

Community and Growth

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One Heart, One Soul, One Spirit

Community as belonging

Community is a place of belonging, a place where people are earthed and find their identity. Of course, people do not belong only to communities; some belong to gangs or to sects, to clubs, to militant groups and other organisations which are not communities. Many also belong to churches and to parishes. The very first community to which people belong is the family; a child first belongs to the mother. This initial belonging in the womb is so deep that some mothers feel they have the right of life and death over the child, as if the child in the womb does not exist in its own right.

When a child feels it does not belong to anyone, it suffers terrible loneliness and this is manifested in anguish. Anguish is like an inner agitation which affects the whole body, transforming the digestive and sleep patterns, bringing confusion, destroying all clarity about what to do, and how to act. It closes the child in on itself in feelings of uselessness and death, but also of anger and hatred which are intolerable. A child that feels unloved, knows it is not lovable; it is not good; it is evil. Loneliness is quickly transformed into terrible feelings of guilt.

But when a child is loved, seen as precious, listened to, touched with reverence, then it is at peace. It knows it belongs. It is held, protected and safe. It opens up without fear.

The deepest yearning in a child is to be in communion with its mother and father. This is the most fundamental need of every human being, the source of all other needs and desires.

If that thirst to belong and to be in communion with another is

not satisfied, the pain of anguish rises up and with it feelings of guilt, anger, and hate. In fact, this pain can become so unbearable that the child, if it is strong enough, tries to smother it, hide it, cover it up, or forget it by directing its energies into dreams and doing things. Thus, the empty feeling of loneliness and all the pain are pushed down into the secret recesses of its being, into a sort of tomb over which a stone is rolled. All that dirt is hidden away. But with the dirt, the heart itself, the wounded heart craving for communion, is also hidden away. The child can now get on with living, achieving, obtaining success, being admired, seeking independence. Instead of love, the child wants admiration. Other children fall into deep depression and revolt; they are angry with their parents and with the world around them; they seek out companions with whom they can live in an anti-social way. But deep down inside, in all these situations the child continues to be governed by unconscious forces, by those guilt feelings hidden in the tomb of its being.

Each person with his or her history of being accepted or rejected, with his or her past history of inner pain and difficulties in relationships with parents, is different. But in each one there is a yearning for communion and belonging, but at the same time a fear of it. Love is what we most want, yet it is what we fear the most. Love makes us vulnerable and open, but then we can be hurt through rejection and separation. We may crave for love, but then be frightened of losing our liberty and creativity. We want to belong to a group, but we fear a certain death in the group because we may not be seen as unique. We want love, but fear the dependence and commitment it implies; we fear being used, manipulated, smothered and spoiled. We are all so ambivalent toward love, communion and belonging.

According to circumstances and personal needs, according also to childhood needs that were not fulfilled, some people want belonging at almost any price. They feel so lonely that they are prepared to sacrifice personal consciousness and growth in order to be part of a group. Others may be fearful of belonging; it is as if the group stifles and crushes what is most precious in them, their personal conscience and uniqueness, their yearning for communion. This phobia towards all forms of groups prevents these

people from living in community. They need their independence, but that does not prevent them from loving people, being compassionate and assuming responsibility for others; it is just that they need a lot of personal space.

There is a great difference between people coming from poorer countries, where the extended family is strong and well-knit, and those coming from Western countries where the family is breaking up and where people are encouraged to live in a very individualistic way, to rise up the ladder of success, and to seek riches, power and the greatest independence possible. The first have a sense of belonging, security and peacefulness, but sometimes their personal conscience, freedom and creativity have not grown; they are in some ways prisoners of the group. The latter are frequently insecure, with little sense of belonging, a confusion of values and a lack of identity. Often they compensate for their insecurity by creating barriers around their hearts and developing their capacities to *do* things, and in this way to be self-sufficient. In both situations, there is a lack of true inner freedom.

When I visit African villages, I realise that through their rituals and traditions they are living community life. Each person has a sense of belonging to the others; men of the same ethnic origin or village are truly brothers. I remember Mgr Agré, bishop of Man, meeting a customs officer at Abidjan airport; they embraced like brothers because they came from the same village, they belonged to each other in some way. Most Africans don't need to talk about community. They live it intensely.

I've heard that Aborigines in Australia want nothing of our technical world except cars, which enable them to visit their clan. The only thing they find important is this link of brotherhood, which they cherish. There is, it seems, such a unity between them that they know – even if they are separated by hundreds of miles – when one of them is dying; they feel it in their guts.

René Lenoir, in *Les Exclus*,¹ says that if a prize is offered for the first to answer a question in a group of Canadian Indian children,

1 R. Lenoir, *Les Exclus* (Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1974).

they all work out the answer together and shout it out at the same time. They couldn't bear one to win, leaving the rest as losers. The winner would be separated from his brothers and sisters, he would have won the prize but lost community.

Our Western civilisation is competitive. From the time they start school, children learn to 'win'. Their parents are delighted when they come first in class. This is how individualistic material progress and the desire to gain prestige by coming out on top have taken over from the sense of fellowship, compassion and community. Now people live more or less on their own in a small house, jealously guarding their goods and planning to acquire more, with a notice on the gate that says 'Beware of the Dog'. It is because the West has lost its sense of community that small groups are springing up here and there, trying to refind it.

We have a lot to learn from the African and the Indian. They remind us that the essence of community is a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging can, however, get in the way of their seeing other groups objectively and lovingly. That is how tribal and religious wars begin. Sometimes too, African community life is based on fear. The group or the tribe give life and a sense of solidarity; they protect and offer security, but they are not always liberating. If people cut themselves off from the group, they are alone with their fears and their own deep wound, facing evil forces, wicked spirits and death. These fears are expressed in rites or fetishes, which in turn are a force for cohesion. True community is liberating.

I love that passage from the Bible: 'And I will say . . . "You are my people"; and he shall say "Thou art my God" ' (Hosea 2:23).

I shall always remember one of Martin Luther King's disciples, saying to a gathering of many thousands of blacks in Chicago, in the early seventies: 'My people are humiliated.' Mother Teresa of Calcutta says: 'My people are hungry.'

'My people' are my community, which is both the small community, those who live together, and the larger community which surrounds it and for which it is there. 'My people' are those who are written in my flesh as I am in theirs. Whether we are near each

other or far away, my brothers and sisters remain written within me. I carry them, and they, me; we recognise each other again when we meet. To call them 'my people' doesn't mean that I feel superior to them, or that I am their shepherd or that I look after them. It means that they are mine as I am theirs. There is a solidarity between us. What touches them, touches me. And when I say 'my people', I don't imply that there are others I reject. My people is my community, made up of those who know me and carry me. They are a springboard towards all humanity. I cannot be a universal brother or sister unless I first love my people.

The longer we journey on the road to inner healing and wholeness, the more the sense of belonging grows and deepens. The sense is not just one of belonging to others and to a community. It is a sense of belonging to the universe, to the earth, to the air, to the water, to everything that lives, to all humanity. If the community gives a sense of belonging, it also helps us to accept our aloneness in a personal meeting with God. Through this, the community is open to the universe and to humankind.

We all belong to the universe; we all receive from it and give to it; we are all parts of a whole. The danger for people today is to forget that and to think that they are the centre; that everyone else is there for them. People must die to this form of destructive egoism and be reborn in love, where they learn to receive from others and to give to them.

In many groups of people and clubs of all sorts (political, sports, leisure, liberal professions, etc.) people find a sense of security. They are happy to find others like themselves. They receive comfort one from another, and they encourage one another in their ways. But frequently there is a certain elitism. They are convinced that they are better than others. And, of course, not everyone can join the club; people have to qualify. Frequently these groups give

security and a certain sense of belonging but they do not encourage personal growth. Belonging in such groups is not for becoming.

You can often tell the people who belong to a particular club, group or community by what they wear, especially on feast days, or by their hair style, their jargon or accent or by badges and colours of some sort. Grouping seems to need symbols which express the fact that they are *one* tribe, *one* family, *one* group.

Community as openness

People come together because they are of the same flesh and blood or of the same village and tribe; some wanting security and comfort come together because they are alike and have the same vision of themselves and of the world; some come together because they want to grow in universal love and compassion. It is these latter who create true community.

The difference between community and a group of friends is that in a community we verbalise our mutual belonging and bonding. We announce the goals and the spirit that unites us. We recognise together that we are responsible for one another. We recognise also that this bonding comes from God; it is a gift from God. It is he who has chosen us and called us together in a covenant of love and mutual caring. But, of course, a group of friends can become a community, when its sense of belonging grows and it opens to others, and when little by little people begin to feel truly responsible for each other.

