

On the Edge of Mystery
Towards a Spiritual Hermeneutic of the Urban Margins

by

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Declaration of Authorship

I certify that the following thesis is my original work. It is the result of research carried out at the Divinity Faculty of the University of Edinburgh from October 1990 to December 1993.

Gill K. Goulding IBVM

This thesis is dedicated

Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

and

In Memoriam

Peter Goulding who inspired Mystery

and

Michael Kyne SJ who revered the reality.

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Abstract

The questions explored in this thesis are: whether it is possible to have a shared spirituality between those who work on the urban margins and the people with whom they work; and what factors might assist such a reciprocal sense of depth exchange?

The focus for the empirical work was on a situation where a group of religious and lay women are living and working on a peripheral urban housing estate. Although it was necessary to employ sociological research methods, this is not a sociological case study, but rather the exploration of lived spirituality within the Christian tradition.

The emerging importance of conversation and dialogue leads to interaction with Gadamer and Tracy. The work of Rahner, particularly his emphasis on the dynamic drive towards divine mystery inherent within humanity, proves important, as it becomes evident that by virtue of their own discovery of the transcendent, the people of the estate are celebrating grace, but have come to it in and through the sacrament of their own lives.

It is suggested that this operative fact of grace at work amongst the marginalised merits further consideration by the church. Here the vital function of a critical listening faculty is imperative. Indeed, it is suggested that such a developed faculty has more universal applicability throughout all forms of ministry. The facilitative tool for such an attuned listening is seen to be the openness to engagement with the contemplative dimension. Thus there is a re-engagement with the classical spiritual tradition, which is seen to authenticate the integrated nature of contemplation and action. Finally, detailed consideration is given to the process of the interior journey and the qualities engendered along the way vital for a contemporary spiritual hermeneutic. Here interaction with the work of Merton proves invaluable.

Thus the course of the thesis is an unfolding of a spiritual hermeneutic which, it is suggested, has ramifications not exclusively on the urban margins, but as a potential dynamic force within the church at the close of the twentieth century.

Introduction

This thesis originated in personal experience working with marginalised individuals and groups in four British cities. In Birmingham, Bristol and Brixton I worked with teams of lay people and religious in fields as diverse as prostitution, race relations, unemployment and homelessness. In Glasgow, for eighteen months prior to commencing the research, I was employed in a drug rehabilitation unit, dealing with both drug abuse and the inevitable problems of H.I.V. and A.I.D.S. Working in such stressful circumstances, with individuals who faced severe problems, awakened very deep questions for many team members. These included reflecting upon what the reality of God meant for themselves and for the people with whom they worked. These questions arose in each team with which I worked and were considered important by all members, whether individuals had a firm or vague Christian commitment. Another common factor was that team members were often looking for some forum wherein to reflect upon these matters and had various expectations that the church could both provide such a forum and be a source of support and encouragement for their work.

Reflecting upon my own experience, I was conscious of God at work within marginalised groups and individuals in a way often embarrassingly direct and simple for our more complicated Christian formats. Most people I worked with inhabited no specific religious tradition and yet demonstrated a spiritual aliveness, openness and exploration of real depth and quality which puts many of those of us who do inhabit such traditions to shame. Since they showed no sign of being susceptible to conversion it occurred to me to ask, what can the tradition offer to them, and what more importantly, can they offer to us? Given that the "spiritually alive of no fixed abode" may be on the increase, how do we relate to them? Also, given the breakdown of shared frameworks of discourse how can individuals or a community share and communicate their values, perspectives and prescriptions with those who inhabit different frameworks? How does one achieve either prophetic witness or courteous translation in such a world? Ultimately one focus emerged for the empirical work. Is it possible to have a shared spirituality between those who work on the margins and the people with whom they work and what factors might assist such a reciprocal sense of depth exchange at that level of experience? It seemed to me these considerations were fundamental for any Christian social outreach.

Given the contentious nature of two words which will occur frequently throughout this work, it seems appropriate to address them at an early stage. "Spirituality" has

become an over-exploited contemporary term which can cover a wide spectrum of possibilities, from New Age meditation in pyramids through shades of occult practice to the most orthodox Sunday worship. Within the Christian tradition particular forms of contemporary spirituality can render a degree of elitism, such that if you do not visit a spiritual director and preferably have a therapist as well, keep a journal, know your Enneogram number, have your Myers Briggs profile and make a regular retreat, you are falling short somewhere. However, spirituality is always grounded in a context and particular experiences. My working definition of spirituality has been that which is most deeply personal - is me - is most precious to me. This is not just the "me" which may so often be alienated, distracted and inauthentic, but also what is the most genuine, often most simple and certainly the most profound "me" that exists. This is the depths of an individual where we meet God and other real human beings. Here we touch the place where spirituality is more than what shapes and guides us. It is also what moves us, what resonates deep within, the place of our deepest desires. This centre, this focal point, this deep silence within, is the source of our lived response to God and to others. From here come the actions that really count. Here, the source of faith, is the inspiration of our vision - the fusion of prayer and action - for each individual in each specific context.

The term "marginalised" encompasses an enormous spectrum of marginality including the old, the very young, the handicapped, the sick, the incapacitated in many different forms, and ethnic groups. In terms of this research it has been specifically focused on marginality in the inner city and peripheral housing estates and has included: problems associated with bad housing conditions and homelessness; issues of ethnicity and racist violence; drug abuse and problems associated with H.I.V. and A.I.D.S.; unemployment, prostitution and all the other problems associated with multiple deprivation in urban areas.

In seeking to develop an empirical methodology to facilitate exploration of the research question, there was a prolonged emphasis on investigating the literature of qualitative methodology, endeavouring to formulate a framework. The literature consulted varied across a wide spectrum. There are those, such as Fay¹, who would stress the need to opt definitively for an interpretative meaning-centred paradigm, as a vital prerequisite for methodology, denouncing anything that smacked of a potentially positivist approach. Towards the other extreme of the spectrum, one might encounter in Bell and Newby's Doing Sociological Research² the assertion that

1 Fay B., Social Theory and Political Practice, London, Allen & Unwin, 1975, Chapters 2 and 3.

2 Bell C. and Newby H. (eds.), Doing Sociological Research, London, Allen & Unwin, 1977.

the only way to avoid methodolatory is to espouse the cause of methodological pluralism. Such rejection of methodological exclusivism had a healthy resonance with this research, particularly as Bell and Newby³ stress the importance of a constructive scepticism and ethical and logical scrupulousness. The basic dilemma in specifying a particular methodology appeared to involve combining both an intuitive insight which enabled originality and a disciplined approach with some degree of reliability.

Choosing any particular research strategy automatically involves being vulnerable to attack from alternative positions. And since all such stands are fallible taken in isolation, a certain degree of resilience appeared necessary to follow through in terms of the choice or choices made. Here, it was reassuring to recognise that sociology lacks any widespread paradigmatic consensus.⁴ It became apparent that a degree of reflexivity was important. Thus within the methodological framework there is a dual movement involving ethnography⁵ as the attempt is made to uncover and document participant's perspectives; and use of the interactionist paradigm⁶ in order to ascertain how individuals take and make meaning in interaction with others.

The ethnographer's central concern is to provide a description that is faithful to the world view of the participants in the social context being described. It involves writing about a way of life and thus its most important characteristic is that it is rooted in the natural setting of what is being described. Here, the work of Whyte⁷, Willis⁸, Becker⁹ and Goffman¹⁰ have provided classic studies and enabled consideration also of the way in which subcommunities fit into the larger community matrix. Within this research a similar attempt was made both to relate the views of participants, and to examine these within the wider community context.

Interactionism has become a major theoretical perspective and influence on field research in contemporary sociology, along with the growth of ethnography. The interactionist stance provides an interpretative view of sociology, which puts

3 Ibid. p. 17. ff.

4 Indeed the method of obtaining data is often valid sociological data in its own right. c.f. Newby H. "In the field: reflections on the study of Suffolk farm workers" *ibid.* pp. 108-129.

5 Ethnography defined by Conklin as, "The data of cultural anthropology that are derived from the direct observation of behaviour in a particular society." Conklin H. "Ethnography" in Sills D. (ed.) International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, vol. 5, New York, Macmillan and The Free Press, 1968, pp. 172-8. cited in Burgess R., In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research, London, Allen & Unwin, 1984. p. 2.

6 See particularly the work of Gill R. and Rock P. as outlined below.

7 Whyte W., Street Corner Society, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1955.

8 Willis P., Learning to Labour, Farnborough, Saxon House, 1977.

9 Becker H., Geer B., Hughes E., Making the Grade, New York, Wiley, 1968.

10 Goffman E., Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates, London, Penguin, 1978.

emphasis on understanding the actions of participants on the basis of their active experience of the world and the ways in which their actions arise from, and reflect back on, experience. The study of action has to be conducted from the position of the actor in order to see the way in which actors perceive situations. Using this theoretical perspective, it therefore becomes essential to gather statements made by participants with a view to examining the various dimensions of the situation that they construct.

Symbolic Interactionism as outlined by Rock¹¹ appears to incorporate a dualism not unrelated to that just outlined. Rock stresses the importance of a working amalgam of two discrete solutions. There is a formalism stressing the features of the partial, evolving, and synthetic a posteriori character of social knowledge. There is also the pragmatism emphasising how knowledge must be grounded, practical and experiential. The emphasis throughout is on an interpretation of society as a shifting combination of foci variously in conflict, harmony and contradiction. Any enquiry mounted in such circumstances can only result in conclusions which are inevitably provisional and partial, and such enquiry in order to have any validity must be rooted in the active investigation of observable social phenomena. For Rock, it is only an active encounter with the world which furnishes interactionist material. Such active encounters emphasise each actor as the only source and site of knowledge.

The interactionist paradigm, as outlined by Gill,¹² forms a fundamental part of the framework.¹³ His assertion is that theology appears as a thoroughly determined discipline originating from and being maintained by social factors. Thus a circular paradigm is outlined whereby society is both determined by theology and acts as a fresh determinant upon theology. Indeed, Gill argues that practical theology has a two-fold function. It is legitimately concerned with analysing the contemporary role of the church vis a vis society. It also has a prophetic function which is less concerned with the church as it is than with the church as it ought to be. In the course of this research the empirical work gave insight into the former position while reflection, analysis and evaluation led to suggestions being made with regard to the latter.

11 Rock P., Symbolic Interactionism, London, Macmillan, 1979.

12 Gill R., Theology and Social Structure, Oxford, Mowbrays, 1977, chapter 7.

13 A not dissimilar progression (i.e. utilising the work of Bell C. and Newby H., Gill R., and Rock P.) is outlined in the work of Northcott M., The Church and Secularisation: Urban Industrial Mission in North East England, Frankfurt, Verlag Peter Lang, 1989, pp. 11-36.

The distinctive methodology of both ethnography and interactionism is participant observation. The individual engaging in this field finds herself needing to practise two seemingly contradictory roles. As an observer there is the need to survey social life from without, treating it in a fashion which may seem unfamiliar and disturbing to ordinary experience. Yet as a participant, she must attempt to merge with the world about her. Such a blending appears inimical to the notion of distant appraisal. This fusion of subjective involvement and objective analysis is the tension involved in formulating ideas and explanations from within the situation. It is only by the researcher locating herself in the flow of social life that she believes herself entitled to issue authentic reports. As Rock emphasises¹⁴, participant observation is the pivotal strategy of interactionism. It is a methodology which uses the self of the researcher as a tool to explore social processes and directs the researcher to place herself in the scenes which she wishes to analyse. It requires her continually to observe and participate at the same time. According to Rock,¹⁵ the justification for participant observation is threefold: from a definition of knowledge as an ongoing practical activity; from an argument that sociologists cannot know by introspection or surmise; and from an injunction to respect the reality of appearances.

It does appear that participant observation as a primary methodology generates paradox - as such it seemed of particular applicability to this research. It is composed of contradictory imperatives, conflicting postures and at times seemingly insuperable problems. With an emphasis on praxis, and avoidance of speculation, participant observation mirrors other pragmatic processes. It defies exact explication, centring as it does on an interpretation of knowledge as praxis, not as an analytic a priori. Interactionists espouse participant observation because it is based on an epistemology that describes immediate experience as an irreducible reality. Consciousness of this reality prompts a degree of humility within the researcher, as Rock indicates,

"Interactionism enjoins its adherents to adopt a posture of humility before a world which is defined as more opaque and mysterious than commonly supposed."¹⁶

Indeed, paradoxically, it is the very vulnerability of the epistemology of participant observation which makes the method imperative. At the mercy of charges of subjectivism, this is the very core of interpretative appreciation of lived experience. The researcher must find her place along a spectrum from complete participant to complete observer, while avoiding the danger of either "going native" or becoming

¹⁴ Rock P., *Symbolic Interactionism*, op. cit. p. 178.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 90.

completely detached, in both cases thus contaminating the material. It is axiomatic of this methodology, as Rock indicates¹⁷, that such experience is never adequately described by words, it occupies realms which are sui generis and which thus make articulation at best moderately difficult.

The very fact of the marginality of the participant observer enables her to appreciate the problematic quality of social life in a manner alien to all complete participants. In participant observation the dialectic between participation and observation is always problematic. Indeed at each stage of practical involvement undertaken, initial conceptions of the research were being continually modified. Accordingly, as Burgess¹⁸ indicates, concern with research design and access was an ongoing feature of the research process. It was soon apparent, for example, that, alongside participant observation fieldnotes, formal interviews with those with whom I lived and worked would be inappropriate, whereas informal interviews could be relatively easily integrated into the normal pattern of life of Community and residents.

The actual acquisition of data involved some form of sampling. This was confined to one primary source, one secondary source and other individual contacts - the latter assisting triangulation. If such sampling appears limited, it is well to recall Mead's comment on sampling in anthropological field research which she claims is not,

"a version where "n" equals too few cases. It is simply a different kind of sampling."¹⁹

It appeared possible that this research would be seen in some quarters as subversive, because it might provide an unpalatable account of features of the life of the church which would conflict with the beliefs, interests or public assertions of some individuals or groups. Here one encounters the reality of the ethics of social research which, as Wallis²⁰ makes plain, involves a complex weighing of values in relation to particular situations. The researcher's interaction with subjects forms a part of, and takes place in, the context of the overall situation between those subjects and the wider society. Thus the researcher - myself - might be seen as a potential legitimator

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 79.

¹⁸ Burgess R., In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research, op. cit. p. 51.

¹⁹ Mead M., "National character", in Kroeber A. (ed.), Anthropology Today, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, pp. 642-67, cited *ibid.* p. 76.

²⁰ Wallis R., "The moral career of a research project", in Bell C. and Newby H. (eds.), Doing Sociological Research, op. cit. pp. 149-67.

and defender of their public image, or as a threat to it. The outcome is somewhat predictable!

"A study that purports to deal with social structures .. inevitably will reveal that the organisation or community is not all it claims to be, not all it would like to be able to feel itself to be. A good study therefore will make somebody angry."²¹

The structures of the church are not exempt from such anger.²²

I was concerned that the location for the empirical work should be some area or areas where it might be possible to see the interaction between those who chose to work on the margins and the people with whom they worked. My own background as a religious sister meant I was conversant with some of the initiatives being undertaken by religious women in this sphere, and consideration of these appeared a likely possibility and a relevant focus both within the Roman Catholic tradition and the wider church. Given the constitution of such communities, it seemed that the possibilities of contributing to the understanding of the ministry of women²³, and the particular contribution of women within the field of spirituality, was also a feature.

The primary placement for participant observation involved a religious community living and working in Wolverhampton on a peripheral housing estate, who are endeavouring to assist community development. The Hope Community have four flats on the estate within near proximity and during my time with them the Community comprised three religious sisters and three lay women.²⁴ Here I spent ten months in periods of one, two, or three months at a time living as a member of the Community and engaged in their regular programme of activities. I was accepted by the Community as another member of the team and by the residents as another religious

21 Becker H., "Problems in the Publication of Field Studies", in Vidich A., Vensman J. and Stein M. (eds.), Reflections on Community Studies, New York, Wiley, 1964, cited *ibid.* p. 166.

22 It would be important to indicate how generally open and communicative were members of the institutional churches. Difficulties emerged when dealing with hierarchical structures, where I was in some instances unable to meet the personnel concerned and thus had to be content with either a telephone conversation or letter. Neither of these modes of communication were satisfactory.

23 Here, my experience was that most of the women with whom I was involved, both Community personnel and local residents, welcomed the opportunity of trying to make some sense of the contradictions they faced in life in the presence of a sympathetic listener. A similar experience is described in Finch J., "It's great to have someone to talk to: the ethics and politics of interviewing women", in Bell C. and Newby H. (eds.), Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice, London, Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1984, pp. 70-87.

24 There has been a change of personnel since my last visit to the Community. Two of the lay women and one of the sisters have left for work in other parts of the country and new members have been incorporated.

sister who arrived for periodic involvement with the Community.²⁵ During this time I also conducted a series of informal interviews with forty individuals and recorded details of numerous group meetings involving members of the Community and residents of the estate. Engagement with the Community and residents was thus widespread, but the primary focus was the spirituality emerging and interactive within these groups. In accordance with an agreement entered into with the Community and local residents, in what follows, no personnel are identified by name or substitute names. Instead, Community members are designated as Fieldworkers A-F and residents and clergy receive alphabetical referentials.

In order to assist understanding of the sociological context, I had recourse to local newspaper offices where I was given access to past news stories concerning the Heath Town estate. I also visited local Housing and Social Security offices, the local Police Station, and the Community Business Trust. I was enabled to attend Estate Management meetings and other area groups in embryonic stages of formation looking to a more effective engagement of local people in their own affairs. Meetings with local ecumenical groups, local clergy and hierarchy enabled me to ascertain the relationship between the Community and the institutional churches within the area.

I was also involved with a smaller community in Birmingham, with whom I spent a short time working with girls on the streets. An ongoing connection was maintained with individuals in Scotland and London working in the fields of drug abuse and people affected by H.I.V. and A.I.D.S. Meanwhile I continued my part-time involvement in retreat work and spiritual direction which, within a different sphere, brought me into contact with those working amongst marginalised people. These provided further sources for reflection and evaluation of the data emerging from the primary source.

From the accumulated primary data the seeds of an analytical framework began to emerge. Such grounded theory²⁶ is both derived from the primary data and illustrated by characteristic examples from the data. This process is followed throughout the thesis and thus there is an ongoing interaction with the voices of the participants, which both adds to the significance of the emergent theory and contributes to its

²⁵ My initial contact was the leader of the Community. My purpose was initially explained to the Community members and residents, but this was quickly forgotten as I became for the majority just another member of the religious sisters within the Community.

²⁶ Here I am indebted to the work of Glaser B. and Strauss A., The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, New York, Aldine, 1967.

validity.²⁷ Reflection on the information acquired revealed a predominant emphasis on the importance of conversation and dialogue between Community members and residents and the prerequisite of a listening disposition on the part of Community members. The primordial feature of the life and work of the Community was the willingness and ability to exercise this listening faculty. This thesis proposes, that the easy and natural engagement of the Community with the affairs of daily life is a vital ingredient in any potential shared spirituality. Thus conversation as the natural mode of interaction between Community and residents appeared most useful as a starting point for a model to analyse the primary data. Here Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics and his emphasis on conversation proved most helpful - without implying a negation of the criticism of Habermas²⁸ concerning the subjective orientation and transcendental emphasis within Gadamer's work.

As Gadamer describes genuine conversation it is open-ended. It is characterised by the fact that all participants are led beyond their initial positions towards a richer more comprehensive view. Gadamer refuses to foreclose on such interaction, emphasising that it is always possible for dialogic encounters to develop.²⁹ Understanding, for Gadamer, is primarily coming to an understanding with others. This requires profound and indeed uninterrupted listening which is the rigour of hermeneutical experience. Indeed there is a particular dialectic implied in hearing.

"It is not just that he who hears is also addressed, but also that he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not"³⁰

One cannot "hear away" in a similar manner to the way one "looks away" if refusing to observe any particular phenomenon. Rather there is a certain primacy in hearing, which, as Gadamer indicates, is,

27 "Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research." *ibid.* p. 6.

28 "One of the criticisms leveled against Truth and Method by Habermas ... concentrated on Gadamer's alleged narrow transcendental interest in hermeneutics and the social sciences. Habermas expressed this criticism in his study On the Logic of the Social Sciences (1967) Gadamer replied at length in an essay "Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology" (1967). Habermas' "reply" to Gadamer cannot be read simply as a polemical statement by a neo Marxian thinker against the views of an allegedly idealist metaphysical philosopher. It is a statement which reveals, above all, the hermeneutic dimensions of Habermas' own thought and the extent to which hermeneutics plays an essential part in his conception of the social sciences." Mueller-Vollmer K. (ed.), The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 292 and 319.

29 As Warnke indicates, for Gadamer it is important that there is an openness that issues from the hermeneutic experience of negation. Warnke G., Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 173ff.

30 Gadamer H., Truth and Method, trans Weinsheimer J. and Marshall D., London, Sheed & Ward, 1989, p. 462.

"the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon ... there is nothing that is not available to hearing through the medium of language .. hearing is an avenue to the whole"³¹

It is to such a model of listening that the church might look in order to become aware of the urban margins, in a way that does not deny them or is threatened by them but that can enter deeply into conversation with them, and thus have the potential to embrace the richness of areas of experience outside its present domains. Here it will be important to bear in mind Gadamer's emphasis that,

"Experience is always actually present only in the individual observation. It is not known in a previous universality."³²

Accordingly, the focus within the empirical work is upon a case study where religious women are in many and varied ways endeavouring to bring an open disposition to hear what life experience means on the urban margins. It is significant that these experiences have a consequent reciprocal effect on all involved in relating and hearing. The receptivity to such potential effects, and the willingness to allow modification in understanding, permits no definite curtailment to knowledge, but rather sees the very open disposition as the recurring goal, open to limitless non-exclusive experiential possibility.

"A person who is called experienced has become so not only through experiences but is also open to new experiences. ... the experienced person proves to be .. someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself."³³

The reality of such an open disposition involves personal vulnerability and the voluntary admissibility of potentially negative knowledge. This is necessitated if the other in a dialogue is to have the real status of other.

"In human relations the important thing is to experience the Thou truly as a Thou - i.e. not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another. When two

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid. p. 351.

33 Ibid. p. 355.

people understand each other, this does not mean that one person "understands" the other."³⁴

The classic illustration of a dialogue between two individuals might be analogously related to the reality of the institutional church and the marginalised. The question here posed is - does the church really wish to envisage the kind of genuine human bond portrayed above? A positive answer to this question is a necessary prerequisite for real conversation to occur. What is being proposed is that the church enter into a reciprocal dynamic with the marginalised, not engage in a benevolent monologue. Neither interlocutor in any mutual exchange has possession of the language of the exchange by ordained right. Rather, in the reality of the conversation that occurs a deeper bond is forged and a transformation of both participants.

"In a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were."³⁵

In order to accomplish such a transformation, a degree of renunciation is required in order to effect a form of transposition into "the other", and thus acquire comprehension of a different experience and understanding.

"It belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject."³⁶

Hermeneutical conversation as Gadamer explicates involves finding a common language, the search for which coincides with the very act of understanding and reaching agreement. However a problem arises in the very familiarity of a particular language structure which for those who live within it appears peculiarly appropriate, indeed linguistically unsurpassable. It seems impossible that another language could have an equally positive effect in describing experiences. In the same manner, the ecclesiastical subculture with its esoteric in-language can appear equally closed and exclusive in its relationship with the urban margins. Thus to search for a common language may involve a real agony on the part of the institution to widen a fore-shortened view and willingly embrace what is seen as alien and possibly inferior.

34 Ibid. p. 361.

35 Ibid. p. 379.

36 Ibid. p. 385.

Gadamer's solution to the linguistic dilemma is to highlight the hermeneutical experience as the corrective by means of which the thinking reason escapes the prison of language, and is itself verbally constituted.

It is not that experience begins by being wordless and subsequently becomes an object of reflection, is named, and then subsumed under the universality of language. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. Though such words may be limited in vocabulary, they may still convey something of the essence of the experience. More than that, the most unsophisticated speech may potentially still convey something of the mysterious reality of both what is said and unsaid.

"A person who has something to say seeks and finds the words to make himself intelligible to the other person. ... to say what one means to make oneself understood means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way. Someone who speaks in this way may well use only the most ordinary and common words and still be able to express what is unsaid and is to be said. .. Even in the most everyday speech there appears an element of speculative reflection namely the intangibility of that which is still the purest reproduction of meaning."³⁷

For the church as institution, as for all individuals, the possibility exists to widen the horizons of understanding by being open to exterior insight, and therefore to the expansion of its own vision of the world. This might then result in a wider availability to include both its traditional membership and the marginalised.

"As verbally constituted, every world is of itself always open to every possible insight and hence to every expansion of its own world picture and is always available to others."³⁸

The only true reality of language lies in dialogue, that is, in the reality of understanding being achieved. If this is indeed so and the language of the church is alien to people on the margins such that there is no real dialogue, then there is no real understanding. Genuine understanding is rooted in truth rather than in a concern to adhere to presupposed criteria of belief.

"In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe."³⁹

37 Ibid. p. 469.

38 Ibid. p. 447.

39 Ibid. p. 490.

In analysing the interaction of the Community and the residents, it became evident that a discovery had been made of the transcendent human dignity of individuals and the reality of grace in the daily life of the people. Here the work of Rahner proved particularly appropriate - in interaction with the primary source material - with his emphasis on the dynamic drive towards divine mystery inherent within humanity. Thus our experience of God is given with and through human experiences in the world. This emphasis, when applied to the concrete circumstances of the life of the people of the Heath Town estate, is able to authenticate the experience of grace at work in the lives of individuals and the corporate celebration of that in the paraliturgical gatherings. When reflectively considered, this experience achieves a dynamic evangelistic thrust in the lives of Hope Community members, such that there is an acknowledged sense of being evangelised by the residents of the estate. Here also, the experience of God at work amongst the people presents a challenge for reflective evaluation at all levels within the churches. Moreover, it is at this juncture, that this irregular group of women who have chosen to enter the marginal status of the residents of the estate become also marginalised within the institutional church. The experienced reality provokes a question, if not a challenge, to the church, to seek a more effective communication between the church and its own marginal members - for in the experience of the latter lies a potential source of blessing. It is from the conviction that the mystery of God is already at work upon the urban margins, that commitment is made to a mode of profound critical listening within the ordinary conversation and dialogue of daily life. This is seen as imperative not merely for the members of the Hope Community working on the Heath Town estate but also for the institutional church to both confirm and incorporate.

The conversation advocated is not only between individuals and between the institutional church and the urban margins but also involves reflective engagement with the Christian tradition. Here the work of Tracy⁴⁰ proves particularly important. Tracy argues⁴¹ that the heart of any hermeneutical position is the recognition that all interpretation is a mediation of past and present, the tradition and the contemporary world in which that tradition ongoingly develops. Here his use of the "classic" is invaluable. It is important hermeneutically as an example of both radical stability become permanence and radical instability become excess of meaning through everchanging receptions. For Tracy there is the conviction that if the religious

40 Of particular importance have been Tracy D., The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism, London, SCM, 1981. Tracy D., Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope, London, SCM, 1988.

41 Tracy D., The Analogical Imagination, op. cit. p. 99ff.

classics are classics at all, they can be trusted to evoke a wide range of responses including the shock of recognition of God, which in religious terms is named faith. He states that explicitly religious classic expressions will involve a claim to truth as the event of a disclosure-concealment of the whole of reality by the power of the whole - as in some sense, a radical and finally gracious mystery. Though the classic referred to by Tracy is predominantly a text, analogously I argue it may be used in reference to the experience of those on the margins of society. Here, just as in a text, there are demands necessitating constant interpretation. The experience here manifested is such as is apprehended by those who have chosen to live and work there as both disclosive of the reality of the mystery of God at work there, and involving a transformative truth if approached in openness and reverence.

Within the hermeneutical tradition priority is given to understanding in the process of interpretation, yet there is an essential dialectic of understanding-explanation-understanding. However, a prior dimension is that of listening in order to hear in order to understand. The actual form of this listening is involvement in conversation and dialogue and the facilitating tool for this is a deeper engagement with the contemplative dimension. Here, it is suggested, there is a call to an ever deeper and ever more finely-tuned listening, from the depths of the human heart. At this level may be experienced the powerlessness and helplessness which is a daily reality for those who live on the margins. Here, in that position of essential vulnerability within an individual's own contemplative depths, the clarity of resonance with others - particularly the marginalised - is peculiarly powerful. It is from the wellspring of the contemplative dimension that true compassion is born, and this provides the existential dynamism for action and orientates the disposition towards a spiritual hermeneutic of the urban margins.

