**The Individual "I" and the Indispensable "We":**
**Christian Community in a Postmodern World**
by David Fleming, SM

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## Community No Longer Taken for Granted

The development of communities sharing faith and values and offering members support and challenge in facing a rapidly changing world was a key perspective for Father Chaminade and his early disciples. Often they took community so much for granted that they felt little need to talk about it. Chaminade himself develops the theme of community when he feels the need to explain or defend his foundations to authorities or to critics. Otherwise little was said on the subject in his era. Despite the far-reaching changes of the French Revolution, the family, the village, the parish, and the neighborhood were still the glue that bound people together.

Today, in contrast, we have to talk about community because it so often seems lost. Martin Heidegger said people never talk about a hammer unless it is broken. Reflection about human community, and even more about faith community, has become necessary because community has become suspect as an obstacle to individual freedom. As Robert Bellah said, our passion for individual freedom has created a context of "loose connections and porous institutions."

This theme was illustrated cleverly in *East is East*, a British film recently screened at the Cannes Festival. It tells the story of a Muslim family living in a working-class neighborhood in the North of England. The father is an immigrant from Pakistan, and the mother is a long-suffering and impoverished English woman with six teenage sons and a daughter. Even though he has been in England for thirty years, the father insists on maintaining the norms of traditional Muslim society by arranging marriages for his rebellious sons and imposing a rigid oriental discipline on the younger generation, which is undergoing the usual growing pains of contemporary occidental adolescence. All forms of community (Islamic, the British neighbors, the family itself) are held up to ridicule. The leaders of community are portrayed either as oppressive (in this film, the Islamic father) or as irrelevant (in this case, the neighbors and their dithering local Anglican vicar, who makes only a cameo appearance).

The conclusion to be drawn from such stories is keep loosening the connections and making the institutions still more porous (to use the terminology of Bellah), for the old ideals of human community are an impediment to modern humanity.

Perhaps a negative critique of community, even though it stings, is needed in our time. It is true that many of the old ideals have lost touch with the reality of the contemporary world and have become obsessed with details that are no longer helpful to much of humanity.

**Individuality and Unity**

A key insight about community was articulated by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the brilliant Jesuit paleontologist of the past century, one of the seminal minds of our times. Writing about the process of evolution and including the sociocultural history of humanity in that evolution, Teilhard believes that the human race is moving toward ever-greater personalization (i.e., individualization) and at the same time toward greater unity. For me, this is a greatly hopeful thought.

The individualization is clear for all to see, for example, in the political splintering of Europe, Asia, and Africa into more and more autonomous regions, each resisting identification with the nationalisms of the past, each asserting its uniqueness. Such splintering and individualization is most striking, sometimes tragically so, in the republics and autonomous regions of the former Soviet Union and in the former Yugoslavia.

Culturally and religiously, the individualization part of the process is mirrored very clearly in some areas I know much better. Our Marianist schools in Spain, for example, are now obliged to teach subjects in a variety of regional languages. Spanish has been replaced to a considerable extent, and even the more moderate Basques and Catalans take umbrage at being identified as Spaniards. From halfway around the world, another example is the dalits of India—about half the population—who refuse to be homogenized into a dominant Hindu nationalistic society. Our Marianist brothers—many of them dalits—must carry out their ministries in at least six different languages within their own homeland. Some people would call such phenomena "fragmentation."

What about the unification of which Teilhard spoke? Its signs are more tenuous. Politically, the striving for unity is sometimes to be seen in the overarching idea of the European Union or in the efforts for multilateral collaboration in other parts of the world. The human race perhaps is slowly learning to live with pluralism. Culturally and religiously, in an effort to shape some kind of personal synthesis, more people than ever before are taking on a global mentality and seeking to draw from the beliefs and experiences of many others. The syntheses are often pretty eclectic, fuzzy, and private. They do not yet give rise to much community. In any case, the number of people tending toward such a global mentality is still a small minority. Yet the signs are there, and I think Teilhard was right in the long run.

**The Postmodern Context**

The truth is that we live in a context of postmodernity[1] that offers a new set of problems for the search for human community. I believe this context also offers a new set of opportunities for unity among people. What do we mean by this postmodern context? Here are a few characteristics that are being identified today as representative of the new "postmodern" age.

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[1] For many of the ideas summarized here, I am indebted to an article by Hermann Schaluck, OFM. "'Everything is possible, nothing is certain': Religious Vocations in Post-Modern Times," in *Vocations to the Consecrated Life in the Context of Modern and Post-Modern Society* (Rome: 11 Calamo, 1999).

