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## A New Experience of Church

Modern society has produced a wild atomization of existence and a general anonymity of persons lost in the cogs of the mechanisms of the macro-organizations and bureaucracies. These massive . structures produce uniformity—uniformity of behavior, of societal framework, of schedules and timetables, and so on. But there has been a reaction. Slowly, but with ever-increasing intensity, we have witnessed the creation of communities in which persons actually know and recognize one another, where they can be them-selves in their individuality, where they can "have their say," where they can be welcomed by name. And so, we see, groups and little communities have sprung up everywhere. This phenomenon exists in the church, as well: grassroots Christian communities, as they are known, or basic church communities.

### The Basic Church Community

Through the latter centuries, the church has acquired an organizational form with a heavily hierarchical framework and a juridical understanding of relationships among Christians, thus producing mechanical, reified inequalities and inequities. As Yves Congar has written: "Think of the church as a huge organization, controlled by a hierarchy, with subordinates whose only task it is to keep the rules and follow the practices. Would this be a caricature? Scarcely!"<sup>1</sup>

In reaction, the basic church communities have sprung up. They represent a new experience of church, of community, of communion of persons within the more legitimate (in the strict sense of the word) ancient tradition. It would be simplistic and would betray the lack of a sense of history to conceive of the basic church communities as a purely contingent, transitory phenomenon. They represent "a specific response to a prevailing historical conjuncture."<sup>2</sup> Theologically they signify a new ecclesiological experience, a renaissance of very church, and hence an action of the Spirit on the horizon of the matters urgent for our time.<sup>3</sup> Seen in this way, the basic church communities deserve to be contemplated, welcomed, and respected as salvific events. Not that we are thereby dispensed from a diligent quest for lucidity and for better ways. Our every effort at comprehension is called for, as we undertake a theological contemplation of the eminent ecclesial value of these communities.

Within this more general frame of reference, however, we are also moved by more specific considerations of the actual situation of the church and its new awareness. The rise of the basic communities is also due to the crisis in the church institution. The scarcity of ordained ministers to attend to the needs of these communities has aroused the creative imagination of the pastors themselves, and they have come to entrust the laity with more and more responsibility. Although the great majority of basic church communities owe their origin o a priest or a member of a religious order, they nevertheless basically constitute a lay movement. The laity carry forward the cause of the gospel here, and are the vessels, the vehicles of ecclesial reality even on the level of direction and decision making. This shift of the ecclesial axis contains, in seed, a new principle for "birthing the church," for "starting the church again:"<sup>4</sup> It is a transposition that bids fair to form the principle of a genuine "ecclesiogenesis"—to use a word that was employed on several occasions in the Victória dialogue of January 1975. We are not dealing with the expansion of an existing ecclesiastical system, rotating on a sacramental, clerical axis, but with the emergence of another form of being church, rotating on the axis of the word and the laity. We may well anticipate that, from this movement, of which the universal church is becoming aware, a new type of institutional presence of Christianity in the world may now come into being.

A new phenomenon creates its own language and establishes its own categories for coming to self-expression. The phenomenon of the basic communities constitutes no exception to this rule. The basic communities are generating a new ecclesiology, formulating new concepts in theology. This is still just beginning, still in process. It is not accomplished reality. Pastors and theologians, take warning! Respect the new way that is appearing on the horizon. Do not seek at once to box this phenomenon within theological-pastoral categories distilled from other contexts and other ecclesial experiences. Instead, assume the attitude of those who would see, understand, and learn. Maintain a critical watchfulness, and help us to discern true paths from false. The history of the church is not merely the history of the actualization of ancient forms or of a return to the pristine experiences of the historical past. The history of the church is genuine history: the creation of never before-experienced novelty. Even the New Testament, like the history of the church, presents a pluriform institutional incarnation of the faith. The church's path from Christ's first coming to the Parousia is not rectilinear. It moves through historical variations, carrying the world through different ages, and offers it to God. Perhaps we are now in a phase of the emergence of a new institutional type of church. Our situation will have to be understood in the light of the Holy Spirit. We must conquer our mental resistance, modify our church habits, and stay open. Otherwise we may smother the Spirit.

