

Community and Growth

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Living with Every Day

One of the signs that a community is alive can be found in material things. Cleanliness, furnishings, the way flowers are arranged and meals prepared, are among the things which reflect the quality of people's hearts. Some people may find material chores irksome; they would prefer to use their time to talk and be with others. They haven't yet realised that the thousand and one small things that have to be done each day, the cycle of dirtying and cleaning, were given by God to enable us to communicate through matter. Cooking and washing floors can become a way of showing our love for others. If we see the humblest task in this light, everything can become communion and so celebration - because it is celebration to be able to give.

It is important too to recognise the humble and material gifts that others bring and to thank them for them. Recognition of the gifts of others is essential in community. All it takes is a smile and two small words - 'Thank you'.

When we put love into what we do, it becomes beautiful, and so do the results. There is a lack of love in a dirty or untidy community. But the greatest beauty is in simplicity and lack of affectation, where everything is oriented towards a meeting of people among themselves and with God. The way we look after the house and garden shows whether we feel really at home, relaxed, and peaceful. The house is the nest; it is like an extension of the body. Sometimes we tend to forget the role of the environment in liberation and inner growth.

Our lives in l'Arche are disarmingly simple. We often say that half the day is taken up with dirtying things and the other half with cleaning up! That is not entirely true because we also have

work, celebrations, meals and prayer. But that does say something about the littleness and ordinariness of our lives. This is particularly evident when we are with people who have severe handicaps. They need a lot of presence and caring in all the vital acts of the body: bathing, toilet, clothing, feeding and so on. Many of them cannot be left alone during the day, even for short periods; their anguish is too great. Much of our life is situated around touch: holding them, bathing them, playing with them. Of course there is no place for interesting conversation. Play and laughter is the only communication possible. We experience communion with them around all the very little things-to-do of each day.

We are *all* called to do, not extraordinary things, but very ordinary things, with an extraordinary love that flows from the heart of God. St Paul expresses this very clearly when he says that if we do extraordinary things like speaking with all the tongues of angels and human beings; if we have all knowledge and faith; if we give all our goods to the poor and our bodies to martyrdom, but have no love, then all these things have no value at all. And then he goes on to say what love is: it is to be patient and kind, not jealous nor boastful, not arrogant nor rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it finds its joy in truth. And it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all.

Love is communion, communion with God and with our brothers and sisters. Love is manifested in all the little things of life that build community, not in heroic acts.

Some communities are always doing big projects, noble acts. They go from one big project to another. Things are always exciting and prophetic. There always seem to be marvellous interventions of God. All this can be true and wonderful, but then communities must remember that the essential is to be found in all the little acts of love day by day; it is being patient with people who drive you up the wall.

I find a great resemblance between contemplative monasteries and l'Arche communities. At first sight there is nothing more

different than these two ways of living. But if one looks more closely, one discovers that both are centred on the reality of presence and communion, manual work and prayer; neither type of community does big things, and both are regarded by many in our societies as useless.

Communities that are always involved in the big and the heroic are perhaps fleeing from the essential. They should meditate on the words of Micah (6:8): 'He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And, be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:12-17)

A community which has a sense of work done well, quietly and lovingly, humbly and without fuss, can become a community where the presence of God is profoundly lived. All its members will feel at home, living all that makes up daily life tenderly and competently. They will be happy to serve, considering others before themselves, communicating peacefully with God, others, and nature, and living in God as he does in them. So the community will take on a whole contemplative dimension.

Many people believe that community life is made up of a series of problems to be solved. And consciously or unconsciously, they are waiting for the day when all the tensions, conflicts, and problems brought by marginal people and structures will be resolved and

there will be no more problems left! But the more we live community life, the more we discover that it is not so much a question of resolving problems as of learning to live with them patiently. Most problems are not resolved. With time, and a certain insight and fidelity in listening, they clear up when we least expect them to.

But there will always be others to take their place!

