

# COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT

By TIMOTHY LIVESEY

**W**RITING THIS ARTICLE has been a challenge. It has taken me much longer than I expected and there have been many false starts. I am not an academic, or even a writer. My approach has had to be practical. I gave up trying to be theoretical or even very analytical. Instead, I have tried to observe and describe my own experience of community, as simply as possible and to see the part that community life has played in my journey of faith. As I wrote, I saw more and more clearly what a vital influence on my slowly growing faith the experience of different caring communities has been.

To begin with I was extremely fortunate to spend four years at Stonyhurst College, a Jesuit boarding school and to have been very happy there. It was my first experience of community away from my family and I loved it. It offered the luxury of a secure environment and a balanced lifestyle. In addition to the usual academic and sporting pursuits of a school we had ample opportunity to develop ourselves in more individual and personal ways. For me, two aspects of that life were particularly precious. First, living in such beautiful countryside. Almost every evening I would go out with a friend and walk in the fields which surrounded the school. Most days too, I went running on the nearby fell. I was always conscious that life at Stonyhurst was a great privilege, so different from the playground environment of my previous comprehensive school. Secondly, I began to grow spiritually. In particular I was encouraged by one of the Jesuit priests who became both my tutor and friend. I was helped to express inner thoughts and questions. And I was encouraged—we all were—to become aware of our larger communities, through contact with handicapped and elderly people. I had the opportunity each week to attend a small informal eucharist celebrated by the school's spiritual director. There was a small group of us who benefited

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enormously from this chance to meet once a week, to talk, to pray, to listen to the word of God and to each other.

Stonyhurst was and is proud of its family tradition and stress is placed on developing values. There is very little bullying. As far as I can remember, very few of us suffered from a sense of inferiority or superiority. The teachers were, in general, kind and genuinely committed to the welfare of the boys. Many became our friends. Of course, not everyone was as happy there as I was. Often boys who had been boarders since the age of six were less able to appreciate what the school had to offer. And, obviously, Stonyhurst could not offer me the contact with 'the real world' twenty-four hours a day which I had had before. But the benefits to me were enormous and they resurface later in this story: a sense of security, a value placed on the individual and his development, the freedom to think, to question, to be oneself, an atmosphere of care and encouragement, room for spiritual formation.

Between school and university I spent time in a very different community. I served for ten months in a regiment of the British Army, the Royal Irish Rangers. Much of my time was spent training. This meant often spending stretches of two or three weeks under canvas in a huge pine forest in Scotland. The contrast with the warm, secure, liberal atmosphere of Stonyhurst could hardly have been greater. The army and the soldiers were rough, tough and the discipline was strong. Nevertheless, here too people and their pulling together was of the essence. In every unit, from the Section of eight men to the Company of one hundred, each individual had a specific and necessary role. Everybody was expected to give of their best for the greater good of the group. Strong bonds of respect and affection helped foster a sense of identity and esprit de corps.

The officers and NCO's in the regiment were expected to provide the professional and leadership skills for the formation of a cohesive, committed and disciplined group. Fostering and maintaining morale and commitment was our most important task. The welfare of each individual was our primary concern and took precedence over concern for self. At Stonyhurst I had received all the advantages of the care and concern fostered by the school. In the army I was expected for the first time to play a role in providing some of the same care and concern. It was not by any means just a question of taking and giving orders; the interplay between one soldier and another was crucial.

Life at university in Oxford was quite different again. I was not always happy and perhaps missed the stability and security that a pre-established community had provided for me at school and in the army. Equally I had not yet discovered a personal desire to search for and become part of a Christian group or community. Although I went to mass regularly and even thought seriously about becoming a Jesuit, my faith remained largely something only between me and God. I did not discuss spiritual concerns with my close friends even though I am sure we were all searching spiritually all the time. I did not want to get involved at the chaplaincy, and I was too proud to visit the Worth Abbey Benedictine Lay Community which had become a popular weekend retreat for many friends of mine. Many people I have met since became very involved in their university chaplaincies and consequently were happier and more fulfilled than I was at university.