A vast spectrum of questions is tied up with the subject of the basic communities. We can hope to list only the most pressing ones, and so we shall select those that seem to be the most significant: the ecclesiality of these communities, their contribution to a transcendence of the church's current structure and, as *quaestiones disputatae*, the historical Jesus and the institutional forms of the church, the possibility of a lay person celebrating the Lord's Supper, and women's priesthood and its possibilities. Before moving on to these questions, however, let us briefly survey the emergence and inherent possibilities of basic church communities.

## "Building a Living Church"

The emergence of the basic church communities in Brazil began with a community evangelization movement in Barra do Pirai, R.J. (Rio de Janeiro district) and the efforts of lay catechists there.<sup>5</sup> Specific concerns were with a movement for grassroots community catechetics and general education via radio, from Natal, R.J., and various lay apostolate experiments and parish renewal within the framework of a renewal movement projected in the national pastoral plans (1962-65). One of the plans recounts these beginnings:

In 1956 Dom Agnelo Rossi initiated an evangelization movement, using lay catechists, for regions of Brazil not being reached by pastors. It all began with the lament of one humble old woman: "Christmas Eve, all three Protestant churches were lit up and full of people. We could hear them singing. . . . And the Catholic church, closed and dark! ... Because we can't get a priest." A question hung in the air. If there are no priests, must everything grind to a halt? At this juncture, Dom Agnelo, in Barra do Pirai, decided to train community coordinators "to do everything a lay person can do in God's church in current ecclesiastical discipline. At the least, these catechists will gather the people once a week for religious instruction. Normally they will also celebrate daily prayer with the people. On Sundays and Holy Days they will gather the people from all over the district for a 'Massless Sunday,' or 'priestless Mass,' or 'Catholic worship,' and lead them spiritually and collectively in the same Mass as is being celebrated by the pastor in the distant mother church. They will recite morning and evening prayers with the people, as well as novenas, litanies, May and June celebrations, and so on" (*Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 17 [1957]:731-37). Thus catechesis became the center of a community, and someone was responsible for religious life. Instead of chapels, meeting halls were built and then used for school, religious instruction, sewing lessons, and meetings for solving community problems, even economic ones.

To deal with grave human problems of illiteracy, epidemic, and so on, "radio schools" were created, along with the MEB (Movement for Basic Education), in Natal, for the archdiocese. Reading and writing, along with other school subjects and, of course, religion, were taught by radio. On Sundays, communities without a priest would gather around the radio and pray aloud the people's parts of the Mass being celebrated by the

bishop, and hear his homily. By 1963 there were 1,410 radio schools in the country (*REB* 23 [19631:781]). By then the movement had spread all over the north-east and centerwest.

The Better World Movement created an atmosphere of renewal through out the country. A team of fifteen persons traveled about the country for five years, giving 1,800 courses and stimulating all areas of church life. Priests, bishops, religious, laity, and movements all experienced this renewal. This program resulted in the Brazilian Bishops' Conference's Emergency Plan, and the First Nationwide Pastoral Plan (1965-70), which said, in part: "Our present parishes are or ought to be composed of various local communities and 'basic communities,' in view of their great extent, population density, and percentage of persons baptized and hence juridically belonging to them. It will be of great importance, then, to launch a parish renewal in each place, for the creation and ongoing dynamics of these 'basic communities.' The mother church will itself gradually become one of these communities, and the pastor will preside in all of them, because all are to be found in the portion of the Lord's flock with which he has been entrusted."<sup>6</sup>

Ever since the Medellín conference (1968) this new ecclesial reality has been winning its citizenship, and today it constitutes, without a doubt, one of the great principles of church renewal worldwide.<sup>7</sup> The basic communities knew "building a living church rather than multiplying material structures."<sup>8</sup> The communities are built on a more vital, lively, intimate participation in a more or less homogeneous entity, as their members seek to live the essence of the Christian message: the universal parenthood of God, communion with all human beings, the following of Jesus Christ who died and rose again, the celebration of the resurrection and the Eucharist, and the upbuilding of the kingdom of God, already under way in history as the liberation of the whole human being and all human beings.

