Parishes, Monasteries, and the Future of the Church

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Our present situation

Writing this in the middle of the Pandemic and on the day when the deaths in Britain have reached an all-time high I would like to offer some thoughts which have been forming in my mind during the 'lockdown' and which seem relevant not only in the present situation but also for the future.

Something that we are all feeling is the lack of contact with others, our friends, families and all whom we meet day by day but at the same time neighbourliness has been on the increase and people of every faith and none have become far more concerned for one another and generous towards each other. In every walk of life, and not only in the N.H.S. people have found enormous support from their awareness that they are working in and supported by a team. I have heard this from people working in supermarkets, in social work and in the Police to name but a few.

Listening to various speakers on the Television would also lead me to believe that people in general are hoping for something new when we have, eventually, overcome the Pandemic and are able to live more freely again. They want to hold on to the lessons learned from team work in a time of crisis

Those, however, who have been regularly involved in their churches, both Roman Catholic and others, have felt particularly during this time the problems involved in meeting together with others, especially for worship. Religious leaders have made a stand against the closure of church buildings and the forbidding of religious services. This has led to

the continuation of services, especially the Eucharist, albeit with the constraints of non-participation verbally, social distancing and the injunction to arrive and leave the building quickly and without real contact with others. Although this has been happening, the practice of 'zooming' services, especially the Eucharist, has also become widespread so that many people have become accustomed to looking at their computer or television screen and feeling that they are joining in what is going on from the comfort of their own home. All of this has led to the emphasis from our bishops being on 'going to church', something which they suggest we must seek to do as soon as possible, rather than 'being the Church'.

How all this will affect the church for the future is, as yet, not able to be properly assessed. But while any real sense of community with people gathering together for worship has been, to a large extent lost, communities have often been built up and strengthened by the efforts of those who have kept contact with others, especially the isolated and the elderly, by the telephone or other means.

The Christian 'community'

This brings me to what these few thoughts are all about and that is the church as community. Although the word community may cover a variety of meanings, here I would want it to mean as the Concise Oxford Dictionary describes it as 'a body of people having a religion .... in common ... with a fellowship of interests'.

If we go back to our origins and what we find in the writings of the New Testament, community is absolutely central. Jesus lived in community with those whom he had called to be his disciples and the band of women who accompanied them on their journeys, but also with all those with whom he would meet and who enjoyed table fellowship with him he would seem to be encouraging community.

The first Christian communities or churches with all their problems, differences and internal frictions, are a striking feature of the New Testament. They were bound together not by Creeds or uniformity of practice but by adherence to the Apostles' preaching and teaching. In fulfilment of the Lord's instruction, they were convinced that they should go out and proclaim the Gospel to the whole of creation. They believed that the Lord was risen and among them and that he had bidden them recognise his presence particularly when they met together to break

bread and to share a cup of fellowship. Their task was to become communities that revealed his risen presence to the world by the love they had for one another. By their very being they would proclaim the coming Reign of God of which they were the sign. It was this that would bring others to that conversion that they themselves had experienced in the knowledge that God was a God of forgiveness and love and that they were called by the Lord to live a life of love in community.

It is obvious, of course, that as the Christian movement spread and communities grew larger, the close knit character of those original churches would be lost and the movement, for better or for worse, would become more organised so that something of the fervour and uniqueness of those first communities would be lost.

The Monastic Movement

It is from this growth of the Church as an institution, organised and, eventually seen more and more as the religious arm of the Empire, that the monastic movement sprang. The desire of those who fled the cities in the beginning was to escape their 'worldliness' and to find God in the wilderness, but it became apparent very quickly, that these groups of hermits needed some organisation. For this reason monastic communities formed around the great religious leaders among them. The desire in these groups was always to return to the way things were at the beginning in the first Christian communities. In the sixth century in the West people were again fleeing from the chaos of the world and the apparent break up of society. They sought a place where they could live the Gospel within a community of like-minded men or women, once again returning to the fervour of the early Christian communities It was at this time that Benedict wrote his Rule which became the standard for monastic communities for many centuries.

The monastic movement spread like wildfire and became one of the great civilising influences in the Western world, but it needed over and over again to be reformed in order to return to its original simplicity and purpose. It was this that moved the original Cistercians in 1098 to move away from the splendour and power of Cluny and to attempt to return to their origins by founding a reformed community at Citeaux. However, with growth, as the Reformed Order spread across Europe, came power, influence and a way of life that compromised the intentions of their founders. So yet another reform took place in 1623 when the Cistercians

of the Strict Observance came into being. In 1664 Armand-Jean de Rancé became the Abbot of the monastery of La Trappe and under his leadership the Trappists (as they came to be called) became the strictly disciplined and ascetic Order that Thomas Merton discovered and joined in his search for God.