Very often, we tend to look for 'great' moments or beautiful and ecstatic celebrations. We forget that the best nourishment of community life, the one which renews us and opens our hearts, is in all the small gestures of fidelity, tenderness, humility, forgiveness, sensitivity, and welcome which make up everyday life. It is these which are at the heart of community and can bring us to a realisation of love. It is these which touch hearts and reveal gifts.

Daily rhythm

When I was with Chris, in our community in Kerala in India, I really enjoyed watching the Indian masons who were working on the house. They worked hard, but with a great sense of freedom and relaxation. They seemed to enjoy building something beautiful together – and remunerative, of course! The women laughed as they carried piles of bricks on their heads. In the evening, they must have been tired. But I'm sure they slept with peaceful hearts.

There is something very beautiful in work which is well and precisely done. It is a participation in the activity of God, who makes all things well and wisely, beautiful to the last detail.

In these days of automation, we tend to forget the value of manual work which is well done. There is something contemplative in the craftsman. The real carpenter, who loves his wood and knows his tools, doesn't push himself and doesn't get irritable. He knows what he is doing; every action has its purpose and his work is beautiful.

There is something particularly unified about a community

where the work is hard and precisely defined and all the members have their place. Where there is too much luxury and leisure, too much wasted time and imprecision, a community quickly becomes tepid and the cancer of egoism spreads.

In the community of Kerala, all the water for cooking, washing, drinking, and watering the garden has to be drawn from the well. That sort of activity keeps us close to nature and to each other.

Here's a text I like:

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. (Deut. 30:11-14)

Daily life in community is not beyond us.

Sometimes this littleness is hard to accept. I remember one summer I was responsible for a holiday group from my community. There were fifteen of us. Friends had lent us a house near a Trappist monastery. I loved to get up early to go and pray with the monks. The silence and the peace opened up my heart. Then, around 8 o'clock I would walk back down to the house; my heart was a bit heavy. I knew I would have to get some of the people up; they would have dirtied their beds and I would have to wash and dress them. And then there would be breakfast and so on. All the chores and squabbles of daily life together; all its bodiliness. How far from the peace and quiet of the monastery!

All that inner pain obliged me to go more deeply into the spirituality of l'Arche. It was important for me to find unity in my being, not to have just a deep spirituality early in the morning and then business for the rest of the day. I had to find how to put love and prayerfulness into all my activities and bodily gestures,

into all the cleaning and washing up, into all the chores and togetherness of community living.

I find it marvellous that Jesus lived for thirty hidden years in Nazareth with his mother and Joseph. No one yet knew he was the Christ, the son of God. He lived family and community life in humility, according to the Beatitudes. He worked with wood and lived the small happenings of a Jewish community in the love of his Father. It was only after he had lived the good news of love that he went out to preach it. The second period of his life was the time of struggle, when he tried to get his message across and used signs to confirm his authority. It seems to me that some Christians are in danger of talking too much about things they do not live: they have their theories on what makes for the 'good life' but they have not really experienced it. They speak from ideas rather than from the heart. The hidden life of Jesus is the model for all community life.

The third stage of his life was the one when his friends deserted him, and he was persecuted by the religious and civil authorities. People who are committed to a community may also go through this third period.

Spirituality of movement and spirituality of the circle

Some people have a spirituality of movement and hope. They are filled with energy; they are called to travel and carry the good news and do great things for the Kingdom. The spirituality of St Paul and the apostles was of this kind. They were seized by the desire to make Jesus known and to create new Christian communities. The spirituality of others is to stay where they are: it is the 'spirituality of the circle'. They have more need of a regular rhythm than of constant movement. They use their energies to remain in the presence of God and of their brothers and sisters. Their spirituality is sensitive and compassionate, rooted in the everyday, rather than one which shows itself in action and movement.

