

# Community and Growth

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## Contents

Preface	xiii
Acknowledgements	xvi
Introduction	1
1 One Heart, One Soul, One Spirit	13
Community as belonging	13
Community as openness	18
Community as caring	20
Community and co-operation	24
Community, a place of healing and growth	25
Sympathies and antipathies	31
Community as forgiveness	35
Have patience	38
Mutual trust	41
The right to be oneself	42
Called by God just as we are	44
Share your weakness	47
Community is a living body	49
Using our gifts	50
From 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community'	55
2 Walking Toward the Covenant	61
A birth of hope	61
The call to families	64
Other paths	66
The first call	68
Leave your father, your mother, your culture	72

The beginning of the journey	76
Recognising the bonds	78
Choice for rooting	79
The final 'Yes'	82
<b>3 Mission</b>	<b>84</b>
Coming together for a purpose	84
Universal mission to give life	85
General and specific mission	88
Clarifying the goals	90
The yearning for God and the cry of the poor	93
Jesus is the poor	95
The cry for love	97
Inner pain	98
The waters flowing over humanity	101
<b>4 Growth</b>	<b>104</b>
A community grows like a child	104
From heroism to dailiness	108
The vision is clarified	109
From monarchy to democracy	113
Openness to the neighbourhood and the world	115
Times of trial: a step towards growth	118
Tensions	120
Sending people away	126
The outsider's eye, or external authority	128
Growth in individuals and growth in community	131
Losing illusions	134
The second call	139
Prayer, service and community life	141
From doing to listening	142
Signs of sickness and health in community	143
Openness to others	144
The focal point of fidelity	149
Generating life	152
Expansion and taking root	155
Born from a wound	155
The role of Providence	157
The dangers of becoming rich	158

The risk of growth	160
I was a stranger and you welcomed me	161
Be zealous and repent!	162
<b>5 Nourishment: Give Us Our Daily Bread</b>	<b>165</b>
Growth needs nourishment	165
Food for each day	169
Times of wonder and of awe	171
Affirmation from outside	173
The Word as bread	174
Rest and relaxation: 'the Sabbath Day'	177
Food for thought	181
Growth as nourishment	182
The friend	183
Sharing	185
The eyes of the poor	185
Personal prayer	189
Becoming bread	194
Communal prayer and Eucharist	195
The bread of pain	199
The bread of unity anticipated	203
<b>6 Authority as a Gift</b>	<b>205</b>
Authority	205
A mission from God	209
Being a servant	212
The danger of pride	216
Sharing responsibility	218
Community structures	221
Learning to listen and to exercise authority	224
Don't hide!	227
Personalised authority	229
Attitudes to authority	231
The sign of forgiveness	236
Letting the community evolve.	238
<b>7 Other Gifts in Community</b>	<b>240</b>
The spiritual guide	240
The specific role of the priest or ordained minister	247

Community and work accompaniment	249
Psychological accompaniment	250
Each person has a gift to share	251
The gift of listening	253
The gift of discernment	254
Fidelity over time	254
The gift of wonderment	255
The gift of the 'grandmother'	255
The gift of men and women	256
The anti-gift	260
The gift of animation	260
The gift of availability	261
The gift of the poor	262
<b>8 Welcome</b>	<b>265</b>
Giving space	265
Who welcomes?	270
Welcome: true and false	272
Welcoming Providence	273
Welcoming the vulnerable	274
Marginal people at the heart of the community	280
Welcome and service	282
The need for community	283
<b>9 Meetings</b>	<b>284</b>
Coming together to share	284
Coming together in the Spirit	288
Leading a meeting	290
<b>10 Living with Every Day</b>	<b>297</b>
Daily rhythm	300
Spirituality of movement and spirituality of the circle	302
The laws of matter	303
Love and poverty	304
The conflict between living littleness and political commitment	307
Political dimension of the community	308
<b>11 Celebration</b>	<b>313</b>
At the heart of community: celebration	313

## CONTENTS

xi

Meals	322
Preparing the celebration	325
Invited to the wedding feast	328
Conclusion	329

## Mission

### *Coming together for a purpose*

Jesus first of all called men and women to him and told them: 'Leave all; come and follow me.' He chose them, loved them and invited them to become his friends. That is how it all began, in a personal relationship with Jesus, a communion with him.

