

Whose community is it anyhow?

Séamus O’Gorman

HOW IS COMMUNITY TO BE CONCEIVED AND CREATED within the Christian context in an age shaken by extraordinary changes? With so much disagreement about the place of God in our lives, with the living of faith becoming an adventure chosen by the few rather than a conventional option of the many, with such a one-sided stress placed on the sanctity of individual choice and personal space, where is the room for the creation of some kind of meaningful and structured community dimension in the living out of Christian commitment?

The Jesuit Volunteer Community Programme, with which I have been involved as a Community Support Person over the past number of years, is based on four pillars: service, spirituality, simple lifestyle and community. My impression has been that the volunteers are often more deeply and permanently attracted by the counter-cultural values of service, of spirituality, of living simply, than by all that is involved in community living. And what makes, or could make, these values liveable over time – namely community – is often the least attractive pillar and the one which seems to be most easily discarded. The volunteers *have* a community experience. However, in a distinctive way it ends as the volunteers walk out the door when the programme finishes. You do not have to live in a community to serve, to develop spirituality or to live simply. Yet without finding new and better ways to create attractive and sustainable communities in our world, I am sure we will have a lot less service, spiritual seeking and simplicity. That makes me wonder: what does community need to say for itself so that more young Christians would consciously rate it higher among the real goals of their lives and commit their talents to its creation?

What community means varies widely across different cultures. My reflections here are based principally on the immensely rewarding experience of trying to support community-building among young Irish adults; they also emerge from my own hopes as a ‘younger adult’ Jesuit with real hopes for what the specific version of community provided by religious life may become. In this article I am going to look at the topic of community in two parts. In the first I will outline some key factors which influence young adults’ indifference towards and attraction to living in community. In the second, I will briefly explore what I believe

are four key challenges to be faced if the community as an aspect of Christian living is to become something young adult Christians will more actively commit themselves to.

PART 1: FACTORS SHAPING PRESENT ATTITUDES TO COMMUNITY

The limits of religious-life models of community

In the eyes of many young adults, most of the people who live their lives in community are members of religious congregations. Joining a community in a very explicit and distinctive way is something they do. In many cases our dominant feelings about community – as an organized dimension of Christian living – is influenced by our contact with nuns, priests and brothers. That experience will probably be widely varied. At its best, perhaps, we will have met people who consciously live a ‘community life’, and who seem to be enriched or supported by it at some basic level. On the other hand, we may have glimpsed that, for some, a religious community is often not the source of life’s greatest blessings but at times a place of real frustration and pain.

Religious communities do not strike most young adults as something very natural, as something that forms part of the way life should be. In most cases they are single-sex communities; in many parts of the world they are increasingly places with a high preponderance of older people. For religious it can be difficult to remember the ‘oddness’ of walking into a room full of adult men or women who live their separate lives together. The religious community has a role, but it ought to be an exceptional rather than normal version of organized Christian living. It cannot bear the strain of giving witness to all the blessings that are available to Christians who try to work out their lives in common.

If some such images form people’s model of what communities are about, it is unlikely that young adults will ever spend great energy devising and trying to live out workable models of community unless the idea of community – what it is, what it could be – is freed from this religious life atmosphere. Models of community need to be allowed to emerge from the longings, thoughtfulness and intelligence of younger people and the kinds of relationships they want to create and to experiment with.

The natural attractiveness of community

It is of course true that there are many young adult Christians who realize that the inclination to live in community is not a monopoly of

those in religious life. Some choose to be part of communities in a more intentional way. They join groups that have an explicit commitment to building up community life, such as Sant' Egiddio, Comunione e Liberazione, Christian Life Communities, Jesuit Volunteer Communities and L'Arche. Their existence does point to the reality that there are for many young adults real advantages to thinking of, and exploring the possibilities of, life lived in community.

At an ordinary human level, while we can develop a certain taste for and appreciation of solitude, most of us prefer it to be periodic rather than endless. We may long for space but we do not necessarily really want all the space and supposed freedom of living alone. Living together with others has many attractions, despite all its easily told inconveniences. Having others around gives us a kind of basic security. It is often where the door to real and lasting friendship is opened to us. A community can provide an irreplaceable setting – in something so simple as a shared meal – to experience and to express the joy and sheer fun of being alive.