Frequently people group together or are grouped together thinking that they are an elite, God's chosen people. Frequently the founder of such a group or 'people' was prophetic and truly chosen by God. This founding figure gave inspiration, laws and traditions which created cohesion and unity, and gave wholeness to the people and a new meaning to their lives. The danger comes when they believe that *only* that particular founding figure was chosen by God and no others.

Our universe is filled with so many species of animals, birds, fish, flowers, fruits and plants; each one is the work of God's hands. It is the same with families, tribes, clans and communities of people. Each one is the work of his love. There is no one family that has all the truth. They are all called to live together in harmony, to share their beautiful gifts and to receive the gifts of others; to discover the height and the depth, the width and the breadth of the wisdom, the beauty and the love of our God.

So often, alas, groupings do not work together for the glory of God. They close themselves off one from another, each one certain that they are the chosen people, the beloved of God, the special community that will renew the face of the earth; that they are the best and they alone have the truth. They do not realise that everyone is special; everyone is called to manifest a particle of the glory of God – in communion with others. When they do not work together, groups create apartheid. Walls are built up between them, rivalry and competition set in. This leads to jealousy which, in turn, leads to hatred and warfare. Thus what began so beautifully ends up so horribly. Religious and political groupings (just as clubs and other groups) become filled with the desire 'to win', to beat others, to prove they are right through powerful means. They become blinded by their own concerns and desire for power (or fear of death); they are unable to see and appreciate the beauty of others.

Communities are truly communities when they are open to others, when they remain vulnerable and humble; when the members are growing in love, in compassion and in humility. Communities cease to be such when members close in upon themselves with the certitude that they alone have wisdom and truth and expect everyone to be like them and learn from them.

The fundamental attitudes of true community, where there is true belonging, are openness, welcome, and listening to God, to the universe, to each other and to other communities. Community life is inspired by the universal and is open to the universal. It is based on forgiveness and openness to those who are different, to the poor and the weak. Sects put up walls and barriers out of fear, out of a need to prove themselves and to create a false security.

Community is the breaking down of barriers to welcome difference.

Community as caring

If community is belonging and openness, it is also loving concern for each person. In other words we could say it is *caring, bonding and mission*. These three elements define it.

In community people care for each other and not just for the community in the abstract, as a whole, as an institution or as an ideal way of life. It is *people* that matter; to love and care for the people that are there, just as they are. It is to care for them in such a way that they may grow according to the plan of God and thus give much life. And it is not just caring in a passing way, but in a *permanent* way. Because people are bonded one to another, they make up one family, one people, one flock. And this people has been called together to be a sign and a witness, to accomplish a particular mission which is their charism, their gift.

So many people enter groups in order to develop a certain form of spirituality or to acquire knowledge about the things of God and of humanity. But that is not community; it is a school. It becomes community only when people start truly caring for each other and for each other's growth.

Esther de Waal writing about the rule of St Benedict says:

It is noticeable how both the abbot and the cellarer are constantly concerned about the brethren, caring for each singly in all their uniqueness rather than with the community *en bloc*, that ideal which seems to haunt so much contemporary ideology. The common life never becomes a piece of abstract idealisation or idealism. St Benedict would probably have appreciated Dietrich Bonhoeffer's aphorism: 'He who loves community, destroys community; he who loves the brethren, builds community.'²

A community that is committed to itself – to appearing perfect,

2 Esther de Waal, *Seeking God* (Collins/Fount, London, 1984), p. 139.

stable and secure – rather than to *people*, to their growth and inner freedom, is like a person giving an address who is more interested in the beauty and coherence of the talk rather than in whether the audience can hear and understand it. It is like a beautiful liturgy that nobody can follow and during which people have difficulty praying.

Community must never take precedence over individual people. It is for people and for their growth. In fact, its beauty and unity come from the radiance of each person in their truth, love and union with others.

Some communities – which are more groupings or sects – tend to suppress individual conscience in the interest of a greater unity. They tend to stop people from thinking, from having their own conscience. They tend to suppress whatever is secret and intimate in the individual as if personal freedom cuts across group unity and constitutes a sort of treason. In such a place, everyone must think alike – so there is a manipulation of intelligence, a brainwashing. People become automatons. Unity here is based on fear – the fear of being yourself or of finding yourself alone if you leave the others, the fear of a tyrannical authority, the fear of occult forces and reprisals if you leave the group. Secret societies and sects have a very great attraction for people who lack self-confidence or have weak personalities, because they can feel more secure when they are totally linked to others, thinking what they think, obeying without question and being manipulated into a strong sense of solidarity. The individual submits to the power of the group, and it becomes almost impossible to leave. There is a sort of latent blackmail, individuals are compromised to such an extent that they cannot leave.

In a true community, each of us is able to keep our own deepest secret, which must not be handed over to others, nor may be even shared. There are some gifts of God, some sufferings and some sources of inspiration, which should not necessarily be given to the whole community. Each of us should be able to deepen our own personal conscience and mystical life. It is precisely here that the weakness and strength of the community lie. There is weakness

because of the unknown of individual consciences; because they are free, people can deepen in *gratuité*³ and in the gift which helps build community, or they may betray love, become more egotistical and so give up and harm the community. There is weakness too because, if the individual and his union with God and the truth are paramount, he or she can, if God so calls them, find another place in the community and no longer assume the function that the community finds most useful; he or she can even physically leave. The ways of God for the individual are not always those of the people at the head of the community or what human reason and experience establish. But there is strength too in putting people first. There is nothing stronger than a heart which loves and is freely given to God and to others. Love is stronger than fear.

Belonging is for becoming. A young man or woman leaves the family because it has become stifling; they need something else in order to grow to greater maturity. So it is with community. It is for becoming and for the growth of personal consciousness. If for some reason it becomes stifling, then the person may have to take the risk of moving on, no matter how painful the separation may be. Community as such is never an end in itself. It is people and love and communion with God that are the goal. But, of course, a separation of this kind comes only after mature discernment and not just because being in community is painful or because there is a new leader we do not like!

If community is for growth of the personal consciousness and freedom, and not just for the collective consciousness, with the security it brings, there will be times when some people find themselves in conflict with their community. Some out of fear of this conflict and of loneliness will refuse to follow their personal freedom and inner conscience; they choose not to 'rock the boat'. Others will choose to grow personally but the price they will have

3 *gratuité*: a lovely word meaning giving freely and generously of oneself. Because the English words 'gratuity/gratuitous' have lost this sense and carry negative overtones, the French form is used here.

to pay will be a certain anguish and loneliness as they feel separated from the group.

This happens particularly when someone is called to personal growth and is in a group which has become lukewarm, mediocre and closed in on itself. The loneliness and anguish felt by this person can lead to a more intimate and mystical union with God. The person no longer finding support from the group cries out to God. 'Let those who thirst come to me and drink,' says Jesus. Those who suffer in this way find a new strength and love in the heart of God. Their communion with the Father deepens.

The authenticity of their communion with God is shown as they continually try to love their brothers and sisters with greater fidelity, without judgement or condemnation.

In community, people are called always to *become more*. It can be so easy for some to be stifled and even manipulated by the group, or overcome by a terrible fear of being rejected if they are in contradiction to the group or appear to be different from the others. Belonging should always be for becoming. The right question to ask is: 'Who am I trying to please?' If we are always trying to please Jesus and not just the group, then we will grow, and the community will be *for people*. But, of course, Jesus does want us also to be obedient to a group. That is where discernment and wisdom are necessary.

Workers come together in a factory to produce things and to make a good living wage. Soldiers come together in an army to prepare for war. People come together in community because they want to create a place of caring. Community is not for producing things outside of itself; it is not a gathering of people struggling to win a cause. It is a place of communion where people care for others, and are cared for by others; a place where they become vulnerable to one another.

In community, people let down barriers; appearances and masks disappear. But this is not easy. Many people have built up their personalities precisely by hiding their wounded hearts behind the

barriers of independence and of the attitude, 'I know, you don't'. They are highly active and their activity is based on a need to assert, to succeed, to control, to do projects and to be recognised. Others have constructed around their hearts a mask of depression, or of timidity or submission to others; they do not dare allow their true person to rise up inside them.

A community comes about when people are no longer hiding from one another, no longer pretending or proving their value to another. Barriers have come down and they can live together an experience of communion.

Scott Peck talks of this experience as the 'miracle' of community.

