

DISCERNING IDENTITY: TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNITY

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'For Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his.'

IN THE PHENOMENON of the varieties of faith communities mushrooming up in the Church, I believe there is a spirituality developing—a spirituality of community. From a reflection on my own various experiences of community, I would like to draw out the important aspects of this spirituality, especially the sense of identity that accompanies this spirituality. I hope to deal with the main elements groups should be looking for in order to put on this spirituality and so become ongoing Christian faith communities.

After some introductory observations on the broader phenomena of small groups in today's Church and the basis for discovering a spirituality, I will recount three personal experiences of small Christian community. Then, I will attempt an analysis of the important spiritual aspects in these experiences and give some further remarks on the experience of identity that expresses the spirituality of community. Finally, I will suggest some ways of assisting groups to discover and discern their own spirituality of community.

I. The phenomena

Today, there are many different ways in which Christians are attempting to live a spirituality of community, some in well organized common living together, others in less organized living together, still others not living together. There are persons living in large and small institutions of vowed religious life, some for the sake of contemplation, some for the sake of active ministry. There are married and single people living in rural and city communes: some to witness to the significance of marginalized persons such

as l'Arche communities, some to create a correct relationship with the environment, some to establish a more holistic approach in medicine and science. There are persons attempting to live a spirituality of community outside such institutions and communes, such as Cursillo, Charismatic Renewal, Marriage Encounter, Christian Life Community (CLC), Christian Family Movement (CFM). In all these expressions there are common elements either of life style or spiritual expressions or expected relationship with other members.

II. Spirituality

Although the lived expression of these various gatherings of Christians is very different, there seems to be a spirituality of community present in all of them. I would like to make some beginnings in describing this spirituality. A long discourse on the topic of spirituality is not in order at this point, but rather a short statement to situate us as we proceed to investigate and describe the spirituality of community.

Briefly, one's spirituality is the basic perspective, horizon, motivation, desire, ideal or image from which a person finds affectionate meaningfulness in a God-centred life (Trinity, saints, Church) which influences the person's judgements about life, the person's decisions in response or reaction to life and the actions one takes to live out this affectionate meaningfulness.

In describing a spirituality the following elements should be considered: the foundational religious experiences and their significance; the sense of relationship with the Godhead; how these influence the images of self vis-à-vis God, Church and humanity as they get sketched out in life; what these mean in terms of motivation, prayer life, life style and Christian ministry. In other words spirituality should primarily deal with a person's identity. (Vocation, mission and celebration will be a further expression of identity.)

III. Three experiences

The description of the spirituality of community given below will be drawn in a great part from three personal experiences of Christian community. The first is a five-year experience I had with a group of four married couples and two single women. The second is an eight-year experience I had with the Loyola House Spiritual Centre staff (two religious women, a layman and six Jesuits). The third comes from facilitating decision-making groups (five-seven persons) through experiences of communal discernment that lasted anywhere from four to seventeen days long.

Types

A. The first group of eleven persons met every week for two and a half hours in the homes of the married couples. At the beginning the meetings consisted of sharing the results of prayer on scripture and the significant moments in the lives of the members through the last week. This group eventually became a Christian Life Community (CLC).

B. The second group of nine persons (Loyola House staff) were involved in creating and running programmes of Christian spirituality that were two or four or eight or forty days long. Besides the constant interchange and support entailed in operating the centre, the group spent about fourteen days each year in evaluation and creative work on goals, objectives and programmes for the Centre. Each week about three hours were set aside for the intimate sharing of each member's 'story' (physical, psychological, social and spiritual state) as well as offerings of commitment to the enterprise and expressions of desires, hopes and vision.

C. The groups of the third experience (usually five or six persons) were either councils of religious women or men, or small communities of religious men or women or teams of men and women in some ministry of the Church. Some of these groups lived together, some met once a month, some worked on a project together. My involvement with them was on four or ten or seventeen-day experiences of concentrated prayer and group interchange. I acted as a guide to assist them in attaining a deeper communal identity and in doing communal discernment.

Involvement

The process of arriving at community was different in each instance. Group A had special experiences of intimacy and commitment for me but these were not as all-pervading as with group B. The most intimate sharing and commitment for myself and the group as a whole was probably in group B. My own sense of intimate sharing was least in group C.

