

# CONFRONTED BY A WIDER WORLD

By ADRIAN SCOTT and MARK CRISP

**I**N OUR MODERN WORLD one of the biggest challenges facing the Church is to be 'relevant' to a generation which for the most part regards it as a relic from the past with nothing to say to our problems and aspirations. It is a challenge the Church faces constantly, especially since the Second Vatican Council and the epoch-making document on 'The Church in the modern world': *Gaudium et spes*. It seems fashionable at present to assess the progress that has been made and of course it is crucial that the momentum of Vatican II is not wasted. Our present age has been compared by Karl Rahner to the era of the early Church after the council of Jerusalem, in which the Christian community is confronted by a distinctly wider world.

In the past twenty years we have witnessed many brief enthusiasms, in a world where fashions, even theological and ecclesiastical ones, are short-lived. However if we are to avoid a 'backlash' attitude, seeking to escape into a Church of the past, then the real world we are called to serve and be a sign to must be kept firmly before our eyes. The challenge of relevance is being met, we believe, by those who have a type of pioneering attitude which leads them to participate in our 'secular' society and take the risk of exposing themselves and the gospel they proclaim to the cut and thrust of everyday life. Of course this cannot be achieved without a genuine sensitivity to the 'signs of the times'.

### *The raw materials of formation*

This tension is particularly experienced by those involved in the formation of Christian communities new and old. It is here that the ideals, atmosphere and vision of the Church confront the raw materials of modern society, namely those individuals who have grown up in and been shaped by the concerns and trends of the times and now seek to be involved in the communication aspects of the Church's life, be it parish life, prayer groups, marriage, religious orders or priesthood. Across the board in formation

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houses and seminaries it has been recognized that people arriving on the doorstep do not have the 'religious' background that thirty years ago would have been taken for granted. The catchment area for religious and priestly vocations has become significantly broader and reasons for pursuing such a course all the more diverse. This situation can tempt those responsible for formation to retreat into only taking candidates from 'safe' backgrounds, which tends to be the educated middle class. Alternatively the task of discovering new ways of formation can be faced, which will be open to the often confused and insecure products of our pluralistic society. On the whole we feel the Church has not quite 'woken up' to this new situation. Few of us are truly aware of the broken world that exists both within the Church and outside it and thus we are inadequately prepared to deal with the new generation from which the communities of the future will be formed. We would assent that the secret of a more affective response is a willingness to accept the 'raw material' and not be half-hearted in our efforts to broaden our perspective and pursue our call to be salt and yeast in the world.

In the rest of this article we want to outline something of the history and development of our community in the hope that it will illustrate some of the challenges and inspirations that stem from our experience of being involved in the formation of a new community in today's world.

#### *The Maltfriscan experience*

The Maltfriscan community has its roots in the early history of 'Punk Rock' (1978). A group of colourful youths who were taken up with the anarchic ideals of total disregard for authority and conformity formed the nucleus of the group. They all hailed from the mining town of Maltby in South Yorkshire. Here life is not very glamorous. The feeling of being unimportant in comparison with the 'successful' world pumped into every home by the media is certainly enough to make young people look for an alternative lifestyle. Unemployment and alcoholism form part of the fabric of life and, combined with a growing drug culture and outbreaks of violence, all provide numerous 'pitfalls' for young and old alike.

These particular punks had formed a band called the 'Creeps' and their musical talent was as dubious as their name. However the parish priest, Father Leonard May, decided to try to reach them with the aid of some parishoners. He invited them to play

their instruments at a parish charismatic prayer evening he was holding. Their curiosity got the better of them and led them to their first experience of God in a way they could appreciate (i.e. pretty direct!). The ensuing outbreak of enthusiasm was the beginning of our community. Of course some drifted away, to return at different times in the future or even move away from the Church completely. Yet this initial exuberance was enough to attract a fair amount of other young people and to begin a youth prayer meeting.

