

COMMUNITY: SCHOOL OF THE SPIRIT

By CHRISTINE AUER

THE TIDE comes and goes. While there is some predictability to it there is essentially no control over it. So too it is with the Spirit of God. New Jerusalem was an oyster shell cast upon the coast during one such spiritual tidal wave that swept the western continent in the early 1970s. That outpouring, of which we were only a small part, helped shape the yet emerging Church of the Second Vatican Council. We are continuing to uncover and discover the pearl of great price, the kingdom of God, housed in this oyster, called community. In the wake of the scandal of Viet Nam, the stronger shift toward consumerism, and the devaluing of basic human rights, the Spirit reawakened the faithful to some very dangerous memories. Quite dangerous, even to the Church. Let us recall why.

New Jerusalem began in the quiet of a chapel where high school seniors were required to participate in a youth retreat. The first retreat conducted by Father Richard Rohr O.F.M. was to a group of athletes. Despite a strong veneer, every budding adolescent possesses a 'window' of vulnerability. It was through that window that the Spirit came and was manifested through the gifts of joy, tears, tongues, hunger for the Word of God and reconciliation. What began as a one-weekend requirement continued as scripture series, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and Christian fellowship. The dangerous memory that had broken through the status quo of the Church was that there is more to Church than *leitourgia*; there is *kerygma*.

A treasure that had been buried under Baltimore catechism had resurfaced with this incoming tide. The term 'dangerous memories' and the four elements of Church described here are borrowed from a book entitled the same. (What a beautiful gift when theology so well articulates the lived experience of the faithful!) In it Bernard Lee and Michael Cowan describe *kerygma* as the Great Story of Jesus and all who followed him who proclaimed his story and

thereby joined their own story with his.¹ The Great Story continually has the power to birth, to be new, each decade, each day that we listen for how the Spirit would interpret our history in its light.

The gospel was proclaimed, the epistles were taught, and we began to get a flavour for the life of the disciples. The lives of the saints were retold with new receptivity, especially Francis of Assisi. The foundational message of this good news is now immortalized in a bumper sticker which is a quote from Fr Richard. 'God doesn't love you because you are good; you are good because God loves you'. People bore witness to this in great numbers at a weekly prayer meeting with liturgy, typically reaching one thousand. The teens were now joined by adults whose spiritual hunger had brought them searching. But the Spirit of the Lord did not rest. For there is more to Church than *leitourgia* and *kerygma*; there is *koinonia*.

So it was that after about three years a call for further commitment was issued by the now six-person leadership team. The words 'This man speaks harshly; who can listen to his words?' (Jn 6,60) took on new meaning. Numbers were reduced by two-thirds, one-third staying. Expectations were increased in inverse proportion. These came to include participating in a circle of spiritual companions (a weekly gathering of six to eight members), some form of communal service and some spiritual discipline of prayer. Neighbourhood living was encouraged in a small central area of Cincinnati. Thirteen large households existed for about eight years. These were a cross-section of mostly singles, a few marrieds and a few religious and most often a combination of males and females. Others moved to the neighbourhood as nuclear family. Some opened their home to one or two singles at a time to share an extended family experience.

To ask what was new about all this, we can examine some of the choices that emerged, those that ran counter to the cultural or religious norms. These same norms (and at times seductions) repeatedly ask for either allegiance or creative alternatives in our current history as a Church and world.

The kind of energy New Jerusalem was founded on was the freedom to say, 'I surrender to your will, Lord. I do not know what you want or where we are going, but take all of me'. The folly of such abandonment! In a Church which has the largest membership of any institution and the longevity of two thousand years, the tendency to control and presume how things should go

is difficult to avoid. It is, in fact, only partially a choice. The rest is surrender to grace.