Growth

A. The group that eventually became a Christian Life Community (CLC) of four married couples and three singles went through these steps:

— Prior to coming together they had attended programmes that gave them updated knowledge of scripture and Vatican II. They had participated in extended personally directed retreats and programmes that gave them facility in sharing their feelings (Genesis

II, Cursillo, Marriage Encounter, Better World, short personally directed retreats).

— They came together from a desire to assist other lay persons in the directed retreat movement.

— At the beginning (three months) there was much interchange over the meanings of scripture and Vatican II's Decree on the Laity.

— This was followed by the practice of sharing the story of their ongoing interior life.

— Eventually, all the members went through the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life (Exx 19).

— After this they assisted each other in the discerning of decisions in response to a call to lead a more fully Christian life.

— In time they composed a goal statement for their community and committed themselves to a discerned way of living their Christian life in today's world.

— Then they realized the importance of going beyond themselves to be agents of change and to initiate other communities like their own.

B. The group that developed into a creative discerning staff of a spiritual centre went through these steps:

— The staff meetings of this group at first dealt mostly with the running of existing programmes.

— The committees were formed to brainstorm and design new programmes.

— At this time the agendas were not well designed and times not clearly prioritized with the result that meetings were filled with much frustration and anger.

— Then the staff agreed to go through an eight-day retreat designed to assist small groups to develop good working relationships and good meetings. The result of this retreat was a calendar of times for deeper entry into an experience of an apostolic community that included two 3-day, two 2-day, four 1-day and weekly three-hour meetings each year.

— At the beginning of each year the staff prayed over the communal graced history of the centre which included the personal graced history of the members.

— From this backdrop of our 'myth' the staff was able to develop its goals, objectives, policies and resulting programmes.

— The designing and maintaining of the weekly three-hour staff meetings continued to be crucial.

— Even after the dates and times of the three-hour weekly meetings were in place, the staff had to establish the priority of returning to its vision/dream/myth and the telling of the 'story' of each one's

interior life at the beginning of a meeting before dealing with the 'nitty gritty' decisions in running the centre.

— Two things happened with the decision to place the sharing of the myth and each other's story at the beginning of the meeting: the 'business' part of each meeting took less time with less hassle; the staff began to sense the affective experience of Christian community.

— This led to the same introductory process at the beginning of the longer 3-day, 2-day and 1-day sessions. Near the beginning of these longer sessions the practice of 'dropping into our myth' took place.

— Three things happened as a result of this: the staff experienced being more creative; members grew in appreciation of each other; they tended to be more accepting and affirming of each other.

— Of course, all this was accompanied by struggle, pain, misunderstanding, tears, reconciliation and team parties.

C. The decision-making groups that I facilitated went through these steps:

— In preparation these groups considered their goal and mission statements. They came prepared to enter more deeply into community and to use communal discernment to deal with whatever issue surfaced.

— In the process of coming to decision: they prayed and shared about their personal and communal graced history; they considered the ways in which communities begin, develop, grow, decline and die (Life Cycle); they prayed over their leadership styles and their use of power; they considered the best uses of energy in meetings (Agenda Setting and Power Cycle); they went through a communal discernment process.

— I observed and shared their consolations and desolations, delights, surprises and fears, as they recognized and appreciated the presence of God in their communal history, i.e., in the life of the founders, in the achievements and failures of the larger congregation, in the present membership of the group.

— I sensed their sensitivity or lack of it with each other and to the Holy Spirit.

— I was able to heighten their awareness of deception under the guise of light or virtue.

— I helped them to persevere in a discerning process of decision-making.

— I was with them in their experiences of division, struggle and desolation.

— I rejoiced with them in their sense of unity, achievement and consolation.

— I learned how to be ‘like a balance at equilibrium’ in the midst of their affective experiences.

IV. Analysis

What are the common factors (experiences and movements) in these three examples?

1. Previously, all groups had some experience of the use of scripture in prayer, personal direction and the sharing of elements of their personal lives.

2. In each there was a sense of being called to be more involved in Christian ministry to others.

3. Out of this grew a need to determine and plan this ministry.

4. From this arose a need for expertise on the topics of scripture, prayer, Vatican II, psychology, group dynamics and discernment.

5. This usually led to an intellectual interchange on questions that arose.

6. This was followed by sharings on the successes and failures of ministry activities.

7. Then the issue of whether they should continue to stay and work together arose. The question ‘who are we?’ got asked.

8. With this, more heart-felt sharing of each one’s personal faith story took place.

9. This led to the members seeking a deeper experience of the spiritual life.

10. With further sharing a deeper sense of community happened.

11. Out of this a fuller expression of their communal dream and vision (myth) took place and a fuller sense of call was recognized.

