

## Living in Unity

*How good and how pleasant it is,  
When brothers live in unity!*

Ps. 132:1 Grail

Having written at some length of the experience of personal suffering and the manner in which it both humbles and shapes us, I turn to another very important cause of pain in carers: inter-personal conflict. As in the rest of this book, I do not offer clear answers – just a few recollections from someone in the middle of a particular situation: a small hospice for the terminally ill.

The first thing that must be said is that conflict is endemic in communities, and that not only is it a cause of much individual suffering, but it can be very damaging to the work of the group. The next observation is that this conflict is frequently hidden from the casual observer – patients or families cared for in a hospice, retreatants in a guest house or visitors to a monastic community. I have often shared with friends involved in retreat work or other communities the wry humour they feel when visitors exclaim, ‘What a marvellous atmosphere – you can feel it as soon as you come in!’ One smiles enigmatically and makes no comment, hoping devoutly that the tense voices behind the closed door will remain inaudible and that the scars on one’s heart can be concealed just a little longer.

Gerard Manley Hopkins in his poem *In the Valley of the Elwy* captures that very special feeling of welcome that some houses can evoke in the visitor:

I remember a house where all were good  
To me; God knows deserving no such thing:  
Comforting smell breathed at very entering,

Fetches fresh, as I suppose off some sweet wood.  
That cordial air made those kind people a hood  
All over, as a bevy of eggs the mothering wing  
Will, or mild nights the new morsels of spring:  
Why, it seemed of course, seemed of right it should.

I have long thought that this poem referred to St Beunos, the massive Jesuit house in the Clwyd valley where Hopkins wrote much of his poetry, and where from time to time I have found refuge when my heart was troubled. He is, however, referring *not* to his religious community but to some friends in London! On reflection this comes as no surprise because Hopkins was too close to his own community not to be painfully aware of the disharmony behind the welcoming façade.

I write *façade* for that is what it is: we present quite unconsciously to the stranger a warmth and welcome which is only one facet of the truth of our community life. We allow them to share, for a time, in our riches of love and companionship, but shield them from the painful forces by which we are being shaped as a group of people. Like the whole of creation, we are groaning in a great travail. God is at work in us, stripping, hollowing, moulding, purifying, in a process which is infinitely painful but without which we would never become a community. I find it rather a joke that I who after twenty years ‘vocationitis’ found that I was quite unsuited to religious life should end up, after all, in the heart of a community of women. If one believes in a God who ‘writes straight with crooked lines’, then perhaps the eighteen months I spent as a novice was a formation, not as I had intended, for starting my own monastic community, but for being the medical director of a cancer hospice! Let me share with you my experience of community life, for what it lacks in depth it makes up for in variety!

My first experience of community, like so many Catholic schoolgirls, was a boarding school run by nuns. In the early 1950s Catholics rejoiced in an intellectual security concerning the ways of God which the Second Vatican Council was to explode for ever. The nuns *knew* with a deep certainty that the religious life was the highest possible way of serving God and that anyone who had a ‘vocation – a calling’ to become a nun was especially loved by God.

It should come as no surprise therefore that many of the



more ambitious or susceptible of us became stricken with what has become known as the 'divine measles'; the belief that God was calling us to the religious life. My own attack came in the middle of a quite blatant 'vocations' retreat in which we were plunged into prayer in order to reflect upon our immortal souls. Surrounded by posters with legends such as 'We grow like those with whom we live – the nun lives with Christ', or the Kitchener-like demand 'Is God calling YOU to the religious life?' perhaps it is no wonder that it has taken me nearly forty years to be convinced that I am running, *not* away from God but *towards* him. I know now that my vocation, my best way of serving God lies not in a convent but in lovingly doing that task for which I am best equipped.

But of course it was not only the vocations drive which convinced me I should become a nun: it was the fact that I recognised in those particular women qualities of warmth and generosity that I had not met in those outside the convent. Whatever the quality of their community life, they gave me a glimpse of something so special that I was to spend the next twenty-five years in its pursuit.