In those first ten years much of our ministry went into our pastoral life (counselling, spiritual direction, listening, receiving, respecting). Yet even from the beginning we were chided to give away what had been freely given. Travelling teams were a regular part of our life. When Fr Richard was asked to be retreat master, he began to take a few members with him. Throughout the country we were seeing first-hand how the Spirit was moving, bringing new vitality to little pockets within the Church. The travelling teams came from the deep conviction that, as our community's commitment form states, 'together we can be the Truth'. The 'good father' as lone ranger and saviour was countered by the prophetic emergence of the laity in the role of evangelization. The powerful witness there continued to be both the interactions between the team members and the sharings they gave out of the fabric of their life together. The kingdom of God was among them. When Fr Richard coined the phrase, 'Faith is caught, not taught', he was reversing for us the tide of over one hundred years that seemed to presume faith to be essentially cognitive. No, when we say, 'In him we live and move and have our being', we are giving a very gut or primal expression which revolutionized our lifestyle as well as our understanding of the Incarnation.

Jesus, this person-God, resides within us. Jesus, this great lover, desires communion and dialogue with all that is—within us, around us. 'Take off your shoes; this is holy ground' (Exod 3,5). What a dangerous memory to recall! It is the kind of faith that draws you to the heart of God—this heart that loves, celebrates and suffers with us and for us.

Christ has always suffered in the cries of those oppressed in any form. We innocently presumed that God loves each of us, dwells within each of us and calls *each* of us by name. To begin our communal experience on this premise had quite natural consequences. Woman's role was half of that consequence. Many of our ministries were headed not by one but by two, male and female. Most of our companioning circles had both male and female facilitators. The spirit of the feminine emerged in ways that offer an alternative to the norm of patriarchal consciousness that dominates the world and the Church. Into New Jerusalem pulsed living waters that refreshed us by encouraging the feminine side

of each of us. After all, we are more than male; we are androgynous. We are more than female; we are androgynous. So that along with logic and goal-setting and linear thinking we are developing an appreciation for ritual, rhythms, listening that seeks to stand with the other instead of change the other, waiting, reflecting, dreaming and intuitive thinking. We hope that our style will grow in reflecting a collaboration of the balanced masculine with the trusted feminine. There is much work to be done when one is seeking to live in the creative tension of holding apparent opposites together.

Yet if 'pontifical' means 'bridge-builder', then oddly enough it is a very feminine characteristic that we are called to draw upon: in the East-West stalemate currently being played out in Central America, in the dichotomy of rich-poor, in racial inequality, in the clergy-laity concerns, in our own souls, as our light befriends our shadow side. It is truly a seduction to separate, categorize and alienate the 'other side'. We are all too often prey to this. The inner work of bridge-building is just that work. So now (though not new) there is more to Church than *leitourgia*, *kerygma* and *koinonia*. There is lastly *diaconia*: participating in the work of God in our historical situation.

A scandal to God must indeed be the division in the Christian Churches. But when the Church begins to look for ways to confront systemic evil, when the laity take the gospel all the way (all the way to the marketplace) there they find remnants of others of like mind though quite dissimilar denominations. So it was for New Jerusalem when we first began to question the powers that be in light of the power of God. We have had the graced and sometimes disturbing opportunity to join hearts and hopes with a network of communities that came to be known as the Community of Communities. This place of accountability and support has challenged us in the area of *diaconia*.

So here we were: Catholics, Evangelicals, Anabaptists, Episcopalians, Christian Reform and various Protestant groups, finding a source of unity in Christ that went deeper than the doctrines that separated us. Here are others trying to be faithful to a local Body of Christ as well as bring that faith to bear on the *status quo* of the cultural gospel that manipulated and desecrated our spiritual heritage. Here are people willing to struggle for and rejoice in the good, the true and the beautiful no matter where it was found; to be more than pronouncers of the darkness and injustice of the

world but to be proclaimers of light, liberty and mercy by witness and word. We have enjoyed and drawn from these various traditions as we co-labour in the fields.