The early life of the community can be compared to being caught up in a whirlwind. For instance one major event was the overnight cure of a heroin addict after he had attended a meeting and his subsequent joining of the group. Throughout this period two things became very apparent. Firstly the desire to witness to what had occurred among us, which led to such projects as school missions and the like. Secondly the need to root this experience in some sort of commitment, hence Father May (on request) wrote a simple rule stating the main aims of the community: praise of God, loving service and the spreading of the gospel. The combination of these two factors allowed for the spread of the community. So we are now about a hundred strong, scattered around the country in such places as Glasgow, Liverpool, London, Chorley, Chesterfield and Maltby.

A very distinctive mark of the group is its family consciousness. It comprises a variety of vocations: lay people, married and single, secular priests, and even our own religious (in private commitments). This family attitude has developed over the years and provides a great feeling of diversity and equality. To preserve this we are in the process of writing some simple constitutions, in the hope that this will maintain a unity between the separate groups in the community and allow the freedom for all in their respective calls to develop as Maltfriscans. The desire is always for a simplicity in the formation of our written rules so that the initial charism will not be stifled by legal language. Obviously another challenge has been communication, holding such a broad spread of people together, keeping them all up to date and involved in the progress of the community. This has been a constant difficulty and at present we have a sort of newsletter which is sent to each individual member thus providing a forum in which news and ideas can be circulated.

The foundation stone of the community has been a very vivid experience of God and the presence of Jesus with us. This may seem unusual in a society where religion is seen as a traditional and more 'elderly' pastime. However our involvement with Christianity has definitely not been one of conformism. Rather it has been a constant process of facing the reality of Jesus of Nazareth and his gospel and allowing it to speak to our lives. Initially this has been a very liberating experience, of an encounter with the love of God and the feeling of one's importance in a world that seems indifferent. However before this leads to a self-comforting, introverted attitude, the real world-changing power of the message becomes apparent. If this has happened to me, why not others? As we have grown up and entered into marriage, priesthood and religious life the challenge has been to bring this table over-turning gospel to the mundane and ordinary world.

We still have our weekly prayer meeting, in which we seek to renew our experience of God together and to share the message of the scripture and our inspiration in a fruitful way. This is very important for us as we are not a residential community and so it is a very good way of supporting and encouraging one another. It is in these meetings, in fact in all our community life, that we try to foster an environment which is open to everyone, where anyone can participate and feel accepted. The paradox of our community formation is the initial lack of it, the willingness to take people on however 'anti-social' they appear and offer an experience of being worthwhile because this has been the overriding formation experience of most of us.

Of course this kind of outreach demands some formation after the initial experience, however the experience always remains a point of reference. In our continuing growth as a community we have been faced with three major challenges. The first is willingness to go through the 'results' barrier. If one is constantly trying to ascertain the level of one's success in the Christian life it will inevitably be a disappointment, especially if outreach leads one to spend a lot of time with ordinary, non-religious people. This can often be tiring; it requires a fair amount of apparent 'time-wasting' and is very different from one's initial euphoric experience. The need for prayer and scripture reading to sustain one's commitment is very real. Some form of structure soon became necessary; in an attempt to be very open, there has to be a way of protecting one's self from becoming burnt out and of little use to anyone. Shared

and individual prayer have been a very good way of preserving our cutting edge and of overcoming the 'results' syndrome, as has bearing in mind our call is to be yeast which makes bread not more yeast!

The second challenge posed by the real world involves risk, it means getting your 'hands dirty'. The people who make up the basic stuff of our society are not of the type a lot of 'Church' people would view as good material: unmarried mothers, divorced people, the unemployed, those who have had no contact with the Church. The risk is to stick your neck out for such people (perhaps because you are one of 'them') knowing you may be let down and not giving in to the temptation to be cynical or patronizing. Part of our formation has been to go through these disappointments, it is a maturing process and leads in turn to a renewed openness and willingness to take on new projects. This often repeated pattern has been very valuable. The experience of one member of the community will serve as an illustration here. 'Smiggy', one of the original punks, soon became disillusioned with himself and Christianity and drifted away. He ended up in the National Front as rather a violent skinhead. However after a crisis in a relationship and a new experience of prayer he returned to the Church and to the community. He is now married and training to be a nurse. This has been a constant challenge for us and is a challenge facing anybody involved in community formation today.