At the end of three years I was ready for a change of heart. My closest friend took me to Worth Abbey the week after my Finals to stay at the Lay Community. Monks, monasteries and the energy of the young lay people there came as a surprise. I was instantly, if a little reluctantly, hooked.

During the next few years Worth Abbey became for me a focus of new growth. I began to discern more formally what life in community could offer. At the Lay Community it was easy to relax, make friends and talk about subjects which were taboo in the sophisticated Oxford environment. Possibly I became a little intoxicated by it all, but I made many friends whom I still see regularly.

At the same time I came into contact with *L'Arche*. *L'Arche* began in Trosly in France in 1964 when the Canadian, Jean Vanier, decided to try and live with two mentally handicapped men called Raphael and Philippe in a spirit of fraternity and equality away from the institutions where they had previously lived. The experiment worked. Vanier found all three of them could grow together spiritually and emotionally in a normal and natural way. *L'Arche* developed and spread and now there are communities or families all over the world. They provide handicapped and non-handicapped people with the space and opportunity to share their lives. Most of the houses have gardens and workshops where an ordinary day's work is done in addition to

the domestic chores of any household. In most respects the atmosphere is the same as that in any family. There are ups and downs, fights and reconciliations, peaceful times and times of turmoil.

It was at a retreat just before the Easter of my final year at Oxford that I met someone who had lived in the *L'Arche* community in Bognor Regis for a number of years. I had never heard of *L'Arche* before but felt immediately inspired by what she told me. I knew instinctively that this was the change I wanted. I asked if they needed any help. Soon afterwards I spent a trial weekend in Bognor. I was a little shy of meeting handicapped people but I was also confident I was going to discover something new and special, something I had not encountered before.

I was not disappointed. *L'Arche* specializes in warm welcomes. I felt loved and accepted from the moment I walked in the door. I joined the community properly the following September.

During the next year I was introduced to a new world where every person, whatever scars he or she carries, is deeply respected. There were ten of us living in a small council-type house built for a small family. We had to be close. I shared a tiny room with someone called Fred. Fred was still very disturbed after spending nearly thirty years in a psychiatric hospital, many of them on a locked ward. We shared and did everything together. It was an exhausting experience. I had one day a week and one week-end in four free and would often escape to the peace and tranquillity of Worth. It was during these visits that I began to get to know the monks and became more and more impressed by the abbot and community.

At *L'Arche* I learned a great many things. My teachers for the most part were handicapped. I learned not to rely solely on my intellect and powers of speech as means of communication. I was shown the importance of touch to express the gamut of emotions from love to anger. I was shown how important skills are—from peeling potatoes to making welcome posters or birthday cakes.

I made many friends in Bognor—the *L'Arche* houses were very much a part of the local community and the Anglican and Catholic parishes. Meeting people was made a lot easier in Fred's company. He didn't suffer from my self-consciousness. Neither did I after a few months! All in all my time at *L'Arche* was a time of awakening. I became much more aware of the richness of human relationships, and of profound suffering endured by many people, of alienation and how community can heal that isolation by bringing people in

from the peripheries. In only a year I was fortunate to be part of an extraordinarily rich exchange of emotional and spiritual experience. I was a much more open person, ready to experience new things, new people. Even when I returned to the familiar Oxbridge world of a merchant bank in the City, the move was not as strange as many seemed to think. After all, what is so different about bankers?

I worked for three months in a merchant bank before finally deciding to try to discover if I had a religious vocation. I asked the Abbot of Worth if I could join the novitiate the following September. He agreed. We both knew it was a trial and might not work.

Events seemed to have led me to Worth and this move seemed to make sense of all that had happened to me up till then. In London I had spent my three months as a banker living with four friends in a shared house in Hackney. None of us knew all the others but we had the Worth Lay Community in common. We just 'clicked'. It was a marvellous experience of living together. The four of us shared everything, from our faith to the cooking. We always seemed to do everything together—we went to the launderette together, we prayed and went to church together. For all of us, this was a time of great spiritual discovery and it influenced me to put my question to the Abbot and then leave behind me a promising job.