Our fields have been more focused lately as we have tried to use our time and energy wisely. Even here there is still diversity. We have paid close attention to this diversity, both celebrating it and bemoaning it. Yet it appears that our own call is to consider our diversity as gift and to trust what unfolds.

So we have come full circle once again to *leitourgia*. Now we can celebrate 'in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4,24) with integrity. We can repent of our sin and collaboration with evil with a certain compassion when we repent of our country's dark side. We can sing the *Gloria* with deep gratitude for God's enduring mercy. We can listen to the gospels and allow them to shake and shape our understanding of God's word to us personally, to our faith community and to our mission. We can bring our needs before the Lord, knowing that the Body suffers in our suffering and knowing that 'our' includes many faces we have not touched. We can sing the Great Amen with the experimental knowledge that Jesus has conquered death in its many forms. We can embrace one another with the sincerity that says, 'I need to begin again to love you'. We can eat the Bread of Life (who is also the bread of suffering) and drink of the cup of Blessing and allow Jesus to heal us once again. Having the nourishment offered through Eucharist, *kerygma* and *koinoinia*, we respond to the call to 'go out to love and serve the Lord'.

What a gift to tap into the richness of our Church heritage! We have approached the elements of our life together with great care and diligence. It has resulted in making specific commitments each year in the areas of interiority, community and service. They are not the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience! They do, however, stand in contrast to what the culture offers as values. These are the areas that are a part of the formation experience for our initiates. This programme is modelled after the revised adult rite of initiation into the Church. It is designed to include teaching, sharing and experiences that facilitate the understanding of community, interiority and service as expressed in the myth of New Jerusalem. The following is a synopsis of each area.

Interiority

In this area we are called to search our hearts for our personal and authentic response to God through a spiritual discipline of

prayer. The community offers exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and the Divine Office six days a week to support this. There is also a weekly public witness of one hour of prayer at the local Federal building. Currently there is a monthly prayer meeting. And of course there are our Circles of Spiritual Companionship which presume prayer as a building block. With the exception of Circles all else is optional. Prayer must be a hunger. One of the dangerous memories in our communal *kerygma* is Fr Richard's reminder that 'ultimately we are alone before the Father'. It is a bit of a paradox in *communal* life. It remains a serious reminder that jumping on the bandwagon is not a free response to God's word, rather a choice made with no inner authority. We are learning in retrospect that inner authority is difficult to develop. When people (whether through lack of discernment, unwillingness to face personal limits or the inexperience of age) make choices with no inner authority, that is authorship, the consequences can be staggering and long-felt. A cutting edge for our communal growth right now is this very issue coupled with the response to outer authority or obedience. It is so important to know yourself, to be able to detect what you are surrendering. Is it a preference or is it a part of your very fibre? As Merton would define it, is it the true self or is it the ego? Jean Vanier once said that nearly all of Western culture has a problem with authority and sexuality. Our limited sixteen years of existence have inadvertently been a testing ground for this. If we have erred with authority it has most often been on the side of allowing people to do what they seem to need to do. While there was always strong preaching from the pulpit, in the intimacy of the pastoring setting one cannot uphold objective ideals and call them everyone's next step of growth. It simply does not work. So an attitude of liberty and diversity has been the leaning. To quote Pope John XXIII, 'In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity'. This has called for an ongoing conversion to trust, to 'be quite certain that the One who began this good work (in you) will see that it is finished' (Phil 1,6). This intrinsically invites leadership particularly to keep asking the questions, 'What is essential? What furthers the kingdom?' This can be very unsettling. We thus grapple with the question of fidelity. How can we be faithful to a corporate call and response to following Jesus and be faithful to our personal call and response as well? When they are not compatible, does the common good ever take precedence? Is there a cultural resistance to allowing that

to happen? How do we have membership (identity) parameters without watering them down to the least common denominator? The memories of Jesus's life cease to be dangerous when we reduce them in order to keep everyone happy.