1. *Everything impossible, nothing is certain.* We live in a time of rapid upheaval. Today's sure foundation quickly becomes yesterday's outdated idea. We learn to live with a high degree of skepticism and with an adventurous curiosity about new trends, but without conceptual and spiritual anchors. We get used to living with fragments and lose our faith or even our interest in overarching, integrated, and homogeneous systems, such as those provided by traditional philosophies and political creeds and by religion. The old ideological and theological communities, held together by a common struggle for shared convictions, have lost much of their power.

2. *Differentiation and plurality, individuality is the spice of life.* Technological innovations and new consumer markets have diversified living conditions. Many different lifestyles exist side by side in the same city, perhaps rarely interacting. We witness a high degree of cultural pluralization. It appears relatively easy to discard any given set of cultural traditions and to try out new ones. More than in the past, individuals tend to have a "loose and porous" attitude toward traditional ties, like family and religion. Human relationships may still be the stuff of life, but it is dangerous, we think, to develop ties that will be hard to break. We must safeguard our individual sovereignty. We get used to being on the move from one place to another, one lifestyle to another, one community of people to another.

3. *Mix-and-match, do-it-yourself beliefs and identities dominate.* In the Modern Age, from the Renaissance until the late twentieth century, people lived with the presupposition that they "belonged" to a particular configuration of faiths, ideologies, and cultural traditions that largely determined their identity. I was perhaps Roman Catholic, Irish-American, and a Democrat; you were perhaps a German Lutheran and voted Republican. People in Russia were atheist communists; Indians were Hindu socialists, and so on. We might (and often did) rebel against our upbringing and transfer our allegiance from one cultural identity to another, but there tended to be a consistency, a gestalt in the new identity we adopted. We usually rebelled in the name of some new utopia that aimed to create a new community of people.

   Today, in contrast, postmodern people enter into a supermarket or cafeteria of traditions, ideas, and beliefs and try to "mix and match" to find the highly personalized combination that suits them. There are Irish-American Buddhists, Thai atheist technocrats, and French Muslim intellectuals. Especially in the developed countries of the West, many people try to create an idiosyncratic identity, a patchwork of attitudes, habits, and beliefs unique to themselves alone. Community tends to be little more than a shifting, unstable set of opportunistic alliances.

4. *Instantaneous enjoyment is the best that life has to give.* Postmoderns emphasize whatever is "here and now," whatever brings instant entertainment and promises that we will "feel good." Substitutes for traditional community often grow out of the search for short-term satisfactions; for example, some people build their identity and their social life around a common interest in a hobby or sport (gourmet cooking or deep-sea diving) or in some social cause (an alliance for abolishing the debt of the Third World).

Perhaps this somewhat epicurean approach to life is explained by the fact that many people have become skeptics in the face of the perceived failure of so many great ideas and ideals. We can criticize everything but feel little inclination toward tenacious commitment. There is a tremendous tolerance, a sincere interest, and sometimes a sort of aesthetic admiration for the convictions of other people, but there is little inclination to analyze and argue about them in view of a commitment. It is enough if we can savor the pleasures of the present moment. In a skeptical age, with a great distrust of what is thought of as "merely rational," community is chosen more on the basis of emotive and aesthetic criteria than as a result of rational analysis.

5. *There is no greater value than individual freedom and autonomy.* This is the one quasi-absolute ideal in most of the West. The recognition of the inalienable rights of each individual is precious to us, but it tends to create centrifugal societies. We have not found many ways to safeguard the rights of the community and to maintain coherence and peace in stability. In favor of the dangerous but perhaps necessary idea of the rights of society as such, a number of Asian nations have expressed a thoughtful critique of the Western concept of the "rights of man." Even in the West, there still remains a considerable divergence of opinion about which rights are to be included in the list, with representatives of the United States government most often leading the opposition to the inclusion of such "newer" human rights as the right to decent housing or the right to legal protection from abuses of governments through an international court of appeal. In any case, postmoderns take it for granted that the individual should be assured the greatest possible realm of choice, no matter what the consequences for human communities.

6. *What really counts is integrity, holistic fullness of life.* Postmoderns include all of nature in their purview. They tend to be concerned about ecology, the use of natural resources, and a healthy balance between human beings and the nature that surrounds them. They long for an "earthy" connectedness with the entire universe. These concerns are integrated in new ways into an inchoate spirituality that loves life and responds to beauty and gentle relationships. This spirituality eschews the dualistic tendencies that pervade much religious history.