My next experience of community was, I suppose, in the 1960s when I was first a medical student and then a resident in the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. Perhaps it is stretching it a bit to call a big hospital a community – and yet we were bonded together as a group of people in the service of our patients. I was a resident in the 'bad' old days when junior doctors had no time off and we worked and slept and ate and found our fun within the confines of the hospital. I remember that, arriving late for work on the first morning, I left my bicycle outside the main door of the hospital – only to find it gone when I emerged to claim it three months later! But, in spite of it all, my memories of that first year as a doctor are tinged with an immense nostalgia. There was a sense of pride of belonging to a great and worthwhile enterprise that made one put up with appalling hours of work, bad food and poor living conditions; there was, too, an amazing sense of comradeship that bound us together in a way which does not seem to happen today when many young doctors are married or only on call every third or fourth night. I am not saying it was better in my day, just different. There was also a curious loyalty between people far distant from each other in

the hierarchical structure. I suppose it was a very paternalistic world but I remember with real affection the domestic staff who cherished us in a way that is less common in today's more egalitarian society. I would not deny that the great hospitals of twenty years ago were full of proud doctors and underpaid porters – but we shared an *esprit de corps* that is less obvious today. And what of conflict in those days? I have no memory of deep feuds – just the odd row between people who were tired and cross. In hindsight I would suspect that there *was* conflict and hurt among the senior doctors, because it seems there always is – but this would not necessarily have been apparent to us as junior doctors. There was too the time-honoured hierarchical structure by which people protected their own emotional space while in the hospital and which led to a slightly formal, stylised way of relating to each other which was not unlike behaviour patterns in the armed forces or in a monastery.

I must admit that having long mocked the hierarchical barriers in medical and clerical society I am, in my middle years, coming to appreciate their value! It is not easy to be in a position of authority, still less to be a good leader; and perhaps a certain distance and formal way of relating makes it easier to remain impartial in disputes and to correct when that is necessary. There is too the very basic fact that each of us has only a limited amount of emotional energy and one cannot be all things to all men. I am certainly not advocating the sort of society in which those in authority are allowed to be pompous and arrogant but rather some sort of compromise between two ways of being. Alas, nothing is ever black or white, much as we would like it so!

I spent a number of years in these curious medical 'communities', working all the hours God gave, and playing just as hard in between times. One of my happiest years was spent at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford where I was a resident in surgery. We lived in old Nissen huts left over from the war years when the Churchill had been an American army hospital. They were incredibly ugly but well heated and we were not very demanding in those days. If we were not demanding, however, we made up for it by satisfying our needs by devious means and the authorities turned a blind eye so long as the work got done and we did not burn the place down. There was one particular time when the dozen



or so of us in my hut were united in our law breaking. With my philosophy that nothing is impossible until proven so, I was probably one of the ringleaders.

It happened like this. After finishing a particularly exhausting six-month stint in the accident and emergency department at the Radcliffe, I was given a week's leave before beginning my next job as senior house officer in plastic surgery at the Churchill Hospital. When I arrived, refreshed from my week in Devon, I found that Consuelo, a Chilean doctor in the UK on a British Council scholarship, had done my locum. We became good friends and I discovered that she was living a cold and lonely existence in a bed-sit in Headington. This seemed nonsense when she belonged with us junior doctors and, when we discovered there was a spare bed stored in the box-room we assembled it and moved her in among the suitcases. We got away with it for nearly a month but then the cleaning lady complained to her supervisor. (Did I write rather sentimentally a few pages ago about doctors being cherished by adoring domestic staff? Perhaps the Churchill was different!) We were not to be easily thwarted, however, and I hit on a brilliant idea. The resident in thoracic surgery was a married lady called Phil who had for many years been a psychotherapist and was getting a medical qualification so that she could practise as a psychiatrist. We decided that it was bad for Phil's marriage that she be apart from her husband, so every night we packed her off home in Consuelo's elderly Ford, 'Harry' (named after Henry Ford, of course) while Consuelo slept in her bed and took her night calls. When I moved on to general surgery, Consuelo got the plastic surgery job and for a while we were all legal, but then my job finished and it was I who had nowhere to sleep. Nothing daunted, we picked a clean bed, mattress and arm chair off the hospital skip and set up house in Consuelo's room. As we wearied of hospital food we took up housekeeping seriously and one Saturday afternoon moved a fridge and small cooker in through the window. Those were the days of the squatters! While I camped in Consuelo's room Australian Danny, the obstetrics and gynaecology resident, had his wife and baby living with him while another houseman had a beautiful Chinese girl friend to cook his dinner and warm his bed. Lord we had fun!

