

Community and Growth

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Revised edition



Paulist Press
New York • Mahwah

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Growth

A community grows like a child

Each of us is on a journey – the journey of life. Each of us is a pilgrim on this road. The period of human growth, from the time when we are infants in our mother's womb to the day of our death, is both very long and very short. And this growth is set between two frailties – the weakness of the tiny child and that of the person who is dying.

There is a waxing and then a waning in activity. The child and adolescent are travelling towards adult maturity; it takes many years for them to reach it and the independence and strength that it implies. Then come illness and weariness and we become more and more physically dependent, until that dependence may become total and we are once again like a tiny child.

While there is a waxing and then a waning in action and efficiency, growth can be continual at the level of the heart, of wisdom and of communion with God and with people. There are some precise stages in the growth of the heart. Tiny children live by love and presence – the time of childhood is a time of trust. Adolescents live by generosity, utopian ideals and hope. Adults become realistic, commit themselves and assume responsibilities; this is the time of fidelity. Finally, old people refind the time of confidence which is also wisdom. They cannot be very active, so they have time to observe, to contemplate and to forgive. They have a whole sense of the meaning of human life, of acceptance and of realism. They know that living has not just to do with action and running; they know that it is also to do with welcome

and loving. They have somehow got past the stage of proving themselves through efficiency.

Between each of these stages, there are steps to be crossed. Each of these demands preparation and education and must bring some suffering, particularly that of grieving for what is lost. Human life is this journey, this growth towards a more realistic and truer love; it is a journey towards wholeness. Tiny children are unified in their weakness and their relationship with their mother. But as they grow, divisions begin to appear between their sexuality and their relationships, between their will and their psychological make-up, between inwardness and outwardness, between what they live and what they say, between their dreams and reality. As they grow towards independence, their fears about their weakness, vulnerability and limitations, about suffering and death, become more conscious, and so do the barriers they throw up around their vulnerability. The journey of each of us is a journey towards the integration of our deep self with our qualities and weakness, our riches and our poverty, our light and our darkness.

To grow is to emerge gradually from a land where our vision is limited, where we are seeking and governed by egotistical pleasure, by our sympathies and antipathies, to a land of unlimited horizons and universal love, where we will be open to every person and desire their happiness.

Just as there are steps to cross in human life, so are there steps in the life of communities. And crossing these also demands preparation, education and a degree of suffering.

There are the steps of foundation and launching, and then there is the time when the community settles down in a peaceful rhythm. It begins to flourish and expand. This is frequently like a period of adolescence; members feel that their community is unique and blessed by God; they are apart from others. They are naive, 'have all the truth' and are very generous and idealistic. Gradually they discover, sometimes through crisis, that they are not perfect and that they have made some serious mistakes; and that there are

other communities blessed by God with whom it would be wise to co-operate. Then after a while the number of new members begins to diminish; the mean age of members rises gradually. During this time there can be tensions coming from the clarification of goals and life-style. Then, after the death of the founder, there can be a real crisis if the changeover to new leaders has not been well prepared and thought out. There can be times then when the community appears old and sick.

These steps are less clear than those of human life, but they are still there, and in some ways they are recurring; they never end unless the community dies. Communities are born, grow and give life, grow old and then are reborn. There are different stages in the way authority is exercised, in the evolution of structures of decision making. The community and those responsible for it have to be careful that these transitions are carried out well.

Many tensions in community come from the fact that some people refuse to grow; yet the growth of a community depends on the growth of each of its members. There are always people who resist change; they refuse to evolve; they want things to be maintained as they always were. In the same way, in human life, many refuse growth and the demands of a new stage; they want to remain children, or adolescent, or they refuse to grow old. Community is always in a state of growth.

The journey towards community is one of continuing discovery. We know little about the route ahead. We are not on an expedition where we carry a detailed map and an itinerary which tells us precisely when we will arrive at scheduled stopping-off points or even at our destination.¹

The community of Taizé gives an important example of growth and adaptation to events, new circumstances and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Kathryn Spink in a particularly inspiring book on the community says:

From the very beginning of Taizé, Brother Roger accepted that nothing could be accomplished without a process of maturation and that the community must progress one day at a time in the

1 David Clark, *Yes to Life* (Collins/Fount, London, 1987), p. 25.

knowledge that it was only little by little that Christ would become their essential love. They must, he knew, be prepared to love Christ without seeing him and so grow in Spirit. The history of the brothers' life together is characterized by a continual search for the mode of existence which might best make that growth possible. Certain elements within it are constantly changing and evolving.

... The search continues as does the creativity. In their different ways, more recent years have been as creative as the first, and perhaps the brothers are still learning how better to integrate their individual creativity into the whole.²

It is no easier to live in community after twenty years than it was at the start; on the contrary, in fact. People are always a little naive when they enter community; they have many illusions and they also have the grace they need to pull them away from an individual and egotistical life. People who have been travelling for twenty years in community know that it isn't easy. They are very conscious of their own limitations and those of others. They know the full weight of their own egoism.

Life in community is a little like that journey in the desert towards the promised land, towards inner liberation. The Jewish people only started to murmur against God when they had crossed the Red Sea. Before that, they were caught up in the extraordinary events, by the adventure, by the taste for risk; any burden at all seemed preferable to slavery. It was only later, when they had forgotten what it had been like to be oppressed by the Egyptians and when the extraordinary had given way to the ordinariness of everyday life, that they murmured against Moses and felt they had had enough.

It is easy to keep the flame of heroism burning in the early stages of a community. The struggle with the environment stimulates generosity of heart; no one wants to be beaten. It is much harder when months and years have passed and people find themselves faced with their own limitations. Things from which we think we have detached ourselves come back to tempt us: comfort, the law of least effort, the need for security, the fear of being disturbed.

2 Kathryn Spink, *A Universal Heart* (SPCK, London, 1986), p. 162-3.

And we no longer have the same strength to resist; to control our tongues and to forgive; the barriers come up again and we hide behind them. We are more easily governed by anguish.

Some people say that communities start in mystery and end in bureaucracy; that they start with great enthusiasm and a love that surpasses all frontiers and all difficulties, a yearning for risk, but they end up with a lot of administration and wealth, loss of enthusiasm and fear of risk.

The essence of the challenge to a growing community is to adapt its structures so that they go on enabling the growth of individuals and do not simply conserve a tradition, still less a form of authority and a prestige.

These days, we tend to see spirit and structures as being in opposition to each other. The challenge is to create structures which serve the spirit and the growth of people and which are themselves nourishing. There is a way of exercising authority, of discerning and even of running the finances which is in the spirit of the Gospel and the Beatitudes and so makes these tasks sources of life.

Community means communion of heart and spirit; it is a network of relationships. But this implies a response to the cry of our brothers and sisters, especially the poorest, the weakest, the most wounded, and a sense of responsibility for them. And this is demanding and disturbing. That is why it is very easy to replace relationships and the demands they bring with laws, rules and administrative devices. It is easier to obey a law than to love people. This is why some communities are swallowed up by rules and administration instead of growing in *gratuité*, welcome and gift.

From heroism to dailiness

It is quite easy to found a community. There are always plenty of courageous people who want to be heroes, are ready to sleep on

the floor, to work hard hours each day, to live in dilapidated houses. It's not hard to camp – anyone can rough it for a time. So the problem is not in getting the community started – there's always enough energy for take-off. The problem comes when we are in orbit and going round and round the same circuit. The problem is in living with brothers and sisters whom we have not chosen but who have been given to us, and in working ever more truthfully towards the goals of the community.

A community which is just an explosion of heroism is not a true community. True community implies a way of life, a way of living and seeing reality; it implies above all fidelity in the daily round. And this is made up of simple things – getting meals, using and washing the dishes and using them again, going to meetings – as well as gift, joy and celebration; and it is made up of forgiving seventy times seventy-seven.

A community is only being created when its members accept that they are not going to achieve great things, that they are not going to be heroes, but simply live each day with new hope, like children, in wonderment as the sun rises and in thanksgiving as it sets. Community is only being created when they have recognised that the greatness of humanity lies in the acceptance of our insignificance, our human condition and our earth, and to thank God for having put in a finite body the seeds of eternity which are visible in small and daily gestures of love and forgiveness. The beauty of people is in this fidelity to the wonder of each day.

The vision is clarified

After the time of heroism and struggle, after the initial period of wonderment, there comes a time when the vision, the goals and the spirituality of the community are clarified and written down; the community's identity and its place in society, in the Church and in the history of humanity are clarified. It becomes clear how the community is counter-culture, in what way it is prophetic; what are the dangers for it and for its members; what specific formation they need. Vision and intellectual understanding are

important to the life of a community. But intellectual consciousness must always spring from wonder and thanksgiving, which must remain at the heart of the community.

For us in l'Arche, it took some time to come to the realisation that our charism was to be with people with a mental handicap and not with people of all kinds of handicaps or poverty. It was a number of years before we discovered that we were called into the pains and joys of community. It is taking time for us to formulate clearly our spirituality and how we are nourished by our people. It is taking time to see more clearly what characterises l'Arche and makes it different from group homes; what makes it different from religious communities such as the brothers and sisters of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, for example.

A community must be clear about its spirituality and help form its members in it, for it is through the spirituality of the community that its members grow to wholeness and union with God. Each community brings to light an aspect of the Gospels and the life of Jesus: Francis of Assisi reveals the beauty and gift of poverty, while Benedict reveals a life of prayer and work; other communities reveal the role of peace-making and non-violence. The spirituality of a community is its charism and focal point of fidelity. It is manifested in the way people work, meet, pray and celebrate; in the routine and rhythm of the day; in the priorities of the community, and so on. The spirituality of l'Arche is manifested in the way we live with people who have handicaps and see Jesus in them. But a spirituality is always oriented to a mystical life; its finality is always communion with Jesus and his Father in the Holy Spirit, and in the communion with brothers and sisters.

There is always a temptation, because of the need for security, to plan a community beforehand, in all its details. Ideas then precede life and want to govern it. But that is not usually the way the Spirit works. A community is called to birth and must *live* first of all; it grows, deepens, evolves with time, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and obviously in a certain direction; but all must

not be planned beforehand. As people join the community they have their say in its development; they bring their insights and inspirations. Events modify the way things are done; little by little a common vision is forged. Too much detailed intellectual planning before a community starts can, in fact, stifle the Spirit, just as a desire to remain open to anything and everything and a refusal to clarify goals, can also prevent growth. There is a time for everything; a time for conception, birth and growth. Then there is a time for reading what has been given and reflecting upon it. God gives us hearts so that we may be inspired by his Love and his Spirit, but he also gives us minds, so that we may understand, clarify, discern and read what he is saying and giving in and through life.

The Latin temperament tends to announce and even impose a vision, and then judge and modify reality according to this vision. It has difficulty sometimes listening, reading and evaluating reality. The vision can become too theoretical. The Anglo-Saxon temperament is more pragmatic; it can listen and evaluate reality, but sometimes it lacks vision. A community needs both; it needs vision, but it also needs to listen and to read reality.

