Jean Vanier

COMMUNITY AND GROWTH

Revised Edition

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Contemporary society is the product of the disintegration of more or less natural or familial groupings. People are afraid, uncertain — and shut themselves away. But they need companions, friends with whom they can share their lives, their visions and their ideals; in short, they need community.

Jean Vanier, founder of the world-famous l'Arche community for the mentally handicapped and their helpers, has written a unique book. This is no dry and systematic treatise, but rather a brilliant series of 'starting-points for reflection' on the nature and meaning of community.

'Our communities should be signs of joy and celebration ... If we are accepted with our limitations as well as our abilities, community gradually becomes a place of liberation ... this terrible place can become one of life and growth.'

Jean Vanier was educated in England and Canada and served as a naval officer for some years. In 1964, after he had obtained his doctorate in philosophy, he founded the first l'Arche community in France. Since then, they have spread to many other countries.

This revised and extended edition of *Community and Growth* — now regarded as one of today's great classics — reflects fresh insights and new developments in the thinking of Jean Vanier.

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COMMUNITY AND GROWTH Jean Vanier PAULIST PRESS

By the same author

The Broken Body
Man and Woman He Made Them

Community and Growth

JEAN VANIER

Revised edition

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To Father Thomas Philippe
with whom I made my first steps in community

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Preface

This new edition of *Community and Growth* is essentially the book on Community which I wrote over ten years ago, but enlarged and revised.

Over these ten years I have learned a great deal about community life, both through mistakes I have made in l'Arche and through the evolution of our communities. Some of these have gone through an immense amount of pain and have nearly collapsed; two had to be closed for various reasons and the people with a handicap who were there welcomed into other l'Arche communities. All our communities have lived times of crisis and growth. We have seen some assistants put down roots, flower and give life; others have left, some angry, some with their hearts transformed in love and taking elsewhere the gifts and the vision they had received. And, of course, I have learnt a great deal from other new communities, particularly the communities of Faith and Light[1] with which I have been involved since their beginning in 1971.

In some ways, when I began l'Arche in 1964, I was a bit idealistic. I felt people could begin a community as I had begun, without too much outside help. I encouraged people to start and they did. Quite quickly serious difficulties cropped up. I had begun l'Arche with Father Thomas Philippe; but other founders were often alone and needed more support than I could give or was available from others. Over these last ten years I have seen how much leaders and communities need support, accompaniment and challenge if they are to fulfil their task and remain open and faithful to their call. I have seen also how much assistants need this same support, accompaniment and challenge to make the transition from a life of independence in society to community life. I have also seen

how much assistants need a spiritual guide. When there is a priest committed to a community, assistants seem able to put down roots more firmly. All these aspects I have enlarged upon in this new edition.

I have also expanded a great deal on the question of mission in community. What I wrote about this in the first two chapters of the first edition have been taken out, enlarged and made the basis for the third chapter of this new edition. Over the last ten years L'Arche, and also Faith and Light[1] have developed ecumenical communities in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Germany, North America, Switzerland and Australia. They have taught me a great deal about the pain and hope contained in such communities.

And so it is that in many parts of this book I have made additions and corrections. My thought, born from daily experience of community life, has thus become clearer and more precise.

This new edition is a work of community; many from the l'Arche communities sent me, at my invitation, their reflections and suggestions. My thanks go to each one who brought light to this book.

After a further ten years I imagine I will have many other reflections and corrections to add. Every day I am discovering new things. Maybe it will be someone else who will make those corrections. The important thing for me and for each one of us is to grow in the wisdom of community and never to hide behind clichés, rules and regulations. This growth means a continual and deeper listening to God, to people, and to communities as they grow and live through crises and tensions, as they bear fruit and give life. My hope is that this new edition will help people to live

1 Faith and Light are communities which meet regularly to celebrate life and to pray. They are composed of parents with their son or daughter who has a mental handicap and friends. These communities are now spread across the world like a big family. For more information write to: International Secretariat of Faith and Light, 90 ave. Suffren, 75015 Paris, France.

better the demands of community life in order to bring more fully the good news of love to this world.

February 1989 *Jean Vanier*

Note

There are some words I have used frequently which sound strange in English. Words such as 'accompaniment', 'formation', 'gratuity', 'fecundity', 'spirituality'. They are often a direct translation from the French. These words are not just l'Arche 'jargon'; they reveal a community experience or reality which cannot be signified in standard English. But I believe language is called to evolve. Over the centuries the English language has assimilated many French words. I hope it can continue to do so where there is no adequate English word. I have, however, taken the precaution of defining these words where they first appear in the text.

