

IMAGES OF COMMUNITY

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RELUCTANCE OVERTOOK ME after I accepted the invitation to write this article on the images, implied or explicit, in the recent document on formation from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. My initial perusal of the document left me with the impression of a certain thinness in the document's use of images. I was looking for metaphors, those poetic images that intimate the 'is-ness' and the 'is-not-ness' of any reality, on the one hand richly describing a reality, a process or an experience, while on the other hand preserving its 'beyond-ness' and mystery. A comment Gerald Vann once made came back to mind:

Our Lord did not say 'I am come that you may have safety, and have it more abundantly'. Some of us would indeed give anything to feel safe, about our life in this world as in the next, but we cannot have it both ways: safety or life, we must choose.¹

The document is safe. It reminds religious of their traditions and repeats sections of other documents, but it breaks no boundaries. It would be difficult to disagree with anything that is there, but the uniqueness of each individual in formation and of each community receives scant attention. There seems to be a facile skimming over the very real demographic fact that many religious congregations simply are not attracting new members, or that when they are, the applicants come in ones or twos and that this has serious implications both for the shape of the formation process and for the kind of community into which these new members are to be inserted. Community is spoken of as if there were a single recognizable shape, a fixed reality that characterized all communities and there is almost no explicit attention to the fact that this document is addressed to religious right across the globe, struggling to proclaim the word in many cultures and situations which have a profound bearing on the shape of community and on the process of formation. Neither does it take account of the fact that the personal gifts of entrants to religious

life and the unique experience of life that these people bring may, in fact, carve out new and hitherto undreamt of forms of community. Much that is creative and hopeful is happening around the world in the area of formation, but this document seems to have been put together without much explicit recognition of or learning from the efforts of experienced religious formators and community-shapers.

At the very beginning of the document there is an allusion to the image of religious life as a community of disciples—an image that many religious men and women experience as both an ideal and a struggling and unfinished reality in their lives. It seems a pity that this rich and central image receives such a cursory mention. The section explicitly devoted to community fails to take this up again in any challenging way, though there is reference to the basic inspiration to be derived from the first Christian community, the fruit of the Pasch of the Lord [26]. Because this is indeed the image that holds the greatest range of possibilities in this document, I shall discuss it briefly in the following section and shall then take up some other current images notably omitted by the document, images that stem from contemporary experience of religious community (which, to my mind, is *always* formative, either positively or negatively) and which seems particularly pertinent to the ongoing experience of religious life in these times.

A community of disciples

‘The greatest dignity to be striven for is neither papal, episcopal, nor priestly; the greatest dignity is that of belonging to the community of the beloved disciples of Jesus Christ.’²

When Jesus called the twelve he called them as individuals—‘Come after me’ (Mk 1, 18); ‘Follow me’ (Mk 2, 14). But this was only the beginning of their formation as his band of disciples. It is clear from John’s Gospel that he called them to a bondedness with one another which is spelled out in the discourse at the Last Supper. By placing it in this context John gives it the ultimacy of a legacy from a man on the eve of death. It becomes a statement weighted, therefore, with the magnitude of a last will and testament: ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you . . . My command to you is to love one another’ (Jn 15,14.17). Thus Jesus calls them to a *community* of discipleship the first movement of which is an obedient following of himself. He proposes no creed, no ideology, no list of conditions, The core of the call is into close and loving relationship with him, relationship that entails walking into the dark with him—

even to death—amid all the demands of daily living. He demands an uncluttered relationship gradually purified by a cutting loose from everything that stands between the disciple and the master. Paradoxically, it is only entering the relationship with him that can make this possible. Performance and the keeping of the law are not enough, as is made clear in the account of the call of the rich young man (Mk 10, 17-22). What is asked is a relationship shot through and through with the spirit of the beatitudes, an emptiness, a hunger and a passionate yearning that can be assuaged only by Jesus. It is a relationship that mirrors Jesus's own relationship with his God. It is uncluttered and total.

