

COMMUNITY LITURGY

A Celebration and Statement of Who We Are

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DURING THE LAST twenty five years, vowed religious communities have been engaged in a process of re-discovering, re-modelling, re-founding and now re-defining their life together and their ministry. This experience of 'transition', as we will call it, has evolved out of a variety of issues and developments that have been presented in other articles in this *Supplement*. In this article I would like to look more particularly at the transition that is happening in womens' apostolic religious communities; much of what I say will also have some relevance and practical application to lay communities and to Brothers' apostolic religious communities.

Transition in general terms is understood as the crossing from one stage or state to another. In developmental psychology the major transitional stages are adolescence and middlescence. Adolescence is the stage between childhood and young adulthood. Middlescence is the stage between adulthood and senescence. These transitions are critical periods of growth and further development. During the transition of adolescence, the young person is beginning to define her or his identity. During middlescence, the adult once again has the opportunity of re-defining and understanding identity at a deeper level.

Identity formation is the process, according to developmental psychologists, that begins to take place in a developing adolescent. In this process, the young person simultaneously reflects and observes how other people judge her. She begins to compare this judgement with how she judges herself and tries to integrate these observations and reflections from inside and from outside herself. Eventually she comes to claim a personal sense of identity that is significant to her.

Erik Erikson, a developmental psychologist, writes about the importance of each of the stages of childhood. Each one is a

process of increasing differentiation as the child develops towards adolescence. The 'crisis of identity', according to Erikson, is the need of the adolescent to attend to the variety of changing self-images that have been experienced during childhood and to integrate them. A pervasive sense of self and a conscious and continuous experience of an *I* bring about some resolution of the identity crisis. The adolescent begins to glimmer, if only fleetingly at this stage, the reality of an existential identity. When there has been faulty resolution of the 'identity crisis', or identity confusion, young people often resort to identifying themselves with groups that have a strong visible sign of identity. It is for this reason that most religious congregations will not accept into their communities young people who are still grappling with issues of identity.

The process of identity formation in the individual can be taken as a prototype of the identification process that occurs in groups of people coming together for a particular purpose. When we look at religious congregations and their historical development we can begin to see some parallels in the growth process as they differentiate themselves from other similar groups. The foundresses and founders claimed a special charism that made this congregation different from others. The manner of dress and way of life were external markers of differentiation. Styles of prayer were also developed which were intended to be expressions of their common life.

The main expression of liturgical life, however, was always the Eucharistic celebration and the Divine Office. This form of daily worship, taken from the older monastic tradition, became the liturgical expression of all the newly founded apostolic congregations in modern times. Until recent years this monastic model for common prayer seemed to satisfy most and gave them a sense of unity and of communal spiritual identity. The relevance of this monastic model has come to be questioned since the Vatican Council and the documents on the liturgy and on the Church. Religious communities, and particularly women's apostolic communities, have become increasingly dissatisfied with liturgical prayer which no longer expresses their communal identity or sense of unity.

The up-dating and re-writing of constitutions during the last ten years has brought about a very different level of awareness of communal identity. Re-discovering and re-appropriating the dynamic element of the charism has forced communities to look at the expression of their charism through their ministry. Members

of communities often work in a variety of different ministries, where previously they were involved in the same activity, e.g. in hospitals and in private educational projects.

An important factor in the developmental and on-going life of apostolic religious communities is that for many of them there has been active participation and involvement in the writing of these new constitutions. Most congregations are taking trouble to enable members to appropriate and own their constitutions. The living out of the charism through the constitution gives expression to the communal identity. However it must be said that, just as in the adolescent crisis of identity, here too, community members must personalize and claim for themselves the charism and its expression.

