



News Items:PREPARATION FOR SEDOS ASSEMBLY DECEMBER 9TH

In the course of November the following groups are meeting to prepare for the December Sedos Assembly. We are grateful to those who agreed to convene the meetings and to those who will agree to act as secretaries. The secretaries will meet at Sedos on Tuesday, 24th November to synthesize the findings of the small groups. Here are the details:

- 1st Group: ICM; SCMM; SSND; CMM; SDB.  
Convenor: Fr. Martin Boelens, cmm. at Marianhill.
- 2nd Group: OMI; PA; SPS; OFM; SMC; IMC.  
Convenor: Fr. Michael Fitzgerald, pa. at White Fathers.
- 3rd Group: SJ; MHM; SCMMT; PIME; MCCJ.  
Convenor: Fr. Parmananda Divarkar, sj. at Berço S. Spirito.
- 4th Group: SFB; SMA; SX; FSC; RGS; CM.  
Convenor: Fr. Gabriele Ferrari, sx. at African Missions.
- 5th Group: MM(Srs.); MM(Frs.); OFMCAP; FMM; RSCM.  
Convenor: Sr. Mary Motte, fmm. at Via Giusti.
- 6th Group: OSU; MSC; SNDN; OCD; SSC.  
Convenor: Sr. Peggy Loftus, sndn. at Columbans
- 7th Group: SMSM; MEP; CSA; SSPS; CSSP; CP; SA.  
Convenor: Fr. Bruno Trachtler, cssp. at CSSP Generalate.
- 8th Group: O-CARM; CSSR; TOR; OP; SVD; RSCJ.  
Convenor: Fr. Henry Heekeren, svd. at SVD Generalate.

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SEDOS ANNUAL SALE OF  
BOOKS & PERIODICALS

On 30th November - 9.00 - 12.30 - come for real bargains. We will be dispensing with duplicates of documentation, periodicals and books. (Limit of 3 items per person).

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THERE IS HOPE FOR A TREE  
A STUDY PAPER ON THE EMERGING CHURCH

Rosemary Haughton, June 1980

*Cette étude sur la "nouvelle" Eglise est forcément incomplète. Elle aura besoin d'être précisée et revue au fur et à mesure de la croissance et des changements de cette Eglise en train de se constituer. Son but est de stimuler la prière, la discussion et l'action: de nouvelles expériences et des intuitions plus profondes doivent en découler. Cet article est ma contribution au processus de croissance, mais son utilité dépendra de la manière de s'en servir. Son efficacité, également, dépendra, non de moi, mais de ceux qui s'en serviront. Je demanderais simplement à toutes les personnes qui liront cette étude d'en faire faire autant de copies que possible, pour la répandre autour d'elles et la mettre ainsi à la disposition d'un plus grand nombre. Il n'y a pas de droits d'auteur!*

*Shalom!*

PREFACE

This study paper on the 'new' Church is necessarily in a state of incompleteness, and will need to grow and change as the 'shoots' of the emerging Church grow and change. It is intended to stimulate prayer, discussion, action, and new experience and insight will grow from these. This paper is my offering to the process of growth, but its usefulness depends on how it is used. Its availability, also, will depend not on me but on those who use it, and I would simply ask each person who reads it to have as many copies made as she or he can afford, and so make it available more widely. There is no copy right.

Shalom!

"For there is hope for a tree,  
if it be cut down, that it will sprout again  
and that its shoots will not cease.  
Though its root grow old in the ground,  
yet at the scent of water, it will bud  
and put forth branches like a young plant."

Job 14: 7-9

INTRODUCTION

CALL TO MISSION.

This paper is an unambiguous call to mission. It is a call to all who are Christians, and also to people who feel drawn to the teaching of Jesus in any way, even if they would not call themselves Christians. It is an invitation to listen to the voice of Christ in the cry of the poor, the lonely, the fearful, the distrustful, the misled, the despairing, the abused and neglected and exploited, whatever their economic situation, and to know that this voice is also the one we hear in the deepest part of ourselves.

It is a call to people of courage and hope at a particular point in history, which therefore requires a particular kind of response. And it is a call which is made clear in the nature of those circumstances themselves.

Therefore, this paper takes the form of an analysis of that situation, of the ways in which men and women say and do bring hope into it, and thereby create the possibility of a real human future. This analysis is theological, but also cultural, and is simply about the circumstances and concrete possibilities of real and particular people. The call evoked and explained in this analysis is so loud in our world that many wear permanent ear plugs. In order to listen and understand, we must take them out and hear the sounds of anguish, but also of desire and irrepressible and apparently unreasoning hope.

#### CHAPTER I

#### 'THOUGH ITS ROOT GROW OLD IN THE GROUND'

Dominance of fear: Never in the entire history of the human race has there been a time of such universal fear. Not only is the threat of nuclear destruction a permanent background to cultural consciousness, but the dread of less identifiable danger is present in every part of society, in every person. There is physical damage which is already being done and is constantly increasing as a result of such things as low-level radiation, pollution of water and air, and also of food which is often so processed as to be positively detrimental to health, and also frequently contaminated accidentally or deliberately with poisonous substances at various stages of production from field to table.

There is fear of the hidden control exercised by smaller and smaller numbers of larger and larger corporations on all aspects of life (food, education, health-care, for instance) both directly and through behind-the-scenes pressure brought to bear at government level. There is the fear of a growing yet unacknowledged "secret police" system connected with major industries for the sake of 'security', especially dangerous in the case of the nuclear industry, whose power-mystique has made its controllers feel themselves to be superior to all moral and civil law.