Acknowledgements

I wrote the original edition of this book in French. It was Ann Shearer, in London, who with such deep and intimate knowledge of l'Arche, translated it. She did it beautifully and I am deeply grateful to her.

This new edition has been worked on by Olive Peat of Darton, Longman and Todd. I am grateful for her expertise in the English language and her love for this book which have helped this second edition to be more clear and precise.

Introduction

Not too long ago, people lived in homogeneous groups, composed of families which had more or less the same roots. In these groups – the tribe, the village – people spoke the same language, with the same accent, and wore the same type of clothes. They lived by the same rites and traditions, had the same code of behaviour and accepted the same authority. There was a solidarity among them, that came both from their flesh and blood and from the need to co-operate to meet material needs and to defend the group from enemy attack and natural dangers. There was a unity among people of the same group which etched itself deeply on their unconscious.

Times have changed. Contemporary society is the product of the disintegration of these more or less natural or familial groupings. Nowadays, people who live in the same area are no longer part of a homogeneous group. Cities are made up of neighbours who do not know each other – and this will soon be true of villages too. People live in a pluralistic society, and many today are the children of inter-cultural marriages. In the cities, where solidarity has disappeared, people are afraid, and so shut themselves up in their own houses, frightened of neighbours and of intruders. Human community is no longer to be found in the market place, the neighbourhood or the village. Mobility has brought about a mixture of people, religions, and philosophies.

> People are now drawn toward cities large and complicated enough to meet our economic desires, and toward families small and portable (and even disposable) enough to make mobility possible. Popular sociology portrays us as victims of these 'movements' and 'trends', as if the woes that accompany mod-

> ernity had been forced upon us. But no. The destruction of intimate community has been at our own hands. It has corresponded to our own hierarchy of values . . . which stand largely in tension with the value of total and intimate community. As much as we yearn for community, we yearn even more for the social and economic prizes individual mobility can bring.[1]

The breakdown of confidence in community and traditional values pushes people into a desperate form of individualism, with all the struggle that implies, in order to go up the ladder of social success and to be able to stand alone. This has brought a terrible toll on family life. The former extended family has become the nuclear family, with only one or two children and with both the man and woman working in order to obtain the maximum financial income. When the husband or wife asks too much of the other and wants the other to fulfil all their emotional needs, there is serious danger of marital breakdown. And that is what we are witnessing today: families are breaking up. Stark individualism increases and a terrible loneliness sets in which finds a certain relief in working harder for more money and more success, and in more distractions, yet still cut off from relationship. But these ultimately push people into an even deeper loneliness. And so they fall into a vicious circle alternating between inner pain and efforts to escape it.

But of course, people cannot live in isolation and in such extreme individualism; everybody needs friends or companions. A certain togetherness or belonging, be it in groups of friends, in family, in clubs, in gangs, in militant groups orientated to politics and issues, in churches or in groups of all sorts, is an integral part of human nature. Isolated we shrivel up and die.

Today even more than ten years ago, when the first edition of this book was written, people are crying out for authentic communities where they can share their lives with others in a common vision, where they can find support and mutual encouragement, where

1 Parker J. Palmer, *A Place Called Community* (Pendle Hill, Philadelphia, 1977), p. 7–8.

they can give witness to their beliefs and work for greater peace and justice in the world – even if they are also frightened of the demands of community.

When families and tribes were well knit together, people were not lonely. They felt safe and secure, although perhaps parents and those in authority controlled children too much and did not see them as unique and capable of growing towards greater personal freedom. Personal conscience was in some ways sacrificed to group consciousness.

Today the discipline of the family and neighbourhood group, with their sense of belonging, have been lost, and personal freedom has increased. This has led to extreme individualism, but it could also give rise to a deeper search for community and belonging, orientated towards the development of personal consciousness rather than its suppression. But reaction to extreme individualism could also give rise to totalitarian and fanatical forms of power to 'save people from chaos' and preserve the identity of groups. 'I have come to believe,' writes David Clark,

> that without a strong sense of community human beings will wilt and begin to die. Community is the foundation of human society, the zenith of interdependence, the epitome of wholeness; in fact, the end of our journeying. As Parker Palmer writes: 'Community means more than the comfort of souls. It means, and has always meant, the survival of the species.' Without a continuing and enriching experience of community, as well as a vision of its glory to keep us moving forward, all of us eventually perish.[2]

In which direction will humanity evolve? This is the challenge for the last decade of the twentieth century.

