

CHRISTIAN FORMATION IN THE PARISH

SOME TENTATIVE SUGGESTIONS

By MICHAEL HOLLINGS

BY WAY of introduction to these suggestions for christian formation in the parish, I want to make it quite clear that nothing can be really definitive, because the type and content of one parish will differ from another. Where there is a rather sophisticated, comparatively affluent and quasi-grammar school origin blossoming into largely professional people, the psychology, range and group ability may be very different from the working-class, shift-work, tenement or tower-block people. Secondly, whatever I write here is based not on theory, but on an attempt at practical living where I am, and also on insights from talking with others and taking part in efforts in other areas, but with the same end in view. For example, a north London parish recently gathered about 150 men and women for a saturday afternoon and evening to discuss *Church 2000*,¹ because they came from a background where a free saturday afternoon is possible. Where I work, that is more difficult. There are, however, other ways: for instance, last week there gathered here ninety-six parishioners to take part in a series of talk-discussions held on monday evenings from eight to nine-thirty; we can also take whole families away for the day. In the autumn, a group of five hundred enjoyed such a sunday outing, from ten in the morning until six at night: and this, not simply on the level of entertainment, but of serious discussion in different age-groups.

I would like very much to stress that, though it is much easier to group the more sophisticated, leisured, professional-type people, and lead them to discussion and development of learning or formation; nevertheless at all levels of class and ability, given time, patience, and the belief — against their own beliefs — that the participants have intelligence, can use it and will enjoy using it, there will emerge very worthwhile discussions in which even the most silent can be drawn out.

¹ The *Church 2000* is the Interim Report of a joint working-party set up by the Hierarchy and National Conference of Priests of England and Wales to discuss the preparation of national pastoral strategy.

Of course, I would be obscuring my personal and deep conviction if I did not say that this was almost entirely the work of the holy Spirit. There is a real need for a background of prayer and acceptance that the Spirit can, will, and does work among every kind of person. If we, who may be leaders, are not confident of this ourselves, how can we hope to encourage others to believe? Christian formation starts with the leaders on their knees, encouraging the trainees also to get on their knees.

This said, there follows the need for study and planning and considerable hard work to build some kind of structure of spiritual, human and material resources.

Christian formation is hardly a dynamic or challenging phrase. We would surely want to include within the object or purpose such ideas as 'coming alive in Christ', 'growing in Christ', 'becoming open to the Spirit', 'learning to live by faith in hope through charity', 'awakening others to the cost of discipleship', and so on. The process is one of personal resurrection to a new life which, by its nature, diffuses itself in its surroundings, and so begins a chain reaction of resurrection to a new life in the local community.

Community

'Community' and 'Community-building' are very much 'in' words and notions. This is all to the good, since they have to do with basic christian, as well as human, ideals; and the coincidence of the two can assist the marriage of the Church and the world in a real way. Though community is not easily built, I grow gradually to feel that the chance of any christian being formed or growing fully outside 'community' is unlikely and 'unnatural'. Hence the paramount importance of the spirit and atmosphere of community at a very local level. Here, I believe, we are close to the early christian instinct in Acts:

These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone. The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the Temple every day, but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.²

² Acts 2, 42-47.

Today's church structures scarcely resemble this in any way: living together, selling and sharing, breaking bread in our houses, praising God, being looked up to by everyone, and so on. Indeed, it is difficult to know what *would* be basically attractive to the outsider, so that 'day by day' the Lord could add to our community those destined to be saved.

The centrality of liturgy

At the time of the Acts, the policy seems to have been one of continuing in temple worship, with the addition of the central feature of Christ's legacy — 'the breaking of bread'. No doubt, because of smaller numbers, the sense of community could be greater; so that when I stress here the centrality of liturgy, I pose for myself and the Church a major problem.

It is not easy to see that the average mass on a Sunday in the average church is much of a 'community' act. This is to make a wide judgement, but it is borne out by personal visits to churches across a fairly broad spectrum during the past ten years. It would be reassuring to be able to say of the majority that there is in their Sunday mass a real feeling or atmosphere of being together, thinking together, praying together and breaking bread together. Unfortunately, it does not measure up to the truth. There are very wide divergences of understanding and practice, whether it is in priest or people, in responding, singing, sitting and kneeling close to the altar or at the back of the church, receiving communion at each breaking of the bread, or staying away except on special occasions.

