FORMATION OF LAY FAITH COMMUNITIES

By JOHN P. MILAN

AN ONGOING RESPONSIBILITY for animators of newly-emerging communities, especially lay faith communities, is the encouragement of their growth into genuine communities of Christian life and mission.

Genuine communities are inclusive wholes which have a distinctive orientation to all aspects of life, social as well as spiritual. Despite a distinctive orientation, they make room for difference, allowing themselves to be challenged by it, while celebrating the interdependence which difference implies. Because they have a vocation in the public world, they have an identifiable and conscious posture toward the larger Church and culture which they serve. While they value intimate personal relations, they are also semi-public bodies which have clear structures, clear roles, and clear common goals which have something to do with their vocation in the world. Christian communities in this sense are centres of energy for the world-transforming mission of the gospel.[1]

However, to move in this direction beyond the quasi-therapeutic functions of faith and psychological support of the members is very difficult for many groups. They remain gatherings of the like-minded, operating only in the private realm of interpersonal relations. If they move to mission, it is only with great difficulty. Both animators and participants hunt for formation processes which will successfully integrate the needs of the membership with the mission to which the Church constantly calls us. But our efforts seem to fall short of the mark. The communities of which we are a part appear to be faint images of the vibrant communities of faith and mission we had hoped for.

There are probably many factors, social, cultural and psychological which account for our relative success. However, it appears to me that three interrelated factors in current formation practice contribute to our frustrations: a spirituality of interpersonal relationship, community imaged as family, and the frequent

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assumption that mission is the consequence of personal and communal formation. I would like to explore these three factors and then offer an alternative approach which might be more congenial to our hopes for community. While the frame of reference for these reflections is the small group of lay Christians, commonly referred to as 'lay faith community', I believe they will also speak to the concerns of those responsible for other communal forms.

Interpersonal spirituality

The Second Vatican Council marked a shift in spiritual styles from spirituality as conformity to external rules and objective truth to spirituality as intimacy with God, self and others. The central symbol of this spiritual style is interpersonal relationship.[2] While it is not the only style in the Church, it does appear to represent the mainstream of spirituality today and the one which forms most lay faith communities.

Without taking on the task of an exhaustive analysis of interpersonal spirituality or the theology implied in it, it is possible to sketch its major features. An interpersonal spirituality may be described as one in which self-transcendence in love is expressed in growth from interpersonal isolation (inauthenticity) to relationships of intimacy rooted in intrapersonal integration and interiority (authenticity).[3] In this framework, virtue (expressions of the authentic) is self-intimacy, relationships of fidelity to brothers and sisters, trust and acceptance among loved ones, and covenant relationship. Skills in self revelation ('deep' sharing), emotional support, and affirmation are deeply valued.

God is imaged as love, Jesus is close personal friend, encourager and source of intrapersonal and interpersonal integration. The Holy Spirit is imaged as affective harmony with others. Salvation is personal and interpersonal alienation is overcome; relationship is restored. And the Kingdom is community established (in the small group sense).

Conversely, sin (expression of the inauthentic) is self-rejection, broken relationships, manipulation of affection, or conflict. Mistrust, judgmental attitudes, relational game-playing and acting out of self-interest are additional markers of inauthenticity. The roots of sin are traced to emotional hurt and reconciliation is healing. The processes of conversion take on a similarity to processes of psychological therapy.

If this is an apt description of mainstream spirituality today, then it would appear to have a feminine gender orientation. At the risk of gender stereotyping, it is safe to say that feminine socialization in the West is still centred on the person-oriented values of emotional support, intimacy and relationship. These are expressions of authenticity in a relational spirituality. In contrast, males are socialized in the goal-directed values of achievement, competition and tough-minded negotiation. And these might be considered inauthentic within a relational framework, or at least in tension with relational values.[4]

This may be an important reason why it is difficult to attract and hold men in spiritual and communal formation programmes, especially if the programmes are gender mixed. Men are simply not comfortable in a feminine oriented spirituality. In most lay faith communities, men are consistently in the minority; in many they are not represented at all. It is a source of frustration and disappointment to many women that they are not able to interest their spouses in religious matters, whether it be spiritual development or the experience of community.