Then he brought together the twelve he had called to become his friends; they started to live together in community. Obviously it was not always easy. They quickly began to quarrel, fighting over who should be first. Community life revealed all sorts of jealousies and fears in them.

Then Jesus sent them off to accomplish a mission: *to announce* good news to the poor, *to heal* the sick, and *to liberate* by casting out demons. He did not keep them with him for long, but sent them out so that they would have an experience of life flowing out from them: an experience of giving life to people and an experience of their own beauty and capacities if they followed him and let his power act in and through them.

The pains of community are situated between the joy of this communion and friendship with Jesus and the joy of giving life to others: the mission.

If people come together to care for each other, it is because they feel more or less clearly that as a group they have a mission. They have been called together by God and have a message of love to transmit to others.

When two or three come together in his name, Jesus is present.

Community is a sign of this presence: it is a sign of the Church. Many people who believe in Jesus are in some degree of distress: battered wives, people in mental hospitals, those who live alone because they are too fragile to live with others. All these people can put their trust in Jesus. Their suffering is a sign of his cross, a sign of a suffering Church. But a community which prays and loves is a sign of the resurrection. That is its mission.

### *Universal mission to give life*

Humanity is one. We are all part of the same human race. However different we may be through culture, race or disabilities, we are all human beings; we are all brothers and sisters.

I remember once when I was in Papua New Guinea, I went up into the mountains. There I met tribal people. The womenfolk wore few clothes, so did the men for that matter! I spoke to them about people with a mental handicap and about l'Arche. Then there was a time for questions. They spoke about their lives and sickness and death, about joys and difficulties in relationships in their families and between families, about the menfolk drinking too much and about violence – all the same questions that could have come up in London or New York. Yes, we are truly of the same race.

The fundamental questions of humanity are always around love and hate, guilt and forgiveness, peace and war, truth and lies (or illusions), the meaning of life and death, and belief in God. Every community wants in some way to manifest a universal truth that they have discovered, like a treasure in a field; they want to announce this good news to other people and to offer some insights on these fundamental questions. They want to live this truth, because they believe it leads to a fuller and more beautiful life: to love, to peace, to truth, to freedom and to an experience of God. They want to communicate to others the beauty they have received.

There is a big difference between a community and a group that is militant for a cause. A community will say 'Come and see'. It



wants to manifest the truth in a non-violent way, offering it to others; visitors are encouraged to come, to ask questions, to experience the way of life. A community knows that the fundamental questions of life can only be looked at in a spirit of peace and inner freedom. Nobody can force anyone else to love and to walk to freedom. Militants for a cause will tend to be organised for a struggle which they hope to win; they will seek to impose their way aggressively. Frequently they seek outward change more than inward change. Of course it is very different when those concerned with causes and issues are living in community.

Clubs and closed groups that only accept members on certain criteria of race or of competence are elitist. These clubs demonstrate to themselves and to others their 'superiority'. Consequently, they make others feel inferior and that the good news is not for them. In these groups, humanity is broken down into a system of apartheid - groups separated one from another. There is no universal message of hope or of freedom.

Communities can produce things, make cheese, beer or wine; they can show new and better methods in agriculture: they can build hospitals and schools; they can further culture through their books, libraries or art. However, these things do not necessarily give life; and the mission of a community is to give life to others, that is to say, to transmit new hope and new meaning to them. Mission is revealing to others their fundamental beauty, value and importance in the universe, their capacity to love, to grow and to do beautiful things and to meet God. Mission is transmitting to people a new inner freedom and hope; it is unlocking the doors of their being so that new energies can flow; it is taking away from their shoulders the terrible yoke of fear and guilt. To give life to people is to reveal to them that they are loved just as they are by God, with the mixture of good and evil, light and darkness that is in them: that the stone in front of their tomb in which all the dirt of their lives has been hidden, can be rolled away. They are forgiven; they can live in freedom.

Jesus wants each one of us individually to bear fruit, but he also

wants us to bear much fruit in community, and then we become his disciples (John 15).