Today, more than ever, people need to understand what community is about – the laws of growth and of deepening in community, the nourishment that is needed and the dangers of community. There must be an intellectual stock-taking. Because we are in a world governed so much by the mass media and by a culture of success, pleasure and independence, people are unclear about the values of community. Many want community and a feeling of being together, but they refuse the demands of community life. They want both freedom and community; freedom to do just what they want when they want, *and* community, which implies certain structures and values. It's like wanting the cake and eating it too! People have to choose. But to be able to choose there has to be clarification.

This is very clear in regards to sexuality. In this area of life people

cannot do just what they want when they live in community. Community life implies a common vision of ethics, just as it implies a vision about wealth and the use of power. Some people want community without authority. This might be possible for a few months or years, if there are a few mature people in the community, but it is not possible when a crisis arises. So living in community implies a reflection on all these matters. People in community must reflect on their vision and their way of life; if they do not, then another vision will infiltrate their lives, maybe unconsciously.

In community there is always a danger of people remaining like children, too dependent on good parental figures. They get on with living, doing things and praying, but they do not reflect on what they are living. If people refuse this intellectual stock-taking, remaining only under 'the inspiration of the Spirit' or governed by emotional urges, then the community is in danger.

Of course we must remain like little children, filled with a sense of wonderment, but we must also be wise: wise in knowing how to govern community, how to deepen it and to protect the seed of love against the powers of evil, of seduction and of oppression, that want to crush it.

The more a community grows and puts down roots, the more it must discover its own deep meaning and own philosophy of life, which cannot be cut off from the fundamental questions of the world and of the Church. The more it lives authentic human relationships, and the more it becomes a place to live in rather than a gathering of 'doers', the more it must find answers to the fundamental questions of human life. It must give meaning to suffering and death, to healing and to wholeness, to the place of man and woman in society and in the world, and to sexuality, family and celibacy. It must be clear about the use of power, the role of authority, and about the meaning of growth to freedom and responsibility. It must have a deep sense of the place of God, prayer and religion in human existence. It must have a vision about poverty and wealth, and clarity about the relationship between love and competence.

A community must be aware of its place in the Church of today and in the world; it must be clear how it stands in regards to the terrible pains and injustices of the world. It must also know how it can respond to the cry and despair of the young. Communities must find symbols to express the meaning of these fundamental realities. We cannot grow together in community and deepen in our relationships without looking at these questions. Community traditions in some ways give answers to these questions, but we have also to try to understand intellectually the significance and deeper meaning of these traditions.

From monarchy to democracy

When a community starts, it is the founder who decides everything. But gradually brothers and sisters arrive and bonds are created. Then the founder asks their advice. It is no longer he, or she, who dictates what should be happening; he listens to others. A communal spirit is born. The founder begins to discover the gifts of each of the others. He discovers that others are more able than he is in certain ways, and that they have gifts which he doesn't. So he entrusts more and more to others, learning to die to himself so that the others can live more fully. He remains the link and the person other community members turn to, a co-ordinator who confirms the others in their responsibilities and ensures that the spirit and unity of the community is maintained. At moments of crisis, he will still be called on to assert his authority, because the ultimate responsibility rests with him; he must, when discipline is failing, recall the others to their responsibilities. His authority will become less visible, but will still be very present until the day he disappears and another takes his place. Then his task is done. His work will continue; his role has been to disappear.

There is an analogy with the authority of parents. At the start, they do everything for their children, but gradually they become friends with whom their children can discuss things; they can even become their children's children when they are old. Parents have to guard against a possessiveness which stifles the life that is grow-

ing in their children. In the same way, the founder of a community must learn to withdraw gradually and not to cling to his authority.

One of the important passages in a community is when the founder becomes really conscious that the community is not his or her project but the project of God. The founder is but an instrument of God and is called to disappear.

It is important that people in a community have their own projects and responsibilities which allow them to take initiatives. But it is important too that these projects are confirmed by the community, or that they spring from community discernment. Otherwise they will go against the flow of the community; they will be the projects of individuals who either want to prove that they know better than the community or else are saying they do not fit into it.

People in community sometimes believe that they know better than the others, or see themselves as 'saviours'. Community discernment implies that all members, or at least all those with responsibility, try together to discover its direction and the important things it is to do. The vital thing is that discernment is approached without passion, so that no one feels the need to convince others or to impose particular notions. If everyone listens to each other's ideas, the truth will gradually and calmly emerge. This can take a long time, but it is worth while, because once the decision has been made, each member of the community will have a personal commitment to the project.

Some communities have been founded by individuals who need to be leaders, to prove something, to create projects. Founders will always need help to avoid this trap and to clarify their own motives and to die to some of their own ideas. They should not be alone; it is better if a community is founded by two or three people who discern together and share responsibility from the start.

Otherwise founders are in danger of throwing themselves

entirely into their own creation; they do everything and become possessive of 'their' child. They can't bear criticism and listen only to those who agree with them – and they can always find people like that. They think that they alone are inspired and are prophetic. A community will suffocate if its founder stifles the intelligence of the people who have come to join it or mistrusts them and denies them any share in responsibility and creativity.

If people start a community in the desire to prove something through their 'child', there is an unhealthy pride in them which has to die. A community is there for people who live in it, not for its founder. Responsibility is a cross which the founder carries, but which must very quickly be shared so that all the members realise their own particular gift. If the founder doesn't learn to withdraw gradually, the community will either die or be obliged to reject the founder.

From time to time I meet people who want to create a community. After twenty-five years' experience of community life, I wouldn't advise anyone to do so of their own accord. (There are, of course, exceptions, founded on real signs from God.) I advise people instead to go and live in an existing community and then, when the moment is right, that community will send them to found another. If people are to create a community, they need a sense of belonging and a sense of having been sent. We need someone to confirm and support us, to direct and advise us. The first Christian communities were founded by people who were members of the community of apostles and who prayed at Pentecost with Mary the mother of Jesus. They were sent and confirmed by the apostles.

Openness to the neighbourhood and the world

Before starting a community, it is important to make contact with the village or the neighbourhood in which it is to be. Too many communities are born without these initial contacts and, if they welcome people who are handicapped or distressed, that can lead

to catastrophe. The neighbours reject them. The community, far from being a sign of hope, becomes an abscess. If the founders had taken time to explain their plans to the neighbours, they would have got a more understanding welcome. And if the community could have welcomed the handicapped people of the village, the community would have been better integrated in it. Time spent over several months creating contacts and forming bonds of friendship with the neighbours, before the community even starts, is never time wasted.

I speak from experience here, for at the beginning of l'Arche I made many mistakes. I welcomed more and more people from the psychiatric hospital; I was burning with zeal for them, and maybe angry about all the injustice that they had experienced. However, I was less aware of what the people in the village were experiencing as we opened new houses. Then, of course, the inevitable happened. The village people – at least some of them – got together and signed a petition against l'Arche. There were several months of tension and of pain which could have been avoided if I had worked more closely with the village people from the start.

For a community to become a sign, its neighbours must see it as bringing something positive to the neighbourhood or village. It is good to have someone in the community who can help people nearby who are old or ill; it is good for the community to be open to welcome people who suffer and are in need.

The more a community deepens and grows, the more integrated it must be in the neighbourhood. When it begins, a community is contained within the four walls of its house. But gradually it opens up to neighbours and friends. Some communities begin to panic when they feel that their neighbours are becoming committed to them; they are frightened of losing their identity, of losing control.

But isn't this what true expansion means? There are times when it is important to knock down the walls of a community. This demands that each person respect the other's commitment and that their rights and responsibilities are clearly explained. Each person must become responsible for the others in a specific way. Each must freely bring something to the others and true bonds must be

woven. This is how a small community can gradually become the yeast in the dough, a place of unity for all and between all.

As a community takes root in a neighbourhood and begins to grow, and as its neighbours become involved in it, it will inevitably become aware of social injustices which oppress people and prevent their growth, especially if they belong to disadvantaged minorities. And so the community might have to take a political stand. It will seek to help people and to modify laws and struggle against injustice. Perhaps it will become unpopular with the government, and the opposition parties will try to entice it to join their own political struggle. It is hard for a community in this position to find the middle road between two extremes.

Margarita Moyano, an Argentinian working with young people in Taizé and also on Argentinian evangelisation programmes, reminded us at l'Arche that a butterfly has to break the cocoon if it is to live, and that every child commits a violence when it is born. A new society cannot be brought to birth without some upheaval. But this must spring from, and reinforce, communion and trust.

A community gradually discovers, as it grows, that it is not there simply for itself. It belongs to humanity. It has received a gift which must bear fruit for all people. If it closes in on itself, it will suffocate. When it begins, a community is like a seed which must grow to become a tree giving abundant fruit, in which all the birds of the air can come to make their nests. It must open its arms wide and hold out its hands to give freely what it has freely received. Then seeds fall from the tree and new trees are born, and so life continues to flow and to grow; new communities are born.

A community must always remember that it is a sign and witness to all humankind. Its members must be faithful to each other if they are to grow. But they must also be faithful as a sign and source of hope for all humankind.

A community has to be apart from society and open to it at the same time. To the extent that its values are different from those of society, it must necessarily be apart from it. If it is too open, it will never keep and deepen its own values; it will have no identity or life of its own, and it will tend to seek a compromise with or be influenced by the spirit of the culture and the values of society. It will lose its freedom for truth.

However, if it is too enclosed, it will not grow and it will not see the true values which exist in society and in others outside it. It will become dogmatic: 'I'm right, the others are wrong.' It will become incapable of seeing its own darkness and flaws. A community is called to grow gradually in relationship with others, with its neighbours; each will help the other to grow. It is not a question of one being right and the other wrong; they are there to help each other.

There was a time, it seems, when the religious orders were too shut in on themselves; they were suffocating. They recognised this, and have become more open to society. But some, perhaps, have gone too fast. They discarded their traditional clothing so that they could be closer to people outside; but they threw off their traditions and lost a sense of the initial inspiration as well. They lost their identity; they lost community.

The time when a community feels it is dying is not the time to change externals, like the rule or the habit. If it does this, then there is nothing left to hold people together. This is the time for inner renewal, for a renewed trust in personal relationships and prayer; it is the time to stay close to the poor and those in distress. When the inner life is strong and when love is truly the guiding spirit, then we can reduce the externals, but not before.

Times of trial: a step towards growth

No community grows without times of trial and difficulty; times of poverty, persecution, tensions, and internal and external struggles; times which destroy its balance and reveal its weakness; times of difficulty which are inevitable when a new step has to be taken.

Creating a community means struggling against all sorts of things. But once the community is launched, energies may evaporate and people may seek distractions; they may compromise with other values. This can be very marked in a therapeutic community. At the start, it accepts people who are difficult or depressed, people who break windows. Then gradually everyone settles down and if 'window-breakers' arrive, they are unacceptable. The energies which used to be there to tackle all sorts of problems and to deal with difficult people have dissipated. A time comes when we feel too comfortable together, and that complacency signals a decline in the quality of unity. That is why times of trial are important for a community: they force people to look at themselves and at what is happening in the community, and then to reassess their goals and life of prayer; they oblige them to refind the quality of unity and the energy to face difficulties.

