

LAY COMMUNITIES AND THE MONASTIC VISION

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THE EARLY MONKS, wandering off into the desert or living on the tops of pillars, were quite naturally regarded by most people as wild eccentrics. And no doubt monasticism was seen by respectable Christians as an aberration that would soon die out. Yet these strange activities were the beginnings of a movement which transformed the Christian world; and for over a thousand years monastic communities were the centre of Christian culture, spirituality and even evangelism.

In recent decades there have been similar stirrings; yet now it is not just single people, but whole families who feel called to some form of community life. In the 1920s, in the wake of the Great War, a variety of lay communities sprang up throughout Europe; in Britain it was mainly Catholics and Quakers who were the founders. In India a number of Christian ashrams were formed, adopting the traditional Hindu pattern of community; I myself became a Christian living in such an ashram in 1970. Since the last war this movement has continued to grow, and during the 1960s and 1970s lay communities seem to grow and wither like wild flowers.

It is tempting to write off the community movement as an interesting, yet ultimately sterile, form of Christian life. The majority of the new communities last only a few short years; and, although during their brief lives they may aspire to the highest Christian ideals, so far they seem unable to put down firm, strong roots. The more open-minded members of the traditional religious orders look across to these lay communities, wistfully wondering if they offer signs to the future—perhaps even, in some indirect way, an answer to the problem of declining vocations to the religious life. Yet for the most part they soon conclude that the new groups seem too unstable, and the leaders too young and immature, to provide any realistic hope for the renewal of Christian community. Likewise many lay people, who may wonder if they are called to community life, decide that the lay communities seem

to demand such a degree of commitment and such high spiritual standards that they draw back from joining—preferring the safety and comfort of a pew in a parish church.

But, just as men like Pachomius, Cassian and Benedict, with their gentle wisdom and firm, down-to-earth leadership, created stable patterns of monastic life which have lasted for many centuries, so the lay communities are now searching for a greater permanence and security. We are in a critical phase. If the lay communities cannot find stability, then the movement will surely die; indeed the number of new communities being formed has diminished considerably in the past decade, which suggests that the initial enthusiasm has already waned. Yet if we can find patterns of community life to which ordinary families and single people can feel able to commit themselves, then the coming century will see an extraordinary flowering of lay communities—which will be as important to the life and spirit of the Church as the monasteries were of old.

The question, then, for all those concerned for lay community life is: what are the essential elements of such stability? More particularly, what lessons can we learn from the monastic experience, and in what way should the lay communities differ from the traditional monastery?

Types of Christian community

From the early centuries of the Church one can discern three forms of Christian corporate life. The first, and numerically by far the most important, is that of the neighbourhood church. The members live in ordinary houses, work in normal jobs, and in all external matters are indistinguishable from those around them; and they meet each Sunday for worship, and perhaps once or twice during the week. The second is, of course, that of the monastic community. In its extreme form the monks or nuns live entirely cut off from the world, in the midst of the desert or behind a wall; in the form which has become most common since the sixteenth century, the communities are dedicated to some particular ministry, such as teaching or nursing.

At times these two main types of Christian life have been in conflict. Monks have been contemptuous of the worldliness of the wider Church, and indeed it was partly in reaction to the growing wealth and political power of the Church that monks first trekked into the desert; also for many centuries family life was regarded

as morally and spiritually inferior to the celibate life of the monk. On the other hand, lay people have often accused monks and nuns of escapism, retreating from the world in order to avoid its demands. Yet happily the two ways of life have more frequently been seen as complementary. In a self-sufficient monastery the gospel can govern every aspect of daily life, and so monastic community can be a living witness of the social and economic, as well as the spiritual, ideals of Christianity. This in turn can inspire and guide the ordinary Christian in applying the gospel to the secular world in which he lives and works.

The lay community comes between these two main traditions. Although the present century has seen a rapid growth in lay communities, there are many examples further back in history. Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding established a community in the early-seventeenth century based on his own extended family; a century earlier radical Protestant communities formed in Europe, whose modern descendents are the Mennonites and Hutterites still flourishing in North America; and in the Middle Ages the Third Orders of Francis and Dominic were attempts to bridge the gulf between monastic and lay life. Arguably the first Church in Jerusalem, described in the early chapters of the Book of Acts, was a lay community in which families living in the world met daily for prayer, and shared meals and possessions.

The challenge of lay community life is to hold fast to the vision embodied in the monastery, and yet remain within the world. When lay communities fail it is because they veer too far in one direction or the other: they become too similar to monasteries, and so erode the independence which families within them need; or they lose sight of the monastic vision, at best merging into ordinary parish life, or at worst becoming another Christian sect. If lay communities are to succeed they must study carefully and critically the monastic traditions, taking to themselves those parts which realistically can be applied to a group of families, and discarding the rest.

