Building the Christian Community

Our priority for action

All our attention should be centered on the building of Christian communities which are rooted in the cultural milieu... GA/12

An old confrère "thinks out loud"

"With our older men and the few young ones, we are at an impasse; we have no future... We have been here for more than a hundred years and we have not succeeded in forming a Local Church. What we need now is a sharp break, to provoke a conscious awareness. I wish I were mistaken, but that is the conclusion I have come to."

Another wants us to share his joy

"I consider this the best period in all my missionary life. Now I am very happy and I better understand my work as a priest." (Father Martinho, Brazil, 60 years old).

What is Father Martinho's secret? All alone, with a large area in Brazil to care for, he asked the Principal Superior for more Fathers to help him. But there were none. The Principal Superior encouraged him to appeal to the laity for help; to have confidence in them. Living and dynamic communities began to spring up. Now he has no need of those extra priests. Father Martinho discovered the "miracle" of small communities. In the words of his Principal Superior, "these communities are truly a rejuvenation for the Spiritans."

From all over, Bishops are calling for the creation of Christian communities inspired by the renewal of the Second Vatican Council. To quote one example.

"The work of founding, rooting, and animating communities which group Christians and catechumens together at the village or area level must be promoted and considered as a vital priority for the Church in the Congo."


A new opportunity for our missionary activity? How do we react to it?

Dear Confrères,

We are happy to present this first edition of I/D.

We propose, in each issue, to discuss an idea or a question of particular interest to us, which seems at the same time to have particular relevance as well to the Congregation and its mission. In seeking to fulfill the mandate given to us in the Guidelines for Animation (146-148) we shall draw upon the lived experiences of confrères, the reports of experiments, investigations and discoveries and of disappointments too.

It is our sincere hope that I/D will grow into a powerful instrument of animation and fraternal union for every member of the Congregation. We invite your comments and suggestions.

The Generalate Team

An interview with father Martin van Roy CSSp

"Towards a Living Christian Community in Bantu Country"

Note: Father Martin van Roy works in the Popular Republic of the Congo. For several years he has been working at the formation of Christian communities, deeply rooted in the human environment. We give here only a suggestion of Father's rich experience. If you would like to know more about it, we can supply copies either of the interview itself in its entirety or of two mimeographed articles. (Over)
Q. Father Martin, what was the starting-point for your experiment?
A. I started from the Bantu milieu itself, from the Bantu man’s communitarian view of life. The Bantu exists for his clan. Left alone and in isolation, he withers away; he is like an outcast. He develops and flourishes above all, by the very fact of being with his brethren; his life consists in his close relationships with them. Community spirit and the sense of belonging are the creative forces at the heart of the community.

Q. Starting from the Bantu milieu, how do you see the Church developing?
A. First of all, let’s make one point clear: we believe simply that the Christian community is the Church, the Body of Christ. The theological considerations we leave to the specialists! We stress the Church as the People of God, the race of sons of God which has its ancestor and progenitor the living Jesus Christ, who died and rose again.

We stress the solidarity and the living relationship which the community must have with Christ, the Apostles, their successors, and among the members themselves.

We stress solidarity in the apostolate. Formerly, the people at the grass roots were allowed to be too passive. Now we insist on the fact that the first of the sacraments is the Church itself; i.e. the Christian community. To be passive is the "original sin" for a member of the Christian community.

We stress collective salvation, insisting upon the liberating power of the Message, a collective and group liberation.

Q. How did you succeed in setting up these communities?
A. First of all, there must be an effort at sensitizing at the grass roots, persuading people that the Church is their business; that they have a responsibility for it.

Once this is understood, there is the task of choosing leaders. This selection must also be everybody’s business. We prefer to have people who are representative and recognized as such, who are just and open-minded, who have a real influence among the people.

We devote ourselves to the formation of these leaders. This we consider to be the specific task of the missionary.

Once a week there are meetings which contribute a great deal to the development of the community. It is at these meetings that we try to highlight, or, should we say, to live, what we consider to be the essential characteristics of a true community:

- to be a community devoted to the apostolate
- to be a community marked by charity
- to be a community engaged in development.