12. The sense of call referred to both a ministry beyond the group and to the life within the group itself.

13. As life continued in the group, issues of ministry and community life were faced by making communal decisions in line with gospel values. Discernment became the natural mode of operating.

14. With these decisions deeper commitment to the community took place. More communal self-knowledge and healing were present. Commitment to action led to anger, fear, jealousy as well as achievement. Commitment to each other gave them a sense of fellowship among themselves as well as a concern for the larger communities of nation, Church and humanity.

In summary we might say that these groups experienced many of the steps of the Life Cycle in different ways. We can see # 1-7 as preliminary to identity and the articulation of the myth; # 8-11

as the developing and articulating of the myth; #12 vocation; #13 mission; #14 deeper identity, vocation, mission.

V. The spiritual experience of identity

Identity

From the viewpoint of spirituality we can see the three groups moving from an obscure sense of identity to a deeper sense of identity that included their sense of vocation, mission and celebration.

What are the intrinsic or interior affective components that make up the spiritual experience of identity? How were these present in the three groups?

Briefly, one may speak of identity as the answers to the questions, 'who am I?' or 'who are we?' But the answers to these questions might indicate very little. Indeed, possibly only a name. Identity has to do with the way one senses or images one's person. For example, someone may sense herself as a younger sister, himself as a wayward son. Identity is known in the relationship one has to oneself and to other persons including God, Jesus Christ and the faith community. I discover, know and am my person in relationship to other persons. Identity has extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions. Often people only consider their identity in terms of exterior relationships. Identity then becomes only an extrinsic statement. But identity has an interior quality which resides in the person. People expect to grow to an awareness of their interior identity. For Christians the realization and heightened awareness of the indwelling Spirit is an expression of identity. As in individuals so in groups, only with time do they come to a communal awareness of who they are.

The above experiences suggest that groups of Christians come together for many reasons: worship, special expressions of prayer, study, social and moral action, financial considerations, to be creative, to be religious orders, or be third orders of these religious orders, to be associations of piety or action, or to be intentional faith communities. These groups might be composed of nuns, monks, priests, religious women or religious men, lay women, lay men, or combinations of lay women and lay men all of whom might be married or all of whom might be single, or a combination of singles and married, or group of teachers, labouring people, councillors, lawyers, doctors, engineers, the unemployed, etc. In some instances the members live together in a communal house (institution, commune), in other instances they do not live together.

The presence and absence of community

The three experiences indicate that community does not always take place when people gather to solve their needs. The sense of community is more than a group gathering to handle needs and solve problems. A group may gather to pray together, to solve family issues, to make changes in a collective style of living, to determine apostolic action. The persons present may find their needs taken care of and yet community is not present. The group at prayer may only be a setting that is conducive for individuals to pray well. Married couples may discover solutions to certain family problems in a discussion with other couples on similar problems. A group of religious women living in the same institution may meet to determine the life style in their building and do it to the more efficient running of the place. Yet only individual needs have been addressed. A group of religious men might meet to deal with a common ministerial endeavour and do so to the satisfaction of individual preferences. Yet community has not happened.

What characterizes all these examples is that the group functions for a purpose outside their person. Community is experienced when personal relationships happen, when person (individual and communal) is the end. A group is a collectivity (aggregate) when the relationship of the members is functional. A group is a community when the relationship of the members is personal. We can see that it is not the length of time that a group has been together nor the expression of their intention to build faith community that brings about faith community and spirituality of community. Then what does bring it about?

The above examples suggest that the first step towards a spirituality of community takes place and develops as people acknowledge the significance and impact of this group in their lives. After this the experience of regularly gathering together and continuing together brings about Christian community. As the persons in the group recognize and appreciate Christian community happening among them, they acknowledge it as a gift and a present from the Lord. 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Mt 19, 20). This acknowledgment is one aspect of the spirituality of community.

The example of Christian groups that come together to meet an issue that is present to them (a problem or an opportunity) indicates that in some instances Christian community and with it the spirituality of community take place, and, in other instances they do not. Nor does the fact that such a group has followed good process of Christian communal decision-making necessarily bring about lasting Christian community experience and a spirituality

of community. On the other hand good communal processes are significant instruments to bring about Christian community and its accompanying spirituality.

