

09. Community



The central importance of community

Bernard Lonergan SJ *Philosophy of God and theology*

‘The person is not the primordial fact.

What is primordial is the community.

It is within community,

through the inter-subjective relations

that are the life of the community,

that there arises the differentiation of the individual person ...

If persons are the products of community,

if the strongest and best of communities is based on love,

then religious experience

and the emergence of personality

go hand in hand.’

The primary task of community-as-community is the building and maintenance of the community itself. The community may, in some cases, share a common task. In other cases, diverse individuals have diverse tasks. Much can be said about these tasks and about the role of good administration in assisting their proper and efficient realisation. But because of the critical importance of community for the flourishing of mature people, it remains that the primordial task of a community is the nurturing of community.

Behind this statement lies the key insight that the goal of maturing is individuation. Each person in the community has unique gifts, call, and mission.

Differences, therefore, are to be nurtured and celebrated. We are not speaking of individualism. We are not speaking of rivalry, or independence. Using the analogy of the body, Paul speaks of the inter-dependence of mature and graced persons, who, sensitive to each other's gifts, cooperate to build the harmony that befits the body of Christ, each adding his or her own strength to the common mission.

Only to the extent that we are maturing as persons
can we help build authentic community,
and authentic community is the appropriate environment
within which maturing persons can blossom.
Attention must primarily go to the nurturing of community.

Far from community being the end of differences,
it is the only safe and nurturing environment
in which creative and inter-dependent differences can flourish.
It should be clear that we are not speaking of conformity,
but of cooperation;
we are not speaking of sinful obduracy
or fearful hesitancy, or of me-first individualism.
We are speaking of a community in which
to be out of step is not necessarily to be wrong,
and to be in step is not necessarily to be right.

If the celibate fails to grow in an adult and nurturing and generative love as a celibate, he or she can be caught in a self-centred existence, and can end up in distracting substitutes that do not satisfy and that do not lead to maturity.

It is never too late to go to Jesus and to seek from him a share in the purity of his heart. In communion we respond to his invitation: 'This is my body given for you'. May we learn to be as loving and self-giving as Jesus in our self-giving.

MSC Constitutions

45. 'The community will strive to create an atmosphere in which each member can give himself more generously to the Lord in celibate love, for the building up of his Kingdom, both within the community and among the people he serves. Community life, commitment to mission and a healthy asceticism will help us to live celibacy fruitfully and honestly. Convinced of the love of Jesus, we will not be afraid to live this form of solitude which God alone can fill.'

Vow of poverty and community

Detachment, simplicity of life, the common life, accountability are required of religious by their vow.

- The problem of poverty is personal, and therefore institutional: it involves the way people relate - economically and in every way. It therefore demands a communal commitment to oppose institutionalized selfishness, exploitation and irresponsibility. It involves contributing to every effort to alleviate poverty by creating structures (including economic structures) which will effectively relate finite resources to human ends: by co-operation, criticism or condemnation. If we are to play a role in effectively responding to the cry of the poor, we will need to be involved in communal processes.

‘If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ’(Ephesians 4:15). We will need:

i) New common experiences

ii) New common understandings of these experiences.

iii) Processes for common reflection to bring us to a new common affirmation in regard to how things really are, and the real desirability and effectability of being poor-like-Jesus.

iv) Consensus concerning what ought to be done to realize this value.

v) New common decisions to do what is to be done.

MSC Constitutions

‘By professing poverty, we commit ourselves to be, like Jesus, completely available for God and the kingdom, in all things concerning material goods. Our sense of poverty will lead us to put all our talents, time and effort at the service of the community and its mission’ (n. 47).

MSC Constitutions

‘In order to grow in the commitment entailed by a preferential choice for the poor according to the spirit of our congregation, our style of life – both for individuals and communities – should always reflect a great simplicity, taking into account the circumstances of time and place. We adhere to the common law of work and do not look for privileges. With confidence in God we accept dependence and even insecurity, which is the lot of many people’ (n. 48).

MSC Constitutions

‘Each community through regular revision of life will examine before God the manner in which the vow of poverty is being lived, especially with regard to the following points:

- responsibility concerning the goods of the community
- simplicity of life
- a sense of work
- the quality of their sharing with the poor
as well as with other communities and the missions
- their sense of social justice

In order that our detachment might be real, it must be collective as well as individual’ (Statute n. 127).

MSC Constitutions

‘After their profession, all that members receive, as remuneration for their work or ministry, or for whatever reason (except as patrimonial goods) belongs to the goods of the community and cannot be considered as personal goods’ (n. 242).

Covenant of Love



Prayer

J. Tillard OP La communauté Religieuse (NRT May 1972,51).

‘The law of social existence demands that the central value which unites a group should be expressed and celebrated in community. If the religious community knows that it exists only because it is brought into being by the grace of the Spirit, it will need to look towards its source of continued existence. Would we be too categorical if we affirmed that a religious community is risking its very fraternal texture as soon as it ceases to live in prayer its relation to God.’