Thus the empirical work, engaging with a community who are a living embodiment of that tradition of Christian involvement with the marginalised, leads through a process of analysis emphasising the importance of conversation and dialogue into a realisation of the vital prerequisite of a critical listening faculty. The facilitative tool for such an attuned listening is seen to be the willing openness to the contemplative dimension. At all stages it is emphasised that this process has both an individual and institutional applicability. It does appear that a shared spirituality on the urban margins is possible, and that the Hope Community have made major strides in this direction.

The format of what follows is in three parts. The first gives consideration to the sociological context - outlining the factors which gave rise to the building of the estate, its chequered career and the contemporary living conditions. There follows a brief historical perspective, indicating the involvement of the churches with the urban margins. Against this background the coming of the Hope Community to the Heath Town estate and their life and work is outlined. Part one concludes with an indication of the way in which the Hope Community is viewed by the churches at local and hierarchical levels, and the particular nature of that regard in the light of the all female composition of the Community. The second part enters into an analysis of the primary data utilising the work of Gadamer, Rahner and Tracy. Here it becomes apparent that the core listening dimension which the Community brings to its involvement with the residents and which is of critical importance with regard to a shared spirituality, may be facilitated by deeper engagement with the contemplative dimension.

Part three attempts to explore the contemplative dimension and includes both concluding evaluation and an outward orientation indicating where further research might be appropriate. Firstly, by re-engagement with the spiritual tradition, it becomes evident that much within the tradition points to the peculiar fecundity of contemplation in its outward working in discerned action. Secondly, engagement with contemporary spirituality, through the work of Merton, reveals the importance of a renewed spirituality and a renewed asceticism not only for those who work on the urban margins but also at all levels within the churches. Here the emphasis within the tradition upon the need for ongoing purification of desire in order to authenticate discerned action is interlinked in contemporary mores with the coinherence of humility and integrity. Thus these chapters indicate the need for further investigation to be made of the spiritual tradition and its contemporary applicability, particularly as related to the peculiar dynamic of this listening mode. Such an exploration could deepen the preconditions for a renewed spirituality and a renewed asceticism - leading inevitably towards a spiritual hermeneutic of the urban margins.

Part I

Chapter 1 The Sociological Context

"Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone"¹

"Heath Town a tinder box" "a breeding ground for criminals"²

"The best thing I think we can do to rid Heath Town of all its many problems is to each take a sledge hammer and knock it down. Heath Town really epitomises our brutal society."³

"What sort of society are we aiming to build together? .. A substantial minority swollen by mass unemployment, feel they have no stake at all. Many more are troubled that their life chances appear to be determined by impersonal economic forces and distant bureaucracies over which they have little or no control."⁴

"Underclass" is a destructive and misleading label that lumps together different people who have different problems. It is the latest of a series of popular labels that focuses on individual characteristics and thereby stigmatises the poor for their poverty."⁵

1 Donne J., 1611, "An anatomy of the world", cited in Best S & Kellner D. (eds.), Postmodern Theory, London, Macmillan, 1991, p. viii.

2 Wolverhampton Express and Star, November 6th, 1984, and 24th May, 1989.

3 Councillor Purchase, reported in Wolverhampton Express and Star, 13 July, 1979. In 1992 he was elected as MP for the area.

4 Carey G., Archbishop of Canterbury, The Times, 6th October, 1992.

5 McGahey R., "Poverty's Voguish Stigma", New York Times, March 12, 1982, cited in Jencks C., Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 6.

Imagine grey: a grey day reflected in the mirror image of the buildings; grey-soaked and sodden concrete, marked by millions of tiny rivulets of water; rain beating upon reinforced concrete and ill-fitting window panes, condensing into pools along walkways slippery with dog dirt. Grey faces as a few individuals scurry through the rain or walk more slowly with a disconsolate air, rain-soaked hair plastered to the head. A few mothers pushing baby buggies or clambering up stairs with push chair and shopping and infant clutched in one flailing embrace. Two older children moodily kicking a tin around a patch of churned mud and turf, while a bedraggled dog looks on belligerently. This is Heath Town Estate one October afternoon.

Walking around the estate the eye is drawn to the number of blank boarded windows of the "voids" - flats which have been left vacant and whose windows are covered by boarding to protect them from vandals. Row upon row of interconnected flats empty and occupied, common entrances to both. At the corners of corridors concealed stairs or lifts - which are frequently out of order - are the connecting lines for the inhabitants. The graffiti on the walls of stairways vary in its poignant portrayal of life on the estate from obscenity to political and racist issues. Passing a bin-chute room - all rubbish is sent through a series of chutes to a ground floor collecting room, unwanted pets pass that way too sometimes - a mattress and a pair of shoes indicate this as the sleeping place of one illegal resident. Suddenly, the loud rumbling of a train passing by is heard. The estate is only a few hundred yards from the main railway track in and out of Wolverhampton station. It is still raining! Such was the recollection of one visit to the estate.

Clearly evident are the physical constraints and inadequacies of the material fabric of the estate. The responses elicited during the empirical work give further illustrations. In 1992 a number of residents were asked the question - How would you describe what Heath Town looks like? The following replies were received:

"a box"⁶

"run down grey area full of derelict buildings"⁷

"a prison on stilts"⁸

"reminds me .. of just boxes with roofs on ain't they"⁹

6 Resident Y. meeting, February, 1992.

7 Resident K.

8 Resident M.

9 Resident S.

"and what about the silver fish?"¹⁰

"it's like your living in a prison looking at four walls"¹¹

None of the replies elicited had a positive image of the estate with regard to the material fabric. All seemed to suffer from some problems both with individual flats, and in terms of sharing a common environment. The most prevailing images evoked were those of a box and a prison, the sense of being enclosed was paramount, and amongst some contributed to a real sense of claustrophobia. In particular the lack of access to play areas for children and indeed the absence of any childcare provision was acutely felt. The cliché - a concrete jungle - was one not infrequently used.

Who lives on the estate?

In the same gathering of local residents it was interesting to see the differing perceptions concerning those who lived on the estate. The opinions of the Hope Community leader reflect the understanding acquired while the Community were involved in a survey of the estate, thus gaining a more accurate overall view. However, there is a section of the community which is transient and which therefore distorts any definitive picture.

"how would you describe the majority of the people in terms of country or nationality?"¹²

"90% come from Jamaica!"¹³

"I'd say more than that."¹⁴

"I'd say 90% aren't English. I never thought of it before .. all different nationalities .. majority West Indian I'd guess."¹⁵

"60% white 40% black I'd say - but if you were bigoted you'd say 90% black - but if you walk around and look at the people it's not so."¹⁶

"Most of the children are West Indian or mixed race - but the majority will be British all the same born over here."¹⁷

This brief exchange reveals also the innate prejudice of R. and E. - particularly the former. Himself from Northern Ireland and in the past a supporter of the National

10 Resident E.

11 Resident Y.

12 Fieldworker A. meeting, February, 1992.

13 Resident R.

14 Resident E.

15 Resident M.

16 Resident T.

17 Fieldworker A.

Front, his automatic reaction was that all black people came from another country. It is interesting to note that T. the only black person present on that occasion had a very different impression about the numbers of black people who actually lived on the estate. In a later discussion with F. a black community worker, I raised the point about numbers and he indicated an important factor for consideration.

"You have to remember that when black people are seen they stand out more. Yes you may find quite a gathering around the Betting shop, but they don't all live on the estate. But if you were passing in a car along by the Bookies or the shops there, you might well think the area was full of black people, but if you walk around the estate any day, you won't get the same impression."¹⁸

I took his advice, and for a number of days made a point of counting the number of black people I noticed on my walks through the estate. At no time did this equate with 90% of the people I encountered on any given day.

Another important consideration was the age range of those who lived on the estate. Here again different perceptions emerged of those who lived on the estate.

"The people are mostly middle aged."¹⁹

"In the flats there are a lot of young single people and some couples."²⁰

"I'd say there is a majority of single women with young children except in the tall blocks where the elderly live"²¹

"There are a lot of women on their own with kids."²²

At this point I made an intervention desirous of knowing what they meant by middle age, and what kind of age range we were talking about.

"well ... 16 - 45 is young; over 45 is middle age; and 60+ is elderly."

From my own observations, and using K's guide-lines the majority of tenants on the estate fitted into the first and last categories. There are few middle age residents, according to K's categories and this was verified by the local housing office.²³ However, there had been a chequered history with regard to tenancies allocated to young people. Indeed on a number of occasions a discriminatory ban had been

¹⁸ Community worker F. interview, March, 1992.

¹⁹ Resident E. meeting, February, 1992.

²⁰ Resident K.

²¹ Fieldworker A.

²² Resident E.

²³ The local housing office was reluctant to give any official figures.

imposed. In 1980 a report²⁴ was ordered into the living conditions and possible improvements on the estate, since many homes were standing empty and it was hard to find tenants willing to live in the area. By October of the following year the local paper recorded that residents were calling for radical changes to stamp out what was perceived as anti-social behaviour, and this appeared to be particularly associated with noise and all night parties. A suggestion was put forward for a selection process for tenants wanting to live on the estate. It was hoped that those chosen would have "a high degree of social responsibility"²⁵ That same month a temporary ban was placed on young single people taking tenancies. However, this left many properties empty. In November a local scandal ensued as local residents were asked to suggest names of friends willing to move into the flats while 7,000 families remained on the Borough waiting list.²⁶ The following year, the residents informed the council,

"We only want people who can live in harmony. Since a ban on single young people getting tenancies on the estate was imposed five months ago by the town council, the problems of noise nuisance have dropped."²⁷

The residents actually stated later that they wanted an age limit on any new tenants taking high rise flats on the estate. They wanted no one below 45-50 offered these tenancies. Yet it does not appear that this policy was followed by the Council. Indeed reports of 1982 indicate ongoing confrontation between the Resident's Association and the Council, the former complaining that they were not consulted in how the estate was run. In 1983 the Council decided to lift its ban on single people under 25 being tenants, which had been enforced since Summer 1981, but in its place to enforce another restriction prohibiting unmarried people under the age of 21. During that year this policy was called into question by the race relations committee as fears of a Heath Town ghetto began to develop. Yet the local council maintained that substantial improvement had resulted from the situation of controlled tenancies.

"Councillor G. told the council race relations committee that since the previous ban was imposed there had been a great improvement on the Heath Town high rise estate. More people were now wanting to move there because of the activities of the residents association, community policing and a more responsible social attitude being taken up by tenants. The assistant Director of Housing said that the housing services committee had changed the ban because it was merely displacing estate management problems from Heath Town elsewhere. Many of the applicants for flats were of Afro-Caribbean descent, so it

²⁴ Wolverhampton Express and Star, 13 February, 1980.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 9 October, 1981.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 4 November, 1981.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 22 February, 1982.

was likely that some blocks could have a disproportionate number of young coloured people."²⁸

In the same month it was claimed that the estate which had previously been regarded as one of the town's worst areas was enjoying a popularity boom.

"Heath Town has become a very desirable place to live since we took the estate's problems in hand" said Councillor G. who is also a member of the residents association. But despite the clamour for flats at Heath Town many remain empty because of the council's letting policy."²⁹

The rehabilitation of the area was short-lived, and ultimately the council was forced to drop its selective tenancy policy as more pressure on limited housing stock, necessitated the utilisation of all available property. In 1993 there is a significant population of young single-parent families and the particular difficulties for young women on the estate proves a real source of concern both to the social services and the Hope Community.

The estate has become a dumping ground for individuals and families who have been labelled "problem". Such families are placed in this category by local officials.

"They seem to have a greater adverse effect on the condition of their houses than the condition of their houses has on them. They can be expected to treat their houses inefficiently if not badly, and will therefore have allotted the worst houses available."³⁰

Criteria for selection by local authorities may also reflect further forms of discrimination as Rex and Moore found in their study of Sparkbrook.³¹

"A basic distinction is drawn between local people and immigrants and between those in normal family situations and isolates and deviants."³²

Another problem category involves individuals who have been released from long-term psychiatric care. Here the laudable aim of endeavouring to absorb individuals into the local community with the maintenance of appropriate support structures has not been realised. Increasingly the difficulties such individuals encounter in endeavouring to lead an independent existence are compounded by the lack of after-care provision. A Joint Report of MIND and the National Federation of Housing Associations in 1986 drew attention to this problem.

28 Ibid. 21 April, 1983.

29 Ibid. 25 April, 1983.

30 Condemned, A Shelter Report on Housing and Poverty London, Shelter, 1971.

31 Rex J. & Moore R., Race, Community and Conflict, London, OUP, 1967.

32 Ibid. p. 275.

"Community care has not led to the construction of coherent funding systems to enable the development of a proper service. Indeed the context is one of substantial public cuts."³³

On the Heath Town Estate it was only in 1991 that a day centre was opened specifically to support ex-psychiatric patients living within the community. An inability to cope, and an increasing sense of isolation and alienation amongst those with psychiatric problems has led at times to violence or other forms of anti-social behaviour. The local community comprising others who in different ways are particularly vulnerable, has received no assistance in dealing with these new problems. Consequently a degree of hostility has been created with regard to ex-psychiatric patients amongst some members of the community, although it is notable how supportive others, with few resources themselves, can also be. The following extracts from a conversation discussing this issue illustrate some of the difficulties. Near to the estate is a large psychiatric hospital and government policy in recent years has been to disperse ex psychiatric patients within the community. Prior to the opening of the day centre there was little in the way of after-care for these very vulnerable members of the estate. One of the residents present on this occasion reminded all of a plan which had been proposed at one point to knock down part of the estate and build a community house for people from the psychiatric hospital. This provoked an interesting series of comments.

"I wouldn't like to live with them people from New Cross."³⁴

"Do you think we should help New Cross patients out?"³⁵

"New Start already helps. They have day visitors there from New Cross; you can have someone who moves in just as dangerous if not more so than someone coming out of New Cross."³⁶

"If they came out to a caring community who were prepared to help them and be lenient because of their strange behaviour that would be brilliant."³⁷

"Heath Town is not a good place to put them."³⁸

"This estate has a high suicide rate because once you decide to top³⁹ yourself it's easily done."⁴⁰

³³ International Year of Shelter, London, Church of England Board of Social Responsibility Report, 1987.

³⁴ Resident Y. meeting, March, 1992.

³⁵ Fieldworker A.

³⁶ Resident K.

³⁷ Resident T.

³⁸ Resident K.

³⁹ During my last visit a man was found hanged in a flat nearby. In previous visits two suicides occurred by women jumping off the top of a block of flats.

⁴⁰ Resident T.

Of the suicides which occurred during my times visiting the estate, and those that were recounted to me by members of the Community, or residents, it became clear that most involved individuals with some form of psychiatric disorder.

The Modernist Dream

In 1992 there seemed to be little good to say about the material circumstances of the estate. Yet at the time of its planning and commencement, it had held such promise in terms of a housing complex of the future, creating a new form of community, benefiting from the technological revolution. The clearance proposals preceding the building of the estate were the largest scheme of its type to be undertaken by the Council in the post-war years. Many of the houses cleared to make way for the scheme were without internal water supplies or adequate facilities for the preparation of food. A good number had walls which were buckled and fractured, roofs which were sagging or leaking and brickwork which had perished. Wolverhampton was endeavouring to project a new image, to build a large complete community rather than sporadic developments in portions of the town as the land became available. It was hoped that this new scheme could set a pattern which other local boroughs would follow.⁴¹

"£6,000,000 scheme to transform the debris of Heath Town into a safety town of the twenty-first century. A safe pedestrian way, elevated clear of roads, will link the majority of the 1,245 dwellings to the shopping centre, infants school and central play areas..... "Grand Magnificent, splendid " was how Alderman H. chairman of the housing committee, described the dream that will come true in about 4 years time. And the Borough architect Mr C. said "The new Heath Town scheme is by far the biggest project ever to be undertaken by the corporation. Indeed it exceeds in size and cost anything else that has been attempted by a local authority in the Black Country..... Schemes like this are going a long way to solving our housing problem. We are going the right way to finding a realistic answer."⁴²

What went wrong? How did the modernist dream of a prestigious new housing scheme disintegrate into the nightmare of contemporary life on the estate? The high modernist dream of rational planning procedures and the rationalization of spatial patterns appeared to have come adrift in the reality of life as experienced in Heath Town. Indeed, in many ways, it would appear that the circumstances on that estate present in microcosm the failure of the vision of modernism.

41 Wolverhampton Express and Star, accounts between 1958 and 1966.

42 Wolverhampton Express and Star, 24 June, 1966.

The benefits of high-rise housing were still being extolled in the sixties. Indeed the Medical Officer of Health for the borough in his 1960 Report commented on the desirability of high-rise flats as follows,

"The most obvious sign of rehousing in Wolverhampton is the dramatic appearance in the central areas of high flats that make a valuable though limited contribution to the housing needs of the town. These units of accommodation cut down travelling time when close to the town centre and work, and they provide quietness, privacy, a good view without a garden to maintain, clean air and unobstructed light. Their arrangement is equivalent to streets running vertically; their restricted size and absence of exclusive yard space present problems of storage, clothes drying and room for hobbies; reliance on lifts, inaccessibility of shopping facilities and inconvenience in delivering goods can be disadvantages; the absence of a fire complicates the disposal of refuse and adds difficulties to the home nursing and domiciliary midwifery services; room for a pram and opportunities for small children to explore and play and to keep pets may be absent, and due to the lack of a garden the necessity for older children to play at a distance from their mothers imposes anxieties. Although increasing demand for garages will diminish space saved by high flats, they are a welcome contribution to the housing of families with grown-up children, childless couples, single men and women wanting their own dwellings and families with a breadwinner liable to be moved from place to place. They are efficient units for those whose interests are predominantly in work or social activities based on the town centre. For those whose interests centre on the home, the family and its needs, houses are more satisfactory."⁴³

This clear indication not just of the advantages but also the drawbacks of high-rise flats gave useful information for those who were planning tenancies. Yet it does not appear to have been utilised in this manner. The reality of single-parent families and elderly pensioners trapped in these flats in the 1990s is a particularly poignant ratification of the difficulties outlined above. Interestingly, too, the stress that houses are far more appropriate dwellings for those more home-based individuals, and particularly those with children is echoed in the longing expressed by single-parent families for a house if possible with a garden.

"It would be better if we had a garden; babies need to play out."⁴⁴

Even before the development in Wolverhampton commenced, critical studies of such kind of building had already been produced in the USA, and indeed some of them read like social comments upon today's inner cities.

⁴³ Barnsby G., *A History of Housing in Wolverhampton 1750 - 1975*, Wolverhampton, Integrated Publishing, 1975, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁴ Resident E.

"Low income projects that become worse centres of delinquency, vandalism and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace."⁴⁵

The compiler of this report endeavoured to draw attention to the human reality of inner city life. The human relationships involved should have some determining voice with regard to planning. The modernist tendency to look to market processes produced architecture whose features were consistently ugly and suffocatingly dull in the regularity and uniformity of the construction. By contrast the tremendous diversity of human beings and the multitude possibilities for their interaction deserved something more vibrant in terms of dwelling places. But these warnings were not heeded, and plans went ahead to construct this new estate.

Those who had lived in the little streets which were bulldozed in the process of demolition, and who had established street communities and identities were now like those with no named background, their traditional allegiance having been erased, and scattered as they were through other building schemes, or waiting in temporary accommodation to be rehoused on the new enterprise estate.⁴⁶ With the loss of these communities the area became a series of "used to be" references - it used to be these particular streets - and was not yet the new Heath Town estate. With the many hiccoughs surrounding the commencement of the estate, the initial contractors pulling out through lack of finance as costs, even in estimate soared, the derelict remains formed a place with no name except that of delayed and diminishing prospects, as three years passed between the demolition of the houses and the commencement of building.⁴⁷ It was within this time that opinion in the country was beginning to turn against what seemed at times needless destruction of familiar areas, which were then left barren and unbuilt on for years after the clearances. Above all what was most resented was the lack of consultation of the people concerned with regard to their preferences. Rather like an amorphous mass they were uprooted, their sometimes long-established communities were destroyed and they were scattered amidst new housing projects.

45 Jacobs. J., The Death and Life of Great American Cities, New York, Random, 1961. cited in Harvey D., The Condition of Postmodernity, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989, p. 71.

46 It was reported in the Wolverhampton Express and Star, 19 January, 1962, that 100 houses and 29 shops were to be demolished to make way for the new scheme. One intrepid tenant is reported as hanging out for the best possible price with regard to the compulsory purchase that was made of these houses until eventually she was forced to leave.

47 In December 1965 the Midland Housing Consortium withdrew from the contract, and Wates builders took over.

In hindsight, the deficiencies and lack of attention to precedents in other countries are highlighted. Yet the vision which inspired the post-war provision of low-rental housing coupled with slum clearance must be acknowledged. This was seen as a major public responsibility, so much so that in the 1970s around 18 million people were being housed by local councils. There appeared to be what Middleton⁴⁸ termed a "consensus euphoria" that somehow the time had dawned when,

"the rational planning of available resources would enable us, once and for all, to get our cities right; to clear the slums which the Luftwaffe had missed and ensure decent living standards for all sectors of the community. We would hack out the tangled undergrowth, the diseased and dead wood, let in sun and air, plant new towers and clusters to articulate the formless mass of the metropolitan jungles."⁴⁹

The idealism which abounded was partially a consequence of the release from the decade of scarcity and impoverishment which was involved in the post-war recovery programme. With the abolition of rationing and the lifting of constraints on expenditure, cities and towns looked to a massive replanning exercise, committed to transforming the quality of life in the inner cities. The failure lay both in the inspiration which was fundamental to this vision, and most particularly in the political, economic and social factors involved in the implementation of the ideal. With regard to the former: the attempt to provide a material Utopia, with little or no reference to the people who would inhabit such an environment; the lack of appreciation of the deep communitarian ties which already existed; and the use of space in a way which was predominantly utilitarian with no thought for the deeper needs of individuals and families; all this contributed to the evacuation of the spiritual dimension from this new possibility, which became in effect a distilled material essence cemented in concrete. The political, social and economic factors were closely inter-related with the national life, where utopian vision was fast giving way to pragmatic rationalisation.

Dilapidation and Disrepair

The scale upon which the enterprise began was both unprecedented and over-ambitious. Inevitably, costs escalated over time so initial estimates were hopelessly inadequate. This led to faltering in council policy and as, in the case of Heath Town, the withdrawal of one contractor and the passage of time before another was willing and able to commence building. More seriously increasing expense led to the

⁴⁸ Middleton M., Cities in Transition: The Regeneration of Britain's Inner Cities. London, Michael Joseph, 1991, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

use of inadequate materials in building. The result of this - so vividly illustrated in the estate under consideration - was that the new flats which proved initially such a delight to their inhabitants quickly deteriorated into novel "vertical slums" as maintenance repairs were only spasmodically addressed. In 1983 there was a storm of protest in the local press, as angry residents claimed that not only was there a backlog of repairs but that those that were undertaken were inefficiently executed.

"Angry residents of a street in Heath Town claim that more than 500 repairs are outstanding at their council homes. It is alleged that repairs carried out by Wolverhampton Borough Council workmen are below standard. "Three weeks ago the window in my mother's house was repaired, at the week-end it fell out. My front door was replaced, but the lock was put in wrong and we were locked out and had to force the door to get in."⁵⁰

The same pattern continued through the intervening years such that in 1992 a similar story emerged when a number of residents were asked - What do you think about the way improvements or repairs are done?

"Run down - hard to get repairs done - most of the flats that are derelict are in need of repairs inside - to get the council to do repairs is like gold dust."⁵¹

"They're not fair. People were blaming me and me dad when we lived over the other side cos he was on the council but the repairs aren't fair. They'll do some and not do others."⁵² Parts of the estate are worse than others."⁵³

"What you first see from the road, is relatively good - but as you move into the estate it gets worse. Here,⁵⁴ well it's the pits!"⁵⁵

It was certainly noticeable that the properties which received most attention tended to be those closest to the main road, and more visible to passing motorists. The unseen inhabitants of the interior of the estate, and particularly those on the inner edge were seemingly forgotten or ignored in terms of priority rating for repairs. Piecemeal solutions have been adopted to alleviate short-term necessity. The local

50 Wolverhampton Express and Star, 6 September, 1983.

51 Resident K. meeting, February, 1992.

52 The policy with regard to repairs is that application must be made to the local housing office - generally through the concierge. From there the matter goes to the Civic Centre. Here, repairs are agreed or vetoed. The decision goes back to the local housing office. If there is agreement, an approach is then made to the repairs office, and a particular repair is put on a list. And eventually something is done about it. The procedure takes a considerable time. Having said this, on the occasion of difficulty within one of the Community flats which was leading to sleepless nights for core members, a direct approach to the Housing Liaison officer ensured a more speedy solution. Such access would not be open to other residents on the estate.

53 Resident M.

54 Here, being the site of the Community flats.

55 Resident T.

architect sees little possibility of there being any major overhaul involving all the dwellings. An attempt in 1992 to provide new windows for the flats completed only a third of its scheduled programme before the firm went bankrupt.

The demise of yet another inspired feature can be seen in the acclaimed new heating system for the estate, which had intended to provide comfortable conditions for all, in the most efficient way possible. Press reports for 1969 loudly applauded this innovation.

"Wolverhampton council has created something of a precedent in local authority building by incorporating a "district heating scheme" whereby a central boiler house - the control room of which was described by a workman as "Wolverhampton's answer to Cape Canaveral" will provide hot water to heat exchangers in most of the blocks with warm air being convected from the exchangers into each home."⁵⁶

It intended that the new flats should be warm and centrally heated with constant hot running water, a luxury for those who had been housed previously in cold, damp and primitive sanitary conditions. The contrast was very marked for the first tenants in the new dwellings.

"I have to pinch myself when I wake up in the morning before I can believe I'm still here" - said Mrs Felicia Parry. She and her husband moved to a flat on the second floor of one of the twenty-one storey blocks from the Scotlands⁵⁷ after an eleven year wait to be rehoused. "In the morning it's so warm and cosy. There's none of that getting up and shivering about making up the fires."⁵⁸

For another new tenant moving into the new flats meant a permanent home after years in a mobile situation.

"Before moving into the two storey maisonette in Hobgate Mr and Mrs F. lived in a caravan for five years. "So you can imagine what it was like to come here." said Mrs F. It is so warm and luxurious. It has quite spoilt us for living anywhere else."⁵⁹

However, only ten years later problems with the heating were already receiving attention in the local press.

"Damp and defective heating is plaguing residents in Long Lea on the Heath Town high rise council estate who say that the damp is causing hundreds of pounds of damage and unhealthy living conditions. And they claim that things are being made worse by their heating system which is only 80% effective."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Wolverhampton Express and Star, 12 February, 1969.

⁵⁷ A notorious slum area of Wolverhampton.

⁵⁸ Wolverhampton Express and Star, 15 March, 1969.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 28 March, 1969.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 8 February, 1979.

By 1992 the contrast with the original tenants views was even more marked. What had appeared to be a revolutionary new consumer oriented system, had become an unpredictable, potentially dangerous and expensive encumbrance.

"The heating's no good for those who suffer with asthma or for children who suffer with asthma."⁶¹

"The heating's dangerous."⁶²

".. and you pay a flat charge whether you use it or not - and when it's really cold, the heating isn't warm enough."⁶³

"We dursn't turn it on because of the baby."⁶⁴

By 1980 the general conditions on the estate had deteriorated so much that the local paper recorded the commissioning of a "top-level" report into living conditions and possible improvements at the "Heath Town jungle" development of high-rise flats and maisonettes.

"Dozens of homes, available for letting, are standing empty because no one wants to move to the area. There was a feeling of revulsion towards property available in the area said a local councillor, and all the signs are that the situation there is getting worse."⁶⁵

The spiral of deteriorating fabric contributed also to the general sense of decay and maltreatment of common facilities. In 1992 some residents raised the question of the stairways and lifts in Heath Town, a particular source of grievance given the nature of how they are used or abused:

"I'm funny when I get in a lift and them get fouled⁶⁶ .. wet and terrible smell in lifts ... that makes me heave ... bad that is."⁶⁷

"The lifts are often broken. You have to get children and buggies up by the stairs."⁶⁸

By the time a local historian came to write a commentary on the towns and villages of the Black Country, the only inclusion of Heath Town is as a residential disaster area.

