Chapter IV

COMMUNITY LIVING AND THE COMMUNITY PLAN

Be united with one another, and God will bless you. But let it be by the charity of Jesus Christ, for any union which is not sealed by the blood of Our Savior cannot endure. It is therefore in Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ that you ought to be united with one another. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of union and of peace. How can you attract people to Christ if you are not united with one another and with him?

St. Vincent de Paul
(Abelly, book II, c. 1, 145)

Jesus lived in community with his apostles. They shared their lives intimately with each other. They prayed together often. Jesus instilled in his followers the great vision that his Father had given him of a kingdom of justice, love and peace which they could begin to experience and work toward even now. He asked them to preach that kingdom to others, but first to make it real in their own lives. They shared a common purse, from which they paid for food and lodging. When they returned home from preaching, they spent time together resting and enjoying each other’s company.

The early Christians were so struck by this example that they idealized about what community should be like:

The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common. (Acts 4:32)

In this chapter I will attempt to describe what goes into building up a Christian community and then offer a detailed analysis of one of the means the Constitutions of the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity suggest for renewing our efforts at re-creating the reality that Jesus and his apostles lived in common.
SOME FOUNDATIONAL NOTIONS ON COMMUNITY

Below, I will briefly outline four key concepts in regard to community.

1. Community is a gift of God; it is at the same time a human creation. Both of these assertions have deep New Testament roots.

Community as God’s gift

When speaking of community, St. Vincent goes quickly to its theological roots. He sees its foundations in the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In this light he recommends devotion to these two mysteries to his followers.1 The Vincentian Constitutions see these mysteries as the foundation of the Church, and, within the Church, of the Congregation of the Mission.2

All true community finds its source in God. Jesus’ union with his Father is the paradigm for the intimate bonds that link his followers together in the Spirit. It was reflection on Jesus’ mission to draw all together in the Father’s love that led the Christian community to reflect more deeply on God’s inner Trinitarian life.

Since its source is in God, all community is ultimately gift. It is possible only through God’s love as it works in us through Christ:

I do not pray for them 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 pray that they may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. (Jn 17:20-21)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts the God-givenness of community quite strikingly:

It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God and any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.3

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1. CR X, 2.
2. C 20.
But he also speaks of the need for us to respond to God’s gift: “In a Christian community everything depends on whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable.”

All God’s gifts demand a human response; community, therefore, is not only God’s work but our work too.

**Community as a human creation**

Though St. Vincent often reflected on community’s roots in God, even more often he wrote and spoke about the human means for building and nourishing it. The Rules he gave to his communities, the letters he wrote, and the conferences he gave got down to very concrete norms for living together.

The Vincentian Constitutions likewise emphasize both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of community’s coming-to-be. “The Church finds the ultimate source of its life and action in the Trinity. The Congregation, within the Church, does the same,” article 20 states. At the same time, article 129 §1 states: “The Congregation forms itself particularly in the individual local communities.”

So while community is God’s gift, we are his instruments in creating it. Without us it cannot come into being. St. Paul emphasizes the human effort that goes into building community:

*I plead with you then, as a prisoner for the Lord, to live a life worthy of the calling you have received, with perfect humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another lovingly. Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force.* (Eph 4:1-3)

2. True community does not stifle diversity; on the contrary, it sees itself as enriched by the varied gifts of different members.

The New Testament abounds in imagery when it describes community. It is a body with all its varied members. It is a vine with many branches. It is a pilgrim people with diverse gifts. The images focus on unity in diversity, as in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

Through the Spirit one received faith; by the same Spirit another is

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1. Ibid. 72.
3. Cf. SV VIII, 100, where St. Vincent consoles Antoine Durand, superior at Agde: “I feel for you in the pain that you suffer.”
4. Many of his conferences, even on seemingly different topics, are actually on means for living well together; cf. SV XII, 244ff.
given the gift of healing, and still another miraculous powers. Prophecy is given to one; to another power to distinguish one spirit from another. One receives the gift of tongue, another that of interpreting the tongues. But it is one and the same Spirit who produces all these gifts, distributing them to each as he wills. 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. Now the body is not one member, it is many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,” would it then no longer belong to the body? If the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,” would it then no longer belong to the body? If the body were all eye, what would happen to our hearing? If it were all ear, what would happen to our smelling? As it is, God has set each member of the body in the place he wanted it to be. If all the members were alike, where would the body be? (1 Cor 12:9-22)

The Vincentian Constitutions emphasize the same idea: “The initiatives of members should be evaluated in the light of the purpose and spirit of the Congregation. In this way the individuality and charisms of each member come together to foster community and make the mission effective” (C 22). Another paragraph states: “... the evangelization of the poor... gives to all our work a unity that does not stifle diverse talents and gifts but directs them to the service of the mission” (C 25, 2°).

