

# GROWTH IN COMMUNITY: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

By SARA GRANT

I HAVE BEEN ASKED to contribute to this issue of the *Way Supplement* on Formation and Community some insights from my experience of living for sixteen years as a member of an ecumenical ashram community in India. At first, as I read the tentative guidelines for the papers envisaged, I was afraid that mine might turn out to be a changeling among its siblings. I was however somewhat reassured by the resonances awakened by many of the questions raised, and also by the editors' explicit statement that they were anxious to have 'a piece from another context', so I hope that 'deep will call upon deep' in reply.

When I reflected on the origins, evolution and present situation of our community to see if there was anything in our experience that might be particularly relevant to the present task, I was struck by three things:—

Our community did not begin from nothing, so to speak, but has a long history, having emerged from the convergence of the ashram tradition enriched by Gandhian and Protestant insights, with the Anglican and Catholic traditions of Christian and religious life: in this place a series of graftings has taken place on the ancient root of ashram life, each contributing its own distinctive characteristics.

Secondly, we have inherited from both our Hindu and our Christian lines of ancestry—but especially from the first—a very strong sense that the formation, growth and living out of human community does not take place only at the level of the psychological interaction of individuals, but is underpinned and permeated at every stage by another dimension of being, the enabling and supportive Presence known in popular Hindu parlance as the *Antaryamin*<sup>1</sup> or Indweller, and by Christians as the Spirit. On

reading the outlines proposed I was struck by the fact that this dimension of community hardly appears there, though for us it has been of immense importance from the very beginning, and I am personally convinced that our shared awareness of it in faith has been and remains the touchstone of our unity and the most crucial single factor in our survival and growth as a community.

Thirdly, I think that our peaceful sense of the radical impermanence of our life here combined with a strong sense of obligation to live it as fully as possible day by day for an ultimate purpose not fully clear to us may have something to say to other communities today, when the paradox of our manifestly ephemeral existence on the earth shot through with an almost obsessive conviction of being somehow rooted in the eternal is felt by so many who have no way of making sense of it.

With these perspectives, then, I propose to share something of the experiences of my own community in relation to each of the themes suggested for the papers in this *Supplement*, bearing in mind the focus on formation, and adding a few concluding observations of my own.

*Models of community: the Christa Prema Seva Ashram, Pune*

The Christa Prema Seva Ashram, Pune, was founded in 1927 by an Anglican missionary, Father Jack Winslow. He was deeply concerned by the spiritual, cultural and social alienation incurred by Hindus who became Christians, and prayed for guidance to find some small way of getting people to realize that the gospel can be lived in terms of any socio-cultural conditions and so break down by degrees the longstanding prejudices resulting from the well-intentioned but disastrous 'scorched-earth' policy of earlier missionaries in this part of India. He was convinced that the same Spirit was at work in all religious and spiritual searching. The idea came to him of forming a small ashram-style community of Indians and Englishmen where the gospel would be lived in all its simplicity, so much attuned to the ashram way of life, and where the scriptures and other sacred writings of all religions would be studied and held in honour.<sup>2</sup>

The roots of the ashram tradition go back to Vedic times. In its present form it developed from the custom of men who had fulfilled their duties to society by marrying and bringing up a family retiring in their later years to the forest (with their wives if they wanted to come!) and devoting their time to meditation, study of

the scriptures and the education of boys of the three upper castes who were sent to them to be initiated into their social obligations and also, if they were ready for it, to the ultimate meaning and goal of human life.<sup>3</sup> With the passage of time ashrams proliferated and diversified: some, under the influence of Jain and Buddhist *maths* developed on more monastic lines, others became centres of popular devotion or religiosity, or adopted some form of practical service to society—for example, the ashrams on the great pilgrim routes who give hospitality to pilgrims, and later on the Gandhian ashrams, centres of inspiration, guidance and training for those seeking to propagate the ideals of a new society based on the vision of Gandhiji.