The third opportunity for growth has been the need to break out of stereotypes and the desire for respectability. Our community comprises a wide variety of people, from unemployed youths to university graduates. This presents a whole new vision of discipleship; we are brought together by our common desire to follow the Lord and are not necessarily immediately compatible. The challenge to break with misconceptions and not to judge one another according to background obviously can cause tensions and misunderstandings. A sort of psychological oppression can come into play that ties someone into the straightjacket of their upbringing, whichever end of the social spectrum they come from. If worry about 'image' and how we appear to the world is foremost we are on slippery ground. We feel it is better sometimes to seem unusual and a little scandalous than to make no impression at all.

One of the religious branch of the community, whose father and brother are both miners, is always reminding us that it will be obvious to people if you do not really believe they are redeemable

or worthwhile, no matter what you say with your lips. It has been our experience that young people are the most perceptive of all in this area. This confronts one with the reality of evangelization; it demands self-stripping of both evangelized and especially the evangelizers.

These challenges within such a broad-based community require a certain degree of commitment. Of course in the early days the only commitment was the weekly meeting, however as we have grown we have taken the notion of commitment more seriously. This is now done on a yearly basis after a period of preparation. The pressure of a commitment and the heavy-handed way we have approached it in the past has led to some casualties along the way. However we are beginning to realize that commitment is not a question of success or failure but of a willingness to stand by your word and an openness to the others around you when you run into difficulties.

Fully-committed members make up what is known as the 'chapter' in each particular area and they wear the distinctive 'Maltfriscan jacket'—a witness to our 'punk' beginnings and a desire to be obvious for God. These people are sixteen and over (some more over than others!) and, as said above, can be either married or single, our own religious or secular priests. Each community has a guardian (often a lay person) and all are ultimately responsible to the spiritual father (at present Father May). Obedience has always played a part in our community, which surprises some who expect a very charismatic and impulsive group. It has been a very cohesive thing to have a person around who has the final say on an issue. It gives an uncomplicated stability leaving individuals free to express themselves. This is seen most clearly at our annual gatherings at which everyone has the right to speak.

An often heard comment directed to a Maltfriscan is 'Oh, you work with drug addicts' or 'you do school retreats, don't you?' In actual fact we are not really defined by any specific 'work' we have done in the past. Our aim is to allow the gospel message which we have discovered to be such a liberating thing to penetrate through us into the world in which we live. This demands a willingness to be open to each new situation with a certain fluidity and enthusiasm. As tradition becomes more of a reality for us (being almost ten years old) we face the danger of an innate conservatism, but as one of our most radical characteristics is the equality that exists between individuals from different walks of life

we hope to avoid this. Also when we contemplate the type of people the community sprang from we receive a welcome 'kick in the pants' to our uneasiness with change.

Our formation has thus been preparing us for the job of proclaiming the kingdom to the society in which we live and work. Our experience has taught us that this kingdom has a dynamism which transforms lives and shatters preconceptions. Therefore each one of us, in our respective vocations, is seeking to be an effective sign of that kingdom in all its unexpectedness and vitality. One of the keynotes of our community has been an exceptionally widespread musical talent. Music has always played a big part in our gatherings, prayerfully or socially. This combined with a very healthy sense of humour has preserved us from becoming either too sombre and from taking ourselves too seriously. We would like to conclude this article with the words from a song written by one of the original Maltfriscans which sums up an attitude that has played a major part in the formation of our community:

Where your treasure is there's your heart,  
Where your mind is there's your life.  
Where your hopes are there you will go,  
Dream your dreams well, my son.\*

\*or daughter!