

# **COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN THE MIND OF GOD AS REVEALED IN THE SCRIPTURES**

**By**

**Bernard LeFrois, S.V.D.**

From all eternity the divine mind had formed a secret plan which would only unravel itself gradually in the course of mankind's development, and would reach its zenith in Christ, as St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians: "The plan God was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time, namely, to bring all things together in the heavens and on the earth into one under the headship of Christ" (1:9-10). This is community at its best or unity of all in one, planned by God himself for all mankind, to reach its eschatological fulness when, according to St. Paul, "Christ hands over the Kingdom to the Father" (1 Cor. 15:24).

All other communities are intended as cells or units of this grand community of God, and all community-building in miniature aims to complete and perfect this gigantic plan of God for the unity of all creatures in the one Christ, in love. Consciously or not, the development or evolution of the entire intellectual creation tends towards oneness, for at its very center is Christ who directs all toward that goal. Those who are open to this inward impulse toward oneness, which is none other than God's own Spirit within, urging them on, are building the world of love for which all men long and wait.

The initial and basic cell for all community-building as intended by the Creator himself is the family, and this is as relevant in a Christian country as anywhere else on the face of the globe. We read in the book of Genesis: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one" (2:24). From this union of love proceeds the family, the first of all communities in the human realm. God has implanted the deepest love in the hearts of parents for their children as the whole world bears witness, and children in turn blossom on the love of their parents, forming a closely-knit unit in every part of the world, no matter what their religion be or what degree of education they may have. No one can gainsay the closely-knit ties of a family. Is it any wonder? God made man in his own image (Gen. 1:26) and God is triune. The family reflects in a

**certain sense the Community of Three in the inaccessible Light and infinite Love of the Most Blessed Trinity, where the Love of the Father and Son is so mighty that it blossoms forth in the Third Person of the Trinity, Love Itself.**

Therefore the family was so sacred to Christ. He let himself be born into a family to share the love of father and mother, and to experience the oneness that is lived in that community of shared love. He gladly took part in the wedding feast of Cana, for human sexuality was for Christ something most noble and sacred. When asked by the Pharisees "May a man divorce his wife for any reason whatever?" he replied "Have you not read, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and declared, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become as one? Thus they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore let no man separate what God has joined'" (Mt. 19:6). He knew well the harm that would be caused by broken families when divorce is rampant, and he was determined to lay down the guidelines for his followers that would insure the sacredness of marriage, so that it could be the center of a happy community of love, and thus contribute toward the grand plan of the Father.

But God chose a further means of carrying out this plan to unite man in community. His divine election fell on the family of Jacob, offspring of Abraham, then grown into large tribes; and he formed them into a people, Yahweh's own people, with whom he entered into intimate covenant-relations. They were a mixed group consisting of various tribes descended from Jacob, plus a motley group that had followed them out of Egypt (Ex. 12:38), as well as those groups that joined them later on. But out of this heterogeneous crowd, Yahweh determined to fashion for himself a community that would be a holy and royal people, all bearing the name of Israel, the heir of the promises made to Abraham, that in his offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed. Israel was God's intended blue-print for his dealings with men of all times. For that reason he gave Israel inspired writers to write up his dealings with her in the books of the Old Covenant. "You have seen how I bore you up on eagle's wings and brought you here to myself," Yahweh told them through Moses his spokesman, "therefore if you hearken to my voice, and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people" (Ex. 19:4-6).

Yet how would this motley crowd become one people, one community with the same aims, the same ideals, the same direction toward the one true God, to reflect his plan for all the nations?

For that purpose Yahweh gave Israel her sacred laws. He never intended his laws to be burdens or restrictions that would weigh her down. That experience came from her own false grasp of law. Yahweh's intention was to give Israel proper attitudes, both toward himself and toward each other; his law was the expression of his loving will, the will of a Father who loves all men and desires only their best.

The first and greatest commandment given to the People of God of old is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5), and the second is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Both laws are positive: you shall, not negative: you shall not. If a man truly loves God with all his heart, he will realize the need of loving God's image as himself. The Ten Commandments are but a wider extension of these two fundamental commandments given to Israel. For if I love God, I will worship him gladly, and reject all false idols, such as mammon, I will not abuse his holy name. If I love my neighbor as myself, I will not kill or steal or judge him rashly or abuse his rights. Thus the Law of God was intended to unite God's people in a community of love, and offer the same guidelines to the New Israel, which Israel foreshadowed.

But in time Israel forgot that the Law was only directive and guideline, not grace and strength to carry out those guidelines. The Law did not confer the power to fulfill what was commanded. God intended by this means to bring Israel to realize man's inner weakness and sinfulness, and her need of God her Savior. Of himself man with his corrupt inclinations is not able to love God properly nor his neighbor as himself. His nature is imperfect, corrupt. He needs the help of the Spirit of God. So Israel was given by the Spirit the inspired prayerbook of psalms, and the liturgy of worship, to unite her both in her families and as a nation in community prayer and worship, praising Yahweh and asking his help on the journey toward the goal, longing all the while for the Savior to redeem them.