What is more, there is little 'recognition' of each other, because of an over-emphasized 'reverence' inherited from the past. There is little 'knowing each other in the breaking of bread'. And for this reason it seems to me that though the liturgy is and should be central, it is not enough simply and solely to renew the liturgy in the parish. Central it must be, renewed it must be; but even though we must begin with the central or Sunday liturgy, it is very necessary to do other things as well, so that the building of community is approached from different angles simultaneously.

Breaking down before and during building

Except for new towns or housing estates, most parishes in this country are already 'in being'. Each then must start from where it is: or better, go on from where it is. When I joined the outer London area of Southall, I was very fortunate to come to a parish where the ageing

parish priest had not refused the development of ideas and methods by his younger assistants over the years, even though he may not have gone very far with them himself. There were thus already in existence some family groups and a scattered practice of the house-mass.

We began by having a month in which we 'did nothing'; that is, we talked and reflected whilst I tried to discover the parish. After that, we decided to open up the situation by issuing a questionnaire, listing possible kinds of service within the parish. The point of departure was the liturgy: serving at the altar, singing, reading, collecting, altar linen, cleaning, offertory-promises, etc. This was followed by involvement in house-mass, family or discussion groups (later we added prayer groups); then general welfare, community relations, liturgy-groups, social activities, housing, visiting the sick and elderly; then youth, choir and club activities, sports; and we also have a youth council and discothèques. We made the questionnaire the centre-point of a week-end liturgy: giving out the forms and pencils before mass, then preaching on service and allowing time for everyone to fill in what they wanted to do, with space left for suggestions. All this was done during a pause between the gospel and the creed; and the completed forms were brought to the altar along with the sunday offertory.

The result was a great mass of forms with every kind of permutation and combination. It took a large team several hours to sort and classify. We then opened the rectory doors and had it crowded for a fortnight, with several groups meeting each night to begin immediate involvement. Naturally, there was neither a hundred per cent initial response, nor a hundred per cent follow up on the initial response. But for many, it was the first time they had even been inside the rectory; and many people met others whom they had only seen 'in church' before. After the preliminary meetings, the groups settled down to meet in the rectory or their own homes.

Open rectory, open convent

At the heart of building community is this getting to know your neighbour. From my previous experience in an open setting, as university chaplain, and before that when I suffered the contrasting experience of 'enclosure' in a London presbytery and a diocesan clergy house, I wanted to try to open up the rectory to the parish, even if only partially. Fundamentally, this meant leaving the door unlocked, and trying to encourage members of the parish to walk in and out without ringing the bell. I do not want to enlarge on this here, except to say that to me this is essential if priest and people are to draw closer

together and to share. The difficulties encountered may vary considerably, but it is subtly effective.

The same idea was in the minds and hearts of the sisters who came to share our work. Scattered in their own work through different levels of the parish — school, catechetics, housing, welfare of the sick and house-bound, pre-school playgroup, the care of the elderly — they also welcomed all comers to their house.

Out of this initial communication and sharing, a kind of team began to evolve: the big problem (which still remains) is the one of fuller communication within the team, especially in order to avoid overlapping in our dealings with individuals and families within the parish.

Apart from a kind of policy meeting now and then, we have found that one of the more useful ways we have developed is for the team to have Sunday lunch together regularly, so that we sometimes sit down twenty or twenty-five round the dining-room table. Another is to spend a morning, every month or six weeks, in the dining/sitting-room of the rectory. At these sessions, one of the team will present a brief outline of some scripture passage for reflection and discussion, which is followed by a period of silence in the rectory or church. This leads into an extended liturgy, lasting perhaps an hour to an hour and a half, back in the dining-room. These practices, together with daily communication between rectory and convent, act as a springboard for our leadership-community, and seem to bring a developing sense of 'togetherness'.

House-masses

Once we had initiated general co-operation by means of a questionnaire, we divided up the whole parish into fairly small areas of a street or two, and began an intensive campaign for house-masses. At first, we concentrated on trying to get people to accept and co-operate in the house-mass: to accept going into other people's houses, and other people coming into theirs. This is not so easy as might appear at first sight: there are background inhibitions against mass outside of the church, about other people seeing your wealth or poverty; and here in Southall there is a real difficulty of race relations, even inside the church and at the eucharist!

As these house masses settled down into something of a pattern, we tried to arrange that, over a three month period, the various areas of the parish could be adequately covered, and the same readings and discussion-points on important themes used in the various houses. The quantity and quality of participants, participation and understanding

have varied quite enormously. When there was nothing much apart from silence, the priest would have to preach a simple homily, rather than discuss the readings and the theme.

