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THE GOSPEL AS SOCIAL FABRIC

Eventually we started calling our time with the homeless outside St. Joseph Parish “Prayer and Breakfast” (I’ve always been creative like that). The Guys (as we called them) kept coming, and so did we. A few people from the neighborhood caught wind of what we were doing and found ways to be involved, even if they weren’t quite sure they wanted to be at the table with us.

Betty and Linda from the Presbyterian church next door asked if they could make grocery-store runs each week and keep the fridge stocked for us. I think that was when we started having eggs almost every morning. An older English couple from the parish would sometimes come and cook. Students from the Protestant divinity school at Duke heard that if they came to St. Joe’s, they could fulfill their obligation to say morning prayer and at the same time get a free breakfast. Homeless people from the other side of town heard our food was better than the powdered eggs at the shelter, and they’d come on over.

So the breakfast grew, but not too much. Most days there were ten or fewer of us. We got to know a broad range of people, and we met a bunch of folks from the community who were not homeless, but who apparently thought common prayer was

important and also found something attractive in our little daily, forty-five-minute fellowship. We did not seek anyone out; they just came. I hadn't known any of them before.

But very slowly—over the course of two or three years—this random assortment of people became very dear to me. They were the center of my social life. We had become a people where there was previously no people—a new “we.” And this had been strangely brought into being, accidentally almost, simply by taking up the practices of the Gospel. It wasn't an “intentional community”; it was just a Church community.

The fabric that united us, in other words, was simply what we *did* to be Christians. We originally just came to church for the liturgy—to approach Christ in the prayers—only to find that Christ had gotten there before us and, even before we knew it was him, had approached us in the poor.

We ate together, enjoyed one another, and got to know one another. And all this required that we share *work* (a theme to which we'll return): preparation of the liturgy, opening the church, getting food for breakfast, coordinating with the clergy for the use of the buildings, getting breakfast started each day, serving it, cleaning it up, showing newcomers (both homeless and not) the ropes, even putting our heads together about who would help Ruben get to the other side of town to get a driver's license.

A couple dozen people or so (both homeless and not) came to be the most intimate friends over a few years—not by having long conversations or heart-to-hearts, but by being connected by our shared commitment to the Gospel. Or rather, it became clear, our shared commitment to the Gospel was also a shared commitment to one another.

The Gospel had become our social fabric, and our community was solid because it was not grounded in feelings or in liking certain people, but in being necessary to one another's life

project of being Christians. We could not perform “Church” without one another.

Kinds of Community

I say that the Gospel became our social fabric because the nature of a community is determined by the nature of the bonds that hold it together. There are, obviously, all different kinds of community. I use that word so much in these pages, knowing full well that it has become a buzzword and a dangerous abstraction, and so it can be used to make just about any gathering look shiny and bright.

In my time as a Catholic Worker there have been many who have come to us over the years saying they were interested in “community,” assuming that’s what we were interested in as well. Then Blake, one of our seminarians who is now a Catholic priest, would respond by pointing to the duplexes across the street, widely known as crack houses. “They’re a community too,” he’d say.

His point, of course, was that Day and Maurin were not interested in community just for the sake of community. They were interested in being Catholics, and they found they could not do that without other people.

We can contrast genuine Catholic community with other kinds of community that we are all probably quite familiar with (but not crack houses, I hope). Take, for example, today’s secular American community, which is increasingly fickle and seems to dissolve as soon as it is formed. Indeed, many have said that we have a crisis of community in our culture. And from the perspective of this book, I think it’s easy enough to see why.

Unlike the communities of most of human history, today’s secular community is typically not defined by place, work, or

ancestry. It is highly mobile, low-commitment, nonlocal, and often virtual. It makes heavy use of technology and, even when it is not restricted to virtual meetings or social-media interaction, often has for its bonds little more than shifting social or political opinions or the fact that its members happen to go to the same school or work in the same office.

In fact, increasingly, shared use of technology *itself* becomes a central social bond, as demonstrated by rooms full of high school students each silently “talking” (as they say) to one another on their phones, instead of actually *talking* to one another. Their phones don’t let them *share* what they have in common as much as they *are* what they have in common.