An utterly new quietness descends upon the group. People seem to speak more quietly; yet strangely enough, their voices seem to carry better across the room. There are periods of silence, but it is never an uneasy silence. Indeed the silence is welcomed. It feels tranquil. Nothing is frantic any more. The chaos is over. It is as if noise had been replaced by music. People listen and can hear. It is peaceful.⁴

Community and co-operation

In a community, people are called to co-operate together. Work has to be done; food must be bought or cultivated and meals prepared; dishes must be washed and floors cleaned; prayer and work must start on time. People must be welcomed, some turned away. The elderly and the sick must be cared for; younger members must be formed;⁵ money must be earned or received as gifts; it must be spent and the accounts must be kept and so on. Obvi-

4 M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987), p. 71.

5 form/formation: words used to describe the process of developing a person's inner life, growth and knowledge, understanding and commitment. It has a deeper meaning than the word 'training'.

ously each person will have a job to do and be accountable to someone or to the whole community. There has to be clear organisation and discipline in a community; otherwise there will be chaos and terrible inefficiency.

This is particularly true when people live together, but it is also true – although to a lesser extent – in support groups where people come together only occasionally.

In community, collaboration must find its source in communion. It is because people care for each other and feel called to be with each other, walking towards the same goals, that they co-operate together. Co-operation without communion quickly becomes like a work camp or factory, where unity comes from an exterior reality. And there will be many tensions and strife.

Communion is based on some common inner experience of love; it is the recognition of being one body, one people, called by God to be a source of love and peace. Its fulfilment is more in silence than in words, more in celebration than in work. It is an experience of openness and trust that flows from what is innermost in a person; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Community is above all a place of communion. For this reason it is necessary to give priority in daily life to those realities, symbols, meetings and celebrations that will encourage a consciousness of communion. When a community is just a place of work, it is in danger of dying.

Community, a place of healing and growth

When people enter community, especially from a place of loneliness in a big city or from a place of aggression and rejection, they find the warmth and the love exhilarating. This permits them to start lifting their masks and barriers and to become vulnerable. They may enter into a time of communion and great joy.

But then too, as they lift their masks and become vulnerable, they discover that community can be a terrible place, because it is a place of relationship; it is the revelation of our wounded emotions and of how painful it can be to live with others, especially with

some people. It is so much easier to live with books and objects, television, or dogs and cats! It is so much easier to live alone and just *do* things for others, when one feels like it.

As we live with people daily, all the anger, hatred, jealousies and fear of others, also the need to dominate, to run away or to hide, seem to rise up from the wounds of our early childhood when we felt unloved and abandoned or over-protected. All the dirt seems to come up to the surface of our consciousness from the tomb in which it had all been hidden. We begin to experience terrible anguish because people are clutching on to us, asking too much of us, or simply because their presence reminds us of authoritarian parents who did not have time to listen to us.

Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective or sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realise how incapable we are of loving, how much we deny to others, how closed in on ourselves we are. And if we are incapable of loving, what is left? There is nothing but despair, anguish, and the need to destroy. Love then appears to be an illusion. We are condemned to inner isolation and death.

So community life brings a painful revelation of our limitations, weaknesses and darkness; the unexpected discovery of the monsters within us is hard to accept. The immediate reaction is to try to destroy the monsters, or to hide them away again, pretending that they don't exist. Or else we try to flee from community life and relationships with others, or to assume that the monsters are theirs, not ours. It is the others who are guilty, not us.

Marriage is not just a honeymoon; it is also a time of loss. Each one loses their individual independence. Each one sacrifices his or her ego for a relationship in which man and woman have become

one. That is also the pain of community life. Community is the place where the power of the ego is revealed and where it is called to die so that people become one body and give much life. Jesus said that '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).

As all the inner pains surface, we can discover too that community is a safe place. At last some people really listen to us; we can, little by little, reveal to them all those terrible monsters within us, all those guilt feelings hidden in the tomb of our being. And they can help us to accept them by revealing to us that these monsters are protecting our vulnerability and are our cry for and our fear of love. They stand at the door of our wounded heart. In each one of us there is such a deep wound, such an urgent cry to be held, appreciated and seen as unique and valuable. The heart of each one is broken and bleeding. We want so much an infinite and incarnate love that does not suppress liberty; that does not manipulate us but gives us freedom and creativity. Community life with all its pain is the revelation of that deep wound. And we can only begin to look at it and accept it as we discover that we are loved by God in an incredible way. We are not awful sinners, terrible people who have disappointed and hurt our parents and others. An experience in prayer and the experience of being loved and accepted in community, which has become a safe place for us, allows us gradually to accept ourselves as we are, with our wounds and all the monsters. We are broken, but we are loved. We can grow to greater openness and compassion; we have a mission. Community becomes the place of liberation and growth.

An assistant in l'Arche was telling me how he had felt inferior to his brothers, who were all successful and had wonderful jobs. In his family he had always been seen as a failure. His father seemingly looked down on him, so he felt guilty and had a very broken self-image. He came to l'Arche in a way seeking refuge, but he had not really admitted this to himself when he came. In l'Arche he had some deep experiences in prayer and had known some inner

healing, particularly when God revealed to him in the secret of his heart that he was a beloved son. In community, though, it had been quite difficult because he was always wanting to prove himself and was always either angry or depressed, or running away from relationship and dialogue. Little by little, however, he discovered that he was accepted just as he was. Then one day he was able to admit that the wound of his childhood was truly a gift. Through it and through all his inner poverty and pain, he had met community. He had been given something his brothers, with all their success, had no inkling of. He had been given inner joy and liberation and the peace that surpasses all human ideas. In some ways he felt all the joy and exhilaration of the prodigal son. He was loved just as he was, by an eternal love.

The wound in all of us, and which we are all trying to flee, can become the place of meeting with God and with brothers and sisters; it can become the place of ecstasy and of the eternal wedding feast. The loneliness and feelings of inferiority which we are running away from become the place of liberation and salvation.

There is always warfare in our hearts; there is always the struggle between pride and humility, hatred and love, forgiveness and the refusal to forgive, truth and the concealment of truth, openness and closedness. Each one of us is walking in that passage towards liberation, growing on the journey towards wholeness and healing.

As barriers begin to drop, the heart with all its beauty and pain is revealed. The heart, because of wounds and sin, is filled with darkness and the need for revenge. But it is also the place where God resides: the temple of the Spirit. We must not fear this vulnerable heart, with its closeness to sexuality and its capacity to hate and be jealous. We must not run from it into power and knowledge, seeking self-glory and independence. Instead, we must let God take his place there, purify it and enlighten it. As the stone is gradually removed from our inner tomb and the dirt is revealed, we discover that we are loved and forgiven; then under the power of love and of the Spirit, the tomb becomes a womb. A miracle seems to happen. The heart revives in purity. We discover, through the grace of God, a new life, born in the Spirit.

This descent into the heart is a tunnel of pain, but also a liberation of love. It is painful as the barriers of egoism, and of the need to prove ourselves and to be recognised for *our* glory, crack and break. It is a liberation as the child in us is reborn and the selfish adult dies. Jesus said that if we do not change and become like little children, we cannot enter into the Kingdom. The revelation of love is for children, and not for wise and clever people.

As we live truly from the heart, we live from where the Spirit is dwelling in us. We see people as God sees them; we see their wounds and their pain; we no longer see them as problems. We see God in them. But as we begin to live in this way, unprotected by barriers, we become very vulnerable and terribly poor. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom.' It is this poverty which becomes our wealth, for now we no longer live for our own glory but for love and for the power of God manifested in weakness.

There are more and more groups today oriented towards issues and causes. There are peace movements, ecological movements, movements for oppressed people, for the liberation of women, against torture, etc. Each movement is important and, if they are based in a community life and the growing consciousness that in *each* person there is a world of darkness, fear, and hate, they can then radiate truth and inner freedom, and work towards justice and peace in the world. If not, they can become very aggressive and divide the world between oppressors and the oppressed, the good and the bad. There seems to be a need in human beings to see evil and combat it *outside* oneself, in order not to see it *inside* oneself.

The difference between a community and a group that is only issue-oriented, is that the latter see the enemy outside the group. The struggle is an external one; and there will be a winner and a loser. The group knows it is right and has the truth, and wants to impose it. The members of a community know that the struggle is inside of each person and inside the community; it is against all the powers of pride, elitism, hate and depression that are there and

which hurt and crush others, and which cause division and war of all sorts. The enemy is inside, not outside.

Our burgeoning interest in the existence and source of our prejudices, hidden hostilities, irrational fears, perceptual blind spots, mental ruts, and resistance to growth is the start of an evolutionary leap . . .

