

THE COMMUNITY NATURE OF CATHOLICISM

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CARITAS - VERITAS

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Introduction

In this short discussion of the Catholic Church as a 'community made up of many small communities', it is impossible to do more than put forward a very brief outline of the basic ideas. It is hoped that you will find time to go more deeply into it, once your interest has been aroused. With this in mind we strongly recommend: *'THE CHURCH: COMMUNITY, LEAVEN AND LIFE-STYLE'* by Max Delespesse. Published by Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, USA 1973.

Basic Principles

- God is love. Men are created by God, as a free act of God's love. They are made to love and be loved. It is only to the extent that a man fulfils God's purpose that he attains happiness.
- One of the fruits of love is community. Sometimes the community is of a spiritual nature, usually it is both spiritual and physical. The Trinity is a community of three Divine Persons. The early Church was a spiritual and physical community made up of many small communities. Families are the most common form of community. In each case, the life of these communities is love.
- It is here that the essential difference between communities and other associations is to be found. While the organization of particular communities and their particular objectives may differ, love, and all that love implies, always forms the basis. In the context of community, love requires: sincerity, sharing, concern, responsibility for each other, and permanency. Community

also requires: order, fairness and a common purpose. Like the early Church, a Christian Community must be of one mind and one heart (Acts 2:42-47).

Love and common faith are the requirements of membership. While all the requirements of community may take time to fully develop, it is essential from the start that everyone concerned is dedicated to the common ideals and has at least a reasonable chance of living up to them.

- A major obstacle to love and community is selfishness. If one person really loves another, however, their concern for the person loved is as great, and often greater, than their concern for themselves. Christ gave us the supreme example of this when He put the good of mankind before the preservation of His own life. Christ calls His followers to follow in His footsteps. For the Christian, therefore, selfishness is an obstacle to be tackled and overcome. It is certainly not a reason for not forming communities.

- Everything a person has is either directly or indirectly a gift from God. God remains the ultimate owner of everything. Each person must finally account to God for the way he has used his natural gifts, and the share of the world's goods that have passed through his hands. We express, and grow in, our love for God and our neighbour, by the way we use these things. We were given them for this purpose. For a Christian, therefore, the fact that others possess more or less should not be an obstacle to forming communities. Pooling resources is simply a way of placing God's gifts at the disposal of a greater number of people.

- God has created a special community of love - the Catholic Church. Through this community, Christ continues to love and serve men. It is by the love Catholics show for one another that men are to know they are followers of Christ.

"I give you a new commandment: love one another; Just as I have loved you, you must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are My disciples." (John 13:33-35)

- As pointed out above, this love should usually lead to communities.

- The types of communities, and the numbers involved in each community, will vary considerably, according to the different workings of the Holy Spirit. Communities should be closely united to each other, like cells in a body, and to their Bishop. Through the Bishops, each local Church will be closely united with the others. Each community takes its place in the body of the Universal Church through the union between the local Bishop and the Pope.

The Consequences for Catholics . . .

- If Catholics really want to love one another for God's sake they will strive to talk together, pray together, work together, and share things with each other. It is only by increasing closeness to each other that Catholics can 'build up the community in Love.' If this is done sincerely, it will result in increasing numbers of Catholics pooling their resources and forming communities. In this way, they will help each other serve God better and they will give the rest of mankind a more powerful witness to the truth of Catholic Christianity. This is one of the most basic reforms

needed in Catholicism today. Catholics will never convince others of the value of Christianity as long as they fail to live up to its implications in their own lives.

- It is true that there are some who are not called to live in communities of this kind. It is true that there are others who cannot take part for a variety of reasons. However, the essential connection between love and community should make this the exception. It is a disaster for Catholic Christianity that the exception has become the rule.

- In correcting this situation, there will be many difficulties. Faith, sound common-sense, and expert guidance will be necessary. Hasty attempts will do more harm than good. It is most important to foresee the results of various actions and not to rush blindly into anything.

- In any community including families, it is essential and necessary that the family structure is not destroyed.

- One word of caution here: ecumenical communities should be the exception, not the rule. The reason for this lies in the essential differences between the Catholic and non-Catholic Churches. If a Catholic is to be true to his conscience, he must have a spiritual life centred on the Eucharist. He must have a loving relationship with Our Lady and the Saints as well as with Our Lord. He must be loyal to legitimate authority - especially that of his Bishop. These, and many other things, should be freely practised and expressed in community life. For this reason, it would be normal to have an essentially Catholic community. Normally the community should have many loving contacts with other Christian groups. It should be open and outgoing. It should work to foster greater love and co-operation between Christians. There will, of course, be those who are called to be involved in ecumenical communities. If a person feels called to this, they should give the matter much prayer and seek guidance from their Bishop.

- If this program is followed through, other people should be drawn to Christ, in an ever more powerful way, as the Church becomes a more effective light to men.

- As Catholics pool their resources they should find a surplus of time and money, that can be used in the service of others. In this way the problem many of us face, of being willing to do good but lacking the means, should be increasingly overcome.

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