When family ties break down, when children come from divorced, separated or single parents, or are adopted, they can suffer from deep insecurity. Children nourished on television, the mass media, and the popularisation of psychology can lack a sense of values

2 David Clark, *Yes to Life* (Collins/Fount, London, 1987), p. 22.

and become rootless. They may have many gifts and talents, opportunities and wealth, but they have difficulty making choices and knowing what direction to take. In many ways they are lost.

The mass media give instant and constant news about the world situation, about wars, oppression, armaments, hunger, catastrophes, the spread of AIDS and inequalities of all sorts. Young people do not know what to do with all this frightening and confusing information; they feel helpless and guilty. The world appears to be chaotic.

Young people today are different from those of the 'sixties and 'seventies who were looking for alternative ways of living, alternative communities, an alternative society. They felt they could do something about things, throw away the old and take the risk of building the new. It was a time of economic expansion. Now in the late 'eighties, young people cannot and do not want to take risks. They feel too insecure, too rootless, unclear as to what they want. They feel helpless and guilty in front of all the pain and the problems. They see no positive way of working towards a better world. Many become apathetic and fall into a world of depression, seeking compensation in gangs, hard rock, drugs, superficial sex; they are desperately seeking to fill the emptiness of their lives. Or else they choose to throw themselves into the established ways, working hard at school, getting a job and trying to forget about all the rest in their search for security and solid ground. And so the pendulum swings from one side to another.

Coming from the insecurity of broken families or from families where there is a lack of warmth and love, young people are in desperate need of communities where they can refind their deeper selves and experience values that give meaning and a certain structure to their lives. They are faced with different alternatives: on the one hand insecurity, with all the anguish that that implies, or the false securities of work or power, of worldly values or closed-up sects; or on the other hand, being part of a community where they can find themselves and grow into openness and universal love.

I doubt whether the leaders in society and in the churches today are sufficiently aware of the changing face of the young and a

world which is crying out from its anguish and loneliness for a sense of *belonging*.

But community is an urgent need not only for young people. Their cry is a prophetic sign of what is lacking in the world and in the Church, not only for them but for all.

Of course those who are feeling lonely, confused and lost in the world take a risk when they create or seek communities that may seem at first glance like sects. To overcome the powers of anguish inside them they want something absolute, a strong and all-powerful father- or mother-figure, values that are certain, laws that are rigid. Lacking inner balance, they may throw themselves into extremes of action, prayer, austerity, fundamentalism or even fanaticism. Some people may judge such communities as dangerous, for they lack wisdom and openness and freedom for the individual. And this is true. But we must remember the depth of the pain and the insecurity of the young. Such communities meet their needs.

But communities must be led with wisdom. Young people need help in order to integrate the vision into their own hearts and minds and to develop their own inner freedom and choices, learning little by little to be led inwardly by love, rather than from the outside, by rigid laws. They must be led to *true* community where they can become men and women of prayer and compassion, open to others and to the world, particularly to the poor, the oppressed, the lost, and the vulnerable, and thus become artisans of peace.

Many people today are conscious that they can no longer live isolated from others, nor can each group or country be isolated within its own frontiers. They are becoming more and more conscious that the whole of humanity, fragmented as it is, broken up into so many conflicting groups, is nevertheless one single family. Groups, tribes, and nations have to avoid conflict one with another; war is now too dangerous, and our economies, our lives, our scientific discoveries are intertwined. Through television satellites and radio we know instantly what is happening around the world. We are all interdependent. The days when people could live in isolation off their own land are past. Each people, race and country

is part of the vast family of humanity; each one has a gift that can help humanity to live in peace and to be complete. Humanity in its entirety is a body, and in the body each member is important. Groups, nations or races which cut themselves off from others, or seek to dominate by imposing their own culture, ideology and customs by suppressing the identity of another's culture, wound and hurt not only that particular people but the whole of humanity and themselves.

Today, more than ever before, we are called to become more conscious of the fundamental unity of the human family and to help each group of people to find their identity and place in it, and to grow in openness towards others.

The danger for individuals, groups, communities and nations is to close themselves off. This happens to the little child when it feels it is not wanted or loved. Its vulnerable heart is wounded. And because it is so fragile and weak and cannot cope, it closes itself up fearfully behind barriers to protect itself. Inside this little fortress the child feels guilty and angry; it wants to hurt itself because it feels worthless and guilty, or else it wants to hurt others, in revenge for its own inner pain and loneliness. Fear isolates and leads to aggression, conflicts, jealousies, rivalry and competition; communion opens up hearts and leads to unity and peace. Families, communities and nations may experience this same process of closing up behind barriers and frontiers of self-protection. They tend then only to open up from a position of power, in order to dominate, to further their own interests and impose their own ways, rather than from a desire for unity and communion.