Even preliminary reflection on the 'calls' (especially in Mark's account of them) reveals that they were couched in peremptory, unvarnished language that permitted no delay. There was a totality about them that brought immediate response. When one person requested time to go and bury his father and another to attend to some unfinished business they were admonished. The call was for now and it demanded not less than everything (Lk 9, 59-62). The first disciples left their boats and their nets behind, symbols of their livelihood and the life they had led until then. At that critical turning point in their lives, it was Jesus alone who was their focus. Indeed, later they may have returned to their boats and nets, but the depth of their encounter with Jesus brought radical changes. They were different—still sinners, but different—their meanings beginning to be transformed by their call to be deeply involved with the One who overturns worldly wisdom and challenges them to see every nuance of life and activity in the light of the kingdom.

I do not believe that it is fanciful to see here implications for formation within a community setting. The disciples are withdrawn for a time from their usual activities and brought into close contact with Jesus who begins to make known to them the One whom he addresses as Abba. The person being initiated into religious life leaves behind a known and familiar pattern of existence in response to a perceived 'call'. There is a leaving behind, a separation, followed by a time of 'stripping down' best illustrated, perhaps, by a comment from a thirty-year-old novice:

I feel as if I am somehow being purified—almost against my will. Well, leave out 'almost'! When I came into religious life I had been earning my living for years. I had to budget carefully, handle all the adult issues of life. I bought a small house, a secondhand car and gradually paid them off. I held a reasonably responsible position in

the school where I worked and continued my education at night. When I arrived here, somehow all of that disappeared. I have no status . . . (pause) . . . in some strange way, I almost don't have a past right now. There's just me and the God who mysteriously calls me, and the other women in the community who have also been called. All the external things, the etceteras that were important to me, have fallen off like the shell of a peanut. Sometimes I really resent this and am angry. And there are other moments, shadowy moments, really, when I feel on the brink of something far more important. I am forced to submerge myself in the Lord and stay there.

There are signs here of an experience of liminality, seen by some as an intrinsic step in the initiation process whose stated purpose is to

dispose people to be more open to influence by the sacred . . . In summary, liminality is an intrinsically unstable and uncertain condition, involving the embracing of meaninglessness (anomy), or chaos, for the sake of the expanded creative possibilities it can provide and for the experience of existential *communitas* or pure brotherhood [sic].³

It has been suggested, however, that this experience of liminality is not peculiar to those being initiated into religious life, but that it characterizes religious life as a whole.

I wish to suggest that Religious Life in its varied expressions across the different religions and cultures is one of the most pervasive forms of liminality. Indeed, it may well be the primary and most authentic expression of this reality . . . Liminality uses the group or communal medium as its primary mode of expression and articulation . . .⁴

It seems a fair assumption, then, that religious community authentically lived is one proclamation in the world of the radical call to conversion which is the inevitable outcome of genuine relationship with Jesus. Disturbingly, O'Murchu contends that too close an identification with the institutional Church or, indeed, with some secular organizations as well, may diminish its liminal possibilities of standing 'as a countercultural movement on the frontier, opening up new horizons, dreaming new possibilities'.⁵ Clearly, then, when religious life and individual communities within it lose their focus on Jesus and on the world-shaking, countercultural values he preaches, they lose also their essential liminality. As with the rich young man, Jesus continues to look on them lovingly, but they walk away.

Attachment to Jesus, however, brings with it a connection with the world. The same rhythm to be found in the life of Jesus is to be the pattern of the disciples' own life . . . up the mountain to steep oneself again in the central relationship with the One whom Jesus calls Abba, then, energized by that relationship and by the needs of the poor, the next stage of the journey is down to the place of ministry and then there are the special times of retreat to the community for recreation (re-creation). Bonded together by their attachment to Jesus, they are sent out, bearing in their hearts the connectedness they share. Community is not about geographical togetherness but about bonding in a common vision.