7. *We should be spiritual, not religious.* Postmoderns have not shown much inclination for organized religions, but many of them hunger for God-experience. Recent surveys in Europe showed a low percentage of people who identified themselves as practicing members of any Church, but there was a very high percentage of people who consider themselves "spiritual." Teachers of religion to adolescents have noticed a new kind of openness and toleration among their students. Fifteen years ago, hostility and rebellion often confronted them. Today, whenever there is question of sharing religious experiences, they find an interest and curiosity, an open-if-rather-passive tolerance, a stirring of at least momentary interest. The flourishing interest in meditation techniques, in the occult and the esoteric, in the revival of ancient forms of religiosity (Celtic, Native-American, etc.), and in oriental mysticism—all that is

commercialized as the "New Age"—is a sign that many postmoderns are far from indifferent to the trans-rational, mystical dimensions of life.

8. *Institutions are suspect.* All forms of large-scale human organizations that attempt to assert authority and to organize human culture are subject to suspicion. Governments, armies, corporations, professional societies, Churches . . . all evoke distrust and cynicism. No institution is allowed to claim total adherence or to dictate all the details of life.

I would like to conclude this brief description of postmodernism with four comments.

- It is clear that not everyone is a postmodernist. Most postmoderns tend to belong to the younger generations. They are more predominant in Europe than in America. You do not really find a lot of postmodernism in Africa and most of Asia, at least not yet. There are plenty of people, even in highly developed countries, who are not much touched by the characteristics of postmodernity; their identity is still rather well defined by ideals and attitudes (nationalisms and political and religious ideologies) characteristic of the last several centuries. Many modern (not postmodern) people are moved by familiar cultural, social, and religious strategies in continuity with those of the past.

- It seems to me that postmoderns are easily prey to subtle manipulation by the commercial interests. It is not so difficult to notice and reject the obvious, straightforward impositions of the older authoritative institutions like the government and the Church. It is harder to note and resist the clever subliminal messages of contemporary marketing. Products that will sell well often include those that claim to be holistic and to root us in what is "natural," anything that enhances freedom, whatever emanates from an exotic and ancient culture, and whatever cultivates or breathes the aura of spiritual sensitivity. Many people make their livings by catering to the desire for "mix-and-match" philosophies, spiritualities, and systems of self-help. We need to develop a little healthy skepticism about those who profit from the marketing of pseudo-spiritual products and services.

- I would like to stress the positive side of what is now being called postmodernism. It surely suffers from numerous moral, intellectual, and spiritual flaws, some of which I have just noted. But what configuration of human culture does not? Postmodern attitudes may weaken old styles of community, but they offer hope for some powerful new styles. It seems to me the positive trends include emphases on spirituality, integrity, and a holistic approach to life; the willingness to learn from others; and an openness to many diverse cultures. As a Christian, I think that postmodernism may turn out to be more open to hearing the message of the Gospel than many forms of modern culture.

- It is important to accept people and attitudes as they are, to understand them first, to seek their roots, and to appreciate and savor their good points. This is what we call "inculturation" in today's ecclesial language. Rather than lament the changes and long for the past, we need to cultivate the seeds of goodness, truth, and beauty present in the thought and ethos of our times. As regards community, we need to work to develop forms of human collaboration and solidarity that will work and flourish in a postmodern era. This is undoubtedly a key challenge of our moment in history.

**The Marianist Tradition**

Christianity never exists in isolation. There always has been, and must always be, a community of the faithful. Two thousand years have seen the rise of many styles of Christian community. Some of them are quickly dismissed by postmoderns because they seem authoritarian or not integrated or non-holistic or exclusivist or obsessed with details or tied into a total institution.

I believe our Marianist tradition offers some real help. The Marianist tradition is only a small link, but it binds us to the great chain of the Western Christian heritage. It highlights some aspects of that heritage which are most favorable to the experience of community in a postmodern world.

Our Marianist foundation goes back to that paradigmatic time of upheaval in the traditions of European community . . . the era during and immediately after the French Revolution. Father Chaminade, our Founder, was convinced that "new means were required for his times: new institutions, new methods," and even a new kind of person to take up the challenge of transmitting the Christian heritage to the future. Such new institutions and methods consisted in the founding of a movement of young people who were grouped together in many small, interrelated, face-to-face subdivisions that built on the "rich creative possibilities of a Christian community."