There is such fear of difference, such fear of losing one's identity. If an individual, a group or a nation gets too close to others and starts letting down barriers, they can become frightened of losing their own identity and values, their sense of belonging. So, they close up again upon themselves.

The question for every person and community is how to remain rooted in the soil of one's faith and one's identity, in one's own

community, and at the same time to grow and give life to others, and to receive life from them. If people in a community live only on the level of the human, rational, legalistic and active aspects and symbols of their faith – which give cohesion, security and unity – there is a serious risk of their closing in on themselves and of gradually dying. If, however, their religious faith opens up, on the one hand to the mystical – that is, to an experience of the love of God present in the community and in the heart of each person – and, on the other hand, to what unifies all human beings, especially the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed, they will then continue to grow in openness.

This essential rooting through faith and love of God, the source of all life and love, gives immense strength to people and to communities. It is, however, very demanding for it calls for a life of poverty and insecurity, putting one's total trust in God and in his loving protection and providence. And it is precisely this poverty, insecurity and vulnerability which people and communities are frightened of.

This is the fundamental risk of trust, and of belief, taken by the followers of Jesus. Vulnerability, suffering and eventually rejection, appear dangerous and imprudent; they can bring death to the community. This was the fundamental risk taken by Jesus: he accepted vulnerability, insecurity and death, trusting in the power of the Father and of the resurrection. It is the linking of the cross to the openness and radiance of the glory. Followers of Jesus are called to believe that non-violence, poverty, openness and forgiveness are the surest way for them and their communities to receive life from God and to give life, peace and unity to the world. It is in our weakness that the power of God is manifested through the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

The paradox for the followers of Jesus is that we can only live and give life if we accept the need to die. 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24–5).

Today young people are seeking communities – not ones that are closed up and inward-looking but communities that are open to the universal, the international world; that are not limited to their own culture, that are not frightened ghettos but are open to

the pain and injustices of the world. That is why so many flock to Taizé or join groups that are international. That is why so many new communities feel called to found sister communities in developing countries. It is as if a community cannot continue to exist in its own culture if it is not linked to similar communities in other cultures. This arises not just from the desire to 'do good' in the Third World, but also from the discovery and acceptance of the gifts of these countries, which may be less developed economically but which frequently possess a deep and true sense of humanity.

For many centuries, communities were linked to institutional churches, but today in many places the influence of these churches is waning. Many young people see them as irrelevant, cut off from the reality of the world. But at the same time, with the breakdown of the family or in the face of injustices – particularly in Third World countries – there is a new cry for togetherness and community within the Church. This is very evident in the basic communities in Latin America, but it is also evident all over the world. The Synod of the Roman Catholic Church, when considering the Laity in 1987, described the parish, for the first time in an official document of the Roman Catholic Church, as 'a community of communities'. Yes, there is a new realisation that community is the place of meeting with God or, as Martin Buber says, 'the place of theophany'.[3] It is the place of belonging; it is the place of love and acceptance; it is the place of caring; it is a place of growth in love. Individualism and materialism lead to rivalry, competition and the rejection of the weak. Community leads to openness and acceptance of others. Without community people's hearts close up and die.

Maybe today some people see opposition between, on the one hand, a seemingly barren, old, *institutional church*, cut off from the world, looking after buildings, and worried about membership and attendance, and on the other hand, *new communities*, filled with

3 'We expect a theophany of which we know nothing but the place, and the place is called community' (Martin Buber, quoted by Parker J. Palmer, op. cit. p. 4).

life, enthusiasm, risk, openness and welcome, concerned about the big issues of the world – injustice, torture, peace, disarmament, ecology, a better distribution of wealth, the liberation of women, drug addiction, AIDS, people with handicaps, etc. This apparent opposition has always been a question. James, soon after the death of Jesus, cried out against those Christians who had become too institutionalised and who were rejecting the poor.[4] The communities of Francis of Assisi seemed so alive compared to the rich, institutional Church of his time. But we know that every community, with time, risks closing in on itself and becoming an empty institution governed by laws. The new communities of today can become the closed-up, barren institutions of tomorrow.

