

# COMMUNITY FOR MISSION

By UNA O'NEILL

A QUICK SURVEY of chapter documents and identity statements issuing from apostolic religious congregations in recent years leaves little doubt about their commitment to mission in to-day's world. Central to such statements is a strong call to the members to adapt and modify congregational structures in order to facilitate active engagement in the bringing about of the kingdom of God. The needs of the mission are seen as radical, involving as they do the incarnation in our day of the values that are at the heart of the gospel. The consequences for the structures and forms of religious life, and especially of community, are seen to match that radicality.

It would seem to be self-evident that commitment to mission is intrinsic to the identity of apostolic congregations, especially those in the Ignatian tradition. The stress on revitalizing that commitment belies the assumption.

The fact is that for many such religious groups, their founding charism of mission was modified historically in such a way that the centrality of their originating focus was lost or relativized and a shift in self-understanding resulted. Many such congregations, especially those of women, have only lately begun to realize how radical this shift had become. Hence the call to shed the forms and structures of semi-monastic living that were gradually assumed as the original charism was institutionalized.

While theoretically apostolic in focus, the actual experience and tradition of many congregations has been of a stable and structured lifestyle in which apostolate was important but not necessarily central. Physical presence, communal prayer, detailed timetables and a predictable structure were the hallmarks of their experience. In some cases, community living thus defined became an end in itself and the founding focus of mission was adapted to fit in with the demands of regular community living.

In more recent years congregations have tried to restore the balance and in so doing find themselves caught in a dilemma: if

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

mission is the focus, then where does community fit in? Or, to rephrase the question: in the light of our commitment to the Kingdom and the urgency of mission, what does community mean, if anything?

In attempting to answer this question we have to avoid the twin dangers of an idealism that frustrates and a realism that is excessively functional. The former is caricatured in an idealized image of a group of vibrant, committed, united religious engaging enthusiastically in shared ideals, faith and prayer. The latter is given expression in the image of the community trying to decide who will take the eighty-seven year old to the chiropodist!

Similarly, we must refuse to absorb our energies in a useless debate on establishing priorities: which is more important, community or mission? The question is not one of priority but of paradox and this points us firmly in the direction of an Ignatian solution.

The mainstream Ignatian tradition is rooted in commitment to mission. Ignatius and the founding fathers had no doubt about the purpose of their lives. They were 'to spend their lives helping souls'.<sup>2</sup> Everything in the *Constitutions* confirms and reflects this. All is in view of mission. That focus is likewise expressed in the single purpose of the congregation: the members will grow in holiness as they 'labour strenuously in giving aid toward the salvation and perfection of the souls of their fellowmen'.<sup>3</sup> The members are to grow in Christ's life by being apostolically effective.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the image of the apostolic religious painted in the Ignatian *Constitutions* and elsewhere is a pilgrim one. Mobility, availability, dispersal, freedom for the sake of mission are words and phrases which recur constantly. His companions are spoken of as people on the move, 'ready at any hour to go to some or other parts of the world where they may be sent',<sup>4</sup> 'travelling through the various regions of the world . . . to help souls'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet in the midst of this image of dispersal and constant journeying for the sake of the kingdom, there is an element that is equally central to mission. The men were to be united in dispersal, not individuals doing their own thing.

This way of proceeding emerged from the discernment of Ignatius and his companions in 1539. They had dedicated their lives to Christ. They were determined to go wherever sent by the Vicar of Christ for the sake of the mission. But this placed in

question the friendship they had developed and which they recognized as a gift from God. They valued their companionship. They were committed to mission. Had the one to be sacrificed for the sake of the other? Were they to continue to care for and support each other or would this impede their freedom for mission?

The subject for deliberation therefore was as follows:

After we had offered and dedicated ourselves and our lives to Christ our Lord and to His true and legitimate vicar on earth, so that he might dispose of us and send us wherever he might judge we could be most effective . . . would it be better for us to be so joined and bound together in one body that no physical dispersal, however great, could separate us? Or perhaps would this be inexpedient?<sup>6</sup>

Having engaged in a discernment, the decision they eventually took was that since the Lord had united them and brought them together, they would remain united. They would be stronger in service if they formed one body. Hence, since the Lord had gifted them with this unity, 'every day we should strengthen and more solidly ground it, forming ourselves into one body'.<sup>7</sup>

The grace of companionship therefore was recognized as an intrinsic element of their lives, a real charism. They would remain as one body even though separated. And this charism, firmly embodied in the way in which Ignatius and the first companions proceeded was to blossom subsequently in a plurality of forms.