We see that when persons first come together to share their interior life they are often quite excited about the new discoveries they are making about themselves, for example, sharing insights into their psychological tendencies or insights on scripture or theology. Each person is caught up in the gift, responsibility, position, insight that is one's own. This applies to their new sense of personal well-being and peace with the merciful, loving and compassionate human Jesus whom they are discovering in scripture. They find the various instruments and explanations that help them to know their interior life, for example, Enneagram, Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), feminine and masculine archetypes, interior movements of spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation, much more interesting than community building and decision-making or the significance of these instruments for community. At this stage in the group's existence the group is more of a collectivity than a community. It may be that the members appreciate and enjoy each other and even gain insights into themselves and the other members. They are still not a Christian community nor are they living a spirituality of community. Yet, this sharing is a necessary preliminary for both. Through this kind of sharing an element of commitment to each other begins happening. When this commitment moves to Christian decision-making then a deeper level of Christian community can take place.

In the three experiences I noticed that often situations of tension and crisis coming from personality differences in the group became the occasion for communal identity to develop. If the group goes into mutual self-revelation and stays with it until an acceptance of each happen, a new sense of bonding takes place. There is an acceptance in humility that the community is limited, sinful and disordered. Mutual self-revelation with acceptance is a necessary activity for community building.

To a certain extent at the beginning these groups had a therapeutic, healing or support element to them. But when they faced their call to work for the God's realm of justice, love, joy and peace while acknowledging and accepting their limitations (creaturehood) and disordered tendencies (sinfulness), a further sense of identity as a Christian community happened. Willing commitment with the other members of the community to the concrete expression of this call brings a further level of spiritual identity.

At this time people in these groups began to think differently about themselves and about 'their' community. Then thoughts got

expressed in words such as, 'I am part of this limited, disordered group'. 'This is my community, after all.' 'We' statements instead of 'I' statements were made. 'We are limited, disordered, sinful. Still, we are called together in the Lord to build the realm of peace, justice, and love in our world.'

What we have seen so far is that the assembling of a group of Christians in itself does not necessarily lead to community or to a spirituality of community. Groups may remain only a collection of individuals. It is when the individuals begin to reach out to others in the group and to start finding a new personal identity through an identity with the others that community happens.

Upon reflection the individuals discover that their very person (personhood) is given to them in interpersonal relationships. They find their identity in terms of membership in this faith community. This eventually includes the total Church and the whole human race. Their life is understood and grasped as a shared experience with other persons. In time they will image themselves as freely committed members of the body of the risen Christ who is present and operative in this world.

When a community identity starts to happen, a new level of intimacy in the sharing is experienced. The members now begin to risk their reputation with the others in the group. They admit to limitations, fears and sinfulness. Now they share all the aspects of their personal graced history—the failures as well as the successes, the sufferings as well as the joys, the sinfulness as well as the blessedness, the shadow as well as the light, the desolations as well as the consolations. The members become more willing to commit themselves to 'communal' prayer, discussion, decision and action. Gradually, the group's concerns become the individuals' concern. Their prayer moves from totally self-centred concerns to communal concerns. In all this the community is growing in acceptance of its corporate humanity. The more authentic interchange in the community heightens each member's acceptance of the human. With this the individuals recognize in a new way the human Jesus of the scriptures and the significance of Jesus's life as a paradigm for their own lives. Eventually, they move to a recognition and acceptance that Christ is present and found in this faith community of Christians in spite of its faults and humanness.

Communal significance

What is the deeper significance of their experience?

These persons are entering into the mystery of Christian community. They are being given new images, new understanding and new perspectives (horizons) of the Christian life. They are

gradually developing their common vision of life. These people are beginning to relate to their life experience differently; life is grasped as a communal enterprise rather than an individual one. All the members realize that they are not left alone to cope with the mystery of life, but that they belong to a community of faith-filled persons interested in each other's welfare. Their life is experienced as fellowship (*koinonia*). This fellowship is experienced as supportative and energizing. Common acceptance gives a sense of support. Common ideals, values and goals give hope-filled energy. They discover that the Christian life is a communal endeavour and that their life in Christ is to be found in the ways they interact with other persons in the faith community and even beyond it to the whole human race (cf. 1 Thess 3, 12). From this a new sensitivity to the presence of God and Christ in communal life takes place. Now, a new interpretation and appreciation of the person and message of Jesus Christ and the rest of the New Testament happens. They now find the risen Christ in their midst. They realize that the risen Christ can be found in the weaknesses, sufferings and new-found energy experienced in community. Such a group is now in a position to appreciate the spirituality of community and to act out of it. They know the spirituality that motivated the early Church (cf. Acts 2, 42-47). Paul's great hymn to Christ takes on a new corporate significance to them:

In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus: his state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2, 5-11).