So, in the formation of a community of disciples there are some identifiable steps—separation from a former way of life and all its accoutrements, a period of liminality or stripping down (desert time), and a reconnecting and inducting into the life of the whole community. It would be interesting, though outside the scope of the present article, to reflect on these steps in Jesus's own life—the long period in Nazareth under the tutelage of his earthly parents, the baptism, the testing in the desert and the beginning of the public ministry.

A community sent out

The *Directives* document wavers somewhat in section [28] where it does indeed allude to the process of separation and liminality (though not in those terms) and to the ministerial formation of candidates to religious life. The dualistic thinking which appears elsewhere in the document is in evidence here though it is by no means absolute. Recognizing that there must be formation for ministry the document lays heaviest emphasis on being apart, allowing cautiously for 'periods of apostolic activities' under certain conditions. What it seems to me to neglect at this point is the formative effect which ministry itself exercises on the minister and the sustaining-for-ministry that should be exercised by the community, whether this be at the level of initial or continuing formation. Jesus sent the disciples out to speak and act in his name, to encounter the poor and to share in his ministry of healing, teaching and giving life. They returned to him and gave an account of all that they had experienced, and then Jesus took them with him, seeking time apart (See Luke 9 and 10). Salient lessons were taught during these times, especially the clarifying of where the power to heal came from.

The rhythm of contemplating Jesus and his message, carrying the message out and proclaiming it and returning to reflect in the

presence of Jesus again seems only partly recognized in the document and then only to set limits. What it fails to state with sufficient emphasis is that to build up a community and to allow ourselves to be shaped and formed by a community, 'we have to intercommunicate our persons as they are related to the experience of God. To achieve this is to lay the very foundation of authentic religious communities.'⁶ The gritty human reality of working to establish mutuality amid the inevitable differences, of sharing human frailty and fears, as well as a diversity of gifts is somewhat understated in the document in favour of spiritual formation—as if, indeed, these human adjustments were not part of the very fabric of growth in spiritual stature. Jesus himself had to contend constantly with the disciples' competitiveness, ambition and lack of comprehension, and finally with their desertion. Even after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost they were not immune to human differences and struggle, as the controversy in Jerusalem recounted in Acts 15 attested. Formation is a womb-to-tomb experience and part of its pain and its challenge is the continuing lesson of living with love in the midst of the pulsing, buzzing, jostling reality of human differences.

I am troubled by section [28] with its caution about locating formation communities in poor neighbourhoods. There seems to be an ignorance here of the educative and formative effect that the poor themselves may have on the religious. In addition there is a dichotomy in this part of the document between spiritual and ministerial formation. The dualism of this section seems to ignore the wonderfully creative partnership that can and should be set up between contemplation and action. To encounter the face of Jesus in those who are deprived and to reflect on that experience within a wisely-directed formation community seems to me to come close to the ideal proposed by Helder Camara:

Let every word
be the fruit
of action and reflection.
Reflection alone
without action
or tending towards it
is mere theory,
adding its weight
when we are
overloaded
with it already

and it has led
 the young to despair.
 Action alone
 without reflection
 is being busy
 pointlessly.
 Honour the Word eternal
 and speak
 to make
 a new world possible.⁷

In addition to all of this, I wonder how religious formation in Third-World countries would manage to deal with the advice about the location of the formation community. Worse still, there seems to be an assumption that solitude and silence, community life that allows religious authenticity and the 'possibility of living a truly religious life in accord with the ends of the institute' are diminished by being inserted into needy surroundings. Given that in these days entrants to religious life come singly rather than in droves, they will probably have to be part of actively apostolic communities anyway, unless more creative initiatives of co-operation between different congregations are undertaken. Communities of disciples can flourish and form their members wherever they occur. The Spirit breathes where s/he will and if each formative community and each individual in it are unique, then the rhythm of the Spirit in each will never be repeated in any other. It will be the responsibility of each congregation true to its founding vision, and of each community and each member engaged in the lifelong process of formation to listen deeply to the depths and challenges of their own life together in order to determine the direction in which they must orient their life. This makes the task of setting out general guidelines almost irrelevant.