There is the finally terrifying fact that international decisions of war and peace, life and death, are taken by people motivated not by desire for peace and justice, but by irrational jealousies, desires for national or even personal domination or revenge, or just plain greed. All of these threats to health, freedom and life are initiated and controlled by people whose operations are hidden from the ordinary men and women whose lives are conditioned by them, yet this faceless and quite literally 'irresponsible' power has at its disposal a technology of almost unimaginable efficiency and scope, able to control not only physical but (through drugs, thought-manipulation and sheer deception) psychological responses, so that their victims learn to accept and even acclaim the version of the facts issued by their exploiters. "From on high they plan oppression, they have set their mouths in the heavens, and their tongues dictate to the earth. So the people turn to follow them, and drink in all their words." (Ps. 72)

Speed of change: All this has come about in a very short time, and the morally non-responsible exercise of huge power has been able to assume its largely unquestioned role because the previous decades had known a collapse of cultural, moral, legal and customary structures and expectations without precedent in history; a collapse prepared for by a cumulative breakdown of older cultural patterns under the pressure of industrial need and the pseudo 'scientific' gospel. The Second World War, the 'holocaust', and the aftermath of disillusion, and of communist and anti-communist chauvinist phobias, led to the emergence of fanatical nationalisms and to sprouting dictatorships, whose policies were and are enforced by methods of repression efficient and inhuman beyond the wildest dreams of the Spanish Inquisition.

All this has grown rapidly in the huge 'gap' which was left by the disappearance of older securities. Already undermined, most of the traditional networks of responsibility, interdependence, and custom in many different countries and cultures disappeared altogether, and the remaining ones have been so weakened as to provide no more than an angry nostalgia, provoking either cynical rejection or a clinging to the past which is equally divisive and futile.

Three reactions: Reactions to this thoroughly internalized atmosphere of fear and insecurity have been varied, but they are broadly of three kinds.

a) To control. One way is an attempt to control the situation by becoming part of the dominant structures, either in practice (a difficult feat, since they are secret and secretive) or by identifying with their discernible and overt aims and policies, thus turning "science", and "progress" into a quasi-divine pantheon. Once these things become gods, they are beyond criticism; therefore, those who utter criticisms of them can be dismissed or (better still) hunted down as heretics. (The energy and enthusiasm with which this is done shows the depths of fear which make it necessary to crush the people who embody questions we dare not ask.)

b) To escape. Another reaction is to escape 'inwards' by cultivating "my" career, family etc., as an inviolate area, or by retreating into individual or communal 'spiritual' experience, meditation, sects (the "Moonies" are an example of a massively secure religious escape from reality), magic, mystery cults, or fundamentalist religion.

c) To hope. The third kind is the concern of this paper. It is the real hope for humankind. In this vast fear and hunger, among the alienated and oppressed and 'marginalized' people, little points of light appear, like candles in the darkness. The response is still culturally small, but it is significant. It is neither a drive to divinize the "principalities and powers" nor to seek an equally idolatrous "God within." It is incarnational, it is 'church'. Like those other reactions, it is emerging in the 'gaps', the marginal places where the culture has broken down, because that is where all significant cultural changes occur. Because of the unprecedented scale, speed and depth of this cultural breakdown, both the forces of darkness and of light are emerging rapidly from the gap, but the forces of light are, as always, humanly whole and organic in ways of growth. They do not seek to control; they simply grow and as they grow, they transform.

This paper, then, is about how that growth is occurring, what it looks like and what it demands of those who perceive it. It is personal--one person's observations and analysis, though growing out of much sharing with others having different experiences. It is inadequate and patchy, therefore, and it is bound to be outstripped by events and to need constant up-dating. It is intended chiefly to provide a starting point and a conceptual framework for study by others. The 'pastoral' sections are necessarily limited by available reports of actual experience.

#### THE FIRST CONVERSION OF THE CHURCH

The church (in the broadest sense) is both included in, and emerging from, its culture. It has to speak the 'language' (words, customs, life-styles) of the culture, yet it must always challenge and seek to transform them in Christ. It is, therefore, called to be permanently in a state of revolution--that is, of repentance and conversion, leaving old ways as the Lord calls it forward. Therefore, in a time like the present, the church is (like the culture) undergoing a breakthrough more complete than any previously experienced, and in that it is called to a death and rebirth inevitably more far-reaching than any in its history.

It is a real "Exodus", as dangerous and as necessary as that model implies. But it is also one of a 'series', of such deaths and rebirths in the history of Judaism and of Christianity. As such, its most potent model is the first major discontinuity in the history of the Christian Church, when the young and, until that point, entirely Jewish church was challenged to become the church of all nations. It is a point at which the old stump of Jewish religion put out new shoots from its deep roots. This is shown to us very vividly by Luke, in his paradigm case of what happened to Cornelius and his household.

The Cornelius event: On a certain afternoon, not long after the birth of that turbulent and unpredictable entity called the church, Simon Peter went up on to the roof of the house in Joppa where he was lodging, because he wanted some peace and quiet for prayer. This is always a dangerous thing to do. The Lord is quick to take advantage of vulnerable moments of quiet and openness, in order to introduce very unquieting suggestions and requests into our lives. Peter found this to be so, for he was subjected to a thrice-repeated vision (one vision being no doubt inadequate to influence so obstinate a man) which flatly and crudely contradicted some of his most deeply held convictions about what constituted godly and acceptable behaviour. Although he did not yet know what was the purpose of all this, he knew he was being asked to overcome a moral repulsion so deep as to be part of himself. He must do the unthinkable, violate his strongest religious and ethnic taboos.

The Spirit breathes where he/she wills: That was what it meant for Peter (not only as an individual but as representing the infant church) to accept the possibility that the Spirit could work just as well among uncircumcised heathen as among the chosen people. These 'unclean' people must be thought of as chosen also. The kind of conversion this required in Peter, indeed of the early church as a whole, is important. It demanded the laying aside of a whole structure of corporate self-respect, a radical confession of blindness and ignorance, a renunciation of pride and ability to control. It meant a surrender, a new going down in to the dark waters of baptism.