Christian life in the basic communities is characterized by the absence of alienating structures, by direct relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep communion, by mutual assistance, by communality of gospel ideals, by equality among members. The specific characteristics of society are absent here: rigid rules; hierarchies; prescribed relationships in a framework of a distinction of functions, qualities, and titles. The enthusiasm generated by a community life of interpersonal ties, and the experience of breathing the fulfilling atmosphere of the gospel frequently lead to a problem that is not without its gravity. Pastors should be attentive here, and not succumb to illusions. The question is: May the basic church communities be seen as an alternative to the church as such? Or less audaciously: May one arouse and nourish the expectation that the whole church may one day be transformed into a community? What degree of probability may we ascribe to this expectation? Can the entire church in its globalism be transformed into authentic community?

In order to develop a response to this question, theology must listen to what the "social sciences"—or better, the sciences of the social—have to say from their meditation on the relation between communitarian and societal aspects of human life. Here we have help in sociologist Pedro Demo's most competent study on the "sociological problems of community"<sup>9</sup> Sociology today has gone beyond F. Tönnies's classic contrast between society and community. For Tönnies, *a community is a social formation in which human beings are oriented by a sense of reciprocity and "belonging"; a society, by contrast, is a social formation in which anonymity and indirect relationships prevail*. This is not to deny that there are social formations whose relationships are based on a communitarian spirit—on intimate, direct, trusting, informal, reciprocal, egalitarian contact, with a maximum of exchange, interchange, and equivalency: Still, in concrete history, no social formation, not even in the presence of these values, has ever succeeded in extinguishing all traces of conflict, selfishness, individualism, individual and group interest, the pressure to have order and rules, and the establishment of goals with a rigid process for their attainment.

Community does not constitute a typical phase of human-group formation. Nor is it possible for community to exist in a pure state. Concretely, there is always a power structure, in either the dominative or the solidarity version. There are always inequalities and stratified roles, in function of some particular scale of values. There are conflicts and particular interests. Historically, social formations are mixed: they have some societal and some communitarian characteristics. Thus in a certain sense, it is unrealistic to struggle for a "classless

society"—a society that would be simply and totally a community of brothers and sisters, without any conflict at all. Realistically, one can only struggle for a type of sociability in which love will be less difficult, and where power and participation will have better distribution. Community must be understood as a spirit to be created, as an inspiration to bend one's constant efforts to overcome barriers between persons and to generate a relationship of solidarity and reciprocity.

As Demo well says: "In terms of the relationship of community to society, community can be said to be society's utopia."<sup>10</sup> Human togetherness will always be charged with tensions between the "organizational impersonal" and the "intimate personal." *A struggle for the supremacy of the communitarian dimension implies a struggle to prevent structures and grades from becoming substantive, a struggle to see that they assist the humanization of the human being, and thus bring human beings ever nearer to one another and to the values of the gospel. The supremacy of the communitarian over the societal comes more easily in small groups. Hence the importance of the basic church communities. They are communities within church society.*

In order to maintain its vitality as a force for renewal, the communitarian spirit stands in constant need of nourishment and stimulation. Simply for the faithful to be together in the execution of certain tasks is not enough. Clubs and other associations do this, but are not considered communities for it. What constitutes a human group as a community is the effort to create and maintain community involvement as an ideal, as a spirit ever to be re-created and renewed by overcoming routine and refusing to yield to the spirit of institutionalization and "rut." Demo writes:

The relative attainment of the communitarian spirit normally supposes some preparation, since, after all, not all the members of society at large have the personal detachment required for shared intimacy—for a mutual experience of the reciprocal gift of self, for the acceptance of one's colleagues without selfish restraint.<sup>11</sup>

Christianity, with its values rooted in love, forgiveness, solidarity, the renunciation of oppressive power, the acceptance of others, and so on, is essentially oriented to the creation, within societal structures, of the communitarian spirit.