It is not too easy to define the essential elements of an ashram today<sup>4</sup>, but generally there is in the beginning a small group gathered round a man or woman who is recognized as having a certain depth of spiritual experience and the gift of awakening others to such experience. Not all ashrams have such spiritual leaders or gurus, however, either because the original ones have died and it seemed unnecessary to replace them, or because it had always been so strongly felt that God is the only Guru that there was no inclination to have a human one. However, in these cases there is usually one person in the group who is recognized as the visible facilitator for the invisible Indweller in the hearts of all, who leads the community in discerning the promptings of the Spirit, as we would say. All genuine ashrams are vegetarian, very simple in lifestyle, open to all who come seeking God, liberation, realization, knowledge of the Self, the meaning of life—however they may express this. Within these broad outlines the variations are almost infinite. Some ashrams have highly-organized daily programmes of chanting, meditation, discourse and so on; others are simply places to which one may go to find silence and a relatively unstructured lifestyle with the possibility of some spiritual guidance; some expect regular sharing of daily chores, others leave visitors free to pursue their own path. Some say nothing about payment for stay, others make it clear that an offering is expected. Some have a markedly community style of life for long-term members, like the Brahma Vidya Mandir at Pauna founded by Vinoba Bhave for women, our 'elder sister' as they say, who have taught us so much, especially about listening to the Indweller. In others the members live more or less like hermits.

It seems extraordinary that a basic structure of such immense potential and flexibility should have been ignored for centuries by Christians, but the first Christian ashram was begun only in 1921, the Christukul Ashram in Tamilnadu, founded by two Protestant doctors to provide medical service to the poor in the surrounding countryside. The C.P.S. ashram was the second. Like its predecessor, it was strongly influenced by Gandhiji, who was a close personal friend of Father Winslow and a frequent visitor, staying here at least twice and coming over daily when elsewhere in Pune to pray at sunrise and sunset on the *sandhyasthan*, the great circle of stone in the garden for morning and evening prayer. C. F. Andrews was a member of the community and so too for a time was Verrier Elwin, the anthropologist. The ashram was very much a part of the life of Pune at that time: it consisted of a core community of men with an associate group of women (including Carol Graham) and a kind of third order for both men and women. One of the main reasons for the ending of the community was difference of opinion about the admission of married members to the core group. The celibate opinion prevailed: Fr Jack hived off with a small group of married members and soon returned to England and the original community finally petered out not long after the return to England of Bishop Bill Lash,<sup>5</sup> who succeeded him as Acharya.

In the late sixties the then Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the property, the late Bishop Christopher Robinson, Anglican Bishop of Bombay until 1970, invited the Anglican Community of St Mary the Virgin, in India for a hundred years, and the Roman Catholic Society of the Sacred Heart, in India since 1939, to see if they could revive the ashram together as an ecumenical community. The challenge was accepted, and in 1972 a small group under the leadership of Sr Vandana R.S.C.J. took up residence here. After a month's initiation into ashram living and the Pune context under the guidance of Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux, O.S.B.), Dadaji Pandit, a wise and holy Hindu friend whom we had met in the Brahma Vidya Mandir, and Fr M. Lederle S.J.,<sup>6</sup> now all in eternity, we began life together as an ecumenical community in the widest sense, as one of our core members was a Hindu. She was an elderly Brahmin lady who had been with us on the staff of Sophia College in Bombay, and put us on a sound footing from the very first regarding diet, etiquette, and a thousand other aspects of Maharashtra culture and tradition.

Her deep spiritual insight, humorous eye and witty comments as well as her knowledge of medicine, ayurvedic, allopathic and homeopathic, and her general experience as the youngest daughter-in-law in a household of seventy-two persons made her a precious and much-loved member of the household. She stayed with us for ten years, until just before her death, and her constant presence at our prayer, including the Eucharist, made us listen to the psalms and gospel with new and sometimes very uneasy ears—an invaluable education for inter-religious dialogue, and indeed a living form of it.

In 1972 we had no very precise blue-print of what our life would be, though we were clear about certain basic things from the start. We knew that as an ashram we had to be an open community, rooted in God and therefore in a deeply contemplative prayer, welcoming in the name of the Lord everyone who came here, including the poorest, the lowliest and the lost, in Tagore's phrase, convinced that it was he who brought them here and therefore being very chary of turning anyone away without good reason. We were overjoyed to discover in the chaos of the library a copy of the Rule Father Jack had drawn up for the first community, and though we could not adopt it in its details the spirit that permeated it and many of its turns of phrase echoed so uncannily our own groping intuitions and conscious aims that it has remained a treasure-house of inspiration. We realized very early on that the only possible guru for us was the risen Lord whom we gradually came to see as present among us in word and sacrament and by his presence in each one of us, and so the high points of each day for us as a community are the three times of prayer at dawn, midday and sunset and the daily Eucharistic celebration when we come together to allow our Guru to draw us ever more deeply into the great movement of return to the Father which is the secret of his own inner life. This sense of being centred as community in the Eucharist is to us something of a marvel, a miracle of grace, for as an ecumenical group with roots in the Roman, Anglican and Evangelical traditions the Eucharistic celebration is naturally the moment when the cruel reality of the divisions between our Churches is most keenly felt. We have lived together through times of great anguish over this, but there has never been the slightest doubt about the Eucharist being our life-spring and the bond of our unity and peace.

