

# A THEOLOGY OF COMMUNITY

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THE TOPIC of this essay is ecclesial community, with some thought for how this is affected by social and cultural change. I wish to present three points for consideration. In the first place I will make a quick, theologically relevant survey of the present scene. Secondly, I will ask how community expresses itself and what are the possible conflicts in development. Thirdly, I will suggest that hope for the future lies in the recuperation of mystical tradition.

## *The present situation*

It has become almost fashionable to describe the current crisis in western civilization through images of W. B. Yeats' poem, *The Second Coming*:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The failure of nerve and the agony involved in the creation, organization and development of ecclesial communities is part and parcel of the crisis of community and society in our entire western culture. There are few nations through which the search for values by which men may live is firmly directed. Using the image of the broken centre, Nathan Scott describes this as the collapse of traditional premises regarding the radical significance of things, the absence of any robust common faith, the turning of basic cultural presuppositions into yawning question marks.<sup>1</sup> Since western civilization was so definitely grounded in christian presuppositions and traditions, it is not surprising that the decay of these presuppositions for society in general should also raise questions for ecclesial

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, Nathan A.: 'The Broken Center: A Definition of the Crisis of Values in Modern Literature', in *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, ed Rollo May (New York, 1960), pp 178-202.

communities of every type. The crisis cannot be met by strengthening the traditional expression of christian faith, in the hope that at least the ecclesial communities may hold together. Too much of traditional christianity's use of images, paradigms and structures is alien to the present reality and current experience.

The dissolution of community means the isolation of the individual, and the worst isolation of all is the feeling of an absence of shared values. With many fine examples, Nathan Scott spells out what this means for the writer in the common experience and its traditional expressions. Today, traditional images are unable to furnish significant meaning, so the artist has to carve out new meaning and new images for himself.<sup>2</sup>

This is not unlike the position of many a Christian (and many a religious). The community (confession, diocese, parish, institute) to which he belongs offers no significant meaning to sustain him. He must carve out a meaning and an expression for himself. He cannot absolve himself from the struggle by promising fidelity to an institution. He must explore meaning and he must trace out the trail for himself, if there is no man to walk with him. This is the contemporary eremitical experience, lived now not in the desert but in the asphalt jungle, not in a removal of one's person from society but in the isolation of the spirit from commuter traffic and computer systems.

If for no other reason than that man is gregarious, people who are isolated from the centre tend to converge together on the fringe. This spawns many an odd-shaped beast, but it also gives birth to hopeful discoveries. The emergence of many new community endeavours is a growing phenomenon in christian churches. The most significant of such ventures are not clerical but lay; they are not the outcome of religious institutes but of freely associated lay groups. Charismatic movement, *focolarini*, *comunidad di base*, marriage encounter, are words which by this stage say something to all of us. But I am thinking even more of groups that have no name, groups where people come together in a radical sharing of all that they have and are — a group of ten in a small town in the interior of Brazil, a group of seven in the outskirts of a big European city, an open house in a North American village where you are liable to find anybody at the breakfast table, and so on.

It is no surprise that such a phenomenon appears on the scene at the present time. The most inspiring, the most colourful and the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

most meaningful developments in christian community have emerged in times of crisis when forms of society were changing. Monasticism (and so religious life) is in its origins a christian lay movement, born at least in part out of disgust with the high priests' unlawful wedlock with earthly princes. For Jesus of Nazareth, for Paul of Tarsus, for Calixtus of Rome, the community of disciples was a refusal to conform to the patterns of this world. For three centuries, the christian community was essentially non-conformist. Then it gave in, and the christian man was hard pressed to proclaim the lordship of Christ over the lordship of Caesar. In monasticism, Christians sought a more truly evangelical, that is, gospel-rooted, community of living than that which they could find in a Church whose hierarchy, ceremony and possessions were configured to the imperial court. The Christians of Jerusalem had set up their common life in dissociation from the Jews who knew not Christ (Acts 2, 42ff); and at least some of the Christians of Rome would establish their common life in dissociation from an expediently christianized populace.

In the thirteenth century there were many movements of lay fraternities and apostolic groups. Not all of them lived for long; but it needs to be remembered that the mendicant orders were the issue of something greater and more widespread. It was the genius of a Dominic and a Francis that they were able to formulate an enduring inspiration. When looking for a community of apostles, Dominic found that he could not brook the feudal system of association; and Francis found it hard to recognize a disciple of Christ beneath the richly embroidered smock. So Dominic founded an order wherein every man was ruler, and Francis gathered a group wherein every man was naked with Christ on the Cross. And if you wonder whether Ignatius had any answers for his times, just think of the fact that renaissance humanism was countered by the meditation on sin and death; and those who read the greek and latin classics were directed to read the gospels of Jesus Christ.