61 Resident E. meeting, February, 1992.

62 Resident M.

63 Fieldworker A.

64 Resident E.

65 Wolverhampton Express and Star, 13 February, 1980.

66 Children left out to play all day often use the lifts as a urinal.

67 Resident Y. meeting February 1992.

68 Resident E.

"The tower blocks point the way. At their feet are a rabbit's warren of concrete human hutches. Great slab-like buildings with upper floor walkways.... Heath Town is a dangerous ugly place. Ironically when it was first built these new blocks were lauded by architects and planners. Even the venerable Niklaus Pevsner had a good word for them."⁶⁹

It was not long before flaws in the Heath Town dream became apparent as faults in the design began to erode the reputation of success. A shopping centre that was hidden from the main road soon died with no real means of generating income from outside. Stairways that were enclosed and poorly lit left individuals vulnerable to attack; open-air car parks, often out of view, left cars at the mercy of vandals; the long walkway across the estate with no exit points except at either end meant many refused to cross it alone after dark; and an estate-wide-heating system that functioned inefficiently and was prohibitively expensive all began to cause friction amongst residents. Meanwhile the completely illogical layout, though perhaps prematurely postmodernist, continues to cause disruption and sometimes danger to life.

"Mrs M of 87 ... was asked where number 85 was, but she didn't know. "I have lived here for 18 months and I have never found it. I presume it is on another floor somewhere, but I don't know which one." Another resident remembers a search by a doctor for an elderly patient injured in a fall. "It took him three quarters of an hour to find her ... he could have been dead in that time. As soon as he arrived they had to rush her to hospital."⁷⁰

More recently, the very construction of the flats, the absence of smoke detectors, and the difficulty of access to water hydrants for hose reels, meant that firemen were impeded in their efforts to rescue children trapped by a fire and a young six-year old died.

"A young six year old died when fire swept through a fifth-floor flat in a Wolverhampton tower block yesterday... Tenant C. hit out at safety measures in the block, and said they needed alarms and access to hose reels."⁷¹

One further example of the problems not envisaged by the planners, but which came to dominate the lives of the inhabitants of the estate, is that of noise. In 1981 on a list of complaints delivered to the council by residents noise headed the list.⁷² Given the construction of the system-linked flats, in order to reach one flat it often means

69 Raven M., *Black Country Towns and Villages*, Wolverhampton, Broadside, 1991, p. 90.

70 *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 8 November, 1972.

71 *Ibid.* 7 March, 1992.

72 *Ibid.* 17 June, 1981.

passing by a good number of others, on account of the nature of the common entrance layout principle. Also within the flats the soundproofing appears minimal, and given the nature of the buildings, any particularly loud noises, whether in terms of parties or the frequent alarms from the concierge offices resound through the concrete network. Another factor involves those who come onto the estate particularly late at night and into the early hours of the morning for one form of trade or another - prostitution and drug-dealing still flourish. The question of noise proved to be another source of serious complaint in 1992.

"We have one Jamaican chap who walks about and stands outside the kitchen window and stares."⁷³

"It happens a lot, people walking about."⁷⁴

"And then you get the Blues Parties"⁷⁵.⁷⁶

"They're out tooting their horns and skidding up and down at 2 or 4 o'clock in the morning. A policeman told me they haven't got the power to walk in and switch off a Blues Party."⁷⁷

"They should give us some money for putting up with the noise."⁷⁸

"Another thing that bothers me, the walls are paper thin; you can hear everything your neighbours are doing."⁷⁹

"There was that awful noise with the water; it was keeping people awake."⁸⁰

"Then there's the taxis."⁸¹

"What about the trains?⁸² - that's terrible that is."⁸³

"It affects the telly, it do."⁸⁴

73 Resident K. meeting March 1992.

74 Resident Y.

75 Blues parties, generally among the West Indian residents, very often coincide with the free exchange of drugs. Unfortunately they tend to take place in the early hours of the morning. As is evident from remarks made later, noise is a continual problem.

76 Resident E.

77 Resident K.

78 Resident Y.

79 Resident M.

80 Fieldworker A.

81 Resident E.

82 During this period, repairs on the trains were being undertaken in the early hours of the morning from 3am within 500 yards of the estate.

83 Resident M.

84 Resident Y.

"Sometimes we find they'll do the repairs in the night or early in the morning and keep everyone awake."⁸⁵

The issue of noise was one that was raised by one of the Community, when in an interview, I asked what she most disliked about life on the estate. She was one who had suffered the problems with the defect in the water system. However, her comments were related more to the everyday practicalities endured by all on the estate.

"The worst thing about living here I guess is the noise, at times, like 2am. People don't have regular hours; they come awake and alive at times when people who work all day are asleep. This causes people to live on their nerves. I get strained; it's more difficult to be reasonable when tired."⁸⁶

The National Context

The developments on the Heath Town estate reflected in microcosm what was taking place in macrocosm in the wider national context. The optimistic vision of the fifties and sixties gave way to the disillusionment of the seventies. Schemes which began with promise were often not carried through to completion. Yet the demolition and clearance which preceded all had changed the face of many cities in Britain. A significant proportion of the population had been forcibly removed from one situation to another which ultimately proved no improvement. As Middleton states,

"We moved people in great numbers from intolerable conditions into accommodation which we needlessly allowed to become intolerable. What had started as a brave crusade into new territory ground to a halt in the mid seventies, in part because the nation was reeling under the effects of the oil crisis, galloping inflation and escalating industrial decline, but not less because the original vision had faded beyond recall."⁸⁷

The 1960s marked the height of the redevelopment effort when up to 60,000 slums per annum were cleared during the decade. In hindsight it is the professional and political decisions taken at this time - regarding the developing of large areas, the dispersal of inner city communities and the rehousing of them in a style of architecture which today stands as a symbol of all that is most reviled in community design - which are seen as a key to today's problems. "The Crisis in Planning" the report of the Town and Country Planning Association 1977 recorded a "public disillusionment with planning so widespread that one does not even feel obliged to

⁸⁵ Fieldworker A.

⁸⁶ Fieldworker D. interview, November, 1991.

⁸⁷ Middleton M., Cities in Transition, op. cit. p. 34.

document it".⁸⁸ Opposition to the planners' vision of modernisation meant that plans for redevelopment were suspended or reversed and slum clearance was replaced by gradual renewal.

There was a growing awareness of the self-perpetuating poverty which stretched across generations in deprived areas. At the same time racial tension began to be a recognised feature of inner city life. Substantial immigration from the 1950s had resulted in a growth in population in the poorest parts of cities. The genesis of the National Front and the now notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968 by Enoch Powell, Wolverhampton's Member of Parliament, indicated a fearful portent of alien urban environs.

"In your town and mine in Wolverhampton, in Smethwick ... people see with their own eyes what they dread, the transformation during their lifetime ... of towns, cities, and areas that they knew into alien territory."⁸⁹

Indeed the urban programme was given its initial impetus by the desire,

"to deal with the problems of areas where immigration had been at a high level."⁹⁰

The significance of riots in American urban ghetto areas was not lost upon the British government, and legislation in Britain endeavoured to ameliorate the difficulties within British cities. However, under the Heath government in 1972, the research of independent consultants indicated that urban problems were due to lack of jobs, training and good housing and suggested that economic development was the key. Thereafter, this was the central focus of government policy.

By 1974 the inner city - seen as a distinct complex of problems - had come to the attention of the Cabinet⁹¹. It was seen as imperative to gain a clear indication of what needed to be done. However, in the same year OPEC quadrupled oil prices and the economy appeared to have drifted into an ever decreasing spiral. Meanwhile local government was in a period of upheaval and restructuring.⁹² The then Labour government believed that a developed strategy was necessary for the alleviation of

88 Brindley, Rydin, and Stoker, (eds), Remaking Planning: The Politics of Urban Change in the Thatcher Years, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 5.

89 Boyle D., Building Futures: A Layman's Guide to the Inner City Debate, London, W.H.Allen, 1989, p. 26.

90 Ibid.

91 I am grateful for this insight to Middleton M., Cities in Transition, op. cit. p. 34ff.

92 "83 County Boroughs, 259 Borough Councils, 522 Urban District Councils and 488 Rural District Councils were being replaced by 36 Metropolitan Distircts, 290 Districts in England and 37 Districts in Wales: in Scotland the Counties disappeared altogether to be replaced by much larger Regions." Ibid. p. 35.

poverty and deprivation, but for this more information was necessary. The results of areas studies in London, Birmingham and Liverpool and information gathered from Development Agencies set up for Scotland and Wales led to the publication of a White Paper in 1977 which aimed to strengthen inner city economies, repair the city environment and tackle social problems. Resources were initially to be concentrated on the worst areas, and a scheme of "Inner City Partnerships" was envisaged in the belief that the local authorities were the natural agencies to tackle inner city policies. The White Paper also importantly recognised for the first time that ordinary people might be involved.

"Some things will be better done, or done more satisfyingly, if they are undertaken by voluntary groups."⁹³

Efforts were made to restore business and industry's confidence in the inner city. The urban programme was transferred from the Home Office to the Department of the Environment and the budget increased to £100 million. Under the enlarged urban programme in addition to the seven priority partnership areas were fifteen designated areas also to receive some assistance. The Inner Urban Areas Act of 1978 confirmed these measures.

This framework was inherited by the Conservative government in 1979. The new government primary guide-lines were not long in emerging. The first priority was to reduce the degree of government intervention in public life and the degree of public dependency on government. The dynamic of the market economy was seen as guiding all forms of planning, government having merely a regulatory role. Emphasising the "trickle down" theory, the government linked improvement of living standards at all levels of society to an expanded economy. Thus it began a process which endeavoured to galvanise the economy into renewed life. Throughout the 1980s attempts were made to encourage the private sector to take more responsibility for regenerating urban areas. At the same time central government sought to curb the powers of local government, reducing its responsibilities and curbing its spending powers.

Government spending on housing in real terms declined from £10.3 million 1979-1980 to £3.4 million 1989-90⁹⁴ The reduction in the availability of council housing during this period was due to a combination of the implementation of the "right to buy" policy from 1980 and the central regulation of local expenditure. It was

⁹³ Boyle D., *Building Futures*, op. cit. p. 29.

⁹⁴ *No New Homes*, A Shelter Report on the Government's Homelessness Initiatives, London, Shelter, 1990.

reasoned that allowing occupiers to buy their council houses would enable more people to benefit from reduced maintenance costs. At the same time, from 1985 Councils were only allowed to spend 20% of the capital receipts from the sale of houses and land.⁹⁵ This has both depleted the stock of public housing and left councils with the most undesirable tenancies.

In place of the hitherto locally determined standards of provision, central government has set a number of indicative controls on levels of revenue-raising and local expenditure in a reaction to what was perceived as an over-accumulation of fiscal and political powers at a local level. According to Cooke,

"anachronistic centralism has sought to distort and reduce citizenship to an early modern concept of freedom to choose in the market place."⁹⁶

Particular urgency was lent to government policy with regard to the inner cities by the eruption in 1981 and 1982 of riots which struck at the heart of Britain's inner city life, and brought them into public gaze in a way previously unknown.⁹⁷

"Amid the personal tragedy and public disorder, something good emerged, because we were forced to rethink our strategy for the inner cities."⁹⁸

In an unprecedented move for a Minister, Michael Heseltine took three weeks in Liverpool to assess the situation of the inner cities. The outcome of this was a wealth of new agencies including: Urban Development Corporations, Task Forces, City Action Teams, Enterprise Zones - all under the guidance of a more precisely targeted Urban programme. The Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980 had empowered the government to create "Urban Development Corporations".

Local authority reactions to these bodies was suspicious. As unelected bodies they were seen as undemocratic, and designed to impose the government's will, part of an overall strategy to reduce the powers of local government.⁹⁹ The UDCs have had as their primary objective the bringing about of industrial or commercial regeneration, and have formed the government's main instrument of policy for dealing with the

95 Thus while in 1968 local authorities built 133,145 new homes in 1990 this figure had been reduced to 13,434. Figures from Building for the future, Shelter's 25th Anniversary Report, London, Shelter, 1991.

96 Cooke P., Back to the Future, London, Unwin Hyman, 1990, p. 180.

97 1980/1 disturbances took place in Brixton, Southall in London, in St Paul's Bristol, Moss Side Manchester, Toxteth Liverpool. Brixton was the most serious, although Toxteth achieved the most dramatic publicity. 1985 saw the worst incident on Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham when a policeman was killed.

98 Heseltine M. MP November 1982 cited in Boyle D., Building Futures, op. cit. p. 31.

99 The most important innovation for the purposes of this research was the second generation of UDCs, which included the Black Country, inaugurated in 1987.

inner cities during the 1980s.¹⁰⁰ The publication of "Action for Cities" in 1988 saw the highest profile yet given to the inner cities. This package, was concerned with co-ordination and concentration of resources. The contents were nearly all extensions of existing policies into new areas. City Grants were to replace the Urban Development Grants, and City Technology Colleges were to cement the school industry compacts. An important omission within the document was the work of the growing voluntary sector, and significantly the work of local authorities.

The lack of coordination amongst government departments with regard to the inner cities has been a constant feature of the last two decades. Apart from bodies already mentioned, the Youth Training Scheme and Manpower Services Commission have been involved, likewise different promotional and investment agencies, not to mention a host of government quangos. No wonder then that the National Audit Office, the governmental watch-dog body, commented in September 1989,

"Government support programmes are seen as a patchwork quilt of complexity and idiosyncrasy. They baffle local authorities and business alike. The rules of the game encourage compartmentalized policy approaches rather than a coherent strategy .. (so that) - key organisational structures have fallen into disrepair."¹⁰¹

A further deflationary turn in the economy at the beginning of the 1990s brought a sharp halt to what was being cited by the foreign press in 1987 as an economic miracle. With the lowest numbers ever recorded employed in the manufacturing industry and with the demise of companies,¹⁰² the consequent effects for inner city regeneration were devastating, especially combined with the collapse of the construction industry in 1989-1990. Meanwhile in the same report, the Department of the Environment was also criticised for its failure to ensure that its £4 billion budget went to the areas of greatest need, and not to the most prestigious projects such as the London Docklands.

100 However, there has been ongoing conflict between government's spending controls and the push for inner city renewal. Some areas ended up losing more in penalties, because their rates were too high, than they were gaining in grant. Particularly under the City Grants scheme whose purpose was to support capital projects designed to strengthen the local economy, Heseltine's strategy tended to sidestep local authorities and cut back on local government spending, while encouraging the private investor. This ongoing battle between central and local government was a permanent feature of life under the Thatcher government, and by the end of Mrs Thatcher's second term of office, central government had almost succeeded in defeating inner city local authorities.

101 Urban Regeneration and Economic Development: The Local Government Dimension, National Audit Office, September, 1989, cited in Middleton M., Cities in Transition, op. cit. p. 43.

102 In 1990 recorded as 50 a day forced to terminate their affairs; In 1991 900 per week.

The Black Country

The deep economic crisis of the 1970s provoked a steep decline in the manufacturing industry. This was acutely experienced in the West Midlands which saw the collapse of key sections of manufacturing including: machine tool, engineering and the car industry. Until the mid 1960s, the West Midlands had been one of the fastest growing regions with high wage levels and economic activity rates. By the 1980s the unemployment levels were exceeding those in many traditional development areas. Job losses were particularly acute in inner city areas of Wolverhampton - by December 1984 unemployment in Wolverhampton stood at 19.8%.

The decline in the West Midlands was primarily due to the collapse of the manufacturing industry, but at the same time there was a failure to diversify. Nationally, the service sector was growing, in the West Midlands service sector employment did increase but not at the national rate. Additionally, the scale of industrial dereliction, and closure of industrial plant has meant that the industrial capacity no longer exists - as one commentator maintains,

"The industrial heartland of the UK economy is slowly becoming an industrial wasteland."¹⁰³

In 1974 the West Midlands Region had the second lowest UK regional proportion of persons unemployed for over one year: 21.2%. By 1982 the long-term unemployed figure was 38.6%, while by 1984 it was 50% and concentrated on Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton. Indeed, in the latter year it had the highest long-term unemployment figure of all UK regions: 18%.

The particular social deprivation which accrues to long-term unemployment was something that was evident on the Heath Town estate. In 1992 discussing with residents on the estate about the issue of employment and unemployment, the following comments were responses to the question of what people did with their time.

"Majority spend their day sitting in the house."¹⁰⁴

"Up town looking for jobs."¹⁰⁵

103 Spencer K. et al (eds.), Crisis in the Industrial Heartland: A Study of the West Midlands, Oxford, Clarendon, 1986.

104 Resident Y. meeting, March, 1992.

105 Resident K.

"Housework."¹⁰⁶

"The majority are not in work."¹⁰⁷

"I've been through phases when I watched telly all night and didn't get up till late. I'm a bit of a loner. There's only a few people who I would go round to see in their houses."¹⁰⁸

According to the leader of the Hope Community, on the estate 80% of residents were on social benefits of some form,¹⁰⁹ and a tiny minority were earning a salary that was sufficient for their living requirements. According to one resident this latter group,

"are people who can live with dignity on what they get. Others if they have work, it's because they're forced to take it. Ones who do have cars: it's generally on the never/never, apart from the drug dealers and pimps.¹¹⁰ Those can afford flashy cars."¹¹¹

"There seems little paid employment and those that have jobs are badly paid¹¹²."¹¹³

"When I had a job, the money was pretty pathetic. I was on £140 for Mon-Fri and now I'm on £135 on the dole."¹¹⁴

"Those who do get a job and make money leave the estate; they cut themselves off."¹¹⁵

It is noteworthy that the Black Country authorities of Walsall, Dudley, Sandwell, and Wolverhampton between 1961 and 1981 lost 15% of employed persons.¹¹⁶ Those who could afford better housing did move out of the area, and as S. indicates the trend continues in the 1990s. With reducing public and private housing investment in the inner city, many in the greatest housing need are living in deteriorating conditions.

The problem of policy in the Black Country reflected the problems of national policy, namely a lack of integration, an emphasis on ad hoc policies and an approach to policy that seemed to believe new initiatives grow by accretion, rather than by

106 Resident E.

107 Resident N.

108 Resident M.

109 This information was based partly on observation, and on good contacts with the Social Services.

110 Prostitution and Drug dealing are important parts of the local economy.

111 Resident P.

112 Currently 9 million people are in low paid work according to the Low Pay Unit definition which is 2/3rds the average male earnings. Church Action on Poverty figures presented to conference October 1992.

113 Fieldworker A.

114 Resident K.

115 Resident S.

116 Figures given in Hausner V., Urban Economic Change: Five City Studies, Oxford, Clarendon, 1987, p. 228.

detailed analysis and evaluation. Economic development is organised primarily by the urban programme, though Wolverhampton has its own separate Economic Development Committee with limited terms of reference and a limited budget. According to work undertaken by the Cambridge Economic Policy Group and Hausner's analysis in the ESRC-funded area studies it is suggested that,

"even with the most favourable macro-economic policies and full Assisted Area status (not the present selective assistance status of the Black Country) the future of the region will remain bleak."¹¹⁷

This study also maintained that higher costs, weakness in training, a dearth of "new skills", which would facilitate the adoption of new technologies, relatively poor productivity and militancy against changes in the labour process have made labour in the old manufacturing cities of the West Midlands uncompetitive relative to that in other areas. Within the urban programme of the Department of the Environment in the West Midlands a number of factors restricted inner city policy from being more long-term orientated and innovative; these included: the regulatory restraints of central government, annual budget cycles, limited resources and a capital bias in the programme. Accordingly, the urban programme was dominated by a short-term process of bidding for projects rather than strategic considerations. Central and local government policies continually diverged, as the former's interest lay in property development, attraction of private investment, and short-term market opportunities; while local concerns were those of unemployment and the disadvantaged.

Certain inner city residents were seen to be disadvantaged as a result of personal characteristics which affect assessment of their employability. Among these were: young, unskilled, ethnic minorities; those without formal qualifications; and those with lower educational achievements. Similarly public and private employment agencies have eliminated from consideration people with certain personal characteristics. The unemployed have been geographically concentrated in inner city areas or peripheral estates like Heath Town because of their residential segregation in council rented housing; and little effort has been made to encourage movement within the council housing sector. Substantial reductions in government support for council housing and rising local authority rents have increased the concentration of the lowest income groups in the worst council housing and exacerbated the problems of declining inner area neighbourhoods.

"In the main local economic policies have been: reactive, traditional in character, short-term and non-strategic in orientation, ad hoc, unco-

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 248.

ordinated, modestly financed and marginal in effects. The economic capabilities of local government have been limited by: constraints of organisation, professional expertise, resources and policies and central government financial constraints and lack of support for an active local public sector role. The fragmented committee-based structure of local government and short-term fiscal planning has mitigated against the development of a coherent economic and employment strategy."¹¹⁸

Public policy has failed to distinguish and articulate adequately the problem of the concentration of unemployment,¹¹⁹ poverty, and social deprivation in inner city areas and peripheral estates. Certainly it appears that it is the quality of life and the welfare of people on the peripheral estates and in the inner city which is suffering the brunt of the economic decline; to such an extent that the concept of two nations has a present resonance rather than a future orientation, as affluence and poverty exist side by side, or in the case of Heath Town, within walking distance of one another. Consequently, with so few employed the only way of receiving money is through one form of benefit or another, as individuals and families are caught into state dependency as their sole source of income.

When asked how people acquired the money they lived on, the following answers were typical of the replies received from residents of the estate.

"We sign on."¹²⁰

"With great difficulty."¹²¹

"I don't sign on."¹²²

"Why?"¹²³

"I'm on the sick."¹²⁴

Changes in the social security system during the eighties have drastically effected those who live on the margins. The idea of social insurance has been undermined through the removal of some National Insurance benefits for example maternity

118 Hausner V., *Urban Economic Change: Five City Studies*, op. cit. p. 31.

119 With regard to the national unemployment figures, the method of calculating figures has been changed many times within the last ten years such that contemporary figures may understate the real position by over 1 million. The official figures given included: 1.1 million in 1980; 3 million in 1986; 1.5 million in 1990; 2.8 million in July 1992. Long-term unemployment (ie over 12 months) is around 3/4 million and growing by 1,000 per day. In July 1992 unemployed 16 and 17 year olds: 100,000. Church Action on Poverty report, presented to conference, October 1992.

120 Resident Y. meeting, March, 1992.

121 Resident O.

122 Resident L.

123 Resident D.

124 Resident L.

benefit and the reduction in real value of others, for example Unemployment Benefit. There has been a greater emphasis on means-tested benefits but in 1988 many of these were changed or reduced, for example, by the introduction of the Social Fund and reductions in Housing Benefit. Benefits are also now worth far less compared with wages because Social Security benefits are upgraded in line with price inflation. Between 1979 and 1989 price inflation rose 102%, wage inflation by 150%.

The problem of debt can be particularly crippling. It is estimated¹²⁵ that in 1992 two and a half million households in Britain were in serious debt. Loans from loan "sharks" are notorious. Income Support claimants can apply to the Social Fund. However, in 1991/92 591,000 applications were refused, 31,500 because the individuals were considered too poor to make the repayments! In 1979 there were 4.37 million people claiming Income Support - in 1990 there were 7.2 million.

"The worst thing is seeing people worried and hungry. You go to people's flats and you know they haven't eaten, the evidence speaks for itself. The giro ran out well before the next one was due. A terrible thing of living here is to see people suffering, people crying without actually crying. You can see that crying inside, see it in their faces but they can't cry out in the open, can't let their emotions come out. They can be accused of spending all their giro at the pub or on drugs. They talk about criminal elements. What they do to us is far worse, they make people break the law. There's a breaking point. If you see your children hungry and there's no way you can get money legally, social says you've had your giro, they don't care about you. A parent will go and get food for the children some other way, that's their first duty. That's the injustice, that's what I don't like seeing, the suffering and the tears without tears."¹²⁶

Both the reduction in the expected value of benefits and the reduction or loss of entitlement have undermined the effectiveness of welfare provision in ameliorating the most brutal effects of poverty.¹²⁷ The final comment is from the experience of one resident who had previously been employed, but has not worked for a considerable time. His experience of the last ten years has been of a steady deterioration in living conditions. The grim note on which his comments end,

125 Church Action on Poverty report, presented to conference, October 1992.

126 Resident P. interview, November, 1991.

127 In 1991 London Weekend Television and MORI undertook a survey entitled Breadline Britain - 1990s. Researchers agreed on 44 items which were highlighted as ones people should not have to do without in Britain today. They grouped them into seven categories: adequate housing; essential clothing; adequate food; essential household items (eg fridge); financial security (ie could save £10 per month); important items for children (eg money for a school trip); something "extra" (eg birthday present, holiday). Taking these categories as a guide the researchers found that 11 million people (including 3 million children) lacked three or more of these categories; 6 million lacked five or more; and 3.5 million lacked all seven and were classed as living in intense poverty.

indicate the cumulative effect of the cutbacks in benefit provision, coupled with an increase in the cost of living, and the additional pressure of alternative taxation.

"I used to be sceptical. I used to think if people can't afford to live off their giro then they must be doing something wrong. Up till 4 or 5 years ago I used to get on quite well with my giro. I used to buy electricity tokens and all that. My giro would last from one fortnight to the next for food and that. I'd not be short of anything, never in debt, I lived life as it came. Up to a couple of years ago I'd guarantee I'd get my food and everything in, but it seemed then that the same amount of food was costing more and more every fortnight. It was getting more difficult, till I ended up with a choice: I could buy food to eat; or some food and some electric tokens to cook it with; or I could leave the electric tokens and buy food you could eat cold. So that's what I did, I forgot about the electric. They cut me off and I just bought food. So I got on like that for another couple of years and then just recently, all these letters for poll tax and that came dropping through my door. I feel they're all closing in on me. I feel that everyone who lives here is threatened as well."¹²⁸

The oppressive sense of being enmeshed in a deteriorating situation is one which is communicated here with real poignancy. It does appear that contemporary government policies have had a particularly insidious effect upon the prevailing ethos, by communicating a basic tenet that there is no alternative. Such a proscription upon alternative ways of conceiving reality increase demoralisation amongst communities such as those on the estate by reason of the claustrophobic circularity of the proposition.

Ill-Health and Inadequate Medical provision

Given the nature of the experience of poverty which includes lack of nutritional food, warmth, and stimulus (particularly deleterious long-term with regard to children); and the stress involved in the physical housing conditions, the concentration of vulnerable individuals, and personal relationships - health problems abound. The vulnerabilities of poverty are also aggravated by transition in the neighbourhood and heterogeneity among neighbours. This aggregate of disasters leads to an increasing likelihood of illness of one form or another, physical or psychological or a combination of both. Accordingly, the medical services in their turn come under pressure from an increasing number of demands. At the same time the limited resources available to local practitioners appear at times inadequate to deal with the many demands made upon them.

¹²⁸ Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

During the course of my time on the estate I encountered some horrific stories, not least the long wait of Q., a young single parent, to be diagnosed as having a form of non-Hodgkin Lymphoma, a somewhat rare cancer. Over a considerable number of months she had experienced pain which had mystified the medical staff; indeed she had spent weeks being told that the pain she was experiencing was psychosomatic! Extracts from a conversation with local residents concerning medical provision indicated strong antipathy. The local people present were vociferous in their protests.

"Doctors should do more to help."¹²⁹

"I was told face-to-face by an emergency doctor that it was lucky he came out to see our baby because some won't come onto Heath Town Estate at night."¹³⁰

"But it's through places like Heath Town estate that they get paid."¹³¹

"Here more people have need of medical help."¹³²

"We pay their salaries and therefore they should come out."¹³³

"Basically, doctors on this estate are quacks. They send the trainees here."¹³⁴

"They don't examine you."¹³⁵

"They practise medicine. I went to the doctor cos me stomach was playing up and I thought I might have an ulcer. He kept changing me tablets. In the end I says to him "what's going on here do you know?" and he says, "No, I'm just going through a list of possible tablets that might help."¹³⁶

"I've walked in and the doctor's there with a prescription in hand before I've said anything."¹³⁷

"They wanted to give me sleeping tablets and I told him to stick them."¹³⁸

"He knows when I go in there must be something because I only ever go in the Summer for hay fever."¹³⁹

129 Resident T. meeting, March, 1992.

130 Resident K.

131 Resident T.

132 Fieldworker A.

133 Resident H.

134 Resident R.

135 Resident Y. Possibly Y's remarks should be taken in the context of the reality that she is a woman of 30 who is grossly obese, and with little concern for personal hygiene. Not that this should necessarily influence any decision with regard to an examination, but it does give more substance to her words.