For the first few years the community was quite small, a core group of about nine or ten—with a few visitors, except when we had seminars of initiation into 'Indian Christian spirituality', mainly for formation personnel of religious congregations, which was something of a pioneering work at that time, in which Fr Bede Griffiths and our Panditji and several other friends helped us greatly. Then Sri B.K.S. Iyengar, the famous yoga teacher, whose Institute is quite near us, asked if students of his might live with us to have a quiet community life, vegetarian food and a quiet atmosphere. Ever since we have had about five or six a month when classes are in session, usually for a month, sometimes longer, from all parts of India, Asia and the world. This has been a marvellous enrichment and also the source of many challenges, keeping us in touch with what is going on in all parts of the earth as we listen to the story of their pilgrimages during the evening *satsang* or meeting of the household and tactfully seek to harmonize interactions and preserve the ashram atmosphere (no smoking, no sunbathing, for example!) with the minimum of interference. We explain the reasons for everything we ask of our guests and usually meet with much goodwill and co-operation. A member of Fr Anthony De Mello's Sadhana team who stayed here some years ago observed in wonder: 'This place could be *pandemonium*—but *it's a community!*'

Now we usually number from twenty-five to thirty in all, with a core group of seven at present, a wider community of another six or seven, and a floating population staying for anything from a day or two to several months. The wider community came into existence about eighteen months ago. A number of people—all Indian—had asked to stay with us for fairly long periods of time—a year or more. They included two priest students, two married couples (one elderly, from a Hindu Brahmin background but Christian for some thirty years; the other young, Hindu, teaching yoga at the Iyengar Institute, with two very small boys), a young man only recently Christian (evangelical) and two Catholic laywomen. After prayer and reflection we asked them if they would like to be more closely associated with us in responsibility for the life and ministry of the ashram, and all gladly accepted. We meet about twice a month (I shall say more of this under 'commitment').

With the increase in visitors it was not always easy to decide whether people were coming simply for inexpensive lodging, and we had to work through much tension over this, and undergo a

good deal of criticism from without. At last we decided that if we made it clear that we were an ashram, not a cheap boarding-house, we could trust the Lord for the rest. Experience has confirmed this. We explain that all who come are expected to be part of the community at least to the extent of respecting the ashram life-style, including the times of quiet for prayer and meditation, helping with some household task and coming at least sometimes to the evening *satsang*. About once a month we give an orientation on the ashram and its history and self-understanding for new guests. We find that practically everyone—even those who come with vague or mixed motives—finds here something they need for their pilgrimage, though we often learn this only much later. . .

For the core community, this is really a full-time or practically full-time vocation: we decided very early on that full-time work outside would not be compatible with our ministry as we understood it, and experience has amply confirmed this. Some of us have part-time responsibilities or employment outside, but anything more than this puts too much of a strain on all concerned. For the wider community this is not the case. For the core group, our life is our ministry. We see the ashram, in the words of a friend, as a 'crossroads of the Spirit' where pilgrims may pause on their journey and meet the Lord face to face, maybe without recognizing him at the time. Emmaus is one of our seminal gospel passages<sup>7</sup>. Our task is simply to facilitate the meeting, while deeply respecting the mystery of each one's vocation and freedom of response. We explain this clearly at the orientations—we are not out to 'convert' people. We have learnt that it is best to make this clear not only to those of other religions but also to many from the West who are extremely sensitive to anything resembling brain-washing or pressurizing. In any case I think all of us are temperamentally allergic to anything of this kind.

All this has given us a strong sense of relatedness to the whole human race in its unimaginable diversity, and this not only in theory: the number of mother-tongues even among the Indian members of the community, apart from our international community, and differences of background among ourselves as well as our visitors keep us constantly alert to the need to relate to each other without hurting anyone's sensitivities. A small but important example: both our Churches have asked us to help in evolving more Indian ways of worship, especially in relation to the Eucharist,

but most of the earlier efforts in this line drew heavily on the Sanskrit or Brahminical traditions of Hinduism. For the Dalits or 'outcaste' groups (whom Gandhiji called 'Harijans' or 'children of God', a label they now repudiate in favour of Dalit which has more of the connotation of the 'anawim' of biblical tradition) this tradition is irrevocably associated with the oppressions of the past from which they are now trying to free themselves. We had to find some kind of balance, for there are rich treasures in Vedic Hinduism which should be made available to everyone, and yet history cannot be ignored, especially when it is still so very much alive all round us and in the personal history of some of us. Moreover, though the culture of India is overwhelmingly Hindu, we cannot ignore the minority communities and religions. We are fortunate in having in our core group a deeply committed and widely respected Islamic scholar, a Christian Sufi if ever there was one. In these ways we try to contribute in a small way to the national integration India so badly needs.