All this was necessary so that, at this point, a new birth of the church might be possible, a church in which Jews and Gentiles might be no longer two classes of disciples but one and indistinguishable in the body of Christ. I stress the extreme radicality of the conversion required of Peter, and of all the young and still Jewish church, because it is precisely this kind and degree of conversion which is required of the Church now, and although such a demand has repeatedly been laid on the church (and, alas, frequently evaded) in the course of its long history, whenever totally new human situations have been encountered, I think it is inescapable that the present demand is the clearest, and yet the hardest to discern and accept, since that day when Peter discovered that the Spirit had been before him in the house of Cornelius.

Cornelius' group: Peter was called to a group of people, headed by Cornelius, which was clearly under the guidance of the Spirit. They seem to have been that kind of naturally cohesive group which occurs among military or diplomatic people living in a foreign country, who keep together for support and comfort but are often much interested by the culture around them. It seems this group was already living a kind of community life, sharing in prayer and service, and pondering together the insights they received as they studied Jewish Scriptures. We can see this in, for instance, the apparently small detail that when Cornelius wanted to send a message to Peter, he did not simply use messengers to convey his request but 'related everything to them'.

This Centurion was on terms of deep trust in spiritual matters with his subordinates and societal inferiors. And when Peter returned with the messenger, he found the entire group (referred to by Cornelius as 'we') assembled and evidently, as a group, eagerly prepared to listen to what Peter had to say. So when they heard the name which Peter announced to them, it came upon their ears with that sense of inner recognition which comes to those whose minds and hearts are open and prepared. And 'the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word'.

The Spirit fell on the unbaptized: This happened to the assembly in the house of Cornelius before they had received baptism. Uncircumcised, unbaptized, alien in life-style and culture, these people received the Spirit. "God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us," Peter pointed out later to the sceptical Jerusalem believers. "Who was I that I could withstand God?"

Peter accepted the invitation: Peter stayed with these people for some days. For Peter and those with him, the decision to accept the invitation was in itself an act of converted humility which must have been very unsettling and strange to these Jews. Having accepted, they were newly open to God and to these new companions in the Lord. They must have learned, in their new-found humility, to be grateful for the way in which the Lord had worked in these people. No doubt they learned how little bits of the Christian preaching, hints of hopes, had been picked up by the members of the group around Cornelius, perhaps over many months, and how they had talked and prayed together over them, longing and hoping for something to show them what it all meant, but uncertain where to turn, until Cornelius himself had that dream which, as so often happens, came in to resolve struggles and doubts when these had been handed over to the Lord in faith.

There were also, in this group, moral and spiritual attitudes of long standing, which had made these people sensitive to the new and unexpected move ~~in~~ their lives. Not only Cornelius himself 'feared God' but 'all his household'. So Peter and his companions found themselves sharing experiences with people who had been led by the Lord through spiritual discoveries to the moment of revelation, just as the immediate disciples of Jesus had done in their own entirely different way. As much as Cornelius and his household recognized in Peter's message the fulfillment of all they had learned and prayer, so Peter and those with him learned to recognize a message to themselves, which turned their previous assumptions about the nature of the church upside down. They were prepared to accept the implications of this--those they could perceive and those they could not yet perceive. Struggles and conflicts were to come, as we learn in other parts of 'Acts' and in Paul's letters, as the church wrestled with the consequences of that acceptance, but the principle was clear, and it was this:

Radical conversion of the existing Church: Not only would the Lord bring foreigners, of alien culture and faith, into his church in response to preaching, but he would bring to a point of deep and rich development in the Spirit communities of people who could not yet even recognize what was going on in them. He would not wait for those who knew themselves as his church to take the initiative; he would require of them only to witness the work already accomplished, to give it a name and so bring it to the flash-point at which a whole new dimension could be revealed. But in order to do this--to recognize, affirm and celebrate the Lord's work in such a new "church"--a radical conversion of the existing church was required.

The demand now: That is what is required of us now. The demand laid on the church now is for a response as profound and radical and utterly ~~different~~ as that which was demanded of Peter and his companions when the messengers from Cornelius arrived to break open the meaning of that strange and disturbing vision, because the need of the times can be met by nothing less. What follows is an attempt to help this response to emerge, by means of a relevant theological analysis, out of which actual experience can be recognized and studied, and appropriate decisions taken.

## CHAPTER II.

### "IF IT BE CUT DOWN, IT WILL SPROUT AGAIN"

The greatest and constant temptation of religion is to suppose it can contain God. Whether it be the small and fervent sect which takes its own sense of intense illumination to be the sufficient measure of God's working, or the vast church which cannot envisage any valid experience of God not mediated by the richness of its ritual, its learning and spiritual wisdom articulated in structures and forms of guidance and authority, they are guilty of idolatry, of replacing the living God by shapes of their own devising.

We can even see this tendency in the response of the churches to the challenge of social disruption and disaster. They have tried to create a better kind of church, drawing on modern insights and techniques. They have behaved and thought as if planning were the key to transformation, so that often they ended by creating a new and more contemporary idol in place of the living God. This has happened in all the churches, but the way it



happened in the Roman Catholic church shows it especially well because it was more public, deliberate and self-confident than in most churches. All of them planned, but the Roman Church did it most thoroughly. It was, however, an ironic situation, for it all became possible because of the unexpectedness of one man.

Vatican II - a response to change: For the Second Vatican Council did not initiate change. The Council was called in response to the sense of huge changes already happening. The church itself had been heavily planning for generations, but it became evident in the post-war period that new ideas and needs in the whole culture were breaking up the old plans to a point at which it seemed the whole fabric of Christianity might break up. When it became inescapable that the traditional ways could not cope with pressures, that obstinately unplanned old man, John XXIII, allowed them to emerge and to be evident, but the old assumption still prevailed. A Council was called in an atmosphere of euphoric hopefulness. The Holy Spirit was invoked, very sincerely, and in the new atmosphere of joy and hope, new things were perceived, of far-reaching importance. Then, prayerfully and enthusiastically (with all possible help from Experts), the Council Fathers got down to the business of making plans.