Furthermore, a spirituality which finds genuine expression primarily in affective and relational terms will be restricted to the private sectors of life. It will be congenial to family, friends and other areas of private interpersonal life, but public life will escape its influence. Even Ignatian spirituality, with its emphasis on decision-making and love expressed in deeds,[5] when interpreted in an interpersonal way, will tend to image deeds as private interpersonal kindness rather than the heroic action in the public world imaged in the Kingdom meditation. Politics, government, law, business, law-enforcement, science and technology do not run on the private virtues of affectivity and relationship.

Some illustrations come to mind. A female banker from middle management reacts with frustrated anger during a programme designed to assist persons to integrate spirituality with their work. She concludes that to be a Christian banker one must be soft and ineffective, precisely the qualities her male co-workers expect in a woman. A policeman, after attending a mini-series on spirituality and work leaves disappointed, but convinced that the gospel has nothing to say to the work of law-enforcement. To espouse the relational values of the spiritual life may very well cost his life or that of others on a dangerous tour of duty. An experienced male spiritual director wants to know during a spiritual direction seminar

how to 'masculinize' spirituality so men can identify with it. The examples can be multiplied.

Community as family

A second area of concern is the pervasive image of community as family, or intimate circle of friends. These images tend to be highly idealized, leaving out the negative and stressful aspects of real relationships. They restrict community to the supportive, private and informal domains of life: and they have implications for the internal life of the community as well as its external mission.

An important function of family and friendship groups is to absorb the tensions generated in other sectors of life. It is the place where one can let one's hair down, be oneself, and expect to find willing ears to listen to the frustrations of the day. Family and friends are expected to be supportive, caring and a source of healing for the wounds inflicted by the more formal environments which are part of normal living. However idealistic, family, friends and 'community' stand for the converse of modern society: no conflict, no criticism, intimacy, affirmation and emotional healing.

Like family and friendship, community should function in the private domain, beyond the reach of regulation, public scrutiny, and government. Anything 'public'—work, political affiliation and activity, economic and civic life—is inappropriate within the group, especially if it is controversial. The folk wisdom about not talking religion or politics if you want to keep your friends is germane here. Only private life and the affective or interpersonal aspects of public life have a place. Furthermore, the ideal of harmony tends to screen out areas of difference in order to safeguard affective unity.

Family and friendship groups are not formally organized. They do not operate by constitutions or bylaws. Leaders, if there are any, are not elected or appointed and do not have formal job descriptions. Membership is not threatened by poor performance and there are no contractual obligations, formal rules or norms for behaviour. In short, they are by definition, informal social groupings.

In communal groups imaged as family or friends, then, acceptance, belonging, personal support and a certain amount of homogeneity tend to be essential values. They will work at establishing an accepting environment, conducive to personal tension management and self-fulfillment, with no goals beyond the needs of the

group members. The benchmarks of community success will be harmony, personal enjoyment of communal events, or other personal benefit. Any attempt to introduce appropriate structure or goals beyond the group will create tension and strain. Communal decision-making will be avoided because it surfaces difference of taste or value. Leadership will be rotated to avoid authority and rules will be suspect as unloving.

Finally, spirituality as relationship will find a congenial home with familial imagery. It will encourage the communal gathering as the locus for living out one's spirituality, rather than providing the energy for living it in all the events of life outside the group. Those not relationally oriented will experience themselves as misfits in the group. Mission will be reduced to interpersonal kindness within the group and among one's intimates outside the group. The norm for community life and its spirituality will be interpersonal harmony.

