

Problems of the Common Life: Living Together

Encounter with Man and Encounter with God

Authentic Religious Community

Religious community originates in a common experience of God. Two or more persons share their experience and are drawn together in a new relationship founded on the Lord. Religious community grows out of a mystical experience, out of a faith experience.¹ It is superficial and fragile if it rests only on common "religious" interests, such as a mutually acceptable theology or shared apostolic objectives. These are at best a propaedeutic to mature community. Authentic religious community exists only when the source of being together is the Lord Himself.

The Church as a whole is a people established by the Spirit (*Lumen gentium*, n. 9); it exists in open communication with the Spirit (*Dei verbum*, n. 8). The presence of Christ through His Spirit establishes both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal inter-relationships that together constitute the peculiar identity that is "Church". Whatever extension one gives the term "Church," whether it is the "ecclesia" of all the saved, or the "Christian" Churches, or the Roman Catholic Church, or the domestic "ecclesiola"² such as a religious house where two or three are gathered in the Lord's name, the essential constituent of religious community is the presence of the Spirit. The "ecclesiola" is the object of our concern in these pages. It is when Church is experienced, nurtured and perfected.

The "ecclesiola" is not limited to the local religious household. It includes other members of the Order, particularly in our case other members of one's own province, as well as other significant persons who relate to the

members of the household individually or corporately.³ Whatever its composition, it is typified by the apostolic community in Jerusalem that manifested the presence of the Spirit by the fact that they "devoting themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2: 42). A living religious community can neglect none of those elements of life in the Spirit.

The peculiarly contemporary experience of God that founds living Christian community seems to take place in the context of human concerns and preoccupations. God is encountered in history, not apart from the existential reality of the present world, but within it, in the very fabric of human events.⁴ The struggle of human beings to reach a more human existence, to reject oppression and experience the liberty of the sons of God, is the *locus* of the experience of God for many today and the source of a new shared vision and shared values that unite them together in brotherhood. God and mutual ministry and community itself are experienced together. A new consciousness is called for, one which Thomas Merton describes as a "missional" consciousness of the Word in the universe.⁵

The living community that results consists in the people who share faith and love. The inter-personal relationships spring from the recognition of Jesus the Risen Lord, alive in each other and in the events that they experience together.

While the concept of community is difficult to isolate and identify, the reality of ideal religious community as it is envisaged today is fairly easy to recognize. It is simply people interacting in mutual trust, care and

concern, with a balance of dependence and independence, and a warm feeling of acceptance and love. It occurs when men relate to each other in sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5: 8). One modern author gives this concrete description of community:

“Community” ... means not a geopolitical entity like San Diego or La Jolla, but rather something akin to the give-and-take of a good relationship. It means being able to make a mistake without having to worry very much about what you do. It means coming to someone before you are quite ready; it means taking risks, not holding on as tight as usual. It means influencing and being influenced at the same moment.⁶

Can this kind of community exist and flourish in our houses? Can we grow sufficiently, both psychologically and spiritually, to allow the inevitable mistakes, to survive confrontations, to be ourselves and let others be, so that community happens? It is my conviction that this kind of community is essential for our survival as Carmelites and that the source of power to construct this kind of community ultimately lies in our relationship of loving faith with God. This relationship however, today more than ever, does not exist in a vacuum. It is directly correlated with the quality of our relationships with each other.⁷

Encounter With Others

Authentic religious community exists when people relate to each other, not only functionally, in a task-oriented fashion, but personally, on the level of loving and being loved. These relationships are possible only through the death-resurrection dynamic of the Paschal Mystery. They are possible only by grace, by the vital presence of the Holy Spirit.

Common life can be maintained by doing the same things together, especially when the rules of civility and courtesy, of politeness and the “common signs” of charity are observed. But such organized common action falls short of the ideal of community life today. At best it achieves societal or

institutional living, not community. For true community, for *Gemeinschaft*, there must be honest-to-God interpersonal relationships based on entrusting oneself and reaching out to the other in agapeic love. The depth of the community is the depth of the love. In a truly mature community, these personal relationships are more important than one's own time, house schedules, personal political power, or even the efficiency of apostolic endeavors. There need be no opposition among these values; there need be no contradiction between person-orientation and functional efficiency. But in the hierarchy of values the person is more important than the organization.

