

Community, communitas and downward mobility

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When we think of the word “community,” a number of images come to mind. We all have ideas, both of what community is or is not, and what it could be. If we can identify the distance between an actual community and the idea or ideal of community we have formed in our mind, we might be able to acknowledge some of the very real limitations of communities and even look for life-giving alternatives.

In a non-theological sense, dictionaries identify a number of components of community, as well as a number of different kinds of community. In the first place, the word “community” refers to people living in one locality or under one big roof. Community may actually apply either to the people or to the locality or to both. A community may also be a group of otherwise disparate people sharing a common cultural, religious, or ethnic identity. Beyond that, community refers to much broader concepts, such as the “European community” or the “Protestant community,” which are really ideal types and much too big to be encountered as such.

Reflecting on the intentions of Jesus and his commission to the Twelve, to the disciples in general, and by extension to the church, we notice that it is the community and not simply a single individual or a group of individuals that is commissioned. As sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) demonstrated, a community properly is not simply a group of people but a corporate group of people: a group that actually acts like a corporation or a single body. The Christian community is indeed and explicitly intended to be a corporate body, widely differentiated internally but with one head (Jesus Christ) and a unity of purpose.

This theology is elaborated splendidly by Saint Paul when he addresses abuses at Corinth and begs the fledgling community to live up to its high calling. The theology is further developed throughout the Pauline correspondence (For example, 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Ephesians 4:3-13; Galatians 3:26-28).

Mechanical and organic solidarity

Durkheim explicitly—and implicitly Saint Paul before him—identified mechanical and organic solidarity as two very different forms of community. Mechanical solidarity might be what unites a school of fish or a colony of termites. Less attractively, it may describe the people at a parish liturgy. The fish and the termites might at least be said to have a common purpose, even though none of them individually actually has it in mind; the same cannot always be said for people who foregather for some liturgies.

By contrast, organic solidarity is expressed in the teamwork of a group of footballers or the marine exploits of the crew of an oceangoing yacht. Organic solidarity is manifested by a group of people acting in unison; and though each person has a different responsibility, the outcome of the whole group depends on the commitment of each individual.

Organic solidarity can produce world records and generate an indomitable spirit. Mechanical solidarity is not without possibilities, but those possibilities are predictable and less than inspiring. It is possible, though, for mechanical solidarity to lead to organic solidarity, providing there is trust, imagination, and something to galvanize the members of the group. Whatever the future of the institutional church may actually look like, it will only have a future if it develops its potential for organic solidarity, because mechanical solidarity simply does not have the capacity to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Is it conceivable that the Christian churches as we have known them may have to undergo a very long winter, not in peaceful hibernation but in a fight for survival, before a new spring breaks through? The tension and the paradox is that the church worldwide, and in its many denominations, is an institution, and inevitably so, but that institutions are crippled by their own structures. Unless they slough the dead growth and regenerate, they die. Thus communities become institutionalized and suffer the same fate as any other institution. Unless they too undergo radical regeneration (in theological language, conversion or refounding), they slowly become sclerotic, and they too die. Many Christian churches are established as autonomous entities, whatever they proclaim about their desire for unity. How can the constituent communities of the church remain in some communion, corporate and organic, in the face of forces of institutionalization and mechanical solidarity? Much more problematically, how can the unity for which Christ prayed ever become a reality?

Such unity can be achieved. In some measure it has already happened. But great clarity of purpose, vision, dedication, and living hope are required if there are to be further significant breakthroughs in church unity. In the end there will have to be

church or renewed and reinvigorated denominations and local congregations. Inevitably, Christians, too, will be rather different from those who are familiar to us, those who identify themselves as Christians yet fail to rise above intermittent expressions of mechanical solidarity.

The Christian church—and churches—of the future will, necessarily, be slimmed down and streamlined, if only because it is like leaven or light-source rather than great mass or raging wildfire. The Christian community will be once again as it was in the beginning, “a peculiar people.” If the Holy Spirit is allowed to come with fire and to renew the face of the earth, we simply cannot predict what the outcome will be because we are not God. But some strong clues exist in the New Testament—clues suggesting that forms of non-institutional, ecumenical, and most certainly countercultural Christianity will abound. It will not be sufficient—indeed it never was—to call ourselves “Good Americans” or “Good Australians” or “Good Britons,” and expect thereby automatic passage into the realm of God.

Creation and community

The popular image of the very first moment of creation— incandescent heat or the “big bang”—is an image of unharnessed, boundless, elemental energy. That image, transferred to a “founding moment” or, even earlier, to the actual Pentecost moment can raise our consciousness and ignite our imagination. In fact, ignition is another contemporary image that speaks of raw power and primal energy: “Ignition!” is the imperative mood that, at the touch of a button, can boost a rocket from inertia to supersonic speed in a matter of seconds.