Diversity is not the enemy of community. It is part of its richness. The Rule for a New Brother puts this rather beautifully:

Be thankful for the variety of gifts and difference of personality.
When you put your own potential and insights at the service of your community your unity will grow stronger and richer, and together you will create that spaciousness which finds room for everyone.¹

3. True community is not simply physical or functional presence. It is being with and for the other person.

People can have physical presence to one another as strangers in an elevator. They can have functional presence to each other if they work together on an assembly line in a factory. But in neither of these instances is there true community. True community is being with and for the other. It is personal concern and care (even if often within the context of a project).

The Vincentian Constitutions strongly emphasize the personal dimension of community. They call the members of the Congregation to renew the

¹. Rule for a New Brother (London, 1973), ch. 3.
principal elements of their way of living and acting, first of all by “following Christ the Evangelizer as a community, which generates in us special bonds of love and affection; in this spirit we should, ‘like good friends’ (CR VIII, 2) join reverence for one another with genuine esteem” (C 25, 1st). In this, of course, they echo the New Testament:

This is how all will know you for my disciples: Your love for one another. (Jn 13:35)

4. True community is not a static reality. It is always being created.

This characteristic of community is stated quite explicitly in the Vincentian Constitutions (C 25): “The Community is continually responsible for its own development. . . .” This means that true community involves initiative, to get things going. It involves forgiveness, to heal what has gone wrong. It involves ongoing formation. It is always being created. We make a grave mistake when we think of community as an abstract reality (as if a “community” can exist statically and we can simply move into it). True community is concrete, dynamic. It consists of real people who work at building it up rather than the imaginary people we dream of. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: “The person who loves his dream of community more than the real community itself destroys community.”

You form a building which rises on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is fitted together and takes shape as a holy temple in the Lord; in him you are being built into this temple, to become a dwelling place for God in the Spirit. (Eph 2:20-22)

LEVELS OF COMMUNITY

From what has been stated above, we should not be surprised that community is very imperfect at times. If community really is something we must work toward, then it can never be captured once for all. We must always be striving to create it. Sometimes there will be high points, sometimes lows. We will have better community in one house than in another. We will have better community in some matters than in others. I say this, because as Bernard Lonergan points out, community demands union on many levels, some of which may be better realized than others. Lonergan speaks of four levels at which the bonds of community are forged.

1. Common experience

Common experience lays the groundwork for community. It is what initial and ongoing formation programs try to create. It involves understanding a common heritage, sharing in common traditions, learning common ideas through our studies, participating in common symbolic acts, being immersed in and reflecting together on common works, living a common life-style.

When people first come together they often do not have much common experience. So it must be worked at. A confrere who has spent his whole life on the missions may find that he has little in common with a confrere who has spent much of his life teaching theology. When they enter a local community together, they will have to work hard at making community real.

2. Common understanding

Common understanding means that when we say the same things we mean the same things. Take sin, for example. For one person it may mean breaking a law. For another it may mean breaking a relationship. For one person God may be a judge. For another he may be a loving father. For still a third, he may be the sum total of world forces. One person may view the Church as a predominantly hierarchical institution where new directions come mainly from above. Another may see the Church as the people of God where new ideas bubble up from below. For these people to come to a common understanding (and they will never perfectly achieve that goal) will demand much dialogue.

3. Common judgment

This means that we come to agree, as a community, on certain ideas. “We hold these truths”; e.g., those contained in a constitution. Vincentians as a body hold that the end of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ the Evangelizer of the poor. When a new member comes to join the community, he must assimilate the basic common judgments that are foundational to the community. There will also be many other more concrete, practical common judgments that particular local communities come to agree on; e.g., that they will celebrate the eucharist together each day; that the best time for this is at 7:00; that their life-style should be simple, and at the same time warm and family-like; that they will work both in a parish and in a school;
that in their school, the policy regarding admissions will be . . . , etc. Reached common judgments demands meetings, a decision-making process, a willingness to compromise, and respect for differing opinions. Even in the best of times, however, disagreements over judgments, and especially over means, will remain. The body of foundational common judgments will not be excessively detailed, nor very large; moreover, while the most basic truths will remain stable, their interpretation will never be static.