All this is so much cliché in contemporary thinking about Christian and religious life. The theory is based on the premise that human encounter is implicit divine encounter: to love one's neighbor is already to love God.⁸ Because of this fact, true human dialogue is itself implicit prayer.⁹ However, it would seem useful here to develop briefly the precise contribution religious community as human encounter makes to the prayer life of the Carmelite.

Community in the sense so far described is both a preparation and a consequence of union with God. Prayer life means transformation in Christ, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 3: 27), cultivating presence to the Lord in the divine milieu of the universe.¹⁰ It is contemplation in the sense of *Perfectae caritatis*, namely, “Adhering to God in mind and heart,” (n. 5) and includes not only formal extended prayers but the whole fabric of one's relationship with the Lord.

Religious community disposes for and supports the prayer life of the individual. It is an “environmental influence” that promotes prayer, not only by supplying what is often a necessary “conditioning” or moral pressure for recalcitrant human nature, but by creating the atmosphere in which people can mutually

stimulate, inspire, and support each other in persevering efforts in prayer life. The history of the Charismatic Renewal (Catholic Pentecostalism) in North America illustrates the concomitant development and intensification of community with the progressive maturation of the prayer life of the members.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is basically a prayer movement. It began with the free-flowing, unorganized prayer meetings of the late sixties and soon developed into well-organized prayer groups. The organization centered for the most part around the workings of the prayer meeting itself, but with concern for serving human needs, especially of members of the group itself. A further step in growth in community as in prayer manifested itself in the sharing of material goods, always the sign of spiritual sharing, and in the recognition of the role of the community's direction of one's own life. Agreements or covenants began to be made that gave depth and stability to the community. Here again there was gradual development. In the beginning, limited agreements were made and eventually full covenant communities began to spring up. This full communion of life harkens back to the apostolic life of the primitive Jerusalem Church and parallels the history of community structures of traditional religious life.

The Charismatic Renewal has learned by experience what tradition has passed from generation to generation in our own Order. Unfortunately, the forms we inherited were not always self-validating, because they lacked the life and *élan* of the experience that created them. It comes as no surprise that prayer and community grow or decline together in this way. Man is intersubjective. Men need each other, both for psychological and spiritual growth. God saves us in community, and interaction is the process. Interaction is community at work. The interaction of the spiritual life occurs on many

different levels — with one's culture, with the people one serves, with the significant persons of one's life with the Lord Himself in acts of prayer.¹¹ Perhaps the single most important interaction is the living community in which one lives and grows.

A prayer life that would spurn one's neighbor smacks of the formalism condemned so vigorously by the prophets of the Old Testament (Is. 58: 1-12). It is alien to the Gospel ethic of Jesus that measures love for God by love for the least of the brethren (Mt. 25). By the same token, authentic prayer life manifests the fruits of the Spirit: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5: 22-23).

Growth in community forms, such as has been experienced in the Charismatic Renewal, demands ongoing and ever-deeper reconciliation, a daily dying to self so that the life of Christ may be manifest in the Body (2 Cor. 4: 10-12). One function of religious communities is to give the witness of reconciliation to the whole Church.¹² For this reason, kindred communities, i.e., religious houses established and staffed by persons of the same mentality and outlook, are hardly normative for religious life since their witness value is meager. They are signs of weakness and, in a sense, countersigns of the religious ideal. This is not to deny that the compatibility of individuals needs not to be taken into account in selecting members for a particular house, but only that it is not the only factor, or even the primary one.

Religious communities proclaim precisely the possibility of reconciliation of disparate persons in and through Christ. The power of the Spirit calls religious together and gives them the power to live in peace and fellowship. The religious community therefore, by its witness of reconciliation, shows forth the presence of the Spirit. Because observers see communion of life and goods, they can conclude to the union with the Source of all unity among men, the Holy

Spirit, Who has been given to us (Rom. 5: 5). Communion with the brethren and union with God are correlative terms. For this reason it is as accurate to characterize the goal of Christian life as communion with our fellow-men as union with God. The movement out of darkness into the ineffable light of Christ consists precisely in man's breaking out of alienation and isolation into the life-giving joy of human relationship and the ability to live at peace with his household and the ever-widening circles of Church. This life in community shows forth the glory of God in the most tangible and human way, according to the well-known adage of St. Irenaeus: "The glory of God is man fully alive."