Mission as consequence

The third and final element of communal formation which may be contributing to inadequate communal growth is the very common assumption that mission is the *consequence* of personal and communal development. The cause of the assumption may simply be that most people seek community because they sense a need for it and because they desire a more personalized experience of faith. Very few seek community for the sake of mission. Animators, then, provide service on the basis of voiced need.

Because the demand seems to be for spiritual formation in community, most spiritual and communal formation programmes start with prayer, the development of interiority, the correction of images of God and so on. Many programmes, somewhere early on, also introduce participants to small group skills such as sharing and communication skills. Almost always, however, materials on Christian mission in the world are left to the closing phases of the programme. There are exceptions to be sure, which prove the rule. My only point is that the voiced needs for community and spirituality seem to have developed into an unquestioned assumption that spiritual and communal formation eventually will spill over into mission. Or, put in a different way, spiritual and communal formation is a prerequisite for real mission.

In practice, however, groups often find themselves stuck in the task of spiritual growth or become consumed by the energy necessary to keep the community functioning. In spite of substantial desire, group members experience mission as foreign to their spiritual or communal lives. It somehow does not fit. Either it seems irrelevant to what the community and spirituality are all about or there is a sense of not being 'ready'. In any case, mission and service are easily perceived as something added on to what is essential, rather than as an integral part of Christian life . . . and this in spite of quality formation in prayer, personal growth and communal dynamics. In view of what has been said about relational spirituality and familial communal imagery, the call to mission beyond interpersonal kindness in private relations is often a source of frustration and tension.

In contrast to the orientations in communal development described thus far, I am proposing that the starting point for communal formation is mission; that community is the 'bridge' to the larger world; and, that spiritualities of action are more in tune with our goals. These new orientations may be more fruitful in their consequences.

Conventional orientations

Spiritual formation (Self-transcendence expressed in covenant relationship)	------→ Community (As familial)	-----→ Mission (As fruit of spiritual & communal formation)

Alternative orientations

Mission (As starting point— conversion of personal need into public mission)	----------→ Community (As bridge to public world)	-----→ Spirituality (Self-transcendence expressed in genuine action)

Mission as starting point

Communal formation is formation for Christian life and action in the world. And the starting point of formation is mission, not spirituality or community. A sense of Christian mission produces an awareness that community is necessary for effective mission and that in a developing spirituality the Lord gives energy to the missionary effort. In a word, community and spirituality may be regarded as the fruit of mission, not the other way around.

Because persons often come into community out of a sense of alienation or personal need—be it healing, desire for belonging, or need for God—we must develop communal formation processes which in their early stages convert personal need into public mission. Formation must assist persons to move beyond merely feeling their need to perceiving the causes of their need in the larger sociocultural world. Personal biography and social history meet in the inner needs of persons. The conscious awareness of the intersection of biography and history has been described by C. Wright Mills as the 'sociological imagination'.

> The sociological imagination is a quality of mind which helps us use information and develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world *and* of what may be happening within themselves. It is a quality of mind which most dramatically promises an understanding of the intimate relations of the inner self and the larger social realities.[6]

This quality of mind which perceives the inner reality/social reality connection is developed by probing the relationship between the 'need' which brings persons into the community and the possible sociocultural arrangements which are related to the need. If our need is for 'community', we might ask 'what is going on out there that makes it necessary for us to seek community "in here"?' Further, we might ask, 'is our very need a call from the Lord to address, in some way, the "out there" realities which cause our need?' Or 'how can our life in the Spirit assist us to deal with our need *and* deal with the world we live in?'

Such questions help make the connections among personal biography, sociocultural history and the gospel. They assist the group to confront the world and the gospel from the perspective of the 'need' which brought it together. The need/culture/gospel connection, brought to full conscious articulation, contains the seeds of mission. It promotes solidarity and helps overcome the sense of powerlessness which prevents active response in the world. Further, it puts community and spirituality into its proper perspective, that is, serving the mission. Processes which encourage this kind of probing are at the heart of communal formation.