Another simple thought-experiment will enable us to imagine that moment when the founder of a new religious movement—a religious order perhaps— transmits his or her dream to a handful of companions. The moment is brief, but its formative value, its effect on the small company and on an unsuspecting world, is immeasurable. The moment is characterized not only by its brevity but equally by its intensity and daring: the dream must be impossible, the companions must be insufficient, and the audacity of imagination or faith must be total. There is no room here for rational plans and equality of opportunity. In 1703 in Paris, an idealistic 23-year-old seminarian, with a handful of young students, imagined a world in which the penniless and exploited chimney sweeps of Paris would be cared for and protected. Between Claude-François Poullart des Places and this motley group there passed a kind of incandescent burst of energy, and from that moment their minds and hearts were fused round a common and impossible goal. What would become the Congregation of the Holy Ghost was born in that moment.

This occurrence is not unique: it is repeated, one might almost be tempted to say, routinely, at the founding moment of a hundred different congregations and orders, and of many other less canonical but no less creative undertakings. The common factors are outrageous imagination, insuperable odds, little practical likelihood of success (and thus high statistical probability of failure), and burning commitment both to the idea and to the community. This brief moment of incandescent energy generates what can be called “*communitas*.” It is not a community in the usual sense. In fact, a small group of this kind, united in trust and committed to a Gospel ideal, fired by God’s Spirit and launched on the adventure of a lifetime, is definitely not to be confused with a conventional community.

Community and *communitas*

The power of *communitas* is fragile. It is not the power of the self-important. The power of *communitas* is to be found, paradoxically, in its vulnerability and modesty. The small group of people committed to undertaking a seemingly impossible task is touched not by hubris but by humility: the rootedness and groundedness of those who know their own very limited abilities, yet have abiding trust and enduring faith in the God of miracles. *Communitas*-power is not full of itself but is filled with nothing less than the power of God working through human instrumentality.

Communitas is the very opposite of structure: it is anti- structure. Its context is not organized routine or predictable timetable. When the impossible dream is captured by the group, no one would think of creating timetables as an organizational framework or job descriptions as a check on efficiency. On the contrary, meals will be infrequent and unscheduled, sleep a luxury, and comfort and security simply not an issue. “One for all and all for one” is the spirit that characterizes the group. *Communitas* is marked by zeal and energy, enthusiasm and collaboration. It actually generates a great deal of energy, because *communitas* is rooted in hope, united around a common vision, maintained by trust and inspired by great generosity. For a brief moment, a group experiencing *communitas* is both tireless and scheduleless. It is utopian, idealistic, and risk-taking.

Just as a flame struck from a flint surges, steadies, and slowly subsides, so does the incandescent power of *communitas* begin to abate even as its flame becomes visible. A match, once struck, will burn brightly only for an instant, for its relatively fierce heat and great light are already waning. It may be kept alive, even as it dies, if it is rotated and dipped so that the flame is sustained a little longer. And so it is with *communitas*: it lasts but a moment and then begins to die.

In those first days, when nothing is too much for the founding members and when energy is high, everyone is expended for the sake of the dream. But human beings cannot live like solar flares, and they seek a more sustainable life. At the moment when someone first suggests a modicum of rational organization—a fixed time for prayer, a regular schedule for meals, the distribution of responsibilities but, above all, a meeting— at that very moment *communitas* has become community.

Communitas can carry people through moments of drama and high energy, risk and unpredictability; community sustains people for the long haul. Communitas produces the energy for takeoff; community sustains level flight. Communitas produces dreams and visions; community maintains works and programs that keep dreams alive and creates strategies that serve the vision. Communitas is ignited by a small group and is radical and pathbreaking; community is maintained by large numbers and is conservative and routine.

Both communitas and community are necessary for long-term undertakings. But in the long term, renewal can only come from a rediscovery of communitas, since community lacks the imagination and fire required by true conversion. Unless, however, the spark of communitas can be struck again and again from the flint of community, the momentum of a group will slow. The group will run out of ideas, its creativity will evaporate, and ultimately boredom and disinterest will replace inspiration and fire. Communitas is to community as the flame is to the coal, as the spark is to the flint, or as the fuel is to the rocket. Both are necessary, but the active agent is communitas. When the flame dies, when the spark fails, when the fuel is depleted, no coal will produce heat, no flint, flame, and no rocket, liftoff.

