

TEXT

50 Years of Faith, Prayer and Community: Nurturing Good-heartedness and Love in Action...

CLC National Assembly, June 2017

I argue that the experience of community, where 'community' is more than mere association, but is the fruit of a unity in God's spirit (so a community such as CLC), can both fulfil our lives and lead us into a fuller service of the Gospel.

PERSONALTY AND COMMUNITY

We do not relate to God, love God, as disparate and isolated human beings. We can't take God neat because Jesus will never separate the two 'great commandments' of love of God and love of neighbour; also because we are members of the Church which is called to witness by its collective life. St Paul tells the Corinthians, 'You are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (*1 Cor 12: 27*). That does not mean we relate to God only indirectly, only as subordinate parts in a massive organic entity. We are **persons**, each of us a unique centre of consciousness. We often feel tiny and insignificant in a cold world (a cold universe) but we are each of eternal significance, We each have our own experience, our own responsibilities - none of which anyone else shares in quite the same way. Jesus calls his disciples **friends**: and there is no impersonal or indirect friendship, except maybe on *Facebook*. In fact, though, we can and must go *beyond* even this friendship image, however precious. In his final great prayer, in *John*, Jesus asks his Father that 'they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (17: 20-21). We are each taken up personally into the relationship of Jesus and his Father, that relationship that is also the Holy Spirit: yet we are called to be one.

If we diminish the truth of personality, of the uniqueness of each person's experience and consciousness, we diminish human beings. However I still want to insist that we are persons not 'individuals'. When used as a noun describing a person the word 'individual' somehow indicates that our lives, our rights, our decisions, are essentially a matter for ourselves alone, that our relationships exist at a secondary or subordinate level. There's an important distinction to be made here. What I am criticising is individualism as defined by the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville: it is 'a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures; and to draw apart with his family and friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself' *Democracy in America* (written 1832-34). Egotism is 'a vice as old as the world', but de Tocqueville links individualism specifically with 'democracy': or, as we might say today, with the liberal market economy.

On the other hand this criticism of individualism does not disparage personal consciousness and independent thought, or discourage our seeking the solitude that permits that independence. A measure of solitude is essential to resist mass consciousness, social pressures like consumerism, to maintain personal equilibrium, to keep focus on our own priorities and our deepest desires. We may even need solitude to recognise our **responsibility** for society. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's solitude enabled him to resist the social tyranny of Nazism yet he led a Lutheran religious community and even wrote a book on community, *Life Together*. Even in our solitude, then, we are **always and essentially in relationship, social beings**. The 'individual' apart from relationship is a fiction or an abstraction. (Try asking a couple

married for 40 years who they would be as persons if they had never known each other.) The quality of our relationships defines our world. We construct the world we live in together.

LEVELS OF COMMUNITY

It follows that, that, to live healthily as CLC, we need an **adequate** notion of this ‘together’. Most basically we can think of community in terms of efficiency or effectiveness, the awareness of interdependence; of **synergy**, which allows us to accomplish much more with the help of others than we would have accomplished each working on our own.

Second, more systemically, we can think of community as an essential dimension in society, This is ‘civil society’: not the state, not the global business corporation (with its imperative of growth and profit) but that dimension of **experienced relationship**, which embodies mutual awareness, transparency respect, loyalty. ‘Civil society’ can (and must) humanise social structures.¹ Without this lubricant, politics and business become oppressive and ‘inhuman’. Think of Caiaphas: ‘You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed’ (*John 11: 49-50*).

‘Communal’ relationships are not necessarily intimate, but they are, as we say, ‘on a human scale’: so they can deliver us from the two de-humanising poles of **mass-consciousness** and of individualism. That is why civil society tends to be **defined** as good and friendly, though this assumption can be naive, since every gift has its perversion: civil society organisations range from the Samaritans (and CLC) to the Mafia.....