136 Resident T.

137 Resident K.

138 Resident E.

139 Resident T.

"I'd say a big majority of the people are on tranquillisers."¹⁴⁰

"I've been on some."¹⁴¹

Many of those present had at one time been prescribed tranquillisers. However, it is noteworthy that eventually most of those who had been so prescribed had refused further medication of this sort.¹⁴²

"Did anyone get to the bottom of why the doctor wouldn't come out for U?¹⁴³ The doctor told him to get an ambulance and a neighbour had to get a relative of U's to take him to the doctor because he was scared to go into hospital."¹⁴⁴

"They were talking at one time of putting him into an old folks home and he doesn't want that."¹⁴⁵

J has bad cancer. He was in great pain and the locum doctor was contacted by the hospice and was very rude. He demanded full details of his condition and handed him a prescription at ten to seven, and he needed to have the tablets. He said where was he going to get a chemist at that time and the doctor just shrugged and left."¹⁴⁶

"That's not good enough, it's not only your right for them to come out but them getting bloody paid for it."¹⁴⁷

"Next thing they'll be saying what nationality are you before I treat you."¹⁴⁸

"It's the thin end of the wedge .. they're not legally entitled to refuse people like that."¹⁴⁹

"It needs more and more people to protest"¹⁵⁰

This sense of receiving second class treatment, and the infringement of the residents rights and dignity were common features of responses received.¹⁵¹

140 Fieldworker A.

141 Resident Y.

142 "The unemployed and their families have considerably worse physical and mental health than those in work. There is substantial evidence of unemployment causing a deterioration in mental health with improvements being observed on re-employment." Whitehead M., The Health Divide, in Inequalities in Health: Townsend P and Davidson N. (ed.), The Black Report and Whitehead M., The Health Divide, London, Penguin, 1992, p. 394.

143 U. an elderly gentleman who had a bad speech impediment due to a stroke.

144 Fieldworker D. meeting, March, 1992.

145 Resident K.

146 Fieldworker A.

147 Resident T.

148 Resident W.

149 Fieldworker D.

150 Resident S.

151 Regarding the availability of services there is poorer provision in more deprived areas and poorer quality in what is provided. c.f. Whitehead M., The Health Divide, in Inequalities in Health, op. cit. p. 396ff.

Policing - by consent or coercion?

The lack of employment possibilities for young people combined with family deprivation can lead inevitably into petty crime, which may escalate over time. A factor rarely taken into account is the dilemma facing young people, especially the unemployed, who are trying to survive in inappropriate flats that take little account of their poor financial position - as the comments above indicate. This could be a contributory factor to the disinterest and detachment from any sense of responsibility for their neighbourhood. The increased stress on law and order in the national sphere has led to serious consequences with regard to surveillance and policing priorities.¹⁵² The demands for an intensification of policing on the estate were being voiced by the end of the 1970s. As early as 1979 concern was being expressed by residents in the local press that vandalism and a blatant disregard for community relations was increasing on the estate. It is interesting that at this stage in the estate's history the call was being expressed for more substantial policing.

"Mr M. chairman of the Heath Town community association said, "The key to a better standard of living is law and order and that means better policing."¹⁵³

The proposed solution by the community association was a plan of action which included: more police patrols on the elevated walkways and bridges; a sub police station in the shopping centre; a closed circuit television monitoring system; and a clocking in and out system when using the washing facilities (laundries were a prime target for vandals). However, the local police Superintendent at that time made the point:

"There is no doubt that (these measures) would be to the benefit of the community, but it is a question of resources."¹⁵⁴

152 The expanded role of surveillance methods within society constitutes a somewhat sinister move, indicating something of a mobilisation of change within society that does not leave much space for alternative opinions. Surveillance thus becomes a medium of power. Giddens argues that surveillance is the necessary condition of the administrative power of states, for whatever ends such power might be used. Giddens A., The Nation-State and Violence, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985, p. 309ff. An illusion has been created that we live in a non-coercive society because it is one where "the people rule". It depends which segment of the population constitutes the people. Furthermore the connection of surveillance with policing policy can lead to an oppressive creation of "deviants" against whom a policy of suppression must be pursued. The centrally promulgated criminal law, and so also the police force, have been widely deployed in areas they had rarely touched before. **This issue emerges as one of particular significance for those who live on the margins.**

153 Wolverhampton Express and Star, 25 May, 1979.

154 Ibid.

It was clearly evident in the article that the police considered there was little likelihood of the required measures being implemented. In the event, only the further security required for the laundries was enforced. However, some months later an attempt was made to increase the number of police patrols on the estate. Over the years this had been of very variable consistency.

Whatever the desire of local residents in the 1970s to have a more policed environment, by the time of the early 1990s in conversations with local residents, the majority expressed a very jaundiced view of the local constabulary. The following extracts indicate the views of some of those willing to give their opinion.

"You're lucky if you see a policeman round here, you used to, they don't bother anymore."¹⁵⁵

"You can't get one after 6pm."¹⁵⁶

"I've had strange experiences with the police walking along the road because I'm black."¹⁵⁷

"We should have more phone boxes on the estate."¹⁵⁸

"The police couldn't care. I was stopped a while ago and when they saw my RAF ID card they changed their tune immediately."¹⁵⁹

"If we use reason and forget bias, 90% of the people on this estate would say police were non-existent, but the crime rate doesn't match that non-existent presence. When they do come, when there's some disturbance, it's horrific. They're out in helicopters and that."¹⁶⁰

"The police say there's crime here when they want a bit of fun. They move in, big publicity, heavy invasion, gives them public credibility in the eyes of people outside Heath Town.¹⁶¹ In fact they need Heath Town for that!"¹⁶²

The vehemence with which the above remarks were delivered, and the personal histories of varied associations with the police, indicated the great need for reconciliation in any community policing policy. However, these remarks also indicate something of the legacy that needs to be overcome. From my own

155 Resident S. meeting, February, 1992.

156 Resident K.

157 Resident T.

158 Resident H.

159 Resident J.

160 Resident P.

161 This view is echoed in a general concern that "policing methods have changed in response to the growth of serious public disorder. To many the new policies represent an abnegation of the tradition of British policing [by consent] and the adoption of an alien style of paramilitary policing." Waddington P., The Strong Arm of the Law. Armed and Public Policing, Oxford, Clarendon, 1991, p. 334.

162 Resident T. meeting, February, 1992.

observation over the months living on the estate, it is rare to encounter policemen, and never one alone. On one evening there was a drugs raid on the local pub, and the police moved in en masse with helicopters and many men. The reality of drug dealing and prostitution on the estate is well known. The reality of violence can be heard during the night, but a more frequent occurrence is the noise of cars entering and leaving the estate to make a deal at the local drug den, situated close to the Community flat. Yet the crime rate on the estate is not as high as other parts of the town, and, as one resident stressed, the form of police intervention might appear questionable in the light of the statistics available.

"If they were policing Earls Court and they weren't really present, the crime rate would be huge. Here, non-existent police and the crime rate is 7th on the Wolverhampton list as regards reported crime. But there's unreported crime too, I was hit on the head by a policeman when I was 18: that was unreported crime."¹⁶³

The public image of Heath Town is one which emphasises the aspect of violence and crime, associated by right-wing ideologues with the underclass. In a secret police report of 1987, made available to the local press in 1989, it was stated that attempts were being made to make Heath Town a "no go" area for the police. This followed incidents in which police officers were apparently lured onto the estate and attacked - on occasions with petrol bombs. The report claimed the Heath Town complex was a mirror image of the Broadwater Farm estate in north London where in a serious riot a policeman was hacked to death. In 1979 increased police patrols had been an attempt to win back the confidence of local tenants and ease the problems on the estate. However, by 1989 the situation showed no signs of relief and indeed was exacerbated by a police drugs raid, after which it was reported in the local press,

"A teenage boy said police threatened to plant drugs on his father in a bid to force a confession from him. Other men spoke of police violence, abusive language, and being questioned for hours at a time without a lawyer present. One woman was questioned by six policeman as she lay naked in bed, it was alleged."¹⁶⁴

The following year another drugs raid resulted in residents accusing police of wrecking the flats and using strong arm tactics. It was claimed that doors were left hanging on hinges, glass littered the floor and fittings were left strewn around rooms after the search.

"But senior police insisted today that the raid was carried out with search warrants and officers did not use excessive force or cause

163 Resident P.

164 Wolverhampton Express and Star, 1st June, 1989.



deliberate damage. A clean-up operation was underway to repair thousands of pounds damage at two flats. One of the tower block residents said "What the police did was completely out of order; they came in here smashing everything up. There was no need to use so much force. All they had to do was search the place - not tear it apart."¹⁶⁵

The most common occurrence is the problem of vandalism. A survey of young people in Wolverhampton in 1984 endeavoured to ascertain why people were vandalising the area and a number of responses were made: boredom, lack of money, unemployment, were all mentioned. The types of vandalism mentioned by young people included: burglary, broken windows, broken security doors, broken intercom systems. Lifts were a particular target for vandals. The police response to vandalism has been an extension of community policing. However, there are particular difficulties in police protection for high rise flats and maisonettes with the numerous balconies and landings. Modernist architecture and the post war housing policies adopted by urban planners, created the kind of environment in which social malaise and crime were an almost inevitable daily phenomenon.

There does appear to be a particular difficulty with regard to relations existing between the police and the young black community. In a survey of Wolverhampton Youth in 1984, negative attitudes towards the police tended to result from personal experience. The survey indicates,

"It seems there may be a whole field of police/youth face to face encounters very much short of conflict over specific offences, which lays a base for deteriorating relationships. On the face of it, this seems to happen quite disproportionately to the unemployed and to Afro-Caribbeans."¹⁶⁶

With the growth of black consciousness movements in the 1970s there has emerged a solidarity amongst a younger generation of black people which stands in contradistinction to the views of a previous generation. For those who arrived in the 1950s anxious to be part of British society, despite the rebuttal that many received from that same society, there was an acceptance of the basic tenets of British life. However, the children of these immigrants born and raised in this country, and most particularly their offspring, have no similar allegiance to a society which is often seen as inherently racist. In particular, the operating force for law and order within that society is conceived as being particularly partisan in a way which is hostile to black people.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 18th May, 1990.

¹⁶⁶ Willis P., Social Conditions of Young People in Wolverhampton 1984, Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton Borough Council, 1985, p. 171.

"For black and minority ethnic groups, racial harassment and attack are part and parcel of everyday life. A black person need never have been the actual victim of a racist attack, but will still remain acutely aware that she or he belongs to a group that is threatened in this manner."¹⁶⁷

This inherent sense of alienation is one which finds a particular focus in the employment market. Here the lack of opportunities are presumed to be particularly acute for a young black person. Accordingly, the pressure towards participation in crime is liable to increase. Here, the following comment from the local press appears to give substance to a caricature which might well fuel the rhetoric of the right-wing ideologues of the underclass debate.

"Most West Indians in their twenties and early thirties have never worked and as one put it, "There are only two avenues open to you: selling women or selling drugs."¹⁶⁸

The views of some young black residents of the estate were sought in 1992 with regard to their relationship with the police, and their views of police behaviour towards the black community on the estate.

"Lots of kids are stopped because they're black. When I was a teenager, I was stopped left right and centre - not so much now I'm older."¹⁶⁹

"What really hurts, the way they're handled, it's degrading and the other guy is white and in a blue uniform. I feel the police are the worst disservice to racial harmony because of their attitude. I've heard really evil offensive racist jokes from them."¹⁷⁰

"Cos others have more money than us, coppers think they're better than us."¹⁷¹

"It's fucking disgusting the way they treat blacks as though they've got some social disease."¹⁷²

The major question of racist behaviour amongst the police force has become increasingly a National concern following riots in predominantly black areas in the 1980s.

167 Morgan R. & Smith D. (eds.), *Coming to terms with Policing. Perspectives on Policy*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. 135.

168 *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 25 May, 1989.

169 Resident T. meeting, February, 1992.

170 Resident P.

171 Resident S.

172 Resident W.

Security on the estate appeared variable. There was evidence of a number of occasions when individuals were robbed of what little they possessed. Yet these were the exception rather than the norm, and when crime did occur, it was generally dealt with by local residents. The very last option would be to summon the assistance of the local police. It was noteworthy that on the few occasions local officers visited the Hope Community flats, the tension amongst residents was palpable. Such visits were not encouraged.

Underclass - A viable term?

"Ours has become a divided society. Millions are excluded from society's benefits and they now amount to an underclass; bitter, resentful and angry. Mrs Thatcher has created a divided nation."¹⁷³

An emotive word, the term "underclass" always contains ideological implications. Coined first in America and associated in a derogatory way with the so-called undeserving poor, the term had also particular ethnic connotations which in themselves border on the racist. It has never been specifically defined, despite considerable use in the USA; rather it seems to have been employed more as a rhetorical device to enhance a point made or command attention. However, emerging definitions have tended to be behaviourally-oriented ones although some commentators¹⁷⁴ have argued that a definition based on deprivation rather than behaviour would be more appropriate.

"A deprivational definition is more readily related to appropriate policy considerations. The major strength of a behavioural model of the underclass is its more closely resembling the image currently implanted in the public consciousness. In our view, however, adopting definitions on that basis must be resisted."¹⁷⁵

Aponte emphasises in his article that until the mid 1970s the few references to the underclass referred to the poor generally, or the poorest of the poor. After the mid 1970s, behavioural criteria came to be operative particularly when the term was taken up within the media and here he cites a Time magazine article in 1977 as being particularly formative, using the term in association with problem elements of the poor. Thereafter the interrelationship of the term with specific problem behaviour, and increasingly with ethnic overtones, introduced a different dynamic.

173 Gerald Kaufman, Labour Party Shadow Home Secretary talking on BBC TV 3 days before the 1987 general election cited in Mann K., The Making of an English "underclass"? The Social Divisions of Welfare and Labour, London, OUP, 1992, p. 1.

174 E.g. R. Aponte, "Definitions of the underclass: a critical analysis" in Gans H. (ed) Sociology in America, American Sociological Association Presidential Series, California, Sage, 1990, pp. 117-137.

175 Ibid.

Within Britain the divergent views of behavioural-related or deprivation-related definition can be identified with the names of Murray and Field respectively. An article written by Murray, which first appeared in the Sunday Times Magazine in 1989, and published in 1990 under the title The Emerging British Underclass¹⁷⁶, outlines this behavioural mode. Murray's attempts, as an American sociologist to apply his work to the situation within Britain, have been sharply criticised, mostly notably by those of a different political persuasion. Murray applies the term specifically to those among the poor distinguished by their undesirable behaviour: drug abuse; crime; illegitimacy; failure to hold down a job; truancy from school and casual violence. However, he concentrates his attention on three measures: crime, lack of involvement in the labour market, and illegitimacy. For him these factors are the best indicator of the emergence of an underclass, and he is particularly concerned about the growth of illegitimacy. He sees this as the commencement of an insecurity which comes to fruition in violent behaviour which contaminates whole communities. He also sounds a warning that the government will be powerless to deal with an underclass once it is firmly established.

Field, in Losing Out¹⁷⁷ rather than identifying the term with deviant behaviour, associates the term with levels of deprivation such that a crude identification of the underclass would comprise the three-fold grouping of: long-term unemployed, single parent families, and very poor claimants for whom there is no prospect for improvement, such as elderly pensioners. Field expresses particular concern that this minority grouping has increasingly been excluded from any benefits of growth in the economy over the last fifteen years. Thus the incomes of the poorest have failed to rise in line with the general rise in living standards. Indeed, he argues¹⁷⁸ that the tax cuts since 1979 which have proved so beneficial to those on higher incomes have been sustained by a consequent cut in the level of welfare payments. He outlines the effect of this particularly on single parent families and children¹⁷⁹ with reference to child care provision and school attainment. A major burden borne by this group is unemployment which, Field clearly shows¹⁸⁰, falls most heavily and for the longest periods of time on the most vulnerable who include a concentration of young unskilled or semi-skilled workers. For these young people the failure of the Youth Training Schemes to result in employment completes a process of marginalisation

176 Murray C., The Emerging British Underclass, London, I.E.A., 1990.

177 Field F. Losing Out, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989.

178 Ibid. p. 14.

179 Ibid. p. 43ff.

180 Ibid. p. 107.

which began at birth. From the poorest homes, they achieved little success in schools and finally had the greatest difficulty in obtaining full-time employment.¹⁸¹

Murray's concern is to make a distinction between low income as such and the behavioural poverty that results from conduct which is anti-social. Field sees the situation as more complex and is concerned to reduce inequalities of income and wealth, believing that without a return to full employment there can be no effective solution to the problem of the underclass. Murray's view does appear to attach blame to those who may be considered the victims of society; while Field asserts that it is vital to get away from the idea that the underclass of working age is in some way responsible for their own exclusion from the mainstream of society. Field emphasises the class-based nature of income possibilities in Britain, and concludes that,

"The severity of the treatment meted out to the underclass, who have borne the brunt of the welfare changes, is in stark contrast to the benevolent attitude demonstrated by the government in its welfare policies for the most privileged."¹⁸²

In the context of the USA, it was only with the publication of Wilson's The Truly Disadvantaged¹⁸³ that the liberals were persuaded that the term underclass was not just a racist slur. It became apparent that the increase of anti-social destructive behaviour in poor black neighbourhoods had a direct relation to, and indeed was asserted to be a by-product of, economic and demographic changes over which any ghetto had no control. Within Britain, Field maintains there is no racial basis within the British underclass. He concedes that many black people are found within this group, but that this is because they are part of this particularly vulnerable section of society.

By contrast to the views expressed by Murray and Field, Mellor,¹⁸⁴ endeavours to critique the whole notion of an underclass associated with the inner city. She asserts that there has been a shift in the analysis of inner city problems to incorporate this notion of the underclass and the threat posed to the rest of society. Mellor herself insists that this adversarial model of the inner city in terms of an underclass ghetto is unhelpful and inappropriate to reality. The stereotype which is developing is an amalgamation of the deprived: those with no skills, husbands, health, or autonomy;

181 Ibid. p. 115.

182 Ibid. p. 91.

183 Wilson W., The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987.

184 Mellor R., The Inner City as Underclass: A Critique and Restatement, University of Manchester Sociology Department Occasional Paper, No. 23, 1989.

along with the disaffected: the young, capable, and energetic who may often be black. In popular mythology the inner city has already emerged as a dangerous place where people are subject to indiscriminate violence. Within this view the underclass is one that threatens established values and potentially jeopardises key institutions. As opposers of this stereotyping, Mellor cites the work of Leech and Armin who state,

"The notion of a vast and increasingly ghettoised underclass is not correct in British cities, although the clusters of the very poor or "underclass" groups have in some cases become more intense and more desperate."¹⁸⁵

It appears that the term underclass is so ideologically loaded that this undermines its analytical potential.¹⁸⁶

Exploring this issue against the context of the local estate, some young residents in 1992 were asked what they did with their time - why they got up in the mornings and what time, and the following were some of the answers elicited.

"First to stop the dog chewing the postman's hand. I don't know why else I get up. I haven't got a programme for tomorrow say."¹⁸⁷

"Sometimes I get up at 6am or 7am or 8am: the baby usually gets up about 9am"¹⁸⁸

"I get up about 11.30 am or noon."¹⁸⁹

These answers were compatible with a survey of social conditions of young people in Wolverhampton in 1984¹⁹⁰ where it was emphasised that the life style of the unemployed was unrelated to the public image of them as being more socially active or drinking. The long-term unemployed were more likely to be less active, more

185 Leech K. & Amin K., *A new underclass?*, London, Child Poverty Action Group, 1988, cited *ibid*.

186 This was particularly apparent in a BBC Analysis programme (3 December 1992) endeavouring to look at the issue of the underclass. It appeared clear that academic sociology was reluctant to espouse the term underclass. Contributions from this area tended to emphasise that there was not sufficient research to indicate the reality of such a different culture. At the same time it was clear that the reluctance of the social sciences to become involved in this area involved a dual concern. First the area was a minefield of liberal taboos, with little hard-headed objectivity, and secondly, there was a common fear that the right would hijack any research in terms of further stigmatisation of a group and the imposition of a harsh solution to deal with it. One sociologist indicated that the fear of a more coercive policy was linked also with the insufficient resources within the public sector and the discovery of a problem which was too great to handle. The liberal response was to deny the existence of such a group. Thus there appeared to be an ideological stand-off between ideologues of left and right. However, within the context of the programme, there was some significant agreement about the emergence of a group, particularly young people, who were a generation alienated from the labour market. Never having been employed, and thus with no stable relationship with the labour market, they had become amongst the most vulnerable.

187 Resident M. meeting, March, 1992.

188 Resident K.

189 Resident E.

190 Willis P., *Social Conditions of Young People in Wolverhampton 1984*, op. cit.

centred on the home and more socially isolated. There was a general feeling of alienation. Unemployment was seen as a subordinate existence and accompanied by the feeling that society recognised neither their worth nor their existence. Paradoxically work was seen as becoming subjectively more important to the unemployed. Part of the oppression of unemployment seems to concern not only the poverty that being without wages brings, but worse, the fears that crucial aspects of their experience will be misunderstood or even totally inverted in other people's minds. An example of this emerged during an imaginary scenario which was suggested to a group of residents. What would they do if they suddenly had a spare £50, some of the responses were as follows:

"Bank it."¹⁹¹

"I had £50 over once but I wasn't used to having so much money. It was such an unusual feeling having so much money. It gets you tangled up, so you go to the pub to think about it and end up drunk to forget about it - me dad did that. You can think straighter somehow drunk. Life we live without money, drugs or alcohol are one form of escape from poverty. Poverty is the biggest ally the drug dealer, pub or bookie has. So that's not what I want to do with money but that's the way I end up doing."¹⁹²

"I don't know. I think I'd spend it all. I'd bank some of it, then I'd have some for later too."¹⁹³

"I did have it before and just used to go down to the pub and drink. I stopped drinking when I went into the Legion."¹⁹⁴

"I'm a single man. I see myself as that. We do have a community here though and one thing that keeps it strong is families. You hear a lot of shit about that's why them poor - drinking - but family men tend to be the ones that come into a pub and only have a couple of pints."¹⁹⁵

There was a sense within the group that the longer young people were unemployed, the more disillusioned they became about their prospects of success and this could contribute to a sense of hopelessness and loss of self-worth and dignity. However, some of the members of this group maintained a sense of their own worth in very distinctive ways.

"What's dignity for you P? You talked about living with dignity?"¹⁹⁶

191 Resident C.

192 Resident P.

193 Resident B.

194 Resident A. who was a member of the French Foreign Legion.

195 Resident P.

196 Fieldworker A.

"Being proud of yourself."¹⁹⁷

"Being respectable, having respect for yourself and wanting to respect other people."¹⁹⁸

"For me personally, it's to dream really, to open my door to anybody. I spend most of my time checking whether it's a bailiff or the police. Even if a friend came round, I couldn't make tea for them or that cos I've no electric. Dignity for me is to be able to walk down the road with no one pressuring me. You've got to have respect for other people and respect yourself."¹⁹⁹

"I believe I have dignity, no money but my own self-esteem. I'm quite confident with myself - I would like to be in a position that I could pay my bills more frequently than I do with ease and at the same time to be able to buy shoes etc. Being on the dole now, there's no chance of saving up to buy things like shoes."²⁰⁰

"I'd like the baby to have a better life than I've got. If I had more money I could buy things for him, he wouldn't have to go short like we have to do."²⁰¹

The link made between having enough money to live on and feeling a basic human dignity, appears peculiarly powerful. Although such as T. and M. appear to be able to distinguish their own personal value from the circumstances of having enough money to live on, their voices appear somewhat singular. It is perhaps worth noting that these two individuals appear more reflective by nature, and have come to an expression of their own beliefs and philosophy of life.

Given the emotive and inadequate nature of the use of the term "underclass" with reference to individuals who inhabit the inner city or deprived peripheral housing estates - allied with its ideological overtones - it is proposed that the term marginalised is both more accurate and more applicable in these areas. It is the contention of this work that the term "underclass" though seen to describe a real situation of multiple deprivation, reinforces a categorisation which is essentially a stigmatisation. It gives further emphasis to an ethos which conceives of individuals as the "dregs of society" or the "waste products of the system". What must be clearly differentiated are the social and economic processes which are accelerating the creation of an alienated section of society - known only by its alien status, and the individuals and groups which make up that section. The ready employment of the

197 Resident P.

198 Resident A.

199 Resident M.

200 Resident T.

201 Resident Q.

term, to refer to sections of the urban poor may be both ill-advised and potentially highly damaging.

By contrast, the term marginalised enables a degree of solidarity to be perceived to exist between deprived people - in the inner city, peripheral housing estates, within the drug culture, or in some form of abusive situation - and the rest of society. It also enables further consideration to be given to the increased imposition of marginality and marginal status within contemporary culture and society.

The consumer culture, which was a creation of modernism, has evolved in its postmodern manifestation into what Jameson²⁰² terms a "depthless" culture, one which involves a stylistic eclecticism. For those in financial comfort, postmodern cities have become centres of consumptionist play filled with simulation experiences for which Disney world is the natural prototype. According to Featherstone²⁰³ the movement beyond individualism to a de-centring of the subject has led to a new "aesthete paradigm" within which temporary emotional communities are formed for brief periods of intense affective experience and aestheticised play. Such activity is associated with new urban life-styles, but these are restricted to the realms of the well-to-do. With the redevelopment of inner cities to form cultural capitals, the poor who previously resided in these areas were moved out or driven into various small enclaves, to provide new living space for the incomers. In order to protect these new areas from what Featherstone terms "the lower orders", increased security provisions are apparent. Thus the very liberty and licence granted to one group in cultural terms becomes the means of oppression and bondage of another.

There are striking features about those who are marginalised. Very often they are in a position where they are not involved in the central factors which determine their lives. Dependency is an inevitable development, as they are educated to believe that others will always know best, and that some "professionals" in social security, or housing, or education, or local planning, or possibly anybody other than themselves, will have the next determining voice in their lives. From the beginning then, possibly at the early age of childhood, they cease to be participatory subjects in life, but rather form objects of concern for one or another agency. Such a process ongoingly undermines the value and self-worth of an individual and progressively renders them more and more inadequate to cope with life. Considered economically irrelevant, and increasingly impoverished, marginalised individuals and groups present a shocking

202 Jameson F., *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London, Verso, 1991.

203 Featherstone M., *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London, Sage, 1991. p. 101ff.

discontinuity to mainstream society. This process has received added momentum under successive governmental regimes, for the stress that there is no alternative has added a perverted benison upon what was conceived as necessity. Pushed to the margins by national and local government, maintained there by the attitude of police, social services and public media - it takes an individual of great character to refuse to accept the negative connotations of marginality as infallible criteria for life - that such characters proliferate on the margins may be evidence of something at work there beyond the confines of our consumer society.

"Every society has its boundaries and its margins just as it has its central roles and its establishments, and in the end for a society to be understood aright, it has to be considered in the light of both: not only what its mainstream and its establishment are doing, but also what is happening to the people on the margin - what they are doing and what is being done to them."²⁰⁴

Grey is the colour of marginality as popular mythology conceives it - but such a colour has never received the imprimatur of Christian tradition.

204 Hastings A., The Faces of God: Essays on Church and Society, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1975, p. 18.

Chapter 2 The Historical Context

" .. the mass of the people in England do still regard themselves as Christian and a considerable injustice is done to their sensibilities when churchmen discount their, rather impure, religious instincts as too diluted to be of value." ¹

"It is observable from a sociological standpoint that society tends to discard those roles and institutions for which it has no further functional use. In the past the increasing marginality of the Church and the clergyman's role is occasioned by the operation of this process. However, an institution which has the incarnation as a central part of its authorization and believes the world to be the creation of God and the object of his love, must regard marginality as in some sense an abnegation of its charter, and must seek at all times to remain with the mainstream of the society in which it is set." ²

1 Norman E., Church and Society in England 1770 - 1970, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 424.

2 Hastings A., A History of English Christianity 1920 - 1990, London, SCM, 1991, p. 290.

The previous chapter outlined the grey social context of the Heath Town estate reflected in the physical environment and subject to increasing deterioration through the pressure of escalating social and economic pressures. In addition the service provision reinforces the sense of marginality for local people. The only source of escape for residents is to move away from the area. There is no possibility of other than marginal existence upon the estate. Yet it is here that members of the Hope Community have chosen to live and to enter into that same condition of marginality. This is part of their vision: to be a Christian presence amongst the people.