The energy and inspiration of communitas

There are religious communities today that pay for advertisements and pray for vocations. However, the only real success this strategy can produce is if, within the community itself, what is advertised is actually lived; if, in other words, the fire of communitas still burns. There are church officials today who speak of the equality of all and of collaboration among the people of God. But the only success this talk can produce is if, within the church itself, what is preached is actually practiced, if the fire of communitas still burns. A community—or the church—may possibly attract rational human beings with rational plans and rational expectations, but only communitas can attract generous souls with hearts on fire and lives to lay down for a dream.

A community—or the church—in search of recruits may be looking to maintain itself and its works. If so, it needs rational people who can undertake rational tasks and sustain community projects. On the other hand, a community—or the church—may be actively seeking to rekindle the fire that burned in the founding moment, generating heat and light that has now been lost. If so, it needs generous, creative, imaginative people whose zeal can be ignited by the vision of a daring and not quite rational undertaking. But communities— or the church—whose current membership is overtired, fragmented, and philosophically disunited are unlikely to attract generous, creative, and imaginative people.

If communitas-energy can be likened to incandescent fire and community-energy can be likened to the steadily burning but imperceptibly diminishing flame, it is not difficult to see what needs to be done in order to sustain the combustion. The second law of thermodynamics can help us here: it states, in essence, that heat or energy cannot be transferred from a cooler to a hotter body within a system. In other words, community- heat or community energy lacks the capacity for combustion, because community itself represents a cooling down, a tendency toward equilibrium and indeed entropy—the loss of energy and the gradual breakdown of a system which leads to internal disorder. Consequently, only if communitas-energy can somehow be regenerated can the fire continue to burn and the light to shine.

When the flame of a burning match begins to flicker and show signs of dying we know the moment of incandescence that engulfed the match cannot be recaptured. Other matches may be struck, and other bursts of incandescence may be generated. Alternately, the dying match may be placed near kindling and the flame may perhaps catch again as it is taken up by dry wood. Still, in each case, the first incandescence will not be repeated and the uniqueness that was the light of that first match will be lost as the new fire takes hold.

But what if there is another match, not yet struck but ready for the striking? What if, instead of using energy to strike that second match against the rough surface, it is simply brought to the dying flame of the first match! Then there is reignition as the flame of the first match becomes the very flame of the second. New fire is created, but with all the energy of the old.

As a small boy I used to serve the early Mass at my parish in Manchester, England. In the wintertime, the coal fire in the kitchen at home would sometimes have survived the night, having been banked with dampened coal-dust or “slack” by my father as he went to bed. Sometimes, in the morning, before leaving for Mass, I could fan it into flame, but not every day. Unless the ash beneath the fire had dropped through the grate—or was raked out so that the air could pass through the embers—the flame would not take hold. With no air to feed it, the fire inevitably died, even though it still retained some heat. I became quite proficient in riddling the grate and rekindling the fire. But there was a further lesson to learn: unless a critical mass of identifiable coal remained, and not simply a pile of hot ash, there would be nothing left after the riddling. With nothing to build on, there could be no reignition. Then I would return from Mass—to a cold and silent house—and have to set a new fire and start all over. I can still feel the cold and recall the shivers.

Could this experience offer an image for those disciples who want to find a way to carry forward, in a new form, a flame that was first ignited long ago? Such people do not simply want to warm their hands at the dying embers of an old fire or even to try to kindle a flame where there is only ash and memory. They want to see actual evidence of fire: then they will fan it so that it bursts into flames. Such people exist, of that there is no doubt. But many of them see in the contemporary church or contemporary religious life only the ash and the memory—or perhaps a dying ember. This residue is not worth living for, let alone worth dying for.

vulnerable, uncertain, and socially insignificant group will automatically produce communitas. A common dream, unity of purpose, deep commitment, idealism, daring, and indomitable hope—these are the indispensable ingredients of communitas. Something more is needed, however, without which the ingredients will never produce the kind of communitas that can change the world.

Initiation and communitas

In traditional societies, when the time of initiation comes round, a group of young boys or adolescents (and this can apply with equal force to a group of girls) are removed from the routine of daily life to undergo a process of transformation. Ages of the peer-group members may vary by up to three or four years and occasionally more: but the group can truly be called an “age group.” Children of chiefs and of rank-and-file community members together leave the security and predictability of the village for a period of separation and trial. They now become liminal or marginal: neither within nor completely outside the community (they are accompanied by senior adults, mentors, or midwives). They will have an experience of life-changing importance, not only for themselves but also, in particular, for the wider community, including the not-yet born. This experience is of communitas.