If we ask whence the contemporary search for new community derives its energy and light, the answer is clear enough: from the *memoria evangelica* and the Spirit of Christ implanted in man's heart. Hitherto, we were persuaded that Christ was in our midst, in the church institution which he had founded and in the sacrament which we adored. This gave fixed and rigid forms to community activity and the community structure. The conviction has grown in recent years that we have, to our own destruction, neglected other modes of his presence: the word of his gospel, the sacrament which we eat, and

the spirit which we have drunk in baptism. When adverted to, these can do startling and stupendous things among us.

Remembering Jesus is in its own way an odd experience; but he told us himself that we should do this, and he told us that if the Spirit had any serious business among us it was precisely this of calling to our minds the things which he had done and said. Remembering is a far more forceful urge in shaping life and action than institutions; so when it is indulged, institutions are bound to receive a few hard knocks — and shocks. The greatest shock of all may be that of being told that, at least for the time being, this community in Christ may get along without the formal procedures of institutional life and approval. And it is disquieting to see the raised eyebrow when you protest that the Church can be poor only within limits, since it has a world to rule, or statesmen's games to play, or ancient priests to pension off in retirement homes. But the raised eyebrow is one of the hazards in a community which remembers Jesus.

So the action comes from the gospel-word by which Jesus Christ is remembered, and from the Spirit a-blowing. They are the vital forces, but they are not yet the community. So let us come back to earth. What shape is the community going to take?

### *How Community expresses itself<sup>3</sup>*

Here, I have three things to talk about: participation, institution, and symbol-system. No true community exists without participation and symbol-system; and it certainly will not last for long (if it cares to last, for that is another unspeakable thing that some modern communities do, thumb their noses at life-spans) without attending to the need for institutional forms.

It may seem trite, but allow me to say it: participation is what community is all about. It is just a question of deciding what kinds of participation are wanted. We had a working definition of the Church, way back in 1954: the Church is the communion of those who profess the same faith, receive the same sacraments, offer the same sacrifice, obey the same government (ecclesiastical, be it understood, though some non-Catholics feared that it meant other things besides!). I will spare the blushes of elderly men, and cite no manuals, though I could.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Paul Ricoeur: 'The Tasks of the Political Educator', in *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973), pp 142-52.

Those now interested in community would hardly enthuse about such a description of participation. It sounds too like the layman's activity of putting his hand in his pocket and his knees on the pew. Where then do we go? Jesus did say (we are still trying to remember him): love one another. That sounds more enticing, even if it is a little risky. Oddly enough, quite a few communities nowadays are having a go. Jesus also said: bear one another's burdens, comfort one another with a holy kiss, ask my Father in my name and he will give it to you, do always the will of him that sent me, the Spirit will teach and every man will be taught. When communities look for the meaning of participation, they test and probe to see what all these things may convey.

The institution may find some of the results hard to brook. Knocking altars out of the back walls of chapels is manageable, changing clothes is rougher since you have to start choosing your ties or matching the colour of your blouse with your hair. But the limit is reached when you cannot tell whether a community consensus does or does not mean taking a vote.

But let us not be too rough on institutions, and take a look at the purposes which they do serve. Any community's institutional forms have to determine the ways in which relations between persons in the community are regulated, if the social sphere is to be respected. They also regulate control of the power of decision-making in the group, as well as the relations of the institute or community with other communities and societies. Only the grossly naïve (no need for you to start naming them: they have names with which to answer back) will say that these are matters which do not need regulation. Maybe we do not have to be too uptight about the regulations, but we will not get on without them.

Changing them is what causes trouble; but if the modes of participation which they serve are changing, the institutions will have to change in turn. And like stone walls, they do not yield too easily. Control of the power of decision-making, based on a wide sharing in this activity, is one of the hard things to achieve. Those who have the power tend to hold tight, and we end up with elaborate distinctions (distractions) about passive and active, deliberative and consultative, and so on. And by the time the rules are worked out, there are no more members.