A community which is growing rich and secure, and seeks only to defend its goods and its reputation is dying. It has ceased to grow in love. A community is alive when it is poor and its members feel they have to work together and remain united and dependent upon each other, if only to ensure that they can all eat tomorrow!

It is often when a community is on the verge of breaking up that people agree to talk to each other and look each other in the eye. This is because they realise that it is a question of life or death, that everything will collapse if they do not do something decisive and radically different. Often we have to come to the edge of the precipice before we reach the moment of truth and recognise our own poverty and need of each other, and cry to God for help.

But times of trial will only unite a community if there is enough trust in it to contain these crises. If one member of the community is killed or very seriously injured in an accident, small personal frictions and interests disappear. A shock like that deepens unity and brings us up against essentials. A new solidarity is born, which enables us better to bear trials and overcome them.

The times of trial which destroy a superficial security often free new energies which had until then been hidden. Hope is reborn from the wound.

Tensions

Communities need tensions if they are to grow and deepen. Tensions come from conflicts within each person – conflicts born out of a refusal of personal and community growth, conflicts between individual egoisms, conflicts arising from a diminishing *gratuité*, from a clash of temperaments and from individual psychological difficulties. These are natural tensions. Anguish is the normal reaction to being brought up against our own limitations and darkness, to the discovery of our own deep wound. Tension is the normal reaction to responsibilities we find hard because they make us feel insecure. We all weep and grieve inwardly at the successive deaths of our own interests. It is normal for us to rebel, to be frightened and feel tense when we are faced with difficult people who are not yet free from their own fears and aggression. It is normal that our own reserves of *gratuité* run low from time to time, because we are tired or are going through personal tensions or sufferings. There are a thousand reasons for tension.

And each of them brings the whole community, as well as each individual member of it, face to face with its own poverty, inability to cope, weariness, aggression and depression. These can be important times if we realise that the treasure of the community is in danger. When everything is going well, when the community feels it is living successfully, its members tend to let their energies dissipate, and to listen less carefully to each other. Tensions bring people back to the reality of their helplessness; obliging them to spend more time in prayer and dialogue, to work patiently to overcome the crisis and refind lost unity; making them understand that the community is more than just a human reality, that it also needs the spirit of God if it is to live and deepen. Tensions often mark the necessary step towards a greater unity as well, by revealing flaws which demand re-evaluation, reorganisation and a greater

humility. Sometimes the brutal explosion of one tension simply reveals another which is latent. It is only when tensions come to a head like a boil that we can try to treat the infection at its roots. I am told that there is a Chinese word for 'crisis' which means 'opportunity and danger'. Every tension, every crisis can become a source of new life if we approach it wisely, or it can bring death and division.

Tensions and stress come from a lack of balance between difficulties that have to be faced and the support or nourishment that is provided. If the difficulties are great and the support minimal, then people will experience great inner stress. This will come out not only in anger and irrational behaviour, which are ways of letting off steam, but also in a great need for compensatory things such as affection, alcohol, coffee, etc. In times of stress people need to be well accompanied if their inner pain is to become a cry for prayer and for God and for wise help, and not just for human comfort and compensations, or a return to values that had been left behind on entering the community. Tensions can break people or bring them back to essentials.

There is nothing more prejudicial to community life than to mask tensions and pretend they do not exist, or to hide them behind a polite façade and flee from reality and dialogue. A tension or difficulty can signal the approach of a new grace of God. But it has to be looked at wisely and humanly. There can be a danger of spiritualising a tension too quickly instead of talking about it with a third person or an external authority.

Tensions and times of trial often come when the community has lost its sense of what is essential, its initial vision, or when it has been unfaithful to the call of Christ and the poor. These tensions then, are a call to a new fidelity. If the community is to refine peace, it must recognise its shortcomings, ask God's forgiveness and beg him to give it new light and strength.

We must accept tensions as an everyday fact, while at the same time trying to resolve them through a search for a greater depth and for truth. And resolution does not mean hasty confrontation. It is not by making a tension explode in the presence of all the people concerned that we will resolve it. People are not necessarily helped to overcome their limitations, fears, egoism, jealousy and inability to enter into dialogue simply by being made conscious of them. In fact, this can sometimes shut people off in even greater anguish, close to despair.

People can generally only become conscious of their limitations if at the same time they are given the strength to overcome these by being helped to discover their own capacities for love, goodness and positive action, and to regain confidence in themselves and the Holy Spirit. People cannot accept their own fears if they do not at the same time feel loved, respected and trusted. They cannot overcome their difficulties and inner darkness if they have not been helped to discover that they are lovable. This is the role of people with responsibility: to perceive the beauty and value of people who are tense and aggressive and to help others in the community to do the same. Then those people, knowing that they are not rejected, but accepted and loved, will gradually be able to allow their positive energies to flourish in the service of others.

And when the fears diminish, when people begin to listen to each other without prejudice and rejection, and to understand why others act the way they do, the tensions disappear. It is a question of accepting others and loving them with all their fears and aggression. This mutual acceptance, which can gradually become a true welcoming of the other, takes time and patience. It can involve many laborious meetings and sensitivity in dialogue, as well as silent, peaceful and tender acceptance.

Tensions should neither be hidden nor be brought prematurely to a head. They should be taken on with a great deal of sensitivity and prayerfulness, trust and hope, knowing that there is bound to be suffering. They should be approached with deep understanding and patience, with neither panic nor naive optimism, but with a

realism born of a willingness to listen and a desire for truth even if it is challenging and it hurts.

There are always subjective and emotional elements in situations of tension, but there are also elements of objective truth and real differences of opinion. One must not hide the other. It is dangerous to refuse to look at the truth of a situation that is disturbing, under the excuse that the other person has emotional problems. In the same way, it is wrong not to accept the fact that people can use differences of opinion to express their emotional problems.

Tensions may arise from the fact that some people are too set in their opinions. With time, these people become more open and discover that reality has other dimensions. Their vision is modified and the tensions disappear. That is why we have to be patient with tensions and not always seek a speedy resolution. If we act too quickly, we may push people to exaggerate their position instead of becoming more flexible.

Other tensions in a community come when it contains apparently opposed values. The attempt to harmonise these is the genius of community. We want l'Arche to be a Christian community, but also to work within the structures demanded by the state. We have to be prayerful and loving; we must also be competent. Some people hold to one set of values more strongly than to others, and that is good. But this can sometimes bring tensions between people. These tensions diminish as the community and its members become more mature and reach a certain wisdom.

Yet other tensions come from the fact that the community is evolving and new gifts or realities are appearing, which will gradually demand a new balance or even an evolution in the community's structures. It is vital that we do not panic when faced with these tensions, which cannot always be verbalised. We have to know how to wait for the moment when these questions can be discussed in peace and truth.

The Holy Spirit is always making the new out of the old. I am amazed as I read the history of the Church with its pains and struggles. Always new things unfolding: new prophets, new saints arising to announce the old truths, but in new ways. There is always a tension in the Church between the old and the new: supporters of the old are fearful of the new and see it as a threat, as dangerous and wrong; they condemn it and sometimes even destroy it. The initiators of new ways can also be angry with the old, rejecting it as wrong, as corrupt or evil and then breaking away from it. Similar tensions exist in every community, as each one evolves according to the inspirations of the Spirit and the needs of the time but is reluctant to change.

Leaders can be crucified by these tensions. They are pulled in two directions and often criticised and condemned by both sides. They must try to see the truth in each position, keeping their eyes on essentials, discerning what is prophetic in the new from what is just human desire for change; discerning also what is true in the old and must be retained from what is just fear of change and of insecurity. Leaders need to be patient and to wait until the light of the Holy Spirit is given, and they must call others to be patient.

I am touched by the way tensions in community are so often a gift and a grace. Some tensions are like the pains of childbirth. Different people, holding on to different aspects of the vision which seem to be in contradiction with each other, appear to be opposing one another, but this is not so. It means that a new light or a new reality or new structures, which can harmonise the two, have not yet been given by God. People must continue to bear the pain of these tensions and wait for the resurrection, as Mary waited on that Holy Saturday. The pain keeps each one little and humble; it keeps them calling out to God in prayer; it keeps them also struggling to understand and to love truth over and above their own ideas.

Individual growth towards love and wisdom is slow. A community's growth is even slower. Members of a community have

to be friends of time. They have to learn that many things will resolve themselves if they are given enough time. It can be a great mistake to want, in the name of clarity and truth, to push things too quickly to a resolution. Some people enjoy confrontation and highlighting divisions. This is not always healthy. It is better to be a friend of time. But clearly too, people should not pretend that problems don't exist by refusing to listen to the rumblings of discontent; they must be aware of the tensions and then learn to work on them at the right moment.

In many communities, there is someone who is more fragile or difficult than the others, who seems to provoke all their aggression and become the butt of their blame, criticism and mockery. All members of a community, in some corner of themselves, feel frustrated and guilty. These feelings can very quickly be felt as a sort of anguish – a sense that we are not comfortable with ourselves. So we project our own limitations and cowardice on to someone weaker than ourselves. This 'scapegoat' for personal and collective anguish can be found in many communities.

Once the aggression, bullying or rejection are unleashed, they are not easy to control. And yet, for the health of the community, they have to be deflected from their target, because no community can live while one of its members is being persecuted. So another person, either consciously, or unconsciously under the inspiration of the Spirit, must absorb the aggression. They may do it by playing the fool. Then the aggression is gradually transformed and the crackle of tension is dissipated in the light of laughter.

Many tensions arise from a refusal to accept that authority has its failings. We are all looking for the ideal mother or father and when we do not find them, we are deeply disappointed. These are good tensions: each person must discover that the people who carry authority are also human beings who can make mistakes, without losing confidence in authority itself. Each person has to grow in maturity to find a true and free relationship with authority. And

people with authority have to be ready to evolve and to be less afraid.

Sending people away

Some communities break up under the pressure of internal schism and disruption. It is striking how quickly, after a time of grace and unity, the first Christian communities became divided and partisan. Some, for instance, took Paul's side; others supported Apollos (1 Cor. 3). St John talks of these deep divisions in his first letter. There had been real splits in the community; some people left, refusing to be in communion with the others or to accept the doctrine of the apostles or, in particular, the authority of John (1 John 2:19).

Judas himself lived with the eleven and with Jesus, but his heart was full of malice and jealousy, and long before Satan led him to the final act of betrayal, his heart had become separated from the hearts of the others. Jesus had called him, but very quickly – and for reasons we do not know – he decided to take advantage of his position to further his own glory and personal plan. He did not want to serve Jesus with the other apostles; he wanted to use Jesus for his own ambitions.