It is critically important for a community to assure continuity. It does so by socializing its members, turning the raw material (newborn infants) into the finished product (responsible adults). Initiation is one of the most important components of socialization, requiring people to pass through a formative stage of liminality, to forge an experience of communitas, and to reemerge as same-but-different and able to make a major contribution to the larger community.

In the experience of initiation, liminality and communitas converge. The former is expressed in the equality of everyone in the group: there is no hierarchy, no privilege, no single leader. On the contrary, there is a reduction, a leveling down, a stripping away of status. The boys or girls are without status or social identity, emptied of all they were and all they knew, so that they may be filled with all they will be and all they do not yet know. A kind of dying, a series of privations— of food, of sleep, of comfort, of predictability, and even of safety—is associated with this experience. At the end of it all, however, there will be a kind of rising, associated with indulgence—of food and clothing, of gifts and compliments, and particularly of status.

Those who went away as boys or girls returned transformed, as men and women: not biologically but socially, even spiritually. The status of child has been stripped from them, leaving them for a time without identity or place in the structure—liminal, marginal, “nobodies”—only to be replaced by the totally new status of adult. The bonding of these young people will have a profound impact on the broader society as these new adults take up responsibilities consistent with their status and become productive and reproductive providers and parents. This is by no means all that happens, for the liminality has also left each individual with an age-group of peers, formed by a common experience, fused by common memories, and committed to common ends. No longer are they marginal; now they are central to the community. No longer do they experience communitas; but as they become part of the mainstream community they remember the experience of transformation and commit themselves to the future and to life.

Creative marginality and discipleship

Jesus gathered a group of people around himself and withdrew with them periodically as he tried to turn them into something more: disciples. They were a group of peers, but still too interested in hierarchy and status. “What about us?” says Peter. “We have left everything and followed you.” But Jesus offers them only intangible payment—with a bonus promise of persecutions (Mark 10:28-30). When they asked which among them was the greatest, Jesus pointedly declined to choose from among them: he called a child (marginal, liminal, a nobody who lacked status) over to them and told them to become like this child lest they be excluded from heaven (Matthew 18:1-4). James and John persisted, asking to be seated to the of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45). This expression is one of intentional and creative marginality that can lead to life.

The little band gathered around Jesus has the quintessential experience of communitas. The group is small and its members are not very significant. Certainly they are not people of status or power. Its founder has a vision and an impossible dream, of a movement with minimal structure and no predictable routing. A scribe who wanted to join the group is told: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). Clearly, Jesus does not have an explicitly formulated rational plan, but he certainly does have a vision and a strategy.

Communitas attracts people who are “betwixt and between,” marginal to structure, and not the self-important or status-seeking. (Yet sometimes there are individuals in the group who have ambition and airs above their station: this will change as the liminal experience proceeds. The Twelve certainly show evidence of such ambition.) But though communitas requires people who may seem as though they have nothing to lose, it certainly does not offer them any easy options. Actually it demands their willingness to risk everything they have. They must be willing to gamble with their life. This potential for risk is precisely why communitas proves attractive to generous, noble souls: it is not that they have nothing to live for, but rather that they discover that they have everything to live for. No longer do they want to “save” their lives, as they might save money; now they want to “spend” their lives as they might celebrate an achievement. They do not want to lose their lives but to find them and as Jesus promised “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake

Communitas requires liminal people, people committed to a common undertaking in a spirit of corporate solidarity and with no personal ambition. Lacking authority or status they are particularly able to carry universal moral values, to embody truth and justice and equality and compassion without any limitations. Because liminal people are neither inside nor outside but marginal, distinctions of insider/outsider or us/them do not exist: liminal people are best placed to become the inclusive “we.” In fact, it is only by becoming a liminal person and by laying down or being deprived of personal status that one can actually begin to erase the right and left of Jesus; but in response he only promised a taste of his cup with its bitter dregs (Mark 10:35-40). And to drive home the point that hierarchy was not part of his plan, he stated unequivocally, “It is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant....For the Son barriers and boundaries that distinguish and divide people everywhere. Communitas is therefore intentionally countercultural, because culture needs distinctions and divisions, stratification and hierarchy, insiders and outsiders--all of which are antithetical to communitas. Communitas is also utopian; or, better put, it is an illustration of the in-breaking of the realm of God.