On symbols in community, I can appeal to the master in the field and quote Paul Ricoeur:

. . . Values are the very substance of the life of people. This is found expressed in practical *mores* which represent some sort of inertia, the statics of values. Under this skin of practical *mores* we find traditions, which are like the living memory of a civilization. Finally, at a deeper level, we find what is perhaps the very kernel of the phenomenon of civilization — a collection of images and symbols by which a human group expresses its adaptations to reality, to other groups and to history. . . . One could speak in this sense of the ethico-mythical kernel, the kernel both moral and imaginative which embodies the ultimate creaturely power of a group. . . . Each historical group in this sense has an *ethos*, an ethical singularity which is a power of creation linked to a tradition, to a memory, to an archaic rooting.<sup>4</sup>

More important for the community than the change in structures is the revival of symbols and traditions: not practices and habits, which belong to another world than that of traditions. There is all the difference between a Church which is used to the habit of praying in Latin, and a Church which has the tradition of healing the sick.

The conflict between institutions and symbols can be sharp and bloody. The institution cries, 'close the ranks'; while the symbol urges, 'expand experience'. If you don't believe me, look at an example. Of the bishop we say both that he is a member of the hierarchy and that he is the *servus servorum*. The first designation is clear-cut and categorical: he has the power, and the controls are in his hands, and he wants people to co-operate (being too polite and sensitive to say, conform or obey). The second designation to some seems fuzzy. But the truth of the matter is that it presses hard and does not let a man get away with too much, especially if he reads that thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel, a truly ethical singularity in a world of opportunity and advancement!

Consider, too, what a parody of life the Eucharist, chief of our symbols, makes: provided you celebrate it according to the gospels (which is not quite the same thing as celebrating it according to Gregory). It is not that it needs to be turned into a home-spun coffee and doughnuts session, for the ritual is taxing and mind-shattering; but it abounds in symbols of poverty and passage, in the exaltation of the weak and the humbling of the exalted, in the defiance of soft pleasures and in hymns to pain: ecstatic, to be sure, not masochistic; but pain is pain for all that and when it is God's pain it is harder still

<sup>4</sup> *Art. cit.*, p 146.

to bear.<sup>5</sup> We do not exactly need to have resort to Jonathan Seagull to keep the Holy Spirit alive: the passion narrative is still a winner when it comes to drama, even when you tell it with Judas in centre-stage. As far as paradigmatic experiences are concerned, not only Jesus but quite a few of his disciples through the ages have provided us with some worth the telling — Lawrence of Rome, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila.

I have talked of institutions, and it is worth remarking, to name but a few, that ideally the institution is grounded in and subservient to the sacramental or symbolic.<sup>6</sup> Properly to understand the institution, you have to ask not what laws it makes and procedures it follows, but what values and meaning it represents. You can ask a person to supervise procedures only if he realizes that in the first instance his position represents meaning and value. If he has this sense of things, he knows the limits as well as the facilitating power of institutions.

Unfortunately, symbols can quickly be transformed into static images. They are by usage forced into representing only one version of reality. It is like turning a searchlight on one spot and keeping it fixed rigidly there, even though it could light up the rest of the compound as well. What happens is that the concept is put before the symbol, instead of letting the symbol give a pattern to experience. You can say, for example, that the priest has power to offer Mass, and that the paten and chalice stand for this power. What happens if you see the paten and chalice as plate and cup? Or as far as the priest is concerned, what if you took the latin sense of elder, and probed what it means to live as an elder in a community?

At present we have some images of community which do not seem to fit our experience very well. In discomfort, we either try to force the experience into the image and end up with something misshapen (like putting the sense of greater sharing in decision-making into the images of the democratic vote or of the benevolent ruler who believes in consulting); or we are left with an unformed experience, with no suggestive imagery by which to construe its pattern. The examples of ossified images are many: being one in faith means reciting the Nicene Creed, the *fuga mundi* means taking yourself bodily out of the market-place, poverty means having no personal account, communal penance means giving general absolution. The trouble is rarely with

<sup>5</sup> Cf David N. Power: 'The Song of the Lord in an Alien Land', in *Concilium*, 92 (February 1974), pp 99-101.

<sup>6</sup> Cf David N. Power: *Christian Priest: Elder and Prophet* (London, 1973).

the power of the image: it is in the fact that the image is made to fit but one idea. So let your mind rove and explore the power of the image in giving a new look to old things, or in finding the pattern in what is new.