Do we see our community as means or end? I think that in the perspectives of our double heritage we would find it impossible to say it was exclusively either. Perhaps it could best be described in St Thomas Aquinas's phrases about grace as: 'a seed of glory, a certain beginning of eternal life', or the 'realized eschatology' of the Gospel of John: the kingdom 'already present and yet to come'.

*A practical point not mentioned in the guidelines:* finance! We depend for this on the free offerings made by guests, though each member of the community contributes for his or her keep through a pension or part-time work. The religious members receive a small stipend for keep from their congregations, and also for their personal expenses: anything we earn outside goes back to our congregations to repay the stipend in part at least. We are allowed to live here rent free but have to cover the running costs. Somehow we manage, though we never know how much money we shall have next month! Guests give what they can, some more, some less: we never refuse anyone on financial grounds, and explain frankly to those who can afford more that if they give according to their means, this makes it possible for us to accept those who can give little or even at times nothing. We usually meet with great understanding over this. The fact that everyone helps with household tasks, and sometimes with maintenance jobs according to their skills, is an important factor in our financial viability and also contributes greatly to community.



It may be well to add here that though those of us who are religious are answerable to our own congregations for all that concerns our life and ministry, and in fact the R.S.C.J. members constitute a local community of our Province, as ashram community we are to all intents and purposes practically autonomous in all that concerns the ashram and its ministry. We have had great support and at times wise suggestions from our respective provincial and central governments but they trust us to make our own decisions, consulting them when necessary. For this powerful incentive to responsible freedom and initiative we can never be sufficiently grateful.

### *Community and selection*

It must already be clear that diversity was built into us from the beginning and it has only increased with time—Indian and Westerner (only three now in the longterm community), male and female, old and young (age range from three to eighty-four!) married and unmarried, priest and layman, religious and secular, Romans, Anglicans and Evangelicals, Hindus from birth and Christians who were born Hindu, with varying degrees and kinds of education and specialization. If anyone wants to join us, difference is if anything seen as a plus point, but we have a trial period together to make sure that we can relate at a sufficiently deep level to accept each other without the conflict that comes from absolutizing one's own relatives: it is not necessary to agree in all our formulations, but there must be some degree of the freedom born of a sense of at-homeness in the 'vast deep' that casts out the defensiveness that springs from insecurity. This is not as vague as it sounds: Dr M. M. Thomas once said of us that 'in this place, openness to other religions *flows from* commitment to Christ', and we may add now in the light of years of pondering, from the explicit awareness that the Lord who is our Guru is also the Light that illumines everyone born into this world, and can therefore be the cornerstone of the most diversified group without violating anyone's inner truth. It is understood by everyone that the gospel provides the basic principles for life here, and it makes total sense to our Hindu members and friends that Christ should be the Guru. As one of them said on a memorable occasion, explaining the desire of his wife and himself to receive the Eucharist, and indeed arguing for this as a right: 'There is one Mystery beyond all name and form, and *in this place access to that Mystery is through Jesus*

*Christ!*—adding for good measure: ‘*And we belong to this community!*’ It remains true that there has to be a certain degree of temperamental compatibility for membership in the community. We have had some varied and occasionally bizarre experiences over this, but usually find that if a parting is necessary, this is recognized without ill-feeling by both sides.

### *Formation*

This is for us less a matter of deliberate influencing of some by others than a process of mutual interaction and enrichment, the sheer experience of living together as human beings and trying to create an atmosphere of acceptance which makes it possible for people to be themselves and reveal their inner faces without feeling pressurized to do so. Many wise people, Hindu and Christian, gave us help in the beginning, and we have since amassed considerable experience, not least through our fraternal contacts with our ashrams, mainly Hindu, who recognize us as belonging to the fraternity. I think the habit formed at the start of prayerful reflection on our experience and readiness to change and learn by trial and error has been a powerful factor. Three of us including the present *acharya* or head of the community have been here from the beginning, which has been a help in continuity, but the handing on of tradition is profoundly tempered by our lively sense that our Guru still speaks to us through each other and our constantly changing contacts and situation. Moreover we have never forgotten the wisdom of our friend Susheela Didi (‘elder sister’) of the Brahma Vidya Mandir. She was looked on as the charismatic leader of the group for as true Gandhians they regarded God as their only Guru. She told me once: ‘If I ever think a sister is doing something that is harmful for herself or the community, I never say anything to her, but I ask the *Antaryamin* (the Indweller) to show her, if I am right. And,’ she added, ‘if I am, he always shows her’. We do sometimes point things out to each other directly, which is after all according to the gospel, but I personally find Didi’s words a great safeguard against wrong motivation in this whole area of formation and spiritual growth.