Encounter With God

People who have had deep experiences of community, whether in secular settings like encounter groups or in religious sharing such as occurs in "Marriage Encounter" or the *Cursillo*, testify that these meetings are often more real encounters with God than formal worship or prayer experiences.¹³ Human encounter is a religious experience.

This identification could be illusory; it could be trading a mess of pottage for encounter with the living God. But in the presence of authentic love, in the deep sharing of the lives and persons in a group, there is every reason to accept the affirmations of those who identify their human experience as religious. True love of persons is other-centered and self-transcending. It takes a man out of himself and moves him toward the Absolute. Insofar as it is love for the other as other, it already contains love of the Other Who is God. Human love is the translation in human terms of divine love.

True human love is always open-ended; it does not, in itself, satisfy the human heart. The deeper the human love, in fact, the more poignant the sense of inadequacy. Only when human love is contextualized in the divine, is it able to fulfill man's deepest

yearnings. This means that all human love needs to be transformed in the fire of divine love, to be subjected to the all-loving will of the Father and purified and directed accordingly. Human love that is free floating and unrelated to God is doomed to disappointment. Marriage, for example, is no greater a guarantee against loneliness and narcissism than celibacy; both states must be rooted in God. Only true poverty of spirit and a felt need for God are the ground for developing the kind of love that maintains itself in the high points of life and the low, in fullness and emptiness, in the experience of the Cross and the Resurrection. This poverty of spirit, moreover, is created by a surfeit of human love as well as its absence in one's life.

In the economy of salvation revealed in biblical faith, God has chosen community as the place of His self-communication. Jesus, the Sacrament of Encounter with the Father, lives in His followers; He speaks His Word, especially in the Holy Scriptures, and He acts through the ministries of His followers, especially in the Sacraments and pre-eminently in the Holy Eucharist. The Eucharist is the moment when the Church is most perfectly itself. Gathered at the table of the Lord to be nourished by His Word and His Food, the Christian people experience communion with each other and union in the Lord in a most tangible fashion. Here is a real symbolization of encounter with God in community, and symbolizing by definition incarnates what it signifies.

The Eucharistic celebration is the paradigm of community prayer. This is the reason for its supreme importance as a regular feature of community life. Other community prayer is important too if the real foundation of religious community, namely the Lord Jesus, is to be explicitly recognized and appropriately praised.

Some new forms of communal prayer have emerged with the renewal of community life and these deserve special mention. They

are forms that go beyond individualistic praying together. Some of the communal prayer of the past was more like the “parallel play” utilized in the education and therapy of children. Each child plays in his own track, alongside other children who are involved in the same occupation but as single individuals. “Parallel prayer” is a phrase that might describe individuals praying at the same time, even in the same place, but without sharing their prayer with each other. This kind of prayer is generally regarded as inadequate in our time. There is a greater desire for sharing one’s prayer, and forms have been developing to express that need.

Since sharing depends on developed trust and trust is easier to experience in small groups, the small group becomes the operative unit of community. Shared prayer, shared faith, the review of life are some communal forms of explicit prayer that express the ideal and the reality of the lived community. These forms seem to flow naturally out of man’s heightened consciousness of his solidarity with his brothers in a common relationship to the one Father. They express what contemporary man experiences, often unreflectively.

The small group that shares faith and prayer together is composed ideally of the members of the Carmelite’s religious family. Other persons may participate as well and in the absence of willingness on the part of his brothers to engage in this kind of prayer, the Carmelite does well to seek this expression elsewhere. A certain tension, almost a divisiveness, may result from living in one place and sharing prayer life in another. On the other hand, such small group prayer outside the house can give the strength to work at the building of community at home. The same observation justifies the accepting of deep community sharing wherever God gives it. Community is gift, and *servatis servandis*, one accepts it where he finds it.