We also attach great importance to visits from one community to another, or to meetings of several communities, or even all of them at once.

Q. What form does your organization take?
A. After about five years, we developed a structure within which each parish or mission is divided into several sections; each section made up of eight to ten communities.

Each Christian community has its designated leaders who look after the services the community needs. We lay great stress on the need for each community to be missionary in nature.

Each section is a group of eight to ten communities. The person at the head of it makes it his full-time job. He goes around visiting the communities, settling business matters, trains those in charge for the various services required of them. He is assisted by a Council composed of community leaders.

The heads of all the sections together form the Parish Council. The Council has a President, who is not necessarily the missionary. The missionary team does take part in the Council.

Q. What is the missionary’s role?
A. More and more the specific role of every missionary will be that of founding and animating these communities.

An Appeal: We would be interested to hear of your efforts along these lines – experiments, writings or articles about Christian communities; let us know of any reading which has helped you, so that we can pass it on. We can supply you with several articles on Christian communities. If you specify what particular aspect interests you, we shall reply as best we can.

A Final Word: Father Paul Coulon, CSSp. has prepared an audio-visual programme about Christian communities for use in missionary animation. Write to us for more information.

Some personal reflections

A Renewal

It is a reality! In ten years, the face of the Church in Brazil has been transformed by basic communities. After a few isolated experiments, basic communities were launched as the most important means for renewal of the parishes and of the life of the Church.

In 1965 the Episcopal Conference of Brazil placed the emphasis upon basic communities in its pastoral plan for the years 1965-1970. Today there are more than 40,000 basic communities in Brazil and new ones are springing up every day. In 1968 this pastoral plan, launched in Brazil, was taken up by the Episcopal
Conferences of Latin America (CELAM) at Medellin. There are now basic communities in every country on this continent.

In 1974 the Bishops reaffirmed basic communities as a pastoral priority. Several dioceses and prelates including the Spiritans in Tefé and in Amazonia, have concentrated their entire pastoral efforts in this direction.

**Slow Development**

There are regions where basic communities are slow in developing. Strange as it may seem, one of the handicaps in these areas is the too-great number of priests. Besides this, there is often that type of pastoral activity which is too sacramental, too clerical and too traditional.

**Affinities with Other Continents**

I used to think that these basic communities in South America were vastly different from Christian communities in Africa or other continents. In many ways they are different. However on reading various publications and listening to missionaries passing through the Generalate, I get the impression that it is the same movement and the same effort, above all, it is the same Spirit who is bringing the Church to birth everywhere among the People of God.

**A Wish**

Speaking as one who has heard of the development of small communities in Africa, and who has seen the truly extraordinary growth of basic communities in Brazil, I can only wish that all Spiritan missionaries could be part of this renewal in the Church. I feel that it is in small communities that we can find a "second spring" in our missionary efforts.

*Adrian van Sonsbeek CSSp.*

Note: For those who would like to know more about basic communities in Brazil, we have some articles at our disposition and we can furnish a bibliography.

**Another testimony**

(Note: For good reasons we shall let this Spiritan team remain anonymous. Faced with an impasse in its efforts at evangelization, it revisited its entire missionary approach and has slowly begun to succeed in forming Christian communities. We cite this effort both to shed light on the program and to express our solidarity with them, and to urge many to pray for them and for all who are engaged in new and difficult apostolates.)

**An Impasse**

What do we mean by an impasse? Imagine 700 kilometres of river, six missions and several small villages in the interior. The missions are slowly dying. The Sunday congregations are all old people and children. The young and the active stay away. Discouragement among the missionaries grows apace; many think of leaving.

**That "Certain Something"**

Still, there is a "certain something" in the missionary which will not let him resign himself to an impasse; something which fires his ingenuity. That "certain something" was part of this team.

**Our Plan**

Here then is our plan, worked out with the Bishop. Since, a sharp break with the present – practice is necessary to awaken the community. We will begin with the formation of a team of three or four, whose object will not be to run from one community to another to offer mass or to directly animate, but rather to form leaders, people in charge, and to train catechists. The team plans to spend one to three weeks in each center. Since these centers have no resident priests, the people will have to take things into their own hands or else die as a community. We will be there to form, to encourage, and to gather around the Eucharistic Table, those who are willing.