Reasons for failure

The majority of those who start lay communities have little or no direct knowledge of the Rule of St Benedict; yet to a surprising degree they try to create communities in imitation of Benedictine monasteries. And, although there is much wisdom in Benedict's Rule that can be applied to lay communities, the structure he

prescribes is far too rigid and communal for groups of families. This uncritical and largely unconscious acceptance of the Benedictine tradition is the underlying reason for the failure of many lay communities.

In practice it leads to three related sources of tension. The first concerns leadership. Lay communities are often started by charismatic leaders who take to themselves all the authority of the Benedictine abbot. And while this may be necessary in the formative stages—and the leaders' charism may be precisely what attracts new members—it soon becomes stifling. Families in particular feel that their own freedom to make decisions for themselves—to decide how to bring up their children, what style of home life they want, and so on—is being suppressed. Typically, to constrain the leaders' power, the community tries to establish some corporate method of reaching decisions, such as frequent meetings of the members to which matters of common interest must be referred. But this simply replaces one tyranny with another more cumbersome one in which families become answerable to the whole group.

The second problem is the use of money and other material resources. People readily assume that community life means a common purse, so members pool their income and wealth. At first all may go well; then quickly the community finds itself caught in an impossible dilemma, either of accepting dire poverty, or of being forced to create a central authority which is responsible for all economic decisions. A common purse deprives the individual family of the choice of how to spend their income; but, even more importantly, it breaks the link between individual effort and material reward. Thus if an individual works less hard, or changes his job to one with a lower income, it is the community as a whole rather than his own family, which suffers. Visitors to lay communities are often appalled by the squalor into which families have descended; and those communities which adopt some form of central control of people's material activities find themselves bogged down in all the bureaucratic problems that bedevil centrally planned economies. It may sound far-fetched, but a lay community can easily become a living parable of the perils of Soviet-style government!

The third problem is the emotional stresses of a highly communal lifestyle. Monasteries have long since learnt ways of reducing social contact between members who are living in such close proximity—silent meals, limited period of 'recreation', and so on. But such

methods cannot easily be applied to married couples, let alone children. So lay communities whose meals are shared, and, worse still, where the members live together in a single house, soon become emotional hot-houses. It is not uncommon for a punch bag, with a human face painted on the front, to be installed in an outbuilding on which members can vent their feelings! And, of course, as monastic leaders have always known, where men and women live too closely together sexual attachments soon develop—and many lay communities have fallen apart amidst the debris of broken marriages.

But, while a slavish imitation of the Benedictine pattern carries dangers which soon become apparent, the temptation for a lay community to lose its initial zeal, and sink into a self-satisfied apathy, can poison the Church's life for generations. Most of the small Protestant sects started as some form of lay community, filled with the desire to emulate the first Christians in Jerusalem. Typically in the early years the new group grows quickly—just as the Jerusalem Church did—but as numbers expand so the vision of the founders becomes blurred by the more cautious counsels of the next generation of leaders. When difficult decisions have to be made, the easier path is taken; and soon the founders' ideals are reduced to a lifeless set of rules which members must keep. Within a few decades the brave new community has become yet another drab, inward-looking religious sect, stifling the creative spirit of its members.

Pachomius and the modern community

The original monks lived alone—as, indeed, the word 'monk' implies. As someone once remarked, it is typical of Christianity that the best way they found to be solitary was to form communities! So it was Pachomius who first established a loose-knit form of corporate life, in which monks came together for daily work and worship—and it was this pattern that the Celtic monks in Britain imitated. Benedict's Rule, written about a century later, describes a much stricter and more communal way of life than Pachomius ever envisaged; and this suggests that the Pachomian community may offer a better model for lay communities to follow.

It was in this belief that I spent nine months in Ethiopia, in 1972-73, studying the life of the monasteries there. Uniquely amongst the countries where Pachomian monasticism first flourished, Ethiopia escaped Muslim occupation; so for fifteen centuries

monastic life there has continued uninterrupted. The monks continue to follow what they call 'the way of Pachomius'; and after a detailed study of eighteen monasteries we concluded that their pattern of life is remarkably similar to what we know from early manuscripts of the Pachomian monasteries. More importantly, the lessons learnt there we have applied directly to the lay community based at Little Gidding—and, in so far as we have remained faithful to the Pachomian model, things have worked well.

The Ethiopian monastery—like its western counterpart—is usually situated in some spectacular location: on top of a steep-sided mountain, at the base of a deep gorge, or even along a narrow ledge on a sheer cliff. But apart from this the monastery looks like an ordinary peasant village: each monk has his own stone hut, with a small garden where he grows vegetables for himself, and in the middle is the church and a large hall. There is a communal meal in the hall every Sunday and on feast days, but otherwise the monks eat alone. They come together only once a day for worship, and each monk has his own discipline of private prayer to suit his needs. They do, however, meet casually during the day—as people in a village would—and in the evenings groups of monks may get together to chat. Thus the individual monk has a high degree of independence, within the framework of a simple pattern of life. They are also free to leave their monastery and live elsewhere: their commitment is to the monastic way of life, rather than to any particular monastery.