So, does Ignatius envisage community as part of his missionary reality? Is companionship the same as community as we understand it? And if so, what is the relationship between the demands of mission and those of community?

The word community itself is not Ignatian. For him the primary grouping is the congregation as a whole, and the *Constitutions* reflect this.<sup>8</sup> The Society is a body, made up of individuals whose lives are given to Christ and to the salvation of his people.<sup>9</sup> This is the charism that all share. This is the bond of union between the members who form the body. They are united in one body by their common charism. They are companions for mission, bonded in obedience. So where these individuals are in union and in companionship, there is community.

The richness of this idea of community lies not in its colourful imagery but in the human, incarnational and sacramental principles that it embodies.

To be human is to live within relationships. A sociological description of community would be in full tune with the Ignatian understanding. Such a description would characterize community as a group of people sharing common values and goals, working together to achieve them and maintaining a special loyalty to one another in spite of incompatibilities. Human community therefore is about common values, communication and loyalty. The last two derive from the first. Values shared constitute and express the identity of the community and from them the community derives its *raison d'être* and its meaning.<sup>10</sup>

The same is true of Christian community but the reality expressed there has a deeper foundation. It is rooted in the Trinity. Again, Ignatius is in theological accord with this Christian dimension. He speaks of the Trinity as a community of love overflowing to the world.<sup>11</sup> In community we mirror the profound mystery of God which is at the heart of human experience. The unity of God is expressed in Trinity, in the communion of love of Father, Son and Spirit. Likewise, the unity of Christians is expressed and constituted in the communion of those for whom the Mystery is the root and basis of their lives.<sup>12</sup>

This human and Christian understanding of community takes on a sacramental perspective in Ignatius' spirituality. For those who follow his tradition, the understanding of community is in tune with all that is outlined above, but is further rooted in the primary Ignatian focus of seeking and finding God in all things.<sup>13</sup> The call of Christ and our commitment to him takes its shape and form in and through this sacramental perspective. Hence the follower's life is unified. That personal unity is then expressed and constituted in the broader union of minds and hearts of all the members.

Such union cannot exist in a vacuum. It is given outward expression in individual communities whose inward reality is the bond of hearts seeking and finding God in all aspects of their lives. Because we are human we need to express our union concretely and explicitly in time and space. This is the basic sacramental and incarnational principle upon which community builds. Community living provides the context for our ongoing efforts to integrate and consolidate our commitment to God and to his world. We become companions by expressing ourselves as such.

To equate community therefore with structures or forms is a profound distortion of Ignatian companionship. Community is not

in a multiplicity of common observances nor in regular physical presence nor in shared timetables or apostolates. However, it is an equal distortion to reject all community forms and structures. Union must be localized physically and such community is valid and essential provided that it is a specific expression of the body of those who share our common commitment and is not an end in itself.

The specific form that community localization takes depends on circumstances of persons, places and needs. Paradoxical as it may seem, community may include physical and geographical separation as much as regular and structured lifestyles. As well as being ready to go wherever they must for the sake of mission and in obedience, 'they may carry on their labour, not by travelling but by residing steadily and continually in certain places where much fruit of glory and service to God is expected'.<sup>14</sup>

In the final analysis however, the form of community will be dictated by the demands of mission and its structures will be in service of the end of the congregation. Examples of this flexibility, combined with exhortations to uniformity of heart and in externals are evident right through the *Constitutions*.<sup>15</sup> This interplay of adaptability and uniformity is the hallmark of Ignatian community precisely because the commitment to mission is the criterion by which everything is to be measured. At the same time the tension inherent in this interplay must be acknowledged and interpreted for our day if it is to serve its purpose creatively and realistically.