People whose spirituality is of the active kind can sometimes be so taken up with the future that they find it hard to live with the present; their heads and hearts can become blinded by projects. If life is too regular, they become impatient; they need adventure and the unexpected. The others, by contrast, become frightened by too much of the unexpected; they need regularity. A community needs dynamic people who construct and do dramatic things. But even more it needs people whose roots are in the spirituality of everyday life.

The spirituality of Nazareth, or the spirituality of the circle which implies littleness, love of little things and humility, is not easy in our world. We are schooled from an early age to go up the ladder of human promotion, to be outstanding, to succeed and to win prizes; we are taught to fend for ourselves and to be independent. We are taught how important it is to possess knowledge, success, power and reputation. We are taught to put external values over and above internal ones. However the gospels call us to love and live the Beatitudes; to die to ourselves. This implies a huge change of attitude, a conversion. And it can only come about if we are truly grafted on to Jesus and receive his Holy Spirit. We will never be able to live the littleness of love unless we are truly determined to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him. And that means that we have to be rooted in prayer.

The laws of matter

There are some fundamental laws which communities have to obey. We have to respect the budget and the system of accounting, and find the resources we need to live. A community needs structures, discipline and a rule, even if this is only to do with the times of meals. We have to know who does what and how. All this makes up the skeleton and flesh of the body which is community. If it is not respected, the community will die. But of course, the

administration, budgeting and community structure are only there to allow the community's spirit and goals to develop and deepen.

Some people reject the physical body – whether their own or the community's – as if there were something dirty in it and its instincts were bad. These people don't want structures; they are afraid of them. They reject all rules, discipline, and authority. They don't respect the paint on the walls, either. They have no sense of the value of money or of responsibility towards material goods. Their ideal of a community is one which is completely spiritual, made up of love, warm relationships and spontaneity. But they are unrealistic: community is both body and spirit.

If a community can be thrown off course by people who reject the laws of matter, it can also be stifled by those who rely completely on rules, the law, well-run accounts and efficient administration. People who look only to these things kill the community's heart and spirit. As Stephen Verney says: 'We are more earthy and more heavenly than we have cared to admit.' The same is true of a community. The body is important: it is beautiful, and we have to care for it. But we do this for the life, spirit, heart, motivation, hope and growth of those for whom the community exists.

Love and poverty

The question of poverty is a hard one! A community can so quickly become rich, for the best of all possible reasons. We need a refrigerator so that we can buy meat cheaper and keep the left-overs – and then we need a deep freeze. It's true that a large initial outlay can bring eventual savings. A car is absolutely necessary if we are to shop economically in the market; so we stop walking and using bicycles. Machines help us to do things more quickly and efficiently, but they can also destroy some community activities. I would be sad if we ever got a dishwasher for the houses in Trosly: if we did, we would no longer get together, relax and laugh over the dishes. Other communities would say that preparing vegetables offers the same chance to share. Machines can also throw the weakest people out of work and this is sad, because their small

contribution to the housework or cooking is their way of giving something to the community. We are in danger of organising community life as if it were a factory, a hospital or some other institution. People who are capable of doing things very quickly with the help of machines become tremendously busy, always active, in charge of everyone – a bit like machines themselves. Less capable people are condemned to inactivity and gravitate to the television.

Are there any norms in this question of poverty? One thing is sure – a community which gets richer, has everything it needs and is completely self-reliant, will become isolated, just because it needs no help. It will close up in itself and its wealth. It loses its radiance. It will be able to do things for its neighbours, but they will be able to offer nothing in return. There will be no exchange or sharing. The community will become the rich cousin. To what will it witness then?

A community which has all it needs and more is in danger of running up expenses; it will be wasteful or abuse what it has; it will lose its respect for material goods. It will lose its creativity with matter and become slipshod. It will become incapable of distinguishing between luxury, what is helpful for its moral and physical well-being, and what is absolutely essential. A rich community very quickly loses the dynamic of love.