Third, the notion of community recognises that truly personal relationships go **beyond** face to face contacts (whether intimate like a long-married couple, or relatively casual like our momentary relationship with the supermarket check-out worker). In fact we are genuinely related to people we will never meet.

As CLC, though, we need to go deeper again, beyond sociology into the dimension of faith and spirituality. If you discuss mission it is a CLC mission in which you share, not just a personal drive or impulse or even conviction.

SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

In a speech to the Economic Club of Chicago in April 1999, the then PM Tony Blair spoke cogently about the need to recognise our global interdependence - but then defined ‘community as ‘the belief that partnership and cooperation are essential to advance self-interest.’ I think this definition is reductionist. It makes **self-interest** the *end*, the criterion of evaluation, and ‘community’ the necessary *means*. Fortunately there are richer models:

¹ In classic sociological literature, ‘community’ (*gemeinschaft*) tends to be contrasted with ‘society’ (*gesellschaft*) (Ferdinand Tönnies, 1855-1936).

The new Jesuit General Superior Arturo Sosa, speaking in Delhi this February said that understanding ourself as part of a community means understanding our relationship with others **as a dimension of ourself**. We don't seek **'self as the true good'** (as if our own life could properly be lived at the expense of others or by ignoring them) but **'the true good of the self'** which always **includes** the good of others. When the community flourishes we share in that. Equally, the community is enriched when we live at our best.

Second, in an essay 'Imagination and Community', the American cultural critic and novelist Marilynne Robinson (interestingly, she is a Calvinist, and wrote a wonderful trilogy of novels about the life of a Protestant minister in the Mid-West) writes of 'presence in absence'.

As an example, she discusses the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus, in which the quality of Jesus's presence to his closest friends is different than before. In *John 20*, Mary of Magdala falls at Jesus's feet, but is told 'Do not cling to me'. This saying is not the harsh rejection of a close and faithful personal relationship. However this Jesus is *for all*, not the special privilege of some - as was necessarily the case when Jesus himself was subject to the physical limits of being embodied. Now his presence is intimate, to each of us, but is also universal (he fills the whole Creation, including ourselves). (This presence in absence is precisely what we celebrate in the Feast of the Ascension.) This encounter with the Risen Christ — and this incorporation into his mission — underlies all the theology of the Church. Jesus, God's presence in our midst, the Word of God, is now, at the right hand of God, **closer to us than he could ever be before**.

Now Robinson argues that this consciousness of presence in absence is in fact *the basis of community*. It 'consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly'. Sensing Jesus presence to us - in a non-egoistic way - we strive to communicate his presence to others - which is also **our** presence to others.

TOWARDS LOVING ACTION

What Robinson calls 'imaginative love' is not merely a mental act. The sense that our lives in Christ interpenetrate with the lives of others is the inspiration behind service and mission. And this takes us to the next stage of our argument. Love in the NT (*agape*) is not primarily an emotion. It is a human commitment to **the good of the other**, the beloved.

This claim is a challenge to us because I suspect that in this matter we instinctively walk in the footsteps of Freud. He takes the primary mode of love to be **erotic** (*eros*, not *agape*) and regards other forms of 'love' as at best derivative and at worst deluded. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1929) Freud argues that in the case of *eros* (emotional and sexual love) our fulfilment depends on being accepted by the object of love. We risk rejection, sadness, even tragedy, so to love in this way is an act of courage. Fair enough: but from this starting point Freud goes on to argue that the Christian notion of love **avoids risk** by focusing not on *being loved* (our natural and instinctive desire) but on *loving*. Christians make themselves independent of the other person's acceptance! It is not a risk if we don't demand love in return. So Freud suggests that Christians want to 'love their neighbour because they are *unconsciously* afraid to **really** love anyone in particular (in case they are rejected). So from his starting point, that passionate bonding & sexual attraction **define love**, selflessness is either psychologically impossible or pathetically unhealthy. (Our love for God or God's love for us is even less comprehensible to Freud.)