They were good plans (even if in some ways incompatible). They were plans designed to serve a different world, a pluralist, secular, technological, confident world which didn't seem to want or need religion. They were plans to bring together what had been harshly separated. They were plans based on a desire to understand the real lives and real needs of real people. There were even plans to give people more scope and initiative in making their own plans. It all seemed so excellent, yet what happened was scarcely at all what was expected. In the event these benevolent despots were faced with a chaos of conflict and experiment, anger, exaggeration, bewilderment, revolt and finally and most galling of all--an increasing tendency to ignore the plans altogether, not rudely or angrily, but simply as if they didn't matter.

What went wrong? In a sense, nothing went wrong. A great deal was done which urgently needed to be done. There was a clearing and freeing, a new honesty and clarity became possible. But through that openness, much appeared which the planners had not reckoned on. What happened, to the church as to secular situations which worked on the same assumption, was the effect of that which makes human beings capable of being what Christ calls them to be. It is strong and deep and ultimately irrepressible, and it can be somewhat articulated but never exhausted by conscious intelligence. It is the Spirit of God, that which made humankind in the Image of the Three-In-One, given and received in exchanges of love at all levels of bodily and spiritual being. It is what creation is, what life is.

It is the deepest being of each person, as he or she comes to the point of unique particularity, known in being the intersection of many and vital exchanges of divine love in all creation. A thing whose life is that kind of life cannot be planned into joy and eternal bliss. Still more, a group of people who share that kind of life will discover, and be driven by, a sense of desire and hope which pushes against whatever is felt as a restriction in the discovery of the life that is between them as well as in them.

This is what has been happening, and for a long time it happened virtually unnoticed not even recognizing itself for what it was, as is the nature of such things. For this is the genuine action of the Spirit who blows where he wishes, and we hear the sound of it, but we do not know whence it comes or whither it goes. "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit", and so it is in particular with the way the church, the earthly body of Christ, is growing now.

To recognize this movement of the Spirit, who is behaving in exactly the same way as he did in the household of Cornelius, we have to hold two things in tension--two which are really the same thing: the actual, concrete people and events which we can observe, and the theological 'description' of them, by which (and by which alone) we are able to recognize the real nature of what they are, and are doing. For theology is not an extra description (using categories which we find helpful to religious understanding) of things which could just as well be described in the categories of psychology or sociology. We could, and must, also use those (and other) categories, but they will not give us the clue to the deepest reality.

A description, or definition, can be called accurate in the measure in which it makes available to the mind the fullest possible potential in the thing defined. So the sociological and psychological description of the growth and being of many and varied groups and communities at this time is useful and necessary and illuminating, but only the theological description will enable us to grasp the full meaning, and therefore the full scope of what is happening. And it is only when we have become aware of this meaning and scope that we can respond to it realistically.

Begin where experience begins: In a sense, it would seem logical to start with the theological description, but it is more illuminating to begin where experience begins, with random and apparently unrelated phenomena, long before it becomes possible to realize that questions are arising from similarities and relationships between them. Even to point to what has happened is, in a sense, to skip that stage through which most of us have lived unseeing. The discovery, whenever it comes, that there are connections between experiences previously lived as unrelated is always exciting and very personal, and can only come from a certain process of sensitization by which the mind is pre-disposed to such an awareness. This is why I make no apology for using my own experience as an introduction to the general description of the new phenomenon in the church.

I have spent six years in a small, struggling and heterogeneous rural community, in process of discovering its work, its needs, and so its identity--ultimately, a religious and Christian identity though with very varied interpretations of what that might mean or demand.

This experience was interspersed, for me, by frequent lecture tours in North America, during which I tried to learn as much as possible of the way of life, hopes and plans of my hosts, from coast to coast in the U.S.A. and more recently in Canada. The result of this continuous double experience was that I gradually became aware that the kind of community search and discovery of which I was a part when at home was not confined to that one instance nor even to that particular kind of community (rural, engaged in 'therapy' for people in need, growing its own food, mainly young, non-religious in name but Christian in values).

It was, I began to realize, happening in an enormous variety of different ways, and specifically it was happening in a religious and Christian context, which gave the search and discovery a certain 'sharpness' of definition.

In families, and groups of families; in small temporary groups of college students sharing life and prayer and service; in groups gathered for some kind of social action or service; in groups gathered for prayer; in residential communities and in more loosely encountering 'neighborhood' ones; in professional groups; groups in prisons; groups of factory workers and of farmers; groups of religious searching for new ways or groups of lay-people and religious together; on farms or in apartments, in church halls or somebody's living room; on college campuses or within the forbidding walls of fortress-like 'Motherhouses'; in all these ways and places people are coming together, trying to find a way to make sense of their lives, to put right things that seem wrong, to 'be' the future by letting it grow out of the depths of themselves.

The age-range is as large as human life; the variety of education, race, religion (or lack of it) and income is equally so. Many are Christian, many are Jews, forming small household synagogues, as in the Babylonian exile the synagogue first began. Many are spiritual seekers but have no explicit faith, and many are a mixture of these. What, then, do they have in common?

Common characteristics: They have two things in common, one negative and the other positive. From these two, certain consequences (usually unforeseen, as is the way of God's Spirit) seem to flow.

The negative aspect, which is felt but may not always be articulated, is that all these groups are reacting against the cult of bigness. They are aware, at some level, that scale is a matter of crucial importance in human life, whether in buildings or organization; that at a certain point, bigness leads to loss of real contact, and facilitates manipulation rather than cooperation in human life. They are aware of the obscure sense of fear which I referred to earlier.