As they stand the *Directives* make no mention of one of the prominent images currently enriching our understanding of religious life, the call to proclaim the Word prophetically. What follows is a brief exploration of this.

The prophetic community

One of the most compelling images of religious life and of community in these days is that of a prophetic presence in the world. In recent years (i.e. since Vatican II) religious life has grown increasingly preoccupied with its own inner working. Because of the lack of attention given to basic human needs for belonging, esteem

and love in earlier times, with the flourishing of the behavioural sciences in the sixties and seventies came a surge of interest in psychology and in redressing some of the deprivations experienced in the past. This was simultaneously aimed at the healing of individuals and the 'warming' of communities now beginning to be seen as bonded groups of committed people, joined by their common vision, but also seeking normal human companionship on the journey. For a time the god of self-fulfilment began to demand homage. Self-improvement in the areas of counselling, spiritual direction, communication, emotional and social development was pursued single-mindedly. These things are not in themselves bad. They may indeed have been a necessary phase of the journey, arising from the recognition of the sacredness of the whole person. However, when fulfilment becomes the ultimate goal, the kingdom becomes subordinated to it. Religious life is presently emerging from self-contemplation into the recognition that its style of life and its apostolic involvement point beyond itself to the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus. Its horizon is prophetic. There is a dawning understanding that self-fulfilment happens at some level, not when it is sought like the Holy Grail, but when religious together find a radical meaning at the heart of who they are and what they are called to be. Neither riches nor comfort nor power can bring it. In painfully divesting ourselves of these things we may find the meanings that the consumer mentality drowns out.

Christ reveals that human fulfilment is found in the *opposite* of riches (whether spiritual or, as Luke more directly says, material), the *opposite* of mere good times and absence of suffering, the *opposite* of being powerful, unforgiving, the *opposite* of war-making, even the *opposite* of victory.⁸

Formation, as I understand it, is assisted growth into life. Within religious life, it is assisted growth into life with a particular focus and system of meanings—meanings that are perhaps in danger of being watered down or lost. It is devoutly to be hoped that religious will play a significant part in realizing a dream for the Church of the third millenium, 'a hope that, in these difficult times of ours, prophets will be sent to us, to show us the way, and courageously lead our people out of exile'.⁹

Vatican II enjoined upon us a life:

(i) centred upon the following of Christ as it is put before us in the gospel;

(ii) a genuine study and understanding and love of the charism of each religious congregation, and

(iii) a sensitive understanding of humanity, the conditions and signs of the times and of the needs of the Church (*Perfectae caritatis* 2).

Here indeed are the three aspects of the call to discipleship mentioned earlier—focus on and commitment to the following of Jesus, nourished and attested to by the quality of our life together, and sent to be with humanity, working to build a global web of relationships at the heart of which God reigns. It is for this that we are all being formed, no matter whether we are in initial or continuing formation, young, old or in between, healthy or ill, recognized or unrecognized, in consolation or desolation! We are called to be part of a prophetic reality, 'called to be the cutting-edge, the front-liners, the trail-blazers for this new dream; our vocation is to be in the vanguard of mission'.¹⁰ This is a call to a prophetic existence. Though we may experience the same reluctance and sense of inadequacy and fear felt by the ancient prophets ('Ah, ah, ah, Lord Yahweh; you see, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child', Jer 1, 6) we receive the same reassurance that it is not simply by our own efforts that we are to work for the visibility of the reign of God—'There, I have put my word into your mouth' (Jer 1, 10); 'The word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice' (Deut 30, 14). As part of a prophetic movement we are called to criticize and energize,¹¹ holding up the mirror of the gospel to our world, revealing by the quality of our life with one another and our involvement in our world that there *is* a way to be that does not rest on the dominant values of oppression and greed and self-seeking and dominating power; a way to be that springs from the certainty of a God who is inextricably involved with our human existence while at the same time transcending its limits.