The quotes that follow are taken from *Rule of Life of the Society of Mary*, passim. Chaminade felt that such a communitarian movement could offer striking witness to the relevance of the Christian message in a context greatly altered from that of the *ancien régime.* He felt that such a community movement "could attract others by its very way of life . . ., thus giving life in turn to still other communities. A community could thus become the great means to re-Christianize the world."

Our Marianist heritage speaks unapologetically of "forming a new family" and of "family spirit." We know that we are never the same as a biological family, but we also believe that the family is the archetype for all meaningful forms of community.

We aim to "share in common prayer, friendship, possessions, work, successes, and difficulties." That is, we share in all aspects of life.

We admit that being together in community is no sweet and idyllic experience, "sometimes involves struggle," and "leads us to experience the grace of reconciliation." We must "honestly recognize our strengths and weaknesses" and "try to accept and affirm one another." (The word *try* is important, because sincere and conscious aims count for a great deal. We know that they always fall short of the mark, but we must not give up the

effort.) We are urged to maintain an open attitude toward giving and receiving advice for improvement and to work at the challenges of conflict resolution.

The Marianist heritage recognizes that "community life is not the same as uniformity" and calls people to an "understanding of personal differences which arise from temperament, age, health, the needs of varied kinds of work, or cultural backgrounds." It insists on "the right of each individual to meet fundamental human needs," such as "health, rest, leisure, privacy, and a minimum of material resources."

Our Marianist form of community aspires to be dynamic, to foster "a climate of continuing growth," and to develop the gifts of each person for the good of the entire body. It seeks "support and enrichment from its environment" and calls on whatever new developments are available (for example, Internet and e-mail) to enhance the sense of bondedness and connection. We search together to solve problems and to determine important decisions adapted to each moment, even while realistically recognizing that the "process of discernment is sometimes painful" and almost never simple. We emphasize "a spirit of positive dialogue and mutual openness, which excludes no one and encourages each member to contribute to the development of all." All are called to learn from one another and from an attentive scrutiny of the developments of our times.

We recognize the indispensable role of good leadership, but we see it as a "service" that is "to help the members in their spiritual growth and in the fulfillment of their mission."

Most basically, in our *Rule* we affirm that lasting human community must have shared faith as a basis. We seek to be aware of "Christ, present among us, who gives inspiration and strength to community life and makes it a sign to those around us: 'By this shall all know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.'"

Such an approach, which is concrete, realistic, noncoercive, and experiential to human community, seems to me to offer a great deal of practical wisdom and a good measure of hope for the process of unification of which Teilhard prophesied.

Our Marianist style of community places us squarely in the Western and Catholic Christian heritage, but it also leaves rather ample space for that plurality, freedom, and individualization which proponents of that heritage have sometimes abridged.

It gives people a chance to experience growth and to search together, without demanding that they suspend from the outset all doubts and silence all questionings. A healthy dose of skepticism can feel at home in a Marianist community. It offers the possibility of enduring connections that go deeper than commitment to any particular ideology or system.

The Marianist approach to Christian community emphasizes face-to-face human encounter rather than the total institution.

It remains open to the integration of sources of wisdom from a variety of cultures and traditions. This approach invites such integration to go deeper than "mixing and matching," deeper than a "patchwork identity." But it welcomes new sources of wisdom and new insights, with an inclination more to discovering their truth than confusing their errors.

It also invites commitment without imposing it and leaves room for each person to grow into it at his or her own pace.

The Marianist style of community is a formative, educative one. It is naturally at home in a university, because it fits in a place where people question, grow, change, and become worthwhile persons capable of their own unique contributions.

The Marianist style of community finds its symbol in Mary, that womanly figure who stands for acceptance and affirmation; solidarity in struggle; and integration, harmony, and peace in the midst of uncertainty.

Naturally, we do not always live up to our best potentials or exemplify the full wealth of our heritage, but I believe that this heritage is an important resource for people at this moment in history.

**Challenges for Today: A Marianist, Catholic Perspective**

If we are to continue this search for the Marianist style of Christian community in the age of postmodernity, what are the main challenges for us today?

First, I believe we are challenged *to find a foothold, a place in which to stand.* The style of community we represent is not common in contemporary thought and experience, especially in the academic world. Articulating it, offering it to people, and learning with them by trial and error is part of that "evangelization of culture" which Pope John Paul II sees as the key challenge of the Church today. The pope has a short list of critical areas for the action of the Church today, which he calls the "new *areopagi*," with reference to St. Paul's experience at the ancient *areopagus* . . . the marketplace of Athens where people met to orate, argue, and explore new ideas. All of the areas the pope mentions (the intellectual life, mass media, higher education, the arts, and the dialogue of religions and philosophies) involve the quest for community with people who are at the cusp of culture in our times.