Meanwhile there is a warning to be heeded. Institutionalization is inevitable in any group that means to last, to be established. With institutionalization comes the codification of successful experiments, and here there can be a threat to community. For its self-preservation, the communitarian spirit has constant need of revitalization. This task will be facilitated if the groups keep relatively small and refuse to allow themselves to be absorbed by institutionality. Here Demo draws an important conclusion for our consideration. *A large organization can be renewed by a community, but it cannot be transformed into a community.*<sup>12</sup> Demo goes even further:

Therefore all hope vanishes of organizing an entire church along lines of a communitarian network. This would be tantamount to institutionalizing the de-institutionalizing aspect of community. This is not to say that [a community's] formation cannot be organized by well-prepared teams. But its internal experience seems to renew its vitality daily, drinking at its own wells. Indeed, here is its source of strength for protest, here is where it draws its utopian attraction."

In other words the basic church communities, while signifying the communitarian aspect of Christianity, and signifying it within the church, cannot pretend to constitute a global alternative to the church as institution. They can only be its ferment for renewal.

## **Institutional and Communitarian Elements of the Church in Coexistence**

When we say that the basic communities cannot hope to constitute a global alternative to the institutional

church, we are not underestimating their genuine value for a renewal of the fabric of the church. We are merely seeking to situate their significance and meaning within the church globally. Without a doubt these communities can be a stimulus for mobilizing new strength in the institutional church, and they represent a call for a more thorough living of the authentically communitarian values of the Christian message. Jesus' whole preaching may be seen as an effort to awaken the strength of these community aspects. In the horizontal dimension Jesus called human beings to mutual respect, generosity, a communion of sisters and brothers, and simplicity in relationships. Vertically he sought to open the human being to a sincere filial relationship with God, to the artlessness of simple prayer, and to generous love for God. Jesus was not much concerned with the institution, apart from demanding that it live in the spirit in which all expressions of human togetherness ought to be lived.

The church in its globalism is the concrete, vital coexistence of the societal, institutional dimension with the communitarian dimension. In the church is an organizing element that transcends particular communities and procures the communion of them all. There is an authority here that symbolizes oneness in love and hope. There is a creed that expresses a basic oneness in faith. There are global goals common to all local communities. Sociological reflection within this church acquires relevance for theology by dispelling illusions, and so helping to keep the correlatives of institution and charism on realistic foundations. Old historical and ecclesiological errors can infiltrate under new names—like too much insistence on a polarization of "traditional church" and "evangelical church," church of the foundation and church of the steeple, ecclesiogenesis and ecclesiology. There can be a genuine renewal of the institutional framework of the church, springing from the impulses of the grassroots communities, without the church losing its identity or being distorted in its historical essence. *The church sprung from the people is the same as the church sprung from the apostles.* What is different is its sociological physiognomy in the world, its forms of liturgical, canonical, and organizational expression. There is no change in the ongoing coexistence of one aspect that is more static, institutional, and permanent with another that is more dynamic, charismatic, and vital. The will to impregnate the institutional, organizational aspect of the church with the spirit of community will never die in the church, and this is the wellspring of its vitality.