"We are a reflective Christian community presence among the people of Heath Town, to nurture with them human community, which witnesses to the dignity and self-worth of each individual and which lives this out as communal responsibility and caring in the wider community."³

In this willingness to engage directly with those on the urban margins the Hope Community stands within a Christian tradition of such involvement. It is the purpose of this chapter briefly to examine the more recent tradition and the involvement of the church with the urban margins. Here it is necessary to explore: the dissension within twentieth century scholarship with regard to church attendance, particularly by marginalised individuals; the continuance of some forms of religious belief - implicit religion - amongst this section of the population; and the particular contribution of Roman Catholicism and its close though diminishing ties with the working class during the twentieth century.

Historical Ambiguity

The Christian tradition of involvement with the working class is one marked by a certain ambiguity. One feature of this was the distinction made between the deserving and undeserving poor. This issue became particularly acute with the transition from a predominantly rural way of life to an increasingly urban one, as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth.

"What the church was left with at the beginning of the vast social change set in motion by the Industrial Revolution, was an uncritical assumption that the existing social order was ordained by God, an individualistic doctrine of stewardship, and an attenuated doctrine of personal charity, attenuated because of the division made between the deserving and the undeserving poor and the fear of undermining the character and independence of the former."⁴

³ Hope Community Mission Statement, 1992.

⁴ Preston R., Explorations in Theology 2, London, SCM, 1981, p. 124.

Such categorisation has a contemporary corollary in the distinction made between those who are considered deservingly dependent on assistance from benefits, and those who are seen as undeserving, generally associated with the stigma of "underclass" (or more pejoratively as "social security scroungers"). Thus the residents of the Heath Town estate, within this view, would comprise predominantly the latter with a minority representation of the former. It is the contention of this thesis that such a distinction is both unjustified and unhelpful.

The history of church involvement with the marginalised in Britain has been one well-chronicled by social historians and sociologists of religion. Another ambiguity has been the apparent unwillingness of this group - historically associated with the working class - to attend church. This was of particular concern during the Victorian era. Victorian churchgoers believed that churches were important. Society it was claimed would fall apart without morality, morality was impossible without religion and religion would disappear without the churches.⁵ A large part of the working class played little or no part in organised religious life in nineteenth century Britain and this trend was maintained into the twentieth century.

In urban and rural areas, the upper and middle classes were under far heavier social pressure than the poor to attend some kind of church. This highlighted the question of whether the poor could be fully integrated into congregations where the whole tone was set by their social superiors. Indeed sermons and prayers spoke the language of the elite and echoed their concerns. Thus the poor who did attend were liable to feel marginal members of the congregation. Developments in the first half of the nineteenth century emphasised this sense of marginality and led to further alienation of the poor from the Established Churches and also from many Free Church congregations. By the mid-nineteenth century it was clear that the churches had not persuaded the emerging urban working class to attend Sunday services en masse.⁶ However, the unjustified sense of failure was the result of unrealistic expectations. By 1900 according to Cox⁷, churches had become accustomed to what had been the case for many years, that regular churchgoing was only for the minority of the population. Callum Brown⁸ maintains that more generally working class women

5 "The greater a person's stake in social cohesion and social stability, the greater the appeal of the argument: society will collapse without the churches." Cox J., *The English Churches in a Secular Society*, Oxford, OUP, 1982, p. 271.

6 c.f. *Ibid.* p. 4.

7 *Ibid.* p. 273.

8 Brown C., *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730*, London, Methuen, 1987, p. 251.

remained in close contact with religious ideas and institutions. Amongst the female population,

"Codes of female respectability derived strongly from religious or semi-religious concepts transmitted by mothers, aunts and girls' magazines and books, and were interpreted and enforced with each generation within the comparatively narrow confines of women's daily contact with peer group pressure and female leisure activities. It is noticeable that whilst religious and voluntary organisations for adults were generally in decline after 1900, the ones that survived best were female such as the Women's Guild and the Women's Rural Institute."⁹

However there continued to be religious activity amongst the working class and the established churches found new and significant social functions at both parochial and national level. Through sacramental rites of passage and the network of social welfare institutions with which it was involved, the rural and urban church maintained contact with the working class in ways which focusing attention on attendance at public worship fails to demonstrate. Indeed the churches created a vast parochial and philanthropic network which provided the sacraments and social services to the working class and the poor. Virtually all the activities of the welfare state were prefigured as the churches responded to urban social conditions.

With the advent of universal education and the legal necessity of some form of religious education by trained professionals, a diffusion of religious knowledge was promoted through the state school system. Indeed this in itself imposed a degree of knowledge of organised religion amongst working class children. In contemporary Britain this may be the only source for many of religious knowledge if not of religious belief. Cox argues¹⁰ that schools rather than churches were responsible for a demystification of religion concerned more with ethical orientation. The technological developments of the latter part of the twentieth century have also seen the contribution of religious broadcasting which receives a wide audience. Both media activity and religious teaching in schools have served as a substitute for active church participation and sustains in diverse ways a form of diffusive Christianity.

Implicit Religion

Cox maintains that "diffusive Christianity"¹¹ has existed across the centuries as a form of penumbra to active church-oriented Christianity. With the decline in active church participation and attendance, it became more difficult to employ devout practising Christians for the teaching of religious education in schools. Accordingly,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 268ff.

¹¹ Term utilised by Cox J. Ibid.

religious teaching drifted away from the orthodox piety of the churches and became more diluted and pluralistic. In more recent years it has become more related to the popular, folk customary or common religion of previous centuries.

Religious forms of sentiment, belief and action have survived as relatively autonomous resources. They retain the capacity to symbolise for example ultimate meaning, infinite power, supreme indignation and sublime compassion. Popular religion included such features as: ecstatic experiences; belief in the power of prayer as a source of renewed strength; rejection of the legalistic morality of Calvinist missionaries; trust in the expiatory value of present suffering and consequent repudiation of the threat of hell; stress on practical Christianity and a lack of interest in correct doctrine.

The work of Ahern and Davie has been valuable in understanding the nature of this diffusive Christianity or as contemporary writers have preferred to refer to it - implicit religion.¹² The evidence that there exists religion "below street-level" is another way of describing what one researcher has termed "subterranean theologies",

"that luxuriant theological undergrowth which provides the working core of belief more often than is realised."¹³

Studies in implicit religion and urban theology have also evinced a common belief in the paranormal, in one form or another - ghosts, fate, the occult, clairvoyancy etc - while at the same time there is a readiness to turn to the church in connection with specific events - notably death. Such inconsistencies are not perceived as such by individuals, but rather part of everyday thought, indeed it is now a hackneyed statement that "orthodox Christian theology plays little part in the everyday life of our nation."¹⁴ Work in this field has also emphasised the reality that religious beliefs are strongly related to a particular cultural inheritance and are absorbed as a whole package of wisdom. They contain largely unexamined assumptions and indeed are almost unconscious parts of an individual's thinking. It is only a major crisis which will bring religious ideas to the fore, unless they are elicited in some less threatening manner. It is here that account must be taken of the profoundly inarticulate nature of much common religion,¹⁵ and the gulf that exists between conventional religious

12 There is also the contribution of the Religious Research Papers of the department of Sociology University of Leeds.

13 Martin D., cited in Ahern G. and Davie G., Inner City God, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1987, p. 70.

14 Ibid. p. 38.

15 "Folk" or "common" religion can be defined as: "those beliefs and practices of an overtly religious nature which are not under the domination of a prevailing religious institution." Towler R., Homo Religiosus:

language and a very large sector of the population. Indeed for many marginalised people the church is seen as one more "authority", another "them" to be mistrusted along with other authorities social, educational, etc, all of whom appear to communicate in a language which is unintelligible to those in the inner city.

"It may be that the nature of belief in parts of our urban society is indeed one aspect of the church's difficulties in such areas, but only if its ministry is assessed in particular terms. If it is true that some gaps may be too large to bridge, others may appear less formidable if looked at from a different perspective."¹⁶

Davie continues by arguing that if the church's aim might be described as a need to create contexts in which "belief" can emerge from a semi-conscious level and be gradually transformed into something closer to an authentic Christian faith, it does not always follow that this is achieved in a uniform way. Indeed, the role of the churches at the end of this century may well centre around this very important area of creating the conditions or contexts in which the unexpressed or inarticulate "spirit" can surface.

A large majority of people in contemporary Britain continue to believe in God but have ceased to have any real relationship with any of the churches. Davie's work¹⁷ highlights the fact that older people are more religious than the younger generation. Pre-war generations grew up with some connection to the churches through the vast panoply of para-church organisations. Thus though they may not have practised their faith regularly, there was a degree of religious knowledge which bore some connection with Christian orthodoxy. Within the post-war generations a certain minimal belief continues to exist and a non-hostile attitude towards the churches; however, religious knowledge along with practice is minimal. Accordingly, a greater degree of preparation time is required by the churches for sacramental involvement such as baptism¹⁸ and marriage¹⁹ as no credal awareness can be assumed. Yet,

Sociological Problems in the Study of Religion, London, Constable, 1974, chapter 8, cited in Davie G., "The nature of belief in the inner city", Ahern G. and Davie G., *Inner City God*, op. cit. p. 34.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 60.

¹⁷ See particularly Davie G., "Believing without belonging: is this the future of religion in Britain?", *Social Compass*, 37, (4), 1990, pp. 455-469.

¹⁸ Baptism has become increasingly problematic in contemporary Britain. The Established Church and other mainstream churches have moved to a much stricter policy. However this has been fiercely debated within the churches. Ahern states one particular view in the following terms "The church shoots herself in the foot with its sectarian retreat into a strict baptism policy. If baptism has nothing to do with the grace of God, but is only to do with chosen conscious belief, the baptising of unthinking infants would seem to be pointless. If it is justified as an agent of social conditioning, it seems unimportant to insist on commitment on the part of one of the parents as a sine qua non for the rite to take place, often insistence destroys the prospect of parial social conditioning. Rite is the best bastion of religion. A sectarian attitude towards access to the rites risks eroding not just orthopraxis but also the Christian mentality which in however diffused a way is implicit in

according to Davie's work, within the 18-24 age range the commitment to ecological, moral and ethical issues is particularly prominent and she suggests that this is a redirecting of religious values.

"Religion and religious values are not so much disappearing among young people as between popular belief and the institutional churches, ie surely the relationship between believing and belonging."²⁰

This discrepancy between believing and belonging Davie perceives as most acute among the urban working class in Urban Priority Areas. Here belief persists but the reluctance to adopt religious practice involves also the mistrust of any kind of institutional life and involvement therein. In line with historical precedent, it is evident that on the urban margins belief is not equated with liturgical practice which at best is seen as unnecessary and at worst hypocritical.

Various views were expressed about why people attended church by residents of the Heath Town estate. In one meeting at the Community flat, only one of those consulted was a regular churchgoer, but many had views on why others went to church.

"People go to church because they want to go to heaven."²¹

"You don't have to go, you go if you want to. I don't think you should look at people and judge them. People take the Mickey out of you if you go to church. I go because I need to, it helps me, to go back to the drawing board."²²

"The only time I go to church is when I feel guilty. The other thing why I don't go, when I need to go it's locked. I've been told to go round the back and peer in the windows, but it's not the same and I'd feel someone would think I was suspicious."²³

In even this brief interchange, the sense of alienation from the church is very prominent. An assertion that people only go because they want to go to heaven received a definite rebuttal from the one resident who did regularly attend a church

the rite. There is some sense that Christening is about naming and that without it communal identity is not legitimated; perhaps that is why most people seem to like the word Christening rather than baptism. ... It is difficult to plumb the sense of rightness about Christening. My impression is that it has power as a traditional action (rather than belief) set apart from everyday life, that focuses on that most altruistic of natural impulses, the nurture of children. The sprinkling of water seems to bring together pragmatic, communal, ethical and metaphysical realities." Ahern G. & Davie G., *Inner City God*, op. cit. pp. 127, 97, 96.

19 In some churches up to six months notice is necessary and marriage preparation classes must be attended if a church wedding is desired.

20 Davie G. "Believing without belonging: is this the future of religion in Britain", *Social Compass*, op. cit.

21 Resident W. meeting, February, 1992.

22 Resident S.

23 Resident O.

and who indicated something of her own experience, and the cost for her of going contrary to the tide of local opinion. Yet she saw her own need as the most important driving force. Another resident's connections with church appear to have involved very negative experiences or personal feelings of guilt which have not been assuaged when confronted with locked buildings, rather this has served to increase the sense of exclusion.

Davie emphasised that working class belief is not only unrelated to religious practice but it rarely finds any formal articulation. Rather it appears in unexamined assumptions which exist within the subconscious emerging only in times of crisis, when religious ideas come to the fore. Thus in the rites of passage of life, and particularly in death, those on the urban margins are brought once more into the parameters of church life.

The very middle class organisational pattern of the churches reflect middle class ways of believing and are expressed in predominantly middle class language - this of its very nature is problematic for those who live on the urban margins.

"My view of church is that it's run by people with a good education. The majority are from middle class backgrounds. The church is sort of aloof from the poor.²⁴ It's meant to be representing the poor but it's staying on middle ground. I wouldn't say it's like that in foreign countries where there's a lot of starvation and that. There's something about Britain, the church in Britain seems cut off from the people it's supposed to be representing. To me the church is people, everybody not just a handful. I've met priests who seemed radical to me. They seem to move from one place to another - too radical for people in the parish. I believe the church should get rid of all its hierarchy and come and live among the people and let the people be the church but I know that'll never happen. Church is part of the establishment."²⁵

Faith in the City²⁶ echoes a similar concern about the middle class nature of much that occurs within the churches.

"It is the consistently middle class presentation of the gospel and style of church life which creates a gulf between it and most working class people."²⁷

The mixture of superstition and belief that generally appears to pervade much of the religious belief in inner cities leads to a certain policy dilemma on the part of the

24 c.f. "The clergy are seen in stereotype as well-fed, callous and reactionary." Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation. The Report of the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, London, Church House Publishing, 1985, p. 28.

25 Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

26 Faith in the City, op. cit.

27 Ibid. p. 66.

churches and Christian involvement. Recent studies indicate that the most sensible policy seems to be one which uses popular religion as a base upon which to build, but at the same time stresses the need to "affirm" selectively; ie to strengthen those elements that are closest to an authentic Christian faith and to discourage those that are not. This strategy appears to give value to the expressions of faith arising from the people, but the attitude implies a judgement over and against established practice. It is not merely a question of semantics to argue that a real endeavour to listen to the reality of what religious experience is emerging from the people with an openness to consider it might be calling the establishment to some change, might seem a more positive attitude

The Roman Catholic Phenomenon

Throughout the period under consideration, as the nineteenth century unfolded into the twentieth, the Roman Catholic Church has proved an anomaly in the pattern of church membership and attendance. Gill²⁸ maintains that over the period of 150 years for which data exists regarding church attendance figures, the Roman Catholic churches were consistently full. However, this phenomenon is in part due to the completely different practices of church building. Instead of providing more buildings to accommodate numbers, more services were provided.²⁹ Thus even in contemporary Britain it is not unknown for there to be five masses in a church on one Sunday. Indeed Gill maintains that even today urban Roman Catholic churches have more numbers attending than could be accommodated at any one time. This is quite distinct from other denominations.

Apart from the old established centres of Roman Catholicism, in the first part of the twentieth century, this denomination was predominantly to be found in the cities. The influx of Irish immigrants - "the poorest of the poor" as Chadwick termed them - was a feature of nineteenth century urban Britain. The Irish Catholics felt like foreigners, and knew themselves disliked. This feeling of isolation within English society was something they shared with recusant aristocrats and converts from other churches. This alienation from society only began to change under the influence of Cardinal Manning who endeavoured to thrust Roman Catholics into the mainstream of society. Thus a curious ecclesiastical paradox arose as liberals within the Church of England endeavoured to press for more working class clergy, the Roman Catholic

28 Gill R., The Myth of the Empty Church, London, SPCK, 1993,

29 Gill R. notes the remark of Arthur Black in The British Weekly, 23 Feb, 1928. "How wise has been this Church in limiting the number of its centres, using them more fully and concentrating strength in a few rather than dividing limited energies over many." *ibid.* p. 79.

Church, whose priests were often of an Irish background and working class origins, endeavoured to recruit those from a rather different social strata.³⁰

However, the ordinary membership of the Roman Catholic Church, unlike other denominations, incorporated a substantial working class membership. For the Irish immigrants church membership was part of their patrimony and one of the ways in which identity could be maintained within an alien environment. Allied with this were the exacting demands which membership made on individuals, demands which of their very nature served to authenticate the church's claim to mediate the sacred. In addition the church was consistently able to incorporate different classes within its structured framework.³¹ All might be found attending the mass, the central form of worship, celebrated throughout the world in the same manner, utilising Latin as a universal language and providing a means of personal and private sanctification within a corporate and universal setting. The emphasis upon "the one true church" gave a certainty and confidence to Catholic identity. This was of particular importance in working class areas where the basis of attachment to the church was first through the family and thereafter via communal solidarity.

According to Archer³², although there was an obligation on all Catholics to attend mass, with the penalty of mortal sin if this was not fulfilled, still Roman Catholics who went regularly to church did not do so either through fear or to maintain their moral superiority. Rather they attended because they wanted to, it was their religion and part of their identity. However, Archer distinguishes between being within the parameters of the church in the sense of belonging to some community associated with the church and being within those parameters through regular churchgoing. Here one of the strengths of the Roman Catholic Church has been the ability to encompass a wide range of religious sensibilities including the non church going and a spectrum of specific ways of relating to the sacred in terms of ceremony, mystery, symbol and distinctive practices.

The watershed of the second Vatican Council had its consequent effect upon the urban Catholic community, but changes had been in motion already. The old working class communities had been breaking up as younger generations were moved out of the inner city areas and onto new peripheral housing estates. This dispersal of

30 Chadwick O., The Victorian Church, Vol. 2, London, Adam & Charles Black, 1970, p. 251 ff.

31 Such incorporation was not always able to bridge class barriers and indeed it is debateable whether the cleavage between the mainly English upper middle classes and the mainly Irish urban working classes has ever been bridged completely.

32 Archer A., The Two Catholic Churches - A Study in Oppression, London, SCM, 1986.

traditional Catholic communities meant that in many areas the church's symbolic function in old working class communities was ending and it was revealed that,

"in a practical sense these communities had been bound together primarily by the shared values and experiences of working class life rather than any specific activity of the church."³³

Thus the nature of Catholic identity was in decline and as the once immigrant community was absorbed into British society, Catholicism was no longer seen as important and symbolic of difference. The extensive research of Hornsby-Smith³⁴ supports this understanding of a gradual erosion of the distinctive Catholic subculture through increasing levels of marital exogamy, the widening of friendship circles beyond religious allegiance and the drift towards only nominal involvement with the church.³⁵

"The Roman Catholic Church was ceasing to have any distinctive service to offer, or to stand for anything in particular with which working class people could identify. It was just one of a number of bodies providing religious services when required."³⁶

Against this context, the changes wrought by the Conciliar fathers in no way served to stem this tide of change rather it received fresh stimulus as,

"Before the very eyes of Catholics, enchanted, indignant or indifferent, the former things of Catholicism simply passed away."³⁷

Most marked were the liturgical changes which evoked passionate acceptance or rejection provoking dissension within congregations. The contrast with the former liturgy was marked. Whereas pre-Vatican II the old mass appeared to provide something distinctively out of the ordinary and Roman Catholic, the new mass appeared little different from other liturgical practices. The old mass,

"allowed people to engage the sacred in their own fashion, providing for a whole range of religious demands and sensibilities and drawing people into the space where there was evidently something more to life. It provided a fixed centre to which people could relate their changing worlds."³⁸

33 Ibid. p. 128.

34 In particular: Hornsby-Smith M., Roman Catholics in England: Studies in Social Structure since the Second World War, Cambridge, CUP, 1987.

35 "In general the evidence I have reviewed supports the general proposition that the maintenance of a distinctive socio-religious subculture is facilitated by marital endogamy, exclusivity of friendship ties, and high levels of inclusive patterns of institutional involvement and activity." *ibid.* p. 213.

36 Ibid. p. 129.

37 Ibid. p. 133.

38 Ibid. p. 139.

By contrast the new liturgy allowed little room for individual withdrawal but was a more rational form adapted by certain intellectual conceptions of what was appropriate in this particular part of the universal church. According to Archer the new mass presupposed a gathered community whose members would be already known to one another but rarely was this the case in Britain. It endeavoured to transcend class barriers, but the very mode of its language was middle class. What was achieved Archer denigrates as "the evacuation of meaning from the old symbolism and the emasculation of its gestures."³⁹ Access to the transcendent which lay at the heart of the mass was not now apparent to confused congregations, and as a result numbers of Catholics felt unable to trust themselves to the new ritual. Meanwhile the paraliturgical forms which had fed Catholic devotional practice no longer seemed encouraged by the new dispensation.

"The powerful novenas and devotions disappeared, special occasions no longer saw the candles massed around the altar and to light one privately in front of a statue was no longer recommended as a sensible and natural thing to do."⁴⁰

In particular the predominance of mystery which encouraged reverential participation appeared to have been swept away. Many for whom the devotional life of rosary, benediction, novena, and first Fridays had sustained their commitment found no attraction in the prayer groups, liturgy groups and discussion groups of the renewed paraliturgical forms. There appeared few remnants of the non-intellectual forms of piety to which such individuals could relate, and ostracism appeared the natural consequence. Had such changes been enforced under the traditional approach to ritual with its emphasis on discipline, determination and perseverance, where the action undertaken appeared more important than any possible participatory enjoyment, they might have had some measure of success. However, within the post-Vatican II church the mass was required to be an engaged community experience. As Archer states,

"An earlier Catholic approach to ritual showed clearly that what was required was determination. It was not invariably or usually supposed that the fruits of churchgoing would be enjoyed during the mass itself. Perseverance was extolled and initiation into the mysteries was a long haul; there was no promise that church going would be fun. Now what was being demanded of the mass was that it should provide an immediate and pleasant experience."⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid. p. 144.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 133.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 194.

Also, paradoxically those with only a loose connection with the church but who nevertheless had found some shelter within the broader Catholic fold, were further alienated by the renewed church. Under the pre-Vatican II dispensation which had appeared to some coercive, those Catholics who failed to attend church were regarded not as individuals who were deliberately opting out of their Catholic allegiance but somewhat indulgently as those whose return should be indulgently sought. In the new post-Vatican II era the drift away from the church comprised an increasingly large number of the working class population as a new orthodoxy demanded an uncompromising commitment or a recognised exclusion.⁴²

The traditional supports of clergy and religious appeared more suspect. What had formally been seen to lie within the competence of the priest was now decided by the informed consciences of an increasingly educated middle class laity.⁴³ Meanwhile the relative respectful seclusion of religious life was now exposed to public gaze, to the confusion of laity and clergy alike.

"For the nun to clamber off her pedestal, exchange her habit for ordinary clothing with cardigans and sensible shoes and engage in theological controversy and general insubordination, was both confusing to the laity and a challenge to the clergy."⁴⁴

Post-Vatican II, the Catholic working class increasingly absorbed the prevailing cultural ethos that church going was not an inevitable part of Christianity. This coincided for many with the relinquishment of an Irish identity and the failure to find any other commitment within the Catholic church. The new style of the post-Vatican II church fragmented working class religion by exclusion. Much popular religion was for the first time driven out of official Catholicism by the imposition of a middle class form of religion. For working class people to take on the new religious dispositions meant adopting the values of another class.

The move towards a more acceptable social status was a feature of Catholic life though the first half of the twentieth century as the church leadership sought to loosen the ties which bound the church to an Irish national identity. Anthony Archer

42 c.f. *ibid.* p. 156ff.

43 Hornsby-Smith notes evidence of, "A process of laicization at both the individual and organisational levels. This process manifests itself in the increasing differentiation of religious belief and moral decision-making where previously the priest was the sole focus of legitimate teaching and arbiter of morality." Hornsby-Smith M., Roman Catholic Beliefs in England: Customary Catholicism and Transformations of Religious Authority, Cambridge, CUP, 1991, p. 230. By contrast the thrust of the papal encyclical, Veritatis Splendor, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1993, may be seen as one attempt to withdraw moral criteria from the particularity of individualistic interpretation and restore prominence to the guide-lines of the church.

44 Hornsby-Smith M., Roman Catholic Beliefs in England, op. cit. p. 164.

indicates how this quest for respectability became a policy deliberately adopted by the Roman Catholic Church in its post-war modelling of itself upon the Church of England, and its decision to align itself with the dominant structures of society. Furthermore, he sees the church of Vatican II as geared towards an intellectual elite, and consequently, eroding its own traditional base among the marginalised.⁴⁵ His prognosis with regard to the recovery of this constituency is grim.

"It seems likely enough that the Catholic Church in England will continue uninterrupted on the road it has taken partly by force of circumstances and partly by choice. This is the road to becoming just another Christian denomination, without any very outstanding characteristic of its own, unable to make effective any particular demands as to belief or practice, primarily middle class in composition, and giving its support to the prevailing ethos in which the fundamental rightness of the present arrangements of society is affirmed, and through which the interests of the powerful are sustained."⁴⁶

According to Faith in the City, Roman Catholicism still has a strong numerical base within Urban Priority Areas, which employ proportionately more than average clergy and religious. Yet according to Hornsby-Smith, English Catholics may be termed a "domesticated denomination" unlikely to rock the boat of British complacency to any marked extent, content rather with the status quo and marginal social engineering to file down the most pointed injustices.⁴⁷

The fastest growing churches are the Independent predominantly black churches, which not only draw people together for a particular form of worship but in addition provide a series of support mechanisms for the minority ethnic community. The majority of black Christians live in Urban Priority Areas, and most are of West Indian origin. The growth of these churches may be exemplified by the New Testament Church of God which numerically doubled in size from 10 - 20,000 between 1966 and 1970 and in 1985 stood at 30,000.⁴⁸ Other denominations have targeted the urban areas as priority project areas: the Methodist "Mission Alongside the Poor"; United Reformed Church and Baptist Union have developed missionary strategies; the Salvation Army has continued its own distinctive mission to the poorest. What Faith in the City clearly emphasised⁴⁹ was that the Church of England had never enjoyed a golden age in regard to urban Britain. Rather the predominantly

45 In a not dissimilar way to the movement of the Labour Party, since 1945, away from its own working class base.

46 Archer A., The Two Catholic Churches, op. cit. p. 258.

47 See Hornsby-Smith M., Roman Catholics in England, op. cit. p. 216.

48 Figures given in Faith in the City, op. cit., p. 42.

49 Ibid. pp. 45-46.

middle class congregations have found the way of life of the urban poor simply repulsive.

Unrelated to daily life

Reactions to the church from the people on the Heath Town Estate were gauged from attendance at different meetings where opinions were voiced and from interviews with individuals. What emerged was a sense of loss of contact with the institution, which was seen as alien and involving another authority structure. At the same time paradoxically, there was still considerable feeling that the church should be speaking in favour of the poor. One resident indicated a seminal view amongst the fieldworker group that God is especially concerned with the poor. His notion that a "true church" would in some way inaugurate the eschaton is both a challenge to, and critique of, the prevailing ecclesiastical situation.

"We're the poor people, all are God's people, but God's especially for the poor. As people we've lost our contact with God. He's trying to get in touch with us; there's a barrier but it's disappearing. If we were the true church it would mean a perfect peaceful world. God's people are the poor and God's tool is the church - that's how it's seen. The church should speak out against the government in favour of the poor. There are some people in the church I feel I could talk to and express my views but with others we're talking about completely different things."⁵⁰

This resident's views indicate a real appreciation of the dichotomy existing within the church with regard to any relationship with those on the margins. The division between those with whom he might have some rapport and those with whom there would be no point of contact illustrates the problem of any cohesive policy being adopted by the church in its relationship with the marginalised.⁵¹ The authoritarian nature of some of the mainstream churches with structured hierarchies proved problematic for another resident.

"The church is very hierarchical. If God is good, if there is a God, there shouldn't be a church based on hierarchy, shouldn't be any positions."⁵²

When daily life includes, as chapter 1 illustrated, reference to so many professional authorities whose determining voices enhance or disrupt life for the marginalised, other authority structures, however benevolent, are unwelcome. No member of the

⁵⁰ Resident M. meeting, February, 1992.