An integral part of the transition is the growing awareness that the liturgical life of the group must express more authentically who they are as community. This presents quite serious difficulties for the non-clerical orders when an ordained minister from outside the community has to be brought in to preside at the Eucharist. Women's communities often feel frustrated as they try to express who they are through the eucharistic celebration. This frustration generally stems from the fact that the celebrant is a man. It is further compounded by priests who, because of past training and personal conviction, feel that they have exclusive access to the understanding and use of symbol and ritual. They find it difficult if not impossible to allow communities themselves to determine the theme and shape of the liturgical celebration. They are also often insensitive to the exclusive language that pervades the liturgy. They have continued to operate out of the old model which separates priest and people; and they remain aloof and separate throughout the celebration: the 'mass' is theirs.

The effect of all this is to stifle participation and a sense of responsibility as a worshipping community. The community can have the feeling that they are simply attending mass, even when they have taken much trouble in preparing songs, readings and the entire ambience or sacred space in which the celebration takes place. Under these circumstances there is little experience of a communal expression of identity. Happily there are more and more priests who are sensitive to the needs of women's communities. They come in to the community graciously as a guest. They are able to find ways of expressing through the Eucharist their sense of solidarity with the community. However, when the eucharistic celebration is a specific expression of that particular community's

commitment to one another, then it seems more appropriate that the celebrant of the eucharist come from within the community. As things are in the Church at present this will continue to be a problem, though we may also continue to hope that the day will come when the community itself can call forth one of its members to preside.

Another factor which frustrates the expression of communal identity through eucharistic liturgy is the reality that communities are often divided over the issue and importance of 'daily mass'. For many, attendance at mass has become a necessary part of their day. Others find attendance at mass meaningless when it is not the expression of their community prayer nor part of a parish Sunday liturgy. A community that is divided for whatever reason will not be able to express a communal identity through eucharistic liturgy.

These differences in theological understanding and praxis are the reality that we live with in the Church and religious communities need to own and address this as part of their reality also. Nonetheless they do need to find ways of expressing their unity in eucharistic celebrations, and to experience in these celebrations the communal dimension of their life and their ministry.

The divine office is the prayer form that many communities have adopted and continue to pray. For the clerical orders and for diocesan priests there is an obligation to 'say' the office. I do not wish to address myself to the historical factors that determined this obligation, nor to the reasons why so many priests still feel the need to 'recite' it. I want to address myself more to the non-clerical orders, women and men, who pray the divine office though there is no canonical obligation.

Some communities do not have a tradition of praying together daily, and many individuals in these communities have adopted the divine office as their personal daily prayer. Their experience of coming together has been restricted for the most part to shared meals, community and provincial meetings and, on major feasts of the liturgical year, the praying of the divine office and the celebration of the eucharist. This has been a major source of unity for these communities.

As we said earlier, the daily eucharist and the divine office are bound into the monastic tradition that is no longer relevant to apostolic communities. Yet it seems that some communities are finding it very difficult to break out of that tradition. The structure

of the divine office is obviously liturgically sound and is an important tradition in the Church not to be abandoned. Many find satisfaction and comfort knowing that it is the universal prayer of the Church, and more and more lay people find spiritual nourishment in praying it. The divine office evolved out of a need to unify the prayer of the whole Church as an aesthetically pleasing and liturgically correct way of praising God. Once again, as in eucharistic celebration, the format was devised to bring about uniformity of structure for very large groups—the whole Church; but we see more and more that the price of uniformity is high, and brings with it a loss of individuality for small groups. Many communities who undertake its daily recitation find themselves falling into a recitation of the words with some feeling of satisfaction when it is finished. It often has a truly deadening effect on the community—voices become monotonous when saying or even singing it. Many communities have made valiant efforts to make it less monotonous and more meaningful, but eventually the monotony reasserts itself.

Some individuals in the community find the routine of the office helpful. But the reality for many communities and individuals is that it negates any personal sense of identity the community may be struggling to express. The scriptural language is masculine and even the prayers of the faithful, which could more easily be changed, nevertheless convey exclusively male images. The constant use of these images becomes offensive to many women, and to more and more men. This in itself can be a cause of irritation as the community prays together, both for those who find the language irritating and offensive, and for those who do not find it offensive but are irritated by attempts to change it.