After all, the problem of church does not reside in the counterpoint of institution and community. These poles abide forever. *The real problem resides in the manner in which both are lived, the one as well as the other:* whether one pole seeks to absorb the other, cripple it, liquidate it, or each respects the other and opens itself to the other in constant willingness to be put to the question. The latter attitude will not permit the institutional to become necrophiliac and predominate. Nor will it permit the communitarian to degenerate into pure utopianism, which seeks to transform the global church into community. In the church the institutional may not be allowed to predominate over the communitarian. The latter must ever preserve its primacy. The former lives in function of the latter. The communitarian, for its part, must always seek adequate institutional expression.

In the dynamic wave of postconciliar renewal and post-Medellín liberation, two ecclesiological models have emerged in neat distinction. One is oriented to the church as grand institution, with all its services institutionally organized and oriented to the needs of the church universal, the dioceses, and the parishes. This model of the church generally finds its sociological and cultural center in society's affluent sectors, where it enjoys social power and constitutes the church's exclusive interlocutor with the powers of society. The other is centered in the network of the basic communities, deep within the popular sectors and the poor masses, on the margin of power and influence over the media, living the horizontal relationships of coresponsibility and a communion of brothers and sisters more deeply.

Developments in recent years have shown that the church as great institution can no more exist in and for itself, refusing to lend universality to the basic communities and providing them with a linkage with the past, than the network of communities can prescind from the church as great institution. More and more the institution is discovering its meaning and responsibility in the creation, support, and nurture of the communities. To be sure, this has led to a weakening in institutional commitment to the influential sectors of society and state, coupled with a strengthening of evangelical purity and prophecy. For their part, the

communities have come more and more to understand their need of the church as great institution, for the maintenance of their continuity, for their Catholic identity, and for their oneness with one another. The convergence of these two ecclesiological models, and their dialectical interaction, has contributed to a profound conscientization of the church as a whole with regard to its missionary activity, especially among the poor of this world, in whose passion it assists and shares. For the church as great institution, the crucial option is becoming daily more difficult to escape: either continue good relations with the state and the wealthy classes represented by the state or take the network of basic communities seriously, with the call for justice and social transformation that this will imply. With the first option, the church as great institution will have its personal and institutional security guaranteed, and have reliable support for its assisting aid. But it will have to renounce the possibility of efficaciously evangelizing the great masses of the poor. With the second option, the church will recover its prophetic mission, and will cry to the throne of God the cries for justice that rise up from the bowels of the earth. With this option comes also insecurity, official displeasure, and the fate of disciples of Jesus.

What lies in store for the basic community? This, we recall, is the question we asked above. In view of the data we have assembled, we believe we can answer: the basic community has a permanent future, provided it can understand itself in counterpoint to the church as institution. It dare not seek the utopian impossible, and delude itself into believing that it can exhaust the concept of community in its own being, in such wise that no other group or formation could exist. It dare not present itself as the only way of being church today. As we shall see, the basic community constitutes instead a bountiful wellspring of renewal for the tissues of the body ecclesial, and a call and a demand for the evangelical authenticity of ecclesial institutions, so that they may come more closely to approximate the utopian community ideal.

The church never lost this authenticity. It may have lain hidden, like live coals covered with ashes, but today it is emerging in a way never before seen: a rejuvenating leaven of the gospel ideals of communion, in a community of sisters and brothers simply living one and the same faith in the spontaneous worship of Christ in the midst of humanity, and in disinterested service of and concern for the needs of each member. The utopia of the kingdom anticipated in the community of the faithful, a community of more human ties, more lively faith, and more profound communion of members, never died in the church. The basic church community, if it hopes to keep the communitarian spirit alive, may not allow itself to replace the parish. It will have to remain small in order to avoid bureaucratization and to maintain a direct personal relationship among all its members. Although it will have to open up to the communion of the church universal, with all the latter's societal institutions and forms, yet it will have to maintain a dialectical tension with this global church in order not to be absorbed by it. In this way it will deteriorate neither into a fanatical group of futurists nor into a reactionary group in love with the past. Instead it will continue as the abiding leaven of the whole church.