We get a good deal of input from our respective congregations and Churches, and some of us are involved in priestly and religious formation and ongoing research in the fields of religion, theology and liturgy—and of course ‘Indian Christian spirituality’. Our practical experience, modest as it is, is greatly valued in these

areas, and the resulting contacts are immensely enriching for us. We also read a lot; we take one national and two local newspapers (one in Marathi) and a number of periodicals, secular as well as religious, to keep in touch, and kind friends send us *The Tablet* and the *Guardian Weekly* which we otherwise could not afford.

Last but not least there is the daily rhythm of prayer and liturgy, the hours of silent meditation at sunrise and sunset and the reflection on the Word of God at the morning Eucharist and evening *arati*. Time and again the scripture readings have spoken to us with devastating appositeness in moments of difficulty or crisis, giving guidelines for action which are often unequivocally clear but by no means easy to act on, and more than once proving beyond question that 'God Almighty hath a sense of humour'.

Two areas in which this form of pedagogy through scripture has been most striking for us as a community are our understanding of the mystery of Christ in relation to other religions, especially Hinduism (we have a reading from the other world religions every day before the Eucharist on the same theme as the biblical readings, and this juxtaposition is often an education in itself); and secondly our ability to tolerate potentially disruptive guests who we feel need to be here for a time and yet put a severe strain on some or all of us.<sup>9</sup> This sometimes demands the wisdom of a Solomon to determine how far we can go, and even though a greater than Solomon is here, we have had times of great tension as we sought a way through.

#### *The one who is formed*

This has really been dealt with above, as the formative process is reciprocal and usually arises from the life-situation when it is not identical with it. It is taken for granted that all collaborate in this give and take, according to their capacity, and there is no coercion, but a certain expectation of cooperation which creates a sense of obligation which is normally without constraint. Coercion is in fact unthinkable as it would be self-defeating, and in rare cases of non-cooperation the usual response is to leave the people to work through the problem in their own time, facilitating this as discreetly as possible by keeping communication open in the awareness that they know as well as we do that the situation is abnormal.

In our situation it is definitely more helpful to think of dimensions rather than states of formation, perhaps partly because those who

join us have usually reached a certain degree of maturity which may be more marked in some areas than others, varying from person to person.

*Stages of community growth*

Here too, although there are certain analogies between the development of a human being and that of a community, there is in the latter a certain unpredictability in both areas and degrees of development that suggest that dimension might be the better term. I find a useful model here in the Upanishadic account of the structure of the human person as consisting of five 'layers' or 'sheathes' (the Sanskrit term is *kosa*<sup>10</sup>) of depth or interiority, starting with the gross physical body 'made of food' and progressing inwards to the deepest centre or Self. The physical body is understood to be penetrated by the life-principle or 'layer' of breath, the principle of growth, feeling, perception, and this in turn by the yet richer and fuller and more 'interior' dimension of the mental, including sense-memory, emotion, imagination, discursive reason—the level from which perhaps we most frequently respond to stimuli from without and at which we normally live. There is however a profounder level of awareness, that of the intuitive intelligence, which penetrates to the heart of an object, situation or event and grasps its inner truth in a tranquillity which is both peaceful and objective. Finally there is the deepest centre of all, the 'self' or 'sheath' or 'layer' of bliss, on the precise nature of which the great Hindu commentators are divided, some saying that it is the deepest level of the human psyche, others that it is the supreme Self shining in the depths of every being, the ocean of bliss as it were, in which our roots are plunged or from which we are 'effortlessly breathed forth', in Sankaracharya's phrase. The whole of Hindu asceticism is geared in principle to the disciplining of the person so that no disturbance at the more 'exterior' levels will block or cloud the illumining, pacifying and directing activity of the inmost self permeating and transforming every level of the human agent's activity, without in any way violating his or her relative autonomy and freedom. I think this offers quite a good analogy for community growth as well: we begin as a collection of juxtaposed elements who need to get to know each other through external physical communication, body-language very much included, but all the time the other levels are present and operative and any one of them may preponderate at