I don't intend in any way to disparage emotional, passionate, sexual love etc. However, if one is a 'lover' one had better also be committed to the true human good of the other. Without *agape*, *eros* will soon become destructive, marked by possessiveness, jealousy, exploitation. I cite Freud at all because I think our popular fiction and movies follow his lead, at least in the sense that they imagine erotic love as the **primary**, the 'real' love. Since *eros* is an individual passion, the bond between 'love' and 'community' is severed. In contrast, in the perspective of *agape*, everything changes. In *Luke* the paradigm for the neighbour is not the intimate 'lover', not even the geographical neighbour or the fellow-member of the religious community, but the 'Good Samaritan', the one who acts with true humanity across psychological, religious and national boundaries. The Samaritan **makes himself** neighbour, through merciful and caring treatment of the supposed enemy. Similarly, for Ignatius, love is shown in deeds more than in words or in emotion (*Contemplatio*), just as religious faith is far more than 'belief' but is a combination of an interior personal trust in Christ, and a lived faithfulness in action.

To be adequate, this loving action involves kindness, mercy **and** justice. The search for justice does not dispense us from personal kindness and attentiveness to those we meet. It was said of Tolstoy (I don't know how fairly) that he was a great lover of humanity — but that he made life miserable for anyone close to him. So, in 1938 in the middle of Soviet purges and show-trials, the socialist Berthold Brecht wrote a poem translated 'To Posterity':

...Alas, we
Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.

By the same token, neither is personal kindness sufficient. Brecht was politically committed not just, as we say, 'charitable'. Christian faith entails a mission to the **world**. To understand love as *agape* means we can love those whose needs we can only serve through intermediate institutions, social and economic structure. This is the sphere in which love passes into justice, and that is the final step in the argument.

LOVE AND JUSTICE

The theologian Jon Sobrino argues that we **distort** the Gospel's notion of love if we instinctively take it to refer primarily to the charity expressed by individuals in their close relationships. The true search for justice is itself an act of love:

By justice I mean the kind of love that seeks effectively to humanise, to give life in abundance to the poor and oppressed majorities of the human race. Justice is thus a concrete form of love in which account is taken of the quantitative fact that its recipients form majorities and of the qualitative fact that they are poor and oppressed. (Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, SCM, London, 1985, p.48.)

For Sobrino, therefore, justice is a 'primordial and irreducible form of love'. It is truly 'spiritual', since it involves self-emptying no less than self-assertion. It emphasises service before self-gratification, it is willing to accept persecution and to 'take up one's cross'. In the Latin American context from which Sobrino writes, of mass poverty and tiny, often oppressive elites, this testimony appears to me profoundly persuasive.

Although in the 1970s and 1980s the Vatican was critical of liberation theology, papal social teaching echoed it in many respects. Here is St John Paul II, on **solidarity** — not just support but **love**:

In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimension of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation. . . . One's neighbour must be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person's sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one's life for others : (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, §.40)

Benedict XVI took up the theme in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* of 2005. Precisely because God's self is 'love' (and God's love is clearly **not** emotional bonding or needs-based!) the Church itself must be formed by 'charity'. Bearing in mind Marx's claim that 'the poor do not need charity but justice', Benedict rejects the polarisation. He replies 'Yes and No!', and puts forward two principles:

- a) **(Yes)**: The just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility &. . . . the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. . . .[The Church] cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines . . . and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper.
- b) **(No)**Love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. . . . We do not need a State which regulates and controls everything, but a State which, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces [civil society!] and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need. (§.28)

In *Caritas in Veritate* (2009, §§.6-7) Benedict expresses this relationship more concisely. 'Charity goes beyond justice, because to love is to give, to offer what is 'mine' to others ... but I cannot 'give' what is **mine** to others without first giving them what, in justice, is **theirs**. So 'Justice is the institutional path – we might also call it the political path – of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*.'