At what moment should someone whose heart seems completely separated from the community, who is sowing disruption and trying to use weaker people for personal and destructive ends, be sent away? These people, whose hearts are filled with jealousy, are often extremely intelligent, with a considerable ability to perceive and exploit failings in legitimate authority or the community's life. So they can appear clairvoyant, and to have the ability to redress certain injustices. They can attract some of the weaker people or some who are dissatisfied with community life; they know how to create divisions, sow confusion and sap authority. It seems unreasonable to let them go on dividing the community, especially when all attempts at dialogue with them have failed. But to send them away, especially when they have been in the community for a long time, also seems unbearable.

Jesus is clear:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. (Matt. 18:15-17)

Only the people with responsibility in the community and its long-term members can decide that someone must go. But in doing this, they too must recognise their share of guilt. Perhaps they did not dare to take the person in hand and set up a dialogue as soon as the first inkling of divisions appeared; perhaps they let the situation drag on, hoping naively that everything would sort itself out. Perhaps they even exploited the disruptive individual because they needed him or her for a specific job. But a belated recognition of its mistakes should not inhibit the community from acting firmly. If someone is causing dissension among the members of the community, they must be asked to leave.

At the same time, authority must not be too quick to send people away simply because they dispute it. It is often a refusal to listen to these first disagreements which throws up a barrier of pride. If the points had been heard, if the weaknesses and mistakes of the community had been admitted and if something had been done to try to set them right, perhaps the disputes would have disappeared, or have been converted into positive energy for reform.

A community should not send people away simply because they are disturbing or have a difficult character, or seem to be in the wrong place, or are challenging it. The only people who should be sent away are those who have already cut themselves off from the community in their own hearts, who pose a real threat by influencing others against legitimate authority and sapping confidence in it. These people divide the community and deflect it from its first goals.

In this difficult area of division and schism, there can be no rules except those of patience, vigilance and firmness, and of respect for

the community's structures and insistence on dialogue. In fact, as long as people are integrated into a group and have no opportunity to spread discord, there is no reason to send them away. It is rather a question of carrying them, bearing with them and helping them in whatever ways we can. All members of the community must be on their guard against sowing discord, whether consciously or unconsciously. All of them must constantly seek to be instruments of unity. That doesn't, of course, mean that they must always agree with the people at the head of the community. But they must confront them in truth. None of us who lives in community is free from elements of pride, born of bruised susceptibility, which can, if we are not careful, invade our whole being.

It takes much time and wisdom to build a community. But it can take very little time to break and destroy a community if a proud and destructive person seeking power is allowed to become a member, more out of a need of the community to find someone competent than through a real discernment. If there are no strong people in the community to confront him or her, then it is likely that the community will break up and die.

We must never forget that Satan is the adversary of love and communion. He hates communities where people are growing in love and in the knowledge of Jesus. He does everything he can to sow discord, to create tensions and divisions, and finally to destroy community.

The outsider's eye, or external authority

I realise more and more that no community, whether large or small, can cope on its own. Very often its members are not able to resolve their tensions; they are frequently taken up too much by immediate questions and do not have the distance necessary in order to see what is really happening to the community. They need a sympathetic outsider, who is competent and carries a real authority, to help them grasp the way the community is evolving

and find new structures for the different stages of growth. Every community seems to need regular visits from someone who listens and asks the right questions about their vision and their life in community, and to whom all its members feel they can talk. Above all there is need for someone who can counsel its leaders, so helping the community to evolve and discover the message of God which is hidden in the tensions.

This outside eye needs to be someone with common sense and an understanding of people, wise in human relationships and community; someone who is committed to the community's fundamental goals and respects its structures.

This person must also help the community to evaluate itself. From time to time, and very freely, we should all evaluate our community life, to see where we should be putting more effort, and sense if we are losing our creativity and falling into habit and routine. We have to evaluate our meetings to see if they are really nourishing and living, or whether they are simply a waste of time. It is so much easier to evaluate with the help of an outside eye.

Yves Beriot, a French educator, has said how important it is for people to visit communities and act as sponges which soak up the anguish. All communities feel far from their ideal, and more or less unable to cope with the violence and anguish of the people they welcome. We are all far from the ideal of the Gospel and this causes a latent anguish and guilt which sap our creative energies and can lead to sadness and despair.

This outsider can also be the community's memory bank. It is always important to have someone coming in who can ask, 'Do you remember?' and reminds us of our origins, history and traditions, of joyful times as well as sad ones. If a community is to be able to make plans for the future, it must have assimilated its past and have a sense of its own tradition. That is one of the reasons why the external authority must not change too often; continuity is important.

The role of this outside authority is a delicate one. It is to see as clearly as possible the positive forces in the community and help them to grow; it is also to point out the negative ones. The

outside authority cannot tell people what to do but gives advice, suggestions and ideas for the future. The outside authority encourages, helps to renew hope and take the heat out of things. It must be realised that this role is a passing one; it leaves and the community continues on with the people that are there.

The outside eye is particularly important during the dark winters of community, to call the community to trust, to patience and to prayer.

The external authority has a role also in relation to the leaders; to confirm, give support and encourage them; but also to supervise and challenge them when necessary. It should also be able to intervene firmly and clearly when leaders are incompetent and unable to maintain the spirit and goals of the community or if they start using the community for their own personal interests, or if injustices are being committed.

This external authority is necessary because human beings are weak and fallible, and the forces of evil outside and even within the community are such that if there is no external authority, the community could sooner or later break up or die, or could commit real injustices towards people.

For some therapeutic communities the guarantor may be the state, which has a system of control and evaluation; it can also be a board of directors. Many Christian communities are linked to a bishop. It is he or his representative who approves the community, its charter and constitution; he is its guarantor. Other communities are linked to an authority born out of a network of sister-communities; the person is sometimes called a provincial, a regional superior or servant or a co-ordinator.

I am rather concerned about communities without any traditions which refuse to accept any external authority. They will not outlive their founder for long and, if there is no external control at all, the founder will be in danger of making some serious mistakes.

Growth in individuals and growth in community

Each member of a community who grows in love and wisdom helps the growth of the whole community. Each person who refuses to grow, or is afraid to go forward, inhibits the community's growth. All the members of a community are responsible for their own growth and that of the community as a whole.

Human growth is to do with integrating our capacity for action with our heart. Too often, action springs from fear of relationships, of our own vulnerability, or of love; it comes from fear of dependence, of sexuality and of our own deep and hidden self. Action is too often a flight or a desire to prove something.

When we are at peace, when we have accepted our own deep wounds and weakness, when we are in touch with our own heart and capacity for tenderness, then actions flow from our true selves, and become a source of growth.

True growth comes as members of the community integrate into their hearts and minds the vision and spirit of the community. In that way they choose the community as it is and become responsible for it. When people have not integrated the vision into themselves they tend to imitate others or they are just wanting a place where they can belong. This is dangerous and can prevent growth to wholeness.

Some people come to our l'Arche communities to help people with a handicap. That is good. Others come because they themselves want to grow and sense that they need others to help, stimulate and encourage them; they see the community as the place of their growth and apprenticeship. That is better, as long as they realise that their growth is linked to the growth of others.

Those who come because they feel they have something to offer to people who are weak and poor, often get a shock when they start to become conscious of the weaknesses and limitations in themselves and the other assistants. It is always easier to accept the weakness of people with a handicap – we are there precisely because we expect it – than our own weakness which often takes us by surprise! We want to see only good qualities in ourselves

and other assistants. Growth begins when we start to accept our own weakness.

I am always moved when I speak with men and women who have a problem with alcohol. The urge for drink, which is psychological but also biological, is so great in them. And this urge frequently springs from a habit they adopted to fill a terrible emptiness in them and to calm the pain of anguish, loneliness and guilt. But this addiction to a form of sedative is found in all of us. Some addictions can be seen as destructive, like drink or drugs. Other addictions are less obviously destructive, but they are destructive nonetheless. These can be seen in people who calm their anguish by becoming workaholics or by excessive watching of television, or through possessive relationships or compulsive needs, such as always to be in the forefront and applauded. We can all be addicted to something which is disguised in the clothes of virtue and goodness, but which in reality masks and calms anguish. We are all tempted to relieve our inner pain by letting ourselves be governed by these things. We all have difficulty resisting them, accepting the pain of emptiness and anguish, and walking in truth towards healing, towards communion with God and towards compassion for others.

Some people run from the pain of feeling unlovable by 'doing things' which avoid involvement in deep relationships. But others on the contrary come to community and seek consolation from this pain by responding to whatever demands are made of them. Unconsciously there is a thought pattern: 'If I satisfy your need, then you, or the community, or God, will be grateful, will appreciate my existence, will love me.'

Ultimately this can never bring true fulfilment and true growth. It is important that in communities where the needs are often limitless, we are attentive to this false response, so easily disguised by generosity and goodness. We must help each person to live more and more clearly and deeply from an inner confidence of being loved by God just as they are.

I sometimes tend to behave as if everyone could live in community and grow through their own efforts towards universal love. With age and experience of community life, perhaps too with a growing faith, I'm becoming conscious of the limitations and weaknesses of human energy, the forces of egoism and the deep psychological wounds – fear, aggression and self-assertion – which govern human life and raise up all the barriers which exist between people. We can only emerge from behind these barriers if the Spirit of God touches us, breaks down the barriers and puts us on the road to healing.

Jesus was sent by the Father not to judge us and even less to condemn us to remain in the prisons, limitations and dark places of our beings, but to forgive and free us, by planting the seeds of the Spirit in us. To grow in love is to allow this Spirit of Jesus to grow in us.

Growth takes on another dimension when we allow Jesus to penetrate us, to give us new life and new energy.

The hope is not in our own efforts to love. It is not in psychoanalysis which tries to throw light on the knots and blocks of our life, nor in a more equitable reorganisation of the political and economic structures which have their effects on our personal lives. All this is perhaps necessary. But true growth comes from God, when we cry to him from the depths of the abyss to let his Spirit penetrate us. Growth in love is a growth in the Spirit. The stages through which we must pass in order to grow in love are the stages through which we must pass to become more totally united to God.

If we are to grow in love, the prisons of our egoism must be unlocked. This implies suffering, constant effort and repeated choices. To reach maturity in love, to carry the cross of responsibility, we have to get beyond the enthusiasms, the utopias and the naiveties of adolescence. And during this growth we need a friend, a guide, a wise counsellor – someone who accompanies us along the road and through the passages of pain.³

3 The whole question of accompaniment is treated in chapter 7.

People in community often ask how they can know if they and it are growing. St Paul gives a clear indication in his Epistle to the Corinthians (ch. 13). Love is not heroic nor extraordinary acts; it is not speaking in tongues, prophesying, knowing all the mysteries and all about science, or even having extraordinary faith, giving all one's goods to the poor or being martyred. Love is being patient, rendering service, not being jealous or proud, not bragging all the time about oneself and exaggerating one's own qualities. Love is doing nothing which bruises others; it is putting the interests of others above our own. It is not being irritable, bitter, aggressive, or searching for the evil in others; it is not rejoicing in injustice but seeking the truth in all things.