The Holy Spirit has been characterized as Community-in-Person, the hypostasis of the “we” in the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is “we-in-person.” He exercises His unifying role in all community, so that every real religious community is a participation of Trinitarian life. Growth in community is thus a deepening of one’s insertion into the divine life of the Trinity.

Conclusion

The following practical corollaries can be drawn from the foregoing description.

1) Renewal must begin, not with developing or revamping community structures, but going to the heart of the matter, to the renewal of the experience of God in the Carmelite tradition. For any viable life together, the highest priority must be given to prayer, both private and communal. Even a non-theist like Eric Fromm demands a minimum of twenty minutes in the morning and in the evening for personal reflection in order to exercise the kind of oblation human love he describes in *The Art of Loving*.¹⁴

2) Communal prayer, especially shared prayer, should receive more stress today than in the past, not only because contemporary man finds the immanent God more easily than the transcendent God, but also because of the special awareness of the social and inter-subjective dimension of man today.

3) Ideally the actual living “ecclesiola” of the Carmelite is his local religious household. If, however, the religious does not find community at home but does find it in a network of significant friends outside the religious community, this actual community should serve to help the individual religious work toward more real interpersonal relationships at home.

4) Religious community demands certain mutual agreements and forms. Our *Constitutions* describe the perimeters and guidelines for our communities. It is important that they mirror the actual living conditions of

modern Carmelites and that theory and practice mutually correct each other.

5) Growth in self-transcendence both individually and corporately is promoted both by prayer and the apostolate. The balance between the apostolic and contemplative life will always be a tension, as will the relationship between the individual in his self-fulfillment and the corporate role of the community. These tensions need to be

recognized and dealt with wisely and prudently.

6) The renewal of Carmelite religious life will take place primarily by the renewal of the personal relationship with the Lord of each member; the immediate consequence of that fact will be the renewal of religious community. The renewal of religious community, on the other hand, will contribute directly to the ongoing personal growth of each member.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (tr. John W. Doberstein, New York, 1954) 17-39, especially 21, 35-36; Joseph Grange, "Religion & the Bounds of Experience," in *Cross Currents*, 22 (1972), 327-351, at 330.

² Vatican II uses the term Church in all these senses. See G. Baum, *The Credibility of the Church Today* (New York, 1968).

³ Stephen B. Clark, *Building Christian Communities* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1972) 66-68.

⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, 1973) 189-212, especially 204-205.

⁵ Thomas Merton, "The Self of Modern and the New Christian Consciousness," in *The R.M. Burke Memorial Society News-Letter* 2 (1967) n. 1.

⁶ William R. Coulson, *A Sense of Community*, (Columbus, 1973) 25.

⁷ Cardinal Newman stated in as strong language as any personalistic philosopher of our own day the mutuality of human and divine friendship: "Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low, our attainments are so poor, our view of the truth so dim, our belief so unreal, our general notions so artificial and external is this, that we dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and we keep it to ourselves, and we fear that, as a cause of estrangement, which would really be a bond of union. We do not lay the foundations of our religious profession in the ground of our inner man; we make clean the outside of things; we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds, but our love is not enlarged, our bowels of affection are straitened, and in consequence, our religion, viewed as a social system, is hollow." *On Christian Sympathy*, cited by Fergus Kerr, in *New Blackfriars*, 46 (1965) 672. William Coulson discusses particular difficulties in forming religious community because of the promotion of formality and distance in religious training: *A Sense of Community*, 141-5.

⁸ Karl Rahner, S.J., "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations*, VI (Baltimore, 1969) 231-249.

⁹ Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm., "Place of Prayer in Community", in *Ascent*, (1972-1), 33-39.

¹⁰ Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm., "Prayer as Presence", in *Carmel in the World*, 9 (1969), 155-64.

¹¹ Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm., and Gerard Broccolo, eds., *Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood*, (Washington, 1973).

¹² Jerome Murphy-O' Connor, O.P., "What is Religious Life?" in *Supplement to Doctrine and Life*, n. 45, (May-June, 1973).

¹³ Coulson, *A Sense of Community*, 134

¹⁴ *The Art of Loving* (New York, 1963) 95.