4. Common action

A community must act together on the judgments which it has made. The members must work with one another in such a way that they feel co-responsibility. If the community merely has common experiences, common understanding, and common judgments, but its members do not carry them into action, then it is not a true community. It lacks follow-through. It is in agreement ideologically, but not committed in actuality.

The commitment to obedience, which has played a part in all Christian communities, comes into play on this level. Members of a community must be resolved that after consultation and dialogue, they will work together in acting on common judgments, even if some (or even many) continue to hold dissenting views. Obedient, loving dissent is a healthy reality in community and can provide the basis for ongoing dialogue. As Socrates pointed out, dissent is a function of loyalty to the group, even if at times it may create some discomfort for the members.

In summary then, true community involves all four levels: common experience, common understanding, common judgment and common action. Sometimes these will be more fully realized; at other times, less fully.

THE COMMUNITY PLAN

The new Constitutions of both the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity offer a practical means for renewal in community life, the local community plan. I want to suggest that this can be a particularly effective means for renewal if those in a given community enter into it as a covenant. If through dialogue based on common experience, we can come to greater

2. C 27; cf. S 16.
3. Données à Dieu pour le service des Pauvres 3.46; cf. S 57.
common understanding and formulate common judgments, we can covenant before God and with one another that we will live out in common action what we have agreed on. The community plan will serve as the written statement of that covenant.

I am convinced that we are still struggling to find adequate concrete means for renewing community life and have not yet been fully successful in the quest. But much of the problem is quite understandable. We have passed from a long period in which the structures of community living were universally legislated. Thirty years ago, for example, if a Visitor went to Rome or to Rio he would find that, even though the Vincentians there spoke a different language, the basic forms of community life were quite familiar. The community rose at 5 A.M., went to morning prayer and meditated for an hour. Then there were probably private Masses, breakfast, and time for the apostolate. At midday there was a particular examen, followed by lunch. In the evening, the community prayed vespers and perhaps anticipated matins before supper. Later it joined in a common night prayer, after which the grand silence began.

Today most of these universally legislated structures have disappeared. Within the rather general framework of Constitutions, Statutes, and Provincial Norms, each local community is asked to agree on the structures that will concretize the various aspects of its life: how will we carry out our specifically Vincentian mission in this house, how will we share life with one another, when and how will we pray together, how often will we meet for dialogue as part of the decision-making process, what meals and other “family” times together will we commit ourselves to, etc.? In place of universally legislated structures, we are called to create covenanted structures. The questions above set the stage for some of the decisions that form the covenant.

It is evident that covenanting demands great creativity and responsibility from the members of the local community. No longer are there many universally legislated structures that bind us from without; it is up to us to create structures that bind us from within. And, of course, covenanting implies that, having made common decisions and created local structures, we will abide by them.

In the paragraphs that follow I offer an outline of what the Vincentian Constitutions and Statutes say about the local community plan and some models of what such plans might look like.
a. The statements of the Vincentian Constitutions and Statutes concerning the community plan

1. The basic legislation for the local community plan is found in C 27 and S 16.

   **C 27** Each community should work at developing a community plan, according to the Constitutions, Statutes, and the Provincial Norms. We should use this plan as a means of directing our life and work, of fulfilling the recommendations we receive, and of examining periodically our life and activities.

   **S 16** The Community Plan which each community draws up for itself as far as possible at the beginning of its work year, should include: apostolic activity, prayer, the use of goods, Christian witness where we work, ongoing formation, times for group reflection, necessary time for relaxation and study, and an order of the day. All these should be revised periodically.

2. Several other paragraphs in the Constitutions and Statutes refer explicitly to the local Community Plan:

   - **C 32 §1** Confreres’ work responsibilities
   - **S 19** Acts of piety
   - **S 69, 5°;78,4°** Approval by the Provincial
   - **S 78, 4°** Formulation by the local superior together with the community

3. Still other paragraphs provide relevant background for better understanding the plan:

   - **C 23** Proper autonomy of local community
   - **C 25** Need for local community to renew itself
   - **C 129** The Congregation forms itself particularly in individual local communities
   - **S 79 §3** Frequent meetings should be held

4. Many other paragraphs suggest matter that might aptly be included in a community plan: S 3; C 17; S 9 §2; C 24 2°; S 18, S 37 §1; C 96; C 149; C 152; etc.