The major threats to our survival no longer stem from nature without but from our own human nature within. It is our carelessness, our hostilities, our selfishness and pride and willful ignorance that endanger the world. Unless we can now tame and transmute the potential for evil in the human soul, we shall be lost. And how can we do this unless we are willing to look at our own evil with the same thoroughness, detached discernment and rigorous methodology to which we subject the external world?⁶

John of the Cross says that the love of God and the love of people have the same source and the same goal. If people grow in love for others, then they grow in love for God and vice versa. If they close their hearts to others, then they close their hearts to God.

John, the beloved disciples of Jesus, says the same in his letters:

If anyone is well off in worldly possessions and sees his brother in need but closes his heart to him, how can the love of God be remaining in him? (1 John 3:17). Whosoever claims to be in the light but hates his brother, is still in darkness. Anyone who loves his brother remains in light . . . whoever hates his brother is in darkness and is walking about in darkness, not knowing where he is going, because darkness has blinded him (1 John 2:9-11).

Community life with all its difficulties is a special place of growth.

In every human being there is such a thirst for communion with another, a cry to be loved and understood – not judged or con-

6 M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1983), pp. 260, 263.

demned; there is a yearning to be called forth as special and unique. But to have this communion with another involves demands: to come out of one's shell of protection, to become vulnerable in order to love and understand others, to call them forth as special and unique, to share and to give space and nourishment to them. That is where the pain and fear lie, even sometimes the incapacity to love. Jesus calls his followers to love, to love one another as he loves them; not just to love others as one loves oneself. He proposes something new; to love others with the very love of God; to see them with the eyes of the Lord. And we can only see and love them like that if we ourselves have experienced Jesus loving us with a liberating love. It is only then that we can open ourselves and become vulnerable and grow to greater openness to others.

Community is the place where people grow in love and in peace-making. That is why it is imperative for communities to grow, expand, and deepen; and for many new ones to be founded and supported. Today war has become too dangerous; it could bring an end to our planet and to the human species. We are all called to learn to grow in love and forgiveness.

Sympathies and antipathies

The two great dangers of community are 'friends' and 'enemies'. People very quickly get together with those who are like themselves; we all like to be with someone who pleases us, who shares our ideas, ways of looking at life and sense of humour. We nourish each other, we flatter each other: 'You are marvellous' – 'So are you' – 'We are marvellous because we are intelligent and clever.' Human friendships can very quickly become a club of mediocrities, enclosed in mutual flattery and approval, preventing people from seeing their inner poverty and wounds. Friendship is then no longer a spur to grow, to go further, to be of greater service to our brothers and sisters, to be more faithful to the gifts we have been given, more attentive to the Spirit, and to continue walking

across the desert to the land of liberation. Friendship then becomes stifling, a barrier between ourselves and others and their needs. It becomes an emotional dependence which is a form of slavery.

There are also 'antipathies' in community. There are always people with whom we don't agree, who block us, who contradict us and who stifle the treasure of our life and our freedom. Their presence seems to awaken our own poverty, guilt feelings and inner wounds; it seems menacing and brings out in us either aggression or a sort of fear and servile regression. We seem incapable of expressing ourselves or even of living peacefully when we are with them. Others bring out our envy and jealousy; they are everything we wish we were ourselves. Their presence reminds us of what we are not; their radiance and their intelligence underline our own poverty. Others ask too much of us; we cannot respond to their incessant emotional demands and we have to push them away. These are the 'enemies'. They endanger us, and, even if we dare not admit it, we hate them. Certainly, this is only a psychological hatred - it isn't yet a moral hatred, because it is not deliberate. But even so, we just wish these people didn't exist! If they disappeared or died, it would seem like a liberation.

These blocks, as well as affinity between different personalities, are natural. They come from an emotional immaturity and from many elements from our childhood over which we have no control. It would be foolish to deny them.

But if we let ourselves be guided by our emotional reactions, cliques will form within the community. It will become no longer a community, a place of communion, but a collection of people more or less shut into different groups cut off one from another.

When you go into some communities, you can quickly sense these tensions and underground battles. People don't look each other in the face. They pass each other in the corridors like ships in the night. A community is only a community when most of its members have consciously decided to break these barriers and come out of their cocoons of 'friendship' to stretch out their hand to their enemies.

But the journey is a long one. A community isn't built in a day.

In fact, it is never completely finished! It is always either growing towards greater love or else regressing, as people accept or refuse to descend into the tunnel of pain to be reborn in the spirit.

The barriers and walls around communities, as they lock themselves up in fear or elitism, are the mirrors of those barriers and walls that people put around their own wounded hearts.

There is a very significant passage in the letter to the Ephesians where Paul says that Jesus came to break down the dividing walls of hostility between two groups of people to make them both one (cf. Eph. 2:14).

Bill gave as an example of the pain of living in community, where two people live in the same room and one always carefully presses his or her tube of toothpaste from the bottom while the other person borrows the same tube but presses it from the middle!

Scott Peck talks of pseudo-communities. These are where people *pretend* to live community. Everybody is polite and obeys the rules and regulations. They speak in platitudes and generalities. But underlying it all is an immense fear of conflict, a fear of letting out the monsters. If people start truly to listen to each other and to get involved, speaking from their guts, their anger and fears may rise up and they might start hitting each other over the head with frying pans. There are so many pent-up emotions contained in their hearts that if these were to start surfacing, God knows what might happen! It would be chaos. But from that chaos, healing could come. They realise what a terrible mess the community is in, what horrible fears inhabit them. Then they feel lost and empty. What to do; what road to take? They discover that they have all been living in a state of falsehood. And it is then that the miracle of community can happen! Feeling lost, but together, they start to share their pain, their disillusionment and their love, and then discover their brotherhood and sisterhood; they start

praying to God for light and for healing, and they discover forgiveness. They discover community.⁷

Our enemies frighten us. We are incapable of hearing their cries, of responding to their needs. Their aggression or domination stifles us. We flee from them – or wish that they would disappear.

But in community we are called to discover that the 'enemy' is a person in pain and that through the 'enemy' we are being asked to become aware of our own weakness, lack of maturity and inner poverty. Perhaps it is this which we refuse to look at. The faults we criticise in others are often those we refuse to face in ourselves. Those who criticise others and the community, and seek an ideal one, are often in flight from their own flaws and weaknesses. They see the piece of straw in the eye of the other, but seem completely unaware of the log in their own. They refuse to accept their own feeling of dissatisfaction, their own wound.

Scott Peck writes that one of the things we know about evil is the tendency of the evil to project their evil onto others. Unable or unwilling to face their own sinfulness, they must explain it away by accusing others of defects . . . ⁸

I know that the first task of love is self-purification. When one has purified oneself, by the grace of God, to the point at which one can truly love one's enemies, a beautiful thing happens. It is as if the boundaries of the soul become so clean as to be transparent, and a unique light then shines forth from the individual.⁹

The message of Jesus is clear:

But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. . . . If you love those who love you, what credit

7 cf. Scott Peck's reflections on the movement from pseudo-community to community, through chaos and emptiness, in *The Different Drum*, ch. 5.

8 Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*, p. 260.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 268.

is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.
(Luke 6:27-9, 32)

Of course you don't meet enemies in Carmel, but when all is said and done you do have your sympathies. One sister attracts you; another sister - well, you'd go a good long way round to avoid meeting her. Without knowing it, she is your persecutress. Good; then Jesus tells me this is the sister I've got to love, the sister I've got to pray for. Her behaviour to be sure, suggests that she isn't too fond of me; yes but 'What credit is it to you if you love those you love you? Even sinners love those who love them'. And just loving her isn't enough; you've got to prove it.¹⁰

The enemy in the community reveals to us the enemy inside us.

Community as forgiveness

As long as we refuse to accept that we are a mixture of light and darkness, of positive qualities and failings, of love and hate, of altruism and egocentricity, of maturity and immaturity, and that we are all children of the same Father, we will continue to divide the world into enemies (the 'baddies') and friends (the 'goodies'). We will go on throwing up barriers around ourselves and our communities, spreading prejudice.

When we accept that we have weaknesses and flaws, that we have sinned against God and against our brothers and sisters, but that we are forgiven and can grow towards inner freedom and truer love, then we can accept the weaknesses and flaws of others. They too are forgiven by God and are growing towards the freedom of love. We can look at all men and women with realism and love. We can begin to see in them the wound of pain that brings

10 Thérèse de Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, trans. Ronald Knox (Collins, London, 1958), p. 214. Thérèse Martin, frequently called Thérèse of Lisieux, entered an enclosed Carmelite community at the age of 15. She died aged 24. Her autobiography is one of the most enlightening documents about the pain and holiness of community life.

up fear, but also their gift which we can love and admire. We are all mortal and fragile, but we are all unique and precious. There is hope; we can all grow towards greater freedom. We are learning to forgive.