The general result of these house liturgies has been the exposure of a wider range of people to the word and the eucharist. Though the level of participation and involvement is by no means as great as one would wish it to be, there has been some development in breaking down barriers, fostering a more local spirit within parts of the parish, and in answering one of the fundamental needs — that of creating a greater articulateness even among the more inarticulate. The closer, more relaxed, literally more homely atmosphere of the house-mass has, I believe, done much to breed a new understanding of the meaning and purpose of the eucharist and to help in changing the pattern of participation.

Though this is a matter which is still controverted, there can be no doubt that if some change is to be introduced into the parochial celebration of the sunday eucharist, it is more easily accommodated first in the house-mass: whether it is women readers, communion in the hand, communion under both kinds, a discussion-homily, the gesture of peace. (I will refer to this again in a further consideration of the central eucharist, or sunday mass.)

Family and discussion groups

Given the kind of parish which is St Anselm's, Southall, we have found that it is by no means easy to keep these groups going. Some of them have been very successful, have kept going and have greatly benefited the people concerned, to the extent that they have become an essential part of life. Others have gradually run out of steam. Generally speaking, it has not been found possible to extend beyond about six or eight groups in the whole parish. Two points emerge: in the first place, success for groups of this kind will vary according to the type of parish, because by and large its possibilities are greater amongst a more middle-class population. However, and secondly, I would want it to be clear that it is possible (and where possible, very helpful) in a working-class parish, but probably on a smaller scale. I was very sad to hear in last year's English National Conference of Priests the general cry that modern methods of groups and discussions were of no use in working-class areas. I admit the difficulty, and the limited number of those who are 'available'; hence our greater concentration on the house-mass, where discussion can be introduced in a way that is less formidable than the prospect of a whole session devoted simply to discussion.

With house-mass groups, we have found it very worthwhile to discuss quite wide and deep topics. We tackled the Laity Commission questions on priesthood and people. We used the questionnaire of the Brentwood diocese on the appointment of bishops when Cardinal Heenan asked for names for the archdiocese of Westminster. We have used sections of *Church 2000*. It is also fascinating to find in these developing discussions great openness and the desire for greater knowledge and participation in subjects hitherto untouched. On a question of technique, though it is usual for a priest or deacon to attend the discussions, which are held in different houses in turn, we make it a habit not to be present at the beginning, but to wait until they have been going for about an hour. Our absence helps the general opening up. As a rule, the leadership of the group is in the hands of the host for the evening; which is also useful in spreading the load and helping self-confidence. It is worth noting that our groups, as very ordinary christians with very ordinary background, have been able to take part effectively in discussions on radio and television, and have produced tapes.

Zoning and wardens

In furtherance of the general need to break up the parish into smaller units, we have tried to develop a system of zones. These are larger areas than the street or house-mass groupings, and the general idea is to make it more possible for christians to grapple with the difficult task of being good neighbours. Let me confess that this has been among our less successful efforts. We began with a small committee of the Parish Council studying the problem and making suggestions. This group then undertook to gather people in the different zones for an initial meeting, and a further one after the zone had been visited by the people at the original meeting. At the second meeting, if they agreed to go ahead in the zoning, a leader or warden was elected.

The general idea behind the division was to do what is, practically speaking, impossible for the priests and sisters to do themselves or by themselves: to cover the parish with knowledge and care. Specifically, we agreed that it would be of very real benefit if the zones could be responsible locally for noting the comings and goings, welcoming newcomers, notifying the clergy of movements, of sick people, of deaths, of any who needed visiting; that they should themselves care for the sick and the house-bound in their area; that, rather than relying on the Society of St Vincent de Paul or the Legion of Mary for visiting, helping the poor and so on, the parish in general should be responsible,

as all christians should, without belonging to any organization except the parish community.

Undoubtedly, much depends on the leader, and here we have not been over-strong. There has been a definite increase in caring, in neighbourliness, in rallying round during times of sickness and death, and so on. But not enough news comes in; there are still areas not covered by the zoning, and the co-ordination still leaves much to be desired.

However, the kind of initiative which has grown out of the attempts at zoning is quite marked at the far end of the parish, a good long way from the church, where the people suggested that we try to obtain the use of a recently-built anglican church. They completed all the negotiations involving the parish priest at the right moment, and now are responsible for the liaison with the anglican rector, for all the internal arrangements for mass, and for tidying up afterwards. The result is that the whole area has come alive; before it was a question of disparate individual families going in different directions for sunday mass, whereas now they are becoming neighbours and a real community.