They know that much of the democratic process is window-dressing; the real decisions are made outside it. They know that their needs and desires are manipulated by advertisers, and that many of their 'own' reactions are conditioned by questions that may not be asked, assumptions which may not be questioned. The people who turn to each other, in so many different ways and contexts, in small groups, are reacting against all this; they have recognized, at least implicitly, that they are up against something basically and finally corrupt and corrupting. Something very deep and essential in them revolts, and in their need to articulate and 'live' this revolt, they turn to others and discover a shared response and need.

#### SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

The positive aspect is not only the other side of this; it goes much further. There is an awareness of the positive value of being in a group small enough for people to relate to each other very directly. How small the group has to be depends on the kind of association they have and the degree of interaction needed to accomplish the purposes of the group.

For instance, a group gathered to work at preventing the disintegration of a neighbourhood due to falling property values can be quite large and not intimately associated, though it must have, and relate firmly to, leaders who can trust each other deeply. Such a community generates its own real 'common mind' and has an identity and sense of shared hope and creates a union of minds and hearts, in an experience which becomes, for those who share it, a kind of 'touchstone' of the value of human relationships from that time on. But relationships within such a group need not be very intimate. Their community lies in the deep and real encounter which takes place at this one point of common endeavor, sacrifice and achievement.

On the other hand, a group meeting weekly in someone's living room for prayer and study of scripture has to be small enough for gentle and unforced interaction of all present. Development of this kind requires an increasing degree of mutual openness, a sharing of many aspects of life and even of very deeply personal hopes and fears, which is only possible in a very small group.

In families, or communities of several families, there is yet a different kind of relatedness, a 'natural' one re-discovered as available in community, for service to others, and it is intimate and deep yet does not necessarily require much verbal articulation, though some is necessary. Its size can be quite small, as in one 'normal' family, or quite large, as in some rural communities of twenty or more families.

Small or large are relative terms: All such groups are small in relation to the size of the dominant 'social units.' Their positive quality derives from the fact of this smallness, which gives each person a sense of being significant and purposeful, able to contribute, able to be part of real growth, and not merely the passive recipient of an order planned at some distant and unknowable point. This confidence is the direct result of the kind of sharing which is only possible when people are able to encounter each other as mutually responsible, and to lower their defences sufficiently to be deeply available to each other.

So 'community' grows, as a fact, and as an experience. The community may come together only for a short time, for a specific purpose--at a conference, or to carry out some protest, or initiate some service. It may be permanent, taking on a long-term service of some kind (farming, therapy, education, etc.) or it may be a 'developing' situation, such as those in which families are involved, in which children and their changing needs make a constant re-assessment of possibilities and priorities a part of the life and meaning of the community.

It is not static: whatever form it takes. The failure rate is high, because many people are not prepared to go through the successive stages of deepening interaction which growth in community requires. This fact in itself shows us the need to be accurately aware of the dynamics of community growth, and on examination these prove to require articulation as spiritual, and if spiritual, then (if they are not to be purely subjective and relative), theological.

To say this is somewhat to pre-empt the argument, but to take the reader through all the stages of comparison and theological reflection and discovery which lead me to the conclusion I want to share takes a book.

I have, in fact, now written that book which I hope will prove useful and stimulating to many people, and it turned out to be an entire theology, but my aim here is more modest, and a certain level of explication can be subsumed in the next.

So, at this point I want to take a jump and propose a definition of what is going on in such communities, and then go back and support that definition theologically.

#### THE CHURCH HAPPENING

What I perceive in such little, varied and struggling communities is the early stages of the happening called 'church'. At a certain point, a group of people gathered together to search--for truth, meaning, justice, experience of God--begins to diversify its common life. Whether it begins with a common act of service, with study or with prayer, it discovers a need for a measure of all three, in order to go on being. A community incapable of such development may break up at this point, but a community which works, studies, and prays together in order to serve some ultimate good--which is God, whatever image they happen to be using--is a church in embryo, though it can only truly be called 'Church' when it has reached the point of being able to articulate its own meaning as in some way Christ-centred. This relation when it is discovered, may perhaps be inadequately expressed, but it is enough to be identifiable as the point at which we can say 'this is the church happening'. It is important to recognize that to call a group at this point a 'church' does not mean it is 'holier' or more clearly Spirit-led than some other. It is a reference to its language of self-recognition, as centred on Christ.

Self-recognition: The change in the community gathered in the house of Cornelius had precisely this character. It had already been living its common life in prayer, study and action ('alms-giving') and it was reaching, or more probably had already reached, the stage of explicitly recognizing that this man Jesus, about whom they were hearing reports and picking up clues, was the point towards which all their prayer and study and action had been moving.

Peter's job was to affirm the truth of what they had perceived, and to articulate it for them in an explicit way which showed them clearly what it was in which they were involved, and what that involvement required of them.

This is exactly what we see happening now, in thousands of groups all over the world, of all kinds and levels of awareness, many of whom have not yet reached the point of self-definition which makes them truly 'church'. Many of them perhaps never will, because of mental blocks, created, often enough, by the behaviour of existing 'churches'. But even if they do not reach this point, we can still see the process at work and recognize the situation from a theological standpoint as what we might call a 'Pre-church'.

Many, however are at the point at which they can, and need to, recognize who they are: the body of Christ. Unless they do so, they cannot move further as a real incarnational body. This is true even of people who are already Christians and know a theological description of 'church', which may even be a barrier to the kind of awareness they need to reach that the Spirit is active and explicit in their particular situation and that their response to him must be made in that context, if they are to live.

### THREE STAGES OF CHURCH GROWTH

If people do respond, there are visibly three stages of 'ecclesial evolution' in such groups, which can be called, for convenience, the 'pre-church'; the 'emerging church'; and the 'church in mission'. Naturally, these stages overlap, and the last two may never happen, so that what could have become a church breaks up into individuals or small groups, or an emerging church gets 'stuck' and gradually petrifies and dies.