It will be a mobile team with meetings about three times a year in each center. When there are four of us we will be able to organize two sessions in the same area, one in the centre itself, the other in the back country, the bush.

**The Sessions**

In each session, we will work on several levels:

- The formation of leaders in Gospel and community living.
- Information and exchange of ideas with the whole community.
- Liturgical gatherings with the whole community. Since these celebrations will be prepared and animated by the community leaders, they will be necessarily limited in number.
- Work with the young people and the formation of literary and Gospel study groups wherever possible.

**Our Purpose**

We propose to lay the foundations for a self-operating organization deeply animated by the Word of God.
A Team

I believe we have the opportunity to form a closely-knit team, complementary in its membership. Preparation and evaluation will be done regularly and will present no problem. We are determined too, to maintain a deep prayer life and a sharing of faith.

We are Happy

The work is hard, but we are happy to be involved in it. That this is the method of the future, we are more and more convinced. We are aware of the fact that had the experiment been tried under less favourable geographic and human circumstances than ours, the results might have been more conclusive. We realize that, but we would rather work here, in this spirit, than work with older methods anywhere else.

A Proposition

Almost everywhere we hear of pilot teams organized or in the process of formation. Several have expressed the wish that they too could start moving in these directions. We know, in good part from experience, how difficult and demanding this can be. Would it not be a good thing to put these teams in contact with one another? In that way they could give mutual support, supply information to one another, create bonds of solidarity; in short, help one another. We would be pleased to serve as the “introduction-service” and “exchange desk.”

Our Comments

Perhaps your reply will be: “Christian communities are ‘today’sfad,’ or, ‘but we have always founded Christian communities,’ or again ‘you’re going to break up everything into little groups; it will lead to a break-up of the unity of the Church.’”

Far from being the “fad of the day,” the Christian community is essential if we wish to belong to Christ; this has been understood from the very first years of Christianity: “The whole group of believers were of one heart and one soul” (cf. the two descriptions of the primitive community in Acts 2:42-46 and 4:32-34).

It is striking to note too the diversity of the first communities: in Jerusalem, in Corinth or in Colossae. The meeting of the Gospel and the different cultural milieux resulted in quite different communities. It will always be so.

The phenomenon of Christian communities, “the sign and communication of the Spirit today,” is the result of the renewed ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. It is nothing else but the rejuvenation of a pyramidal Church, much more in conformity with the primitive Christian community as Scripture reveals it to us.

“The Second Vatican Council reemphasized the primitive concept of the Church as the People of God, the body of Christ. Its highest law, its style of life and its bond of unity and interpersonal love is true fraternal charity, lived and exercised in Christ. Its ministries and services are the sustaining points, the channels of divine Goodness, spread out everywhere among the People of God.” (Bulletin of the District of Gabon, n° 23).

To us it seems important and necessary, shall we say indispensable, that we be open to this renewed ecclesiology if we wish to respond to what Guidelines for Animation sets up as a first priority. (GA/12) The same is true of all our mission priorities today.

Inspired by this renewal or simply by an analysis of the situation in which they find themselves, many of our missionaries are striving to establish genuine communities which will be able to assume responsibility and be missionary in spirit. These communities are something quite different from a large parish or mission which so often favors anonymity and lack of personal responsibility and turns Christians into “consumers”.

We encourage such missionaries.

As a first step toward developing these vital Christian communities, we encourage the formation of missionary teams which attach great importance to a life of sharing at every level; teams whose pastoral approach will be based on mobility, rather than on being tied to a permanent presence which hinders the emergence of communities; teams devoted above all to the formation of the laity, particularly leaders. We are convinced that Christian communities offer a whole new scope for our missionary activity.

The Generalate Team

Address all communications to:
Information Services
Congregazione Dello Spirito Santo
Clivo di Cimna, 195
00130, Rome, Italy