In community it is so easy to judge and then condemn others. We lock people up in a category: 'He or she is like this or like that.' When we do that we refuse them the possibility of growing. Jesus tells us not to judge or condemn. This is the sin of community life. If we judge, it is often because there is something inside us that we feel guilty about and which we do not want to look at or allow others to see. When we judge, we are pushing people away; we are creating a wall, a barrier. When we forgive we are destroying barriers; we come closer to others.

Sometimes I can judge people too quickly, their acts or the way they exercise their authority, not knowing or having assimilated all the facts or circumstances. It is so easy to speak from our wounds rather than from our centre where Jesus is present. It is so easy to see the flaws in others instead of affirming all that is positive in them.

When we speak from our wound, frequently we are trying to prove that we are someone; we are frightened of disappearing and of not being recognised; we are frightened of loss. There can be an unconscious anger or need to dominate and control others in the tone of our voice; there can be also an urgency or compulsion coming from an inner disturbance or anguish. We must not be surprised if we speak from our wound and defence mechanisms and judge others too quickly. That is our broken humanity. Each one of us carries within us wounds and fragilities; we can be quickly frightened by other people and their ideas; we all have difficulty truly listening to others and appreciating them.

However, we must all work on our emotional life and deepen our spiritual life in order to be more centred in truth in love, in God, and in order to speak and act out of that centre and not to judge others.

We can only truly accept others as they are, and forgive them, when we discover that we are truly accepted by God as we are and forgiven by him. It is a deep experience, knowing that we are loved and held by God in all our brokenness and littleness. For me

it has been such a grace and a gift over these years in community to verbalise my sins and to ask for forgiveness of a priest who listens and says 'I forgive you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.' To accept responsibility for our sinfulness and hardness of heart, and to know that we are forgiven is a real liberation. I don't have to hide my guilt anymore.

We can only really love our enemies and all that is broken in them if we begin to love all that is broken in our own beings. The prodigal son, after the discovery that he was loved in such a tremendous way by the Father, would never be able to judge anyone any more. How could he reject someone when he sees how he has been accepted by the Father, just as he is, with all his brokenness. The elder son, on the other hand, did judge, because he had not come to terms with his own brokenness; all this was still hidden in the tomb of his being, with the stone rolled tight against it.

We can only really love with a universal heart as we discover that we are loved by the universal heart of God.

Community is the place of forgiveness. In spite of all the trust we may have in each other, there are always words that wound, self-promoting attitudes, situations where susceptibilities clash. That is why living together implies a cross, a constant effort, an acceptance which is daily, and mutual forgiveness.

Too many people come into community to find something, to belong to a dynamic group, to discover a life which approaches the ideal. If we come into community without knowing that the reason we come is to learn to forgive and be forgiven seven times seventy-seven times, we will soon be disappointed.

But forgiveness is not simply saying to someone who has had a fit of anger, slammed the doors and behaved in an anti-social or 'anti-community' way; 'I forgive you'. When people have power and are well settled in community, it is easy to 'wield' forgiveness.

To forgive is also to understand the cry behind the behaviour. People are saying something through their anger and/or anti-social behaviour. Perhaps they feel rejected. Perhaps they feel that no one is listening to what they have to say or maybe they feel

incapable of expressing what is inside them. Perhaps the community is being too rigid or too legalistic and set in its ways; there may even be a lack of love and of truth. To forgive is also to look into oneself and to see where one should change, where one should also ask for forgiveness and make amends.

To forgive is to recognise once again – after separation – the covenant which binds us together with those we do not get along with well; it is to be open and listening to them once again. It is to give them space in our hearts. That is why it is never easy to forgive. We too must change. We must learn to forgive and forgive and forgive every day, day after day. We need the power of the Holy Spirit in order to open up like that.

Have patience

We are not the masters of our own feelings of attraction or revulsion; these come from places in ourselves over which we have little or no control. All we can do is try not to follow inclinations which make for barriers within the community. We have to hope that the Holy Spirit will come to forgive, purify and trim the rather twisted branches of our being. Our emotional make-up has grown from a thousand fears and egoisms since our infancy, as well as from signs of love and the gift of God. It is a mixture of shadow and light. And so it will not be straightened out in a day, but will take a thousand purifications and pardons, daily efforts and above all a gift of the Holy Spirit which renews us from within.

It is a long haul to transform our emotional make-up so that we can start really loving our enemy. We have to be patient with our feelings and fears; we have to be merciful to ourselves. If we are to make the passage¹¹ to acceptance and love of the other – all the others – we must start very simply, by recognising our own blocks, jealousies, ways of comparing ourselves to others, preju-

11 passage: a transition that includes a deeply changed attitude, or a movement from one stage of life to another.

dices and hatreds. We have to recognise that we are poor creatures, that we are what we are. And we have to ask our Father to forgive and purify us. It is good, then, to speak to a spiritual guide, who perhaps can help us to understand what is happening, strengthen us in our efforts and help us discover God's pardon.

Once we have recognised that a branch is twisted, that we have these blocks of antipathy, the next step is to try to be careful of how we speak. We have to try to hold our tongue, which can so quickly sow discord, which likes to spread the faults and mistakes of others, which rejoices when it can prove someone wrong. The tongue is one of the smallest parts of our body, but it can sow death. We are quick to magnify the faults of others, just to hide our own. It is so often 'they' who are wrong. When we accept our own flaws, it is easier to accept those of others.

Here is a word of advice from St John of the Cross: 'Never listen to those who speak of the weakness of another. If someone comes to complain about someone, you can ask that person with humility, not to say anything.'¹²

At the same time, we should try loyally to see the good qualities of our enemies. After all, they must have a few! But because we are afraid of them, perhaps they are afraid of us. If we have blocks, they too must have them. It is hard for two people who are afraid of each other to discover their mutual qualities. They need a mediator, a conciliator, an artisan of peace, someone in whom both have confidence. This third person can perhaps help us to discover the qualities of our enemy, or at least to understand our own attitudes and blocks. When we have seen the enemy's qualities, one day we will be able to use our tongue to say something good about him. It is a long journey, which will end the day we can ask our former 'enemy' for advice or a favour. We all find it far more touching to be asked for help than we do to be helped or 'done good to'.

12 Sayings of St John of the Cross, no. 198.

Throughout this time, the Holy Spirit can help us to pray for our enemies, to pray that they too grow as God would have them grow, so that one day the reconciliation may be made. Perhaps one day the Holy Spirit will liberate us from this block of antipathy. Perhaps he will let us go on walking with this thorn in our flesh – this thorn which humiliates us and forces us to renew our efforts each day. When Paul cried out to be delivered from the thorn in his flesh, Jesus replied: 'My grace is enough for you; my power is manifested in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9).

We shouldn't get worried about our bad feelings. Still less should we feel guilty. We should ask God's forgiveness, like little children, and keep on walking. We shouldn't get discouraged if the road is long. One of the roles of community life is precisely to keep us walking in hope, to help us accept ourselves as we are and others as they are.

Patience, like forgiveness, is at the heart of community life – patience with ourselves and the laws of our own growth, and patience with others. The hope of a community is founded on the acceptance and love of ourselves and others as we really are, and on the patience and trust which is essential to growth.

There is one sister in the community who has the knack of rubbing me up the wrong way at every turn; her tricks of manner, her tricks of speech, her character, strike me as unlovable. But then, she's a holy religious; God must love her dearly, so I wasn't going to let this natural antipathy get the better of me. I reminded myself that charity isn't a matter of fine sentiments; it means doing things. So I determined to treat this sister as if she were the person I loved best in the world. Every time I met her, I used to pray for her, offering to God all her virtues and her merits. I felt certain that Jesus would like me to do that.¹³

We must pray that God will teach us to love those we do not like and then to like those he is teaching us to love.

To grow in love is to try each day to welcome, and to be attentive

13 Thérèse de Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, p. 211.

and caring for those with whom we have the greatest difficulty; with our 'enemies'; those who are the poorest, the oldest, the weakest, the most demanding, the most ailing; those who are the most marginal in the community, who have the most difficulty conforming to the rules; and finally those who are the youngest. If people are faithful to these four priorities of love then the community as a whole will be an oasis of love.

Mutual trust

The mutual trust at the heart of community is born of each day's forgiveness and acceptance of the frailty and poverty of ourselves and of others. But this trust is not developed overnight. That is why it takes time to form a real community. When people join a community, they always present a certain image of themselves because they want to conform to what the others expect of them. Gradually, they discover that the others love them as they are and trust them. But this trust must stand the test and must always be growing.