a given moment. As we grow together in mutual understanding and love, through each one's maturing self-discipline and dependence on the Indweller, our initiatives and responses tend more and more consistently to proceed from deeper levels of our being, and ultimately from the Source without a source who is its ground. Obviously there are ups and downs, not a straight line of development: we can reach a very deep level of communication on one occasion and next day may need to have recourse to basic techniques of human dynamics to sort out a problem in relationships. Sometimes both may operate simultaneously. We had a marvellous experience of communication at different levels a few years ago when ordinary rational discourse seemed to be getting us nowhere. The point at issue was what to do about our then housekeeper, not a resident member of the community, who had had a fiery altercation with one of the core members. As in the gospel, their witness did not agree, and no one else had been present. X, the core community member involved, was deeply hurt and resentful because the rest of us had unanimously concluded that it would be unjust to dismiss Y but would not admit that this was what she really wanted, so that we could not come to grips with it. In the end we decided to stop all discussion. We met in my room, with the Lord sacramentally present in the middle of the circle, and after silent prayer each one was asked to write her response to three questions, which we took one at a time. The first was: 'How do I *feel* about Y?' the second: 'What do I think we should *do*?' and the third: 'When I sit still and relax, what word of the Lord surfaces in my consciousness in relation to this whole situation?' Each one gave her response without any comment except for an occasional clarification. Then after a pause for prayer we took the next question. At the first level there was a fairly peaceful and objective statement of feelings from everyone except X who said she felt nothing!

At the second level again there were a number of sensible suggestions, chiefly aiming at reducing pressures on Y and realizing her very real problems: it was again unanimously felt that she should not be sent away. X said she had no suggestions but would follow the majority decision! When however we came to the third and deepest level, when the rest of the group had offered: 'Love one another as I have loved you', 'Take the beam out of your own eye. . .', etc., we were electrified to hear the hitherto impassive X suddenly exclaim with tremendous vehemence and passion:

'Jesus made a *whip* from string and *drove them out of the Temple!*' There was an immediate relaxing of tension and paradoxically perhaps an upsurge of joy as we recognized after days of apparent division that we had all somehow been in touch with the Spirit at the deepest level, and at that point we were compelled to be honest with each other. We did not attempt to take a decision that evening. All were invited to put one in, in writing, but no one did, and not long after the problem solved itself, for us at least, when Y left of her own accord.

The question of community growth seems inevitably to raise the question of community decline and death, and the taking of risks already touched on: how far in practice can one live the ideal of the totally open evangelical community without destroying oneself in the process? How far should one go in the laying down of life individually and as a group, and how far must one take into account the psychological and other limitations of the group and its members? Perhaps the grain of wheat of John 12 offers a wise hint here: it underwent death, but not total destruction, or there would have been no hundredfold. The line between the two may sometimes appear like a razor's edge, especially when the community is divided and the one ultimately responsible has to fall back on the consolations and desolations of his and her own spirit. But right decision? Wrong decision? Who knows? The original C.P.S. ashram community died out in the sixties and came alive again some years later in a new form which the founder, then ninety-two years old, hailed with immense joy as something beyond his wildest dreams. Prophetically, as it now seems, he had begun the Rule he wrote in the 1920s for the first community with a reference to the grain of wheat, its death and rebirth. . .

#### *Expressing community identity*

In our experience awareness of a common identity has been something which had to grow and grow from within, from each one's rootedness in God and commitment to follow the leading of his Spirit along the lines which seemed to be indicated by our heritage in this place and the demands of the contemporary situation. It was however clarified and strengthened by much often painful reflection together on some of the elements in our diversity which really seemed divisive, which it was not wholly in our power to modify. A classic and crucial instance already referred to was of course the question of participation in the Eucharist. It was

gradually resolved to some extent with the very understanding help of our bishops<sup>11</sup> and also thanks to the honesty with which we talked it through until we all realized that it was a matter of profound suffering for all of us, leaving no room for superiority or inferiority complexes: we had to accept the hard reality of where our Churches were even if we had together gone much further on the road to union in the one Spirit.