Community

In our commitment to this area we specify that we will be accountable for major decisions to our circle of companions or to the pastorate when it is a decision that affects the community. We make a statement of committed giving or tithe. We acknowledge the desire to be in communion with the Church of Rome. We indicate something specific about building the common life and to living simply. I will highlight some of these.

Our desire to be in communion within the broader Catholic Church has expressed itself in different ways over the years. We have been grateful for the support we have received from past and present bishops (Liebold, Bernardin and Pilarczyk). Each of these has listened to our hopes and offered encouragement and concrete support, from the buildings we rent to the opportunity to worship on Sunday. We are looking more now at how to be collaborators within our diocese. We are in this together.

From our beginning we heard that humble and awesome call with St Francis, 'Rebuild my Church'. What better position to critique the Church than that of love. We do not have to look far to celebrate the signs of life in the people of God. The spiritually hungry have welcomed us as travelling teams and we have welcomed them through our guest ministry. We have witnessed the enthusiasm of small groupings within local parishes as they participate in a parish community development programme. We offer this for those who want to take a further step *together* after their involvement in a renewal programme that their parish offered. People are sensing that they cannot stop with personal piety. As Catherine of Siena states, 'It is heaven all the way to heaven'. To celebrate the communion of saints in the afterlife we must begin to celebrate with them before death! If the business of the Church is to herald the coming of the kingdom, then we can only support that through the nurturing of *koinonia*.

Unfortunately the Church has been run all too often as just that, business. And at its worst moments, business as usual. For understandable reasons it is encumbered by the need to maintain what is: policy, power, guidelines *ad infinitum*. What a drain on

power. What a drain on creativity. It is a struggle we share on a smaller level. Yet we are compelled to witness even here, to the hope of Christ. 'The gates of hell will not prevail against it' (Mt 16,18). What an unexpected arena to 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil 2,12). Welcome to the gospel. Welcome Charles Curran, welcome Raymond Hunthausen, welcome Miguel DeScoto! Welcome. As our community's yearly commitment form states, 'We choose the vocation of the Church as our sharing in the pain of God and in the power of God for the life of the world'.

Sharing in the pain of God has a natural impact on one's lifestyle. While we in no way adhere to a vow of poverty, a commitment to a simple lifestyle is definitely countercultural these days. We hope it is a statement of trust and freedom in an age where we are life-insured to death, in an age where upward mobility is the norm. This is a time when achieving status has been pursued at the price of interdependence. There is a tremendous pressure to succumb to all the conveniences that the First World provides. Quite often this at the expense of the Third World or the environment. Wants quickly become needs, and luxuries necessities.

Financial giving and simple living are different but related concerns. For many Christians it is still taboo to talk about politics, faith and money. What a sad commentary when this is the reality. If our budgets are merely a reflection of our values, what is it saying when Christians tithe such a small percentage of their incomes? Tithe is only half the issue. The radical response to the gospel is called for even here. Especially here. What is the conversion or healing needed to bring forth the magnanimous love of God, generosity and zeal? To change charity to justice? So many virtues can be a part of our giving—and so many vices. Fear, hurt, greed, and lack of discipline are but a few.

We do expect each member to be in a circle of spiritual companions. This is a place of prayer, sharing, accountability and caring. It is a place where we can dream or be challenged that dreaming of ideals or giving intellectual assent are inadequate responses. We hope they are places where Jesus is recognized in the reality of our lives, desires, abilities and limits. Many times our common life is more evident in the face of sickness and crisis. The laying on of hands, meals and childcare are genuine manifestations of the bonds that unite us. Most of us have been

here over eight years. A lot of water goes over the dam in that amount of time. The Servant Song speaks tenderly to this:

Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too . . .
When we sing to God in heaven, we shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together, of Christ's love and agony.

