

# COMMUNITY IN CHRIST

By PAUL MOLINARI

**T**HIS PAPER undertakes to explore one simple question. What, precisely, is the message which the holy Spirit intends to convey to us, just now, on the subject of community? It is impossible to believe that light on a matter of such crucial urgency will be denied us if we seek it humbly and sincerely.

Today we can all admit that somewhere, somehow, in all good faith, we and/or our predecessors took a false turn in this area. The evidence is beyond controversy.

Who has not witnessed the tragedy of the young man who entered the Society, apparently with the purest motives, seeking the Lord and the service of his people sincerely, with all his heart, and became an egoistical, self-seeking, demanding, insensitive bachelor? Nothing can protect those who do not co-operate with God from this miserable dénouement; but our communities should help to make it an unlikely fate for those who do. At the very least they should constitute a support rather than a hazard.

Even among those whose selfless service of the Lord and his people has resulted in a fruitful and rewarding apostolate, how many, in their private lives, understand only too well the anguish expressed in Mathew Arnold's words:

... in the sea of life enisled, We mortal millions live alone.

For those whose melancholy fate it is to scrutinize applications for dispensation from priestly religious vows, the refrain is as depressing as it is repetitious: 'I do not want to become the kind of person whom I have encountered and tried to live with in community'. The most distressing cases, in the experience of many of us, are those whom we believe had genuine religious vocations – those who would never have left had they encountered true community in Christ.

The mournful post-mortems could go on, but they are news to no-one, and there is no reason to labour the obvious. We have a primary responsibility to improve our communities. How do we go about it? By reliance on the Lord first of all, who brought the

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miracle of christianity out of a ghastly human mess. It is important also to place the problem in historical perspective: to try to discover as best we can, how we got where we are.

The problem seems rooted essentially in our attitude toward affective relationships with God and man. We have to admit, first of all, a serious inadequacy in terms of faith. Many religious have been unable to make a satisfactory personal synthesis between an over-intellectualized, abstract 'series of propositions', and the cultural-intellectual atmosphere of the air they breathe. Consequently, they have never developed an integrated personality. Quite simply, they have never become the sort of person who is comfortable to live with in community. The problem, at bottom, is in the affective order. Twentieth-century man, for all his sophistication, cannot accept a faith which seems to float free of his affective perceptions.

It is not hard to understand this widespread affective weakness. In all good faith, for centuries, we have depreciated the central christian imperative of love for God and man in favour of a semi-pelagian search for 'perfection', which owed more to Aristotle than to divine revelation. In practice, christian perfection was presented in voluntaristic terms. Life was a kind of athletic contest of endurance based on a false exegesis of the pauline promise that he who runs receives the prize.<sup>1</sup> The affective element in prayer, in our relationship with God and one another (which is in fact the same thing), was systematically played down. If one worked hard enough and 'put in' the time of prayer, faithfully and painfully, all would be well. St Ignatius encouraged the patience and the pain, but never as ends in themselves. In fact, all his apparatus of preludes, points etc. was designed to prepare the way for one inestimably desirable experience, should the Lord deign to grant it; a conscious contact with himself. Yet we almost came to feel that this contact, and the joy it normally produces, was a luxury we should reject, a form of selfish indulgence.

Apart from the fact that this attitude was a travesty of the teaching of Ignatius, who cherished the gift of tears as well as the 'company' of his brethren, it was psychologically naive and unrealistic. If we never find joy in the Lord, it is practically inevitable that we shall seek it elsewhere; most often perhaps, in the narcissistic and thoroughly unwholesome urge for personal achievement, recognition,

<sup>1</sup> Cf 1 Cor 9, 24.