Newly-married couples may love each other a great deal. But there may be something superficial in this love, which has to do with the excitement of discovery. Love is even deeper between people who have been married for a long time, who have lived through difficulties together and who know that the other will be faithful until death. They know that nothing can break their union.

It is the same in our communities. It is often after suffering, after very great trials, tensions and the proof of fidelity that trust grows. A community in which there is truly mutual trust is a community which is indestructible.

I am becoming more and more aware that the great difficulty of many of us who live in community is that we lack trust in ourselves. We can so quickly feel that we are not really lovable, that if others saw us as we really are, they would reject us. We are afraid of all that is darkness in ourselves, we are afraid to face our

emotional or sexual problems; we are afraid that we are incapable of real love. We swing so quickly from exhilaration to depression, and neither expresses what we really are. How can we become convinced that we are loved in our poverty and weakness and that we too are capable of loving?

That is the secret of growth in community. It comes from a gift of God which may pass through others. As we gradually discover that God and the others trust us, it becomes a little easier for us to trust ourselves, and in turn to trust others.

To live in community is to discover and love the secret of what is unique in ourselves. This is how we become free. Then we no longer live according to the desires of others, or by an image of ourselves; we become free, free to love others as they are and not as we would like them to be.

The right to be oneself

I have always wanted to write a book called 'The Right to be a Rotter'. A fairer title is perhaps 'The Right to be Oneself'.

One of the great difficulties of community life is that we sometimes force people to be what they are not: we stick an ideal image on them to which they are obliged to conform. We then expect too much of them and are quick to judge or to label. If they don't manage to live up to this image or ideal, then they become afraid they won't be loved or that they will disappoint others. So they feel obliged to hide behind a mask. Sometimes they succeed in living up to the image; they are able to follow all the rules of community. Superficially this may give them a feeling of being perfect, but this is an illusion.

In any case, community is not about perfect people. It is about people who are bonded to each other, each of whom is a mixture of good and bad, darkness and light, love and hate. And community is the only earth in which each can grow without fear towards the liberation of the forces of love which are hidden in

them. But there can be growth only if we recognise the potential, and this will never unfold if we prevent people from discovering and accepting themselves as they are, with their gifts and their wounds. They have the right to be rotters, to have their own dark places, and corners of envy and even hatred in their hearts. These jealousies and insecurities are part of our wounded nature. That is our reality. We have to learn to accept them and to live with them without drama, and to walk towards liberation, gradually knowing ourselves to be forgiven.

Many people in community, it seems to me, live with the burden of unconscious guilt; they feel that they are not what they should be. They need to be affirmed and encouraged to trust. They must feel able to share even their weaknesses without the risk of rejection.

There is a part of each of us which is already luminous, already converted. And there is a part which is still in shadow. A community is not made up only of the converted. It is made up of all the elements in us which need to be transformed, purified and pruned. It is made up also of the 'unconverted'.

Thérèse of Lisieux writes that as she meditated on the New Commandment of Jesus, to love people as he loves them, she began to see how imperfect her own love was:

it was so obvious that I didn't love my sisters as God loves them. I realise now, that perfect love means putting up with other people's shortcomings, feeling no surprise at their weaknesses, finding encouragement even in the slightest evidence of good qualities in them.¹⁴

To love people is to recognise their gifts and help these to unfold; it is also to accept their wounds and be patient and compassionate towards them. If we see only the gifts and beauty, then we expect too much of people; we idealise them. If we see only the wound,

14 Thérèse de Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, p. 209.

then we do too much for them and tend to keep them in submission.

Called by God just as we are

We can choose to live in a community because it is dynamic, warm and radiant. We find happiness there. But if a crisis arises, with tensions and turmoil, we begin to doubt the wisdom of our choice: 'Maybe I made a mistake.'

If we *enter* community because of our own choice, we will *stay* only if we become more aware that it was in fact God who chose us for this community. It is only then that we will find the inner strength to live through times of turmoil.

It is not the same thing in marriage? The bond becomes truly deep when husband and wife become conscious that they were brought together by God, to be a sign of love and of forgiveness for one another.

Parker Palmer writes: 'Community is finally a religious phenomenon. There is nothing capable of binding together willful, broken human selves except some transcendent power.'¹⁵ And I would add that no reality can lead us into the heart of forgiveness and open us up to all people, except a loving, forgiving God.

Henri Nouwen says that

true solitude far from being the opposite of community life is the place where we come to realise that we were together before we came together and that community life is not a creation of human will but an obedient response to the reality of our being united. Many people who have lived together for years and whose love for one another has been tested more than once

¹⁵ Parker J. Palmer, *A Place Called Community* (Pendle Hill, Philadelphia, 1977), p. 18.

know that the decisive experience in their life was not that they were able to hold together but that they were held together. That, in fact, we are a community not because we like each other or have a common task or project but because we are called together by God.¹⁶

God seems pleased to call together in Christian communities people who, humanly speaking, are very different, who come from very different cultures, classes and countries. The most beautiful communities are created from just this diversity of people and temperaments. This means that each person must love the others with all their differences, and work with them for the community.

These people would never have chosen to live with each other. Humanly speaking, it seems an impossible challenge. But it is precisely because it is *impossible* that they believe that God has chosen them to live in this community. So then the impossible becomes possible. They no longer rely on their own human abilities or natural sympathies, but on their Father who has called them to live together. He will give them the new heart and spirit which will enable them all to become witnesses to love. In fact, the more impossible it is in human terms, the more of a sign it is that their love comes from God and that Jesus is living: 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).

When he created the first community of the apostles, Jesus chose to live with men who were very different from one another: Peter, Matthew (the publican), Simon (the Zealot), Judas, and so on. They would never have come together if their Master had not called them. And when they were together they spent a lot of time squabbling about who was the most important amongst them. Yes, community life is definitely not easy! But it becomes possible because of the call of Jesus.

We shouldn't seek the ideal community. It is a question of loving

16 'Solitude and Community', *Worship*, Jan. 1978.

those whom God has set beside us today. They are signs of God. We might have chosen different people, people who were more cheerful and intelligent. But these are the ones God has given us, the ones he has chosen for us. It is with them that we are called to create unity and live a covenant. We choose our own friends; but in our families, we do not choose our brothers and sisters; they are given to us. So it is in community life.

I am more and more struck by people in community who are dissatisfied. When they live in small communities, they want to be in larger ones, where there is more nourishment, where there are more community activities, or where the liturgy is more beautifully prepared. And when they are in large communities, they dream of ideal small ones. Those who have a lot to do dream of having plenty of time for prayer: those who have a lot of time for themselves seem to get bored and search distractedly for some sort of activity which will give a sense of purpose to their lives. And don't we all dream of the perfect community, where we will be at peace and in complete harmony, with a perfect balance between the outward and the inward, where everything will be joyful?

It is difficult to get people to understand that the ideal doesn't exist, that personal equilibrium and the harmony they dream of come only after years and years of struggle, and even then only as flashes of grace and peace. If we are always looking for our own equilibrium – I'd even say if we are looking too much for our own peace – we will never find it, because peace is the fruit of love and service to others. I'd like to tell the many people in communities who are looking for this impossible ideal: 'Stop looking for peace, give yourselves where you are. Stop looking at yourselves – look instead at your brothers and sisters in need. Be close to those God has given you in community today; and work with the situation as it is. Ask how you can better love your brothers and sisters. Then you will find peace. You will find rest and that famous balance you're looking for between the outward and the inward, between prayer and activity, between time for yourself and time for others. Everything will resolve itself through love. Stop wasting time running after the perfect community. Live your life fully

in your community today. Stop seeing the flaws – and thank God there are some! Look rather at your own defects and know that you are forgiven and can, in your turn, forgive others and today enter into the conversion of love, and remember, pray always.'

But to be good instruments of God's love we must avoid being over-tired, burnt-out, stressed, aggressive, fragmented or closed up. We need to be rested, centred, peaceful, aware of the needs of our body, our heart and our spirit. Jesus says that there is no greater love than to give our lives, but let us not give over-tired, stressed and aggressive lives. Let us, rather, give joyful ones!

Share your weakness

One day, Colleen, who had been living in community for more than twenty-five years, told me: 'I have always wanted to be transparent in community life. I have wanted more than anything to avoid being an obstacle to God's love for the others. Now I am beginning to discover that I am an obstacle and I always shall be. But isn't the recognition that I am an obstacle, sharing that with my brothers and sisters and asking their forgiveness, what community life is all about?' There is no ideal community. Community is made up of people with all their richness, but also with their weakness and their poverty, of people who accept and forgive each other, who are vulnerable one to another. Humility and trust are more at the foundation of community life than perfection and generosity.