One way of approaching this interpretation is to reflect on those values which form the intrinsic links between the body as a whole and the specific expressions of that body in communities. These values are clearly spelled out in the *Constitutions*: charity and love preserved and encouraged in communication, common life and obedience and expressed in the corporate mission of the body.<sup>16</sup>

Community therefore is the experience of mutual love of companions expressed and communicated in common living under obedience, in order that the mission of the body will be the better served. This will be further specified for individual congregations in the charism of their spirit and founding. But the constitutive elements mentioned above are non-negotiable. Furthermore, they are founded in that faith-inspired love that leads the individual to choose the radical following of Christ in mission.

Ignatius lays great emphasis on this. Repeatedly he refers to Christ's personal call of each person.<sup>17</sup> It is only by being united

in loving service to Christ that a person has the strength and courage to commit his or her life to God's greater glory. Hence the chief bond of union for members of apostolic congregations is the love of Christ our Lord.<sup>18</sup> No group dynamics, no shared apostolate, no common structures, no amount of good-will can sustain the demands of community living. Common faith in Christ, rooted in a self-sacrificing love that leads to this radical following of him is the primary unifying factor.

The basis of Ignatian community therefore is the common call in love of each individual member, lived in obedience. These individuals then come together in community, the purposes of which were clearly spelled out by Ignatius and the first companions:

Everyone should have concern for and comprehension of the others for greater apostolic efficacy, since united strength would have more power and courage in confronting whatever challenging goals were to be sought than if this strength were divided into many parts.<sup>19</sup>

The twin purposes of community are here spelled out: care for each other and greater apostolic efficacy.

Community is about expressing care, concern and encouragement for each other in order that each will be strengthened and empowered for the challenges of mission and engage in it with greater efficacy. The companions who make up community take responsibility for each other, value each other and empower each other. One of the first cares of the risen Christ was to reassure and encourage his friends. If we are one with him then we will assume that role in relation to our companions.<sup>20</sup>

We value and care for each other, not because of position, apostolate or power but precisely because we are human beings who share a common call and charism. To live out the Ignatian principle of seeking and finding God in all things in this context is an effort and a challenge.

To seek and find God in the people with whom we live and share our lives requires a sacramental vision that sees beyond the surface to the depth of each companion's reality. Such a seeing is described by the poet when he says that 'vision is not simply seeing straight'.<sup>21</sup> It is a seeing that refuses to draw lines around the people with whom we live but that rather recognizes and respects the mystery that is at the heart of the person. That

recognition is then given shape in the care, concern, encouragement, creativity and trust that we express for each other.

Such valuing then is basic to apostolic community living. We are companions who care for and encourage each other for the good of God's people and for his greater glory. It is not the careful concern that reaches its boundaries when there is a question of inconvenience but the concern that ends in the selfless giving of Christ on Calvary. In such companionship we learn to cope with our own incompleteness and consequently to be at ease with the incompleteness of others. We learn to accept ourselves and each other, not allowing our own fears and insecurities to absorb us.

We share the truth, realizing that none of us has a monopoly on it but that in such sharing, understanding is deepened and the quality of commitment is enriched. In community we learn to entrust ourselves to each other because our trust is ultimately in God, and we know, with a heart-knowledge, that Christ's power is the only true ground of our companionship. And in that heart-knowledge, rooted in shared experience, reflection and discernment, we disperse to share it with others. The enduring quality of Ignatian community is evident in this value. It is a value that directly critiques an aspect of our modern experience that is both destructive and pervasive.

People daily experience a paralysing functionalism in which the primary criterion of the value of the person is his or her usefulness. Such an approach is directly contrary to the gospel and gives rise to ideologies, policies and relationships which breed injustice, cut-throat competition and a dehumanizing of the person.

Companions who care for and have concern for each other are committed to transforming the structures of society so that the quality of human life is changed from fear and suspicion to trust, from competition to co-operation and from despair to hope. Hence, far from detaching us from the human condition and struggle, the community experience of valuing and being valued is at the heart of those human longings, fears and questions that are part of our contemporary experience.

Apostolic communities therefore, must witness in a practical way to that caring and valuing of the person that is rooted in God's creative love. In their own experience of such 'concern for and comprehension of each other', they ensure a sound basis for apostolic effectiveness and they witness to the eschatological dimension of human life and activity.