Merton and the Monastery

For what was Merton looking when, on December 10th 1941 he entered the Cistercian Monastery of Gethsemane? He tells us in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that 'the monastery is a school-a school in which we learn from God how to be happy.' With all the enthusiasm of a still fairly recent convert to Catholicism, he saw the monastery through somewhat rose-tinted spectacles but he soon realised that now he 'was face to face with monks that belonged not to some dream, not to some medieval novel, but to cold and inescapable reality.'[1] In spite of all that, what he had sought and found was a community of Christians who had come to the monastery to seek God together.

This they did in work very similar to the work of the peasants around them, in *Lectio Divina* and in worship, but they did it together as a community. Much later Merton would write that, contrary to his earlier ideas about monastic life, 'the monastery remains in the world, but not of the world, as a vision of peace, a window opening on the perspectives of an utterly different realm, a new creation, an earthly paradise in which God once again dwells with men and is almost visibly their God, their peace and their consolation.' In the same work he says that to be a monk is to be 'a member of a little "mystical body", the monastic community'. The monk, he says, comes to the monastery simply to live the Christian life in its fullness, 'to realise and to appreciate all that any good Christian already has ... He comes in order that he might see and understand that *he already possesses everything*.'[2] 'The monk,' he says 'is inexorably involved in the common suffering and problems of the society in which he lives.'[3] We might say that Merton sees that the purpose of the monastic life is to form fully human beings.

The Monastery and the Parish Community

Leaving Thomas Merton aside for a moment, it has always seemed to me that the Monastery is a sacramental sign of what any Christian community ought to be, 'in the world yet not of the world'. But that is a very far cry from what our parish communities are. In fact, are they

communities at all for the most part? How can the ideals which are proposed for Christian communities in the New Testament possibly be realised in the average parish where, generally speaking, people are merely on a polite nodding acquaintance with those who sit around them on a Sunday morning? If we are called to love one another we must know one another and that is well-nigh impossible in a parish of even three or four hundred people attending Mass.

Returning to Merton, when he entered Gethsemani, the community was enormous and, had it not been for the silence which the community observed strictly at that time, it is difficult to see how so many men, especially young men, would be able to live together peaceably let alone truly love one another.

Many years ago a monk friend of mine who belonged to a community at that time of some thirty monks, said 'Of course, the community is far too big, something like a dozen would be the ideal!' With the diminishing number of those who seek to enter the monastic life, this, has, of course, become a reality and, although there are regrets that so few want to join them, many monks would say, I believe, that their numbers are far more in keeping with the monastic ideal. Our parishes are diminishing in numbers and the solution often sought has been to join parishes together rather than to seek to support the smaller groups that remain. My contention here is that this is the wrong solution and those smaller groups ought to be encouraged to become real communities.

One of the problems, of course, is that the Eucharist would seem to be an essential element of any Christian community and our churches have tended to make the celebration of the Eucharist dependent on the presence of an ordained minister. Again, the New Testament would tell us that the solution to this is for the group to select one of their number who would preside at the Eucharist and there seems to be no theological reasons why this should not be done. Again, of course, the upkeep of church buildings is seen as a problem but small groups of Christians would not need church buildings. They would meet, like those first Christians, in their homes or in a room in the local library or a pub if their own rooms were too small.

In all of this, the monastery would continue to be, as Merton says, 'a pattern to the rest of the Church, ... the realization, on a small scale, of that which we all seek: unity in charity and peace.'[4] Each group would be a school of discipleship where together they would pray, break bread,

reflect on the Scriptures, encourage one another and support one another in love. Moreover they would, each in their own way, be 'inexorably involved in the problems and common suffering of the society in which they live'.[5] The many initiatives which have taken off as a result of the present pandemic and those which were already tackling endemic problems such as homelessness and poverty, would, as they already do, involve Christians so that, not only would the Christian community be the leaven in the dough of humanity, but so would each individual member by his or her involvement in the world.

As the Second Vatican Council teaches, the Church, that is each small church, would be both a sign and a sacrament of the coming Reign of God. Of course, there would be need for oversight and the local bishop would provide that, being the link and the sign of unity between the small churches which is what the bishop is meant to be. This would certainly need a total reorganisation of structures which, in any case, seem to have become large and cumbersome and more akin to the world of big business than the simplicity of the Gospel.