As our lifelong formation goes on within the prophetic community, we reflect together on our experience of the God who is the author of our mission, we courageously speak the world that is in our hearts and on our tongues—first to ourselves, and only then to others—and we gather to explore new ways of making that word audible and credible. For this, one of the tasks of our formative community life is to keep us listening sensitively to the changing signs of the times that resound in us, around us and among us.

The call to be prophetic demands a constant listening and attentiveness to what the creative Spirit of God is doing in the heart of the world. Where are the vibrations of new life? What are the new

aspirations of our age? What are the emerging paradigms of our time and what is their cultural and spiritual significance? What is God saying to us in the cry of the poor and oppressed? These are the perennial questions for prophetic discernment, questions that cannot be fobbed off with yesterday's solutions, questions which in today's rapidly changing world demand a novel and flexible response according to different cultural situations.¹²

If this is indeed the mission of religious community, many questions remain to be answered about formation. How do we proceed with the formation of individuals who have joined us because they have been attracted by the phase we are emerging from, that is, a rather self-focused, fulfilment-preoccupied emphasis? How do we balance the need to help young persons develop as persons while committing themselves to a prophetic and collaborative mission that is beyond questions of human growth and maturing? How do we live together so that those of us who are older may learn to move from rigidity or comfort into the flexibility and risk-taking that is the vocation of the prophet? How must community be if there is to be mutual learning and education, the sacred stories of the past transmitted by the older members, the dynamism and energy of others (perhaps but not necessarily younger), informing the present moment? How is the vision of founders not only to be preserved and kept alive, but also accommodated to new and ever-shifting cultural needs? How are we to avoid fragmentation by ensuring that we all take ownership of the prophetic vision, since without this vision we perish? None of these questions can be answered (if there *are* answers) in isolation. They are all community questions. Community is the process and context in which we agonize over the questions of new meaning.

While I hear and appreciate much that is good in the Roman document, I do not hear the urgency of these crucial questions. The document seems more preoccupied with directives than with questions, more with limits than with freedom, more with caution than with risk, more with structures than with possibilities, more with what has happened in the past than with what might be in the ever-renewing, ever-novel, ever-creative activity of the Spirit among us and within us, and among and within those around us who do not recognize such a Presence but whose lives call and challenge us. There is no sign in the document of an imagination that envisages community as evolving, shaped and reshaped constantly by the challenge of its life on the margin, by its fidelity to the founding vision

in new social and cultural settings and by the continuing experience of radical conversion, and by the constant stretching and enlarging that comes from leading lives open to being overturned by the gospel of Jesus and the cries of the *anawim*.

Religious life always begins
on the periphery of power.
Founding people, now as then,
feel their hearts stretched
by some group, some need,
peripheral in their time.
What is peripheral becomes
central in their lives.
A founding moment
when being centered in God
coincides with being pulled
to the periphery.¹³

NOTES

- ¹ Gerald Vann, *To heaven with Diana* (Chicago, Henry Regnery Co., 1965), p 52.
- ² Raymond E. Brown, *The community of the beloved disciple* (New York, Paulist, 1979), p 164.
- ³ Gerald Arbuckle, *Out of chaos* (New York, Paulist, 1988), p 48.
- ⁴ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *The prophetic horizon of religious life* (London, Excalibur Press, 1989), p 38 and 39.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p 41.
- ⁶ Marcello Azevedo, *Vocation for mission* (New York, Paulist, 1988), p 129.
- ⁷ Helder Camara, *The desert is fertile* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1971), pp 58-59.
- ⁸ John Francis Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a consumer society: the spirituality of cultural resistance* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1981), p 72.
- ⁹ Walbert Buhmann, *With eyes to see: Church and world in the third millennium* (Middlegree, U.K., St Paul Publications), p 156.
- ¹⁰ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *op. cit.*, p 56.
- ¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The prophetic imagination* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978), Chapters 3 and 4.
- ¹² Diarmuid O'Murchu, *op. cit.*, p 57.
- ¹³ Mary Jo Leddy, *Reweaving religious life* (Mystic, CT, Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), p 171.