The second essential element or value of community is that its members come together for dispersal on mission. This is the paradoxical key to Ignatian community. Our relationships as companions have a distinct and definite apostolic character which alone justifies them. We are together for dispersal and in dispersal. The basic life energy flows to each from his or her engagement in mission and community empowers and energizes us for mission.

It follows that apostolic religious must guard against any community interpretation which would diminish apostolic efficacy. At all times community must serve apostolic freedom, not restrict it. Unfortunately some experiences of community can paralyze the mission today and tranquillize the urge actively to engage in bringing about the kingdom. Hence the need to examine and assess the structures and forms of community living to ensure that they truly serve the dual purpose as outlined above.

Community is not a refuge, a return, an escape from reality, a cocoon of comfortable complacency, a sanctuary used to cloak our insecurities. Ignatian spirituality is a spirituality of risk and we come together to share the struggle inherent in that risk.

Community therefore sends us on our pilgrim way, convinced by our shared experience and discernment that our mission is to critique prevailing world values and systems that dehumanize the person, refusing to be bystanders to political, economic, social or educational systems that maintain and control power structures for their own ends, preaching by our own lives the values of the gospel. Community sustains the effort, consolidates identity and deepens the conviction that what is of ultimate value is the coming of the kingdom. Hence, the central process of community is that corporate discernment which issues in greater apostolic efficacy, a deepening of the bond of union and a clearer sense of each one's responsibility for the corporate mission of the congregation. Community is for mission because ultimately everything leads to service.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that mission is not equated with work, with the job. The functional approach to mission implied in these terms can result in a task-oriented single-mindedness in which community is depicted as a useless waste of time and energy which would be better devoted to building the kingdom. Such an attitude generates an atmosphere that is charged by continual activity. In its worst form it results in an individualism devoid of interior



freedom which paralyzes the freedom of the body of the congregation. This is then justified in a self-righteous dismissal of community as a waste of apostolic time.

To be job-oriented in an activist manner is to deny the Ignatian way of proceeding through shared experience, reflection and understanding to more effective and Christ-rooted action. Such activism similarly precludes the depth and balance that is so truly Ignatian and which community facilitates through those structures that invite companions to share the truth of their life commitment with each other, thereby strengthening both the bond of union and the commitment to personal vocation. This union and bond is sought

in order that, being united among themselves by the bond of fraternal charity, they may be better above and more efficaciously to apply themselves in the service of God and the aid of their fellowmen.<sup>23</sup>

To live in community as described above is a way of death to the tendency to isolation and selfishness. This is seen quite clearly in Ignatius's firm directives in relation to union. The way of community is an ascetical way. Self-love is seen as the enemy of union and hence the self-sacrifice and mortification required. It will only be possible for the individual to sustain the demands of such sacrifice if it is rooted in the desire to order one's life in accordance with that magnanimity which is the characteristic of the person of the Spiritual Exercises.<sup>24</sup>

While granting the above, it is equally necessary to face the fact that rejection of community can arise from experiences that are a contradiction of all that community should be. It is hard to counter the claims of those who reject it because their actual experience is of polite and civilized superficiality. Such experience reflects the emptiness of much of our contemporary relationships. In religious communities, physical presence and superficial bonhomie can cloak our reluctance to share what most unites us and to commit ourselves to true companionship.

Apostolic community is a critique of such escapist forms, captured in the images of common coffee breaks and occasional loud celebrations, and condemned by the poet when he says: 'unrelatedness is the skin on every face'.<sup>25</sup> Such so-called community is further expressed in casual chit-chat and superficial concern that is a self-serving contradiction of everything that should characterize the inner bond of hearts.