popularity etc. The alternate, or concurrent, temptation is to seek the necessary affective fulfilment in human relationships which are wholly incompatible with the particular modality of our commitment to the Lord. This temptation becomes progressively and understandably more common as the social barriers fall. The answer is not to re-erect artificial barriers between human beings, but to revivify the authentic affective bonds with Christ and our other brothers. The lamentably high incidence of lost vocations on the one hand, and atrophied hearts on the other, is sometimes taken as an argument for abandoning celibate consecration as a 'casualty of christian history'. In fact, the historical evidence is that whenever consecrated celibacy has been lived in union with Christ and according to his mind, it has created truly integrated human personalities who have loved God and man with unique affective and effective power. This is the kind of personal development which should ensue from Christ's call. Essential for such development are deeply cohesive communities in Christ; but these will never be created until we replace the compulsion to personal achievement with a disposition to accept the Lord's leadership. We cannot love one another as competitors in the race for 'perfection', for prestige or accomplishment. On the other hand, to try to create authentic religious community primarily on the basis of human compatibility or psychological needs is self-defeating. Such needs could be better met, in the normal course of events, in the more natural human community of marriage. The point of religious community is community in Christ. There is no other. What we are gathered together by his love to share is his love, which is concentrated on him and on his people. At the same time, those who are gathered together by his love and not by compatibility, personality or taste (except the taste for him) are human persons with normal human needs. They have an elementary duty in justice and charity to satisfy these needs in one another. The evidence accumulates that our large, highly-institutionalized communities, especially where close personal friendships have been discouraged, have failed and still fail disastrously to meet such basic needs. In fact, the jansenistic and unconsciously unchristian distrust of affectivity in our relationships with the Lord and with our brothers was all of a piece; in all probability, it has been the most serious obstacle to the formation of genuine community in Christ.

I have deliberately drawn a depressing, negative picture, for the reason that the good – of which there is and always has been a great

preponderance in many of our communities – does not constitute a problem. All I wish to show is that the holy Spirit has something to say to us. Certainly we do find today communities of persons who have set their hearts on the Lord and are gathered in his love, developing their relationship with him in a way that neither excludes nor denigrates affective bonds, but fosters their wholesome growth. Under such conditions, these intimate bonds are easily forged between those who share this love most deeply; and they are spontaneously extended to the whole world.

*Christ's own approach*

It will be helpful here to reflect on the first evangelical community, to see what happened in actuality to those men and women Christ first bound together in his love, thereby creating a warm, open, human community. The model is not an unrealistic one, the fruit of wishful thinking. These men were appallingly like us. They were stubborn, individualistic and incredibly intolerant. They were as unpromising as we are. How did Christ mould them into a community of his love?

I do not propose to treat this subject in the abstract. I prefer to go directly to the original source, holy scripture, in order to see how Christ himself gradually led his disciples to become a community. It is in the evangelical narratives that we will learn to understand what it actually meant for them to be his disciples, to be drawn together to form an evangelical-apostolic community. When we read, prayerfully, the gospels and the other New Testament writings, it becomes obvious that the whole intention of Christ's living among men, and in the midst of the particular group who were his disciples, was to transform them: so that they would respond spontaneously and humanly to himself and to each other – that is, to do as he did himself. Because they loved him intensely, because they were fond of him and affectively attached to him, they adopted his manner of life and gradually accepted his way of thinking and behaviour.

In the process, they tended to grow closer to one another. Sharing the same deep love for him, they found themselves thinking and acting on the same wave-length, and therefore understanding one another better. They felt a mutual need of communion. In a word, they became fond of one another and were known as an authentic living and loving community, the community of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The process was a slow one, requiring on the part of Christ an infinite patience, and it was not fully accomplished

until the day of Pentecost, when the fulness of the Spirit renewed them. Until then, although they were full of good will, they were slow to understand and weak. However, as time went on, and most especially when Christ's earthly life came to its climax in the pascal mysteries, these disciples grew in their communion in Christ. Here, the gospel narratives of Christ risen are particularly relevant to our purposes. They show us in a vivid crescendo how the disciples became a real community when, in their attachment to the Lord, they began to share at a deeper level with one another, and, in the process, experienced an increasingly stronger affective bond among themselves.

A striking feature of the evangelical narratives which deal with the episodes which immediately followed Christ's passion and death is the gathering of the disciples in secret, 'for fear of the Jews'.<sup>2</sup> It was the very human experience of fear and anguish which brought and kept them together. They knew that they could be recognized as followers of Jesus, in danger of being sought out and subjected to a fate similar to his.

During these hours together, behind barred doors,<sup>3</sup> they certainly shared their disillusionment and their sorrow that the Lord, whom they dearly loved, was no longer with them. It was true that he had said that he would rise again on the third day, yet they had seen him hanging on the cross, mocked by those who passed<sup>4</sup> as the messiah who was supposed to restore Israel!<sup>5</sup> Some of them had laid him in the tomb and had seen the stone rolled across over the entrance, almost sealing off their hopes.