The most striking aspect of the Ethiopian monastery, however, is the structure of leadership—especially for someone accustomed to the hierarchical structure of western religious life. There are two distinct types of leader: firstly the *komas*, generally older monks who act as spiritual directors, and who are chosen with the unanimous consent of the whole community; each monk is assigned to a particular *komas*. Secondly the managers—the abbot, the cellarer, and so on—who are appointed by the *komas*; they are usually young, energetic monks, whose task is to organize the practical aspects of the community. This division of leadership has spared the Ethiopian monastery the corruption and apathy which poisoned medieval monasticism in Europe, and has enabled it to maintain its vitality: neither spiritual directors nor the abbot are able to accumulate excessive power; and able, young monks, with fresh ideas, are quickly incorporated into the community's leadership.

The way of life of the Ethiopian monastery can be transferred almost exactly to the modern lay community. From the outset at Little Gidding we have ensured that each family and single person has their own house or flat in which they can cook for themselves; and, as part of our Rule, we commit ourselves to only one common meal each week. We meet once a day for prayer—a routine which even a busy mother can usually manage—and in addition families and individuals may have their own discipline of private prayer. The community has some common work, such as running a small farm, but many members have outside jobs; and everyone is free to decide for themselves their own pattern of work. Although the community was founded at Little Gidding—and for the first ten years all its members lived there—the commitment which members make is to the Rule of Life, not to a particular place; thus more recently some members have left Little Gidding to form a new branch in a nearby village.

We have also imitated the Ethiopian structure of leadership. We have pastors who are the 'spiritual leaders', and managers in charge of the various practical spheres of the community. This reflects also the structure which the first community in Jerusalem adopted. Initially the apostles were both the spiritual leaders, and also managed the Church's affairs. But increasingly, as numbers grew, the apostles found themselves unable to perform both roles; and their spiritual authority as preachers was being undermined by their incompetence as managers. Thus 'deacons' were appointed to manage the Church, leaving the apostles free for their spiritual ministry. It is the structure too which in principle both the Anglican and Methodist Churches follow, with their division between priest and churchwarden, minister and steward. Yet, just as priests and ministers often find themselves taking on the material management of their churches, so too we find that the dividing line easily becomes blurred, with pastors taking over the role of managers, and so acquiring undue authority. The Ethiopian monastery is well aware of this danger, and so chooses as *komas* only those who are free of all personal ambition for power and status; it is a lesson which lay communities too must learn at their peril.

Community and mission

In the early centuries of the Church the monasteries played a major role in spreading the gospel. In Ethiopia monks who had

trained in the Pachomian monasteries in Egypt formed communities dotted round the countryside: they offered to educate the young men in the locality, who in turn often became priests and established churches in their villages. Likewise in the British Isles it was the Celtic monks who were the most vigorous evangelists.

In the twenty-first century the new lay communities may play a similar role in the renewal of Christian life in the West. Already most people are neither church-goers themselves, nor have they had any contact with Christianity as children; so the majority is as ignorant of the gospel—and perhaps therefore as free of prejudice against it—as an Ethiopian peasant in the fifth century. While the spiritual life of our parish churches is as healthy and vigorous as it ever has been, history shows that the parish church is by itself an inadequate vehicle for mission. To the outsider all that is visible is a group of people performing strange rituals and ceremonies; and in everyday life the effects of the gospel on people's behaviour is not immediately obvious. A community, on the other hand, is a far more visible embodiment of the gospel, since in a particular place and amongst a particular group of people the gospel can be applied to every sphere of life. That was how the early monasteries could make such a profound moral impression on people; and in our own time lay communities could do the same—all the more so, perhaps, since it is ordinary families, as well as single people, who belong to them.

Yet if the lay community movement is to rise to this challenge, it has to grow from wild adolescence to stable maturity. Community life may be less exciting and less heroic in the future than in the past; but its witness to the eternal truths of the gospel, as members relate to ordinary and unheroic people, will be far stronger. And to make this transition from adolescence to adulthood the lay community must look closely at its spiritual forebears, the monasteries. In the West it is the Benedictine tradition which has shaped our ideas about Christian community; and the Benedictine Rule, with its gentle wisdom and tolerance of human frailty, has much to teach the modern community. But, for the basic form and structure of community life, we need to go back beyond the Benedictine monastery to the original vision of Pachomius. Our experience is that, to a remarkable extent, this offers the blueprint for a modern lay community. If those remote, seemingly insignificant communities in the Egyptian desert could within a few decades inspire imitators as far afield as Britain and Ethiopia, it is surely

not fanciful to imagine that lay communities inspired by the same vision can spread with equal speed and force across the western world in our own time.