Like the pope himself, I live in Rome, a place where it is obvious that for many centuries the Church set the agenda for culture, art, entertainment, and the intellectual life. It is equally obvious that the Church today is far from setting any such agenda, least of all in Rome itself. To tell the truth, the Church lacks an effective presence in these domains in almost every part of the world.

People are looking for meaningful and thoughtful community in the bewildering world of postmodernity; to find it, they sometimes feel that they have to go to the Buddhists or Native Americans. It is important to make an offer of our style of Christian community at the crossroads of our times, not to confine ourselves to the tried and true and comfortable satisfactions of the sacristy and the neighborhood parish supper.

Second, we need to develop a *creative interaction with the world around us.* I believe there is no more urgent issue in Christian thought today than the working out of this relationship. This can be viewed from three approaches.

- Some members of Christian communities take a stance of "negative mutuality" to the world around them; they see their prophetic function as one of denouncing evil, developing resistance to earthly blandishments, and standing with those who are abused and marginalized by the juggernauts of history.

- Others emphasize "positive mutuality." According to this line of thought, the world is good and beautiful, God's creation, and we must integrate its riches into Christian life. In the past, focussed only on some unearthly better future, Christians have too often been against progress by resisting freedom and democracy, perpetuating inequalities, condemning science, avoiding helpful technology, overemphasizing asceticism, and eschewing beauty and earthy involvement. It is time for Christians to open up the windows and let in the winds of human progress.

- Another group of Christians seems to think that contemporary movements of the world are more or less irrelevant to their religious life. Whatever is going on in human culture, the norms and forms of living by faith should be little affected. The community of believers should be permanent, unchanging, and *semper eadem* (always the same).

There must be great kernels of truth in each of these three approaches. Yet they often give rise to bitter oppositions within Christian groups today. Christian community will flourish in the future only if some integration of these approaches, some coherent and inclusive "theology of earthly realities," can be articulated and embraced.

Third, we need to find *stability of commitment* amid the fluidity of our times. This critical and skeptical mind-set of postmodern life and its emphasis on maximum autonomy and instant gratification has left many people feeling that they must pick a difficult path among shifting sands. Is temporary, carefully hedged commitment the only possible option? Is it impossible today for a person to look at her or his whole lifetime and take a firm stand with individuals or groups, to persevere in good times and bad, through times of success and failure? Surely it is not impossible, but it certainly is difficult, and our times are studded with spectacular examples of failed promises. Many people are simply afraid of taking a permanent stance and are unsure of themselves and of others.

In Christian community, I believe that temporary commitments should be welcomed and developed more fully. We have many helpful examples of them in our Marianist tradition of community. But I also believe that we need to rediscover the creative power that can be unleashed—in marriage, in faith-life, in professional activity—only by taking a definite and permanent stance.

Finally, I believe we need *to open out our personalism and individualization into an inclusive, global consciousness.* At this point in history, individual autonomy and heightened self-consciousness—even an integrated, holistic spirituality—appear to be prerogatives of the privileged. Some people can expend enormous wealth and energy on self-development while others languish at the direst levels of mere subsistence. The poorer two-thirds of the world's population does not have the option of enjoying the benefits of postmodernity.

Thomas Hobbes described human life as "brutish, nasty, and short." His description is still true for the billions, even several millions in the United States, whose choices are severely limited by the constraints of physical survival, who depend on huge faceless institutions even while they resent them, who must eke out their living with a minimum of choices and a maximum of austerity, who face a poverty of culture and

human development as well as economic resources, and who experience in their lives much more compulsion than freedom. Our community only will be Christian and Marianist (only deserve the name of Jesus Christ and of his mother) by reaching out in sisterhood and brotherhood to those who are poor and marginalized. Jesus and Mary were members of a despised and impoverished minority and shared their people's feelings of oppression and their struggles for resistance and freedom. Their life pattern was intimately bound in solidarity with the marginalized of their time.

**Conclusion**

Justice and peace and solidarity and sharing will have to be the characteristics of any contemporary community that is worth the trouble and that truly transforms the world. Already many Christian communities, among them many Marianist ones, are taking up this challenge and finding that it gives new life and a new urgency to their mission. It provides a new inclusiveness to their efforts at sharing. Moving from personalism to global solidarity is the greatest challenge of human community today: it is the test of its viability and worth.