So the conflicts in those days were with Authority, devious-

ness leading to almost open warfare, as on the occasion when I spent a happy Sunday morning sawing the end off my bed to convert it into a divan and found myself up before the administrator on Monday morning! Feminine wiles, however, are not easily defeated and I fled with my case to a more senior official and ended up drinking sherry with him in the board room. This somewhat St Trinian's mentality was to stand me in good stead nearly ten years later when I found myself once more confined to barracks – this time in a Chilean concentration camp.

When I first arrived at Tres Alamos detention camp, after four days in an interrogation centre and three weeks in solitary confinement, there were a hundred and twenty women packed into a single compound. We slept seven to a room which measured about nine feet square – perhaps less. Six of us had bunks; the seventh, Cristina (now a doctor in the UK) slept on the floor. The five weeks I spent with these mainly Marxist prisoners of conscience was, I think, my most impressive experience of community, outstripping by far my later experience of life in a convent. It is hardly surprising, I suppose, for prisoners of conscience are a very specially selected group of people who are not only strongly idealistic but courageous and highly disciplined. What really impressed me then, and the memory remains bright to this day, was the experience of a truly loving and sharing community. I remember Anita Maria who, when my hair fell into my dinner for the third time, handed me a hair grip – the only one she had, from her own hair. *This* was true sharing – giving away what you are using, not what is surplus to requirements. It is hard not to be nostalgic about those days. There was a kind of purity about them as, stripped of all that we had, we were welded into one body, giving graciously to the weaker members that which we would have preferred to keep for ourselves. I truly believe that, for a time, we were living a kind of basic Christian community life. How long it could have lasted one cannot say. It was enough to have experienced it, and for that I am grateful.

It was, I suppose, naive to expect that I would recapture the spirit of Tres Alamos prison in a British convent – but I did expect it when, afire with zeal about the ideal of the monastic life and full of preconceived ideas of how it should be lived, I moved from Ampleforth Abbey to become a novice



in a semi-enclosed monastic convent. I found the experience very traumatic and was asked to leave after eighteen months because it was clear that I was unsuited to the life.

It is very difficult indeed to write dispassionately and honestly about the religious life. Some people write from the outside, often rather sentimentally, and I think do nuns little service. Others write after they have leapt over the wall and describe their experience with ill-concealed bitterness. Such books are often sensationalised by the Sunday papers and written off by the devout as the rantings of an unhinged and malicious mind. Even now after seven years I am loath to write about my own experience in the convent for to do so would be to risk wounding a group of women who took me to their hearts and shared everything they had with me. The fact remains, however, that I was often (though not always) terribly unhappy. I felt like a caged bird and fretted for the open spaces, for my friends and for intellectual stimulus. I badly missed the swift exchange of repartee and intellectual argument that I had known at Ampleforth and buried myself in books of history and theology. I found myself endlessly restricted by a world in which almost anything I did by instinct seemed to be wrong and I was either interiorly cowering and trying to be something I was not or relaxing and getting into trouble yet again.

I still do not really understand what was wrong. I know now quite clearly that I was not personally suited to that particular community, though I shared their *ideals* totally. It is not so much the ideals but the living out that is in question. The thing in particular that happens in convents is that there is a leaning over backwards not to upset the older members of the community. This means that out-dated and even foolish ideas and ways of living can be perpetuated out of a mistaken concept of charity. Then of course, by the time the old guard have gone, the coming generation have become so used to the status quo that there is no longer any desire or energy for change.

Paradoxically, the other thing which is evident in some enclosed convents is a lack of ordinary Christian charity. In theory a religious community should be a place where gospel values are lived out in a very special way; it should be a witness to the power and beauty of the Christian message. More than anything a convent or monastery should be a

community of love, a living out of Christ's words at the Last Supper.

My little children . . .

I give you a new commandment:

love one another;

just as I have loved you,

you must also love one another.

By this love you have for one another,

everyone will know that you are my disciples.