And in his letter to Galatians (ch. 5) St Paul says that growth in love is growth in joy and patience, goodness, generosity, fidelity, tenderness and self-control. It is the opposite of all our tendencies to division – hatred, quarrelling, jealousy, rage, disputes, dissension, schism, desire and of all those dark tendencies which lead us to fornication, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, orgies and gluttony.

Perhaps the essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience: a recognition that we, others, and the whole community take time to grow. Nothing is achieved in a day. If we are to live in community, we have to be friends of time.

And the friend of time doesn't spend all day saying: 'I haven't got time.' He doesn't fight with time. He accepts it and cherishes it.

Losing illusions

The danger for any community and for every person is to live in illusions. We all do that as we shut ourselves off from others. A community that is closed off from others, lives in the illusion that it alone has the truth; or maybe it is fearful of any kind of change or challenge or of being seen as it is, in all its poverty. The leaders refuse to listen to others; they find all sorts of religious reasons and signs to enhance their belief that they alone are filled with the

Spirit and are in direct communication with God. That is perhaps an extreme situation; but in all of us and in every community, there is the fear of challenge; and the danger of covering up tensions and the things that are not going well, or at least refusing to look at them and to confront them.

'Truth is reality,' writes Scott Peck:

That which is false is unreal. The more clearly we see the reality of the world, the better equipped we are to deal with the world. The less clearly we see the reality of the world – the more our minds are befuddled by falsehood, misperceptions and illusion – the less able we will be to determine correct courses of action and make wise decisions. . . .⁴

Truth or reality is avoided when it is painful. We can revise our maps [i.e. our own course of action] only when we have the discipline to overcome that pain. To have such discipline we must be totally dedicated to truth. That is to say that we must always hold truth, as best we can determine it, to be more important, more vital to one's self-interest than our comfort. . . . A life of total dedication to truth also means a life of willingness to be personally challenged . . . but the tendency to avoid challenge is so omnipresent in human beings that it can properly be considered as a characteristic of human nature.⁵

One of the most important things for growth in people and in communities is precisely this dedication to truth, even (and maybe especially) if it hurts. There is no growth when we live in falsehood and illusion; when we are frightened to let the truth be uncovered and seen by ourselves and by others. So often we hide our fears, our injustices, our incompetence, our hypocrisy. We can hide behind religious rules, as did the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We must open ourselves up to the truth and let it be revealed, even if it shows our intrinsic poverty and sinfulness. And then let us cry out to Jesus, the Saviour, who will send us his Spirit and guide us, and forgive us. Only then can the truth make us free.

4 M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1978), p. 44.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.

Peter went through four crises while following Jesus. I imagine it was a crisis when Jesus called him: part of him must have regretted leaving his family and his trade. But his love for Jesus and his hope enabled him to get over this. Then there was the crisis when he discovered that Jesus was not as he would have wanted him. He would have preferred a Jesus who was prophetic and messianic, who didn't insist on washing the disciples' feet, who didn't speak of dying. The greatest crisis was when Jesus became weak and died. Then, Peter denied him – and that was the crisis when he lost all the illusions about himself.

These are the four great crises of community life. The first – which is certainly the least hard – comes when we arrive. There are always parts of us which cling to the values we have left behind. The second is the discovery that the community is not as perfect as we had thought, that it has its weaknesses and flaws. The ideal and our illusions crumble; we are faced with reality. The third is when we feel misunderstood and even rejected by the community, when, for example, we are not elected to a position of responsibility, or do not get a job we had hoped for. And the fourth is the hardest: our disappointment with ourselves because of all the anger, jealousies, and frustrations that boil up in us.

If we are to become totally integrated into a community, we must know how to pass through these crises. They are all new deepenings – movements towards inner freedom. They all imply the losing of illusions and the gradual welcoming of reality as it is.

Losing illusions involves much pain and grieving. We all live more or less on illusions which protect our vulnerability. When these come crumbling down, we are faced with a terrible emptiness; this is rather like death. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross marks the stages before acceptance of death: refusal, revolt, bargaining, and depression. The grieving process can be a long one. But when it is over, we are reborn in truth. And the truth always sets us free.

To grow is to learn to die. Is not this the ultimate meaning of our lives? By the age of twenty-four, each one of us loses daily 100,000 cells in the brain that are not replaced. Fortunately, we

have a lot of cells! As we grow, we leave behind us many things. As an adult, we must no longer be attached to childhood ways; we have to learn to be responsible. When married, we lose the freedom of a single person. Ageing, we lose capacities, health and responsibilities. If we spend time weeping over the past, we become imprisoned in that past. We must certainly grieve what we have lost, but we must live freely the new realities of the present and we must wait in hope for new life. And so each one of us will make the final passage of death, not clinging to life, not weeping with guilt because of misspent lives, but trusting, moving forward, waiting for that new gift which we will welcome: the embrace of the eternal.

People are sometimes frightened of following Jesus because they are frightened of *losing* things. To renounce certain values and certain goods that apparently bring human fulfilment is terribly difficult. Many today would rather not choose to follow him. But Jesus tells us (Mark 10: 28–31) that if we do accept the renunciation of father, mother, children, brothers, sisters and land, we will receive these again a hundred-fold, with persecutions, in this life – and in the next, eternal life. That's a good bet! But it calls for belief.

It was easy for Peter to follow Jesus when he was doing miracles and other wonderful things. Then Jesus appeared truly as the Messiah who would give back to Israel the dignity of the chosen people after so many years of humiliation under Roman rule. It is easy to enter a flourishing community that is doing wonderful things. It was more difficult for Peter to follow Jesus when he was beaten and had lost. It is more difficult to remain in a community when it is poor, broken and humiliated. It is *never* easy to lose or to die. And yet, the mystery of growth for a Christian is to accept the pain of littleness and humiliation. It is then that we truly live the mystery of our faith; it is then that the power of God becomes manifest.

It is terrible to see enthusiastic young people becoming disillusioned, wounded and cynical after a few years of community life where they felt neither welcomed nor understood. After that bad experience they can lose all taste for giving, and shut themselves off in political movements or the illusions of psychoanalysis. That doesn't mean that either politics or psychoanalysis are unimportant. But it is sad when people are totally shut up in them because they have been disappointed or have not accepted their own limitations. There are false prophets in communities who attract and stimulate the enthusiastic, but who through lack of wisdom or pride lead young people towards disappointment. The world of community can be full of illusions. There are many sects that attract young people, and it is not always easy to distinguish what is true from what is false, or to sense if the good grain will flourish or be stifled by the weeds. Those who are thinking of founding communities should surround themselves with people who are wise and know how to discern. I ask forgiveness of all those who came to my own community or others of l'Arche, full of enthusiasm, and who felt deceived by our lack of openness, our blocks, our lack of truth and our pride.

People who enter into a covenant and choose community life are in danger of losing within a few years the eye of the child and the openness of the adolescent. They are at risk of shutting themselves in on their own territory. They tend to want to possess their function and their community. How, once we are committed to community life, can we ensure that we never stop growing and loving? How can we ensure that we keep walking towards an ever greater human insecurity? Once we have taken root in the ground, we have to continue to grow and this means being pruned, cut back, and sometimes even broken so that we can go on bearing fruit.

There can be danger that we define ourselves entirely by community activity and the responsibilities this brings. We can become hyperactive and not know either how to stop or how to relax. By doing things for other people all the time, and devoting ourselves to them, we become more and more identified with our function

and the privileges this brings; then we cling jealously to these. We have a terrible unconscious fear of letting go because that implies dying and confrontation with the emptiness inside us. Those who carry heavy responsibilities in a community must look at their own inner life: are they blotting it out, or dispersing it in activity, or are they truly trying to nurture it? It is too easy to live on the periphery of ourselves, using our superficial energies instead of constantly working to deepen our inwardness and our contact with the silent places at the heart of our being where God lives.

The more we become people of action and responsibility in our community, the more we must become people of contemplation. If we do not nurture our deep emotional life in prayer hidden in God, if we do not spend time in silence, and if we do not know how to take time to live from the presence and gentleness of our brothers and sisters, we risk becoming embittered. It is only to the extent that we nurture our own hearts that we can keep inner freedom. People who are hyperactive, fleeing from their deep selves and their anguish live on illusions. They quickly become tyrannical, and their exercise of responsibility becomes intolerable, creating nothing but conflict.

The second call

The first call is frequently to follow Jesus or to prepare ourselves to do wonderful and noble things for the Kingdom. We are appreciated and admired by family, by friends or by the community. The second call comes later, when we accept that we cannot do big or heroic things for Jesus; it is a time of renunciation, humiliation and humility. We feel useless; we are no longer appreciated. If the first passage is made at high noon, under a shining sun, the second call is often made at night. We feel alone and are afraid because we are in a world of confusion. We begin to doubt the commitment we made in the light of day. We seem deeply broken in some way. But this suffering is not useless. Through the renunciation we can reach a new wisdom of love. It

is only through the pain of the cross that we discover what the resurrection means.

We all carry our own deep wound, which is the wound of our loneliness. We find it hard to be alone, and we try to flee from this in hyperactivity, through television and in a million other ways. Some people think their wound of loneliness will be healed if they come into community. But they will be disappointed. While they are young, they can hide their disappointment behind the dynamic of generosity; they can flee from the present by projecting themselves into the future, into a hope that things will be better tomorrow. But towards the age of forty, the future is past and there are no more great projects; the wound is still there and we can become depressed, especially as we are now carrying all the guilt and apathy of the past. Then we have to realise that this wound is inherent in the human condition and that what we have to do is to walk with it instead of fleeing from it. We cannot accept it until we discover that we are loved by God just as we are, and that the Holy Spirit, in a mysterious way, is living at the centre of the wound.

At the end of a few years in community people often go through a crisis which has to do with this feeling of loneliness. They have believed, more or less consciously, that the community would suffice them in every way. But their wound remains and they feel deceived. Some may think then that the answer is in marriage, hoping that this will heal their wound. But there they are at risk of being disappointed again. No one can really enter marriage unless they are trying to accept their wound and unless they are determined to live for the other.

Old age is the most precious time of life, the one nearest eternity. There are two ways of growing old. There are old people who are anxious and bitter, living in the past and illusion, who criticise everything that goes on around them. Young people are repulsed by them; they are shut away in their sadness and loneliness, shrivelled up in themselves. But there are also old people with a child's heart, who have used their freedom from function and responsibility to find a new youth. They have the wonder of a child, but

the wisdom of maturity as well. They have integrated their years of activity and so can live without being attached to power. Their freedom of heart and their acceptance of their limitations and weakness makes them people whose radiance illuminates the whole community. They are gentle and merciful, symbols of compassion and forgiveness. They become a community's hidden treasures, sources of unity and life. They are true contemplatives at the heart of community.

Prayer, service and community life

Some communities start by serving the poor. When they begin, their members are full of generosity – though sometimes a bit aggressive in respect of the rich – and have a rather utopian ideal. Gradually, they discover the need for prayer and an inner life; they realise that their generosity is being burned up and that they are in danger of becoming a collection of hyperactives who put all their energy into external things.