Young people also appreciate being in a community because we want to learn, and together with other people we learn a lot. A community gives us access to the experience, the insight, the wisdom of other human beings, the 'how they put it all together'. Most of us find that life provides us with enough challenges for which we are glad to have some kind of reference group with whom we can 'suss' things out. Coping with who you are, what you are doing, how you get on with other people, what you commit yourself to is not easy. Overall, it seems to be made somewhat easier if at least some of it can be shared.

Considered from the perspective of faith, we are increasingly aware of the need of community if we are to discover, hold on to and develop religious faith in a secular world. Where sincere religious searching and living has become something so quaint and unusual, and where religious freedom very often means opting out, community life takes on a much more important role. Committed faith is under pressure, and one of the best supports God provides us with is other people. It is easier to sustain a life of seeking, of idealism, of generosity and commitment if there are others who are at least some of the time heading in the same direction. What inspires and energizes and attracts may happen somewhere in the intimacy of our own hearts; what makes it possible that this becomes a life lived is profoundly related to its being expressed in connection with other lives.

On occasions we do grasp that community is ultimately a gift from God. For all the reflection and planning we may do, community is

clearly not just ours to produce. The painful complexities and 'stuckness' of relationships – where we touch the raw limits of our generosity, of our sensitivity, of our willingness to trust – show us that. Yet there are times when, although the whole weight of nature seems to drag people the other way, we awaken to find that something precious – even beautiful – has been created among a group of people. This can be experienced in many ways. It may be almost tangible in the shared silence of prayer, in respectful listening, in reconciliation achieved, in the effort to clarify ideas, or in celebration which just takes off. When a community flows we are not involved with something marginal to God. At these moments, we glimpse truly that community is a thing of God.

At a fundamental level, the hope for the future of communities is that the God-given drive towards some sort of community living remains very strong. Hell may be other people, but the same people are also what makes heaven. However, if new models of Christian community are to emerge more strongly and to project themselves as viable realities which are to attract more people to choosing to live in community, I think there are some key points where the questions and experiences of young adults raise the need to carve out new models of community life. They include the place of sexual relationships, the need for leadership, the requirements of belonging and the big horizons small communities need.

PART 2: CHALLENGES FOR NEW MODELS OF COMMUNITY

Female and male

Sexual relationships are crucially important to people, including young adults. While this is startlingly obvious, the question arises as to how well this is effectively acknowledged in the context of the modelling of Christian communities. The challenge here is sex, not the more abstract and too easily spiritualized 'sexuality' that can be so easily made the topic of a kind of disincarnate Christian attentiveness to the topic. It is the actual business and ritual of seeking, searching, pairing, connecting, linking, sharing, struggling, playing, living together, physical intimacy – or the desire for it, or loss of it – that captures the attention and longing of many young adult people and brings them to life. Sex is also the gateway to essential life projects such as partnership, marriage and parenthood.

Community cannot be a substitute, an alternative or even a distraction from this. Even at its very best, it is not intended to fill the hunger of this particular search. The credibility of the effort to

develop new models of community depends to some extent on its being founded on a real reverence for the emerging centrality of these intimate and most personal aspects of being human. For most young men and women, this includes the primacy of the intense personal relationships with one other person, or at least of the search for it. If models of community are to be created which are to attract young people, clearly they cannot hinder sexual relationships. Neither can they afford to leave unacknowledged or unaddressed all that is at stake for people here. Made as we are to relate as sexual men and women, we cannot be asked just to put this to one side if we are to be part of other groups.

Those wishing to see communities develop among young Christians cannot avoid facing the disturbing complexities of the living out of human sexuality in the context of community relationships. Preaching the value of community life in an exaggerated way makes it very difficult for couples to work out how to live out, in liberating ways, the fact that their sexual attraction draws them towards one particular person rather than towards a community. If a community is to claim the loyalty of young men and women, if communities are to support these miraculous and intense elements of human becoming, they will need to develop ways of allowing such love to flourish, and perhaps to refashion their own identity and living arrangements when two community members begin the journey of falling in love. Also, in relation to the sensitive question of how they express their sexuality, young adults need to be allowed to find out for themselves what helps them on the basis of both their own experience and the wisdom of Christian insights into sexual relationships.