To accept our weaknesses and those of others is the very opposite of sloppy complacency. It is not a fatalistic and hopeless acceptance. It is essentially a concern for truth, so that we do not live in illusion but can grow from where we are and not from where we want to be or where others want us to be. It is only when we are conscious of who we are and who the others are, with all our wealth and weakness, and when we are conscious of the call of

God and the life he gives us, that we can build something together. The force for life should spring from the reality of who we are.

The more a community deepens, the weaker and the more sensitive its members become. You might think exactly the opposite – that as their trust in each other grows, they in fact grow stronger. So they do. But this doesn't disperse the fragility and sensitivity which are at the root of a new grace and which mean that people are becoming in some way dependent on each other. Love makes us weak and vulnerable, because it breaks down the barriers and protective armour we have built around ourselves. Love means letting others reach us and becoming sensitive enough to reach them. The cement of unity is interdependence.

Didier expressed this in his own way during a community meeting: 'A community is built like a house, with all sorts of different materials. Cement holds the stones together. And cement is made of sand and lime, which are very insubstantial – it takes only a gust of wind to blow them away in a cloud of dust. The cement that unites us in our community is the part of us that is weakest and smallest.'

Community is made by the gentle concern that people show each other every day. It is made by small gestures of caring, by services and sacrifices which say 'I love you' and 'I'm happy to be with you'. It is letting the other go in front of you, not trying to prove that you are right in a discussion; it is taking small burdens from the other. 'Do not do anything out of jealousy or vanity; but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to selfish interests, but to those of others' (Phil. 2:3).

If living in community means letting down the barriers which protect our vulnerability and recognising and welcoming our weakness, then people who are separated from their community can sometimes feel terribly vulnerable. Those who live all the time

in the struggles of society have to build an armour around their vulnerability.

People who have spent a long time at l'Arche sometimes discover a whole lot of aggression in themselves when they return to their family, which they find very hard to bear. They had thought that this aggression no longer existed. So they begin to doubt their calling and who they really are. But the aggression is to be expected, because they have been stripped of much of their personal armour by being in community; they cannot live so openly with people who do not respect their vulnerability. They have to defend themselves.

Community is a living body

St Paul talks about the Church, the community of the faithful, as a body where there are many different parts. Every community is a body, and in it all the members belong one to another. This feeling of belonging comes not from flesh and blood, but from a call from God. Each of us has been personally called to live together, to belong to the same community, the same body. This call is the foundation of our decision to commit ourselves with others and for others, responsible for each other. 'For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another' (Rom. 12:4-5).

In this body, each member has a role to play. The foot needs the hand, says St Paul; hearing and sight complement the sense of smell . . .

The parts of the body which seems to be weaker are indispensable . . . God has so composed the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior parts, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. (1 Cor. 12:22, 24-6)

And in this body, each member has a different gift to offer

... according to the grace given to us ... if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching, he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom. 12:6-8)

This body which is community must act and give light for the work of love, the work of the Father. It must be a body that prays and a body which is merciful, so that it can heal and give life to those who are hopeless in their distress.¹⁷

Using our gifts

Using our gifts is building community. If we are not faithful to our gifts, we are harming the community and each of its members as well. So it is important that all members know what their gifts are, use them and take responsibility for developing them; it is important that the gift of each member is recognised and that each is accountable to the others for the use to which this gift is put. We all need each other's gifts; we must encourage their growth and our fidelity to them. Everyone will find their place in community according to their gift. They will become not only useful but unique and necessary to the others. And so rivalry and jealousy will evaporate.

Elizabeth O'Connor¹⁸ gives some striking examples of St Paul's teaching. She tells the story of an old woman who joined the community. A group of people were discerning her gift with her. She believed she had none at all. The others were trying to comfort her: 'Your gift is your presence.' But that wasn't enough for her. Several months later she discovered her gift; it was to carry each member of the community by name before God in a prayer of intercession. When she shared her discovery with the others, she

¹⁷ See also 1 Peter 4:10-11 and Ephesians 4:7-16.

¹⁸ Elizabeth O'Connor, *The Eighth Day of Creation* (Word Books, Texas, 1971).

found her essential place in the community. The others knew that they somehow needed her and her prayer, if they were to exercise better their own gifts.

When I read that book, I realised how little we at l'Arche help each other to build community by sharing about our gifts. I realised how little sense we have of really depending on each other and how little we encourage each other to be faithful to our gifts.

Envy is one of the plagues that destroys community. It comes from people's ignorance of, or lack of belief in, their own gifts. If we were confident in our own gift, we would not envy that of others.

Too many communities form – or deform – their members to make them all alike, as if this were a good quality, based on self-denial. These communities are founded on laws or rules. But it is the opposite which is important; each person must grow in their gift to build the community and make it more beautiful and more radiant, a clearer sign of the Kingdom.

Nor must we look just at the obvious gift, which is maybe linked to a natural talent. There are hidden and latent gifts, much deeper ones, which are linked to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to love. They too must flower.

Some people have outstanding talents. They are writers, artists, competent administrators. These talents can become gifts. But sometimes the individuals' personalities are so tied up in the activity that they exercise their talent chiefly for their own glory, or to prove themselves or to dominate. It is better then that these people do not exercise their talents in community, because they would find it too hard to use them truly for the good of others. What they have to discover is their deeper gift. Others, of course, are more open and flexible, or their personality is less formed and rigid. These people can use their abilities as a gift in the service of the community.

There are more and more communities today where there is not only a variety of gifts but a variety of people in different states of life. In the communities of l'Arche there are married and single people; there are also people who are married but are separated; and others not married but with children. Each situation is so different, but each one is part of the body and is vital to the life and growth of the body. Each one must be respected and find their place and their nourishment and thus be helped to grow. We can so quickly compare ourselves with others; then jealousy arises. We truly need the power of the Holy Spirit to accept what we have been given and to accept what others have been given.

In a Christian community, everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them. It will be well, therefore, if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community, that he may know in hours of doubt that he, too, is not useless and unusable. Every Christian community must realise that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship.¹⁹

Using our gift means building community. If we are not faithful, the edifice will be weakened. St Paul emphasises the importance of charismatic gifts in this building. But there are many others which are more directly linked to a quality of love. Bonhoeffer²⁰ speaks of the different ministries a community needs: holding one's tongue, humility, tenderness, silence in the face of criticism, listening, constant readiness to render small services, support of brothers, forgiveness, proclamation of the Word, speaking truth and authority.

19 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper and Row, New York, 1976). Bonhoeffer is not referring here to people without a paid job, but to members of the community who refuse a responsibility that is in accord with their abilities.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

The gift is not necessarily linked to a function. It may be the quality of love which gives life to a function; it may be a quality of love which has nothing to do with any function. There are people who have the gift of being able to sense immediately, and even to live, the sufferings of others – that is the gift of compassion. There are others who know when something is going wrong and can pinpoint the cause – that is the gift of discernment. There are others who have the gift of light – they see clearly what is of fundamental concern to the community. Others have the gift of creating an atmosphere which brings joy, relaxation and individual growth. Others again have the gift of discerning what people need and of supporting them. Others have the gift of welcome. Each person has a gift to use for the good and growth of all.

But in each person's heart of hearts there is also the deep and secret union with God, the Bridegroom, which corresponds to their secret and eternal name. We are certainly made to nurture others, each in our own way. But above all we are made to live this unique relationship with our Father and his son, Jesus. The gift is like the radiance of this secret union on the community. It flows from it and strengthens it.

Community is the safe place where all of us feel free to be ourselves and have the confidence to say everything we live and think. Not all communities will get to this point, it's true. But this is the direction in which they should be going. As long as some people are afraid of expressing themselves, for fear of being judged or thought stupid, or of being rejected, there is still a long way to go. There should be a quality of listening at the heart of the community which tenderly respects everything that is most beautiful and true in each other.

Self-expression does not mean simply giving vent to all our frustrations and angers at what is going badly – though sometimes it is good to bring these out. It also means sharing our deep motivations and what we are living. It is often a way of using our gift to nurture others and help them grow.