Other communities start with prayer – like many of the communities of the charismatic renewal. But gradually they discover the need to serve the poor and to develop real commitment to them. Opening to God in adoration and opening to the poor in welcome and service are the two poles of a community's growth, and signs of its health. And the community itself must grow towards a stronger sense of its own identity, like a body in which every member can exercise its gift and be recognised for it.

If those communities that started by serving the poor do not discover the deepening of prayer and the bonds of love flowing into celebration, they risk becoming a militant group struggling for justice. If those communities that started with prayer and adoration do not discover the waters of compassion flowing from them upon those in pain, they risk becoming legalistic and sterile.

The three elements of community – prayer, or communion with the Father through and in Jesus, presence and service to the poor, and the consciousness of being bonded in a single body – are always necessary for a community to be healthy and to grow.

Jesus called each apostle into a personal relationship of love with him, then he bonded them together in community and then he sent them out to announce *good news* to the poor.

From doing to listening

Communities which start by serving the poor must gradually discover the gifts brought by those they serve. The communities start in generosity; they must grow in the ability to listen. In the end, the most important thing is not to do things for people who are poor and in distress, but to enter into relationship with them, to be with them and help them find confidence in themselves and discover their own gifts. It isn't a question of arriving in a slum with the money to build a dispensary and a school. It is more a question of spending time with the people who live in the slum to help them discover their own needs and then together building what they want. Perhaps these buildings won't be as beautiful. But they will be more used and loved, because they will belong to everyone and not just to a foreigner who means well. It will take a long time. But all service which is really human takes time. The promise of Jesus is to help us discover that the poor are a source of life and not just objects of our charity. If we are close to them we will be renewed in love and in faith.

Some communities grow by listening more to the needs of their members than to those they are serving. This growth sometimes focuses mainly on the material: better buildings where everyone has more comfort.

Other communities will grow by listening to the cry of the poor. Most of the time this leads them to remain poor themselves, so that they can be closer to the poor people and in communion with them. That does not lessen the fact that the members of a community need to be cared for; they need to have what is necessary for their well-being so that they can be good instruments of God's love and be prepared for the long-haul.

When a community lets itself be guided in its growth by the cry of the poor and their needs, it will walk in the desert and it

will be insecure. But it is assured of the promised land – not the one of security, but the one of peace and love. And it will be a community which is always alive.

Signs of sickness and health in community

When people refuse to come to meetings and there is no longer a place of dialogue, when they are afraid to say what they think and the group is dominated by a single strong personality who inhibits the others, when people flee into outside activities instead of taking part in community ones, then the community is in danger. It is no longer home for the people who live there, but an hotel.

When the members of a community are no longer happy to live, pray and work together, but are constantly looking for outside compensations, when they talk all the time about themselves and their problems instead of their ideal of life and their response to the cry of the poor, these are signs of death.

When a community is healthy, it acts like a magnet. Young people commit themselves; visitors are happy to come there. When a community starts to be frightened of welcoming visitors and new people, when it starts to lay down so many restrictions and ask for so many guarantees that practically no one qualifies to come, when it starts to reject its own weakest and most difficult members – the old and the sick – these are bad signs. Then it is no longer a community; it is becoming an efficient place of work.

It's a bad sign too when a community tries to structure itself to ensure total security for the future, when it has a lot of money in the bank. Gradually, it will eliminate all possible risk. It will no longer need God's help. It will cease to be poor.

The health of a community can be measured by the quality of its welcome of the unexpected visitor or someone who is poor, by the joy and simplicity of relationships between its members, by its creativity in response to the cry of the poor. But it is measured above all by the ardour for and fidelity to its own essential goals: its presence to God and the poor.

It is important that communities discover both the signs of

disruption and the signs of deepening. From time to time they should set themselves to find out where they are. It is not always easy, for they have to learn to go through times of trial. But there are signs of life and death which should be discerned.

Openness to others

When a community is born, it is very difficult to know whether it is a real community or a sect. It is only by watching it grow over time that we can know the answer. A true community becomes more and more open, because it becomes more and more humble. A sect seems to be open, but with time in fact becomes more and more closed. A sect is made up of people who believe that only they are right. They are incapable of listening; they are enclosed and fanatical; they find no truth outside themselves. Their members have lost their capacity for individual reflection; only they are elect, saved and perfect; everyone else is wrong. And in spite of the apparent joy and relaxation, there is an impression that these are weak personalities who have been more or less manipulated and who are imprisoned in a false friendship from which they would find it hard to escape. They are governed more by fear than by growth towards inner freedom.

The language of elitism smells bad! It is not healthy to believe that we are the only ones to have captured truth and even less healthy to condemn others. These attitudes have nothing to do with the message of Jesus Christ. A Christian community is based on the recognition that we are all sinners and that we need to be forgiven each day and to forgive seventy times seven. 'Judge not, and you will not be judged' (Luke 6:37). A Christian community should do as Jesus did: propose and not impose. Its attraction must lie in the radiance cast by the love of brothers and sisters.

Communities are also distinguished from sects by the fact that the members of a sect focus more and more on a single authority – their founder, prophet, shepherd, leader or saint. It is he who holds all the temporal and spiritual power and keeps all the members under control. They read only his writings and they live from

his words alone. This false prophet refuses to allow anyone but himself to speak to the group; he dismisses anyone who could threaten his all-powerful authority. He surrounds himself with people who are weak, incapable of any personal thought. He is submissive to no one.

At the start of true communities, founders hold spiritual and communal power; they hold authority and are the person others refer to for all decisions. If they are essentially submissive to the Holy Spirit, they must also be submissive to other authorities in their church and to others in the community. They must gradually help the members to make contact with other sources of inspiration and authority, and journey towards their own inner freedom, so that they think freely, while remaining in the spirit of the community.

True Christian communities always have a multiplicity of authorities including the founder, the Gospel, the whole tradition of the Church, the bishop and the Holy Father (if they are Roman Catholic), and other Christians living in the spirit of Jesus. Then, most important of all, each member of the community must learn to take as their authority the Spirit of Jesus living in themselves.

It is fairly natural and perhaps even necessary that a new community is taken up with its own originality and tends to idealise itself. If it didn't believe itself to be unique, perhaps it would never have been founded at all. It's like love, which always starts by idealisation of the other: a baby is always the most gorgeous in the world to its parents, and a bride is always the most beautiful to her husband. With time, both parents and married couples become more realistic; perhaps too they become more committed, more faithful and more loving.

It is understandable that a new community should be turned in on itself, strongly conscious of its qualities and originality, and giving thanks for these. At the start of a marriage, a couple has to take time to forge its unity, this isn't egoism, but a necessary stage in growth. With time, the community must stand back a little to discover the beauty and particular gifts of others, as well as its own limitations. Once it has found its own identity and discovered

how the Holy Spirit is guiding it, it must be very attentive to the manifestations of the Spirit in others. It should not believe that it is the only community to have the privilege of being inspired by the Holy Spirit; it should listen to what the Spirit is saying to others. This will enable it to rediscover its own gifts and mission and encourage it to be more faithful to them. This in turn will enable it to discover its place in the Church and in humanity as a whole. If it is not attentive, the community risks missing a decisive turning point in its own growth.

One of the signs of life in a community is the creation of links with others. An inward-looking community will die of suffocation. Living communities are linked to others, making up a huge reservoir of love for the world. And as only the one Spirit inspires and gives life, communities being born or reborn will be alike without ever even knowing each other; the seeds the Spirit sows across the world, like prophetic signs for tomorrow, have a common source. It is a sign of maturity for a community to bind itself in friendship with others; it knows its own identity, so doesn't need to make comparisons. It loves even the differences which distinguish it, because each community has its own gift which must flourish. These communities are complementary; they need each other. They are all branches of that unique community which is the Church, the mystical body of Christ. He is the vine of which the communities are branches.

I am always amazed by the multiplicity of communities which exist, from those which go back to St Benedict and have been revitalised by love, to those which the Holy Spirit is bringing to birth today. Some are within the churches; others are outside any institution, bringing together young people with prophetic intuition who are looking for a new way of life. All these communities are part of the vast invisible Church. Each has its own spirit, way of life, rule and character. Each is unique.

There are communities founded on adoration and silent and contemplative prayer – the many Carmels, the Little Sisters of

Bethlehem and all those monasteries whose communication is more non-verbal than verbal, living a tradition that goes back to St Bernard or St Theresa of Avila. Linked to these are the communities of the sisters of Darmstadt in Germany and of the Little Sisters and Little Brothers of Jesus, silent and prayerful, in slums and ghettos across the world, linking contemplation and a presence to the poor.

Then, there are all the communities of prayer which are linked to the charismatic renewal, in which people come together to pray while remaining very rooted in society. There are the 'Foyers de Charité', welcoming retreatants across the world. Madonna House, founded by Catherine Doherty, is yet another example of Christian community based on prayer, manual work, announcing the Word and a very beautiful liturgy. There are all those little communities of Focolari spread around the world. There are ecumenical communities, like Taizé in France. There are communities which have as an immediate goal the welcome and care of the poorest people of all – the Sisters and Brothers, Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa and Father Andrew in Calcutta. Some communities are more committed to social action. They aim to bring improvement to the life of oppressed and suffering people, like the communities of the Church of the Saviour and Sojourners in Washington, D.C., the Catholic Worker communities, those of El Minuto de Dios in Colombia, and Father Ted Kennedy's community with the aborigines in Sydney. And there are many others, which are in the world as signs of the Holy Spirit. Personally, I am drawn to the communities whose roots are in the poorest neighbourhoods, or which welcome those who have been deeply wounded, like alcoholics, people coming out of prison, young people who are lost in drugs, delinquents or people with mental illnesses. There is not always much joy and fun in these communities, but there is great fidelity and acceptance of woundedness. The faces of the people who work in them are lined with fatigue. They don't have time for community meetings; they seldom have beautiful liturgies or even celebrations; often, they can only come to snatches of the Mass because their work is so demanding. But in these communities we feel the presence of

Jesus, who is close to the most rejected and wounded people of all.

As I think of all the communities throughout the world, struggling for growth, yearning to answer the call of Jesus and of the poor, I realise the need for a universal shepherd – a shepherd who yearns for unity, who has clarity of vision, who calls forth communities and who holds all people in prayer and in love, who is a guardian of unity and a servant of communion.

How long will it take before people realise this deep need for a universal shepherd? How long will it take for Roman Catholics to understand the depths of their gift and be confounded in humility, and to open themselves up to others in understanding and love? How long will it take them to recognise the beauty of the Orthodox Church with its sense of the sacred, and the beauty and gift of the Anglican and Protestant churches, especially with their love of Scripture, of announcing the Word, and their desire to live in the Holy Spirit? And today Protestant churches are discovering more and more the immensity of riches hidden in the Eucharist.

Yes. I yearn for this day of unity.