The 'pre-church' is the stage at which, as we have seen, a group of people gather together for any number of reasons, and as they interact over a period of time, discover a sense of group identity as people involved in some kind of quest, however vaguely articulated. They may come together for one single course, but if the group is to become a 'pre-church' it will soon diversify the things it does together to include the areas of prayer, study and action.

Prayer: In the 'pre-church' situation, the idea of prayer may not be explicit, but there must be a desire to reflect deeply, both personally and in common, on the underlying values which have drawn the group together and have been in practice articulated at first by one particular common cause or interest.

This deliberate deepening of understanding, the facing of underlying desires and motives is the 'anamnesis' or recovery of meaning in its own history as the story of God's calling, and it is necessary if the group is to discover the unity, trust, and sense of longing and hope which will enable it, when the time comes, to become a church, and to develop as one. At the point where this fails, the reality of the group as church will also begin to fail.

'Study' in this context means basically rational reflection on the nature and work of the group, with a view to understanding it more deeply--not only as it is experienced in this interaction of the people concerned, but in its larger social, political and religious context. 'Study' may include group discussion, background reading and comment on it, taking appropriate 'course', getting 'outside' advice and comment, but also it means constant and careful observation of the group's being 'history', to show where it seems to be going, its mistakes and its 'breakthroughs' and their 'whys' and 'hows'! Such 'study' is closely linked to prayer but it is distinctly intellectual, however informally carried on.

One aspect of this which may not immediately sound like 'study' at all is the use of imagination. One of the most difficult things in the movement from 'pre-church' to church is to move people from the point at which they see themselves as 'church' in the abstract to the point at which they 'feel' church.

Many embrace the idea of 'being a church' and discuss it with enthusiasm, but are still completely hung up on their existing religious or secular churches. Conversations always seem to end up with complaints about the local pastor, or the reluctance of other people to join the parish council and take their turn collecting for the boat people.

What is needed is deliberate exercise of the imagination in answer to concrete questions about the 'how' and 'when' and 'where' of being a church. Much of the material in this paper is intended to assist this, drawing on Scripture and on contemporary experience.

'Action' hardly needs explaining. It means things the group does as a result of its discovery of identity as a group. Some things may be done only by a few people, even by only one, but they are done in the name of the group and motivated by discoveries made and directions taken by the whole group. 'Action' undertaken may vary from organizing a protest to doing yoga, but whatever it is, it must grow out of prayer and study, and in turn will contribute to study and deepen prayer.

The three things must all be present, in some degree, and all are inter-related and cannot survive without each other. Without any one of the three, the group will not be a 'pre-church' and will not be capable of becoming a church.

A 'pre-church' becomes a 'church' at the moment at which it becomes consciously aware that its identity as a group finds its name, center and meaning in Christ. This can happen quite suddenly as it did to the household of Cornelius, or over a long period, as Christian words and ideas, vaguely and perhaps uncomfortably heard and used, gradually acquire meaning through their relation to activities and common experiences, and little by little words and experiences become linked, until people begin to say 'Jesus' and mean not just somebody in a story, or an ideal, but an effective presence and fact.

The theological articulation of the awareness of Jesus as the 'being' of the group may be rudimentary, or naïve, or even falsely stated, but although this may lead to mistakes or disaster later, such inadequacies do not alter the fact that this is the one single event which creates a church.

No amount of zeal, heroism and piety will make a Church without the conscious recognition of Christ as its meaning, and no failure or one-sidedness in the group will alter the fact that it is a church, once this recognition has occurred. (Some 'churches' become so narrow that we have to call them 'sects', but to be 'sectarian' is really a heresy in the area of ecclesiology. It does not, in fact, stop them from being a church, though a mistaken one.)

#### THE CHURCH KNOWS WHO IT IS

The church is the body of Christ, his being on earth, at the point of consciousness. All human beings of good-will are his body, moved by his spirit, responsive to his love. But the church knows who it is, it is conscious of being his Body, and therefore consciously committed to doing what is appropriate to that Body. This is the one basic thing which makes a Church. Nothing less will do, and nothing more can make it more 'Church', though it must always struggle to recognize and live its reality more fully, specifically by its mission, as we shall see later.

The moment of recognition always occurs because something comes 'into' the pre-church situation which is able to open up to consciousness what has been present and working unconsciously. This can be a book passed around, or a speaker somebody hears. It can be (when the process is the slow kind) the at-first-unrecognized presence in the group of some person or set of ideas, which only gradually dawns on the group as significant--thus, although it was 'there all the time' it also 'came in' in the sense that at a certain point, its special meaning and relevance dawned,

Most often it is the actual coming of one person or a few people, perhaps met at a conference or settled in the neighborhood, or coming by invitation. The way this happens will be discussed in the next section, since the kind of 'messenger' needed is important, but some kind of 'messenger' is needed if pre-church is to become church.

What happened in the house of Cornelius is happening now in exactly the same way, and can be observed in numerous different stages of development and with varying adequacy of definition, but this is not how we expect the church to happen. We have become accustomed to think of the church as something which happens when Christians go to a place and preach the gospel, and people hear the message and are converted and baptised and organize themselves or are organized into a church, on the model of some existing church or sect.

This is indeed how it has often happened, but even in acknowledging this, we are failing to ask why, in such situations, people do listen and accept the gospel, and also why some don't. What has gone on in their lives already that they should hear and respond to the message? Some kind of preparation of hearts was going on or nothing would have happened at all; and the way people are normally awakened to new possibilities in their lives is by the intimate interaction in which they help each other to articulate a sense of longing and hope previously hidden and only barely impinging on consciousness.

If we can admit that much, perhaps it will be easier to recognize what is happening. But there is a more adequate way to understand why things happen this way, and why at this point in history it should need to become explicit in observed fact and consequent appropriate action.

end of Part I.