John 13:33-34

But alas, this is not always so. As someone who has been particularly interested in religious life I have, over the years, come into contact with quite a number of women who were either going into or coming out of enclosed convents, and I am shocked and saddened at what I hear. There emerges a picture of small-minded behaviour and an obsessive preoccupation with petty material detail which would be laughable if were not so damaging. Women who should be friends, sharing their ideals, supporting each other and growing in compassion and wisdom become somehow turned in on themselves, dried up and warped until it seems they are incapable of love. Particularly frightening is the power of the superiors in some of these very enclosed houses. Charismatic, strong women who should be educating, enabling and liberating their charges seem to become transformed into dictators, inspiring a degrading subjection and even fear. The power of 'Our Mother' over adult women, many of whom have held powerful and important posts 'in the world', would be laughable if it were not downright dangerous. The human psyche is a marvellous and fragile thing and to subject it to deforming forces in the name of Christ must surely be blasphemy.

I write thus not of my own experience but of what I have been told by strong intelligent women whose confidences I have been privileged to receive. The nuns with whom I lived for eighteen months were very good to me, struggling to help without crushing. The superiors were sane, wise women, deeply spiritual and full of humour who listened to me patiently and tried to give me space to be myself. And yet it is a fact that I *felt* far more hurt and angry when I left the convent than when I came out of prison and it took me many months before I was able to work again.



What is it then, that happens to women whose extraordinary generosity and zeal for Christ has led them to give up so much of what the human race holds dear? Are they deluded, victims of childhood repression, or have they been brainwashed by religious propaganda? Or are they perhaps just ordinary people with an extraordinary longing for God who, in giving their lives to Christ, unwittingly subject themselves to a system which is inherently flawed? I believe that the latter is the case: not that the rules of St Benedict, of St Augustine or of Carmel, are flawed but that the way in which they are interpreted leads sometimes to an unhealthy way of life. To illustrate what I mean, here is an account of convent life taken from *The Christian Neurosis* by Pierre Solignac, a French psychiatrist with twenty years experience in working with priests and nuns. The quotation comes from the testimony of a religious sister who, at the age of sixty, consulted Solignac for depression:

I was just twenty when I became a novice. I followed a divine call which I never doubted, and I was resolved to go through with it to the end. Some basic themes kept recurring in the instructions given by the novice mistress: 'You are never wrong to obey. You must be faithful in the little things. You must always ask permission.' And it was necessary to ask permission for everything: to take a bath twice a month, to wash one's hair, change one's nightdress once a month. It was also necessary to ask permission to give or receive the least little thing, even a picture; to write a letter (of course all the correspondence was censored); to go to bed or to get up at a different time than anyone else: recreation, the refectory, the religious office. Permission was also needed to have a conversation with a pupil or sister. Breaking the rule meant certain traditional penances: kissing the feet of one's sisters; eating meals on one's knees; prostrating oneself full length for all the sisters to walk over; saying a prayer in the refectory with arms outstretched; holding a pencil between one's teeth for a certain time as a punishment for breaking silence; carrying round one's neck the pieces of an article one had been clumsy enough to break. It was the done thing to ask permission to inflict certain mortifications on oneself: self-flagellation with knotted rope, or wearing bracelets made of thorns.

When I think back to this period I am struck by the fact that we were treated as though we were irresponsible, creatures who could not be trusted: the novice-mistress and the Mother Superior could enter our cells without knocking at any time. We had to leave the doors of our cells open to undress: the novice-mistress came to shut them personally, at nine in the evening. We were not allowed to go out of the garden and we were forbidden to look out of the windows giving on to the street. In the parlour there was always a sister as chaperone. We were not allowed to talk to a priest or a religious outside the confessional. Of course, all that is going back forty-five years, but it is not long since the changes came. This period of the novitiate wasn't the hardest. I followed the path laid down for me with the fixed idea, 'The will of the Mother Superior is the will of God.' As I wanted beyond all doubt to be faithful to God, or rather to Jesus, I did not raise any questions, and I lived day by day in a kind of unconsciousness bordering on a degree of fatalism. (*The Christian Neurosis*, p. 21)

This nun was sixty when she presented to Dr Solignac for the treatment of depression so perhaps one could calculate that she entered the convent in the 1930s (the book was published in 1976). She is then speaking of life that existed some fifty years ago and which could be regarded as a regrettable historical fact. Indeed Sister Prue Wilson, in her delightful book *My Father took me to the Circus*, writes of her experience as a novice in the 1940s as a way of life which no longer exists:

There was, too, the satisfaction of knowing that only the love of God would induce one to wear a night cap or leap out of bed well before dawn on a winter's morning. My sorrow is that although much of the life was neither good nor bad, merely peculiar, too much energy was wasted on conforming to the minutiae, and too much creativity on the need to walk a traditional tight rope acceptable to the elders of the congregation. I am not only thinking of the novices but of those asked to direct them. For us at the receiving end, most of it was either dotty or funny – the doing of it – the failure to do it – the scoldings and 'penances' – all made for a bond of laughter and friendship, and tears, and a shared way of faith. But was it really



worth the fuss? There were also those who were unable to laugh, who took the whole thing with a terrible seriousness. For them it proved damaging. Lives could be scarred and maturity impeded by over concentration, not on the music or rhythm of the dance, but on its toe pointing demands.

Karen Armstrong, in *Through the Narrow Gate*, gives a graphic account of life in a pre-Vatican II convent and of the damage that it wrought in her:

All afternoon I had felt sick, gripped by a fierce, unreasoning terror. Now, in the hot silence of an August evening, I stood shivering slightly in the community refectory. I could feel a tumult inside me threatening to erupt. The only sounds in the vast room were the clash of heavy metal dishes and tinkling of cutlery as three white-aproned nuns scurried round, putting supper out on the long wooden tables, their rubber soles squeaking on the polished floor. A long sunbeam slashed through the tall windows, catching the big crucifix in a dramatic natural flood light, tinging the white walls with a pink glow. Suddenly I heard a strange keening noise, a scream like an animal caught in a trap. What was it? Where was it coming from? Then, from a long way off I saw myself, my eyes clenched tightly shut, my mouth gaping and contorted and from it coming the unearthly cry. Nuns hurried round. They slapped me, shook me, but could not quell the sound. Finally I watched myself crumble through their arms in an awkward huddle. The sound stopped, and a black shutter clicked down in my brain.

The rigid inhuman system which broke Karen Armstrong in the 1960s is now ancient history in her order – but it is still alive and well today in some enclosed houses. I have spent many hours listening to accounts of convent life which bear an uncanny resemblance to that described by Armstrong or Solignac. True, many of the ‘dotty’ customs have been abandoned but there remains a way of handling people which is based on a false theological premise: that the will and spirit of the disciple must be broken in order that the person may be remoulded. ‘Only when her old worldly self has been smashed to pieces can God build from the rubble a new, Christ centred individual’ (Karen Armstrong, *Through the*

*Narrow Gate*). I see this kind of thinking as a total corruption of the Christian message, a denial of the infinite worth of the individual and the command that we should love one another. I believe it is a matter of grave scandal in the Catholic Church.

It must be clearly stated, however, that there are many convents where happy mature women live together a life of community which they have freely chosen. The monastic way of life is older than Christianity itself and there will always be men and women whose desire for the transcendent God leads them to abandon home and loved ones for a life dedicated entirely to the search of God. These are what a monk friend of mine called ‘the God struck’, those with a ‘vocation’, a calling that they cannot deny. What seems important to me is that we Christians of the twentieth century should use our knowledge of theology and psychology to revitalise and heal a time-honoured way of life that in some places has, despite the good will of many, become flawed.

There are indeed many religious communities who have done just this, and in obedience to the spirit of ‘aggiornamento’ of the Second Vatican Council they have returned to the vision of their founders.

These women have, often painfully, examined their way of life, and are grappling with what it means to live a life consecrated to God in the latter part of the twentieth century. During the last year that I spent in Chile I became friendly with a number of American missionary sisters and found in them a marvellous amalgam of common sense and desire for God. Two of my dearest friends were Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Carla Piette. Ita, an ex-journalist, was a small woman with short dark hair and a sharp wit, while Carla was a tall zany, artistic redhead who had caused chaos in early days in Chile by confusing the Spanish words for charity and chastity, when she was making her confession. I remember her laughter as she described the horror of the elderly Chilean priest when a young fully habited American sister confessed to having sinned ‘*contra la castidad*’. It took her half an hour to extricate herself in broken Spanish while the rest of the sisters waited their turn in the queue! By the time I met them Ita and Carla had long since abandoned their religious habits and convent fortress and lived with another sister in a little wooden house in a shanty town called La Bandera on the



outskirts of Santiago. I was captivated by their warmth and humour and began to wonder if here at last were women with whom I could live as sisters. We met many times in the months between Easter and my arrest in November, sharing food, good conversation and prayer in their 'convent' or, more often, in my more spacious house in the suburbs. I remember particularly the times we spent sitting on the floor of my bedroom with a candle and praying that I might be freed of my attachment to my material possessions. The three of us were to laugh together again, but in another place when that prayer was 'answered' in a way that none of us had bargained for: by my being arrested and the secret police stealing anything that was of any value!