Because these sorts of bonds are rather weak and superficial, such modern communities predictably shift and break up constantly, because when we find that others are no longer useful to us, we can simply “cancel” them.

Kinds of Catholic Community

We might think that any kind of Catholic community is necessarily superior to all this. But not all Catholic community is the same. Many of us will be familiar with popular expressions of it that, however well intentioned, don’t actually amount to much more than its secular counterpart with some spiritual sprinkles on top.

We’ve all been part of this kind of low-commitment, often one-off, event-based sort of community, whether it’s officially offered by a parish or spontaneously organized by individuals. I have in mind occasional gatherings that include book studies with bourbon and cigars, dinners and holiday parties at big houses, last-minute playdates for the kids coordinated over social media, moms’ mornings with coffee or mimosas, large

and impersonal parish festivals, or theology on tap at the local microbrewery.

Now, don't get me wrong; there's a place for many of these sorts of things (I particularly like a good parish festival). They can sometimes be stepping stones toward genuine Christian community, and I certainly wouldn't want to see it all go away. But my point is that if it's the only kind of community we have, it leaves us still far from having the Gospel itself as our social fabric.

For the bonds that hold this kind of community together are not the works of mercy or the Sermon on the Mount, but more or less the same bonds as those that hold much of our secular community together: a certain amount of expendable income; constant access to texting or social media; a comfortable home for hosting; and having your own car, cheap (and not so cheap) commodities, purchasable conveniences and services, childcare, and free time.

These modern bonds do not create so much authentic community, much less Christian community, as much as associations of people with sufficient resources to enable a certain level of shared consumerism. Because of this, in these sorts of communities, we don't actually depend on one another for much more than company, and these gatherings do not, importantly, easily include the poor (or even someone who might have to save up for rent this month).

And this, for me, was an important realization, because this sort of community is probably the dominant model today across all different kinds of parishes and all different kinds of Catholics.

Individualistic Piety

We'll come to more of the Church's true vision of community in a moment, but it's worth noting now that this rather impoverished notion of Christian community goes hand in hand with the way that most of us go about practicing even the more "churchy" or "religious" parts of our faith these days.

For if we take the community out of Church and put it in taprooms and chatrooms, and let those arenas suffice for the social aspect of Christianity, what do our parishes become? They become, inevitably, simply hubs of individual piety. Church is no longer defined as a community, but as that institution that facilitates each of our individual personal relationships with God.

Even if we do our praying at church with other people around, we do Church, you might say, together all by ourselves. We are in no way essential to one another's faith: we each separately go to Mass, we each separately say our prayers and devotions, and we each separately seek to become holy. Being a Christian simply becomes the practice of private spiritual exercises between me and God.

Like belonging to a gym, Church in this model becomes a sort of devotional club for individuals. We all come to one place to use the equipment and facilities, but the point is that I get my spiritual exercise and you get yours—and we don't need each other to get that done. We come to church, take care of our own business, and head back home. If we want to—and maybe even if we don't—we practice our faith more or less anonymously.

So the Church becomes an impersonal institution made use of by a collection of individuals who just happen to come together to get certain goods and services: sacraments, beliefs, moral rules, and even a "personal relationship with Jesus." These are all things that we can have without having to get mixed up in the messy business of anyone else's life.

Why Community?

But this is not at all the picture of the Church that I encountered at St. Joseph's, or, for that matter, the one that is given to us in the scriptures. In the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the early Church

held steadfastly to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

Here, and in other passages like it, the Church is portrayed as (1) a *people*, deeply involved in one another's lives. Moreover, they are (2) a people defined by the *Gospel*: "they" refers to those who celebrated the Eucharist, prayed together, shared their homes and possessions, ate together, and took care of the poor and sick, and they did it, it seems, (3) more or less *daily* (for they were "*together . . . day by day*"; see also Acts of the Apostles 5:42). The Church, in other words, is *a people, practicing the Gospel, daily, together*. Being a member of the Church is meant to be a whole *way of life*.

What exactly this amounts to will, of course, vary from context to context, depending on whether you're in the city or in the country, whether you're married or single, whether your community is big or small, and even whether you're an introvert

or extravert. Sometimes it will look like what I experienced in Durham, and sometimes it will be adapted to the rhythms of a rural agricultural society. But the point is that such daily communal practice, if scripture is any indication, is *essential* to being Church. If we don't have it, we'll be missing something absolutely vital.