On the other hand, the community – with its diversity and various relationships – has a valuable role to play in helping people to live these intensely personal and private dimensions of life well. Despite the sexual revolution, and all its supposed freedoms, it is clear that cultural trends which open up the possibility of earlier and easier sexual intimacy do not fulfil the longings of humanity as it is dreamed they should. Intimate relationships cannot cope with the burden of all that we need to receive from others, or with all that we have to give.

Leaders and led

Another key area that young adult communities will increasingly have to struggle with is that of decision-making and leadership. The idea of community is very strong on equality. In a way that we are unlikely to have found in our families, at school or in the world of work,

a community can offer us, as young adults, an experience of radical human equality. An atmosphere of respect, sensitivity, the willingness to listen, a moratorium on judgement, the readiness to trust: all of this allows us to appreciate and savour our lives in completely new ways. A community provides a setting where people with all sorts of different talents, levels of confidence and public *personae* can gradually learn to speak with some honesty and depth about significant dimensions of what is going on in their lives. To be privileged to hear others speak, to be struck by the wonderful mysteriousness and sheer generosity of the way people carry the reality of their lives, can allow the equal but unique value of each human life to shine in a real way. In such a competitive and often brutal world it is profoundly redeeming to be a member of groups where all members are valued, where all are allowed to have their voice.

On the other hand, this same egalitarianism – for all it promises – is often experienced as inefficient and profoundly frustrating. All the good things of valuing each person, of respecting everybody's opinion, or of consulting about decisions, have a downside in that they make it harder for decisions to be made and for leadership to be exercised. They also make it harder for direction to be assumed. At the most trivial level, it is sad to see how hard it can be to get a group to decide on the most mundane aspects of life without some habitual decision-making power. Good people with great desires do stumble because there is no way of deciding what time to eat or which pub to go to. A sequence of such paralysing and apparently insoluble experiences, while laughable in themselves, almost imperceptibly corrodes faith in community life. In such trivial decisions, the question of whether the community is worth the effort, whether sacrificing personal autonomy for the sake of the – at times – painful, but greater, common good is at stake.

The values and the practices which equality inspires are vital. But preserving these in a way that ensures communities are not deprived of other elements necessary for their existence is a real challenge. In order that groups of people can live together or carve out some common direction for their lives, decisions need to be made. Space for leadership also needs to be found. For loose and fragile connections to become real and more substantial, and to be strengthened, the gift of leadership needs to be allowed to emerge. Without it, who will propose a vision, invite participation, organize basic structures and inspire the effort all community creation requires? Without it, how can anybody's idea of community become a reality?

If we have an ideology that only stresses that all lay people are equal – if there is no appointment to special and real authority within the lay community – the result can ultimately be that nobody can take responsibility for proposing a new vision, a new direction, something to which people can sign up. For lay communities to thrive, it will also be necessary to find some appropriate, perhaps more formal, way of allowing for the exercise of authority. For this to happen, there is no doubt still a need for much letting go on the part of the clerical church, both at the level of holding power and also of making available resources for training for lay leadership. But increasingly there is also a challenge for lay people to begin to step into and expand the space that needs to be filled if the structuring of Christian community is to take place.

Insiders and outsiders

If some vision of community living is to be proposed for young adult Christians, one of the more difficult problems which the idea of community faces in *our* age is to have the courage to face the faith that there must be something – some structure, some practices, some beliefs – to belong to. For a community to be a community, eventually it must have some content. A Christian community cannot survive if the community's Christian identity is only something empty and merely formal. Right at the heart of Christianity is the revelation of the person of Jesus, a person with real beliefs, passionate convictions and clear lifestyle options. Community, gathered in his name, cannot exist in outer space. It has to form its identity. Internally, there have to be some decisions about whether people eat together, talk together, worship together, and about how they will do all of these things; externally, decisions are required about the jobs people do and with regard to involvement in social and political questions.