With regard to our characteristic spirituality or 'way' as ashram community, we were also gradually led to clarify this and make it explicit by questions we began to be asked with striking persistence: 'What is your *sadhana* (spiritual path, specific means of union with God or "realization")?' At first we said cheerfully 'The gospel—we don't have any common specific way of meditation or devotion (as many ashrams do). Within the scope of the gospel each one follows their own path'. But the questions continued, so in the end we said: 'Perhaps the Lord is saying something to us through this'. So we prayed and reflected to see if any light came to us about our own personal *sadhana* or that of the community, if we thought there was such a thing. It may seem silly, it looks so obvious with hindsight, but when we finally sat and shared we were astonished and happy to find that we had been very clearly led to the name of the ashram: the service of the love of Christ. We had all said in varying ways that our life is our *sadhana*—always being ready to do what ever needs to be done at any time to keep the ashram going, maintain it as a place of prayer and peace by the depth of our own prayer and peace, welcoming all who come in the name of the Lord and with his patience and composition—a 'way' at once highly diversified according to gifts and talents and demands of times and persons, and yet profoundly one, exemplifying once more the principle of the *Antaryamin*, our identity springing in a very practical sense from the life-force of each individual and of the group.

#### *Formation for living alone*

I think the same principle applies here too, but cannot say much about it for lack of space. Even for community living today in the sense of living together, there has to be much less relying on external props than in the past, and if this is recognized and provided for in formation there will be much less trauma when the need arises to live alone. It is perhaps worth noting that several people who have been members of our community in the past

have recently asked us, quite independently of each other, if they may continue to be associate members, as it were, living their own lives, married or single, in union of love, prayer and friendship with us, sharing our common ideals, and coming from time to time for longer or shorter periods of community living. Some have also told us that they learnt to stand on their own feet here, occasionally after years in a religious community.

### *Commitment*

In our experience, realism is essential over this: impermanence is woven into our very being here, in a place which does not belong to us, so none of us can make a permanent commitment to the ashram community except a conditional one, 'for as long as it lasts'. This has to be explained to all would-be members, and is of course much more of a challenge to those who have no religious community to fall back on, though it is quite demanding even for us who have. Again, we have degrees of commitment: the core community can be expected to take responsibility for seeing that there are always enough of us here to keep the place viable, and deal with whatever needs to be dealt with, in a way that our wider community members cannot, for the extent of their commitment is in each case defined in terms of the demands of their previous commitments—studies, family members who need attention, teaching at the Yoga Institute and so on. This is clearly recognized by all and causes no tension. In general, the wider community members are exemplary in their dedication to the ideals and needs of the ashram, and are a source of great strength and inspiration to the rest of us.

It has recently been explicitly accepted by our religious communities that no one should be asked to join the ashram community who does not feel inwardly drawn to this kind of life. Here too experience shows that realism is the wiser course.

### *What is new about new communities?*

In recent years as we have listened night after night to our endless succession of guests sharing with us their spiritual pilgrimage, we have heard the same phrase recurring again and again: 'I belong (or belonged) to a community. . .'—communities of all sorts and kinds, permanent and temporary, communities 'not sure how long we'll last', communities where salaries are pooled, where some are mentally or physically handicapped or out of work, (one at least



had a dramatic ending, when some of its members stripped the lead off the roof and windows and finally had a shoot-out with the police!); religious communities where the bond is overtly spiritual, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or whatever, others where it is the desire for a simple, non-consumer life or belief in nature foods or the desire to do something for immigrants, or merely the conviction that highly diversified human beings should be able to live together in peace, and the desire to demonstrate this to others as a small contribution to the birth of a saner world. We have also noted with an amazement no less than that of the Jesuit friend quoted earlier that our own kaleidoscopic household manages to remain a community in spite of all, and attributed this in large part to a kind of basic instinct for community that seems to be peculiarly strong in the human race today. This appears to be somehow related to the reaching out across frontiers of race, religion, social class and political differences to come to the help of victims of flood, famine and human cruelty and callousness, including the threat of nuclear war which is also a striking feature of our time. What does all this say to us who belong to communities of basically Christian inspiration? How does it relate to the forms of community we have known in the past and which are still by no means extinct? What is new about the new communities?

I had reached this point in my reflections when I read John Todd's Viewpoint on 'The Inclusive Church' in the Easter issue of *The Tablet*, in which he speaks of the 'many kinds of small groups, based on prayer, often ecumenical, occasionally multi-religious' which are 'beginning to be sufficiently numerous to be taken into account as we re-forge our Christian understanding', He says:

The experience of such groups provides a valuable context as we continue on . . . converging lines towards a consensus about the purpose and meanings of the Christian doctrines, sacraments and structures we have inherited. There is always a danger that this inheritance will be mistaken as the heart of the Gospel. Everyone who reads the Gospel knows that cannot be so. It is the Spirit that gives life. That life is Christ, His words come to us indeed from the Church in inherited forms. But the Church itself depends on the Spirit. And the Spirit seems to be leading us to the open style which the small groups commonly use.

