

Community is a sign of this presence: it is a sign of the Church. Many people who believe in Jesus are in some degree of distress: battered wives, people in mental hospitals, those who live alone because they are too fragile to live with others. All these people can put their trust in Jesus. Their suffering is a sign of his cross, a sign of a suffering Church. But a community which prays and loves is a sign of the resurrection. That is its mission.

Coming together for a purpose

Jesus first of all called men and women to him and told them: 'Leave all: come and follow me.' He chose them, loved them and invited them to become his friends. That is how it all began, in a personal relationship with Jesus, a communion with him.

Then he brought together the twelve he had called to become his friends; they started to live together in community. Obviously it was not always easy. They quickly began to quarrel, fighting over who should be first. Community life revealed all sorts of jealousies and fears in them.

Then Jesus sent them off to accomplish a mission: *to announce* good news to the poor, *to heal* the sick, and *to liberate* by casting out demons. He did not keep them with him for long, but sent them out so that they would have an experience of life flowing out from them: an experience of giving life to people and an experience of their own beauty and capacities if they followed him and let his power act in and through them.

The pains of community are situated between the joy of this communion and friendship with Jesus and the joy of giving life to others: the mission.

If people come together to care for each other, it is because they feel more or less clearly that as a group they have a mission. They have been called together by God and have a message of love to transmit to others.

When two or three come together in his name, Jesus is present.

Universal mission to give life

Humanity is one. We are all part of the same human race. However different we may be through culture, race or disabilities, we are all human beings; we are all brothers and sisters.

I remember once when I was in Papua New Guinea, I went up into the mountains. There I met tribal people. The womenfolk wore few clothes, so did the men for that matter! I spoke to them about people with a mental handicap and about l'Arche. Then there was a time for questions. They spoke about their lives and sickness and death, about joys and difficulties in relationships in their families and between families, about the menfolk drinking too much and about violence – all the same questions that could have come up in London or New York. Yes, we are truly of the same race.

The fundamental questions of humanity are always around love and hate, guilt and forgiveness, peace and war, truth and lies (or illusions), the meaning of life and death, and belief in God. Every community wants in some way to manifest a universal truth that they have discovered, like a treasure in a field; they want to announce this good news to other people and to offer some insights on these fundamental questions. They want to live this truth, because they believe it leads to a fuller and more beautiful life: to love, to peace, to truth, to freedom and to an experience of God. They want to communicate to others the beauty they have received.

There is a big difference between a community and a group that is militant for a cause. A community will say 'Come and see'. It

wants to manifest the truth in a non-violent way, offering it to others; visitors are encouraged to come, to ask questions, to experience the way of life. A community knows that the fundamental questions of life can only be looked at in a spirit of peace and inner freedom. Nobody can force anyone else to love and to walk to freedom. Militants for a cause will tend to be organised for a struggle which they hope to win; they will seek to impose their way aggressively. Frequently they seek outward change more than inward change. Of course it is very different when those concerned with causes and issues are living in community.

Clubs and closed groups that only accept members on certain criteria of race or of competence are elitist. These clubs demonstrate to themselves and to others their 'superiority'. Consequently, they make others feel inferior and that the good news is not for them. In these groups, humanity is broken down into a system of apartheid - groups separated one from another. There is no universal message of hope or of freedom.

Communities can produce things, make cheese, beer or wine; they can show new and better methods in agriculture: they can build hospitals and schools; they can further culture through their books, libraries or art. However, these things do not necessarily give life; and the mission of a community is to give life to others, that is to say, to transmit new hope and new meaning to them. Mission is revealing to others their fundamental beauty, value and importance in the universe, their capacity to love, to grow and to do beautiful things and to meet God. Mission is transmitting to people a new inner freedom and hope; it is unlocking the doors of their being so that new energies can flow; it is taking away from their shoulders the terrible yoke of fear and guilt. To give life to people is to reveal to them that they are loved just as they are by God, with the mixture of good and evil, light and darkness that is in them; that the stone in front of their tomb in which all the dirt of their lives has been hidden, can be rolled away. They are forgiven; they can live in freedom.

Jesus wants each one of us individually to bear fruit, but he also

wants us to bear much fruit in community, and then we become his disciples (John 15).

All living beings give life. Thus from generation to generation we have birds, fish, animals, trees, flowers and fruit - the incredible fecundity of creation as life flows from one being to another. Man and woman together give life, conceiving and giving birth to a child.¹ And that is just the physical and biological aspect of procreation. Once the baby is born, and even before birth, the parents give life to the child, and reveal to him/her its beauty by the way they welcome and love it. Or else they may bring inner death to the child, making it feel ugly and worthless through the way they reject or over-protect it. Through love and tenderness, through welcome and listening, we can give life to people.

Jesus' whole message is one of life-giving. He came to give life and to give it abundantly. He came to take away all the blockages that prevent the flow of life. The glory of God, wrote Irenaeus in the second century, is people fully alive, fully living. Jesus came to announce good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and imprisoned, and sight to the blind. He came to liberate, to open up new doors and avenues; he came to take away guilt, to heal, make whole and to save. And he asks his disciples to continue this mission of life-giving, of fecundity and of liberation. That is the mission of every Christian community.

When Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, he told them to be poor, to take nothing with them. And he told them to do things that were impossible for them to do all by themselves. So it is for all missions. Communities and their members are called to be poor and to do impossible things, such as to build community and to bring healing, reconciliation, forgiveness and wholeness to people. Mission is to bring the life of God to others, and this can only be done if communities and people are poor and humble, letting the life of God flow through them.

¹ Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (Darwin, Longman and Todd, London; Paulist Press, New York; St Paul Publications, Australia, 1981).