The story of the Good Samaritan exemplifies the dimension of liminality characteristic of communitas. The story starts with a person on the edge, crossing a boundary, neither insider nor outsider, as he travels between Jerusalem and Jericho. Having been attacked and robbed, he becomes even more liminal, hovering between life and death. The Good Samaritan was also a traveler, and certainly liminal to the people listening to Jesus tell the story. They were Jews (or gentiles) with very strong animosity toward Samaritans. Nevertheless, the Samaritan in this story not only acts nobly but puts to shame those socially significant people— the priest and the Levite—from whom more was to have been expected. It is not that the Samaritan has nothing to lose by helping a fellow traveler. Rather, he would have lost his own dignity and integrity had he failed to do so. It is not that he was unafraid of dying, but rather that he could not have lived with himself if he had failed to show compassion. And having made the point, Jesus said to the self-righteous lawyer, (and by extension, to those who hear the story): “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:29-37).

Some people appear to want something that looks, at least superficially, like communitas. What actually may develop, however, is a community of servants or sycophants around one person who holds all the authority. This model is one of patron-and-client, and Jesus was quick to warn against it (Matthew 20:25-28). The only way to avoid the crippling effects of dominant hierarchy is to counter them with dedicated service. Yet faith-filled pioneers, creative persons, generous souls, visionaries, and innovators also need communitas in order for the dream to continue and for the fire to burn brightly. However, communitas is like wine without a bottle: it needs some structure- community so that it can be sustained over time. But community is like an uncorked bottle of wine: it needs communitas lest the flavor escape and the contents turn to vinegar. If communitas alone produces burnout, community alone will give rise to torpor. Together they can animate and sustain the founding vision, but only if vigilance is exercised lest communitas become suffocated or community paralyzed.

Permanent liminality and downward mobility

Some wonderfully imaginative initiatives and clearly marginal ministries can, after a few generations, turn into comfortable and predictably routine operations. Once it was very dangerous to go to the “foreign missions.” Between 1859 and 1900 the life expectancy of young missionaries (Holy Ghost Fathers, Spiritans) embarking for Sierra Leone, West Africa, was less than ten months, and the average missionary died before reaching 30 years of age. But there were always more people waiting to replace the missionaries who died.

In the 19th century, women like Cornelia Connolly of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, Anne-Marie Javouhey of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, or Katharine Drexel of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament pioneered girls’ education and inspired generations of women to rise to the challenge in less than hospitable environments in North America, Europe, Africa, and on Native American Reservations.

Today the life expectancy of those in overseas ministry is comparable to that of those at home, while girls’ education no longer needs pioneers. Still, today’s ministry, wherever it may be, cries out for dedicated teachers willing to commit to marginal situations; and, meanwhile, a host of new pioneer situations have arisen—from AIDS care to hospice, from rehabilitation of child soldiers to ministry among child prostitutes. The successors of the Spiritans— or of the Connollys, Javouheys, and Drexels— are not as numerous now; but those who remain must rekindle the fire if they are to be credible and creditable sons and daughters of their founders; and other inspired people—women and men—must step forward as advocates for today’s needy and forgotten people. This replenishment of the ranks is so, simply because such dedication and initiative is the lifeblood of Christianity. Without it, Christianity would deserve to die. The fastest-growing group of people on earth today is the poor. Even in the United States, there are more than thirty million people below the poverty line; they are dying, not immediately but by degrees. Worldwide, more than a billion people are in abject poverty, dying with every breath they take. A curious statistic appeared recently. Less than 20 years ago, the very rich were estimated to have 50 times as much as the very poor; now they possess 72 times as much. Those figures represent such a gap as to be almost meaningless, but they illustrate a highly significant point. With every single increment in our standard of living, every single decimal point of upward mobility, we are thereby falling further away from the poor, to whom we, as Christians, have a responsibility in justice. It is not enough for us to claim that we cannot do anything: we can, and must, do some thing. Simply because we cannot do everything does not give us permission to do nothing; and if we do nothing positive, we are doing something negative: we are sinning by omission.

less, at 46. In the year 2000, the life expectancy of women in the U.S. and across Europe had risen to around 80 years, while men's was further back, at around 76. In 2000, the life expectancy for all people in Ethiopia was actually less than 40 years (Pears Factfinder 2002, Penguin Books, New York, 2001); and with war, AIDS, and genocide accounting for so many deaths in Africa, life expectancy in several countries on that continent was less than in Europe a century ago.

History will hold the rich nations accountable for the decimation of nations through AIDS and genocide. Their apathy, dressed as nonintervention, is an abdication of moral responsibility. And as a small percentage of the world's population can choose retirement-with-benefits around the age of 50 and expect the benefits to last them another 30 years or more, a huge percentage of the world's population has neither the hope of retirement-with-benefits, nor even the expectation of life beyond the immediate future. If we bring the earlier reflections—about communitas and creativity, liminality and loving service—into engagement with these brief reflections on contemporary needs and the faces of injustice, we should be able to draw some conclusions that can be applied to our own lives as disciples.

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