In fact, they are now able to hear the preceding words of Paul in a new way and to seek the mind and heart of Christ in their own experience of community:

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing which would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit, but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better

than yourself so that nobody thinks of his own interest first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus (Phil 2, 1-5).

VI. Helping groups discover their spirituality of community

As each person discovers his/her own personal spirituality so each group discovers its own spirituality of community. What are some processes to assist groups to do this? There are many different ways this might happen depending on the background of the group and how long the group has been in existence. Some groups are smaller expressions of a tradition that is 1,400 years old (*viz* a small Benedictine group of sisters or brothers). Some may be part of a confraternity of laity which may also have an extended history (e.g. Third Order of St Francis, Christian Life Communities, Legion of Mary, St Vincent de Paul Society). Others have no such background and yet have many years of interrelating and commitment (five, ten, fifteen years). Others may have only begun to gather.

Two sets of processes

I would like to discuss the ways all these groups may discover their spirituality from two sources: the spirit of the group as it wells up from within the group and the experience the group has had or is having. These two interrelate and become one when the spirituality of the community is known.

When a group wishes to discover its spirituality, no matter its age, one set of processes it can perform is to articulate its vision, dream, hopes and desires. This will require some reflection by each member of the group and then sharing these reflections with each other. Eventually, the members are able to agree on a communal expression of these in words, drawings, dance or song. Groups from older traditions will realize that their present vision, dream, hopes and desires re-express some of that tradition. This is a beginning process for the group to recognize the spirit welling up from within. Similar processes are helpful when the group is trying to determine its life-style (the way the members are to relate to each other) or to discover the way it is called or how it is to go beyond itself (its mission) or the ways it is to celebrate its life (in parties and liturgies).

A second set of processes that can help a community discover its spirituality relates to the historical experience the group has had. A new group can only surmise its spirit with this process since it has little history to reflect on. But there is a hidden history

underpinning the group and that is the one each member knows. So it is that some sharing can take place on where each member has come from, each one's ancestry. This activity will point out to the members certain common aspects in these histories. From this a certain awareness of why they have come together and how they might stay together may appear.

With groups that have a longer period of relating together this history is a significant experience in which they can discern the ways God has dealt with them in the past. There are many interchanges the members can perform to help them appropriate the group's 'spiritual' identity as it is present in this history. This may be done in many different ways. One way is through the activity of praying and sharing over its communal graced history—the light, dark, joyful, suffering, hope-filled aspects of this history. Another way is to get the group to develop a fairly detailed 'history line' located on a wall for all to see and to follow this up by an in-depth sharing of the significance of this history for their communal identity, vocation, mission and celebration.

The union of the two sets of processes, i.e., sharing their vision, dream, hopes and desires springing up from within the group, plus the appropriating of their communal graced history is the first approximation of the community's 'spiritual' identity. Technically, they are now in touch with their *myth*.

Now they need to continue to tell their ongoing 'story'. They do this by recounting their own meetings with the risen Lord in their daily journey. This continual telling of the story develops even further their *myth*. As the group appropriates its *myth* the community will move to new levels of identity as it proceeds to the awarenesses of community vocation, community mission and community celebration. The sense of communal identity also comes through many weeks of ordinariness. The members of the community share quite prosaic events of their personal interior life. The gatherings are not always characterized by painful crises and disagreement in the group nor by communal experiences of intense joy, satisfaction, achievement, peace and unity. Through these quiet experiences the community becomes relaxed in itself. It gains confidence in its sense of communal being and the sense of conviction about its significance in the Lord's scheme of things.

The persons of the community now have a new perspective and horizon. They begin to realize that their communal life is the place of God, their word of God for prayer. They take on a spirituality of community. Their desire is to see the community grow in love and reach beyond itself. They acknowledge the disorder and sinfulness of the community. They image the community (in the

context of the whole Church) as the body of Christ. The eyes and ears of each person praying in the community now focus on the giftedness of all the members of the community. They recognize experientially, 'There is a variety of gifts, but always the same Spirit' (1 Cor 12, 4). They realize affectively 'We, although there are many of us, are one single body in Christ' (1 Cor 10, 17). Out of this they know that in some way they will relive communally the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.