I remember Brother Andrew of the Missionaries of Charity talking about Calcutta, where he lived for fourteen years. The scale of human misery there, he said, made it the worst city in the world. But it was also the most beautiful, because it had the most love. When we become rich, we throw up barriers; perhaps we even hire a watchdog to defend our property. Poor people have nothing to defend and often share the little they have.

In a poor community, there is a lot of mutual help and sharing of goods, as well as help from outside. Poverty becomes a cement of unity. This is very striking at l'Arche when we go on pilgrimage together: everyone shares gladly, sometimes contenting themselves with very little. But when we become rich, we become more demanding and difficult: we tend to remain in our own corner, alone, and isolated. In poor African villages, people share in mutual support and celebration. In modern cities, they shut themselves up

in their own apartments. Because they have all the material things they need, they seem not to need each other. They are self-sufficient. There is no interdependence. There is no love.

A community which spends a lot of time watching television very quickly loses its sense of creativity, sharing, and celebration. People don't meet any more - they are glued to the screen. When people love each other, they are content with very little. When we have light and joy in our hearts, we don't need material wealth. The most loving communities are often the poorest. If our own life is luxurious and wasteful, we can't approach poor people. If we love people, we want to identify with them and share with them.

The important thing is for communities to know what they want to witness to. Poverty is only a means to a witness of love and a way of life.

I very much liked what Nadine said about the l'Arche community in Honduras, Casa Nazareth. There, they have welcomed Lita and Marcia, both of whom are visibly handicapped. They both come from very poor families and it is important that their new home is always open to the neighbours - like the rest of the homes in the area. This is the way that people live there, and Lita and Marcia mustn't live differently, because then it would be like living in an institution; they need to have friends, and live like everyone else. So the local children are always running in and out of the house, laughing, singing, chattering and playing. I asked Nadine if she'd like a tape recorder and she turned it down, because she'd have to keep it locked up to prevent the children playing with it and breaking it. If she did this, a cupboard would become a secret hiding place, and so a barrier to welcome. And then, she said, l'Arche shouldn't have things that the neighbours don't have themselves. If it did, people would want to play with them or have them themselves. So wealth could very quickly throw up barriers of envy, or create a sense of inferiority, because possession means power. Poverty, on the other hand, should mean love and welcome. The question remains the same: do we want to witness to love and welcome, or do we want to retreat behind a barrier of comfort and security?

But larger and richer communities shouldn't despair! They have to witness to another sort of poverty. They can still avoid luxury and waste; they can, for instance, use their space to welcome more people. Their wealth is a gift of God, but it doesn't belong to them – they are only trustees. They should use this gift to spread the good news of love and sharing.

The conflict between living littleness and political commitment

We have a small community in Bethany on the West Bank. There is a lot of pain in the village and surrounding area. The Palestinian people are struggling for survival. The Israelis are also struggling for survival and have been trying to crush recent uprisings, often with great cruelty. It is difficult and disturbing just to be living there with Rula and Siham, helping them to eat, to dress and do all the little things of daily life when there is so much going on around 'us. If we get too involved in what is happening, we will not be able to be present in mind and spirit to Rula and Siham and to others who need our presence and attention in order to live. And yet we can feel torn and guilty doing little things, when so many important things are happening which could change the course of history for so many people. It is not always easy to trust in the importance of doing little things when political struggle is raging round us.

Political dimension of the community

Christian communities cannot be outside society. They are not bolt-holes for the emotions, offering spiritual drugs to stave off the sadness of everyday life. They are not places where people can go to salve their consciences and retreat from reality into a world of dreams. They are places of resource, which are there to help

people grow towards freedom, so that they can love as Jesus loves them. 'There is no greater love than to give one's life for one's friends.' The message of Jesus is clear. He reprimands the rich and proud and exalts the humble. Christian communities have to be at the heart of society, visible to everyone; they should not hide their light under a bushel. They should be a sign that we don't need artificial stimulants or material goods for our hearts to rejoice at the beauty of those around us and of the universe in which we live, a sign that we can work together to make our neighbourhood, village, or city a place of creativity and human growth.