Roger Schutz, founder of Taizé, has a prophetic passion for unity and I would wish to have the same passion. In the Acts of the Council of Youth 1979 it is written:

A way exists to put an end to the scandal of the divisions among Christians and to allow the churches to join in a common creation: that every local community refer to a ministry of reconciliation at the heart of the People of God. These past few months, the eyes of many men and women have been opened more than ever before to the ministry of a universal pastor: 'attentive to serve humanity as such and not only Catholics, to defend above all and in all places rights of the human person and not only those of the Church'. (John XXIII)

The focal point of fidelity

Communities are born, flourish and then often degenerate and die. You only have to look at the history of communities and of religious orders to see this. The enthusiasm, the ardour, the generosity of their beginnings disappear as they gradually become comfortable; they become mediocre, and rules and law take precedence over spirit. There is nothing attractive about mediocre communities; they disappear.

It is important for communities to discover the focal point of fidelity which enables the spirit to stay strong, and what makes for deviation from it. There seem to me to be two essential – and linked – elements which lead to deviation: the search for security, or a weariness of insecurity, and a lack of fidelity to the initial vision which gave the foundation its spirit.

When a community is born, its founders have to struggle to survive and announce their ideal. So they find themselves confronted with contradictions and sometimes even persecution. These conditions oblige the members of the community to emphasise their commitment; they strengthen motivation and encourage people to go beyond themselves, to rely totally on Providence. Sometimes, only the direct intervention of God can save them. When they are stripped of all their wealth, of all security and human support, they must depend on God and the people around them who are sensitive to the witness of their life. They are obliged to remain faithful to prayer and the glow of their love; it is a question of life or death. Their total dependence guarantees their authenticity; their weakness is their strength.

But when a community has enough members to do all the work, when it has enough material goods, it can relax. It has strong structures. It is fairly secure. It's then that there is danger.

A French civil servant, working in the social services, once said to me, after I had explained in detail what l'Arche was: 'What you are doing is certainly very fine and I'm sure it is the ideal situation for handicapped people. But it depends completely on the motivation of the assistants. Does a government have the right to invest in a place which could disappear completely the day it can't find assistants who want to live that way? What guarantees can you

give me?' Of course, I had none. But uncertainty about new assistants arriving and about how long those we have will stay is the insecurity and poverty of our communities. People don't come because of the hours or conditions or pay we offer: they come because of the community's atmosphere. The day we look for material ways in which to guarantee enough assistants, is the day that l'Arche will die. It can be tiring and even agonising to live in insecurity. But insecurity is one of the only guarantees that a community will go on deepening and progressing and remain faithful.

Our focal point of fidelity at l'Arche is to live with people who have a handicap, in the spirit of the Gospel and the Beatitudes. 'To live with' is different from 'to do for'. It doesn't simply mean eating at the same table and sleeping under the same roof. It means that we create relationships of *gratuité*, truth and interdependence, that we listen to our people, that we recognise and marvel at their gifts, and particularly their openness to God and their holiness. The day we become no more than professional workers and educational therapists is the day we stop being l'Arche – although of course 'living with' does not exclude this professional aspect.

Other communities have a different focus of fidelity. For the sisters of Mother Teresa, it is to bring help to the most wounded and rejected people of all. For the Little Sisters of Jesus, it is to live together in small groups, present to the poorest. For contemplative communities, it is to orientate the whole day to silent contemplation. For others, it is to live poverty. Each community must recognise its own focus of fidelity, its own essential vision. If it loses sight of this focal point, it will regress, because the foundation on which it was built has crumbled.

All members of the community have to be watchful that they remain insecure and so dependent on God, and to live in their own way the focal point of fidelity, the essential of the spirit. These two things have to be stressed. Otherwise, the community will fall into routine, doing things by the book. It will end up ossified.

At l'Arche, we have constantly to encourage each other in these two areas. All serious decisions must be seen in their light. Are we deciding this because we are afraid of insecurity? Does this decision reflect the essentials of our life – our faith that Jesus is living in the poor and that we are called to live with them and receive from them?

There is always a prophetic element in the birth of a community. It is a new way of life, set up in reaction to other ways, or to fill a gap in society or the Church. With time, this prophetic element tends to disappear and the community's members are in danger of looking not at the present, or to the future, but to the past, in an effort to maintain the spirit or tradition. But the prophetic spirit must always be there if the community is to remain alive and hopeful. There is a particular tension between the value of the past (spirit and tradition), the needs of the moment (a dialogue with society and its prevailing values), and the pull towards the future (prophecy).

The spirit of a community is more than a way of life. It is a hope, an incarnation of love. It is made concrete, though, in the way authority is seen, in the sharing, obedience, poverty and creativity of communities and their members in the propagation of life, or in the way they emphasise one activity rather than another. The spirit, in effect, decides what is essential in their life. It provides a scale of values.

But with time, this spirit may perhaps be dissipated, stifled and obscured by routine or custom. The job of the responsible people, and indeed all the members of the community, is to try constantly to purify the spirit, clarify it and live it more truly. It is in a way the gift of God to the family, the treasure which he has entrusted to it in a special way; it must always be there at the heart of the community. The community should always live in the spirit of its foundation. That doesn't mean living as it did in its founder's time. But it does mean having the same love, the same spirit and the same courage.

The spirit and spirituality of a community are embodied in particu-

lar traditions. It is important to respect these and explain their meaning and origin to new members, so that they do not become routine but are constantly renewed and remain alive.

There are traditions in the way the community lives important events like death, marriage and baptism, in the way birthdays are celebrated and new members welcomed. The songs and actions around these events are not so important in themselves; but they affirm the fact that we are truly members of the same family, with the same heart, soul and spirit. And they have been passed down to us by those who came before us and may now be with the Father. These traditions remind us that the community did not just happen, but was born at a specific moment, that it has perhaps been through some hard times and that what we are living today is the fruit of the work of those who came before us.

It is always good for individuals, communities, and indeed nations, to remember that their present situation is the result of the thousands of gestures of love or hate that came before. This obliges us to remember that the community of tomorrow is being born of our fidelity to the present. We are all links in the great chain of generations which makes up humanity. The fact that our lives are not long in the sum of time gives us a true perspective on our community, and the place of each of us in it. We discover that we are at the same time very insignificant and very important, because each of our actions is preparing the humanity of tomorrow; it is a tiny contribution to the construction of the huge and glorious final humanity.

Generating life

A community cannot remain static. It is not an end in itself. It is like a fire which must spread even at the risk of burning out. A moment comes when a community can only grow through separation, sacrifice and gift. The more it finds unity, the more it must be prepared in some sense to lose it, through the free gift of some of its members who will create other networks of love and communities of peace.

That is the meaning of life. Life reproduces itself. Growth means the appearance of flowers and fruits, which carry the seeds of new life. A community which jealously keeps its members to itself and doesn't take chances in this extraordinary work of procreation is running a far greater risk: the risk of withering away. If the corner isn't turned, if the evolution of a community towards greater giving is not encouraged, its members will become infantile, close to regression. They will become sterile and life will not flow through them. Like dead branches, they will be good only for the fire.

So many communities are dead because the people who carry responsibility in them have not known how to encourage their young members to give life in the procreation of new communities. The time of love has passed and they have come to a stage of sterility and frustration. It will then be hard to refind the forces of love and life.

The moment when life is given is different for each kind and type of community and for each person. For some members, it means leaving for far-off places, with all the risks that this can bring. A community which has reached maturity is able to give a brother or sister to support another community in distress. For others, giving life means more truth and warmth in their welcome of the poor, the marginal person, the stranger. For others again, giving life means taking on the role of shepherd in the community by helping all members see the beauty of life and free themselves from egoism. For yet others, it is discovering and accepting their contemplative role in the community; it is carrying their brothers and sisters and the wounded and rejected of the world in their prayers, bringing them to life in a mysterious and hidden way. Whatever the expression, to give life is to enter into the mystery of the Father. It is to work with him and become his instrument in the extraordinary work of procreation and liberation.

It is sometimes difficult for people who are responsible for distant communities to know what sort of bonds they should have with

the community they came from and the people who hold responsibility there. The important thing is that the distant communities live deeply their own life and spirit and integrate with their own neighbourhood. Many members of missionary communities live a contradiction. They have come from a particular culture and they have brought their own customs and ways of living, eating, welcoming and celebrating to a foreign soil. The spirit they want to transmit is so much born of their own culture that in the end they transmit more of the culture than of the spirit. And their neighbours are lost. They are often either shocked or seduced by what is foreign to their own culture; they do not grasp the spirit. And those among them who want to commit themselves to the community are sometimes obliged to adopt customs which are foreign to their own mentality.

Too often, the anxiety for unity with the 'mother-house', in a simply material way, takes precedence over the dynamic concern for love, the spirit and the goals of the community. Unity doesn't come by ensuring that everyone is living in exactly the same way across the world. It comes from a harmony of hearts in fidelity to the initial spirit of the community, with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Distant communities have to know how to die to some of the elements of their own culture so that they can better live the Beatitudes in their new one. They must have a great trust in God who has sent them so far to make a covenant with a new people.

The concern of the 'mother-house' must be to help the new community put down roots and so become a source of life where it is. If the 'mother-house', takes this attitude, it will quickly discover the grace of rejuvenation and openness which comes from a multiplicity of communities. The distant communities, which live in risk and difficulty, can become a source of hope for the 'mother-house', which in turn can offer them the security they need to establish themselves in hard situations.

Expansion and taking root

The more a community grows and gives life, sometimes by sending some of its members far away, the deeper its roots must grow into its own soil. Expansion has to be accompanied by deepening. The more a tree grows, the stronger its roots must be; otherwise, it will be uprooted by the first storm. Jesus speaks of a house built on sand. A community's solid foundation is in the heart of God. It is God who is at the source of the community, and the more it grows and expands, the more it needs people who stay close to this source.

There is external growth, which is nearly always in expansion. But there is also internal and secret growth, which is a deeper rooting in prayer in Jesus, in greater love and forgiveness between brothers and sisters, and greater compassion and welcome. This growth is not visible but it creates a tangible atmosphere: a lighter joy, a denser silence, a peace which touches people's hearts and leads to a true experience of God.

Born from a wound

There is a mysterious link between suffering, offering and the gift of life – between sacrifice and expansion.

In one of our communities in India, a man with a quite severe handicap, who had only been with us for a short time, drowned in a well. An old friend of his father told us: 'A just man must die if a work of God is to live.'

I'm deeply convinced that people of action and of light can do nothing unless they are in communion and rely on those who accept their own suffering, immobility and prayer, and offer these to bring life. Men and women of prayer, hidden in monasteries and hermitages, sometimes living in great pain, are like hidden pumps irrigating dry land. Some people are like dirty hoses; others are doing the pumping; others are being watered. People who are old or sick and offer themselves to God can become the most precious members of a community – lightening conductors of

grace, secret pumps. There is a mystery in the secret strength of those whose bodies are broken, who seem to do nothing all day, but who remain in the presence of God. Their immobility obliges them to keep their minds and hearts fixed on the essential, on the source of life itself. Their suffering and agony bears fruit; they give life.