All living beings give life. Thus from generation to generation we have birds, fish, animals, trees, flowers and fruit – the incredible fecundity of creation as life flows from one being to another. Man and woman together give life, conceiving and giving birth to a child.<sup>1</sup> And that is just the physical and biological aspect of procreation. Once the baby is born, and even before birth, the parents give life to the child, and reveal to him/her its beauty by the way they welcome and love it. Or else they may bring inner death to the child, making it feel ugly and worthless through the way they reject or over-protect it. Through love and tenderness; through welcome and listening, we can give life to people.

Jesus' whole message is one of life-giving. He came to give life and to give it abundantly. He came to take away all the blockages that prevent the flow of life. The glory of God, wrote Irenaeus in the second century, is people fully alive, fully living. Jesus came to announce good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and imprisoned, and sight to the blind. He came to liberate, to open up new doors and avenues; he came to take away guilt, to heal, make whole and to save. And he asks his disciples to continue this mission of life-giving, of fecundity and of liberation. That is the mission of every Christian community.

When Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, he told them to be poor, to take nothing with them. And he told them to do things that were impossible for them to do all by themselves. So it is for all missions. Communities and their members are called to be poor and to do impossible things, such as to build community and to bring healing, reconciliation, forgiveness and wholeness to people. Mission is to bring the life of God to others, and this can only be done if communities and people are poor and humble, letting the life of God flow through them.

1 Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London; Paulist Press, New York; St Paul Publications, Australia, 1985).

Mission implies this double poverty, but also trust in the call and the power of God manifested through poverty, littleness and humility.

In the degree that people and communities are rich, self-satisfied, proud of their competence and power, and want to do things that they know they are capable of doing, then they can no longer be instruments of the life of God. They give what they have, which is their self-satisfaction.

### *General and specific mission*

This mission of life-giving and of liberation is first of all for the members of the community themselves. It begins with them. People enter community in order to grow in inner freedom, then to give it to others; to radiate it, to offer good news to others. This mission will be accomplished in different ways, places and times. There is the general mission for each community and for each person to give life. However, each community has its specific mission, its specific way of giving life through its particular goals.

The communities started by St Benedict in the sixth century were centred on prayer. Communities founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta are centred on the lonely, the broken and the dying. The Covenant House community in New York City cares for street kids while the Catholic Worker and Simon Communities are centred on men and women who are down and out. The Taizé Community is centred on prayer and a life dedicated to the unity of all the Christian churches. The community of Lanzo del Vasto (also called l'Arche) is centred on a way of life close to nature and on the principles of non-violence. The basic communities in Latin America are centred on the poor, restoring to them their basic dignity and rights, and their voice and place in the Church and in society.

In each community there is caring, bonding and mission. Each one has different ways of living, and different rules and structures; priorities in daily life are different in each, but there is always the same desire to care for and love one another, to announce the

universal good news to all people and to bring greater freedom, life and peace.

Each new community is called forth by God, as he inspires a particular man or woman or a group of people to respond to a specific cry or need of humanity at one particular moment of history. This cry can be very obvious: the cry of the dying in the streets of Calcutta or of the street kids in New York or of people with physical and mental handicaps. Or else it can be a more hidden cry: the need of the sixth-century Church for oases of prayer, the need of the thirteenth-century Church in Assisi for communities close to the poor. There is a cry hidden in the heart of God, of the Church and of the saints to give life. And finally, there are the hidden tears of the rich floundering in their wealth and the pain of their selfishness, emptiness, illusions, error and sinfulness, as they search for meaning. Each new community with its founder has a specific charism, gift and mission, responding to a particular cry for help, for recognition and for love.

A community becomes truly and radiantly one when all its members have a sense of urgency in their mission. There are too many people in the world who have no hope. There are too many cries which go unheard. There are too many people dying in loneliness. It is when the members of a community realise that they are not there simply for themselves or their own sanctification, but to welcome the gift of God, to hasten his Kingdom and to quench the thirst in parched hearts through their prayer and sacrifice, love and acts of service, that they will truly live community. A community is called to be a light in a world of darkness, a spring of fresh water in the Church and for all people. If a community becomes lukewarm, people will die of thirst. If it bears no fruit, the poor will die of hunger.

