identified by others in terms of him, as the community of the believers, the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth who had been crucified. Because they were made one by their enthusiastic love for the same Lord, they constituted, as a community, an existential witness. They were people who belonged to Jesus of Nazareth, who thought as he did, who acted as he did, who loved as he did, and so shared in his love, loving one another as he loved, so that all the world could say: 'See how these christians love one another'.

At the same time, the disciples had the mobility, the interior freedom which is possible when Christ, the Word incarnate, has become the only real centre of one's life. Their whole existence,

¹⁵ Jn 20, 2.

¹⁸ Lk 24, 32.

²¹ Jn 21, 3.

¹⁶ Jn 20, 5.

¹⁹ Jn 20, 19.

²² Jn 21, 13.

¹⁷ Jn 20, 17.

²⁰ Jn 20, 26.

²³ Jn 14, 5.

through each individual and through the community, spoke as a community, proclaiming in a visible way that Christ had come, that he was a reality, that he was with them, that he continued to live in them. This is the experienced presence that shook the world. Jews and pagans were struck when they saw the apostles, when they came into contact with them. They experienced the reality of the risen Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, who, though crucified, was yet living again in the midst of his christian community, of the men and women whom he had called. Much is written about the witness value of religious life. Writers do not always seem to recognize that the value of the evangelical life does not arise from the fact that it is a sign; it is a sign because of its intrinsic value, because it is a life lived in and with Christ. Only when it is lived authentically does it become a witness.

Our life is centred in the experience of the Lord; and this experience has, by its very nature, a communitarian dimension. Because it derives from God, who wills that it be shared by our religious family, it is the most important element in our lives and creates the deepest bond among us. But this experience, like any relationship, must be constantly deepened and renewed. Such a renewal and deepening requires a profound spirit of that prayer which inspires our apostolic action and in its turn is fed by our apostolic experience. This experience, which concerns people called by God to be united in one body, cannot be lived out and deepened on an exclusively individual basis. The individualism, isolationism and self-centredness which have sometimes developed among religious are a consequence of the failure of themselves and their communities to share what is most precious and most intimate: a failure which deprives them of the mutual inspiration and support which are fundamental values in religious life.

It remains true, in spite of all the contemporary tensions, that, for the great majority in nearly all congregations, those issues which divide them are far less important than those fundamental values which they continue to share. It is essential that all communities should so live as to foster the kind of contact that will enable members to communicate with one another at the deep spiritual level where their most real bonds can be recognized. Where serious efforts have been made in this direction, polarization and tension have decreased; there is a new and better understanding in the community; the union in the Lord which has developed results in a better sharing of apostolic ideas; the process of discernment ha

been facilitated; more successful and courageous apostolic projects have been developed. When deep spiritual communication becomes possible, members of the community feel not only the support of their superiors, but also the warm and positive enthusiasm of all the brethren, even for apostolic initiatives they may take as individuals; there is greater openness and readiness to receive inspiration from one another. Every community should strive constantly that a process so vital for its life develop as fully as possible. The level of its communication must be constantly evaluated so that ever better ways to improve it may be discovered and tried.

To this end communities should be structured above all else to develop a deeply spiritual and human sharing. They should be, as far as possible, of a size which facilitates personal contacts. Yet it is clear that we cannot assume any one formula to be valid in every case. There are different psychological needs, different apostolic exigencies. We must consider also the needs of the older and sick members of our congregations.

Experience drawn from many religious institutes in nearly all parts of the world indicates that any new form of community life is viable only when the reasons which urge its adoption are a genuine desire, even a deliberate determination, to search for the Lord together: to lead a more evangelical life and to respond to an apostolic need which has been recognized as genuine only after a profound and honest discernment. Experience shows also that these new forms are valid and produce positive results only when the persons involved in them feel the need of extended periods of shared prayer, and above all for that eucharistic sharing which is the most precious prerogative of christian community. When this spirit of fraternal unity in the Lord develops, the community is in an attitude of constant self-evaluation and readiness to listen to God's demands. Such an attitude obviates stagnation, self-satisfaction and the resultant incapacity for adaptation and change.

For these reasons every community needs time set aside at regular intervals to share apostolic experience, spiritual insights and communitarian reflection on scripture and on the heritage of the congregation. Such discussions deepen the sense of membership in a true apostolic community.

A religious superior, in this context, can function as a positive principle of animation, fostering the growth of individuals and their response to the Lord and thus contributing to the development of community. The more each person responds to God's action, the

more he will find himself united with his brethren, since God has called him to live and work in a social body. Obviously, this kind of relationship leads not to uniformity but to a substantial unity which is enriched by the variety of gifts and insights among the individuals who constitute the community.

Our personal and communitarian attachment to Christ and the Church, and our willingness to share in his apostolic mission, must be built on a deep and living faith, shared by all the members of our communities. For this reason no congregation can afford to neglect the theological and scriptural formation of its members, old and young.

It is clear that the *raison d'être* of apostolic religious life, the being with and for Christ, cannot be reduced merely to the announcing of the kingdom. His *being* announces God's presence. Now that the last times are come, Christ does not limit his mission to preaching. The witness of his disciples is not simply their words. Their entire life, work, mutual love, must be an evidence of the action or God, present in each of them and in the community as such. Christ intends for them an evangelical life, lived out of love in living faith, with him, in communion of life among themselves. Such a life proclaims the loveliness of God who has come to offer his own love and life. Consecrated virginity testifies to how much God can be loved, even in this world. Just as Christ's presence showed us the Father, so the presence and life of his disciples, when lived radically, reveals the goodness of Christ and of the Father.

The needs of mankind are subject to constant change. Christ's life and mission are not altered, but their expression in his followers must be adapted whenever the need arises. Evangelical life, authentically lived, bears the seeds of change within itself, because of its very vitality. There is an infinite number of modalities possible in living out and in expressing the christian message, not in spite of, but *because of* the fact that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and always.