Look at your own poverty
welcome it
cherish it
don't be afraid
share your death
because thus you will share your love and your life.

Some communities are composed entirely of old people. Their time of expansion seems to be over and it is probably now too late for a young person to come into them. The gaiety and peace of these communities is sometimes astonishing. Their members know that their community is dying, but they don't mind. They want to live fully and to the end the grace they have been given. These communities have a lot to bring to our world: they teach us to accept setbacks and to die in peace. And it is their acceptance of their suffering and offering of their sacrifice that brings to birth new and dynamic communities.

In other communities, by contrast, old people are in terrible anguish in the face of their sterility. They have not discovered that this sterility can be transformed into a gift of life by offering and sacrifice.

Sometimes during a meeting of the International Council of l'Arche, we speak of one of our communities as a problem. It has been in crisis for such a long time; assistants do not want to stay and the people with a handicap are not well, and so on. We forget that before being a problem, the community is poor and in pain. If a poor person is a source of life and not just an object of charity, so too is a poor community. In some mysterious way God is present there. The cry of a community in pain is also the cry of

the poor. We must approach such a community with great love and respect.

From the wound at the heart of Christ on the cross came water and blood, the sign of the community of believers which is the Church. Life sprang from this cross; death was transformed into resurrection. That is the mystery of life born from death.

The role of Providence

Before they enter community, people feel a call or attraction to a life oriented towards God and the values of love and justice, instead of towards the more egoistical and visible values of possession, comfort, prestige and power. This attraction can be very weak at first, but if we respond to it, it gradually grows and becomes incarnate in a true desire and deep need to give ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters, especially the poorest among them. This call is already a certain experience of God.

With time and through contact with our brothers and sisters and mutual commitment, there is the discovery of Providence. God has called us not only as individuals, but with others. We have all heard and followed the same call. It is God who has brought us together and inspired us to love each other. It is he who is at the heart of community.

This experience of Providence grows stronger with time, with the discovery that God has watched over the community in times of trial which could have destroyed it. Serious tensions have been resolved, people have arrived exactly when they were needed, there has been unexpected financial or material help, someone has found inner freedom and healing.

With time, the members of the community realise that God is close and is watching over them with love and tenderness. Then the experience of God is no longer personal but communal, and this generates peace and a luminous certainty. It enables the community to accept difficulties, times of trial, need or weakness with

a new serenity. It even brings the courage the community needs to keep going through daily setbacks and sufferings, because it knows from experience that God is present and will answer its cry. But this recognition of the action of God in community life demands a very great fidelity.

Nor does the recognition lead to a sort of irresponsibility, a feeling that there is nothing to do because God will provide. Far from it. In fact, the recognition demands that a community cling to the essentials of its vocation, whether this is prayer, welcoming the poor, or openness to the Spirit. God will only watch over us if we try courageously to remain faithful and true in our search for the community's final goals and unity. And God responds to our needs only when we are working, sometimes very hard, to find true solutions. Sometimes he waits until we have exhausted our human resources before he answers our call.

The dangers of becoming rich

At the start of a community, God's action can often be felt very tangibly – in the gift of a house or money, the arrival of the right person at the right time, or other external signs. Because of its poverty, the community is completely dependent on him. It calls and he responds. It is faithful in prayer. It lives in insecurity, it welcomes whoever knocks on the door, it shares what it has with the poor, and tries to take all its decisions in the light of God. In these early days, it is often misunderstood by society. People judge it as utopian or quite simply crazy; to a degree, it is persecuted.

Then with time, people see that this crazy project is working; they discover its values and its radiance. The community is no longer persecuted; it is admired and becomes renowned. It has friends which meet its needs. Gradually, it becomes rich. It begins to make judgements. It becomes powerful.

Then there is danger. The community is no longer poor and humble; it is self-satisfied. It no longer turns to God as it did before; it no longer begs his help. Strong in its own experience, it knows how to go about things. It no longer takes decisions in

the light of God; prayer becomes tepid. It closes its doors to the poor and to the living God. It becomes proud. It needs to be jolted and to go through some serious trials if it is to refind its child-like quality and its dependence on God.

The prophet Ezekiel describes the Jewish community as a woman. When she was a child, struggling in her own blood, God rescued her, cared for her and saved her life. He took care of her. Then, at the time of love, he covered her with his shade; he made her beautiful and married her. She became a Queen. And by her union with her King and Bridegroom, she became powerful. Then she turned her eyes from her King; she looked at herself and believed she was the source of life. She found herself beautiful and looked for other lovers. She prostituted herself and was disgraced. But, in the depths of her poverty and despair, God was waiting for her, faithful to his love. He took her back as in the time of her youth, because he is tender and good, slow to anger and full of mercy, because he is the God of forgiveness (Ezekiel 16).

The first sin of a community is to turn its eyes from the One who called it to life, to look at itself instead. The second sin is to find itself beautiful and to believe itself to be a source of life. If it does this, it turns away from God and begins to compromise with society and the world; it becomes renowned. The third sin is that of despair. The community discovers that it is not a source of life, that it is poor, that it lacks vitality and creativity. And so it withdraws into its sadness, into the darkness of its poverty and death.

But God, like the father of the prodigal son, does not cease to wait. Communities which have set aside the inspiration of God to rely on their own power should know how to return humbly to ask his forgiveness.

The risk of growth

When I started l'Arche, we were poor. I remember an old woman who came every Friday night to bring us soup, and others who brought us small gifts of food and money. Now, after twenty-five years, when there is a house for sale in the village, its owners come first to see if we want it – at an inflated price, of course. We are known as the rich people of the village, even though our money comes from state subsidies. In the beginning, professional people ignored us. Now they come to visit us from miles around, even if they still find us a bit crazy. There were five or six of us in the first l'Arche house; now we are over four hundred, not just in Trosly but scattered through neighbouring villages and the town of Compiègne.

Sometimes the assistants complain that l'Arche has become too big, that it is no longer possible to know each other well, as we used to. That is true; there is a danger in growth. But there is also a grace. And I have the feeling that we have followed the signs of Providence at the different stages of our growth. The danger is that we close in on our success, forgetting our first inspiration. The danger is that we become a professionally competent centre which has forgotten *gratuité* and community as a place of communion, that we put so much emphasis on structures and the rights of assistants that we forget that handicapped people need to be with brothers and sisters who give themselves to them and are committed to them. The danger is that we forget how to welcome and no longer see people with a handicap as a gift of God and a source of life.

Some communities should stay small, poor and prophetic, signs of the presence of God in a world which is becoming more and more materialistic. But other communities are called to grow. Their mission is to help not just a few privileged people but a growing number, to show that it is possible to keep a spirit alive in a large centre, to create structures which are sensitive to people and to exercise authority in a way that is both humane and Christian. The mission of the small, prophetic communities is to show

a path. Larger communities must live the challenge of this path by creating structures which are just and good for a large number of people.

Personally, I'm happy that l'Arche in Trosly has grown. Each day brings the challenge of trying to live community with a large number of people, of creating structures which allow for the greatest possible participation and give each person the chance to take responsibility and initiatives, while maintaining a unity of spirit. I am happy that we have been able to welcome a large number of people who are wounded and in distress, and that so many of them have been able, after a time with us, to find work and live independently, while keeping in touch with us.

The important thing is to remain open to the signs of Providence while growing, to go on listening to the cry and the needs of handicapped people who are at different stages of their lives, to continue to be welcoming, to be ready to found communities if there seems to be a need for them, and to accept new kinds of poverty each day – for material poverty is not the only one. The danger is that we close in on ourselves and our achievements. We have to pray that we keep going further along the road of insecurity.

One of the only things I regret about the growth of l'Arche is that we have not worked enough with the people of the village; our growth has been rather at their expense and against their wishes. Now there is a good understanding with them, but there is still work to be done if l'Arche is to be integrated into the life of the village. It is important too, that all a community's growth doesn't happen in the same village or neighbourhood.

I was a stranger and you welcomed me

One of the risks that God will always ask of a community is that it welcomes visitors, especially the poorest people, the ones who disturb us. Very often God brings a particular message to the community through an unexpected guest, letter or telephone call. The day the community starts to turn away visitors and the unex-

pected, the day it calls a halt, is the day it is in danger of shutting itself off from the action of God. Did not Jesus say: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'? Staying open to Providence demands a very great availability. It has nothing to do with hiding behind structures, laws, traditions, and what has worked in the past. It demands a quality of attentiveness from each member of the community and an awareness of daily reality with all its unexpected happenings and insecurity. We are too quick to want to defend our past traditions, and so to shut ourselves off from the new evolution that God wants of us. We want human security, not dependence on God.

At the same time it is important that the members of the community remember together, and with the new people who arrive, what Providence has done for them, and that they give thanks for it. The history of a community is important. It should be told and retold, written and repeated. We are so quick to forget what God has done! We have to remember time and again that God is at the origin of everything, and that it is he who has watched lovingly over the community. Thus it is that we refind the hope and the boldness we need to take new risks, and accept difficulties and suffering with courage and perseverance.

The whole of Holy Scripture, as the Jews recognise so well, is a constant reminder of how God has watched over his people. It is when we remember this that we find the confidence to continue without stumbling.

Be zealous and repent!

In the Book of Revelation, the Angel says to the church in Laodicea:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich [in faith], and white garments to clothe you [the clothing of the covenant] and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten. (Rev. 3:15-19).

These words can be applied to many of our communities and to each of us, myself first of all.

'Be zealous and repent! Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me' (Rev. 3:19-20). It is sad to see communities which have let fall their first love (Rev. 2:4). We all need to be encouraged and stimulated to repent and set off again with a new enthusiasm and ardour. But for that, we have to reopen the doors of our hearts and let Jesus enter: 'And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord' (Hos. 2:19-20).

When we are going through difficult times in community, there is a text of Isaiah which I find brings me support and light. The prophet is asking what kind of fasting will be pleasing to God - which has to do not with renouncing food, but with gestures of love towards the poor:

... to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free . . .
to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him . . .

If we do that, we shall be luminous as the dawn; our deep wound, the inner sores of sin, will be healed.

Your righteousness shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard,

You will be enveloped in the protection of God.
And in the hard times
the Lord will respond when you call;
If you cry to him from the depths of your poverty,
from your weakness and your weariness,
He will say, Here I am.
He will reveal himself to you.
The Lord will guide you continually,
He will nourish you in the desert,
He will give you water in arid places,
He will give you strength,
He will make your bones strong. (cf. Isa. 58:6-12)

And then, supported, guided, gathered in by the Lord, we shall be like irrigated gardens, full of flowers and life. We shall be like inexhaustible springs of water; we shall be able to spill over a parched humanity which is dying of thirst.

That is God's promise, if we give ourselves to the hungry, to those in distress and insecurity, to those who feel alone.

It is when we are close to the poor and defenceless – who need special protection for precisely that reason – that we are close to God.

When our communities become tepid, we should open our hearts and our doors to the poorest and respond faithfully to their cry.

Then God will always be there to sustain and guide us.