A further enemy to true community is an attitude that sets the ideal in such a way that it becomes the enemy of the real. W. B. Yeats describes such attitudes in the following lines:

The fascination of what's difficult  
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent  
Spontaneous joy and natural content  
Out of my heart.<sup>26</sup>

Instead of being fascinated by the problems, paralyzed by the hurts of the past, fearful of the risks, we must concentrate on creating a community at the service of mission that will consciously release the power and creative force of the Spirit. This it will do when its members proceed in a spiritual freedom that comes from values shared in a companionship that is derived from the personal call of each to follow Christ together. When such sharing is real, when the quality of presence of companions is rich in self-sacrificing love, when care and concern are communicated, then community may be a struggle, but it is also transformative and empowering. United and strengthened we have 'power and courage in confronting whatever challenging goals (are) to be sought'.<sup>27</sup>

This is not to idealize community nor to say that Ignatian companionship transcends the reality of life's struggle for community. Because it is part of the fragility of human relationships that reality is often one of discouragement, of disagreement, frustration, depression, anger, uncertainty and failure. Lack of human development and individualism can generate a sense of worthlessness and frail identity. Pressures from apostolate, from family, from political and economic sources, from the uncertainties of life today, all reflect on the experience of community.

But the Ignatian principle of seeking and finding God in all things, not just in sunsets and flowers and warm community experiences, but in broken spirits, anguished minds and the dark corners of reality, will sustain us. In community the companions come together to share the real struggle in the darkness of life and to rekindle the faith that assures us that in Christ life has overcome death, good has triumphed over evil and that in fusing our efforts with Christ we have the certainty of apostolic success. Such sharing sustains and revitalizes the self-sacrificing charity that challenges the power of selfishness and sin, and deepens in us that great-heartedness and magnanimity to which we are called.<sup>28</sup> All of this

however ultimately depends on how firmly our gaze remains fixed on the 'end' of the congregation: the praise of God and the good of his people. Then we will experience the depth of that sacramental vision described by John Hewitt in the following lines: 'So must the world seem keen and very bright to one whose gaze is on the end of things'.<sup>29</sup>

No matter how great the effort, tension between community and mission, spoken of at the beginning as intrinsic to apostolic community, will be experienced. It is a consequence of our pilgrim status while we live in this world. The tension will be experienced differently. For some, the self-sacrifice of expressing companionship concretely in time and place will be the difficult aspect. For others, the letting go of the reassurance and security of tangible companionship in order to engage in mission will be the challenge. The structures of community must reflect this tension. They must be firm but flexible, never becoming ends in themselves.

And one of the greatest dangers to be avoided is that of establishing priorities. Such a line of action misunderstands the whole paradoxical nature of Ignatian polarities, intrinsic to apostolic spirituality. There is only one way of integration, one way of living the richness of the paradox in peace: the more deeply the companions become rooted in Christ, the more committed to him and to the 'end' of the congregation, the less fragmented will be their experience. The integrating factor does not lie in the type of community or the structures of community or in the style of expressing companionship. It lies in companions whose primary concern is to seek and find God in all things.

This is not a pious cliché. It is the root and basis of apostolic spirituality and is solidly grounded in those sacramental principles that underly Ignatius's teaching. It is 'by that same grace' that I grow in my relationship with Christ, that I am in union in community and that I engage in the apostolic enterprise. To live in and with that tension is part of the human condition. To acknowledge it is to grow in oneness with Christ. To celebrate it is to enter into the infinite integration accomplished by Christ in his dying and rising.

Community therefore exists where companions share lives committed to devotion and to the imitation of Christ; for whom the greater glory of God, the good of his people and their own consequent growth in holiness are the motivating force of their

lives. How that force is shared, expressed and deepened in companionship will depend on circumstances of time, place, culture and the demands of the apostolate, but take place in some form it must. So while the elements of the form will vary, community must take some concrete form which facilitates the spirit of companionship. Pluralism is to be encouraged in this regard, provided that all forms, structures and expressions of companionship incorporate the elements of 'concern for and comprehension of the others for greater apostolic efficacy'.

Community therefore is the union of minds and hearts of those who have been gifted with a common call in a particular congregation with a founding charism that is unique and specific to them. This is non-negotiable.

Other communities in which members of a congregation may legitimately participate, be they ministerial, social, spiritual or apostolic, cannot replace or absorb or negate the foundational community of origin. The latter is not in ministry or nationality or common interest or spiritual grouping but in union of minds and hearts, the grace of companionship which is the gift of each particular congregation.

We are companions in charism who, out of our shared call, experience and history, affirm the infinite possibilities which God's redemptive love offers for the future and who commit ourselves to speak a word of hope to a world that is burdened with discouragement, doubt and despair. Likewise, in community and in mission we can testify to the reality of the resurrection by our efforts to build a world where peace, justice, forgiveness and trust win out most of the time over anger, oppression, cynicism and condemnation.