5. In addition, a number of matters treated in the Provincial Norms might properly be included among items to be treated in a community plan.

6. Some other paragraphs in the Constitutions and Statutes refer directly or allude to a Provincial Plan, which might be generated from the local community plans: S 37 §2; S 69 1°; etc.
b. Models of what a community plan might look like

Three models for a community plan follow. These can be used freely, of course. There could be other models. A community plan could, for example, simply follow the outline of the Lines of Action of the General Assembly and agree on concrete steps for carrying them out.

MODEL I

(I would recommend that this model be used by community houses that are beginning the planning process. While taxing, it has the value of helping the local community come into fuller contact with the Constitutions and Statutes and can draw it into reflective discussion of what they demand of us.)

COMMUNITY PLAN OF THE VINCENTIANS AT

I APOSTOLIC ACTIVITY (S 3, S 9 §2, S 16, C 17, C 23, C 24 2°, C 25, C 96, C 129).
This section might treat the apostolic priorities of the house.

II PRAYER (S 16, S 19, C 25)
This section might treat our daily exercises of prayer, the weekly service of the word, periodic times of reflection, the annual retreat, etc.

III COMMUNITY LIFE (C 23, C 24 2°, C 25, C 129)
This section might treat the means that the local community chooses for fostering its life together (perhaps these are already treated in other sections of the plan).

IV CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN THE PLACE WHERE WE WORK (S 16, C 20, C 24, C 33, C 44-45, C 49, S 36, S 100).
This section might treat those aspects of our lives that the local community plan sees as its most important witness in its place of work.

V ORGANIZATION (S 16, S 78 4°, S 79 §1 §3, C 24 2°, C 96, C 134 §2)
This section might treat the organizational structure of the local community (e.g., how often it meets, how decisions are made, etc.).

VI ONGOING FORMATION (S 16)
This section might treat the means the local community will take for its ongoing formation (e.g., attendance at workshops, study, meetings and discussions in the house, retreats, guest speakers, etc.).
VII  PROMOTING VOCATIONS (S 36, S 37 §1)
This section might treat the plan of the local house for fostering vocations (how will the local community find young people who will carry on this apostolate in the future).

VIII  RECREATION (S 16)
This section might treat daily common recreation, the need for periodic time off (balancing work and leisure), annual vacation time, etc.

IX  USE OF MATERIAL GOODS (S 16, C 25, C 33, S 18, C 149, C 152)
This section might treat how the local community plans to use its material goods, how it will seek to live simply, how it makes decisions in regard to spending money or using its resources, etc.

X  ORDER OF DAY (S 16)
This section will give the order of day.

XI  EVALUATION AND REVISION OF PLAN (S 16, S 78 4°)
This section might treat how, when, and by whom the plan is evaluated and periodically revised.

MODEL II
(This model presumes that the local community has already worked out many of the issues involved in the first model. It helps it to situate itself within a larger context, articulate its special Vincentian mission, and covenant some goals for the coming year.)

I  DESCRIPTION OF THE CONCRETE SITUATION
This section would describe the concrete situation where the confreres of the house minister (e.g., the number and type of people in the parish or school; the resources available; the needs of the people; etc.)

II  MISSION STATEMENT
In this section, the confreres of the house would formulate a statement describing the specifically Vincentian mission which they carry out.

III  COVENANT FOR THE COMING YEAR
This section might treat any number of the matters listed in the first model above.

MODEL III
(This model aims at situating the house within the present context and plan of the province and at developing goals in that light. It also assigns specific responsibility and provides for periodic evaluation.)
I REFLECTION ON THE PRESENT STATE OF THE PROVINCE AND HOUSE
After prayerful reflection on the Constitutions and Statutes, the Lines of Action, and the Provincial Plan, the members of the house might in this section describe what they see as their principal concerns as a house.

II SPECIFIC GOALS FOR THE YEAR AHEAD
In this section a limited number of goals will be formulated and agreed on (e.g., carrying out a home visitation in the entire parish; meeting every Thursday at 4 P.M., followed by evening prayer and supper together; organizing a day of recollection together four times during the coming year; agreeing on a book to be read and discussed once every two months, as a form of ongoing formation; making some systematic contact with young people in the parish or school with a view toward vocational promotion; etc.). Specific responsibility for reaching the goals would be assigned to various individuals or groups, as well as a time-frame.

III EVALUATION
A method for periodic evaluation of progress toward the goals would be stated here.