But no matter how closed up some institutions are, nor how closed up some churches and parishes may appear to be, that does not mean that they are dead and that they should be rejected. The institution is a part of any society. It is like the bones of a body. These bones can be dry; the body can be sick and like a skeleton; but the body needs the bone structure. The institution can be a living and healthy one if it is open to people, to love, and to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The institution is there in the Church so that priests and ordained ministers may be shepherds in and for communities, giving the spiritual and sacramental nourishment that they need in order to deepen and grow. As Karl Rahner says so well:

> If . . . basic communities gradually become indispensable – since otherwise in the present situation and that of the immediate future the institutional church will shrivel up into a church without people – the episcopal great church has the task and duty of stimulating and of contributing to their formation and their necessary missionary activity. . . . If the basic community is really Christian and genuinely alive, the result of a free decision of faith in the midst of a secularised world where Christianity can scarcely be handed on any longer by the power of social tradition, then all ecclesiastical organisation is largely at the service of these communities: they are not means to serve the

4 Epistle of St James, ch. 2.

ends of an ecclesiastical bureaucracy defending and wanting to reproduce itself.[5]

And of course if the institution is for people and for communities, then communities are there for the whole body. They give life to the institution. And the institution and the communities together are there, not to be closed in on themselves as warm, prayerful ghettos, but to bring life to the world. John Paul II in his first encyclical to members of the Roman Catholic Church wrote: 'The human person is the first road and fundamental road of the Church.'[6] The Church, like Jesus, is called to announce good news to the poor, liberation to prisoners and the oppressed, and sight to the blind. It is called to bring life and to help people grow to greater freedom and wholeness so that all may be one.

When I use the word 'community' in this book, I am talking essentially of groupings of people who have left their own milieu to live with others under the same roof, and work from a new vision of human beings and their relationships with each other and with God. So my definition is a restricted one. Others would see 'community' as something wider.

This book is above all for those who live, or want to live, in community. But many of its points apply equally to family life. The two essential elements of life in community are also part of life in a family: inter-personal relationship, a sense of belonging and an orientation of life to a common goal and common witness. In the same way, much of the book applies to people who, although they do not live together, are deeply bound to each other and meet regularly in small communities to share about themselves and their ideal, to pray and to find mutual support and encouragement, and to be witnesses of love and hope in this world. And I hope too that much that is said here can be applied to community-building in schools, hospitals, industry and other areas of society. I do not believe that a balance of power between employers and

5 Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (SPCK, London, 1974), pp. 114–15.

6 *Redemptor Hominis*, p. 14.

employees through trade unions is the only model for the creation of a just society or institution. Today many are seeking to create places of dialogue in industry and a true participation of all in decisions and profits. Is this not the beginning of a search for community?

Almost everything I say here is the result of my own experience of life in l'Arche, the community in which I have been living for nearly twenty-five years. I have also learned a great deal from visiting l'Arche communities across the world and by listening to others who live in other sorts of community.

L'Arche is special, in the sense that we are trying to live in community with people who are mentally handicapped. Certainly we want to help them grow and reach the greatest independence possible. But before 'doing for them', we want to 'be with them'. The particular suffering of the person who is mentally handicapped, as of all marginal people, is a feeling of being excluded, worthless and unloved. It is through everyday life in community and the love that must be incarnate in this, that handicapped people can begin to discover that they have a value, that they are loved and so are lovable.

I began l'Arche in 1964, in the desire to live the Gospel and to follow Jesus Christ more closely. Each day brings me new lessons on how much Christian life must grow in commitment to life in community, and on how much that life needs faith, the love of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit if it is to deepen. Everything I say about life in community in these pages is inspired by my faith in Jesus.

That certainly doesn't mean that there is no community life outside Christianity. To claim that would be to go against all human experience and against common sense as well. As soon as people group together, for whatever reason, a sort of community is created. But the message of Jesus invites his disciples to love one another and to live community in a special way.

Through being close to many people attracted by community and by new ways of life, I have come to realise how great an ignorance there is about community life. Many people seem to believe that creating a community is a matter of simply gathering together under the same roof a few people who get on reasonably

well together or who are committed to the same ideal. The result can be disastrous! Community life isn't simply created by either spontaneity or laws. It needs a certain discipline and particular forms of nourishment. Some precise conditions have to be met if this life is to deepen and grow through all the crises, tensions and 'good times'. If these conditions are not met, every sort of deviation is possible; which will lead eventually to the breakdown of the community, or else its members will become enslaved.

This book tries to clarify the conditions which are necessary to life in community. It is no thesis or treatise. It is made up of a series of starting-points for reflection, which I have discovered not through books, but through everyday life, through my mistakes, my set-backs and my personal failings, through the inspiration of God and my brothers and sisters, and through the moments of unity between us as well as the tension and suffering. Life in community is painful but it is also a marvellous adventure and a source of life. My hope is that many people can live this adventure, which in the end is one of inner liberation – the freedom to love and to be loved.

> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. . . .
>
> This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:9, 12–13)