In spite of all this, however, the depth and intensity of their grief, which was evidence of the strength and vitality of their affection for the master, made them share recollections of him, of the things he had done, of what he had said to them. These memories revived and kept alive their very dim hope that he might rise. It was this same attachment that led some of them at last to share the desire to do something for him. A few women who had prepared spices and ointments waited anxiously for the hour when they could return to the tomb and embalm the body of the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

A little more than a day had passed, when something more significant happened among the group of disciples. They began to share new and personal experiences, and the concerns which these

<sup>2</sup> Cf Jn 20, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Mk 15, 29-32.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Jn 20, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Lk 23, 55-6.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Lk 23, 35-8.

occasioned. Notice how all these experiences which relate to the Lord are shared with those who are close to each other because of him. In every case we can sense a deeply-felt need to communicate with their brethren whatever anxiety, surprise, joy or consolation they were experiencing. It was in ways like this, by manifesting their strong mutual affection, that they helped and supported one another, and stimulated their desire to search for the Lord and ultimately find him together.

And very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they went to the tomb, just as the sun was rising. They had been saying to one another, 'who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'<sup>7</sup>

When Mary of Magdala saw that the stone had been moved she *came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved.* 'They have taken the Lord out the of tomb', she said, 'and we don't know where they have put him'.<sup>8</sup>

And as the other women stood there,

*not knowing what to think,* two men in brilliant clothing suddenly appeared at their side. 'Why do you look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here; he has risen. Remember what he told you when he was still in Galilee'. And they remembered his words. When the women returned from the tomb *they told all this to the eleven and to all the others.* The other women with them also told the apostles, but this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them.<sup>9</sup>

It is true, the whole story did seem pure nonsense. 'Peter, however, went running to the tomb'.<sup>10</sup> As John says, completing Luke's account, 'Peter set out with the other disciple to go to the tomb'.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that they were the oldest and the youngest in the group, that they were very close to one another, that the others knew it and appreciated their friendship. In the case of Mary Magdalene, we have seen that she went first to them, to tell them her own experiences, before the other women gave the news to the rest.

Still more significant is the fact that it was because Mary and the others fully shared their experiences of the risen Lord that, in spite of the reluctance to believe them, and notwithstanding their doubts, Peter and John at least felt impelled to go and see. Their affection

<sup>7</sup> Mk 16, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Lk 24, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 20, 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Jn 20, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Lk 24, 4-11.

for the Lord, stirred up by what the women had told them, prevailed over the doubts and made them feel the need to go out, at a considerable risk to themselves, to find out what had happened. The mutual sharing and communication was the beginning of a new experience in faith and a new encounter with the Lord, which, because this too was shared with the others, was destined to lead the group to a deeper faith in the messiah and to a greater love for him.

They ran together, but the other disciple, running faster than Peter, reached the tomb first . . . but did not go in. Simon Peter, who was following and now came up, went right into the tomb . . . Then the other disciple . . . also went in; *he saw and he believed*. Until that moment they had failed to understand the meaning of scripture, that he must rise from the dead. The disciples then went home.<sup>12</sup>

No doubt when they came home they discussed what had happened with their friends and tried to share with them the new insights which had come to them, because of their belief, concerning the reality of the risen Lord. Meanwhile,

Mary stayed outside near the tomb, weeping . . . 'Woman, why are you weeping?' 'They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him'. As she said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not recognize him. Jesus said, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?'<sup>13</sup>

We know the evangelical account and the response, full of affection, which Mary gave when, finally, Jesus called her by name, 'Mary!' Knowing him then, she said to him in hebrew, 'Rabboni', and clung to his feet.<sup>14</sup>

At this point, a new and highly relevant element appears. It is the Lord himself who directs her: '*Go and find the brothers and tell them. I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*'.<sup>15</sup> It is he who, when he has manifested himself to her, wishes her to share with the others what she has received. 'So Mary of Magdala went and *told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her*'.<sup>16</sup> Mary did not consider it necessary to keep to herself what must certainly have been for her a beautiful and deeply personal experience. What the Lord gives to one of his beloved is destined to be of value for others as well. And, as we learn from the gospel accounts,<sup>17</sup> it is because of Peter's and Mary's

<sup>12</sup> Jn 20, 3-10.

<sup>15</sup> Jn 20, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Jn 20, 11-15.