In nearly every community I know, and especially in older com-

munities, there are marginal people, that is to say, people who do not quite fit into the community, who have difficulty finding their place in the body. Perhaps this is because they have serious fits of anger or depression, or because they are locked up in themselves and refuse all dialogue. They often feel useless, unloved, unaffirmed and persecuted. They feel they are never given any responsibility; but when it is offered to them, they then refuse it. In some way, because they do not feel unique for someone, they are lonely and in anguish. And as they cannot accept the reality of their uneasiness, they have to find fault with someone else; that someone else is the community. The suffering of these people is great. Nature has not endowed them with an easy temperament. But they are children of God, our brothers and sisters. And God can work in and through them with their difficulties and neurosis, for the growth of the community. They too have their gift to offer. Their cry can frequently be prophetic. Others must be attentive and listen to them.

We must not 'psychiatrise' these people too quickly. We are called to learn to love them and to be wise in helping them, and particularly in listening to what they have to say. Some, of course, may need professional help, but this can be sought only if they themselves ask for it. Through the forgiveness of each day, let us help each other to accept those who are marginal in this way. It is a good sign when the body of a community can accept such people without feeling guilty or making them feel guilty. But of course, there has to be a sufficient number of people at ease within the community in order to be able to carry those who are uneasy with it.

Community is a place for *people* and for their growth, before being a place of laws and rules. Leaders must keep a wise balance between respect for individuals, with their hurts and difficulties, and respect for the rules and structures. Rules and structures are necessary; there can be exceptions only if they are there. But rules are for the life of people and the development of their gifts; and not people for the rules!

I often find in communities members who are suffering because

they feel they have been put aside; after years of carrying responsibility, they have difficulty finding their new place in the community. They are grieving the loss of responsibility. These people have to discover that we are all in community not because it is wonderful and brings human fulfilment, but because we are called by God. It is to be hoped they will discover that through their pain they are being called by Jesus to a new and deeper intimacy with the Father, and that this is their gift to be lived at this particular time. Is this not finally the ultimate goal for each person? If they do not realise their new gift; if they do not discover the road to resurrection through humility and inner pain, then they may remain simply in the bitterness and humiliation of the cross.

Sometimes when people are taking on responsibility 'successfully', and when they are admired and looked up to, they may forget that communion with Jesus and the Father is our goal, our source of peace. They can in some ways by-pass a certain quality of trust in God; they can replace God by community. Community is then no longer a place of love flowing from God and to God, manifesting his life, but becomes an end in itself. This manifestation of the life of God always flows through our own poverty and feeling of helplessness.

But of course community leaders and councils must not spiritualise their own error and injustice or lack of love by saying that these people who are suffering must obey, bear their cross and pray. No. Leaders must learn to rectify their errors and injustice if they have committed them; they must see that these people find the spiritual help they need, and the opportunity to continue to exercise their gifts. For this, leaders need to be truly compassionate and creative.

From 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community'

A community is only truly a body when the majority of its members is making the transition from 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community', when each person's heart is opening

to all the others, without any exception. This is the movement from egoism to love, from death to resurrection; it is the Easter, a passage, the passover of the Lord. It is also the passing from a land of slavery to a promised land, the land of inner freedom.

A community isn't just a place where people live under the same roof; that is a lodging house or an hotel. Nor is a community a work-team. Even less is it a nest of vipers! It is a place where everyone – or, let's be realistic, the majority! – is emerging from the shadows of egocentricity to the light of a real love.

Love is neither sentimental nor a passing emotion. It is the recognition of a covenant, of a mutual belonging. It is listening to others, being concerned for them and feeling empathy with them. It is to see their beauty and to reveal it to them.

It means answering their call and their deepest needs. It means feeling and suffering with them – weeping when they weep, rejoicing when they rejoice. Loving people means being happy when they are there, sad when they are not. It is living in each other, taking refuge in each other. 'Love is a power for unity', says Denys the Areopagite. And if love means moving towards each other, it also and above all means moving together in the same direction, hoping and wishing for the same things. Love means sharing the same vision and the same ideal. So it means wanting others to fulfil themselves, according to God's plan and in service to other people. It means wanting them to be faithful to their own calling, free to love in all the dimensions of their being.

There we have the two poles of community: a sense of belonging to each other and a desire that each of us goes further in our own gift to God and to others, a desire for more light in us, and a deeper truth and peace.

It takes time for a heart to make this passage from egoism to love, from 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community', and to the community for God and those in need. It takes time and much purification, and constant deaths which bring new resurrections. To love, we must die continually to our own ideas, our own susceptibilities and our own comfort. The path of love is woven of sacrifice. The roots of egoism are deep in our unconscious; our initial reactions of self-defence, aggression and the search for personal gratification often grow from them.

Loving is not only a voluntary act which involves controlling and overcoming our own sensibilities – that is just the beginning. It also demands a purified heart and feelings which go out spontaneously to the other. These deep purifications can only come through a gift of God, a grace which springs from the deepest part of ourselves, where the Holy Spirit lives. 'I will give them a new heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh' (Ezek. 11:19).

Jesus has promised to send us the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, to infuse us with this new energy, this strength, this quality of heart which will make it possible for us truly to welcome the other – even our enemy – as he or she is, possible for us to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things. Learning to love takes a lifetime, because the Holy Spirit must penetrate even the smallest corners of our being, all the places where there are fears, defences and envy.

In his last talk with the apostles, Jesus prayed three times that they should be 'one as he and his Father were one, 'that they should be consumed by unity.' These words are sometimes applied to unity between Christians of different churches, but they apply first and above all to unity between people and within communities. All communities should be working towards this unity – 'one heart, one soul, one spirit'.

It seems to me that we should ask a special gift of the Holy Spirit – the gift of unity and communion in the deepest sense, and with all the implications. This is truly a gift of God to which we have the right and the duty to aspire.

Jesus' prayer is astonishing. His vision goes much further than our imagination or wishes. The union of the Father and the Son is total. Each community should be working towards this union. But it can only reach it in and through the Holy Spirit. As long as we live, all we can do is to walk humbly towards it.

A community is not simply a group of people who live together and love each other. It is a place of resurrection, a current of life:

one heart, one soul, one spirit. It is people, very different one from another, who love each other and who are all reaching towards the same hope and celebrating the same love. This is what brings the special atmosphere of joy and welcome which characterises the true community.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (Phil. 2:1-2)

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. (Acts 4:32)

This atmosphere of joy comes from the fact that everyone feels free to be themselves in the deepest sense. They have no need to play a role, to pretend to be better than the others, to demonstrate prowess in order to be loved. They do not have to hide a whole part of themselves behind barriers and masks. They have become vulnerable one to another because they have become vulnerable to God. They have discovered that they are loved for themselves, not for their intellectual or manual skills.

When we begin to discover and to drop the barriers and fears which prevent us from being ourselves and which prevent the life of the Holy Spirit from flowing through us, we become more simple. Simplicity is no more and no less than being ourselves, knowing that we are loved. It is knowing that we are accepted, with our qualities, our flaws and as we are in the depths of our being. Simplicity is letting the love and the light of God flow and shine through us according to our vocation and gifts.

The wisdom of a true community often seems miraculous . . . and is more a matter of divine spirit and possible divine intervention. This is one of the reasons why the feeling of joy is such a frequent concomitant of the spirit of community. The members feel they have been temporarily – at least partially – transported out of a mundane world of ordinary preoccupations. For the moment it is as if heaven and earth had somehow met.²¹

21 Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, p. 76.

When the members of a community are living in communion one with another, and when the poor are at the centre of their life, the community is like a sign of the Kingdom of God; a sign of the presence of God. Jesus came to reveal to humanity that God is not a solitary, eternal being, contemplating his own glory; he is not just an extraordinary Creator of a beautiful yet painful universe. God is a family of three; three persons in communion one with another, giving themselves totally one to another, each one relative to the other. And God created man and woman as a sign of the Trinity; he created them to be in communion, one with the other, in this way reflecting his Love. God yearns for community to be a sign of this communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit: 'That they may be one, as the Father and I are one' (John 17:11).

Beyond human and natural bonds, already so close and strong, there is discerned in the light of faith a new model of the unity of the human race, which must ultimately inspire our solidarity. This supreme model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word 'communion'.²²

At the heart of the kingdom community lies the divine as well as the human 'Yes' to life, and 'Yes' to life together. If the Trinity is seen in this context, then it is not a static symbol but an attempt to describe the intimate interdependence of three Persons. The encounter and the exchange between Father, Son and Holy Spirit must always have been, and always will be, ongoing, or it can never have been a reality. We are engaged in an exchange of life because God is too; we are involved in a process of becoming as well as being because, in some profound and life-giving way, God is as well.

This continuing exchange of divine life with divine life, of divine life with human life, and of human life with human life, means that the kingdom community is characterised by the

22 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), no. 40.

sharing of all we are and all we have. This involves a sharing of love.²³

23 David Clark, *Yes to Life* (Fount, London, 1987), p. 54.