What was intended to make Israel a holy people, welded together in a community of love, namely the Law, proved to be a stumbling block and occasion of multiple failure. Israel's doctors of the Law led her to the brink of ruin by not learning the intended lesson of man's dependence on God, but relying instead on their own individual power and strength to keep the Law. Thus the Law became a burden unbearable, and a choking atmosphere of restriction. Yet God never threw off his people nor desisted from his destined plan. A remnant was always found who would



be open to his will and the inner breathing of his Spirit. In a little Galilean town of Nazareth, the Virgin blossomed in the fulness of time, and God's final step to unite all men into one divine family was about to be realized. God's own Son became one of us, one of the race of man, and in a mysterious way, he planned to unite all mankind and all existing creatures to himself in one Body that is truly his own, with one identical Spirit which is also truly his own. That brings us to the threshold of the Incarnation and to the Paschal Mystery.

The Paschal Mystery! It is the superb salvific work of Christ for the unification of all creation, from the first moment of his Incarnation, in which he determined to channel all his efforts toward complete submission to the Father, and a life of total service to his fellowmen; then on through his Passion and Death whereby he gave himself totally for man; climaxing in his Resurrection and Ascension, with the Pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the believing community; and being consummated in full in his Parousia when the power of the Risen Lord will have penetrated to the uttermost parts of the universe, and regenerated humanity will be forever united in the Kingdom of God's love and holiness.

But we are anticipating. Not long after Jesus entered upon his public life, he formed a community of Twelve to be with him always and to whom he gave his own powers (Mk. 3:13). This little group he gradually formed into the believing community as we find it in the Acts of the Apostles, and later on it would come to be called Ecclesia or Church, the equivalent of the Hebrew "Qahal" designating God's people: called, convoked and formed by him as the object of his designs. But it was necessary that Jesus first carry out the Paschal Mystery and die as the Victim-Lamb of God. In order, as St. John tells us "to gather into one all the dispersed children of God (11:52). This is brought out forcefully by St. Paul: "All of you have clothed yourselves with Christ, and there does not exist among you . . . slave or freeman, male or female, all of you are ONE in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). God's plan is now made clear to man.

In the opening chapters of the Acts the followers of Jesus are portrayed as a community of men and women with Mary in their midst and it is especially noted that they are a praying community: (1:14). They are awaiting the Spirit promised by Jesus and this would be like another incarnation by which the believing members of Christ would go out into the whole world and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:26), immersing them into the new atmosphere that is decidedly Christian. This universal brother-

hood is already depicted in the second chapter of the Acts when the believing community under the impulse of the Spirit breaks forth praising God in the many tongues of the known Roman world, symbolizing the power of the Spirit to unite all nations and tongues into one Body, the Body of Christ, with the same Spirit invigorating its members. In the fourth chapter, the portrait deepens: "The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them claimed anything as his own, rather, everything was held in common. With power they bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (4:32f). Truly we have here the blueprint for every Community: one mind and heart, sharing all things, material and spiritual, with the resurrection of Christ as their stamina, and the Spirit of Christ as the unifying element.

What is the building-potential in this community in which Christ lives on and makes himself manifest to the whole world, to transform it gradually but totally? It is love. On the eve of his death, over and over again, the Master gave his own the injunction, which would be the hallmark of every truly Christian community: it is the one mighty force which truly builds heterogeneous groups into one. Listen to St. John recording it for us: "I give you a new commandment: Love one another, such as my love been for you, so must your love be for each other. This is how all will know you for my disciples: your love, for one another" (13:34f). "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love. You will live in my love if you keep my commandments even as I have kept my Father's commandment and live in his love" (15:9). "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:12f).

Paul, in his hymn on the excellent gift of love demonstrates why love is so important in building up community-harmony: He says: "Love is patient, love is kind. Love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. Love is never rude, it is not self-seeking. It is not prone to anger; neither does it brood over injuries. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices in the truth. There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure" (1 Cor. 13).

Just as Yahweh gave Israel the great commandment of love to make her a perfect community, so Jesus gave his disciples this commandment of loving him by loving one another. But Jesus simultaneously gives his believing community the inner power and strength to carry out this commandment, for he won for us by his Passion and Death his own Personal Spirit of love which is his

greatest gift to us. In the power of that Spirit dwelling within us, we are enabled to be open to one another, to relate to each other even when it is difficult, to build a truly model community of love. "Make every effort," St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "to preserve unity which has the Spirit for its origin and peace as its binding force. There is but one body and one Spirit, just as there is but one hope given to all of you by your call. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all works through all and is in all" (4, 3-6). Even trials and sufferings cannot thwart the work of the Spirit of love: "We even boast of our afflictions: We know that afflictions makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, and tested virtue for hope, and this hope will not leave us disappointed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5, 3-5).