### *The ground of community*

As Christ in his time, and not without the shedding of blood, overcame the limits of judaism, so today we want to overcome the limits of a traditional christianity. We want to explore a new sense of oneness among ourselves, we want to blow our minds wide open and know our oneness with the Hindu and the Buddhist and the Moslem. We want to lie 'naked on the naked earth', and know again the communion with the beasts which was one of the delights of Adam's garden. This imposes a radical departure from historical divisions, from exploitation of persons and groups, from the pollution of discountenancing brother earth and sister water, from the sense of privilege and position which regulates our encounter with God and man. The memory of Christ and the Spirit, which are the energies we possess, will derive their power to meet these desires from a revival of mystical tradition, as ground to all renewal. In accepting the finalities of that experience, in refurbishing our hopes for the *fruitio Dei et se invicem in Deo*, we can revitalize our sharing and fill out our images and symbols with the power which they natively possess.

Mystical tradition centres on unity, a unity focused on transcendence, broad enough to include all men, utopian in its prospects and yet compassionate in its forms. Perhaps we can begin to understand what this means by investigating the dimensions of a communion in love between two persons. It is a starting point which God himself in his foolishness has suggested, by using that startling story of Hosea and his wife.

Loving another person means in the first place being, or learning to be, wholly attentive to the other, herself and her aspirations, and learning to feel with her (or him, if the reader must transpose the sentence for reasons of sex). But you will not feel with another unless you learn to feel with yourself first; so love also implies being wholly oneself in the relationship. Oddly enough, the two do not become two in one flesh until they both in consort recognize that their personal intimacy must yield before and be absorbed into a higher transcendence, into a greater oneness which is beyond any present communion,



beyond what eye has seen or ear heard or what man's heart has thought up. This is opening up the relationship to the Other who is Other to the other whom I love, and Other to the communion which we form. We become most truly other to each other when as one mind and one heart, we become an other to the Other of God, and are caught up beyond that other and Other to a final oneness.

Maybe you feel a vague uneasiness about this mystical stuff. It sounds, I hear someone say, like a cop-out, like a way of dodging social responsibilities, unhappily indeed like the hermits going off into the desert. It sits uneasily with a people growing more socially aware. Having gone one step forward, shall we go three steps back in virtue of this mystical yen?

Let me first quote a writer who lived so far back that he will not be suspect of special pleading (as I might be), and then I will have my own say. Allow me to quote a monk of the thirteenth century, Richard of St Victor, where he speaks of the four stages of mystical ascent:

In the first degree, God enters into the soul and she turns inward into herself. In the second, she ascends above herself and is lifted up to God. In the third, the soul lifted up to God passes altogether into him. In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends below herself. In the first she enters into herself, in the second she goes forth from herself. In the first she reaches her own life, in the third she reaches God. In the first she goes forth on her own behalf, in the fourth she goes forth because of her neighbour. In the first she enters in by meditation, in the second she ascends by contemplation, in the third she is led into jubilation, in the fourth she goes out by compassion.<sup>7</sup>

Notice how Richard contrasts that first stage, when the soul is centred on herself (if you want to transpose into twentieth-century language, substitute person for soul), with the other three stages, when the soul goes forth from herself for God and neighbour. Yet she is not a bad person; in fact she has achieved quite a lot and probably appears in the village as a doer of good. She has entered into herself by meditation, she is self-contained, placid, in full control of self, and she is seeking to do good to others because she believes that that is the right thing to do. But Richard does not think much of her! She has to love herself and her self-possession to reach out for God, she has to tumble in the hay with him, she has to learn as yet the

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by R. C. Zaehner: *Concordant Discord: The Interpretation of Faiths* (Oxford, 1970), p 315.

Song of Songs, and she has still to come to love the peasant for himself, and not because he is a peasant to whom one 'ought' to do good.

Richard, I believe, allows us a new look at the relation between God and neighbour. You do not solve that riddle by the simple answer that to love one's neighbour is to love God. The equation may stand, but it needs to be broken down for examination purposes.

We have our moral norms and we might be at the stage where we wish to be moral persons. For that reason, we keep the norms and pursue our moral values. Maybe we do so at considerable sacrifice. St Paul talks about burning bodies and giving up one's substance. If the purpose is self-perfection, or the ideal society, or the welfare of the poor as a thing that every right-thinking man desires, 'you have not charity'.

One begins to make some progress when one takes the neighbour seriously as 'other'. It is in that sense that the erudite theologian says that the service of neighbour posits the question about God.