CONCLUSION

One of the enduring spiritual struggles is to balance the inner and the outer dimensions: we must work faithfully, throw ourselves into our responsibilities unstintingly: **and** we must be 'mindful' (or in traditional Christian language 'recollected') gathering our thoughts to be fully present to God's presence in our hearts, fully present to those we meet, and to our world.

The 'outer-inner' schema is not the same as the extravert-introvert one. We each have a relatively fixed temperament, we develop a way of being, of relating comfortably, that falls somewhere on the spectrum of extravert-introvert. But we have always and fully the task of **reconciling the outer and inner dimension of our lives**. A friend of mine who was General Secretary of *Caritas Internationalis*, Lesley-Anne Knight, once said when she was faced with what I took to be a serious personal injustice inside the Church, 'The way we deal with whatever happens to us on the outside will depend on what we have become on the inside'. There is no short-cut to generous self-giving (the 'good-heartedness')

mentioned in the conference title!) except by also **paying attention to our inner life**: therefore we need prayer, a provision for times of quiet, and so on.

That is not to dissolve the tension falsely, though, by saying that ‘the inner life always comes first’. I say this because we often hear something like this: ‘Since action from an impure heart cannot be effective, **first** be converted, **then** take action’.

- First, Who would ever think they were sufficiently holy to take action?! To think one is holy is to demonstrate that one is not yet holy!
- Second, as I’ve been arguing throughout, inner life is not **solipsistic** life: it is constituted by faithfulness, by attentiveness to people, work, events and the challenges of our social environment.. Faithfulness in seeking justice is not only the **effect** of conversion but is **part** of conversion.

I agree, however, that for those actively involved in mission and the search for justice, the challenge of sustaining an inner life is especially acute today: so much noise, so many projects, so externally defined benchmarks for achievement. Psychologists become social critics as they say something similar. A recent *Observer* article by a psychiatrist, Holan Liang maintained that the most important things parents need to offer their children are not what she called ‘the outer things’ (gaining entry into the best school, providing expensive toys or hobbies etc.) but ‘the inner things’ — affection curiosity, affection, patience. And we can’t teach those things without modelling them. (*David Brandon on catalysts.*)

None of us is fully integrated here. We need to be patient with ourselves, to maintain a certain lightness of spirit as we confess our fragilities, to avoid being too solemn or judgmental of ourselves. In a phrase I came across recently we need to accept the ‘not-quiterness of life’. At the same time, the **call**, the ideal, is unmistakable I love the first of the ‘Servant Songs’ in *Isaiah*, which shows that this ‘servant’, Israel itself (in Christian understanding, a figure of Christ) **does** integrate seeming ‘opposites’: courage and persistence with gentleness :

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; (*the gentleness*)

he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth; (*the courage and endurance*)
(*Isaiah 42: 1-4*)

The ultimate gift of an authentic community is that we can complement each other, we can begin as Church to embody gifts that the individuals never fully reconcile within themselves. Jean Monnet

said of the EU, Nothing major begins without charismatic leaders. Nothing is sustained without institutions.’ So with the Church: CLC can do what no person acting alone can do. When I visited Nairobi ten years ago, for the World Social Forum and the ‘Ignatian Encounter’ that preceded it, I learned that CLC in Nairobi ran a school in the district of Kibera (which was, I was told, the biggest slum in Africa). Amidst dreadful post-election violence a group of unarmed mothers defied the gangs who wanted to burn down the local school in protest. (‘This is **your** school.’) Their faithful political action was the fruit of the spiritual power of the community, the gift of God’s Spirit.

Frank Turner SJ

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- This business of inner and outer. Do you find that taking time for yourself and for focus on God can be an 'escape' from others and from responsibilities: or is it something essential to enable you to be there for others?
- Is your experience of CLC that the group experience and sharing is a support for your personal prayer, or have you found that prayer leads you to deepen the experience of the group? Conversely, do your social commitments offer the incentive for prayer?
- Is there a way in which the CLC group can help you identify issues of justice, or even offer a way of addressing them communally. Could there be a coherent CLC mission that goes beyond the distinct experience of a local group?