This sense of urgency, however, does not mean that members are hyperactive, nervous and anguished; it does not conflict with a sense of abandonment, trust, peacefulness and inner relaxation.

It is rather an awareness of the pain and evil in the world, but also of the depth, breadth and universality of the good news.

### *Clarifying the goals*

Some people want to live together, but it is not always clear why. They just want to live in community! If people are not clear about the specific goals of the 'why' of their common life, there will soon be conflicts and the whole thing will collapse. Tensions in community often come from the fact that individuals have not talked about their expectations. They soon discover that each of them wants something very different. (The same thing can happen in marriage. It is not simply a question of wanting to live together. If the marriage is to last, you have to know what you want to do and to be together.) This means that every community must have a charter, which specifies clearly why its members are living together and what is expected of each of them. It also means that before a community begins, its members should take time to prepare for living together and clarify their aims.

Bruno Bettelheim has said: 'I am convinced communal life can flourish only if it exists for an aim outside itself. Community is viable if it is the outgrowth of a deep involvement in a purpose which is other than, or above, that of being a community.'<sup>2</sup>

The more sincere and creative a community is in its search for essentials, and in its efforts to accomplish its goals, the more its members are drawn beyond their own concerns and tend to unite. The more lukewarm a community becomes towards its original goals, the more danger there is of its membership crumbling, and of tensions developing inside it. Its members will no longer talk about how they can best respond to the call of God and the cry of the poor. They will talk instead about themselves and their problems, their wealth or their poverty, the structures of the community. There is a vital link between the two poles of community: its goal and the unity of its members.

2 Bruno Bettelheim, *Home for the Heart* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1974).

The sense of belonging to a people, the covenant, with the commitment that it implies, are at the heart of community life. But that leaves the question: Who are my people? Are my people simply those with whom I live and who have the same outlook as I do, or are they those for whom the community has been created? Let me explain. Three people create community life in a slum, trying to live a welcoming, quiet and loving presence. They come inspired by a universal love, the love of Jesus; they were sent, and they want to witness to the love of God and proclaim the good news of the Gospel by their presence and their life. Are their people the group to which they belong, which sustains them spiritually and perhaps materially, or are they the people of the slum, the neighbours? For whom are they ready to give their lives?

The same question comes up at l'Arche. Is the community made up above all of assistants who freely choose to come, with similar motivations, or is it above all the people in need who did not have this free choice but were placed? We do not want two communities – the helpers and the helped – we want one. That is the theory, but in practice there is a tendency for the assistants to make their own community and be satisfied with that. Truly to make community with the poorest and identify with them is harder and demands a certain death to self. The closer you are emotionally to the assistants, the less chance there is of being close to the poor. Your heart can't be everywhere at the same time.

This can be taken further. Should the community, 'my people', be limited to those – both people in need and assistants – who live under the same roof? Doesn't it also include neighbours, people from the district, friends?

As people grow in love, as their hearts become more open, and as a community in its narrow sense becomes mature, so does the reality of the community, of 'my people', get larger.

But each person who lives in the community must still set their priorities. Where should they concentrate their energies? For whom will they give their life?

In the case of the three people living in the slum, shouldn't the group or mother-community to which they belong become a root, which enables them to be closer to 'their people' in the slum? Then there would be no conflict of influences or loyalty. Roots are there

so that flowers and fruits can grow – and it's in the fruit that you find the seeds of tomorrow. In the same way, the unity between assistants at l'Arche is there to encourage them to become closer to the people in need and to create *one* community. Belonging in one sense doesn't rule out belonging in the other – they are there for each other. They are one because love is essentially gift, not possession.

Little Sister Madeleine, who founded the Little Sisters of Jesus, wrote in a letter to them:

Do not feel obliged, in order to protect your religious dignity and your intimacy with God against exterior dangers, to put up barriers between the lay world and yourself. Don't put yourself on the fringe of human society . . .

Like Jesus, become part of that humanity. Penetrate deeply into and sanctify your environment by the conformity of your life, by your friendship; by your love, by your life totally given to the service of others, like Jesus, by a life so mixed in with everyone else's that you may be one with them, wanting only to be in their midst like yeast that loses itself in the dough in order to make it rise.<sup>3</sup>

Christian communities are there to bring life and hope to people in pain.