We once wrote a job description of sorts for Fr Richard. In it we described him as 'chief unifier'. He held the common life together in a way true to a founder. His absence to pursue ministry from a lens other than community creates a space where each of us is invited to search deeply for that current of unity that runs beneath the faces of our diversity.

One bloom that is emerging as we look at who we are anew is the gift that our children are and the needs that they bring. Just as we reshape our marriages to include them, we are reshaping our common life to include them as well. Our 'we' continues to expand. This is part of the stretching and growing process we are in now. We are asking new questions. And appropriately so, when their number is equal to that of the adult members, about two hundred each. We have before us new opportunities to see and serve Christ. It is requiring us to examine worship, formation, service, expectations and support of marriage and parenting. It seems like a healthy step. We have resisted the model of Church that places eighty percent of the resources into twenty percent of the parish (i.e. the children), without concern for the foundational family experience of a living faith. Yet we now find ourselves trying to supplement the faith-nurturing that parents do with their children with communal support and experiences instead of just leaving each family unit totally on their own. We are trying to hold several values in the balance and come up with ways to foster the children's receptivity to the Spirit.

Service

Partnership includes co-labouring in the fields. As individuals we make specific commitments to serve in our family, Church and world. We commit ourselves to examining our use of time, developing our gifts and listening for that next step in a 'preferential option for the poor'. Our primary focuses in outreach are becoming the neighbourhood in which we reside and work for justice in

Central America, particularly Nicaragua. While there are a few who work in the inner city, our own locale allows us to preserve some long-held values. The first is relationship. Embracing the concerns and the struggles of this neighbourhood is more like sharing than service. I hope it supports an attitude of commonality rather than one that perpetuates the myth that 'we have something to offer you'. Both the local and the global focus of ministry offer any of three types of involvement. They include direct aid, rehabilitation and systemic change. For example work with the Central American concerns could be housing and feeding refugees that travel through the Overground Railroad. Another avenue of direct aid would be financial, emotional and spiritual support for two long-term volunteers in Nicaragua and Guatemala. Another might be participation in the sister community project that connects us with a base community that one of our community volunteers works with. There is nothing like a personal ambassador for peace to allow you to reach the heart and soul of a suffering people. This relationship has also been a place of inclusion for our children, a hearts- and hands-on experience. We are trusting the healing power of community when we say that being here is an experience of rehabilitation for the ten refugees who have stayed with us long-term, awaiting admission into Canada. Most of us will never know the transition needed to live in a 'peace zone'. And lastly, as a more widespread effort in the community, we are utilizing our political process to educate people and effect change. Conversion is slow to come. Systems occasionally change their ways but only hearts can be converted, one-by-one, to a gospel of non-violence. Again, our commitment form:

Set free by grace, we do not consider our service in the realm of obligation but as a privilege to be protected and encouraged by community. We have a need to serve the Body even more than the Body needs our service.

Images of community

In all of this we pray for the wisdom to surrender what is only cumbersome and not kingdom-building, that we might 'run the race and gain the prize which is Christ Jesus our Lord' (Phil 3,14). We are looking for images to replace the institutional element of Church that is perhaps the motored boat that rides the waves with

efficient certainty that the destination will be met. This journey of community is more akin to riding by the sail with no assurance of reaching destination's shore, befriending the elements, yielding to the wind and tide and loving what is. This is a sacred school of Spirit. In many ways the tide of our communal life is out right now. But the sign of a 'great soul' (and a great-souled people) is to wait in faith and serenity for the tide to return; to trust the Potter to rework the vessel more than we trust our efforts. What a great and awesome and troublesome adventure it has become! With each passing year we have a better understanding of what Francis meant when he said that the 'journey is the dream'.

What is newest in community is perhaps that we are turning over old stones to find new gems for this age. Wisdom to live by, not simply to speak. As Pope Paul VI said, 'Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses'.

NOTES

¹ Cowen, Michael A. and Lee, Bernard J.: *Dangerous memories* (Sheed & Ward, 1986), pp 25-26.