

Truth Embodied

A Sketch of Catholic Community

—Thomas Storck—

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hat follows here is simply one man's rationale and sketch for the creation of a Catholic community. It is intended less as a blueprint for actual use than as a document that might serve as the basis for

further elaboration, development, modification, or even vehement rejection. Whatever might happen to it, if it can provoke thought and discussion among those who are seriously interested in starting such a community, then it will have done its job.

I wish to state that although I speak of "the community" and of "members," I am not implying a group bound by formal ties, such as an agreement, rule or covenant. The community I have in mind is simply a group of Catholics who think that a richer Catholic life can be led under circumstances such as are outlined here. Certainly the community would have no formal leaders, still less "elders" or anything like that. Without doubt, informal leaders would emerge, but there is no reason to assume that such leaders would lead in everything. Some might be, or become, expert farmers or gardeners or skilled in some craft, others expert at a kind of informal watchfulness over the community as a whole. Both are needed and none should be dictators.

I. REASONS FOR COMMUNITY

What we hope for, ultimately, is nothing less than the transformation of society. We yearn to help build a culture which nurtures a more reflective life, which encourages heart and mind to open in contemplation of God and the sacramentality of creation, where justice and moral truth again inform the economic and political spheres...The new Christian culture will not come by Church proclamation or political action. It will arise when enough of us begin building it in our lives, in our families, and among our friends.

—Caelum et Terra, vol. 1, no. 1

At the present time there is no possibility of the large-scale restoration of a Catholic culture in the United States. In fact, a fully Catholic culture has never existed in the United States, with the limited and partial exceptions of a few heavily Catholic rural areas where, to the extent permitted by the general culture and its political regime, corporate Catholic life really was lived. But though I myself am very interested in these vestiges, and think that a militantly Catholic bishop and a dozen similarly-minded priests might be able to do a great work of restoration here, that kind of large ecclesiastical activity is not ours to undertake. What is proper for us to do

must be done at the level of the family and of groups of families and individuals. We may be able to have an impact in our own lives and in those of our families and friends, but on the larger world only indirectly. This is surely enough for now. Therefore, with this in mind, we can ask ourselves why we desire to build a Catholic community, and we can suggest some reasons.

Our revival of a Catholic culture or community would exist for two reasons at least. First, to make a home for us and our children, a home not simply in the sense of a physical place to live, but a home in a larger sense. For though, as St. Paul wrote, "Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come." (Heb. 13:14), nevertheless there is a sense in which it is entirely proper to search, even on earth, for a place to dwell which is at peace with God its Father and with the earth, our common mother by nature.

Man seems to want a place on this earth with which he has more than an accidental relationship. In modern thought, of which both Cartesian coordinate geometry and free market capitalism are representative examples, nothing has a real place. That is, though obviously everything is somewhere or the other, no thing has any reason why it is here rather than there. In Cartesian geometry, for example, the location of any point is determined by its relationship to the X and Y axes. All such relationships can be measured and described quantitatively, but all are entirely arbitrary and accidental. There are no intrinsic relationships: on the uniform plane of Cartesian geometry no place is qualitatively different from any other place and any point might just as well be elsewhere. In Aristotle's philosophy, on the other hand, the place or "where" of a thing is one of the important aspects of the thing, just as its size and weight and other qualities are. One can argue, then, that for Aristotle and generally for the ancients and medievals, a thing, whether person or inanimate object, had more than just an accidental relationship with its place. And though some might think that such ruminations of philosophers have little effect on the lives of individuals or of civilizations, such philosophizing is in fact probably the chief factor in shaping our everyday lives. And among the many areas in which the above ideas can be seen working themselves out, our economic system is an interesting instance.