Is this all the dream of an elderly priest who has lived through the Second Vatican Council and become increasingly despondent at the failure of our church to build on what the Bishops taught in that Council and to develop and build upon their teaching or does it have some merit and is it worthy of consideration?

As a parish priest of nearly forty years in a small parish of some four hundred people we found that the best way to create a sense of real community was by the forming of small groups. These met regularly on a monthly basis to share a meal during which they would celebrate the Eucharist and reflect together on their Christian calling. Although not everyone was involved, we had six such groups and, probably best part of a hundred people involved in them. With my retirement the parish became part of the next door parish and was virtually destroyed. What the people found most difficult was the destruction of their community and many of the bonds of friendship which had been formed in that community exist even today, nearly twenty years later.

Ecclesial belonging

Many who are disillusioned with the Church, our church in particular, will say that they still believe but they do not wish to belong to the Church any longer, an attitude promoted by the well-known theologian,

Tina Beattie. But it seems to me that believing is one thing but being a disciple of Jesus is very different. While one may be disillusioned with the institutional aspect of the Church, to follow Christ is essentially something done in common with others and that means belonging to a community.

In a very interesting and stimulating article in *Worship* for July last year, the author, Richard R Gaillardetz, considers the question of 'Ecclesial belonging in this time of scandal'.[6] He speaks of a 'growing 'culture-based distrust and performance-based distrust', a 'pervasive suspicion of religious dogmas or doctrine' even though many people still report 'a deep sense of spiritual awareness'. He further notes a 'pastoral complacency in which church leaders have simply taken for granted continued Catholic participation'. Gaillardetz goes on to quote the Second Vatican Council where the bishops describe the modern family as 'a school for deeper humanity' (Gaudium et spes 62) which is what Merton is saying in another way when he says that the monastic discipline is 'not the submersion of the personality in a social whole but the emancipation of the person through his full and mature participation in the common life.'[7]

There is much more in Gaillardetz's article which is very relevant to what we are saying but, in a nutshell, he concludes:

> Making a case for ecclesial belonging means advocating for a church that effectively presents itself to the world as a school for deeper humanity. Within this school Christian doctrine and practice must support one another and illuminate a path toward authentic human flourishing. It is to be a school for Christian discipleship that in a spirit of humility and repentance welcomes all.
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> That this vision seems far removed from the ecclesial life of many is not a counsel of despair but a reminder of the work that lies before us. As a theologian and ecclesiologist, this reality calls me to move beyond discouragement and redouble my efforts to explore the theological warrants for and the pastoral implications of a renewed vision of the church. We can all be encouraged by the recognition that this ecclesial vision has its most enthusiastic supporter in the current occupant of the Chair of Peter.

On that optimistic note I would end these few reflections by saying that I firmly believe that the future of the Church is in such small communities as I have described and that each of us is in a position to make a start. The stimulus, though we have the encouragement of Pope Francis, will not come from our bishops or priests for the most part, since they are too wedded to the 'status quo'. But we are the People of God, the Spirit is with us to guide us and inspired by all those both monastic and otherwise who have tried to take the Church forward by allowing themselves to be inspired by the simplicity of its origins, let us make a start. With a few members of our parish, with those with whom we have organised a local food bank, with a group that is welcoming refugees, or caring for the homeless, there are so many ways in which we can begin these small communities, these little 'mystical bodies', as Merton says, with people of every church and none, being a sign of the coming Kingdom of God and building it here and now.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mo*untain (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), pp. 372, 380.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), from the section 'Monastic Peace', pp. 43, 44, 48.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 172.
4. 'Monastic Peace', *The Monastic Journ*ey, p. 43.
5. *The Silent Life*, p. 172.
6. *Worship* 94 (July, 2020), pp. 196-204. The article may also be found at: https://www.academia.edu/44375212 (accessed 28/02/2001).
7. 'Monastic Peace', *The Monastic Journ*ey, p. 53.

Derek Reeve is a ninety-year-old retired Roman Catholic priest having been a parish priest for nearly forty years. He was greatly influenced by his training for the ministry in France and by the Second Vatican Council. He is saddened by the failure of his church to build on the outcome of that Council, but is encouraged by Pope Francis' new approach to the Papacy; but fearful that he is a voice crying in the wilderness of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy, although he finds great support among the people of the Church.