<sup>16</sup> Jn 20, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Jn 20, 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Cf Lk 24, 34.

sharing their own encounters with the risen Lord that the disciples, who had stayed together in Jerusalem, enjoyed that very same Easter day the knowledge that their Lord was not among the dead, but was alive. Their faith and hope had been restored and revived by the light received by the two who had been privileged to *see* him before he would appear to them all in the evening.

Again and again the gospel narratives demonstrate how their love and fondness for the Lord was interwoven with the bonds of affection that Christ himself had gradually established among the men and women who committed themselves to him. We know in fact that on 'that very same day, two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and were *talking together about all that had happened*. Now as they talked this over, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side, but something prevented them from recognizing him'.<sup>18</sup>

The two disciples of Emmaus were obviously in sombre mood, lonely and profoundly disappointed because the one they deeply loved was no longer with them. Yet their hearts were still full of him. If they had left Jerusalem, it was because of their grief that 'Jesus of Nazareth, who proved he was a great prophet by the things he said and did in the sight of God and all the people',<sup>19</sup> had been sentenced to death and crucified. Their fondness for him could be measured by their sadness, and most of all by the fact that they could not do anything else but talk about him: and this not only between themselves, but even to the stranger who associated himself with them as they walked along. Furthermore, we can appreciate even better the strength of their attachment to him if we consider the intense feeling which made their hearts 'burn within them' as the stranger talked to them on the road, explaining to them the scriptures.<sup>20</sup> It is true that they had left the holy city in spite of the fact that some women from their group had astounded them with their tales about the empty tomb and the vision of angels: news which had been confirmed by some of their friends.<sup>21</sup> It is also true that their hope had gone. And yet they obviously loved the master intensely. They felt the need of pressing the man who had been willing to listen and to talk with them on the subject which preoccupied them, to stay with them, because the day was almost over.<sup>22</sup> Even more revealing is the fact that, when their eyes were

<sup>18</sup> Lk 24, 13-15.

<sup>21</sup> Cf Lk 24, 22-4.

<sup>19</sup> Lk 24, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Cf Lk 24, 28-9.

<sup>20</sup> Lk 24, 32.



opened and they had recognized him, 'they set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem'.<sup>23</sup> They felt a compelling need to go back to their brethren and inform them, without any delay, that the Lord had risen. They could not keep to themselves the joy of knowing that the master was alive. Those who had lovingly shared their sufferings and their disillusionment were to share their joy as well.

With his powerful brevity, St Luke makes obvious the depth of the bond which existed among the Lord's followers when he relates what took place when the two disciples arrived in Jerusalem and found the eleven assembled together with their companions. As the newcomers announced that they had seen the Lord, the others replied, 'Yes, it is true. The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon'.<sup>24</sup> The freshness of this account reveals an intense community relationship. It is full of human overtones; it speaks pointedly of mutual affection; it shows that their fondness for one another had become more and more pervasive because of the one they all loved intensely, each in his own way, which was personal without being individualistic, in a genuinely communitarian context.

#### *Respect for the dissenter*

All of this becomes even more evident when we consider the attitude of the group towards the one who, in a sense, had isolated himself from the others – Thomas. The reason for his behaviour is not difficult to find. His own powerful love for the Lord and the deep suffering which Christ's death entailed for him made some solitude indispensable. We must remember that, a few weeks earlier, while the other apostles were remonstrating, 'Rabbi, it is not long since the Jews wanted to stone you; are you going back (to Judaea)?', Thomas was the one who had shown his desire to share all things with his Lord, for better or for worse. 'Let us go too and die with him'.<sup>25</sup> It is not remarkable, then, that Thomas, a man of strong character and therefore capable of very deep love, should be all alone, desperately searching for an answer to the problem that the Lord's death had posed, that he should be longing, in his solitude and isolation, for the master who was everything to him.

Yet it is touching to see how his brethren, who knew him well, and understood his behaviour and his solitary search, felt the need of reaching out to tell him what they knew, and how Thomas himself, notwithstanding his felt need to be alone, hung around the place

<sup>23</sup> Cf Lk 24, 31-3.