The sense of community that I experienced with these women during my last weeks in Chile was and is very precious to me. Each visiting day at Tres Alamos there would be a group of nuns and priests bearing fruit, books, sweaters and anything else I might need. We sat on the ground and talked endlessly or walked slowly around the prison courtyard if we had need to speak of more personal things. My last memories of Ita and Carla are of those slow measured walks and the incredible urgency with which we shared the deepest meaning of my torture and imprisonment.

I just missed seeing Carla again in 1976 when I was in the United States and she was on retreat. I asked to meet her but she felt that it would be wrong to interrupt her retreat. Instead she sent me a little handkerchief embroidered with the Copihue, the Chilean national flower, and a cryptic note saying something like 'It's a marvellous thing to be on a journey, not knowing where you are going, especially if you trust the cabbie.'

Carla's journey was to end much sooner than she or any of us expected, for in August 1980 she was drowned in El Salvador when the jeep she and Ita were travelling in was overturned in a flash flood. They had been taking a freed prisoner home because other refugees did not trust him and were afraid that he would betray them. It was this generous act that cost Carla her life and Ita her closest friend, for as they were crossing the river the torrent swelled and the jeep was overturned. Carla pushed Ita out of the window, but must have been trapped herself, for finally, 'close to noon the Red Cross found her. Her broken, twisted, naked body had

been washed up on a sand bar in the now tame river, fourteen kilometres from where the jeep had foundered the night before' (from *The Same Fate as the Poor* by Judith Noone MM).

So Carla, who had driven off into the unknown, placing her trust in 'the cabbie', had come home. By one of those strange quirks of fate that send shivers down the spine, I have a poem of hers, a meditation on the 23rd Psalm:

Near restful waters He leads me – to revive  
my drooping spirit

Waters of Mountains – Waters of God  
cleanse us, renew us so shabbily shod.  
Rios de Chile, streams of burnt snow  
melt us, tow us beyond friend or foe.  
Currents so fast, pools deep and clear  
tune us, quiet our hearts still to hear.  
Lord of the river, god of the stream  
teach us your song, our dryness redeem.

It is only now, as I transcribe this poem from the original, that I notice that after the quote from Psalm 22 (Grail) she has put 'ps. 123'. I presume it is a slip of the pen – but on glancing at Psalm 123 in the Gelineau translation I am struck by the second verse:

Then would the waters have engulfed us,  
the torrent gone over us.  
Over our head would have swept  
the raging waters.

Carla was buried in Chaletanango, among the people she had served, and Ita had time to grieve for her friend:

Carla and I had talked lots of times about the possibility of our dying because of things here, very violent things. We talked about how difficult it would be if we weren't together for the one left behind. At the very end of St John's Gospel there is a little scene of Jesus with Peter, and John seems to be in the background. Jesus says to Peter, 'Follow me'. Peter turns around and says 'What about him?' And Jesus says, 'I'm telling you to follow me and he's to wait 'til I return.' If John was in hearing distance, how did he feel? I think we know now. (*The Same Fate as the Poor*)

I quote this passage from one of Ita's letters not only because



I find it moving, but because it illustrates the open nature of the loving relationship between the two sisters. To set this in context we must remember that there are still convents in which 'particular friendships' – close friendships – between nuns are forbidden on the grounds that the nun's heart must be exclusively for Christ. It is this blinkering of the heart which is so damaging to the very people whose love of God should be opening them up to deeply human loving relationships.

Ita continued to work in Chaletenango among the refugees with Maryknoll Sister Maura Clarke who had volunteered to replace Carla. It was demanding, exhausting work involving daily contact with violence and death. They made constant trips into the countryside to deliver supplies or to pick up refugees. More often than not, Ita and Maura went along on these trips because the visibility of these pale-skinned 'gringo' women, particularly if they happened to be citizens of the United States, was considered a guarantee of safety to the driver and to the refugees.