⁵¹ When clergy were asked in the Faith in the City research what they thought were the most important things preventing people attending church the replies centred on: ignorance about the church and Christianity, and the perception of the church as irrelevant in their lives. c.f. Faith in the City, op. cit. p. 34.

⁵² Resident J. meeting, February, 1992.

statutory professional agencies lives on the estate, although many work there during the week. Also there is no church or minister's house actually on the estate. Thus the presence of the Hope Community comprising both religious sisters and committed lay women is a peculiarly powerful expression of church in the midst of the people.

"The problem with church is that it's so different to what people do everyday."⁵³

Within the Roman Catholic community, although the liturgy of the past was divorced from everyday reality, yet it assisted by giving meaning to that reality. Here symbol and mystery helped to convey the sense of a transcendent larger reality which in some mysterious way gave meaning to the present. Catholicism in this way was a vehicle for the working class conviction that there was some point in an insecure and uncertain life. With the demystification process which underpinned many of the Vatican II liturgical modifications, intelligibility undermined meaningful mystery to the diminishment of ordinary life. There seemed little emphasis on the mysterious symbolic security underpinning life, where space was provided for individual dreams and devotions, rather rational middle class forms and participative communitarian ideas came to dominate worship leaving little room for personal devotions.

These changes within the Roman Catholic tradition, the one church which had claimed the allegiance of a substantial section of the urban population well into the twentieth century, assisted the drift away from the church by both respectable working class and marginalised individuals. With the demise of meaning through mystery, the one criterion for attendance was relevance to the ordinary living situation. However, while the pre-Vatican II transcendent emphasis on mystery and symbol proved inclusive of all social classes; the post-Vatican II emphasis on relevance was predominantly middle class oriented and thus bore little relationship to the ordinary living situation of the working class and marginalised. The form and language of the new liturgy was perceived by the latter as alien and failing to meet their needs. Thus within Heath Town, there is a stark lack of contact between what is thought or felt or known to go on in church, and the daily life of most of the individuals on the estate. It is so different from what people do everyday. The everyday activities and concerns of people involve: the daily grind of traversing fouled footpaths; of being subject to interminable ongoing noise; of coping with vandalised laundries; standing in long queues waiting to "sign on" for benefits; looking after children; and for some the boredom of countless unoccupied hours. This lack of engagement of the church in the ordinary lives of individuals who do not

53 Resident T. interview, November, 1991.

make up a constituent membership is still a distinctive feature of most denominations. Not only is the church not seen as relevant to these daily activities, there is the conviction that church personnel have no idea what ordinary life on a peripheral housing estate might be like and little interest in finding out.

"The majority of the people who run (the church) have no idea actually what life's like in a place like this. Living here I feel the church is out of touch. A few years ago I was talking to a few people and explaining how things were. It was like they weren't able to take it in, they didn't believe in inner city Britain. I think people running the church should be educated more about what's going on and should come into places like this more and speak to the people."⁵⁴

For those who do endeavour to enter any sacred portals, the practical difficulties they face with regard to services mitigates against the potential for a real sense of acceptance and belonging. My own experience of regularly attending a local church exemplified this point. The services although intelligible to those who attended, would prove relatively incomprehensible to any unversed in the particular rubrics of that denomination. The church itself was only twenty minutes walk away from the estate, but in terms of the reality of contact between the two venues they could have been continents apart.

This point was one of particular discussion with a resident who had lived on the estate for only two years. He had opted to come to this area, so in this way was unusual amongst the residents, most of whom were there by default, having been allocated by the Council. He was also a regular church goer with a preference for the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, but with an ecumenical spirit which led him to vary his attendance amongst different churches. He raised the very simple point that even in the matter of following the service and knowing what page the congregation were reading when it came to a prayer book could be a difficulty. Not all clergy give a clear indication. Also for those whose reading is habitually tabloid newspapers, a book of any size may appear to be an obstacle, while the position of the illiterate is made even more untenable.

"Things like that make it very difficult for people to get involved in it."⁵⁵

One of the fieldworkers told of a time when she took one of the residents along to another local church, and the impact on the resident, herself, and the congregation of this new "participant".⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

⁵⁵ Resident Clergyman D. interview, March, 1992.

⁵⁶ c.f. "Most people want to feel comfortable and secure in church. We want the people sitting next to us to be like us. Recently a gentleman told me that he would not be able to go to church and sit down next to

"I remember taking Y. to the local Anglican Church. She was terrified. I suppose we sang, the people there knew some songs she knows, and she enjoyed that but otherwise it was all words and books and you had to dress up and there were people looking at her. She stuck out like a sore thumb not just because of her size (Y. is an obese woman) but you could tell she wasn't a churchgoing person."⁵⁷

There can be very little opportunity for people to participate if they are not familiar with the liturgy. Those who are so familiar may find it very helpful, but those for whom it is unfamiliar find it difficult to attune to what is taking place. As this resident indicated:

"I'm sure some people would like to get involved but they're fearful of saying the wrong thing."⁵⁸

With regard to the possibility of change in present church structures to include those who might like to attend but who find the present format too difficult to cope with, this resident was somewhat dubious with regard to possibilities. There was little likelihood that established congregations would be willing to change to become more inclusive bodies.

"I think it's very difficult in a traditional setting to break out of that because there's a lot of people who are very comfortable with the way things are. They will accept certain innovations but basically they don't want it to go too far from what they're familiar with."⁵⁹

The clearly stated difficulties of: the unintelligibility of ritual; a perception of the middle class nature of church membership; and a predominantly white grouping are features which were reiterated in talking with local residents. The question was asked of one black resident whether he liked going to any particular church?

"I prefer the Pentecostal Church; it's my sort of rhythm but what I don't prefer is that they knock the doctrines of the other churches which doesn't sit well with me. I find the Roman Catholic Church rather boring, I'd fall asleep. Anglican is mainly like the Roman Catholic. Methodist and Baptist in between. I like the worship in the Pentecostal Church but because of the dogmatic approach of the pastor and the elders, I don't feel comfortable, which is a shame."⁶⁰

people who wear black jackets with aluminium spangles. "Those people frighten me" he said "and I don't want to be frightened when I go to church." Faucher T., "Outsiders need not apply", *The Tablet*, 12 December, 1992, p. 1566.

57 Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

58 Ibid.

59 Resident Clergyman D. op. cit.

60 Resident T. op. cit.

This resident elaborated his own sense of unease with the very structure of the churches, in particular the hierarchical nature of a number of denominations. Here, the violence he is aware of in his own daily life seems to find an echo in the verbal violence he feels he has witnessed amongst adherents of particular religious affiliations. His conclusion has a seeming cynical inevitability - "church lets you down"!

"I see the church as being too dogmatic and regimented. When I say this I mean the pope and the bishops and the pastors. Well not so much the pastors and the ministers but they are the first level of the hierarchy, anybody above a priest. When I was so much a born-again Christian wanting others to become Christians, a guy said to me "How come you call yourself a Christian and go to a Pentecostal Church and Roman Catholics call themselves Christians and go to a Roman Catholic Church and Jehovah Witnesses and all that and yet there you go slagging one another off" and I thought he's got a point. You've all the people who don't believe in Christianity or anything standing there watching people verbally kicking the shit out of each other. People then say - hang on I'm better outside the church if that's what goes on in there. They talk about unity but they are in to stabbing each other in the back. That's basically what I think of the hierarchical church, in the end it lets you down."⁶¹

This potted ecumenical engagement and the distinct sense of fair play, which causes this resident to rile in the face of prejudice and bigotry, serves as a poignant criticism of much interdenominational feuding. It also highlights for this resident a basic clerical authority structure that he finds incompatible with his own philosophy of life.

Another resident commenting on his own understanding of church made the salient point that not only were church services often unintelligible, but that those involved in the running of churches had little real comprehension of life on an estate, such as the one he lived on. For him, church leaders and congregations comprised predominantly middle class educated individuals.

The comments here expressed appear to emphasise the reality that those involved in running the church are themselves drawn from the same narrow background as those whom they continue to spend their time serving. Indeed in this context the operational boundaries of the church appear remarkably and immutably confined. In terms of identifiable figures associated with the church, it is the clergy who are seen as the church representatives . Other alternative forms of church are the regular

61 Ibid.

visits of Jehovah Witnesses throughout the estate whose presence and persistence prove generally unwelcome.

One of the fieldworkers, summarising her own perception of the relationship of individuals with the churches during her seven years on the estate, was predominantly aware of the general feeling of alienation from the church. Yet it was not that the church was irrelevant to individuals, for many had strong views about why they did not attend. Poignantly for some these reasons focus in a lack of self-worth, as individuals feel themselves "not good enough".

"The chief feeling about church is one of alienation from it really. People don't understand its ritual, They associate it with something middle-class. For the black people it's seen as predominantly white. By church I'm meaning the main line churches. Children will say the usual things like "it's too boring", they've never been but ... "I've no good clothes to wear. I've no money to put in the collection plate." These are the kind of reasons. They feel they're not good enough for church. They are very conscious of sin in their lives and yet they want to pray and to worship God. They want to be together." ⁶²

The radical revisioning of the nature of church which has taken place for some individuals on the estate is connected to their involvement with the Hope Community. Here the forms of activity engaged therein has caused numbers to see this now as their particular form of church. It has a vastly different appeal from the traditional denominational forms. This revived life appears in stark contrast to the worsening socio-economic position of many on the estate, a position clearly exposed in the follow-up report to Faith in the City.

"Our conclusion must be that for a considerable number of poor people the picture looks bleaker than it did in 1985. For some at least this is because in real terms, they have actually less cash in their pockets now than then. For many it is because their relative position is so much weaker. It is they who are most affected by the cuts in social service provision, in declining patient care in the health service, in day nurseries, in affordable decent housing for themselves and their children. ... Faith in the City said "We believe that a national strategy needs to be developed capable of taking the question of poverty into the mainstream of the public debate about this country's future". We can only reiterate that such a strategy is still essential and from a Christian perspective the experience of the poor and those who live in Urban Priority Areas remains a grave and fundamental injustice." ⁶³

This report from the General Synod of the Church of England in 1990, gives some indication of the ongoing concern that has been generated amongst members of the

⁶² Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

⁶³ Living Faith in the City, London, General Synod of the Church of England, 1990, p. 89.

hierarchy with regard to the poverty evinced in the Urban Priority Areas. It also indicates the attempt - on the basis of careful research - to inform national opinion and to bring to bear a degree of Christian pressure upon national policy-making. By contrast the work of the Hope Community is small-scale, local and individual in its outreach, but the effect in terms of some residents of the estate has been profound and substantial.

Marginality - chosen and imposed

Contemporary British history bears witness to the ongoing concentration of the working class and the marginalised within urban environments, and the problems confronting Christian ministry in these areas. Nowadays rather than the influx of Irish immigrants causing concern, the focus has shifted to consideration of immigrants of Asian and West Indian origin and their second and third generation families. The generic sense of distrust of the institutional church has developed into a sense of alienation based on the inability to relate the reality of everyday life to the way in which the church presents itself. The church today is rarely in the midst of marginalised people. Indeed, some such as Edward Norman would maintain that it is contrary to the very nature of the church to adopt such a marginal stance, rather its proclamation should emerge from a position rooted in the mainstream of society.

The alternative position asserts that the failure of the vision of modernity, and the creation of marginality in a social economic and political context, has been reinforced by ecclesiastical structures which have accommodated to the prevailing emphasis of society. The Christian vision, while never extolling a grey reality, has traditionally prized the experience of marginal individuals and groups. The voice of Christian prophecy has generally been heard from the margins. The chosen people were a marginalised group of refugees for many years. Christ himself came from a marginalised area of the country, and the rumours of illegitimacy gave him a blemished social status. His own preference for association with the poor and marginalised has been enshrined - though at times obfuscated - in Christian tradition.

Within contemporary society, the church holds a marginalised position. A fraction of society, less than 10% of the population have some regular involvement with any Christian church. Yet these self-same institutions appear to claim a certain monopoly with regard to Christian vision. It is argued that the vision of the churches is confined within the respectable body of its membership, and is not seen as emerging from outside its own boundaries. This apparently claustrophobic grasp of the reality

of God at work within the world appears at best short-sighted, and at worst positively debilitating. The effect is to emphasise the move towards ensuring continuing respectability and a measure of power within the framework of society for a respectable few, while neglecting to listen, hear or learn from the very marginal elements on whose behalf the churches so often claim to be working.

Accordingly, the marginality of the church is one from which the church appears to seek evasive action, not seeing it as an opportunity for dynamic impetus. Consequently, a primary concern still tends to be diminishing numbers, and the aim is to increase numbers in the pew, rather than to emerge from behind defensive walls into the uncomfortable reality of the everyday lives of individuals and groups on the margins. It is noteworthy how the myth of a golden age of full churches still seems to underlie much of the policy deliberations within the denominations. Such sterile debate focuses upon the search for an ideal form of liturgical life which will draw numbers of people to return to the churches. In so doing the churches continue to distance themselves from particularly the most vulnerable on the urban margins. This inability to see marginal status as an opportunity to be welcomed, rather than a failure to be combated, engenders an inability to relate to those on the margins, those who have been forced into marginal status. It would appear then that the churches may be trampling upon their Christian vision in the pursuit of an illusion. The illusion that on some millenarian day in the future, great numbers will come pouring back into the churches which have faithfully maintained their practice. There is a vast discrepancy in terms of adherence to this view between those who are engaged in the church locally, and members of institutional hierarchies.

Finally, there is the situation of those who have chosen marginality, the religious Community living and working on the estate. Here, that very choice, and the willingness openly to interact with the people in the pragmatic reality of their lives has led to a new appreciation of the life of the marginalised, the work of God among them, and the possibilities to be learned from them. A potential further dimension of marginalisation emerges in consideration of the life and work of the Community. Here the willingness to risk steps into the unknown was a prime requisite both in the formation of the Community and in the continued maintenance and expansion of its life and work.

Chapter 3 A Living Embodiment of the Tradition

"The contribution of women religious to the humanisation of the world and of the church .. will be nothing less than the actual transformation of the gospel message today." ¹

"To accept the effects seen in the very oppressive poverty of the people very seriously without judging or/and evaluating; the necessity of listening deeply to their experience, the meanings those experiences have for them and the interpretations they give them. In that way we come to understand them a little more deeply as persons who are poor, instead of the poor." ²

"The only place I do go to much is the sisters where I meet a few friends. When I'm there we celebrate birthdays and that, we talk about everything. We go on trips to the country and not just day trips. We have prayer meetings and I look forward to them very much. Every now and again we get together in the local community centre and we celebrate festivals like Christmas and Easter and Pentecost. It's all enjoyable whatever happens at the sisters, there's always a happy atmosphere." ³

"Let there be love, peace and hope shared among us - those mean different things to different people but the sisters exude them for us in Heath Town." ⁴

1 Pope John XXIII, cited in Azevedo M., Vocation for Mission: The Challenge of Religious Life Today, New York, Paulist Press, 1988, p. 168.

2 Coene S., "Clinical pastoral education with the poor", The Journal of Pastoral Care, 37, 1983, pp. 90-97.

3 Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

4 Resident L. meeting, October, 1991.

The previous chapter in exploring the recent history of church involvement with the marginalised indicated a contemporary malaise undermining such contact. However, social involvement may long have continued after a previous generation of social historians considered consistent with the facts. More recent scholarship has reiterated not merely the ongoing rites of passage ministry, but also an involvement with the everyday reality of working class and marginalised individuals and families. It does appear clear that when the church fulfils a social function and need, thereby affirming marginal identity, it does continue to maintain support and adherence within these communities. It is when the church ceases to have this social role over and above its liturgical practice that its membership dwindles on the margins. Post-war social provision by the state has meant the increasing lack of involvement of the church in the social sphere of the lives of marginalised people and a widening gulf emerging. It might be expected that the reciprocal effect of this lack of church involvement would be the increased repugnance amongst marginalised people for all things religious. That this is not the case, the work of recent scholars such as Davie and Ahern has made clear, and this is verified by the experience of those who live and work on the urban margins.

This chapter gives consideration to the life and work of a community which has committed itself to living among marginalised people and sharing their everyday reality. In this process there is enacted, by virtue of need, something of that profound listening which Gadamer⁵ asserts is the rigour of hermeneutical experience. It is listening to a person who has something to say and is seeking the words to make himself intelligible. The words may well be most ordinary and commonplace and yet may still be able to express a meaning in what is said and unsaid. The consequences of such profound listening, as seen in the lives of marginalised individuals, is a growth both in self-confidence and in the ability actively to articulate, however tentatively, the presence of God in their lives.

"I used to be a bit of a loner before I knew the sisters. All people come whether they believe in religion or not, and we sit and we talk and we basically enjoy life. I've made many valuable friends through that, as I say I used to be a loner - on my own. Through these friendships I've seen at first hand how God works, through helping, caring, sharing and praying when things are tough; they're always tough in Heath Town and they're tough everywhere now. I've a great affection for the people. I feel that God's working in their lives."⁶

⁵ Gadamer H., *Truth and Method*, trans. Weinsheimer J and Marshall D., London, Sheed & Ward, 1989. c.f. Introduction to this thesis.

⁶ Resident M. op. cit.

The Impact of Vatican II

The history of the coming of the sisters to Heath Town is part of the history of the Catholic church in Britain after Vatican II. The desire to renew the church led the conciliar fathers to call for a major overhaul of religious life and practice.

"In order that the Church of today may benefit more fully from lives consecrated by the profession of the counsels and from the vital function which they perform, the holy synod makes the following provisions ... The up-to-date renewal of the religious life comprising both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes, and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. This renewal, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and with the guidance of the Church."⁷

The laconic terms in which this document on the renewal of religious life is phrased gave no premonition of the massive cultural shock it was to precipitate throughout the international community of religious. Nearly thirty years later, religious congregations are still trying to come to terms with the profound mythological shift which occurred as the once immutable body was seen to metamorphose. The Council that was to "renew the wonders of Pentecost" was likened in an editorial in The Times to,

"an earthquake which so substantially changed the landscape of Christian religion that maps previously drawn were irrelevant."⁸

The aftermath was variously described as a "state of chaos", a time of "ferment and flux" and the "death-knell" of organised religion - if not of God himself. The Church had begun to recognise that if it were to continue to serve the people of God and bring contemporary people into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel it must learn to speak in dialogue with them, using a language and idiom which would be comprehensible and relevant. A new vision and a new world view was sought which might dialogue with the modern world.⁹ In particular the question

⁷ Perfectae Caritatis, in Flannery A. (ed.), Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1975, pp. 611-706.

⁸ The Times, March, 1987.

⁹ The Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan took up the challenge of finding a new methodology which could replace the "old". It was he who coined the terms "Historicist" and "Classicist" world-view to distinguish the way of looking at reality in general of those who lived within the cultural context of the present generation, from those who lived in the cultural context of past generations. The dramatic and irreversible shift from the classicist to the historicist world-view was described as, "The human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic evolutionary one."

Gaudium et Spes, para. 5, in Flannery A. (ed.), Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1975, pp. 903-1014. The classicist culture appeared truly universal. It had accepted structures and laws; accumulated knowledge and prudent wisdom; and appeared to form a permanent bed-rock of stability and security. It seemed that the winds and storms of passing change could

of justice appeared in a number of conciliar documents - and of greater significance - questions of injustice. The Council fathers recognised an increasing awareness of injustice within the world with regard to the tremendous inequalities existing between wealthy and poor which caused stark division among people.

"Many of these causes spring from excessive economic inequalities and from excessive slowness in applying the needed remedies. Other causes spring from a quest for power and from contempt for personal rights. If we are looking for deeper explanations, we can find them in human jealousy, distrust, pride, and other egotistic passions."¹⁰

In this same document the Council expressed a desire that some agency should be instituted by the church for the world-wide promotion of justice for the poor, which resulted in a Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. This hierarchical catalyst led also to a groundswell of awareness of such issues permeating throughout the church.

Within religious life, the call to widen their vision, and to reflect upon the aspirations, sufferings, anxieties and hopes of the world, led religious into a period of experimentation and change. The opening of windows within the Roman curia had a subsequent effect in terms of those who jumped over walls or more sedately walked through doors, out of religious life. Confusion and a sense of loss were very evident because familiar cultural supports had gone and there seemed to be no time given to grieve the passing of what had previously given warmth and meaning to many lives. While some religious had prepared themselves before the Council changes, the majority were totally unprepared.¹¹

only superficially affect this culture. The philosophical underpinnings of this view were classical and were based on a view of reality which looked to "fixed and immutable" categories of being. The historicist world view no longer looks upon "culture" or "reality" as unchanging, but as contingent and determined by the changing circumstances of different times. This view sees itself as of necessity part of an historical process of ongoing modification, change and development. The post-Vatican II church has endeavoured to speak the language of the historicist. It has preached that faith is not just an act of obedient acceptance of truths presented to the intellect to be submitted to by the will, but a life to be lived. It sees itself today as a pilgrim Church, as the pilgrim people of God, right in the mainstream of world history. However, this does not mean being helplessly swept along by every prevailing wind and current. Learning to discern the signs of the presence of God, as well as the signs of the reality of evil was the starting point for the new theology which Lonergan sought. Accordingly, theology became the continuous reflection of the on-going process of conversion - to the heart and mind of Christ.

10 Gaudium et Spes, para. 83, in Flannery A. (ed.) Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, op. cit. pp. 903-1014.

11 The essential truth of the traditional form of religious life was a coherent whole in which "every dimension of life was ordered by a common vision and by a shared system of meaning and symbols. It was a way of life capable of commanding greatness of heart, sacrifice, and commitment. It was also susceptible to pettiness of spirit and the trivial pursuits of piety." Leddy M., Reweaving Religious Life: Beyond the Liberal Model, Connecticut, Twenty-third Publications, 1991, p. 14.

Many congregations began studies into the nature and origins of their charisms, and subsequently into the relevance of traditional apostolates. For some this was an unnerving experience a time of great insecurity¹² while for others there was the scent of "liberation" in the air. A virtual industry developed in the proliferation of documents on mission and the apostolate. However, the purpose of religious life remained unclear; the Council had not provided a clear-cut vision of religious life, but had challenged religious themselves to work at it.

In accordance with this directive the Sisters of the Infant Jesus¹³ undertook the revision of their constitutions and presented to Rome the text approved by their General Chapter in 1983. The Congregation proposed various modifications and then finally approved them in 1986, in terms applauding the particular charism of the Congregation.

"Their vocation as Sisters of the Infant Jesus .. consecrated to Christ in His Church for the proclamation of the Gospel. They contemplate Christ and desire to follow Him in the ways of humility and abandonment which He chose in His Incarnation. It is He who calls them to a shared community life and sends them forth to spread the Good News, especially to the poor and the "little ones", through teaching and other forms of involvement in education."¹⁴

An emphasis upon the "poor" and the "little ones" was one which echoed a significant development in the church and particularly amongst religious orders. Constitutions of many religious congregations committed them to this integration which in recent times has commonly been specified in a decision to make an "option for the poor". Added impetus was given to this development by the 1971 Synod of Bishops. Here there was a clear call to consider the life of the poor in a manner previously unknown.

"Listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures, and hearing the appeal of a world that by its perversity contradicts the plan of its Creator, we have shared our awareness of the Church's vocation to be present in the

12 Many religious recall the anxieties of that time associated with moving out of enclosed spaces, habitual ways of dressing, and defined modes of service. The situation was more acute for women for, unlike the majority of their male counterparts, they did not have the relative security of clerical status.

13 The Institute of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus had its origins in France in the second half of the seventeenth century, although it only became a religious order with members taking vows in 1887.

14 Decree of the Congregation for Religious 1986 contained as frontspiece to the Constitutions of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus 1986. No publication place or publisher given on the English translation.

heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted."¹⁵

The Synod outlined a detailed analysis of injustice in the world, and denounced a whole series of "voiceless injustices". Most memorable is the challenging declaration that:

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."¹⁶

The Bishops had made it clear that the church must stand with the poor and oppressed if it were to be faithful to the gospel mandate. In the face of a such a challenge, contemporary religious life appeared to demand the integration of faith with the search for social justice. Added impetus was given in the same year by the publication of Octogesima Adveniens,¹⁷ on the eightieth anniversary of Rerum Novarum,¹⁸ and the tenth anniversary of Mater et Magistra.¹⁹ This encyclical urged the incorporation into every sphere of Catholic life that dimension of Christian responsibility in the world. It emphasised that action on behalf of justice was the responsibility of every Christian, and indeed every Christian organisation and institution. The principle of justice was extolled to be operative in personal, communitarian and all forms of social life, without exception. The attribution of such prominence to this principle further encouraged the development of liberation theology, particularly within the non-European church of Central and South America. Here the names of Gutierrez, Segundo, Sobrino, Galilea, Boff have become synonymous with an alternative theological vision.²⁰

15 Synod of Bishops, 30 November, 1971, in Flannery A. (ed.), Vatican Council II More Postconciliar Documents, New York, Costello, 1982, pp. 695-710.

16 Ibid.

17 Pope Paul VI, Octogesima Adveniens, 1971.

18 Rerum Novarum, 1891. Pope Leo XIII in this encyclical spoke out against the inhuman conditions which were the normal plight of working people in industrial societies. He recognised that the three key factors underlying economic life are workers, productive property and the state. He also indicated that their just and equitable interrelationship is the crucial issue of Catholic social teaching.

19 Mater et Magistra 1961. In this and Pacem in Terris 1963, Pope John XXIII "set forth a number of principles to guide both Christians and policy makers in addressing the gap between rich and poor nations and the threats to world peace. He called on committed Christians and "all people of good will" to work together to create local, national and global institutions which would both respect human dignity and promote justice and peace. He emphasises that the growing interdependence among nations in a world community called for an effective world government which would look to the rights of the individual human person and promote the universal common good." Schultheis M., DeBerri E. and Henriot P., Our Best Kept Secret: The Rich Heritage of Catholic Social Teaching, London, CAFOD, 1988, p. 7.

20 Gutierrez sees an "irruption of the poor" into history such that society will never be able to ignore them again. The spirituality emerging in reaction to this irruption finds God in the midst of suffering. This is not a

Over the years there has been a marked increase in practical concern for the poor and oppressed, and a genuine attempt to translate into deeds an option of solidarity with the poor. In 1975 Evangelii Nuntiandi added further encouragement to this development when it gave emphasis to the move,

"To bring the good news from city to city and especially to the poor, who are often better disposed to receive it."²¹

Acknowledgement of failure and the British "option"

Within England and Wales fresh stimulus was given to the initiatives involving poor and marginalised people by the Declaration of the Justice Sector of the National Pastoral Congress held in Liverpool in 1980. Here, in an unprecedented statement, an acknowledgement was made of the failure of the church to combat the prevailing ethos of society and to proclaim the gospel message particularly with regard to the poor.

"On behalf of the Church in England and Wales, we in the Justice Sector of the National Pastoral Congress feel compelled to begin by placing on record our failure to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its fullness in this land. We regret our failure as a Church to combat the prevailing national mood of insularity, to identify with the poor in our midst and to work vigorously for a more peaceful world. Above all we regret our failure to make our own the declaration of the 1971 Synod on Justice in the Modern World. We wish humbly to confess this failure to the poor who live amongst us in England and Wales and to the millions of our sisters and brothers in the Third World whose sufferings and oppression we have in good part caused and are still causing. May God give us the grace to make an entirely new attempt to face up to the demands of the Gospel and to put them into practice in our lives."²²

The principle stressed throughout this report was that of the need to hear the Word of God through the experience of the powerless, and for this to determine any apostolic action in the area of social concern. Indeed the tone of the report was to emphasise that it was the poor and the marginalised who must set the agenda for

new feature, but part of the Christian tradition; what is new is that the people have begun to recognise the causes of their situation and seek to release themselves and discovered a new faith in a God who liberates. The recent work of Christopher Rowland reiterates this theme c.f. Rowland C & Corner M., Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies, London, SPCK, 1990. For them, liberation theology cannot be properly understood if its close contact with action in favour of the poor is ignored. Indeed, once liberation theology becomes solely a matter for academic debate, and thereby a subject which merely becomes part of the university syllabus, its power is reduced.

21 Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, 8 December, 1975, para. 6, in Flannery A. (ed.), Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents, op. cit. pp. 711-761.