Again the liturgy

These various happenings outside the walls of the parish church are backed up on week-days by two masses each day in the church, at which there is a homily, spontaneous prayers of the faithful, and the gesture of peace. The fact remains, however, that more of the average parish-personnel are present each week at the sunday liturgy than at any other time during the week. It is thus of paramount importance in the formation, or better, the growth of the christian, that this hour or so on a sunday should be truly an act of praise and thanksgiving, a hearing of the word of God, and an application of the Word to the life and world of the hearer, a fellowship with the other members of the community, and a knowing of the Lord and of each other in the breaking of bread. The various happenings previously recorded all have their part to play in the atmosphere and spirit of the eucharist. What more can be said about the build-up to this sunday worship?

In the first place, as we are working with individuals and families who are of all sorts, by colour, background, education, bias and intelligence, there is need for variety also in the expression of prayer and praise. The essential ingredient, if I may put it that way, is the coming together of the people of God for the hearing of the word as a community, and for their sharing in the thanksgiving-praise of the eucharistic prayer and the sharing also in the 'one bread and one cup'. The understanding

of the balance and intermingling of sacrifice and memorial meal, the true nature of our full share as a priestly people, need to be built up and allowed to grow and develop in the people gathered. In order to help in this development more directly, we try to link together as far as is possible the preaching of the word on a sunday, the atmosphere of teaching in the primary junior school, and the catechetical work among those who are not in catholic schools — some three hundred children whom we try to help in weekly house-groups, with the assistance of largely unqualified religious and lay catechists.

The weekly theme

The clergy, the religious sister leading the catechists, and one or more teachers from the primary junior school come together over the lunch-hour meal on a monday to think about the message for the following sunday liturgy. From this united discussion emerges (hopefully) the main theme, and some notion of our individual and common thoughts. Then we go off in our different directions. The catechists all gather on the same evening for prayer; then they go through the same process, led by the sister. There are some thirty of them; and, having achieved basic consensus after discussion, they go into their own homes to teach small groups during the week. The written work, painting, collage, etc., in which this teaching results, are often used in the church itself during the following week-end, or displayed in the baptistry.

Naturally, the clergy preach on the sunday on the theme, hopefully having lived with it, and in some cases taught it, throughout the week. The overall purpose is that a co-ordinated message should go out through all the masses — a message which might re-awaken echoes of the week in the minds and hearts of children and parents. We must, however, be honest: this is the 'ideal'. It is not so easy to keep to it, to achieve it. It is not sufficient in itself. We are always re-assessing it, and trying to develop and improve.

A deeper involvement

Such week-by-week themes and classes have merit, but it is very evident that the official lectionary, though it may cover the scriptures, does not necessarily leave space for some of the deeply important developments of faith, knowledge and practice essential to the growth or formation of the christian. We have therefore found it necessary and good to break away from the lectionary for specific periods. For instance, it has become a regular feature of our liturgical year to try to tackle in depth certain aspects of faith or worship, the sacraments or

prayer which we feel cannot be dealt with adequately by using the set readings for the following sunday. For instance, in the past year we have set aside three six-week periods in which we have attempted seriously to study the sacrament of penance, prayer and the eucharist, worked according to a very simple and easily adaptable pattern. We meet in the parish rooms at eight o'clock on the first monday evening for a twenty minute exposition of the topic. Keeping rigidly to the timing, we then break into groups of ten or twelve for half an hour of small group-discussion, with direct 'pointer' questions, aimed at bringing in each individual. The evening ends with a general report back and discussion for a further half hour. The average attendance has been seventy to a hundred, and the growth of interest and understanding has been marked. Naturally, the theme is extended through the week and is the material for the sunday liturgy.

Space does not permit more detail or further development. There are areas involving young people, masses, study week-ends, special projects; there is our annual parish day-out, which is intensely interesting and fruitful. There is the more recent development of prayer groups; and sunday afternoons of recollection in Lent, Advent and after Pentecost. There is the preparation for confirmation, and the way in which the church is used for teaching by decoration according to a theme. There is the involvement of the Parish Council, with its election at the sunday liturgy. We know that we are still woefully ignorant, and slow to appreciate and live the great gift of God. But we are trying — and by God's grace, it is enormous fun and most demanding and stimulating. Sometimes it is so good that we almost burst with joy; and, please God, that joy will catch hold, and others will be caught up in the love and service of God, in a fuller christian living.