

# Community and Growth by Jean Vanier

(2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1991 St Paul Publications)

- ‘Community is the place of meeting with God; it is the place of belonging; it is the place of love and acceptance; it is the place of caring; it is the place of growth in love (Vanier, page 8).

‘We want love, but fear the dependence and commitment it implies’.

When people enter community, especially from a place of loneliness in a big city or from a place of aggression and rejection, they find the warmth and the love exhilarating. This permits them to start lifting their masks and barriers and to become vulnerable. They may enter into a time of communion and great joy. But then, too, as they lift their masks and become vulnerable, they discover that community can be a terrible place, because it is a place of relationship; it is the revelation of our wounded emotions and of how painful it can be to live with others, especially with some people. It is so much easier to live with books and objects, television, or dogs and cats! It is so much easier to live alone and just do things for others, when one feels like it.

## Vanier 25-26 continued

As we live with people daily, all the anger, hatred, jealousies and fears of others, also the need to dominate, to run away or to hide, seem to rise up from the wounds of our early childhood when we felt unloved and abandoned or over-protected. All the dirt seems to come up to the surface of our consciousness from the tomb in which it had all been hidden. We begin to experience terrible anguish because people are clutching on to us, asking too much of us, or simply because their presence reminds us of authoritarian parents who did not have time to listen to us.

Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective or sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realise how incapable we are of loving, how much we deny to others, how closed in on ourselves we are. And if we are incapable of loving, what is left? There is nothing but despair, anguish and the need to destroy. Love then appears to be an illusion. We are condemned to inner isolation and death.

So community life brings a painful revelation of our limitations, weaknesses and darkness; the unexpected discovery of the monsters within us is hard to accept. The immediate reaction is to try to destroy the monsters, or to hide them away again, pretending that they don't exist. Or else we try to flee from community life and relationships with others, and to assume that the monsters are theirs, not ours. It is the others who are guilty, not us.'

'Madeleine, who founded the Little Sisters of Jesus, wrote in a letter to them: "Do not feel obliged, in order to protect against exterior dangers your religious dignity and your intimacy with God, to put up barriers between the lay world and yourself. Don't put yourself on the fringes of society ... Like Jesus, become part of that humanity. Penetrate deeply into and sanctify your environment by the conformity of your life, by your friendship, by your love, by your life totally given to the service of others, like Jesus, by a life so mixed in with everyone else's that you may be one with them, wanting only to be in their midst like yeast that loses itself in the dough in order to make it rise.'

‘The good news is announced by Jesus to the poor,  
not to those who serve the poor.’

- ‘We must always remember that the waters are flowing not just from the heavens and from the places of light, but also from the broken earth: gentle springs of living water are flowing from the broken bodies and hearts of the poor. We must learn to drink from them, for they bring into our presence the wounded and broken heart of Jesus, the Crucified One.’