We enter community to live with others. But also, and above all, we come to live the goals of the community with them, to respond to a call from God, to respond to the cry of the poor.

. . . the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and *God remembered his covenant* . . . (Exod. 2:23–4)

3 P. S. Madeleine de Jesus, *Du Sahara au Monde Entier* (Nouvelle Cité, Paris, 1981), p. 410.

Then Yahweh reveals himself to Moses and says:

I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Exod. 3:7-8)

And he sent Moses to liberate them. Today as yesterday the covenant between God and the poor remains; he calls people to community to respond to the cry of the poor and the oppressed.

### *The yearning for God and the cry of the poor*

In all ages and in many religions, people have come to live together, yearning and searching for communion with God. Some of these communities were founded on the mountain tops or in desert lands, far away from the hustle and bustle of cities. Life in these communities is frequently austere, directed essentially toward a personal relationship with God and to acts of common worship and work. Other communities – particularly those in the Christian heritage – were founded to serve the poor, the lost, the hungry and those in need, in the ghettos and the hustle and bustle of cities.

The quest for the eternal, all-beautiful, all-true and all-pure, and the quest to be close to the poor and most broken people appear to be so contradictory. And yet, in the broken heart of Christ, these two quests are united. Jesus reveals to us that he loves his Father, and is intimately linked to him; at the same time he is himself in love with each person and in a particular way with the most broken, the most suffering and the most rejected. To manifest this love, Jesus himself became broken and rejected, a man of sorrows and of anguish and of tears; he became the Crucified One.

And so, communities formed in his name will seek communion with the Father through him and in him; they will also seek to bring good news to the poor, and liberation to the oppressed and the imprisoned.



Within the Church, over the ages, one or the other aspect of this double mission has been emphasised, according to the call of God in different times and places, but both are also present. There are those who are called to the desert or the mountain top to seek greater union with God through the Crucified One; and their prayer will flow upon the broken and the crucified ones of this world. And there are those called together to give their lives for and with the crucified and broken ones in the world; and they will always seek a personal and mystical union with Jesus so that they may love as he loves.

Every community and every family are called to live both forms of mission, but in different ways: to pray and to be present in a special way to the smallest and the weakest within their own community or outside it, according to their individual call. God is the fountain from whom we are all called to drink, and this source of life is meant to flow, through each of us, upon all those who thirst: 'As the Father has loved me, so I love you . . . my commandment is that you love one another as I love you.'

Some people drink first of the waters flowing from God and then discover that they are called to give water to the thirsty. Others begin by giving water to the thirsty but soon find that their well is empty; they then discover the sources of water flowing from the heart of God which become in them 'a source of water welling up into eternal life'.

Seen in this way, community life is not something extraordinary or heroic, reserved only for an elite of spiritual heroes. It is for us all; it is for every family and every group of friends committed to each other. It is the most human way of living; and the way that brings the greatest fulfilment and joy to people. As people live in communion with the Father, they enter more and more into communion with one another; they open their hearts to the smallest and the weakest. Being in communion with the smallest and the weakest, their hearts are touched and the waters of compassion flow forth; in this way they enter more deeply into communion with the Father.

Sometimes it is easier to hear the cries of poor people who are far away than it is to hear the cries of our brothers and sisters in our own community. There is nothing very splendid in responding to the cry of the person who is with us day after day and who gets on our nerves. Perhaps too we can only respond to the cries of others when we have recognised and accepted the cry of our own pain.

When we know our people, we also realise that we need them, that they and we are interdependent; they open our hearts and call us to love. We are not better than they are – we are there together, for each other. We are united in the covenant which flows from the covenant between God and his people, God and the poorest.

### *Jesus is the poor*

Jesus reveals an even greater unity between the personal contemplation of the Eternal and the personal relationship and bonding with people who are broken and rejected. This is perhaps the great secret of the Gospels and of the heart of Christ. Jesus calls his disciples not only to serve the poor but to discover in them his real presence, a meeting with the Father. Jesus tells us that he is hidden in the face of the poor, that he is in fact the poor. And so with the power of the Spirit, the smallest gesture of love towards the least significant person is a gesture of love towards him. Jesus is the starving, the thirsty, the prisoner, the stranger, the naked, the homeless, the sick, the dying, the oppressed, the humiliated. To live with the poor is to live with Jesus; to live with Jesus is to live with the poor (cf. Matt. 25). 'Whosoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name, welcomes me; and whosoever welcomes me, welcomes the Father' (Luke 9:48).