So there is a whole political dimension to Christian communities.

Some Christians are very taken up by politics. They can be terribly anti-communist, forming rather fascist organisations to fight the 'red devil'. Or they can be fiercely anti-capitalist, fighting for new structures and redistribution of resources. Both these tendencies can lead to a centralisation – whether to protect the free-market economy or to further wholesale nationalisation.

I sometimes wonder whether these fighting Christians wouldn't do better to put their energies into creating communities which live as far as they can by the charter of the Beatitudes. If they did this, they would be able to live by, and measure progress by, values other than those of material success, acquisition of wealth and political struggle. They could become the yeast in the dough of society. They would not change political structures at first. But they would change the hearts and spirits of the people around them, by offering them a glimpse of a new dimension in human life – that of inwardness, love, contemplation, wonderment and sharing. They would introduce people to a place where the weak and poor, far from being pushed aside, are central to their society. My personal hope is that, if this spirit of community really spreads, structures will change. Structures are – tyrannies excepted – the mirrors of hearts. But if change is to come, some people should be working now on the political level towards a society which is more just, true and sharing, in which communities can take root and shine, and where human beings can be truly human.

Something similar could be said about people who throw themselves militantly into *causes*. Some people struggling for peace are terribly aggressive, even with 'rival' peace movements. To struggle for a cause it is best for people to be rooted in a community where they are learning reconciliation, acceptance of difference and of their own darkness, and how to celebrate. Isn't there a danger when groups with noble humanitarian causes develop very aggressive attitudes and divide the world into 'goodies' and 'baddies'? This type of elitism can be dangerous and continues a form of apartheid and oppression towards those who do not share the same ideas.

Communities which live simply and without waste, and which do not use television all the time, help people to discover a whole new way of life, which demands fewer financial resources but more commitment to relationships and to celebration. Is there a better way to bridge the gulf which widens daily between rich and poor countries? It is not simply a question of generous people going to work in developing countries. Rich countries themselves have to be awakened to the fact that happiness is not to be found in a frantic search for material goods, but in simple and loving relationships, lived and celebrated in communities which have renounced that search.

Life in industrialised countries has become artificial, its patterns far from nature. Houses are full of electric gadgets; leisure activities are limited to television and the cinema; cities are noisy, stifling and polluted; people are exhausted by long hours of travel in subway, train and car – when they aren't equally exhausted by crawling through traffic jams. The films they watch and the news they listen to concentrate on violence. They cannot possibly integrate all that is happening over the world – earthquakes in Azerbaijan, famine in the Sahel, fighting in the Middle East, disruption in Northern Ireland, censorship of the press, tyranny; torture, people being condemned to prison without trial, or to a psychiatric hospital when they are not ill. It is overwhelming. And people are

overwhelmed by it all. They are not equipped to assimilate all this dramatic information. That is why they latch on to new myths which announce the salvation of the world, or rigid sects which claim to have a monopoly of the truth. The more anguish people feel, the more they seek out new saviours – whether these are political, psychological, religious, or mystical. Or else they throw everything over in the race for instant stimulation, wealth and prestige.

Communities are a sign that it is possible to live on a human scale, even in the present world. They are a sign that we do not have to be slaves to work, to inhuman economies, or to the stimulations of artificial leisure. A community is essentially a place where we learn to live at the pace of humanity and nature. We are part of the earth and we need the heat of the sun, the water of the sea, and the air we breath. We are part of nature and its laws are written in our flesh. That doesn't mean that scientific discoveries aren't useful too. But they have to be at the service of life, applied to create an environment in which human beings can truly grow – whether in town or country, middle-class areas or slums.