We can do this because in the reality of our union with each other we ensure that our lives are not a lonely endurance that is without enthusiasm, not simply an experience of gritting our teeth and grimly hanging on, but rather that, because of Christ and in the midst of darkness, our lives are about a rich and vibrant reality. This is the radicality of hope that characterizes Ignatian spirituality.

We may be on a twilight journey where distances are distorted, where vision is dimmed and horizons blurred, but our pilgrim way is paved by the power of the Christ who is our bond of union and source of hope. We have few assurances. We have scant evidence of concrete success. We step out each day on a pilgrim

way that is insecure and uncertain. But the purpose of our lives justifies our hope and we dare to commit ourselves to insecurity and risk, to community and to dispersal, to a life of radical dying, to community for the sake of mission, because our hope is founded in the belief that he who called us to mission in companionship will 'preserve and carry forward what he deigned to begin for his service and praise and for the aid of souls'.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The gradual change in forms and structures relating to the Society of Jesus is briefly outlined in Buckley, Michael J.: 'Mission in companionship', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol XI (September 1979), pp 18-23.

<sup>2</sup> *The autobiography of St Ignatius*, 85.

<sup>3</sup> *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans. George E. Ganss S. J., 3, p 77.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 588.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>6</sup> *The Deliberation of the First Fathers*, 3. The text is given in full in Futrell, John C.: *Making an apostolic community of love* (St Louis, 1970), pp 187-194. Futrell's historical sketch and interpretation in this book provide a valuable background to the topic under discussion.

<sup>7</sup> *Deliberation*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *Constitutions* 135 and 136.

<sup>9</sup> See *Jesuit religious life today* (St Louis, 1977), pp 41ff.

<sup>10</sup> See Lonergan, Bernard: 'Existenz and aggiornamento' in *Collection* (New York, 1967), p 245.

<sup>11</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, 102, 106, 107.

<sup>12</sup> *Constitutions* 213, p 472.

<sup>13</sup> Exx 235; *Constitutions* 288.

<sup>14</sup> *Constitutions* 603.

<sup>15</sup> In *Constitutions* 586, Ignatius states that because of the occupations proper to the Institute, and permanent residence in one place being so uncertain, his men are not 'regularly (to) hold choir for the canonical hours or sing Mass and offices'. Yet in the following norm he allows for the recitation of the office provided it fulfils a pastoral function. Similarly there is a plea that 'interior uniformity' be combined with exterior uniformity 'in respect to clothing, ceremonies of the Mass and other such matters to the extent that the different qualities of persons, places and the life, permit'. No 671, p 291.

And again, the *Constitutions* exhort that while 'uniformity ought to be retained among all the members as far as possible', all ordinances should be adapted to the times, places and persons in different houses, colleges and employments of the Society. No 136.

<sup>16</sup> *Constitutions* 821. The place of obedience is obviously central and was the subject of discernment immediately following that of union. See *Deliberation* 4 and 8. In this article its importance for the bond of union is presumed but its interpretation and application is not within our brief.

<sup>17</sup> Exx 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Constitutions* 671.

<sup>19</sup> *Deliberation* 3.

<sup>20</sup> Exx 224.

<sup>21</sup> Kennelly, Brendan: *The blind man* (1969).

<sup>22</sup> Exx 230.

<sup>23</sup> *Constitutions* 273.

<sup>24</sup> Exx 157; *Constitutions* 657.

<sup>25</sup> Kennelly, Brendan: *A visit* (1969).

<sup>26</sup> Yeats, W. B.: *The fascination of what's difficult*.

<sup>27</sup> *Deliberation* no 3.

<sup>28</sup> Exx 5 'It will be very profitable for the one who is to go through the Exercises to enter upon them with magnanimity and generosity toward his Creator and Lord, and to offer him his entire will and liberty, that his divine Majesty may dispose of him and all he possesses according to his most holy will.' The *Constitutions*, presupposing a person of the Exercises, echo this presumption of magnanimity. See nos 50, 51, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Hewitt, John: *Frost* (1936).

<sup>30</sup> *Constitutions* 812.