Community as bridge

Secondly, a more productive image of community is that of *bridge*. Community is an intermediate social form[7] which has the

characteristics of both primary social groups (family, friendship circles) as well as secondary groups (formal organizations and bureaucracy). As intermediate social groups, communities stand half way between the intimacy and informality of face-to-face groups and the impersonality and formality of formal organizations. Their function is to relate persons and primary groups to the larger world. Intermediate groups are the *bridges* between the private world of warm, holistic relationships and the public world of social institution.

An example is the neighbourhood improvement association which help neighbours negotiate the politics and bureaucracy of city hall on their own behalf. Halfway houses are intermediate groups which help their residents move out into the larger community.

Intermediate groups value both quality relationships within the group *and* movement toward the accomplishment of clear goals beyond the group. Persons relate to each other with more of their personality and more warmth than in formal organizations; but not with the same intimacy called for in family or among close friends. Interpersonal support and acceptance must be balanced with the goals beyond the group. The relationship/goal achievement tension is often the focus of intervention by the leader or animator.

Since intermediate groups relate persons to the larger world, they must have a common vision and clear goals. The processes which convert private need into public mission help in this regard. The focus beyond the group makes it a semi-public body subject to the pluralism typical of the public arena. Hence, difference and conflict will be an ordinary part of its life. It will develop skills in welcoming difference, resolving conflict and processing the pluralism. Skill in confronting and integrating difference toward common goals in the public world replaces simple affective harmony as the benchmark of communal success.

Because the community has a 'job' to do, it will encourage its members to find and use resources in the world of primary groups to meet needs for affection and intimacy. Likewise, it will assist its membership individually and collectively to negotiate in satisfying ways the public worlds of work, politics and other sectors of societal life. And it will do this in a way which is attentive to the personal dignity of each member.

In order to be faithful to its purposes, community will develop appropriate patterns of formal leadership, authority and norms for

membership. It will develop clear processes for conflict resolution, evaluation, decision-making and action.

The implications of community as bridge for formation are clear. As community animators we may need to examine the communal images which guide our own work. We may have to challenge the inappropriate images which often operate in faith communities. We need to develop skills in assisting communities to structure and govern themselves. We may find ourselves teaching simple leadership skills or how to structure a meeting and negotiate differences. Most of us will find it helpful to acquire some knowledge in the area of organizational development and small group dynamics.

Spirituality of action

As we have seen, relational spiritualities are very appropriate for the sectors of private life where support, intimacy and friendship are the primary values. Such spiritualities are effective supports for the socio-emotional and affective functions of family and friendship. In intermediate social groupings such as communities, however, relational spiritualities provide no framework for the formal elements of communal life and its mission in the larger world of public institutions. I am proposing that a spirituality of action will be more appropriate for our communal life and mission. Using action rather than relationship as the focal symbol for the spiritual life, we may be able to broaden the influence of spirituality, providing a more congenial framework for both relationship *and* mission.

Two writers have recently made significant contributions to the search for spiritualities of action. In *Foundational issues in Jesuit spirituality*, Roger Haight has offered a reinterpretation of the Spiritual Exercises from the perspective of a Blondellian philosophy of action. He writes for those who want to know the Christian value of their actions in the world. His answer is worth quoting at length:

> First of all, the core of what we mean by spirituality lies in action. Human existence itself is free spiritual action in the world . . . In this light, the first Principle and Foundation embraces the absolute value of work of human action in and for the world. Human actions count because God has shared with human beings responsibility in participating in God's own creative activity in the world over

> time. This intrinsic reason for being will lead to a final salvation that incorporates human creativity.[8]