A community should be primarily not a grouping of shock-troops, commandos or heroes, but a gathering of people who want to be a sign that it is possible for people to live together, love each other, celebrate and work for a better world and a fellowship of peace. A community is a sign that love is possible in a materialistic world where people so often either ignore or fight each other. It is a sign that we don't need a lot of money to be happy – in fact, the opposite. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* gave us a lot to think about.¹ In our l'Arche communities, we have to put still more thought into the quality of life. We have to learn to live each day and find our own internal and external rhythms.

In rich countries today there is a growing opposition to immigrants from poorer countries; they are frequently badly treated and housed in terrible conditions. Apartheid exists not only in South

1 E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (Blond & Briggs, London, 1973; Sphere, London, 1974).

Africa; it exists in all our hearts. We all tend to be clannish and to hide ourselves in fear, in our clubs and with friends, with those who think like us. Isn't it politically important today to give witness that different kinds of people can live together – that the dividing walls of hostility are not inevitable? Isn't it important to show that people coming from different cultures and religious traditions can respect and love each other; that war and oppression are not inevitable? Isn't it important, in a world where people with a handicap are being eliminated before or shortly after birth, that there be communities that manifest their beauty and value?

Village people in African and other poor countries have a quality of life. They know how to live in families and communities, even though they don't always know how to act efficiently. I sometimes meet missionaries who know how to do all sorts of things: build schools and hospitals, teach, and take care of people. They sometimes even know how to play an effective part in political struggles. But they often do not know how to live together. Their house doesn't feel joyful or alive; it doesn't feel like a community where everyone is relaxed, bound together in deep relationship. That is sad, because Christians should, above all, bear witness by their lives. That is as important today, when African countries are torn between village traditions and a taste for money and progress, as it has ever been. Missionaries often seem to be saying that successful living depends on being able to use machinery and costly techniques, on having a refrigerator and a car. I always marvel at the Little Sisters of Jesus, the sisters of Mother Teresa and others who live among their people and bear witness by their lives.

We sometimes wonder what l'Arche is doing in Calcutta. There are fifteen people at Asha Niketan. Some of them used to live on the streets, destitute because of their mental handicap. The house is in a grossly overcrowded area, stuck on the side of Sealdah – the busiest railway station in the world. Life is happy, through the usual ups and downs. There is enough to eat and there is work from a Philips factory. The community is growing slowly towards

financial independence – though it's not certain that it will achieve it. In the street, there is a multitude of poor people who have no work at all. A bit further away, there are some very rich people who seem quite unaware of their responsibilities. So we wonder what l'Arche is doing there – a small drop of water in that vast desert of suffering and misery.

But we have to remind ourselves constantly that we are not saviours. We are simply a tiny sign, among thousands of others, that love is possible, that the world is not condemned to a struggle between oppressors and oppressed, that class and racial warfare is not inevitable. We are a sign that there is hope, because we believe that the Father loves us and sends his Spirit to transform our hearts and lead us from egoism to love, so that we can live everyday life as brothers and sisters.

Sartre is wrong when he says that hell is other people. It is heaven that is other people. They only become hell when we are locked into our own egoism and darkness. If they are to become heaven, we have to make the slow passage from egoism to love. It is our own hearts and eyes that have to change.

I marvel sometimes when I visit families with a son or a daughter who has a severe handicap. The parents are living each day, and sometimes the whole day, with little help or times of rest. They are not admired or honoured for what they are doing; sometimes they are even criticised for not having aborted their child or put him or her into an institution, outside the general run of society. We in l'Arche have days off; we get help and encouragement from professionals and clergy. We even receive salaries. And often people see us as wonderful and generous people. And yet, isn't it those families who are living love and truth and humility and abandonment to God in a special way? Isn't it all those families in the ghettos of large cities struggling to feed their children who are radiating a truth about our humanity? People who have chosen to live in community have much to learn from all those people throughout the world who are living love in a simple hidden way, and who are there welcoming and forgiving.