22 Liverpool 1980: Official Report of the National Pastoral Congress, London, St Paul Publications, 1981, p. 290.

action, and who would be able to give authentic voice to their own needs and concerns.

"We must hear the Word of God addressed to us in the experience of our brothers and sisters in the world, and for us this means above all the powerless. ... It is so important that we accept that the agenda for apostolic action in the areas of social concern be written by the powerless of the world. This means that we must hear the Word of God addressed to us in their struggles, their hopes and their sorrows. We must not invent problems; we must rather face problems."²³

The form of listening advocated is resonant with the emphasis given by Gadamer²⁴, particularly with regard to the importance attached to hearing what is coming from the other, and allowing that to transform our own understanding. For the Church of 1980 it was a challenging position to advocate and even more to consider adopting. Accordingly, the reception of this idea was ambiguous. Amongst a number of younger members of the Congress, predominantly laity, there was widespread support and enthusiasm for the report. However, the response of a number of the clergy was such as boded ill for any enactment. It was felt to be somewhat provocative in tone and idealistic with regard to practice. The ringing admission of failure found no echo in the The Easter People²⁵, the response of the Bishops to the reports of the Congress. Concern for human rights and dignity was evident, but no clear focus on an option in favour of the poor.

The one central expression of this option in Britain as a whole through the 1970s and 1980s has been the growing number of religious moving to live and work in deprived areas of this country, seeking to share in some measure the lives and struggles of those who are marginalised. This has been associated with the rediscovery of the original charism of orders and a conscious entry of some religious into the field of social analysis and critique with a concomitant impetus towards practical involvement.

There was a traditional missionary spirit among many orders which had led numbers of religious to seek service among the poor in other parts of the world. What was novel about the moves in this period was the concentration of attention and energy on deprived people within Britain. With a conscious withdrawal from more traditional apostolates, particularly schools, there began to emerge a pool of educationally trained personnel looking towards the inner cities, and peripheral housing estates.

²³ Ibid. p. 294.

²⁴ c.f. Gadamer H., Truth and Method, op. cit. p. 361.

²⁵ The Easter People The Reply of the Bishops of England and Wales to the Reports of the National Pastoral Congress of 1980. Both the Congress Reports and the Easter People may be found in Liverpool 1980 op. cit.

The founding sister of the Community in Heath Town is exemplary of this movement, and she described the reasons which led her out of teaching and into an initially uncertain future in the following terms.

"The desire to work for the poor and with the poor was very much around when I became a sister. I ended up in a good comprehensive school in Crewe with very middle class families. I found myself being drawn always to the more needy children in the class. Then I became more familiar with the charism of our Institute, which I believe anyway, that I have myself, which is to be alongside the little ones, the more deprived of our society. When in 1966 Vatican II invited us to return to our sources, our Congregation looked at our missions and how we are living that charism today. Moving back among the people and away from our institutions has been around for about 20 years really. I was tempted at one stage to go to the third world being quite involved with Justice and Peace when I was in Crewe. But for me it seemed that we never tackled the issues here at home. It was important for me to go and be in the conflict situation of poverty, to get myself into a concrete situation in order to understand."²⁶

This growing sense of a dissatisfaction with an apostolate which seemed to exclude the poorest, and a desire to confront more directly the issue of poverty, coincided with a term of office on the governing body of this sister's Province which enabled her to put her case more powerfully to the congregation's major superiors. Accordingly, in 1984 she was released from teaching and allocated to Wolverhampton with a mandate from her congregation "to go and find what I was looking for". Initially the search seemed to produce little in the way of results, and with a possibly naive sense of commitment an attempt was made to taste the life of the poor through registering for unemployment benefit.

"I thought I should draw the dole to be in solidarity with the poor. I did that for a little while, but it was a complete farce. I would come home to my beef and Yorkshire pudding. I only did it for a few weeks."²⁷

With little apparent success in her search, she began once more to teach; there was a need in local Roman Catholic schools and at least she would be obviously involved in productive activity until other avenues became apparent. Yet there was a constant tension in this involvement, a concern not to become sucked once more into the educational model. Speaking of this time she stated that she didn't want "to get trapped in school". Eventually a local parish priest approached the sisters with whom she was living at the time in search of someone to help in his parish on the other

²⁶ Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

²⁷ Ibid.

side of the town. Driving over to see the parish and the nearby psychiatric hospital, they passed the Heath Town estate.

"That was the first time that I saw Heath Town. Father had all kinds of ideas about hospital chaplaincy, work in the school. I hardly heard him. As we drove past Heath Town I kept saying. "Is that in your parish Father?"²⁸

The prime interest of the parish priest was in having a sister to help in the parish and preferably also undertake the hospital chaplaincy. With a substantial degree of ingenuity this sister also managed to negotiate a "census" of the Heath Town Estate as part of her job description and within a few days she had enlisted two of her congregation to help in the work.

"The three²⁹ of us marched in here with our pens ready to convert people. "³⁰

Where you live determines what you see; whom you talk to determines what you hear.

Their reception by the people of the estate was not of the most enthusiastic; strangers knocking on their doors were not welcome, but considered an intrusive presence. Strangers in Heath Town are often viewed with suspicion and might well be representatives of one or other of the Statutory agencies, the bailiffs, or possibly undercover police personnel.

"We didn't have much luck to begin with. In a tower block twenty two stories high only about two people opened their door to us out of the whole block. We got wiser as the time went on."³¹

However, with perseverance, and key contacts being made, there gradually arose a sense of credibility about these sisters. It was clear that they were actually concerned to listen to what life was actually like on the estate, without any allegiance to particular agencies on whom the people were dependent. Trust began to be established and experience shared. For the sisters it was a novel revelation of what life could be like, and completely divorced from their own experience. The effect was to strengthen their determination not just to be a visiting presence, but to become fully involved by moving to live on the estate.

28 Ibid.

29 Of the original three sisters only one is left. The other two work in a major urban housing scheme in Dublin. During the course of my time with the Community there were four sisters, three Irish and one French; three lay women were living with them, of these, one taught full time in a local school, while the other two were full time volunteers with the Community.

30 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

31 Ibid.

"We were meeting people and hearing their stories of alienation from society generally, their feelings of being forgotten. It was difficult for us to go back to our communities in the evening and just leave them. We felt that we didn't have a clue what life was like here. We felt we had to move in to really understand the hopes and fears and isolation of these people."³²

The decisive move was that which led the sisters actually to leave the well-established community at one end of the town and move into two of the flats on the estate³³, and begin the process of acclimatisation to a novel environment. Yet they had endeavoured to prepare themselves for what might be involved. The ten months which passed between the time when they had initially encountered the estate and the time when they moved in were profitably spent in gaining real access and acceptance amongst the people, such that when they arrived, they came as individuals already known and with a degree of acceptance uncommon amongst most new arrivals.

We started in January and moved in October. We did our homework well really so that by the time we moved in we were known by a good number of people, and I think that was important. I think it's good methodology to actually test the water, explore a little before making a commitment to come in."³⁴

An important dimension in this acceptance by the people was a ready willingness to listen, and indeed to draw out the life experience of the individuals on the estate. This very process of listening, deep uninterrupted listening, is both an affirming of the worth of an individual and the opportunity for joys and sorrows of experience to be put together again re-experienced in a way that can creatively encourage self-esteem and the growth of self-confidence. Such involvement is one which necessitates a long-term commitment, both to a presence among the people, and also to a patient openness to hear what is emerging from them.

"As we meet people the first thing always is to listen to their stories, their lives, and find the sparks of hope that are there, and building on them. It isn't easy, you have to listen carefully, and it's a long slow process. But you know if you've been around long enough you see so much growth in people's lives. You don't see that over a few months, it takes years."³⁵

Another member of the Community spoke of the importance of creatively wasting time with people. Going to visit individuals being in their homes, and just sharing

32 Ibid.

33 In 1993 the Community were accommodated in four flats.

34 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

35 Ibid.

something of their life. This is the way for the patient building of trust and of real relationship. It contrasts sharply with the busy professional competence of many of the officials with whom the people are involved.

"Slowly, slowly slowly, trust is built up with people. Those you bump into regularly on the walkways, and chatting about nothing, gradually trust develops."³⁶

This principle of slow attentive listening to build up trust, and ordinary everyday contact underlies the Community practice of visiting homes. Often the Community will visit new arrivals if they hear of them via contacts in the housing office, or from one of the social workers, or from neighbours. There was at the time a stock of clothing, food, and occasionally furniture which the Community housed and distributed as individuals were in need. Christmas and Easter cards and invitations to Community celebrations are delivered. Any who are known to be ill or bereaved are visited, and the families of children who play pool or attend the bible class which the Community run. The philosophy behind visiting was the subject of an ongoing evaluation meeting during October 1991. Here those who were regularly involved in visiting alongside the core group - namely a sister from the other Wolverhampton community which had spawned the Hope Community and a Jesuit novice from Birmingham - met together to consider their experiences. Some of these were experiences of rejection, or a sense of being drawn into another's pain,

"I once had the experience of going to a man at Christmas and he said I don't want to know anything of Christ, and I don't want the greetings of your Community, but you are welcome. I felt his hurt and I really didn't know what to do - but he was in my prayers for a long time and last week I went back to see him and the circumstances were totally different, and he was really open and saying he didn't think he was a Christian but, now his circumstances had changed, he's now employed."³⁷

This practical willingness to give hospitality, even if there is a sense of alienation from God and the church is a notable feature of life on the estate. It was a factor discussed among the group. Renewed emphasis was given to the importance of being open to receive from the people; it was not just that the Community was coming to bring something to the people.

"It's important to let the people have the joy of giving to us occasionally."³⁸

³⁶ Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

³⁷ Fieldworker B. meeting, October, 1991.

³⁸ Fieldworker D.

The discussion focused upon what it was thought individuals were taking with them when they visited. A variety of suggestions were made: "friendship, interest, concern; practical help sometimes, mucking in with whatever is happening; support in general; a lot of building up of trust and relationships; sometimes information, introducing someone or something. The leader of the Community announced her intention ultimately as being,

"to proclaim the good news whenever the opportunity arises. That may take ages and ages but that's my aim to arrive at a stage where Christ is proclaimed."³⁹

However, for another member of the core Community this provided some difficulties. For her there were,

"Various steps to go through to that. Material needs, emotional needs, the worth and value of the person. I don't believe you can just walk in and say come to Jesus."⁴⁰

These contrasting views raised issues about implicit and explicit proclamation. For the leader explicit proclamation was important while for another of the Community the very reputation of the Community was both an implicit proclamation and also the possible entry for sharing in a deeper way.

"People know that those in this Community are people who love God and that is the background from which we approach people."⁴¹

For the Jesuit novice, new to this whole area of experience, there was the astonishing discovery that individuals raised the matter of God very unselfconsciously. Indeed, they really seemed to want to talk about such matters. For this man it was a revelation!

"I've found that people raise the points about God with me. I don't. We go into their homes, and they feel at ease and they want someone to listen to them."⁴²

"You're so right they are the ones who raise points about God and proclaim them to us."⁴³

With this view the leader of the Community was in full agreement. It was revealing to trace the development of her ideas in a movement within the meeting from stating the importance of being evangelised by the people through emphasising the need to

39 Fieldworker A.

40 Fieldworker D.

41 Fieldworker C.

42 The speaker was a Jesuit novice at the time, but has now left the British Province of the Society of Jesus.

43 Fieldworker A.

proclaim Christ to the people, and back to the sense of Christ being proclaimed to her by the people. Perhaps this is a fuller understanding of the notion of evangelisation which - as the word of God is said to be - may be understood as a two-edged sword, and thus a process of reciprocity - an interactive process not a one way movement. Here we encounter once more Gadamer's insight that conversation is a process of coming to an understanding which involves the openness of both participants. Perhaps conversation might thus become a model for future evangelisation.

"It belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject."⁴⁴

However, it becomes more apparent that there is obscurity as to what evangelisation might mean. A more explicit exposition of the gospel appears to be linked to a more traditional form of catechesis. Such a form of traditional catechesis presupposes a certain theology of the teaching authority of the Church. That theology of teaching authority does not necessarily preclude the very listening and open conversation indicated above. However, in practice it may too frequently do so.⁴⁵

For the leader of the Community, "it energises me to be among the people". This was apparent on a series of visits that I made with her during October 1991. Two examples may give some indication of the approach of Community members to individuals on the estate. We visited first a young woman Q. who had cancer of a somewhat unusual form and one which had taken a long time to be diagnosed. At one time she was told her illness was psychosomatic! She was undergoing a course of chemotherapy, with the usual consequences that she had lost all her hair. She had two children, and her sister gave a lot of support. Her sister was also present when we called. The family background was Catholic and the two sisters were friendly towards the church though not now practising church members. A. had an easy rapport with the two young women, and after a few polite enquiries she asked if Q would like to see the local priest. Q. seemed inclined to think it might be an idea and the matter was left in terms that we would find out some details and get back to her. She gave us some indication of her condition, and of her family's concern and faith.

⁴⁴ Gadamer H., *Truth and Method*, op. cit. p. 385.

⁴⁵ This point is developed in later chapters.

"My gran - ever since the day I was took ill she's been praying for me - it's what's kept me going in many ways, faith and Kenny⁴⁶and Donetta."⁴⁷

The easy exchange in terms of both hospitality and sharing of important issues was a distinctive feature of visits to those with whom the Community had some contacts. The direct response minus pretensions of any kind was certainly what characterised this particular household. The leader of the Community informed me that it was her practice to endeavour to work in with the local churches in terms of alerting them to those who might welcome a visit for one reason or another, whether sick or wanting the baptism of a child or some such formal church involvement. Such occasions are not infrequent, when mediated through the Community. Although it is unlikely that such contact would be established without the Community's assistance.

About a week later, I visited Q. in company with a local curate, who had expressed a desire to work with the Community in terms of visiting, and who came once a week to say mass in the Community chapel. On this occasion there was a good sense of feeling "at home" with Q and the children. The local curate was obviously nervous but trying hard and gradually becoming more relaxed. Certainly Q was pleased to see him and I was made aware of the possible importance for some on the estate of a recognisable church presence. I was also given a brief glimpse into some earlier history of the relationship of Q. and the Community. There was a contretemps with one of the sisters, concerning Q's marital status and how this affected her participation in the sacramental life of the church.

"I had a row with one of the sisters, her that went back to Ireland, she was saying how bad it was me living with my boyfriend and not being married. She really carried on, saying I couldn't go to Holy Communion and that. I says to her, there's some who goes to church and is legally married and who also has someone else on the side like. I can't see that's better than me. When I was in hospital, I talked to this priest and said like that I wasn't married and that but he said I could go to Communion and he brought it me. You need things like that when you're sick." ⁴⁸

The sense of rejection implied in the first part of the above disclosure contrasts sharply with the sense of acceptance in the second half. Here two representatives of the institutional church by the very interaction with this resident had caused her to feel both an outcast and an accepted member. That the former remained a dominant

46 Refers to Q.'s children.

47 Resident Q. visit, October, 1991.

48 Ibid.

impression is clearly seen in the way in which she sought for further reassurance from two other representatives of the church with whom she was conversing.

Her sister then asked if the church still had masses in the evening on Sunday, to which the priest answered in the affirmative and gave times. Her sister then said quite wistfully,

"I used to go .. I'd like to go again... I really would." ⁴⁹

Priest "you'd always be welcome, and if you do come and say hello afterwards."

"I used to love going to midnight mass ... we all went when we were younger." ⁵⁰

Priest "you musn't worry about not going to mass when you're not well."

The atmosphere of this exchange was very heartening. Certainly, the Christian background of the young women was the common factor, but the fact that they felt able to express their feelings so clearly, and that Q. could point to that earlier disagreement, and her ongoing sense of concern, which it seemed now two clerics had managed to allay, gave the opportunity for there to emerge a deep sense of common humanity, and acceptance of people by the official representative of the church. The young priest though initially ill at ease soon settled in such a welcoming atmosphere and was thus open to respond in a way which was very affirming for the young women. Such an approach stood in marked contrast to the related history of Q's previous involvement with one of the sisters and to the more formal atmosphere within the local church where the focus appeared to be solely on those who regularly attended the liturgy and sacraments. There seemed a deep sense of suspicion and alienation from the people on the estate, who lived physically so near, but aeons away in terms of any real contact.

Finally, on another afternoon the Community leader and I called into the premises of a new day facility available for those with psychiatric problems. There happened to be only a few people around at that time. However, one young black man was there, who greeted us rather doubtfully. He has had severe psychiatric problems, and, when in a psychotic spiral earlier in the year, had smashed the windows of the flats in which the Community lived at 3.30 am one morning. Since this was the first time the Community had been subject to any violence, it was a critical time for them particularly in regard to their relationship with the estate. They did not ask for

⁴⁹ Resident R.

⁵⁰ Resident Q.

police assistance, which could have alienated some residents, rather they came to an agreement with the perpetrator that he would contribute to the cost of the replacement of the windows. They have been most willing to resume good relations and the leader of the Community gave the man a cheery greeting, though it was not returned. Indeed, later in the day I answered the telephone to the same man who asked that the sisters should not disturb him, but keep their distance for the time being. His ongoing volatility is a cause of concern to the Community, but there has been no recurrence of the previous incident. The high incidence of psychological disturbance amongst residents on the estate has increased the level of tension between residents and promoted an atmosphere of apprehension particularly in some blocks. The increasing level of violence has also prompted the Community to adopt tighter guide-lines with regard to their young lay associates.

Seeds of hope upon which to build

When questioned about the basic aim of the Community and how it has changed over the years, the leader of the Community emphasised a certain continuity, the essence of their aim has always been to live community themselves and to assist building up the wider community.

"As a community our aim really hasn't changed since we first came and that's to be community and to build community. We believe it's important to somehow gather people together and have them involved in community building, networking groups. Its very difficult."⁵¹

One of the most insidious features of life on the margins, as chapter 1 illustrated, is the inevitable creation of dependency on exterior forces, agencies, professionals of one form or another. The sisters became aware of this reality when they moved into the area and have asserted, as a developing aim over the years, the importance of assisting individuals to grow in their own self-esteem, which often is very low, and gradually shake off this dependent feature of their lives. Again, this is a process which requires time energy and patience. Yet this firm belief that individuals have within them the seeds for possible growth is what sustains the Community and also determined its appellation. It also stands as an article of faith for their commitment to the incarnate Christ present within the people.

"People have got those seeds within to actually build on, That's one of the reasons why we call ourselves the Hope Community, that you still believe in people no matter how much of a mess they have made of their lives or how hopeless their situation is. They still are made in the

⁵¹ Fieldworker A. op. cit.

image of God. They have a contribution to make to their own becoming and to the human community, and they deserve respect."⁵²

This conviction that the *imago Dei* is an ineradicable characteristic of marginalised people encourages individuals to share their own life experience, and to trace something of their own relationship with God. During the course of my time in Heath Town I listened to some such stories told by individuals in their own inimitable style. The first is a West Indian in his late thirties. Exploits in his youth brought him into confrontation with the police, for whom he retains little respect. I recount it, as he told it, not to exemplify a common theme, since each individual story is unique, but rather to share an example of how it may seem that the presence of God reappears as a thread through a life. Also, the attitudes expressed towards contemporary church life, seem to give an indication of the alienation that may be felt, even by those with some established links with church. For him, this took the form of a family connection with the Pentecostal church.

"I have 2 sisters and 5 brothers, I've lived in Heath Town since I was 20. When I was a little boy I used to go to church and coming from a black church, they used to send a van for us every Sunday to make sure we went. While I was there they used to do a lot of clapping, dancing, that sort of stuff, and it was all right. I would rather have been out to play and running about and doing other things like that. When I was 9 we moved to a very rough area, most of the people were in and out of prison. That's where I grew up, so while I was there I learned to fight and steal and all other things like that. I come from that sort of background, and I'm not ashamed of that, because that's my roots, that's where I get my strength. Any plants or anything gets their strength from their roots and they grow upwards towards the sky and that's how I carry on like.

The church van still came for us but not long after moving there I became very wayward. I didn't want to go to church any more because the other kids around didn't have to go to church, they played on the streets all Sunday or went fishing. So about 5 minutes before the van came I'd sneak off with my mates and go fishing. After a time when I got older, God went out of my life, and it was all pubs and clubs.

Five years back God came into my life. I was going through a bad patch. I had fallen madly in love with this lady, she was my world, she meant everything to me this was my heaven. I didn't need anything else, it was beautiful. It turned sour. She told me she had fallen for someone else and I was heartbroken. I was a pitiful man. I had given her my love, my affection, made her laugh; the pain I felt was unbearable. I was all the time angry, hurt and in tears - basically just gutted - my inside felt as if it was being torn out. Love had brought me to this. I would never love again. I began to turn in upon myself. I inflicted mental cruelty upon myself. I wasn't good enough. I wasn't man enough. I found all my faults and magnified them larger

⁵² Ibid.

than they were and even invented a few. I was a mental wreck. I was not at ease. I was not at peace. How could I have been so stupid as to fall in love, me of all people. I started to wonder how I could stop the pain I was feeling, and then the penny dropped, great I could top myself.⁵³ My mind was all churned up. One day I went to church with a neighbour of mine who had asked me to go previously, and guess what they were all singing and clapping and dancing, just like what they used to do when I went to church as a little kid. I listened to the service, they talked about God's love and how he loves everybody on this planet who has done wrong or not, God loves us all. While I was sitting there I was very much aware of the fact that it was touching me, and I wanted to ask God if he loved me and so I asked him. God came into my life again, and he's been there ever since with my ups and downs. He has carried me, he has helped me, and he has loved me.

A couple of years ago believe it or not, I fell madly in love again. She too was my life, she was everything, and we had a great time together. She was charming, sweet and very loving, but there were complications to our relationship which caused us both much pain; in fact I wrote her a poem once called *Tortured love*. To cut a long story short, we could never really be together, I could only love her from afar. I went through the same sort of pain I had felt previously. I felt rejected and upset because such a good thing I had to give up, but this time instead of turning inwards as I had done previously I was able to relax, feel at peace through the whole situation, and through my grief I was able to pray not for myself but for other people who were going through similar circumstances hurts and loss and grief. I was able to set aside my feelings sometimes and take on the feelings of others out there who had heartaches. I remember sitting in front of the telly on a number of occasions and watching disasters, orphans, and all sorts of problems like that and quite a few times it would happen to me that I'd be sitting there watching it and all of a sudden I would burst into tears. I'd be crying because it would be a good feeling that something good was happening and sometimes because it was a bad situation. I didn't understand all this, so one day I asked my auntie if she thought I was going off my head. I was sitting down all of a sudden and the tears just rolling down my cheeks basically; she told me then it was God's way of healing me. His love was touching me and because he was love I was weeping for all those he was weeping for."⁵⁴

The reality of a deeper compassion for others being felt and expressed because of an individual's own personal suffering is a feature which recurs in individual lives. It finds expression in many ordinary acts of generosity, particularly towards those in acute distress. With this particular man, his compassion also finds expression in the time he gives to working as a volunteer with the Samaritans.

The following story is told by a young white man who has lived all his life in Heath Town. He moved onto the estate with his parents when it was built, and has

⁵³ Commit suicide.

⁵⁴ Resident T. interview, November, 1991.

remained ever since, although changing flats at various times. His situation is different from his black contemporary recorded above. He has had previous employment, indeed on one occasion a well-paid job. However, he has been unemployed for a number of years now. The only regular activity he has is on an annual basis when he helps with the children's Summer play scheme on the estate. He has a natural aptitude for relating to children, but a police record for debt, inhibits his employment in this area.

"I've lived in Heath Town all my life, at the moment I'm unemployed. I'm one of 6 children. I've 2 brothers and 3 sisters. I live in one of these great big high rise blocks, with my dog and my brother. My father died 5 years ago, and my mother's still alive; she lives near me, but I don't see her much. I'm a Catholic by baptism but I don't go to church much. I'm a member of the Hope Community. I consider myself lucky enough to have many friends in and around the estate. I don't think I've got any enemies. I like to play football a lot because it keeps me fit and I make lots of new friends playing, and also because I like to think I'm young but I'm getting a bit old now. I get enjoyment out of teaching children how to play football, and anything really, and I spent a year as a youth worker not long back, being involved with children from deprived areas similar to Heath Town, and I enjoyed it, and I built up a great rapport with the children. Many of them were violent at first but I sorted that out. I help at the local playscheme too every year, and I don't think there's many children on the estate over the age of 5 that I don't know.

I consider myself among the poorest on the estate. I don't have a television. In my flat I've only got basics: a three piece suite, bed, and tape recorder but I ain't got no electric. I do get a lot of people who visit me. I don't turn anyone who visits me away, mostly people with problems, mental problems, psychological problems, people who need healing really I guess.

Up until the time when my father died 6 years ago I'd never taken the bible seriously although I'd never had any doubts about the existence of God, because my father was a Catholic and swore by him especially when things got tough - and they usually were tough when we were young. It's only just recently that I've started to understand God's promises. Before my father died I had a well paid job, loads of clothes and I drove around in a flashy sports car. I didn't really care for anyone, but my life's changed and it's gone full circle and I'm poor. I walk everywhere. I like to wear a tee-shirt and jeans. I myself have found a new lease of life just recently. I feel more confident about doing things. Once I was a very nervous person and I never like talking to anyone. Now I don't go out much, but I'm very confident and very happy about life."⁵⁵

Seeds of hope upon which to build are not confined to the lives of those whose natural habitat is on the margins, they are also found in the stories of those who

⁵⁵ Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

came to join the Community from other very different spheres of life. By comparison and contrast the following are the stories of how two of the fieldworkers came to be involved on the estate. Like the residents, their stories involve something of the ongoing search for God, but perhaps experienced and certainly expressed in a very different cultural form. The first fieldworker is a young lay woman in her late twenties. From the first year of the sisters moving to Heath Town, they attracted the commitment of young lay people, mostly women, who come and spend from three months to two years⁵⁶ with the Community helping as volunteers.⁵⁷ From observation, the commitment of these lay people mostly in their late twenties or thirties was most remarkable. Certainly, their contributions were vital to the ongoing life of the Community. The reasons that led them to Heath Town seemed many and varied, but one element was an ongoing search for a living faith with some direct connection with the poor. This was a common element across all stories.

"It was a change in direction in life I guess, but part of a continuous search. Being brought up in a third world country and with parents making us consciously aware of deprived people, I was searching for what I was fulfilled in. I did a lot of work with homeless people and found that I was enjoying this more than the teaching and secretarial work that I earned my living by. I felt much nearer to God, the God whom I was seeking, looking for, when I was with these people who were homeless - people who were in the dirt in a sense. I came across a quotation just by chance. "If thou art wishful to behold me in my uncreated divinity, thou must know and love me in my suffering humanity." This really intrigued me, I wanted to know if this were true. The whole thing was really a search for God. I hadn't seemed to find God anywhere else except nature and there seemed a lack of integration in my life. I wanted to test out this quote and see if it was true.

I was seeing a spiritual director in Oxford for a year, doing the Ignatian Exercises and she put me in touch with the Hope Community, she felt I would be interested by it. I visited with no intention of coming to stay. I was dumbstruck, very affected by what I saw and experienced here. I never realised there was such poverty. I found that I was silenced by it inside.

Christianity I felt was more than going to Church on Sundays, singing songs and having a wonderful time, something to do with practical living out of it. The whole thing of Jesus's life, working with those who were poor, also speaking out on justice etc. I was looking for this Christianity put into practice, not just words, not empty, Christianity in action. I was going to go to the St Egidio community in Italy for a year, but I don't speak Italian, and I thought this is crazy, you don't know about poverty in England. Why not start here and find out what

56 The commitment they enter into and the guidelines for their time with the Community is outlined in the Appendix.

57 During the period of my research four members passed through the Community in this way, and I also encountered past members.

it's like for people in England. After 3 visits to the Hope Community I decided to stay, initially for 6 months and then go to a Jesuit Volunteer Community for a year. But I decided that 6 months was no time at all. It zoomed past for me. I knew I needed more time. Somehow it seemed like a secret that was going to unfold, and I didn't know what this secret was. I wanted to stay with it all. It's very slow for me, just living here and being part of life here not only in Community but on the estate has meant all kinds of things. I don't even know that I can put words on it. All kinds of things emerging that wouldn't have done if I'd left earlier."⁵⁸

The second fieldworker is one of the sisters. Only the leader of the Community remains from the original three who began the Community on the estate. The other two were moved to a not dissimilar situation in inner city Dublin. This newcomer, the oldest sister in the Community's brief history, has had a wide experience of service in different parts of the world including the USA and Australia. Having retired from teaching she became involved with inner city work in other parts of Britain, and came to Heath Town initially on a very temporary basis. Indeed she expressed considerable reluctance when it was first suggested to her that she might join the Community, even for a brief period. However, when confronted with life on the estate, her attitude soon changed.