A community which is trying to articulate who they are through their prayer accordingly finds these times of prayer frustrating and full of tension. Their experience is certainly not one of discovering and appropriating communal identity. Communities who are experiencing the pain of this frustration need to address themselves first of all to the reality of the frustration and anguish within the community and then, perhaps, explore possible ways of initiating change. Communities are often afraid to face these questions because they fear an impossible stalemate. It seems better to live as peacefully as possible rather than face conflict and anger over divided opinion. It is only when we have had the courage to face the reality of 'transition' outside and inside our communities that

we will be able to focus more clearly on our communal identity and find the prayer forms that express this.

What does it mean then to face transition? Having said earlier that transition is the movement from one stage to another, we need to re-assess what was the previous stage and where we are now. The previous stage before Vatican II was based on a monastic way of life. Apostolic communities struggled in the midst of busy lives to learn, for example, Gregorian Chant in order to sing Sunday mass and vespers. Already, in the early sixties, communities were feeling the irrelevance of this style of prayer to their lives, beautiful and uplifting though it was.

We were already in the process of transition by the time the council's documents on the Church and on the liturgy were published. Renewal chapters of the sixties gave some impetus to the transition. Perhaps the most radical element of the transition has been the re-writing of the constitutions which has demanded a new and more dynamic sense of who we are in the Church. Individual prayer and ministry are now demanding a public expression in liturgy that attempts to say who we are. In order to know who we are we need to understand and personalize our charism. This is how we resolve our 'identity crisis'. The particular charism of a congregation states who they are to themselves and to others, within the Church and outside it. The living out of the charism through ministry is the visible witness to a particular dimension in the Church of the reign of God. The liturgical expression must authentically represent who we are. As apostolic communities we are non-monastic, therefore our prayer forms should be oriented to our apostolic way of life. As womens' apostolic communities we are non-clerical, so we must create some forms of worship that are non-clerical. It is unfortunate that in trying to articulate our identity we have to resort to such negative terms as non-monastic, non-clerical.

In the adolescent transition the identity crisis is resolved when the young person comes to accept a sense of self that is significant to herself, and is recognized as significant by others. The resolution of the identity crisis in community will also come about when there is an acceptance and understanding of the charism as it is lived out authentically today. When we are at ease with the lived expression of the charism, we can more clearly define, to ourselves and to others, who we are. Generally we describe ourselves as apostolic religious women of a particular congregation. This means

that we are actively involved in our world, whether as retired members exercising a supportive role, or as younger members fully involved in active ministry. Our prayer life, if it is to be congruent with who we are, must reflect this way of life.

Prayer must pervade the whole climate of our life. Our activities and ministry will be variations on the theme of prayer. The charism of the congregation will colour the direction and slant of the prayer, even of private prayer. Liturgy is the public expression of the private prayer of individuals in community. Therefore in offering praise and thanks to God, liturgy must reflect the concerns of the community, the hopes and fears, the joys and celebrations. Eucharistic liturgy is a sign of our unity and community. Community eucharist must be distinguished from Sunday parish eucharist. The latter attempts to express our unity as parish and inevitably is more impersonal than the former. When our community eucharist does not express our unity we must look honestly and courageously at the source of our disunity. A truly apostolic community will be frustrated if the expression of their life in moments of prayer is dead or irrelevant to their life and ministry.

How then can we express our identity through liturgy? It seems that we must first acknowledge our need to symbolize and ritualize our praise and thanksgiving. The sacraments, and especially the eucharist, are the main symbols of the Christian community—the whole Christian community, and not just the ordained ministry! As apostolic women religious we need to call forth in each other our potential to ritualize and to know that our symbols, music, movement and prayers are sacred. We need to create new liturgical forms that express our praise, celebration and thanksgiving. In order to do this we need to let go of the stranglehold of old forms. Tinkering with the structure of the divine office still feels unsatisfactory. Creativity is needed. This releases the power of imagination to leap out of the ordinary and the familiar, i.e. the monastic structure in the present context; new possibilities are rehearsed in the mind and eventually an idea surfaces and is expressed.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the psalms are the central resource for praise in the bible. They are often identified by scholars as part of Israel's answer to God's action. They were written mostly for use in liturgical settings, and express deeply personal experiences of God and God's goodness. They can best express both our religious acts of prayer and our commitment to ministry.