People who gather together to live the presence of Jesus among people in distress are therefore called not just to do things for them, or to see them as objects of charity, but rather to receive them as a source of life and of communion. These people come

together not just to liberate those in need, but also to be liberated by them; not just to heal their wounds, but to be healed by them; not just to evangelise them but to be evangelised by them.

Christian communities continue the work of Jesus. They are sent to be a presence to people who are living in darkness and despair. The people who come into these communities also respond to the call and the cry of the weak and oppressed. They enter into the covenant with Jesus and the poor. They meet Jesus in them.

Those who come close to people in need do so first of all in a generous desire to help them and bring them relief; they often feel like saviours and put themselves on a pedestal. But once in contact with them, once touching them, establishing a loving and trusting relationship with them, the mystery unveils itself. At the heart of the insecurity of people in distress there is a presence of Jesus. And so they discover the sacrament of the poor and enter the mystery of compassion. People who are poor seem to break down the barriers of powerfulness, of wealth, of ability and of pride; they pierce the armour the human heart builds to protect itself; they reveal Jesus Christ. They reveal to those who have come to 'help' them their own poverty and vulnerability. These people also show their 'helpers' their capacity for love, the forces of love in their hearts. A poor person has a mysterious power: in his weakness he is able to open hardened hearts and reveal the sources of living water within them. It is the tiny hand of the fearless child which can slip through the bars of the prison of egoism. He is the one who can open the lock and set free. And God hides himself in the child.

The poor teach us how to live the Gospel. That is why they are the treasures of the Church.

In l'Arche, assistants discover that they are called to announce good news to people in need and to reveal to them the immense love God has for them. Sometimes these assistants truly lead people

with a handicap over the threshold and into faith. But once over the threshold, people with a handicap truly lead the assistants deeper into faith; they become our teachers.

### *The cry for love*

When I came to Trosly-Breuil, that small village north of Paris, I welcomed Raphael and Philippe. I invited them to come and live with me because of Jesus and the his Gospel. That is how l'Arche was founded. When I welcomed those two men from an asylum, I knew it was for life; it would have been impossible to create bonds with them and then send them back to a hospital, or anywhere else. My purpose in starting l'Arche was to found a family, a community with and for those who are weak and poor because of a mental handicap and who feel alone and abandoned. The cry of Raphael and of Philippe was for love, for respect and for friendship; it was for true communion. They of course wanted me to do things for them, but more deeply they wanted a true love; a love that sees their beauty, the light shining within them; a love that reveals to them their value and importance in the universe. Their cry for love awoke within my own heart and called forth from in me living waters; they made me discover within my own being a well, a fountain of life.

In our l'Arche community in the Ivory Coast, we welcomed Innocente. She has a severe mental handicap. She will never be able to speak or walk or grow very much. She remains in many ways like a child only a few months old. But her eyes and whole body quiver with love whenever she is held in love; a beautiful smile unfolds in her face and her whole being radiates peace and joy. Innocente is not helped by ideas, no matter how deep or beautiful they may be; she does not need money or power or a job; she does not want to prove herself; all she wants is loving touch and communion. When she receives the gift of love, she quivers in ecstasy; if she feels abandoned, she closes herself up in inner pain – the poorer a person is, old or sick or with a severe mental handicap or close to death, the more the cry is solely for

communion and for friendship. The more then the heart of the person who hears the cry, and responds to it, is awoken.

Other people we have welcomed in l'Arche are more capable and able to grow in different ways. However, their fundamental need remains the same as Innocente's: communion and friendship, not a possessive friendship but one that gives life and calls them to growth. Love is not something sentimental; it is much deeper than that. It is a power that brings people to greater inner freedom and growth. Love is not opposed to competence. Love is always competent. And, of course, that love is such that it encourages some people to walk on their own, to leave the community, to risk the pain of separation for greater growth.