One day they were called to the parish house in the environs of a town called Adeleita where sixty people had taken refuge. After unloading the sacks of grain the women and the old men told their story. For eight months they had had to sleep in the hills in the rain and cold in fear of night visits from government-sponsored death squads or the early morning army invasions. They would dare to go down to their homes only in the daylight and with a neighbour on guard so as not to be caught by security forces. Just the day before, a patrol raided their village leaving word that the next time they were going to finish off the women and children. That night all the people abandoned the area for good and trekked five hours through the night guided by the sons and husbands who were defending the area, until they finally reached the parish house at dawn. One woman gave birth to twins an hour after their arrival.

Each day the horror of the repression came closer to the sisters, its reality branded upon their hearts. One day Ita was alone in the house when a young woman came to ask her to accompany her to view the body of her son who had been killed by the security forces. Jean Donovan and Ita went with the mother to a little plot of land outside town where a farmer, was digging to uncover the body.

Several minutes later he reached down into the grave to remove a handkerchief he had placed on the boy's face when he buried him two days before. 'That is my son,' the mother cried, 'now I can rest for I know he is at peace with God.'

Ita trembled and tried to remove that sight from her memory. (*The Same Fate as the Poor*)

I spoke in an earlier chapter of the paradox of the spiritual life; and these descriptions of the life of the missionaries in El Salvador illustrate a hard fact: that Christianity is purified and strengthened by hardship and persecution. Had Ita Ford entered an enclosed convent in Brooklyn perhaps she, like so many other women, would have become caught up in the minutiae of community life and worship and ensnared by the traps of a life lived in isolation from the world. Perhaps she had an insight into this when she wrote to a friend, 'We keep plugging along here, because life is threatened by other evils worse than death – hatred, manipulation, violence and selfishness.'

In November 1980 Ita and Maura flew to Nicaragua for a meeting of their Congregation. At first Ita was very depressed and appeared to have no heart for discussion or celebration. Then, as the week wore on she seemed to reach some kind of turning point in her grieving process and was better able to join in the meeting. On the last night, at the closing liturgy, Ita was asked to read a passage that was important to her. She chose an excerpt from one of Archbishop Romero's homilies:

Christ invites us not to fear persecution because, believe me, brothers and sisters, one who is committed to the poor must risk the same fate as the poor. And in El Salvador we know what the fate of the poor signifies: to disappear, to be tortured, to be captive and to be found dead. (Oscar Romero, Homily for 17 February 1980)

Oscar Romero, the right wing priest radicalised by his episcopal ministry to a suffering people clearly had no illusions about the risks he was running in openly denouncing oppression. This sermon was to prove prophetic when just over a month later, on 24 March 1980, the Archbishop was assassinated while saying mass.

Now, ten months after his death, an American woman from Brooklyn was choosing to make his prophetic words her own.



The next day, 2 December, Ita and Maura flew to San Salvador. Already their names were on a death list shown covertly to the sacristan in Chaletenango. By midnight it was all over, for the two nuns disappeared after leaving the airport. At around ten that night, along the old dusty road to San Pedro Nonualco, one hour from the airport and in the opposite direction towards La Libertad, three peasants watched from a pineapple field as a white van drove by. It travelled another seven hundred yards and then stopped. The peasants heard machine-gun fire followed by single shots. Fifteen minutes later the same vehicle passed by on its way back. The lights inside were on, the radio blaring, and the peasants counted five bare-headed men. Later that night the van was left burning on the side of the road leading from the airport to La Libertad.

Around seven-thirty the following morning a peasant found the bodies of four North American women and an hour later, after identification by the local judge, they were buried in the dry earth of El Salvador.

It was not until the next day that their friends were told of the missionaries' death. Then, in the presence of the American Ambassador Robert White, the four bodies were exhumed. They were identified as Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, of the Maryknoll Sisters; Sister Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline; and a tall blonde lay missionary in her twenties, Jeanie Donovan. Over the past few years I have several times watched the film of Jean Donovan's life, *Roses in December*, which shows the excavation of these bodies. The shots are mercifully a little blurred, but one can still see clearly the limp figures in their jeans as they are hauled out of the grave with ropes. Time and again I have looked at Ita's body and thought, *this* is what being a nun is about; this is about loving to the limit, about the grain of wheat falling to the ground and about the foolishness of those who follow Christ. There is a terrible purity in religious life when it is stripped of all the trappings of religion, of the self-consciousness, the élitism and the feeling of being holier than those in the world. I think of the girl in a lay institute who told me she would not wear a sleeveless dress because she thought of Jesus as her fiancé and he would not like it; and of a friend who after six years in a convent felt 'immodest' in trousers. There is no modesty in being found dead in a river in spate and none in being