MSC Constitutions

‘Jesus became obedient out of love; he even gave his life to accomplish his Father’s will. We profess obedience to share in his spirit of obedience, that we may serve better our brothers and share more deeply in the mission of our Society and the Church’ (n. 38).

‘By professing obedience, we commit ourselves to seek and accept the will of God in the life and mission of the Society’ (n. 39).

MSC Constitutions

‘It is in communion with our brothers that we seek to discover the will of God. We bind ourselves to live and act always within that communion, and to practice obedience in mutual charity. We bring into community whatever gifts nature and grace have given us, and put them at the service of Christ and the People of God’ (n. 40).

‘The community will endeavour, to the best of its ability, to strengthen each member in his response to God’s will for him, both in what he should personally become, and in what he should do for God and for his brothers’ (n. 41).

MSC Formula Instituti 1869

‘Those who enter our Society can readily accept that others may surpass them in learning in mortification, in poverty; but they will not allow themselves to be outdone in obedience and mutual charity.’

Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* (pages 25-26)

‘When people enter community, especially from a place of loneliness in a big city or from a place of aggression and rejection, they find the warmth and the love exhilarating. This permits them to start lifting their masks and barriers and to become vulnerable. They may enter into a time of communion and great joy. But then, too, as they lift their masks and become vulnerable, they discover that community can be a terrible place, because it is a place of relationship; it is the revelation of our wounded emotions and of how painful it can be to live with others, especially with some people. It is so much easier to live with books and objects, television, or dogs and cats! It is so much easier to live alone and just do things for others, when one feels like it.’

Vanier continued

‘As we live with people daily, all the anger, hatred, jealousies and fears of others, also the need to dominate, to run away or to hide, seem to rise up from the wounds of our early childhood when we felt unloved and abandoned or over-protected. All the dirt seems to come up to the surface of our consciousness from the tomb in which it had all been hidden. We begin to experience terrible anguish because people are clutching on to us, asking too much of us, or simply because their presence reminds us of authoritarian parents who did not have time to listen to us.

Vanier continued

‘Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective or sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realise how incapable we are of loving, how much we deny to others, how closed in on ourselves we are. And if we are incapable of loving, what is left? There is nothing but despair, anguish and the need to destroy. Love then appears to be an illusion. We are condemned to inner isolation and death.

Vanier continued

‘So community life brings a painful revelation of our limitations, weaknesses and darkness; the unexpected discovery of the monsters within us is hard to accept. The immediate reaction is to try to destroy the monsters, or to hide them away again, pretending that they don’t exist. Or else we try to flee from community life and relationships with others, and to assume that the monsters are theirs, not ours. It is the others who are guilty, not us.’

MSC Constitutions

‘Jesus is the perfect model of our consecrated life.
His love is our inspiration and driving force.
Therefore our life and apostolate will be marked
by a sincere and fervent love of the Incarnate Word.
This love will urge us constantly to share
the sentiments of the Heart of Christ’ (n. 11).

MSC Constitutions

‘I pray that they may all be one.
Father! May they be in us,
just as you are in me and I am in you.
May they be one, so that the world will believe
that it was you who sent me’ (John 17:21, quoted page 20).

MSC Constitutions

‘Prayer will be regarded by all members not only as an indispensable element in their own life but also as the foundation and support of their community life and mission’ (n. 137).

MSC Constitutions

‘Elderly or sick members, no longer able to work, continue to take part in the mission of their religious family. *By sharing in the life of the community,* and by offering to God their prayers, sufferings and infirmities, they unite themselves to the Paschal Mystery, proclaiming the love in the Heart of Jesus’ (n. 25).

Examine how I spend time

MSC Constitutions

‘Those who live under the same roof and, more importantly, those whose ministry obliges them to live apart, must take seriously the need to **devote time to community life** and to promote it by celebrating special occasions together. All of us will strive to remain united in spirit, and dedicated to the same goals’ (n. 30).

MSC Constitutions

‘Conscious of its responsibility for its life and work, the community will meet regularly to discuss community life and mission. In order to enrich fraternal communion and provide enlightenment and encouragement, each member will gladly share his apostolic experience with his brothers’ (n. 126 Statute)

MSC Constitutions

‘True community does not come about all at once. It grows by God’s grace and the constant effort of each member. It needs to be built up each day into a community of faith and love, by prayer and the Eucharist, by listening to and sharing the Word of God. At the same time it needs to be built up as a human community knit together by fraternal relationships, where each member brings his talents and knows that he is recognised, accepted, heard, encouraged and challenged’ (n. 33).

MSC Constitutions

‘Continuing formation is a duty of all religious.
It should enable them to deepen their commitment to their vocation.
Under the authority of the Provincial Superior
each local community will organise its apostolate
so that each member will be enabled to pay proper attention
to his personal, continuing formation’ (n. 92).

MSC Constitutions

‘Our way of living with one another is one of the most important elements in our efforts to attract young people to our way of life.

Simplicity of life

and a genuine interest in the marginalised people of today’s society will also be regarded as very important elements in our vocations’ apostolate’ (Statute n. 94).

Next

Consecrated Religious life today



In Clearer Light