The lineaments of a fresh understanding of the Church are emerging, one that is not so much exclusive as inclusive. Secularism may be seen to have helped. 'Religion', a ritualised 'God', Church-going, have all become redundant . . . Jesus of Nazareth . . . came to enable the Spirit to bring gifts of life to all. All people, all religions, all activities, the whole twentieth-century world, the whole cosmos, is linked, on this understanding, with the Creator and Redeemer.

As I read this, everything slipped suddenly into focus, and I realized that 'in my beginning was my end'. For what seems new in the communities of today as distinct from those, say, of the nineteenth century, which saw such a proliferation of religious foundations and such optimism regarding the future of humanity on the earth, would seem to be the very points that struck me as particularly relevant about C.P.S. for this paper—their diversity of membership and open character, their sense of being part of a vaster pattern, a mysterious movement that knows no geographical or religious frontiers and seems to spring from something very deep in the human psyche, however diversified its ostensible objectives, and finally their acceptance of impermanence as a paradoxically permanent feature of existence. In the midst of all this I saw the hierarchical Church as herself the grain of wheat, cracking and crumbling in her old monolithic forms in the self-transforming process of giving birth to the kingdom which at the end of the ages will be co-extensive with the human race permeated by the Spirit, and each small community as a seed, a growing-point of the kingdom. . .

What then have we as small communities to say to the Church? Reaffirm, perhaps, our faith in her future as kingdom, her inner resilience and power to be reborn, and our own willingness to be part of that process of death and rebirth. And also perhaps express to her our longing desire for a new eschatology that speaks the earthy language of our times and makes this process somehow more intelligible to our contemporaries—a language that speaks of unity that subsumes but does not destroy our diversity, of frank recognition that our sense of purpose ultimately transcends our mental grasp, but carries the strong assurance that in the midst of the impermanence and dissolution that surrounds us and invades our very being there is already at work the promise of a new creation, a glory not to be compared to the sufferings of this present time, the kingdom *already present* although still to come. . .

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Brahman or Self of the Upanishads.

<sup>2</sup> They were even used in worship, which was extraordinary at that time.

<sup>3</sup> The evidence of the Upanishads suggests that not many were, as they show a number of elderly men still seeking it.

<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Ashram association was still trying to do so at its meeting in November 1987.

<sup>5</sup> They were respectively closely involved in the foundation of Lee Abbey and in the Anglican Franciscan Community of which Fr Algy Roberts, another ex-ashramite, had been co-founder a few years earlier.

<sup>6</sup> He was the founder of Snehasadan, a dialogue centre in the Hindu heart of Pune which was spontaneously accepted as an ashram by the neighbours though he never called it that.

<sup>7</sup> Angelo da Fonseca, the first Christian artist since Moghul times to depict Christian themes in Indian style, lived here for some sixteen years in the old days and constantly painted this scene. We have two originals in the ashram.

<sup>8</sup> This mandate is honoured to some extent in our daily liturgy and is a constant preoccupation, above all in our celebration of the Easter Vigil.

<sup>9</sup> This include a number of needy characters who come for help and sometimes stay for some time. As everyone who comes eats with us and we have bathing places etc. in common, this sometimes poses health hazards and, in the eyes of some; endangers the moral reputation of the ashram. Gospel in hand, we have struggled to reconcile the serpent and the dove.

<sup>10</sup> *Taittiriya Upanishad* 11, 2.

<sup>11</sup> We only have one Eucharist each day. At present six days a week we have two Catholic priests celebrating, and everyone communicates together. Once a week we have a Church of North India liturgy in which we all take part, including the two priests, but the Catholics communicate from the reserved Sacrament, which is passed round on the same tray as the elements consecrated during the celebration. Just before the Our Father we pray: 'Father, we thank you for the union of mind and heart that you have created among us by the gift of your Spirit. With your Son we pray that full and visible union may soon be established among us and all Christians, as you will and by the means you will'. We all feel that this is the best we can do at present, and it is at least honest; respecting the position of our Churches and yet expressing our own feeling of having gone beyond. For five years we had a Church of North India presbyter, Rev Y. D. Tiwari, as a member of our community. Then we had more frequent Church of North India liturgies enriched by his deep spiritual experience, Hindu and Christian.