One psalm, chosen to reflect the community at prayer on a particular day, is an adequate prayer of praise. Another scripture reading in keeping with the liturgical cycle, and with the ongoing life of the community, will consolidate the word of God for the community. The community response in song or in prayer of petition and thanksgiving enables the expression of solidarity and support for one another in ministry.

A community that is truly apostolic will be living out biblical values in a radical way. Their charism will determine how they read the 'signs of the times'. They will be critically aware of the unjust value systems in our world, and their ministry will reflect their struggle to bring about God's reign of justice, peace and love. A community living out this commitment will want to express this in communal prayer, at the beginning or at the end of their day. One person has to take time and trouble to lead the community in prayer. Faith is shared; and each begins to understand the others, and be understood by them, not necessarily by a formal sharing of faith but through their choice of psalms, readings and prayers.

A bonding and identification with one another becomes deeper as the communal identity begins to crystallize. This bonding and identification with one another in prayer and ministry will not happen if each one is not prepared to share her life. It takes courage to break out of old structures, but failure to do so prevents communities from making their liturgical life more meaningful and relevant to their lifestyle. Some womens' religious communities are finding a new sense of Church, as they create and experience liturgies that are non-eucharistic. It may be easier for women's communities to break out of clerical structures in this way and to create alternative liturgies. They are creating liturgies around various issues that are important to them.

A community that truly experiences reconciliation with one another will want to celebrate this in ritual form. When each one shares her concerns and joys in ministry there develops an urgency to share this in prayer. A community involved in inter-faith dialogue, working alongside others to combat racism and unjust structures in society, will inevitably be caught up into expressing this concern in prayer that is ecumenical. Bread, wine, water and light are symbols that belong not just to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but which are ancient symbols for the whole of human-kind. However, in the Judeo-Christian tradition bread and wine

are particularly significant. Some womens' communities are taking the opportunity of celebrating and sharing their Saturday evening meal as an entrance and welcome to Sunday. This is much like the beautiful Jewish Friday evening meal at the beginning of Shabbat. Before the meal begins grace is said and the bread is blessed and shared. The wine too is blessed and shared. The meal is a relaxed event for the community in anticipation of Sunday, which for parish sisters is often a busy day. There is also an important acknowledgement that Sunday is special.

Liturgy is caught up more in the ordinary events of life—eating, working, celebrating, sharing in pain, being reconciled with one another, etc. Small communities are more likely to be involved with one another's families, and then moments of celebration and sorrow become the concern of the whole community. There is a healthy balance in a celibate community helping to prepare the liturgy and celebrate the baptism of nieces and nephews. Likewise assistance is often given to preparing requiem mass for the parent of one of the community. This involvement enables a community to be community for others and for themselves. Visitors coming into a community, as well as new members joining it, learn very quickly from sharing in prayer what its concerns and priorities are.

There is less likelihood of the community prayer becoming monotonous when the preparation is centred around the life and ministries of the community and the events of our world. Our local concerns change daily and the global situation is constantly critical. In the light of all this it is surely clear that what is needed is a more dynamic approach to transition in the context of religious life. We are not moving from one static stage to another static stage. The Council gave us the term 'pilgrim people', and perhaps it is only now, twenty-five years after Vatican II, that we are beginning to understand what it actually means in practice. Our development and self-understanding is bound up with our community life and with our celebration in liturgy of community life and ministry. This has to be on-going until God's reign of justice, peace and love finally comes.