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WHITE FATHERS  
POST CHAPTER MEETINGS 1981

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Robert M. Gay, wf.

(Voici une lettre du Père Robert M. Gay, Supérieur Général des Pères Blancs, aux membres de son Institut. Il s'agit d'un commentaire sur les réactions aux Règles et Constitutions, dont la rédaction définitive a été approuvée, au début de cette année, par le Chapitre Général de la Société. Nous remercions le P. Gay d'avoir bien voulu nous autoriser à reproduire cette lettre. Elle présente un intérêt tout particulier pour tous ceux qui sont en train de reviser leurs Constitutions. Ed).



## Introduction

Towards the middle of June the five members of the Council were back in Rome all together, after an absence of two months. During that period we assisted at 25 Post-capitular Assemblies of the Circumscriptions of the Society. For us this was a most enriching and certainly a unique experience, from which we returned with many and varied impressions which we have exchanged among ourselves.

It is still too soon to make an appraisal of these assemblies. In any case, at the time of writing, two circumscriptions have still to hold their P.C.A. and five reports from the 25 assemblies which we attended have not yet come in. Finally, a true assessment of the P.C.A.s will not be possible until the "Pre-capitulars" for the next Chapter, for the P.C.A.s merely indicate an orientation which will last from one Chapter to the next.

Nevertheless, after such an experience which took us to all the circumscriptions, I would like to share some impressions with you, which may help you to realize how in the Society as a whole the Chapter has been received with a truly committed apostolic zeal; in their light, we may, if need be, re-adjust our aim.

With this in view, I am going to try to indicate among the challenges put forward by the Chapter on the one hand those which were accepted very positively by the P.C.A.s and on the other hand those which were received with some disquiet and hesitation.

### I. CHALLENGES TAKEN UP POSITIVELY

#### 1. Restructuring our communities

On the whole, all the Regions and Provinces saw the need to ensure to every confrere a viable apostolic community.

In the Regions, the P.C.A.s were very well aware that such an objective could not be attained except at the cost of some cutting down of the places to which we were committed. Respecting the needs of the apostolate, plans were drawn up realistically with a view to rethinking the question of where our commitments lay and what were the priorities which we had to maintain, keeping in mind what is feasible in each Region and what are the needs of the apostolate.

In the Provinces the question of restructuring communities meant rather dealing with the quality of the larger communities on the one hand and on the other with the means of creating community links for confreres living outside community.

Everywhere there was an understanding of the need to ensure a truer and more durable service to the local Church where we are working: this would mean that we have to avoid multiplying the presence of missionaries. We rather have to reduce it, if need be, so as to improve our communities in themselves and by that very fact make them more apostolic.

In several places the fact was underlined that any restructuring of communities would suppose a gesture of "transferring our mission". An undertaking or a parish would not be "abandoned" but responsibility for it would be "transferred" to other workers in the apostolate, lay people, religious or priests. This would imply in us a permanent attitude to pass on our mission, an attitude which has always been the basis of our action and which aims at passing on to others the responsibilities which we have taken on so far.

Finally it was noted everywhere that there is an essential link between the structure of communities and the "quality of our life". Hence almost everywhere P.C.A.s could be seen reviving or creating mechanisms capable of ensuring a community life which is truly communion and sharing.

## 2. Our specific missionary character

Everywhere, whether in the Provinces or in the Regions, we felt that the attribute "missionary" had to be the specific mark of our presence in every local Church. Confreres really want to apply their talents and energies to what is more closely linked to the proclamation of the Word "to those who are far away". They have questioned the meaning of their commitments the better to evaluate them. They have searched for formulas which enable them to live their missionary life more dynamically and to pass on their dynamism to the communities among whom they live and for whom they are witnesses to the Kingdom.

Everywhere too confreres have declared that they are available in complete faithfulness for what constitutes the "charism proper" to the Society. This insistence runs the obvious risk of being interpreted as a lack of availability. In fact it is an attitude of humility and of fidelity towards the local Churches.

Attitude of humility, which leads us to recognize our limitations stemming from our number and age. In 1967 the average age of White Fathers was 46; there were then about 3600 members in the Society, of whom 2580 were at work in Africa. Today, with roughly the same number of apostolic commitments, there is a total of 3000 White Fathers, of whom 1800 are in Africa; the average age has risen to 56. Our members are working in 570 sectors. Logically then we should foresee that we must disengage from some 120 posts. This is being objective. In all humility we have to admit it, even while we seek not to diminish the quality of our apostolate.

Attitude of fidelity: both with regard to our missionary commitment and towards those who expect a missionary service from us. For it is in fact as missionaries that we share in the pastoral responsibilities of the local Churches in our Regions and Provinces. And it is at the level of this missionary action that we make ourselves totally available as we seek to offer our service and so remain faithful to our commitment within these same Churches.

## 3. Vocation animation

It is obvious that as far as the Provinces are concerned the Chapter's insistence on a pastoral policy for vocations was made with a view to supporting a concerned effort already well under way since the Chapter of 1974.

In the Regions however the idea of vocation animation aimed at recruiting candidates for our Society was an invitation to take up a line of action which had not yet been followed in many circumscriptions. The P.C.A.s in the Regions were anxious to emphasize the need to continue our cooperation in looking for priestly and religious vocations and in forming candidates whose intention it was to take on a commitment to their own Church. But these same assemblies examined with great seriousness the question of receiving Africans into our Society. They took very practical decisions with a view to starting or continuing a vocation policy in this sense.

We have here a "challenge" which the P.C.A.s have taken up. Their reaction is closely allied to the other challenges mentioned above: namely, the need to restructure our White Father communities and to guarantee the specific character of our action. The White Fathers will have a chance of being recognized for what they are by the young men, who are looking for a missionary ideal lived in community, only to the extent in which the very way they live is a witness to this missionary and community ideal.