In this context, sin is whatever undermines the value of human action, be it forces which corrupt it in destructive behaviour or which foster a more subtle escape from freedom. Jesus is the confirmation of the value of human action since his own actions have been raised up into the very life of God. The will of God is imaged as open invitation to co-operate with God's impulse of love in free action taking responsibility for the world. Prayer becomes the means of keeping alive the faith vision of sharing in God's own creative activity. And union with God is to be found in co-acting with God for God's kingdom.[9]

In another recent contribution, Thomas Clarke, arguing for action as a primary symbol of spirituality, expects that

> A spirituality of action will be equipped for a radically conflictual world, and so will be far removed from any bland developmentalism preoccupied with personal fulfillment. In this sense it is a political spirituality engaged in the non-violent struggle for justice and peace in the world.[10]

The task of spirituality, he suggests, is to distinguish genuine action from the refusal or evasion of action. Authentic action is action which is free of illusion, addiction or concupiscence. Further, it will be distinguished from instrumental activism by its rhythm of receptivity and response. It will be contemplative action without falling into a false dichotomy between contemplation and action.

A spirituality of action, then, is one in which self-transcendence in love is expressed in free, creative action. The range of daily decisions and actions, those oriented toward persons (relationship) *and* tasks (mission), can find spiritual meaning in this framework. They become the very mediators of God's love and our response.

In this sense a spirituality of action includes *all* human transactions, be they private and interpersonal or public and official, inside of community or outside of community. Furthermore, action, properly understood, is gender neutral since action is common to both male and female cultures.

Finally, Clarke leaves us with a challenge in the work of communal formation:

> the challenge addressed to spirituality is the enablement of persons in community simply for action, doing the truth in love. . .

all traditional vehicles—regular prayer, examination of conscience, common prayer and worship, retreats, spiritual direction—need to be approached with one overriding question in mind: how can persons, groups, the larger Church be set free for genuine contemplative action?[11]

Conclusion

With some twenty years of experience since Vatican II, it is time to evaluate, in the light of our goals, the assumptions and practices which have guided our formation work thus far. The spiritualities we use, the images of community we adopt, and the assumptions we make about the place of mission in the formation process are important areas of investigation. Spirituality as relationship, community as family and mission as the fruit of formation seem to be the guiding principles to now. Genuine contemplative action in the world however, may be better served by an approach which more effectively integrates spirituality, community and mission. Mission as the starting point of formation, community as bridge to the public world, and a spirituality of action should produce better fruit.

NOTES

[1] See the following for comprehensive critiques of the modern community movement in North America: Parker J. Palmer, *Company of strangers: Christians and the renewal of America's public life*, (Crossroad, N.Y., 1983), and Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life*, (Harper & Row, N.Y., 1985).

[2] For this insight I am indebted to Mr. Greg Stevens of St. Louis, Missouri.

[3] The model for this definition of relational spirituality comes from Kinerk, Edward S.J.: 'Toward a method for the study of spirituality, *Review for Religious*, vol 40, 1981/1, pp 3–19.

[4] In Jungian language, relational values are of the feeling type: tender, warm, personal, etc. The goal-directed values are consistent with the thinking type: tough minded, logical, cool, etc. See Grant et al, W. Harold: *From image to likeness*, (Paulist Press, N.Y., 1983), p 109.

[5] *Spiritual Exercises* 230

[6] Mills, C. Wright: *The sociological imagination*, (Oxford University Press), N.Y. 1959, p 5. This sociological classic contains valuable insights for the development of formation processes which convert private need into public mission.

[7] For a full description of community as intermediate group see Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton & Whitehead, James D.: *Community of faith*, (Seabury Press, N.Y., 1982), ch 3. This volume is an excellent handbook on community formation.

[8] Haight, Roger S.J.: *An Ignatian spirituality of action*, unpublished manuscript; later published as 'Foundational issues in Jesuit spirituality', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol 19, no 4, Sept. 1987.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Clarke, Thomas E. S.J.: 'For a spirituality of action', *New Catholic World*, July-Aug., 1982, p 176.
[11] *Ibid.* p 175 & 176.