raped in the back of a van by a bunch of brutal security guards – just a foolish identification with the suffering of the world and with the Son of God made man. I find it very sad that Victorian prudery is confused with religious modesty and that the human body, its drives and emotions are not understood for what they are: the creation of our all loving, all powerful God. Only when we are helped to love ourselves and our bodies, to know ourselves as fundamentally good, will we be able to start loving each other as the Lord commanded.

It occurs to me that I have been carried away by nostalgia, strayed a little from the theme. No matter. Perhaps the harsh sun of El Salvador has thrown light upon the deepest realities of caring, and the bleached bones of Ita Ford and Carla Piette reminded us of the dust to which we must all return. Let me come back to the experience of community, but this time to my life with a group who, though nominally Christian, do not think of themselves as religious and who certainly have no call to celibacy: the staff of St Luke's Hospice in Plymouth.



## Hospice as Community

*Have mercy on us Lord, have mercy.  
You are the potter and we are the clay.  
Somehow or other we have held together until now.  
We are still carried by your mighty hand  
and we are still clinging to your three fingers,  
Faith, Hope and Charity  
with which you support the whole great bulk of the earth,  
that is to say, the whole weight of your people.  
Cleanse our reins and hearts by the fire  
of your holy spirit and establish the work  
that you have wrought in us, lest we return  
again to clay and nothingness.*

William of St Thierry

Twelfth-century Cistercian abbot of Rievaulx Abbey.

It is only in the last year or so that I have come to see St Luke's Hospice as a community. Before that it was just the place where I worked, a bit like the hospital but smaller and less formal. Then one day I was listening to one of Jean Vanier's tapes while driving my car and I heard a talk he had given to a group of people who work in L'Arche. He spoke of people called together because of their desire to serve a particular group of the poor or disadvantaged and how what united them was not the natural bonds of family, friendship or common interest but their calling to serve. This means that life in community will almost always be difficult because such people have not chosen each other but have in a very real sense been *chosen by* their calling to serve.

I would not have *chosen* to live or work with many of my present 'community' at St Luke's and I doubt if many would have chosen me! We have been called together to work as a team because of our desire to work with the dying and our

gifts to do that work. As in religious life, there are many who are inspired by the hospice ideal and would like to work in the field but find, when they try their 'vocation', that the reality is very different from what they had imagined. Work with the dying requires not only great sensitivity and patience but a robust and earthy sense of humour, for when you are in the business of caring for those whose bodies and minds are literally disintegrating, tragedy and farce are inexorably intertwined. There is too a deeply contemplative aspect to the work for it demands not just that we *do* things for people but that we *be* with them. It is a ministry of presence, a being alongside the suffering, impotent as they are impotent, mute as they are mute, sharing their darkness. As I described in an earlier chapter, this foot of the cross ministry is enormously demanding because not only does it expose us to the pain of others, but it turns the spotlight upon our own weaknesses. The hardest thing for me about this work is not the contact with the patients and the exposure to their pain but my own recognition of the gulf between what I preach and what I practise. It is not so much that I teach a way of caring which I do not practise but that I can only sustain that level of caring for a limited period. There are days on which I know I am working really well: that my sensitivity to people's pain and needs is finely tuned and I am using all my professional and spiritual skills. There are other days however when I find that I am distancing myself from the patients and their relatives, providing only the statutory level of physical care that ordinary medical practice requires. These are the days when I am tired or my mind is preoccupied or when I have just had enough and want out.

Most of the time, of course, one cannot take time out when one needs it or would like it. To be economically viable a caring service has to be organised in such a way that there is little overlap of staff, and that means that, unless one is really ill, one must press on as best one can, battle fatigued or not. This means that inevitably there will be days when people are irritable or bitchy and not only less sensitive to patients' needs, but less available to each other. I am personally acutely aware that I am not as friendly to junior nurses, domestic staff and volunteer helpers as I should be and not only do I appear distant, but sometimes, quite unwittingly, I hurt people. This is partly thoughtlessness but much more