If this leaves you mystified as ever, ponder this example. Suppose you are faced with another person, whom you never met before. He knocks at the front door, he is obviously hungry and needs a coat on his back to keep out the cold. At first, you see him as one of the poor (even God's poor, if you like pious language); you give him a crust and a cast-off jacket which would look out of place in the office but has enough warmth in it to stop a man freezing. You can send him on his way then, or you can ask yourself whether he may not have some more personal needs. What is this kind of life doing to him? Does he perhaps need a chat more than he needs a coat? You are beginning to get out of your own categories of what is good and what it is to do good. You are now facing the question of what an 'other' may feel, think, want, without any supposition that you yourself have the right answer. Suppose, then, that he answers the invitation to chat, and that he goes beyond the point of telling about himself to asking about you. Your first reaction to this is aversion, but you have to say something to his questions; and the sensitivity he shows in response to your unwilling answers takes you by surprise. So you let yourself be conquered, and speak to him. Once you have delivered yourself over to that kind of communication, you never know where to end. To pursue the relation with the 'other' is eventually to put the question to ultimate meaning and the demands of ultimate sharing. To such question and demands, men give the name 'God'.

To face that sort of issue can well impose a withdrawal from activity. One must know the self, collect one's wits, gather the self together

into some kind of consistent unity. One also needs to think about God and man, to learn contemplation. Such withdrawal is not selfish. It is a simple recognition that we continue to develop community by 'doing good' only if we expand consciousness, dig deep and wander far in the spirit (spell Spirit, if you wish). One then does the things that Richard talks about: enter into yourself, reach out for God and reach out for neighbour. The contemplation (and compassion) gives a new depth to the love of neighbour. It changes the communion in oneness which is sought, because it knows that openness means shedding the individuation of the one over against the other which we so heartily try to maintain. 'If a person wishes to enter into life, he must die'.

How then does this recuperation of mystical tradition give substance and force to the symbols and paradigms of community?

It gives a sense of purpose and finality. It allows for differentiation of cultures, traditions and religions, but at the same time it unites in a common bond and feeling. It makes sense of living in eschatological hope, fills out the biblical imagery which otherwise remains noisily apocalyptic.

It does not allow fear to put a *Stop* sign on the road, but willingly if apprehensively lives through death experience. While seeking communion, it is not afraid to face being lost, abandoned and isolated. It allows for the sense of despair which men feel in face of crumbling reality, and which churchmen feel in face of decaying institutions. With Jesus Christ, it knows that to live for one's friends one may very well have to die apart and separated from them. It builds a bridge with the sense of nihilism and isolation which is so common today among those who put the eternal question 'why?', and find no answer in traditional religion, marxist states and drug experiences.

It is not afraid of withdrawal, of allowing for peak experiences in the uselessness of a liturgy, or of a flight into the desert to pray and struggle with Satan. It knows full well that if a man is to change his horizons, he has to go through times and rites of passage and transition. It nods its head sagely when it hears of houses of prayer, just as it shakes it when it hears of noviciate programmes which are based on the behavioural training methods of a Skinner.

It gives meaning to compassion and teaches us to live beyond the achievement of human rights. It sees the importance of filling the rice bowls, just as it sees the folly of promising paradise in a television set.

In our understanding of community, does this leave us with a choice between the *civitas Dei*, so much desired in the past, and the small

remnant of Israel, which paradoxically looks forward to a tomorrow when all shall be one, as the Father in Christ and Christ in the Father? Whatever the answer to that question, there is an effect on the participation, institution and symbol of the community, once it is accepted that we are all potentially mystics.

The participation sought after is not ultimately a sharing of bread and a common chest. It is not team ministry, not even a general sense of common well-being. These may all be part of community, but sharing is a communion in the quest for ultimate purpose and meaning, whatever we may achieve in this direction while we are in the flesh.

It follows that the institutions are not meant to serve unity in government, faith and sacrament. Those *are* the institutions which help us to go beyond themselves, and which will happily wave good-bye to whomsoever passes beyond that point. Mystical tradition gives the institution its ultimate purpose for existence and spells out its limits by giving some idea of where institutions cannot go.

It plays havoc with stereotyped images which aim to foster a neat and orderly sharing among men, by blowing our minds with wild symbols which try constantly to impose the imperative of expanded consciousness. The mitred Christ, the sweet Jesus of liberation, are replaced by the cosmic Christ at the centre of existence. The anarchy which Yeats feared turns into the concordant discord and discordant concord<sup>8</sup> of the Spirit groaning within us, that we may be set free to see God.

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase is borrowed from the book cited in the previous note.