But Jesus gave us still more. On the night before he died Jesus instituted the Eucharist as a sign of unity and love, a sign that is efficacious, bringing about that which is signified. For as St. Paul says: "Is not the bread we break a sharing in the Body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor. 10:16f). It is chiefly by the Eucharist that men are transformed more and more into the one Christ, for its influence makes itself felt in every corner of the globe, bringing men and women of each and every nation of the world into that One Body of Christ, which gives perfect worship to the Father and is the continued recipient of the outpourings of the Holy Spirit. To look upon attendance at the Eucharistic sacrifice merely as an obligation to be fulfilled is so inadequate, that it is unworthy of a child of God. Rather, the Eucharistic sacrifice affords each and everyone the greatest means to reach that full and perfect manhood in Christ of which St. Paul speaks in Ephesians (4, 13). Teilhard de Chardin would even see the Eucharist as transforming the matter of the entire universe in a certain sense into the Body of Christ. Perhaps a deeper theological appreciation of the Eucharist will open up horizons not even surmised as yet by the People of God. For in the Eucharist, the Divine Word not only incarnated himself in human flesh, but in a sense, in matter itself.

Coming now to the practical side of our theme, how are we to develop that environment which constitutes a truly Christian community? It is St. Paul again, with his practical bent, who offers us good guidelines. First he reminds us there are various gifts in any community and each person has his or her charism, but the same Spirit is the source of each of them. God it is who is accomplishing the works in each of us. To one is given this ability,



and to another that, but to each person is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. The charisms are not given chiefly for the individual but for the community. After that, Paul draws an important analogy. "The body is one and has many members but all the members, many though they are, are one body. And so it is with Christ. If the foot should say, because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body, would such a complaint be justified? If the body were all eye, what would happen to our hearing? If all the members were alike, where would the body be? The eye cannot say to the hand, I do not need you, anymore than the head could say to the feet, I do not need you. All the members should be concerned about one another. If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one is honored, all the members share its joy. You then are the body of Christ, everyone of you is a member of it" (1 Cor. 12).

From this remarkable analogy with the human body, Paul draws striking conclusions for the Body of Christ. It is evident that there must be cooperation and coordination if it is to work smoothly in any community, like in the human body. The vital principle that moves each and every member of Christ's body is none other than the Holy Spirit himself. It is of paramount importance to be aware of this, aware of his directing the community to its destined goal, aware of the necessity of working together with all the other members if we are to build a community of love. This requires much self-control and much self-conquest but it is the overall goal that really counts. We shall surely fail to reach this goal, if, like Israel of old, we rely solely on our own abilities and powers to build a community, for the Spirit alone can accomplish this task in us and through us, when we continue to be open to him. Hence the importance of living this reality of the indwelling Spirit.

Paul returns to this in Ephesians: "It is Christ who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ, till we become one in faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, and form that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature... through him the whole body grows, and with the proper functioning of the members joined together by each supporting ligament, builds itself up in love" (4:11-16). This is a clear picture of the necessity of service, of supporting one another, of cooperation and coordination in the building of a truly Christian community, be it the family, the parish, the religious community, or any other, worthy of the name.

Paul has one more piece of advice for community-building. It is in his letter to the Philippians whom he wanted to make the

ideal community for all the others. Luke had worked long and hard there, and one cannot read Philippians without realizing how dear they were to the heart of Paul. This is what he writes to them: "Make my joy complete by your unanimity, possessing the one love, united in spirit and ideals. Never act out of rivalry or conceit; rather let all parties think humbly of others as superior to themselves, each of you looking to others' interests rather than to his own." (Phil. 2:2-4). This difficult advice he motivates by following it up with that sublime hymn to Christ, who though he was by nature God, did not disdain to empty himself and take the form of a slave, humbling himself and being obedient even unto death (ibid. vv. 5-8).

Cooperation, coordination, service of one another, sincere humility and reliance on the Spirit of God within, these are the practical points Paul offers for genuine community-building among Christ's followers.

The night before he died, Jesus prayed to the Father from the depth of his heart. That prayer will not go unheard. It was for the final fulfillment of the plan of the Father. These are his words: "I do not pray for the Twelve alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word, that all may be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you... I have given them the GLORY you gave me that they may be one, as we are one... I living in them, you living in me... that their unity may be complete. So shall the world know that you sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me. Father, all those you gave me I would have in my company where I am, to see this glory of mine which is your gift to me, because of the love you bore me before the world began. Just Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you: and these men have known that you sent me. To them I have revealed your name, and I will continue to reveal it, so that your LOVE for me may live in them and I may live in them" (Jn. 17:20-26).

When that shall have come to pass, the community of God's plan shall have reached its fulfillment. All one in Christ, Christ living in them as one loving family, and the Love of the Father for the Son filling each one of that mighty family, so that there is an eternal community of love.