The crunch came the next September when I joined the monastery. Many things were hard. There were four novices and all of us were completely unprepared for the novitiate. It was, for example, almost impossible to see groups of visitors coming down to the Lay Community, many of them close friends, and not to be able to say even a hello. The joy and freedom of *L'Arche* and London were replaced by a strict régime strictly enforced. The emphasis was always the cross. The desert became home. And so, in a sense, it should. It is necessary in a monastery to grow up quickly. Detachment, humility and obedience are required. The monk should be quicker to obey than to question, prefer silence to speech and communal chit-chat to the conversations of a special relationship. Because it is not an easy path, our novice master was at pains to direct us appropriately. Sadly for us, the pace proved ferocious and the strain at times almost unbearable. It was not possible constantly to strive to be someone else and to be oneself at the same time. We tried and we failed. I began to feel divided

between me and it, and decided to salvage me. Eight months later I was the last of the four novices to leave.

It seems to me now that the eight months in the Worth novitiate and my decision to leave marked a turning point for my spiritual growth. At Worth my commitment to a life of prayer and obedience was carefully tested. For eight months I was required to pay attention to the smallest details of monastic life. Intellectually and emotionally I became absorbed by the monastic routine. My horizons were restricted to the monastic perimeter except for a welcome weekly visit to St Catherine's hospice in neighbouring Crawley. Consequently when I emerged from the monastery I found that in an attempt to adapt to the life of a monk I had lost many of the skills required for a more ordinary life. Meeting new people and making conversation no longer came naturally. Readjusting to the world proved the most difficult ordeal so far, harder than entering or even leaving Worth.

Employers viewed me with a natural suspicion. My own perspective had changed. My desire was no longer so much to develop spiritually, to do good works, to discover my vocation. It was much more basic: to find somewhere to live, to embark on a career, to pick up important relationships I had left behind. Paradoxically, my involvement with *L'Arche* and with Worth had drawn me away from those people to whom I should have been most committed, my family and Katie, who two and a half years later agreed to marry me. I think that leaving family relationships behind is for some people, particularly religious, a hard cross to bear. No one can be in two places at once.

So what about community and commitment? The last four years have not been easy. I have been much more aware of suffering and struggle since I left the monastery than I ever was before I went in. I am talking not about the suffering we see on television and read about in the newspapers. Nor about the suffering I used to sense cycling through the East End of London every day on the way to work. That is suffering we can experience only from a distance. I am talking about the day-to-day suffering and struggle we feel most profoundly in our own lives and those we are closest to. Things like finding work, coping with stress, experiencing financial difficulties, coping with physical and mental distress. Before I went into the monastery I had not really come close to suffering although I had seen it at close quarters. In community where people live close together it sometimes remains remarkably

easy to escape from near encounters with people and from pain that affects oneself. When I came away from Worth I could no longer escape. Mysteriously my experience there had disarmed me and prepared me (by unpreparing me) for life in the world, for struggle, for commitment. I found myself vulnerable and needing help. I was no longer strong and selective about where my energies went.

In this state, it is easier to discover commitment and community. The two are in a sense the same thing. In the last four years I have learned to apply myself more patiently to doing a job of work, to earning money, and to getting on with life. It is hard sometimes, particularly when work is frustrating and money is a constant anxiety. But I am not the only one battling with this, nor in a more important struggle—to pray, to read, to understand God's Word, to be loving and kind, to resist temptations, to be more Christ-like.

Support in this must come from community. First and foremost I have my wife. I am committed to her and she to me. We are bound by marriage vows willingly and joyfully pronounced two years ago. We may be a minute community at present but we are one nevertheless.

We are too, a community within a community—a family within a family, close to our extended families. Certainly one of the joys of being married is to become son, daughter, brother and sister to a whole new set of caring relations. We all belong to each other and it is natural for us to share as much together as we can.

We also have our friends. Again, we feel committed to them and feel their commitment to us. Slowly but surely we sacramentalize our bonds by becoming godparents, by celebrating marriages, christenings, confirmations. We meet together, eat together and sometimes pray together and celebrate the Eucharist together. We cannot live together, or even near each other but this is a minor inconvenience. Perhaps the most precious sign of love that exists between us is the concern and support that is always shown when some of us are experiencing difficulties. Katie and I, for instance, feel no shame that from time to time we need help and comfort, rather great gratitude that we can always trust it will be there.