### *Inner pain*

The cry for love and communion and for recognition that rises from the hearts of people in need reveals the fountain of love in us and our capacity to give life. At the same time, it can reveal our hardness of heart and our fears. Their cry is so demanding, and we are frequently seduced by wealth, power and the values of our societies. We want to climb the ladder of human promotion; we want to be recognised for our efficiency, power and virtue. The cry of the poor is threatening to the rich person within us. We are sometimes prepared to give money and a little time, but we are frightened to give our hearts, to enter into a personal relationship of love and communion with them. For if we do so, we shall have to die to all our selfishness and to all the hardness of our heart.

The cry for love that flows from the heart of people in need is mixed with pain, anguish and sometimes agony. They are so fearful of not being lovable; they have suffered so much from oppression and rejection. If this call for love awakens compassion in the hearts of those around them, their fears and anguish and inner pain can also awaken fears and inner pain in those who hear

the cry. That is why it is so hard and so frightening to meet people who are inwardly broken. Their anguish seems to awaken anguish and pain in those around them.

In l'Arche, many assistants have felt this inner pain, which can provoke anger and even hatred for the weak person; it is terrible when one feels surging up inside oneself the powers of darkness and of hate. No wonder some want to run away and others try to forget; some try to cover up, others ask for help from a wise guide. The latter discover then that, in their own brokenness, they are truly brothers and sisters with the people they came to serve. They discover too that Jesus is not only hidden in the poor around them, but in the poor person within their own being.

People come to l'Arche to serve the needy. They only stay if they have discovered that they themselves are needy, and that the good news is announced by Jesus to the poor, not to those who serve the poor

Mission, then, does not imply an attitude of superiority or domination, an attitude of: 'We know, you don't, so you must listen to us if you want to be well off. Otherwise you will be miserable.' Mission springs necessarily from poverty and an inner wound, but also from trust in the love of God. Mission is not elitism. It is life given and flowing from the tomb of our beings which has become transformed into a source of life. It flows from the knowledge that we have been liberated through forgiveness; it flows from weakness and vulnerability. It is announcing the good news that we can live in humility, littleness and poverty, because God is dwelling in our hearts, giving us new life and freedom. We have received freely: we can give freely.

As long as there are fears and prejudices in the human heart, there will be war and bitter injustice. It is only when hearts are healed, and become loving and open, that the great political problems will be solved. Community is a place where people can live truly as human beings, where they can be healed and strengthened in their deepest emotions, and where they can walk towards unity and

inner freedom. As fears and prejudices diminish, and trust in God and others grows, the community can radiate and witness to a style and quality of life which will bring a solution to the troubles of our world. The response to war is to live like brothers and sisters. The response to injustice is to share. The response to despair is a limitless trust and hope. The response to prejudice and hatred is forgiveness. To work for community is to work for humanity. To work for peace in community, through acceptance of others as they are, and through constant forgiveness, is to work for peace in the world and for true political solutions; it is to work for the Kingdom of God. It is to work to enable everyone to live and taste the secret joys of the human person united to the eternal.

Mission will always imply struggle: the struggle between the forces of evil that seek to divide – pushing people and groups into isolation and loneliness and then into a closed world of fear, insecurity and aggression – and the force of love and trust, which open up people and groups to forgiveness, humility and understanding, to compassion and mutual acceptance, to unity and peace. This struggle is within each person and each community, and between the community and the world surrounding it. Communities which live this call and mission will always be counter-culture. The world with its false values will try to isolate them, make them look silly or utopian, or else it will try to infiltrate them with its false values so that they lose their spirit and enthusiasm, becoming rich and secure.

Living communities will always be persecuted in one way or another. Their members must be aware of the gravity of the struggle. They must be prepared to live the struggle with courage and in prayer. Satan and the evil spirits do not want loving communities to exist. So they will do everything they can to discourage, wound and ultimately destroy them.

In order to be able to meet Jesus in moments of communion with those who are broken and in need, one must also meet him in

prayer and in the Eucharist. 'He who eats my body and drinks my blood, lives in me and I in him.'