<sup>24</sup> Cf Lk 24, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Jn 11, 8, 16.

where the others were together. 'Thomas, called the twin, who was one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came'.<sup>26</sup> But then, some time in the evening, he returned to the group. The gospel shows how eager his brethren were to share the good news with him. 'We have seen the Lord'.<sup>27</sup> Eight days had to go by before Thomas would be given the grace to see the Lord and to share fully with the others the joy of knowing that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead, that he was the Lord who had conquered death. Eight days had to pass before he could say, like the other members of his community, 'My Lord and my God',<sup>28</sup> and thus come to the fulness of faith in Jesus Christ, the God-Man. The constant recurrence of this theme, reminding us again and again of the affective bond which united each of the disciples with the Lord, and the genuine and warm human love they had for one another, is without doubt a really solid scriptural evidence concerning the character of a genuine religious community.

We can say without hesitation, and without the danger of being simplistic, that the community of the disciples of Jesus Christ, the first evangelical community, became so when its members shared at a deep level the values that really counted with them: their love for the Lord, with all the anguish, sorrow, anxiety, desire and joy which followed it. We can say, in other words, that christian community exists only when its members live a real communion in Christ: and this at the level of a conscious sharing with one another.

I do not mean to imply that the most deeply and uniquely personal experiences, which are characteristic of any inter-personal relationship, and notably of our personal relationship with Christ, must always be shared with everyone! But I do mean that there will never be an authentically evangelical community if there is no communion in Christ, no deep sharing of those core-values which are centred on the person of the Lord who has freely chosen us, so that we might be his companions and might be sent to continue his mission on earth.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, I wish to underline the fact that this very sharing of the Lord's love is, by its nature, based on a deep friendship among the members of the evangelical community, and in its turn, fosters this genuine bond of mutual concern, fondness and affection. We have seen how the relationship which existed among these followers of the Lord, during the three years of his public

<sup>26</sup> Jn 20, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Jn 20, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Jn 20, 28.

<sup>29</sup> Cf Mk 3, 13.

life, became gradually more and more intense, as they grew closer to one another through common sufferings and common joys. It is profoundly moving to watch the inter-play of truly human qualities with those which are delicately divine. The fact that they share the joy of knowing, of having seen the risen Lord, bound them together in a new intimacy. They had experienced the same weaknesses, felt the same pain, enjoyed the same consolations. They had come to understand interiorly many of those realities which the master had explained, but which they could not understand until they lived them in fact. They saw how he had united them to himself and to one another, so that they had become clearly aware that the disciple is not above his master, but that the disciple must be where his master is, must love as he has loved. And the way he had loved was a warm one, at once humanly divine and divinely human. Finally, the disciples felt the deep interior peace that the risen Lord had brought them. They resumed their own most normal activity united by a new affective bond.

Simon Peter said: 'I'm going fishing'. They went out and got into the boat but caught nothing that night.<sup>30</sup> But while they were together, prepared to pull ashore with the kind of disappointment natural for fishermen who have spent a fruitless night, 'there stood Jesus on the shore, though they did not realize that it was he'.<sup>31</sup>

When at his word they let down their nets and caught a large quantity of fish,<sup>32</sup> the disciple Jesus loved had one of his typical spiritual insights. He shared it with his dear old friend, saying to Peter, 'It is the Lord'.<sup>33</sup> Peter's response was instantaneous: he jumped into the water and reached the Lord.<sup>34</sup>

We can see how this same experience of community finds its development in the Acts of the Apostles and in the epistles of Peter, John, and James, as well as in the writings of the last but not the least of the apostles, Paul. But the point I wish to make here is simply that their deep communion in Christ, and the genuine love that bound them together in him, identified them to others as a living cell, a community of believers, a group of men and women who were in love with the Lord, who lived as he had shown them how to live, who loved one another as he had loved them. And for this reason the number of believers increased . . .<sup>35</sup>

This community was apostolic precisely because it was a com-

<sup>30</sup> Cf Jn 21, 2-3.

<sup>33</sup> Jn 21, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Jn 21, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Cf Jn 21, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Cf Jn 21, 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> Cf Acts 5, 14.

munity gathered in the Lord, a community which had him as its focus, one whose members loved one another as the master had urged them to love.

*The first jesuit community*

The very same process took place among the first companions of Ignatius: an aspect of the life and spirituality of the Society which has been too often ignored or underestimated. If one reads carefully the numerous documents in our possession which relate to the early contacts of Ignatius, Peter Favre, Francis Xavier, Laynez, Salmerón, Rodrigues, Bobadilla, one is struck forcibly by the growing need Ignatius experienced for spiritual companions with whom he could relate concerning his own aspiration to follow the Lord. He wished to live with such men, sharing his preoccupation of serving God and announcing Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, one will note how Ignatius, from the time of his experience at Manresa and still more when he was in Paris as a student, became a magnet which attracted others who seemed 'best equipped and disposed to share his own desire and intention'.<sup>36</sup>

Peter Favre has left us in his *Memoriale* a vivid account of his own experience, when he was allowed to become a room-mate of Ignatius and Francis Xavier, and to share the deep spiritual communion which bound them in a community of genuine fraternal love.