Today, much in our culture drives us to want to be a place of welcome, a place that is open, a place that trusts that the good is going on in every life; but community cannot exist really if it does not have some boundaries. There must in some way be the possibility of being in or being out. Accepting that some people are inside and others are outside has nothing to do with moral judgement. Any community with a minimum insight into its own life will be aware of its own flaws and limitations, and that belonging to it is not necessary for salvation. Where the distinction does matter is in relation to a simpler question of the existence and development of the community. At some moment, in choosing to be in, we have to make some commitment; we have to

express some readiness to acknowledge that the building of this community requires and deserves some time and energy. It also requires a willingness to identify with the community. To be part of a Christian community is to accept that religion is not just a matter of private choice and private expression, something that we live out in our individual ways.

Here, I think, part of the struggle is that so many groups, including small Christian groups, do communicate a cliquishness or an alienating and off-putting zeal. Whether it is in the impregnability of their style of being together, or in the unquestionable certainty of beliefs they assume, they can define in narrow and superior ways the core around which their community is created. As a result, for many young adults it takes real courage to risk being identified with religious groups in a public way. There is inevitably a 'group feel' to a community, which can be experienced as threatening to people who are not part of the group. A community can be a tremendous support, but recognizing that you are part of a community, with all its imperfections, is also quite likely to be an alienating thing for others – friends, family and colleagues. It is difficult to take the public step of even the most informal involvement with a community in a world which religiously tolerates everything but young people's demonstrations that, despite their full awareness of all the failures littering the history and *now* of Christianity, they are not yet ready to give up on it.

The big community

A final challenge we are faced with in community life is one of scale – the question of how our communities allow the world outside to break into the small communities we belong to. Ironically, as soon as a community works well it easily becomes a danger. Community can become a closed refuge. Today, more than ever, we are exposed to the awful pain and scale of so many broken relationships. They are made visible to us in the lives of the abused child, the homeless, the drug addict, the AIDS sufferer, the refugee, or the victim of Third World impoverishment. Indeed, while it may in part be such a background which pushes us to try to connect well and to invest deeply with some people, it is also easy to begin to squeeze out or leave aside the disturbing cry of the crucified peoples of the world. Successful communities can quickly become complacent and caught up in the search for small meaning, and reluctant to respond to the challenge to join with others seeking to make *all* human life more meaningful.

To survive, smaller communities have to have boundaries; they need some space for what is internal: the effort to find the right structures, to work out the personal and group relationships, to find a rhythm of life is worthwhile; but communities also need to make sure that their boundaries are permeable. If the small community itself becomes the sole end of the creative energy of the community as a community, there is a real danger of implosion. For a community to flourish, to support all that is stirring in the lives and compassionate hearts of its members, it needs a bigger focus. The full meaning of our efforts to create a community begins to shine most brightly when we situate our own fragile efforts to create that community within some wider project, within God's project for the big world community, and allow God's longing for decent life for all to become more real on earth.

That young adult communities can be drawn into this bigger role is made clear from the fact that all the cynicism and selfishness pushed by the modern system of global capitalism does not in fact seem to extinguish the desire and quiet determination of so many young people: that the homeless twelve-year-old should have a home; that the person with learning disabilities is to be cherished infinitely; and that we should never – and will never – accept that fate condemns a quarter of the world to absolute poverty in a world of such staggering material wealth. Communities have a key role to play to ensure that such desires survive and gain increasing force in a world hostile to a fair share for all people. We need communities where experiences of the cost of the more absurd logic of the world can be shared; where unspoken fragile dreams of something different can be exchanged; and where people can slowly grow together to realize that what is most frightening is not our powerlessness in the face of the world's brutality, but rather, the awesome difference we can make if we care enough never to give up on working for change together.

Conclusion: communities worth the effort

I have looked in this article at some of the challenges I see which need addressing if new and more attractive models of community are to be found. I believe such models need to go beyond religious models of community and build on and engage young people's creativity and natural attraction to experimenting with new ways of being together. Such communities could play a vital role in supporting and allowing for the adventure of the living of the Christian faith at this time in history. Communities which strive to harness and release the gifts of sexual energy, leadership, identity and the cry of the world at large can hope to

persuade young adults that time spent on their creation is time well spent.

Séamus O’Gorman is an Irish Jesuit. He has been working over the past number of years with various young adult groups, including JVC (Jesuit Volunteer Communities) and CLC. At present he works for the international Jesuit network, JDRAD (Jesuits for Debt Relief and Development), and lectures part-time in moral theology at the Milltown Institute.