This is why Peter Maurin called the Catholic Worker way of life *communitarianism*. He refused to relegate the scriptures' vision of Church to the dustbin of the hopelessly idealistic. Like those early Christians, he thought that the Church should be "a new society within the shell of the old."¹ As usual with Maurin, this instinct was merely retrieving parts of the Catholic tradition that (for reasons we'll explore below) had been sidelined in the modern world.

As it turns out, the Church has always seen daily community life as vital, even in the most important matters of personal holiness and salvation itself. St. Augustine and other Church Fathers stressed that humanity, before the Fall, had an original unity that was then broken up and scattered because of sin. This happened not only spiritually, but physically and materially as well, as the story of the Tower of Babel illustrates (see Genesis 11). Sin breaks up and fragments human community.

Because of this, salvation in Christ includes the *Church* as the redemption of human community, bringing bodies physically back into daily proximity. This is why the same book of Acts, in addition to portraying the Church as a fully communal way of life, also portrays Pentecost, the Church's birthday, as the reversal of Babel (see Acts of the Apostles 2).

Salvation is in part *constituted* by being joined back together in all the ways that we were originally meant to be a unity. It is no coincidence that the early Church takes shape by being *united* in one place, gathered around the Apostles and Mary (see Acts of the Apostles 1:14, 5:12). And it's no wonder that when they did

that, “the Lord added to their number . . . those who were being *saved*.” Community is part of what salvation *is*.

The same thing goes for personal growth in our faith, for the cultivation of virtue and holiness (another topic we’ll return to). St. Paul’s letters, for example, are filled with encouragements, as Dorothy Day often pointed out, that we are all “called to be saints” (see Romans 1:7). And the vast majority of the apostle’s letters are concerned with how to live with other members of the Church—the obvious assumption being that becoming holy is as much a matter of living the Gospel with other people as anything else.

Only by daily rubbing shoulders with our brothers and sisters do we find the grace and friendship—and also the frictions and forgiveness—we all need to become saints. We don’t only need the sacraments; we need one another.

Community and Mission

Yet there’s one more reason daily community life is so essential. I said in the introduction that what really captured me about the community that formed around St. Joseph’s was its beauty. And this, I think, is an essential part of God’s *evangelistic* plan. When God wanted to get our attention—when he wanted to call us, attract us, seduce us even (as the Song of Songs says)—he did not send just a message, or a set of words, or a rulebook, or an impersonal institution. His plan for the evangelization of the world was to send it a particular, beautiful *form of life*.

It is no accident that Acts says about the apostolic community that “the Lord added to their number.” Evangelism is not a matter of getting as many people as we can to check boxes affirming their support for some abstract religious theory. It’s a matter of letting people encounter the beauty of the daily

rhythms of the Church, and then saying to them, usually more with deeds than with words, “Come join us.”

The goal of the Gospel is for Jesus Christ to be known and loved. And the whole point of the Catholic Church is that it is the way to Jesus Christ—it is the way, this side of heaven, that all people can have access to him. Through the sacraments, the Word preached, breaking bread together, the works of mercy, the pursuit of holiness, friendship with the poor—and all this in daily communal life—the world is meant to be able to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch Jesus Christ every day.

But the community has to exist for this encounter to take place. That is why the Church is called Christ’s body. So, while I said before that Christian community is a people defined by the Gospel, that doesn’t quite go far enough. For, in the way I’ve been indicating, the people *is* the Gospel.

The Gospel is beautiful, and therefore, for those with eyes to see, it is deeply attractive. And because that beauty takes shape in a community, joining it is the way that we participate in the beauty and so become part of the beauty ourselves. This beauty is the way of life that Catholicism is.

So, while it is true that the Gospel must be “heard,” as scripture says (Rom 10:17), the word that is heard is embodied in flesh and blood in the real world, just like Jesus Christ was. Or rather, the Church *is* Jesus Christ’s flesh in the world today, and the very beauty of that community is how people come to know and love God. He gave us not only things to believe and actions to perform, but an alternative society in which to make our lives. The Gospel is preached only by being embodied in a people, and it is accepted only by being joined.