The economic life of the pre-modern world was much more rooted in place than is the case today. For capitalism and the kind of life that it has created, place matters little. One of the basic premises of capitalism is that the only aspects of economic activity that matter are those that can be quantified. Otherwise, it is all the same: whether you work with wood in the workshop that your great-grandfather built or whether

you write advertising copy to sell cigarettes. Both can be measured and quantitatively described by the amount of money involved and only that differentiates them. Those who measure the gross domestic product are not interested in what is produced or by whom, only in how much. If drugs were legalized tomorrow, this would give a big boost to the GDP, since all the drug sales could now be counted as economic activity. And this same principle of undifferentiated quantity can be extended to our own lives, too. You might just as well live in some new high-rise in the suburbs as in the village where your ancestors had lived for generations. In fact, it is better for you to do so, for there are no jobs for you in the village anymore. Our modern outlook is predicated on the notion of the free movement of things in undifferentiated Cartesian space—of goods, money and jobs—but this depends on the underlying movement of people. People no longer have any organic connection with any place, but are now supposed to move around from place to place, chasing after the goods and the money, and especially after the jobs. Even the physical arrangements of our life, our roads and towns, for example, assume the more or less random movement of people from place to place in pursuit of the necessities of life, much as gas molecules are said to move excitedly about when heated. Consider in contrast these words, spoken in 1793 by a Catholic traditionalist opponent of the French Revolution:



For us, our country is our village, our altars, our graves, all that our fathers loved before us. Our country is our Faith, our land, our King. But what is their country? Do you understand? Do you? They have it in their brains; we have it under our feet.

As long as we understand that whatever “city” we build here on this earth can only be a sign and prefiguration of our true city that is to come, as long as we understand this, we are not likely to make an idol of our land or our community. But, on the other hand, we cannot have a “city” that is a sort of sacrament of the true city of God if we use and view land the way the typical modern does: something only to be measured and then, worse still, valued in dollars per acre and sold to a developer. That is no prefiguration of God’s Kingdom, but rather a bitter foretaste of Hell.

In connection with this, though, all of us need to ask ourselves a question: to what extent are we committed to a sense of place and to what extent are we ourselves rootless moderns? I am afraid that many of us—speaking at least for

myself—have absorbed many of the principles of Catholic life from books, not from a living tradition. In fact, we have it in our brains rather than under our feet. Though I do feel a real connection and a sense of place associated with the region in which I was mostly raised, northwest Ohio, yet in my limited wanderings around the globe I have always looked at places with an eye for finding the ideal location to live. And so I have come to love Santa Fe and northern New Mexico, central and western Pennsylvania, and the west of Ireland. But all of these places are places of choice, not places with which I have any organic relationship. In the traditional Catholic world it was “our villages, our altars, our graves;” now it is what pleases me. If any of us do found a community,

will we and will our descendants come to love it because of the land itself, its altars, its graves? Will our children hesitate to leave that place where we are buried or will they, like so many of us, think nothing of leaving the places of their fathers’ graves? Yes, we do have to start somewhere, but if the community is simply a place of our choice—much as others might pick L.A. or Florida—then I question whether we really understand the land and our right to use it.

The second reason we seek to build a community is to provide a concrete statement and embodiment of what is true. That is, in the midst, and as a kind of counterpoint to, our secularized and denatured way of life, such a culture would try to be, as much as possible, the fullness of

a life of nature and grace. Even if the world never noticed it, and apart from the good that it did for us ourselves, it would be a good thing for it to exist, just as one flower in a crack in the pavement is a good, even if no one ever sees it.

But, paradoxically, the more we would concentrate on trying to live faithfully a life centered on Christ and built on the nature that He created, the more apt we would be (I think) to draw others to ourselves. As an army cannot go forth to fight without a fortress or base, so we would in one way or another venture forth, and conversions would result, both to the Catholic faith and to the fullness of a Catholic life, because of the existence of the community. Most people, even most believers, do not suspect there is anything more to living a Christian life than simply keeping one’s nose clean. Though it will not be perfect, if a community is able to achieve even a measure of a Christian life, that in itself would be such a contrast to our ordinary way of life that it would not fail to attract some to Christ Himself, who will be understood as the real unseen center of the community.

II. ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMUNITY

A few families and single people would move near each other in some rural area, perhaps in or near a small village. Each family and individual would be responsible for its own housing and financial arrangements, as at present. That is, each individual or head of family would have some kind of job, or, in some cases, men might be full-time farmers. But what one did in this case would be up to each individual or family.