Through the years, I am discovering that there is no contradiction between my life with those in need and my life of prayer and union with God. Of course Jesus reveals himself to me in the Eucharist and I need to spend time with him in silent prayer. But he reveals himself too in this life with my brothers and sisters. My fidelity to Jesus is also realised in my fidelity to my brothers and sisters of l'Arche and especially the poorest. If I give retreats, it is because of this covenant, which is the basis of my life. The rest is only service.

Some people in the church consecrate themselves to God in a life of prayer and adoration. Others have a mission to announce the good news or act mercifully in the name of the Church. I sense that my own place in the Church and in human society is to walk with the poor and weak, so that each of us develops and we sustain each other in fidelity to our own deepest growth, on our journey towards a greater internal freedom and sometimes external autonomy.

### *The waters flowing over humanity*

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision (Ezek. 47:1-12) of waters flowing from the Temple. It began as a small stream, but then it grew into a deep river impossible to cross. On each bank of the river there was an immense number of trees constantly bearing fruit; their leaves were medicinal and brought healing. The waters too were healing waters; wherever they flowed, life was abundant and fish were plentiful. John the Evangelist had a similar vision (Rev. 22:1) of crystal clear water, the river of life, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, giving life, bearing fruit.

The Temple - is it not the Body of Christ, the dwelling place of God? Is it not from the wounded heart of the Lamb, on the



cross, that living waters flow upon humanity, giving life. The Temple, is it not the Body of Christ that is the Church?

Each community is grafted into the heart of Christ and into his body, the Church. A community is not the initial source; it is part of something very much greater. It is a sign and a revelation and the fruit of the source of life called to flow over humanity, cleansing, healing, giving life and freedom, bearing much fruit.

No community is alone; each one is born from other communities. Each one is born through people of faith who have given life to others over generations, ever since Christ died on the cross. There the water flowed from his heart and he bonded Mary and John together in a covenant of love as he cried out forgiveness. The gift of faith and of universal love, forgiveness and hope have been passed on from person to person, from community to community, from generation to generation. And each community gives birth to other people and other communities. The spirit of community is like a gentle fire giving light and warmth, communicating itself through hearts in communion one with another.

A community is never there just for itself or for its own glory. It comes from and belongs to something much greater and deeper: the heart of God yearning to bring humanity to fulfilment. A community is never an end in itself; it is but a sign pointing further and deeper, calling people to love: 'Come and drink at the source which is flowing from the Eternal and which is manifested in each act of love in the community, in each moment of communion.'

That is why communities must not be isolated one from another. They are called to live in communion and to collaborate one with another. They are all part of a vast body uniting heaven and earth, uniting those who have gone before and those who are present on the earth today. And together they are all preparing the seeds that will flower and bear fruit in the generations to come. They are preparing the ways of tomorrow so that the body of Christ may be fulfilled. Each community is but a sign of the liberating love of God. Some signify this love through contemplative presence and adoration, dwelling in the secret of Love, some through crying out words of truth, some through tenderness poured over broken bodies and hearts, giving life, reconciliation and peace.

Each community needs to be in contact with others. They stimu-

late and encourage, give support, call forth and affirm each other. Communities that are on the threshold of great pain and warfare, struggling with immense forces of darkness, violence and power, need to be held and nurtured by those secret channels of love – contemplatives rising in the middle of the night to pray, contemplatives who are old people in their homes, and those who are sick in hospitals. A community that isolates itself will wither and die; a community in communion with others will receive and give life. This is the Church, flowing over all of humanity and irrigating it.

And this Church is living not only in believers in the name of Christ, but also in all those who, even centuries before his birth and centuries after are seeking under the guidance of the Spirit the light of universal truth and the mystery of God, the warmth of compassion and the liberation of forgiveness. We are all bonded into one body, the body of humanity which, ever since the Word became flesh and one of us, is the body of Christ. We are called together in love and in compassion to be a witness and a sign of the waters flowing from the heart of God, calling all of humanity to the eternal wedding feast of Love.

And we must always remember that the waters are flowing not just from the heavens and from the places of light, but also from the broken earth: gentle springs of living water are flowing from the broken bodies and hearts of the poor. We must learn to drink from them, for they bring into our presence the wounded and broken heart of Jesus, the Crucified One.