Layneze tells us also how the friendship of these men grew stronger and stronger as time went on, because they continued to share deeply what had brought them together: that is, their experience of the Lord. Because of their brotherly affection, they were strengthened in their resolutions, both by prayer and by their sacramental experience of confession and communion, by their study of theology, as well as their determination to give themselves totally to the service of God in complete poverty. We also learn from Laynez that during this time they used to go to one another's homes by previous arrangement to take their meals together.<sup>37</sup>

In this friendship, which was at the same time virile and delicate, each one encouraged the others to love and serve God; each one carried the burden of the others and knew that his own was carried by the others. Ignatius helped them to see how they were strengthened in their spiritual resolutions by their mutual sharing, and how the love of God is necessarily embodied in the love of the brethren.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Cf Polanco, J. A.: MHSI, *Fontes Narrativi*, 1, pp 182-3, 263-4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 102-4.

<sup>38</sup> Cf Giuliani, M.: *Prière et Action* (Paris, 1966), p 163.

They did not see the communitarian bond merely as an end in itself. It was interwoven with their longing to share our Lord's life and mission, with their determination to be at the service of Christ in the continuation of his work on earth. For this, they shared their apostolic desires and intentions, their missionary plans and ideals. They were very different in terms of temperament, background and culture, but they were at one in those dispositions which led them to gather together at Montmartre, and pledge themselves in prayer to follow the manifestation of God's will: to go without any hesitation to preach the gospel of Christ wherever he would send them.

It was to be in this search accomplished together, in this deliberate determination to accept whatever God indicated as his will for them, in this missionary *élan*, that they were to experience more and more the depths of their mutual bond. The love of Christ had brought them together; the Spirit of Christ fostered and sealed that 'communion of hearts' which made of them an apostolic community, totally oriented to carry on the mission of the Lord.

They listened attentively to the Spirit; they shared what they experienced; they pondered in prayer; they waited for light of the Spirit to know what to do and how to respond. During this process each one begged the Spirit to speak; each one confronted the others with his point of view and listened to theirs, and this more than once. But they conferred in complete detachment and utter openness, because it was all done in the presence of God.

They were 'moved by the same Spirit', that is, each of them experienced the same inclination as the others for the same form of life, in complete fidelity to their most intimate desires – for each and all of them a prolonged yearning for the service of God. These companions were thus bound together by a deep friendship, constantly nourished by a common spirit of generosity, by an unshakeable ideal wholly shared, and above all by the ardent love each of them had for Christ, which made them open to new inspirations, docile to the promptings of the Spirit, ready to answer God's demands. This is what made an authentic community, grounded on the love that God poured into the hearts of those who were members of this *Compañía de amor*, as Francis Xavier later called it.

He used that phrase when, writing from the Orient, he poured his tears over the letters he had received from his father Ignatius.<sup>39</sup> He sensed then that Ignatius and himself were one, because it was

<sup>39</sup> Cf MHSJ, *Epistolae S. Francisci Xaverii*, Ep. 70 (12 Jan 1549), p 8.

the same stream of love coming from God that flooded their hearts, urging them both to serve him with the same relentless dynamism.

*Criteria for today*

What then are the practical implications for us who strive to form communities in 1973 of these experiences of Christ's first followers and of those who first joined St Ignatius in the same high adventure, for us who are striving to form communities in 1973? It seems to me that the following are essential prerequisites for the existence and growth of any authentic religious apostolic community:

(1) Members must be more than notionally aware that our religious-apostolic life has value and meaning only if it is the outcome of a *deeply personal and spiritual experience*. This experience comes from and is centred on the person of Christ, sent by the Father to live and die for the sake of men.

(2) They must realize that this religious experience involves, by its nature, a *communitarian dimension*. Because the experience derives from God and is destined to be shared by many people, and because of the mission which apostolic religious are called to accomplish, they have a deep spiritual affinity which establishes a most important relationship.