There would be no pooling of resources or owning all land in common. The reason that I think this would be a mistake is that many communities organized on this principle in the past have broken up, sometimes with great bitterness. If members have pooled funds, then I fear bitterness would be accompanied by lawsuits, making even greater scandal and giving greater pleasure to Satan. But some things could be undertaken jointly. For example, farmers or gardeners or craftsmen might jointly buy an expensive piece of equipment, but here it would not be the property of the "community," but of those individuals who jointly purchased it. And of course there is nothing to prevent some individuals from buying common land, much as this might take place at present. But it would not belong to the community as a whole, just to those who purchased it for whatever purposes.

All the members of the community might meet together once or twice a week to say the Divine Office. But, in addition to this, I think there would arise a rich life of the group on a less formal basis. Besides individual and family friendships, very likely some would meet more often to pray together, perhaps our Lady's Rosary; probably one or more study groups would arise among the members, some on intellectual matters, some perhaps on practical agricultural questions, etc.

III. LOCATION OF THE COMMUNITY

For myself, I think it would be good to locate the community in an area that is heavily Catholic. Though Catholic faith and life have decayed to an unbelievable degree in the last twenty-five years, there is still something nourishing about being surrounded by fellow members of the Mystical Body. And maybe, if the members of the community extend charity of both heart and hand toward others, they can be a leaven in the lump, and help to revitalize a dying Catholic region. I think it is usually easier to restore what is decaying than to build something fresh. Catholics, somewhere deep inside, ought to have some memory of concepts of which Protestants will never have heard. For Protestants—and secularists who are culturally Protestant—Christianity seems to be a religion in which the sacred merely overlays life, it does not mingle with and permeate all of human existence. This in turn stems from not realizing the profound meaning and implications of the Incarnation.

On a more immediate note, in an area with many

Catholics, even in a rural area, there is likely to be more than one parish around. This is almost necessary today when so many priests are, if not Modernist, at least unconscious of the necessity of either a sane liturgy or a reasonably faithful presentation of the teachings of the Church. Even if one finds an excellent priest and parish, there is always the possibility that he will be transferred. So I think the existence of more than one parish is very important.

Many of us think that a rural area is also important. I think this is not due to some rural romanticism or yearning to become the noble savage, but because, objectively, a rural area (and I include small towns or villages in that definition) is better. Why is this? In part because our cities are not traditional cities at all, but huge agglomerations that have no natural limits to their growth and size. In Christopher Dawson's phrase, a modern city is "a cosmopolitan ergastulum for the production of wealth." (See his essay, "The Evolution of the Modern City" in *The Dynamics of World History*.) These cities have little or no relationship to the countryside around them, except to take the food raised in the country and, too often, the people as well. They give back nothing of value, because they have no interest except in their own city and in other large urban masses.

There have to be, though, sufficient jobs to support the families of our community, decent medical care, and provision for schooling. Rural America has been declining economically for decades, and in some places jobs are very hard to find. Sometimes there is little choice in medical care, and moreover it is likely that some members of the community will be users of what we quaintly call "alternative" medicine, which can be exceedingly hard to find outside of big cities.

In regard to education, many families will probably be interested in home schooling, but some might not be, and for them good Catholic schools are a must. Possibly members of the community could start their own school, which might attract Catholics outside the group, especially if other nearby Catholic schools are not orthodox. Otherwise it will be necessary to use existing Catholic schools, and here what I said above about the existence of more than one parish is important, since not every parish school will be orthodox. Rural areas are even more likely to lack Catholic high schools than grade schools, though I know of more than one rural area that has both Catholic elementary and high schools, and I am sure there are other places as well.

Obviously, with all these considerations to take into account, as well as others that could be mentioned, a group of people interested in starting a community would need to plan carefully and pray fervently. Doubtless it will be impossible to please everyone, and some will have to decide whether they wish to become part of a community that is being formed, even though one or more things that they consider important are lacking. As in other pioneering ventures, the fainthearted need not apply.

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