This is also true of our parish community. We are extremely lucky to find ourselves part of a really alive, loving family. We appreciate it all the more since both Katie and I experienced the opposite in parishes before we were married and moved near to

St William of York in south east London. Trying to grow, to pray and to feel part of God's people was exceptionally difficult when part of a rundown parish. For us, the parish is vital. It is the most tangible expression of the Church, the most intangible object. From the first day we went to mass at St William of York we have known that we are genuinely welcome, genuinely part of that family. Not only does that mean we feel loved and accepted, it means we want to grow. We want to spend more time and effort developing our prayer lives, individually and together. We want to become involved in some of the many activities going on in the parish and the local community, RCIA, justice and peace, liturgy groups and so on. We want to be more involved in the mass, because we feel drawn by the love and life of the community into a fuller sharing with them, a closer involvement. There is no need to intellectualize our growing feeling of community. Its proof is a practical response, answering 'yes' to the invitation to join in something which is so alive and which can offer us so much.

Throughout my life it strikes me that I have been responding more or less generously, impetuously, practically and sensibly to other people—to Katie, to my family, to parish life, Worth, *L'Arche*, Freddie, the Chaplaincy at Oxford, Stonyhurst. All the time people have been offering me opportunities; to take, to give, to be involved, to join, to leave. Behind all these stimuli and choices is a pattern of responses, saying yes, no, maybe. I think it is the same for all of us. We are constantly being called, constantly being asked whether we want to discover some more; more about ourselves, more about each other. It does not matter how each individual chooses to define community and commitment. We are all fortunate to have people whoever and wherever we are. We all have some friends, some family, some human contact. Most of us have a great deal.

People are a sign for us of God's love. We are nourished by the sacraments and in our prayer. But we are also encouraged and fed by other people's love. If we feel even a small sense of commitment, if we have even the vaguest notion of belonging to a loving family then we should be grateful. God has blessed us with friends and family to encourage us in our discipleship. I cannot help being deeply moved by the encounter between the Prodigal Son and his father. Here is all the tenderness, love, forgiveness I have been trying to describe:



While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly (Lk 15,21).

There are times when we fail to appreciate the presence and care of family and friends. We are too preoccupied to feel compassion, too self-absorbed to express concern. Sometimes we walk away. The same happens in our prayer. But nothing moves us more deeply or encourages us more strongly than being welcomed home. It is the outstretched hand that expresses most perfectly for me the heart of what community and commitment is about.

I am going to finish by quoting a prayer of dedication which was recited by my parish family during the Maundy Thursday Service this year. It expresses properly some of what I have been trying to articulate:

Almighty Father, we acknowledge your love in calling us to be part of your family. We believe that we are sent by your Son to preach by our way of life the truths of the gospel. We shall strive to be a people of prayer in our homes and within the worship of our parish. We shall celebrate the sacraments with gratitude in response to your love. We shall involve ourselves in the calls made on our talents and our time to make a real community of love, care and peace. We shall support our parish in all its needs both spiritual and temporal as a sign of our willingness to grow together as one united family. We shall endeavour to educate ourselves to the needs of the wider world and support these needs by our prayer and material aid. We shall try to be less self-centred and more aware of the needs of others especially the sick, the elderly, the lonely, the handicapped, the bereaved, the unemployed, the confused and those who feel isolated from the community of the Church. We shall promote justice and peace at every level and rid ourselves of prejudice of race, colour or creed. We shall make ourselves more conscious of the young so that they may see in their lives their call to the gospel despite all the pressures on them to follow other paths. We shall strive to build a unity of Christians within our locality and so fulfil the will and prayer of your Son. We re-dedicate our efforts to continue his work to the best of our abilities. Lord, we mean what we have said but realize too that we are weak. Help us, Father, through the life of your Son within us and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be faithful, loyal and active members of your family. AMEN.