(3) This experience must be constantly deepened and renewed. As in the case of any personal relationship, our relationship with Christ is destined to grow and to lead us to an ever more intimate knowledge of him. But this is made possible only by a profound spirit of prayer and by prayer itself.

(4) Yet, because this experience involves people who have been called and are constantly called by God to be united in a community which has its own charism and its own spirit, the *experience itself cannot be deepened and lived out on a merely individual level*. For too long, many apostolic religious have lived without sharing with their brethren what was most intimate in them. Very often the results are individualism, selfishness, isolationism, lack of mutual support and of openness to God's demands with regard to our mission.

(5) The aberrations noted above are due also to the fact that genuine, deep and warm human affective relationships have often been discouraged. Unfortunately, in many instances, this attitude has been rooted in a false theology which led many to consider any human element in our lives as detracting from the totality of our consecration, and therefore to be systematically curbed. A true community requires persons who are capable not only of accepting one

another, but of warm, spontaneous, wholesome human relationships, which they can maintain in the nitty-gritty of daily life, in spite of the depressing aspects which are quite certain to emerge in protracted contact with any human personality.

Taking these five points as major premises, and looking ahead at what we can do, at how we should proceed, I would like to propose the following criteria:

(a) *Communities should be structured in such a way that the type of deeply spiritual and human sharing here envisaged can be effectively promoted.*

(b) To this end, communities should be, as far as possible, of a human size; that is, such that members can have personal contacts among themselves. However, it is equally clear that we cannot assume one formula to be valid for every case. There are different psychological needs, different apostolic exigencies; and we must also take into account the special needs of the older and sick members of our Society.

(c) Experience drawn from all over the world and from many religious institutes shows beyond doubt that *any new form of community life is viable only* when the reasons which urge the members to adopt it are a genuine desire and a deliberate determination

to search for the Lord together

to lead a more evangelical (and therefore poor) life

to respond to an apostolic need which has been recognized as valid only after a real and honest discernment.

(d) Experience also shows that these new forms are valid and produce positive results only when the people involved in them *feel the imperative need to have longer times of personal prayer and of shared prayer* (which leads to 'shared silence'), and *which find their climax in the eucharistic celebration.*

(e) It is therefore necessary that in the communities *time should be set aside at regular intervals* (but with flexibility) to share with others apostolic experiences, joys and failures, spiritual insights and reflections etc. Then the communities gradually become more united, and their members become aware that they are not only or primarily persons engaged in activity, but are first of all effectively members of a religious apostolic community.

(f) Experience shows further that only when this spirit of fraternal unity is present can the community maintain itself in an *attitude of constant self-evaluation and readiness to listen to God's demands.* This attitude in its turn prevents stagnation, self-satisfaction and lack of readiness to adapt to the needs of the time.

(g) In this context one can see the importance of the role of each member of the community as well as that of the superior. The latter, having been freed from other duties for this task, should be particularly attentive to the needs of others so as to foster, with the collaboration of all, the growth of individuals and their response to the Lord, thus contributing to the building of the community.

The more each individual tries to respond to God's action within him, the more he will find himself united with the others. In fact, God has called him and continues to call him to live and work in the Society, which is a social body. Naturally, this will not and should not lead to uniformity, but to a substantial unity which is enriched by the variety of gifts and insights of each of those whom God has called together.

For us as for the apostles, the very fact of becoming a genuine community in Christ will constitute us an apostolic community. If we are to be open to the world of men beloved of God, they will see how we love him and one another, and they will come to drink at this source of living water. They will wish to join in our prayer; they will wish to share our vision of the Lord, constantly intensified by fraternal interchange and to experience the warmth of that love which he alone fosters.

There are many ways to work at building community, most of them worthy of our serious attention. Because a human person cannot be compartmentalized, psychology and sociology can render a real service in this process, provided they are used in genuine integration with theology. The social sciences contribute effectively to the building of religious community when men are regarded consistently as persons who are under God's action, influence and presence. He is more intimate to man than man is to himself. Accordingly, any approach to religious, or even to human life which denies the primacy to this dimension can only result in a destructive dichotomy. A religious, therefore, cannot be understood and cannot be helped to develop in himself or in his manifold relationships with others, if God's activity is not seen as the most important element in his life and personality. In the last analysis, since it is the love of Christ which gathered us together, and constitutes our essential bond, the fundamental soundness of our relationships as members of a community must ultimately depend on the strength and authenticity of that love.