#### 4. Dialogue with the local Churches

Under this title can be noted two fairly significant facts, which are common to all the P.C.A.s of the Regions. These facts reveal a very sincere concern to avoid tension between our intention to remain faithful to our own vocation and the desire to share fully the life of the local Churches (Acts 80, No. 71).

The first fact is to be found in the firm intention to set our missionary plans within the framework of the apostolic projects of the Churches in which we work. Wherever the Episcopal Conferences or the Bishops of individual dioceses have a definite pastoral project, the members of the P.C.A.s refer to it, as a matter of course, as to a starting point. It forms the basis of normal reflection leading to the possibility of our participation.

The second fact is the attitude the assemblies themselves showed of wanting dialogue. In several Regions the P.C.A.s foresaw the preparation of material giving information which would be aimed at making known the orientations of the Chapter and of the local Post-capitular Assemblies. Such information would be issued to those who have a part to play in the pastoral policy of the diocese or the country. Over and above such information, meetings are generally foreseen with Ordinaries, to whom the necessary documents would be handed, leaving them the responsibility of passing them on to the local clergy.

Clearly such an attitude cannot do other than foster a loyal and fraternal dialogue between us and the others who have responsibility in the Churches where we work, a dialogue on which depends the peace and harmony which everyone is looking for.

## II. CHALLENGES WHICH ARE A CAUSE OF SOME DISQUIET

### 1. Development, Justice and Peace

Even though this text is one of the longest of our Capitular Acts of 1980 and one of the best put together, P.C.A.s on the whole approached it with some apprehension. The text appears to meet with a good deal of

prejudice. There is a tendency to remain on the level of theory, of considerations; a hesitation to pass on to resolutions which are too precise. We feel uncomfortable when theories about liberation are mentioned, or notions about justice and development or even when talk turns to the priority to be given in our apostolate to the "poor". What is really at stake is that some feel more "accused" than challenged by the texts of the Chapter on these problems. And yet, despite these hesitations and fears, what the assemblies have retained is something very healthy:

- an avowed need to become more aware ourselves of this whole question, which is one the Church has to tackle;
- a desire to help our Christian communities, especially by the slant we give in our renewed catechesis, to become more conscious in their turn of these problems;
- resolutions which are aimed at re-assessing our development projects: a type of development is found which retains the respect due to persons, which liberates them, and this is justice; another type fails to have this respect for persons, but on the contrary enslaves them, and this is injustice;
- finally the intention to question our own life-style.

## 2. Islam in sub-saharian Africa

Here again, all kinds of prejudices make it-difficult to read calmly some texts of our Acts on this subject. We somehow feel that we are out of date and that we do not understand too well how our attitude towards Islam and its renewed proselytism can go hand in hand with our missionary aim to enter into a healthy dialogue. A great number of questions are being asked but there is hesitation about taking a stand.

On the other hand, wherever assemblies have tried to go more deeply into the problem, confreres have been led to say that it is essential to specify what Christian attitude we as missionaries ought to adopt ourselves and to stir up in our Christians, in face of this Islamic pressure in sub-saharan Africa.

In the midst of these hesitations, an interesting phenomenon appears, namely, that of members of our Society who have always been at work in Arab and Muslim countries drawing closer to those working in sub-saharan Africa. The latter look for help from confreres who possess experience and knowledge of Islam.

There would certainly be an enormous advantage to be gained from pooling the experience of both groups. It is with this aim in view that several Regions have already foreseen meetings between confreres who come across these different experiences in their daily lives.

## 3. The Common Project

"...to live, to witness to and to preach the Gospel among the peoples of Africa" (Acts, 1980, No.26). This idea of an apostolic project common to the Society was certainly well received and noted by the confreres as a whole.

They saw it as asserting something agreed by all and contested by none.

One aspect to which the assemblies seem not to have paid too much attention is the fact, underlined by the Chapter, that this is a project COMMON both to the Provinces and to the Regions. But we must modify that slightly by saying that the Provinces have been able to gain greater profit from this point, whereas one looks in vain among the Regions for those who have taken the time to consider what are its practical consequences or to search for ways and means to make confreres more conscious of this global vision of the Society.

But "the Chapter (of 1980) wishes to emphasize that the whole Society, Provinces and Regions alike, have one single apostolic project" (Acts 80, No.91). This was no "pious thought" aimed at pacifying those who are working outside what we call the Regions. We have here a vision which beckons all confreres to accept liability for the responsibilities as a whole which a Society like ours assumes. That is why this same vision is an invitation to us to make ourselves more fully available: "For the work of welcoming, animating and helping confreres...men will be called back from Africa, if the need arises". And the text goes on: "Every confrere can be appointed at least once in his life to give a number of years to the missionary activities of the Provinces" (Acts, 1980, Nos. 99-100, cf.92).

Our Constitutions and Laws are the outcome of a whole evolution which began at the Chapter of 1967. It was with the whole Church of Vatican II that we set out on an unrivalled period of "aggiornamento", a ferment in the Church which did not work without suffering. Three Chapters and two Plenary Councils were given over to this task, with all that this supposes in the way of research, consultation and reflection: The Society really tried to set out in this way its own up-dating; this small book of the new Constitutions is proof of it.

When reading and meditating these Constitutions, we should each one of us put the following question to ourselves: How far have I got in my own "aggiornamento"? They must become a point of reference familiar to us all in our moments of sharing, in our prayers and reflections and in the planning of our apostolic projects.

To all those who shared in the preparation and running of these Assemblies I express my very sincere thanks and I offer my fraternal congratulations for work well done. All of you have taken a true part in this real service of authority in the Society and have fulfilled this "ministry towards (the) brethren by fostering their missionary dynamism and building up the unity of the Society".

May this missionary dynamism continue to grow and this unity continue to become stronger during these post-capitular years 1981-1986.

Reference: Petit Echo, 1981/8, No.723.

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