"Initially I was not too keen on coming, selfish thing really. I had been in Liverpool for a year, and I liked it, but it's not a team there like here. Calling around to houses with no real aim or purpose, it felt a bit aimless. In my memory what remained were the offensive smells, but that's not the same here in Heath Town. In Toxteth there was a different physical set up. Now looking back, I can see that I transferred my sense of failure there into a sense of smell. That's the way it stuck in my mind, and when I was coming here I associated the two, and also I wanted to work with Irish migrants, and that hadn't turned out. I was sent to replace temporarily A who was due to go to the USA for 3 weeks, and I was supposed to be here just for that time. By the time I came here though the Gulf War was in the offing and travel was discouraged, A's trip was postponed and I stayed on, waiting for the trip, on a temporary basis, which I'd made clear. Gradually I slotted in. Finally I said I'd stay as long as I was able. I said I'd give it a year's try, in case I couldn't take it. If I couldn't I wouldn't not say. A. finally went to the USA in September."⁵⁹

Seeds of hope are apparent within all those involved with the Community, the marginalised and those who work with them. In this way the Community itself becomes a seed of hope for the estate and indeed the area in which the estate is situated. As a stone thrown into a pool, the rippling effect of widening circles has an

⁵⁸ Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

⁵⁹ Fieldworker D. interview, November, 1991.

ongoing exterior motion. This is portrayed by the leader of the Community in the following terms,

"I think I can best describe our community now as a series of concentric circles. The central nucleus are those of us who belong to the Sisters of the Infant Jesus. The inner circle are others who have committed themselves to living with us for various lengths of time. And there are outer circles of neighbours and friends, who are involved with us in many different ways."⁶⁰

The Community Programme

In order to facilitate real listening and to enable the people to come together with the Community, a programme for the normal events of the week is made known.⁶¹ For a number of years the Community operated a policy of keeping an Open House for three days in the week. However, limitations on personnel resulted eventually in the cessation of this policy as it ceased to be a viable possibility. Also with the introduction of a drop-in centre for those with psychiatric problems, this meant that a major need was being partially met by the statutory agencies. It was felt that the energies of Community members might be better distributed in other ways: in visiting, or involvement with the many and varied organisations which have sprung up on the estate in recent years.

The principle elements of the weekly programme are events designed to allow some sharing of individual and group experience of God, and encourage deepening relationships among the people and with God. Thus on Tuesdays there is a weekly meeting to look at Scripture which is followed by a shared prayer meeting. Both of these meetings have developed over the years. They are evaluated on an occasional basis by members of the Community, as they endeavour to meet the desires of those who attend. In one such meeting, emphasis was laid on the way in which the prayer meetings had been developing over time.

"On Tuesdays a depth of prayer is appearing and people are asking for more scripture."⁶²

"The listening to the theme and being together in prayer is beginning to happen more. We've got beyond the singalong stage."⁶³

60 Walsh M., Here's Hoping!, Sheffield, Urban Theology Unit, 1991. p. 4-5.

61 One of the ways this is publicised is on the back of the Hope Community Christmas and Easter Cards, which are distributed to every dwelling on the estate twice a year. Thus there appeared on the Christmas 1992 card the following: Tuesday evening - Scripture and Prayer; Wednesday evening - Creative evening; Thursday evening - Faith Alive; Friday evening - Video.

62 Fieldworker B. meeting, November, 1991.

63 Fieldworker A.

There was an expressed feeling amongst some of those present that they would like to incorporate new initiatives from the people in the ongoing evolution of the scripture and prayer meetings. In this the concern was both to be relevant to the lives of the people, and also to allow the focus and format of the meetings to be determined by the people. A suggestion was therefore proposed that soundings might be taken from the people with regard to what they would like to see incorporated into such meetings.

"I'd really like to consult the people - and perhaps the best way is for them to talk to the person they find it most easy to relate to and feel most able to talk to. And we might find other possibilities of things to do."⁶⁴

One of the fieldworkers had already undertaken some preliminary work of consultation and shared the results of this with those at the meeting.

"I asked some people two questions - what they liked about prayer and scripture and what they didn't like. I got these responses:

- I like it when we pray for people
- I'd like more cheerful songs
- It would be good to listen to more songs on tape and sing along
- I sometimes find prayer morbid about people who've died
- I like the silence times
- In scripture there are too many words
- Let's have prayer in different places when we've got the minibus
- we need joyful prayer
- Let's have scripture passages linked to life
- We look into the past too much
- We need the past as well as the future

And there was a suggestion that we have a half hour video on religion and have questions and a discussion."⁶⁵

The oldest sister present, who herself had a wide range of experience, raised a pertinent point with regard to the lack of experience of those who had been consulted. She was concerned that this should not limit any programme devised. Rather her concern was to enable the possibility of widening the vision of the people by presenting them with possibilities outside their previous experience.

"The expressed needs are limited by experience - I think we should still offer variety as otherwise they may not encounter possibilities. We don't need to limit ourselves by the expressions of the people."⁶⁶

However, this raised for another fieldworker the spectre of imposing alien ideas and language upon the people. Unsure already of what she was involved in, she sought

⁶⁴ Fieldworker B.

⁶⁵ Fieldworker C.

⁶⁶ Fieldworker D.

greater clarity and relevance in any proposed changes, with regard to the real lives of individuals on the estate.

"I wonder as we seem to impose all this God language what are we doing. This week I'm on prayer and there's no real come-back, well some sharing, but you don't really know how the people have received it. I wonder what am I doing?" ⁶⁷

For one member present the very mechanics of undertaking a meeting on scripture proved most daunting. She felt unable to cope with seeming lack of interest in anything she might propose. By contrast she felt another member of the group was really able to speak to the people in terms which they could understand.

"I'm no good when the people turn up their noses about scripture - perhaps if I was stronger I could turn them around to it - and the other week I did. Last time you were on D. you were really teaching them scripture at their level and that's what it seems they need." ⁶⁸

"Surely it's better not to share stuff with the people that they don't really want." ⁶⁹

"Perhaps we're still coming from God to the people rather than starting from where the people really are." ⁷⁰

"Perhaps we don't really listen to people where they are. ... This whole prayer and scripture thing keeps coming up - over these last few months perhaps even from the beginning. What are we trying to do?" ⁷¹

The tensions apparent within this short section of dialogue and indeed throughout the meeting are those between a view which would see the time on a Tuesday, particularly the Scripture time, as one in which the people who attended received something from those who ran the meeting with regard to an understanding of scripture. Another view was one which predominantly emphasised an attitude of the meeting being determined by what the people themselves actually wanted. A similar dichotomy emerged in consideration of the prayer meetings whether they should be particularly directed to allowing those present to experience different types of prayer. Or whether again the agenda for this should be set by those who attended.

Some references from different prayer meetings led by different members of the Community exemplify the difficulties which have been outlined. The first was a

67 Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

68 Fieldworker B. meeting, October, 1991.

69 Fieldworker C.

70 Fieldworker D.

71 Fieldworker C.

prayer meeting led by one of the lay women fieldworkers who had decided to lead the meeting on the theme of discipleship, her aim was a simple one, to use three passages from Luke's gospel, have them read by different individuals who could read, for the benefit of all, and particularly those who couldn't read. This was to be followed by a time for quiet reflection and prayer, so there would be some silence, a little sharing and some singing, as one of the fieldworkers present could play the guitar.

She started by endeavouring to set a quiet atmosphere,

"I'm going to play you a little music just to help you centre and quieten down." ⁷²

She proceeded to do so, and a gentle calm settled over the room. Afterwards she said:

"I'd like to read or rather ask some people to read a few passages about discipleship and then we'll spend some time thinking about them." ⁷³

At this point one of the residents asked if he might read the first one. He proceeded to do so, however, his inability to pronounce some of the words led the fieldworker to take over, and read the passage through to the end. There was then a pause for silence. Into this silence the same resident - a man in his late thirties, with a history of psychiatric problems - began to speak. His words were somewhat incoherent but appeared to be,

"I'd like to give a word of testimony, when she said the disciples followed, that's us. The following of the word, that's the celebration on Sunday, and bring your friends, and I try and bring them. Words Sister B. learned me long ago, wherever you go the Lord will follow, if you follow the sisters wherever they go you will be there, follow God or any of the sisters of Heath Town and you will be there." ⁷⁴

It became obvious at this point that this resident was set to contribute for the evening. The fieldworker endeavoured to include space for others to contribute and to leave room for some silence, but to no avail. As the evening progressed the fieldworker abandoned her idea of three possible readings and the resident continued to make occasional interventions into the prayer. One of particular note was to do with the candle placed in the centre of the floor.

⁷² Fieldworker C. meeting, February, 1992.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Resident X.

"The Lord is here at this moment and he is among us. He is kneeling on the floor where the candle is and he is kneeling in front of you." ⁷⁵

What was most impressive throughout the whole time was that, despite the amusement of some present, and there were more than a dozen people, all tried very hard and successfully not to show it, and more than that there was a real sense of support and positive acceptance of all that X. might say. It was recognised that something had happened particularly to disturb him. Indeed, later it emerged that earlier in the day he had been registered as a disabled person, and he found this very hard to accept. A letter received the following day revealed something of his state of mind. ⁷⁶

The letter indicates something of the confusion and poverty of words of the resident, but it also gives an indication of the implicit trust he has that somehow - in this particular practical way - the sisters can help him. The poignancy too of the phrase "my word has gone to my god" simple and direct in that call for help, though expressed in a form very fuzzy to our more "ordered natures".

The atmosphere of acceptance within the group which was supportive of this individual is a common feature of such meetings. There is a lack of judgmentalism that facilitates the expression of the most simple forms of prayer. The very willingness of the fieldworker, on this occasion, to allow this resident seemingly to disrupt her planned programme dispelled any possibility of a conflictual situation emerging.

Another example is a prayer meeting led by the youngest fieldworker, recently arrived in the Community. This particular prayer meeting followed on a time when a group of residents and fieldworkers had been talking about life on the estate. The discussion had been quite intense. The fieldworker began by playing a very loud tape of a man singing in a very graphic way about the crucifixion. I had some considerable difficulty with this tape, both on account of its level of decibels and the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ The following is the letter written the night after the prayer meeting and delivered by hand the following morning.

"Dear sisters,
 can you help me to get a flat in Heath Town are I now you can help me to get a flat here
 with you all I feel very up set my word has gone to my god you have been good to me so
 much you can help me for your help me for your help they are not helping by the housing
 department Bilston office have a words with them you can help me it is God's well some
 people on the Holy community of 8 sisters and friends of you all from me plases help me to
 all of you. God be with you all from me
 Mr X (unintelligible signature)

written by X"

imagery. It felt like an assault on the senses. Yet, in the time that followed, the quiet of reflection brought forth a response from the people. One West Indian man who had been particularly vocal in the previous meeting, and particularly derogatory with regard to the medical provision on the estate contributed the following:

"Lord, I'd like to pray for those doctors and taxi drivers I was knocking earlier on, for you love them too."⁷⁷

And another response which seemed to be called forth from the reflection on the crucifixion.

"If there's anyone who holds anything against me - anyone I've offended, help them to know that I didn't mean it."⁷⁸

Another resident asked prayers for himself, a common practice, as he was going into hospital for an operation the following week. In like manner another resident prayed for members of his own family, and was moved to pray for another suffering family.

"For my cousin T. and my brother and that the family will know why he's so bitter against us and for my girlfriend D. cos she's in a lot of pain that you will ease that pain."⁷⁹

And the fieldworker herself, shared her own difficulties in a simple and direct way that seemed consonant with the way of the people.

Common elements on both these occasions included: an atmosphere of acceptance which allowed any present to participate; a simple articulation of need, or distress, or concern; a willingness on the part of the one leading the meeting to allow space for others to contribute and if necessary determine the progression of the meeting. On both occasions silence played an important part. Music was also a common feature though by contrast one was designed to facilitate a quiet atmosphere, the other was endeavouring to portray a graphic image. The setting on each occasion was the same a large circle of chairs, dim lighting and a candle burning in the centre of the circle.⁸⁰ On each occasion there was a tangible sense of the involvement of the people with the prayer evoking the mystery of Emmanuel.

⁷⁷ Resident T. meeting, February, 1992.

⁷⁸ Resident S.

⁷⁹ Resident R.

⁸⁰ This use of symbol, image, memory is both simple and powerful. Miles in her work endeavours to explore a somewhat similar theme. She indicates the importance of understanding the personal interaction with image or symbol. I use an image when I choose to allow it to address me. Something about the image strikes me as important not as a general, a universal, communication but as a particular message to me, at this moment, during this time in my life. Thus far, I have not used the image critically. The critical use of images involves understanding the particular message recovered from the image; ultimately it means being able to articulate the relevance of this message to my present affective life. Articulation of the message received from the image

Certainly, it would appear to be true that the more simple the prayer, the easier in many ways it is for the people to enter into it. The more wordy and abstract it becomes, the more difficult it is for individuals to feel drawn into it. It would be difficult to overestimate the vital contribution of silence here. Indeed, all whom I interviewed, both fieldworkers and residents, unanimously emphasised the need they experienced for a degree of silence amidst whatever else was happening in the prayer time.

"I find silence in prayer definitely helpful. It's very important to me. It helps you to think about a reading or something like that, and reflect back on your daily life and that, it's very important in prayer."⁸¹

And from one of the fieldworkers,

"The coming before God in that silence is just a relief in a sense that someone has it all in his hands. I suppose the words in prayer get less and less and the silence gets more and more. I guess it's knowing how to pray the silence, that I find hard."⁸²

And from a group of residents just the one telling comment.

"We like the silent times."

Finally two comments indicating the variety of response to prayer, at both a personal and communal level. Though these two residents are more articulate than some others, the expression of involvement in prayer is far more widespread among residents above and beyond those who might frequent the regular Community meetings.

"At the moment, I'm not a very prayerful person. Sometimes I do, sometimes I can't be bothered. I know that you're told to pray a lot like, but I figure that God knows me and understands me and knows there's times when I don't feel like praying -without falling out. I don't feel like going to him and saying Lord and all that, but there's

must come as the spontaneous result of living with the image. One must look at the same image again and again until it has attracted, has drawn to the surface, all the associations memories and longings that originally gave the image its sense of importance for me. Then the personal message of the image can be articulated. Only in this way will critical understanding of the image not dilute its original visual/affective power. Rather, understanding the precise relation of the image for me, its visual qualities can then collect the relevant psychic material - the associations, memories and longings - more effortlessly when I contemplate the image. Here it might be helpful to bear in mind Coleridge's maxim with regard to the consubstantiality of symbol and meaning, for it is the realisation that through symbolism and sacramental vision, that humanity establishes its most vital contact with the realities of life. Miles M., Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture, Boston, Beacon Press, 1985.

81 Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

82 Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

times when I do feel like praying, and I do pray. If there's a cause or something I will pray, or if I pick up a paper and there's something there about someone, then I will pray, because I feel I've been led to pray. There's times I go to bed and I think No and I just can't be bothered. I also think prayer is also by your actions not just talk; your whole life is prayer. If you're living a good strong Christian life, that is a prayer to God, so I'm not living a good Christian life as such all the time. But I try my best and that's all I can do and not get overworked or paranoid about it all. If I'm getting paranoid about it, I'm doing it for man's praises, so I stick to that and try and do it my own way and sometimes I can do it and sometimes I can't so when I can I do."⁸³

The following is a comment from a very reflective individual who spent some time thinking about the question I had asked, namely what prayer meant for him, and how he viewed prayer with the Community. He is a man whom the Community have seen both grow in self-confidence over the years, and willingly undertake a leading role in meetings or celebrations if called upon.

"Prayer for me means talking to God, even though I'm not visibly praying. I believe you can talk to God anytime you want, if you've got any problems etc. It's changed my life I believe what you pray for, you may not get it, but the fact that you're praying for it, that's faith, that's acknowledgement that God exists. We all prayed for the Gulf War not to happen and it went ahead and happened but then it stopped. I believe in intercession. I feel prayer with the Hope Community brings us closer together. If someone prays for me it strengthens me, helps me and others too. Need to pray for those around you, with Community prayer it brings me closer to the people around me gives me a sort of bond there. When I first started praying with the Community I felt embarrassed, people might be thinking who is this guy, now I don't care what people think. I believe in God, it's as simple as that. I don't care what people think because if they think I'm mad I feel sorry for them. They don't what they're missing but if they look at me and think he does believe in God. Then I care about that."⁸⁴

One of the fieldworkers had considerable misgivings, with regard to the prayer meetings, about any kind of imposition upon the people of an agenda which came from the Community. This principle was particularly apparent whenever she led such a meeting.

"I find when I lead prayer sometimes I don't feel I'm touching anyone. I feel I'm leading or dragging a dead horse. I want things to go the way I want to go and they don't. I don't leave things up to God enough. Last Tuesday I was trying to lead prayer on a theme and encourage people to follow that theme, and it just didn't work. So I think where am I going wrong. Maybe I'm trying to lead people in a prayer I'm used to and not in a prayer they want. I'd have loved to

⁸³ Resident T. interview, November, 1991.

⁸⁴ Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

spend a week-end evaluating prayer and scripture. It's been an ongoing sense of struggle since I've been here, for all of us.

At the end of one evening when I felt we'd got nowhere. I asked why do you come to prayer? One of the other members of the Community cut it short. I was furious, because I genuinely wanted to know what do people like about prayer? Why do they come? What is it? One time when I'd planned this really neat prayer, R took over the whole thing and flipped it over. It taught me a real lesson. I thought here I go: I try and prepare this lovely neat prayer which will flow, and it gets turned upside down. Towards the end someone came up to me and said that God speaks through the foolish and not through the wise.

From then on I try and start the prayer leading into a theme and then let it go wherever. And even times when K.⁸⁵ spouts forth, it's still very genuine, and who are we really to curtail him. My fear is that we dump stuff on people, we dump our own way of doing things, but then where do people start from?

The best prayer was when there were only three of us in the Community for a few months, and we had to rely on the people. It was brilliant. It was a real learning experience for me. It's so much easier and quicker to do things myself, more efficient etc. But in the long run, when we handed it over to the people. Maybe we need to involve the people more in the leading of it. And it doesn't matter if it's messy - who wants neat prayers? I'm wanting things to flow smoothly but maybe that's not what prayer is about - maybe it is messy. There's a massive amount of stepping back and allowing others to take part, but that involves a lot of extra time."⁸⁶

The model of listening, deep listening, is one that this fieldworker appears to espouse. However, the practical difficulties involved, and the still underlying ethos of something to be taught by someone to another, is one that is fundamental to formation within the Church, and appears to have a significant resonance within the Community. The issue of what emerges from the people and what is essentially presented by the core group is one which recurs, and finds a significant expression also in the opinions of those who work alongside the Hope Community either as residents who have chosen to live on the estate or as clergy involved in ongoing ecumenical contact.

On Thursday nights there is a meeting entitled "Faith Alive". Here, it may begin around scripture, but discussion focuses around a chosen theme. These may range from difficulties on the estate to problems of the third world. On occasions there can be the creative rewriting of scripture to accentuate life on the estate. One such occasion involved the rewriting of Isaiah 62 vv. 1-12, with the following results: entitled God's Dream for Heath Town,

85 K. has severe psychiatric problems.

86 Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

"God says: I will not keep quiet about Wolverhampton,
 I will not grow tired of Heath Town,
 Until its soundness shines like the dawn over Wednesfield and its
 salvation blazes like an Olympic torch.
 Other estates will see your community spirit.
 The Express and Star will proclaim your integrity
 And you will be given a new name by God.
 God will pour out his love on you,
 No longer will Heath Town be called a Dump, a ghetto or a Hell
 Hole,
 Your flats will no longer be called voids nor will they be broken or
 boarded up.
 You shall be called God's Delight and you shall be married in God's
 spirit and Heath Town will celebrate.
 As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so shall God rejoice in you.
 In your dwellings I shall place prophets.
 Day and night they shall speak up for the poor, the sick and the
 oppressed.
 Go out of your way to do the work of God and never fail to let God
 do his work through you,
 Till he has restored His Kingdom here in Heath Town.
 He will make it the boast of the earth.
 God promised: Never again shall your Government make capital for
 the Arms Trade.
 Never again shall Water companies own the water I have given you as
 a basic human right.
 Those who go all out to do the work of God and see the job through,
 will bask in God's glory here in His Holy Estate.
 My time has come
 Is it not obvious?
 Get ready, for this is what God proclaims.
 Say to the people: Look, your Saviour comes with our reward which
 he has won through his victory on the Cross.
 His Holy Spirit shall be upon all tenants and others will say that we
 are a beautiful people.
 Heath Town shall be called the City of God because here, God walks
 among us.

Some nights there can be very limp discussions reflecting the lethargy of the
 participants; while on other occasions the very vibrancy of the exchange is evident to
 all who visit. One such occasion was a meeting which began by looking at life on the
 estate particularly the lack of medical provision; the conversation moved on to
 consider the problem of unemployment and social benefits as experienced by
 residents on the estate; through a discussion on what one would do with £5 and
 where individuals would like to be in five years time; into the problem of racism on
 the estate; and finally into a discussion about God and the Christian churches.
 Participants appeared to become more energised through the course of the
 conversation, and all present felt able to voice any opinion they felt inclined. By the
 time one of the Community who had been attending another meeting on the estate

returned, the enlivened atmosphere was palpable. So much so she remarked that it must have been a particularly good meeting, as individuals appeared both enthusiastic and rejuvenated.

The following views emerged in another Faith Alive meeting, when the people present were asked what they thought about God. The scene had been set by a consideration of life on the Estate.

"He's definitely not a copper."⁸⁷

"Not racist"⁸⁸

"He comes to us"⁸⁹

"He's not stuck out from us."⁹⁰

"He's not poor."⁹¹

"She's rich in love."⁹²

"He guides us."⁹³

"He's ready to roll up his sleeves."⁹⁴

"I'm not sure there is one."⁹⁵

"He's unwaged."⁹⁶

"Why does he have to be he?"⁹⁷

"If there is a God he's an urban guerilla, because look at the way life is, look at all countries. He can't be on the side of the powers."⁹⁸

"Not a lot makes sense without God."⁹⁹

"God means existence for me. If I didn't have God in my life I'd probably have been dead a long time ago."¹⁰⁰

87 Resident W. meeting, February, 1992.

88 Resident P.

89 Resident S.

90 Resident R.

91 Resident K.

92 Resident E.

93 Resident T.

94 Resident X.

95 Resident H.

96 Resident L.

97 Resident Y.

98 Resident W.

99 Resident G.

100 Resident N.

The theme of the previous discussion was obviously also coming through in terms of the non-racist God, who doesn't receive any money; who comes to the people, and is not removed from them. There is the sense of a freedom of access to this God who is not demanding of formal church commitment. Also, there is an interesting ambivalence with regard to the gender of God which gives grass roots authenticity to the ongoing debate within more academic circles of the Christian community. In later interviews with individuals I asked for some general views about God, and the following are some of the replies which I received. The first is from a young black man in his mid thirties.

"What does God mean to me, that's a complicated one really. There's theories that people see God as something like their father, in that case I would say God was a rough mean old sod, cos that's what my father was like, but I know that God's not quite like my father. He's strong, not wishy washy. One thing I like about God is his loyalty, if he says something he'll do it. I see him as a warm Lord, sounds good that doesn't it, but I like it. Sometimes he must be quite grumpy too. He's also full of love, and passion. I should say too that he's a God that's in a lot of pain."¹⁰¹

The common humanity of this picture of God is poignantly conveyed in the above remarks. Though the family relational bond for this man has lacked authentic affective depth, yet this has not resulted in the repudiation of God. Rather, it has promoted the search for other more creative and resonant images wherein to conceive of God. Thus a "warm Lord", the sense of comfort, well-being, and affection become almost palpable in this term; combined with the reverence that "Lord" implies. Still the humour and humanity is paramount in the anthropomorphism that sometimes God might be grumpy. While the consciousness of the pain of God was linked by this resident with the pain in the world, and an expressed certainty that in some way God was intimately involved in this reality.¹⁰²

Another resident in relating something of the story of his life, emphasised the importance for him of faith in his life. Though his material circumstances are very poor, possibly amongst the poorest on the estate, his outlook on life is very simple.

"My faith is the most important possession I've got. I ain't got many possessions but I'd give anything else away, but my faith I'd keep. I

101 Resident T. interview, November, 1991.

102 When asked what he meant by God being in pain this resident replied, "Think about it, if you had 5 or 6 kids and you watched them play, suddenly you saw them start to fight, it would cut you up. Well, God's supposed to be all kind and that, he must be in a lot of pain seeing people kill one another. I reckon he's going through the suffering with us." *ibid.*

trust in God in all I do and hope. I'm not just saying that, I really do."¹⁰³

The divinity of Christ is a phrase which means very little on the margins. Theological terminology appears abstruse and alienating there, an exclusive esoteric in-language, associated with ecclesiastical structures and sub cultures. Yet surprisingly, there appears a more orthodox Chalcedonian perception underlying much of what individuals may relate concerning their understanding of Christ and the second person of the Trinity. Never having heard of the definition of the early fathers there can appear a resonant appreciation of the reality of consubstantiality which evades many a more well-educated contemporary. A sense that Christ is at the same time involved in daily life, and this not just as another official representative defining lives, nor himself subject to such disempowering procedures, but rather intimate and yet transcending pragmatic constraints. Divinity of its very nature seems to have a human face on the margins. Or in the words of one member of the wider community.

"Jesus was a most extraordinary guy. He was really human. I've never thought of him in those ways before. I just wish I could help others to see something of the excitement of how Jesus really is."¹⁰⁴

Celebrating the reality of God in life

Very few of the people on the estate go to church. Indeed as has become evident, there appears to be a considerable amount of alienation from the church. Yet there is evident a desire to pray and to come together to celebrate the recognition of God in their lives. This led to the formulation of local people's liturgies on the estate. They happen about once every two months and are planned and prepared by the local people in conjunction with the Hope Community. They take place in the local community centre on a Sunday afternoon. This community ground is a very important venue for the celebrations. In the first years of the Community's presence on the estate, they were held in the local school and that proved problematic as they were often disrupted by local teenage gangs. On one occasion, recourse was had to using the local Catholic church hall. However, the latter was a disaster, as the leader of the Community indicated:

"Hardly anyone came, it wasn't their place, it wasn't their environment. It was too far away from the estate."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

¹⁰⁴ Resident G. conversation, December, 1991.

¹⁰⁵ Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

The celebrations have now become a regular feature of life on the estate. Individuals attend who perhaps rarely if ever come to the Community flats, but who feel they want to be part of such a gathering. Indeed, some of the local residents would describe the celebrations as their church. A notable feature of these occasions is the great "freedom" of those not accustomed by a tradition of liturgical involvement into certain forms and appropriate responses. This freedom is not just a significant contribution to all that occurs, but it adds a certain atmosphere of anticipation since no one is quite sure what might happen next. Although celebrations are well prepared, there is an irrepressible spontaneity of response amongst the people which may undermine any restrictive formalism. In this way, the leader of the Community considers the people of the estate have a lot to teach the institutional church about possible forms of worship which are more directly participative.

"I'm sure the people here have a lot to contribute to the renewal of the Church and they're so free you know, because they haven't been brought up in the tradition and all of that. They're very free, they don't have the same sort of hang-ups about what to do or about liturgy. They are more free than those of us who have been brought up in it, more free to explore new expressions of liturgy."¹⁰⁶

Over the years the residents of the estate have grown in confidence also in their knowledge of the scriptures and of hymns and songs which might be appropriate to different themes. With the small group prayer meetings, individuals have felt more able to contribute a prayer on the occasion of a celebration. Slides to illustrate a theme or drama to draw out the reality of a gospel story or a local issue have also contributed.

A specific example would be the celebration which took place in February 1991. It had required extensive preparation. A number of meetings were held with local people contributing ideas and gradually the following points emerged as key features of this particular celebration: the theme was peace, forgiveness, understanding, and the peace of Christ. The contemporary context was the Gulf war. A series of preparatory meetings took place first with a larger group and then a smaller steering group. It was the practice of the Community to have one member of the core group involved with the steering group which otherwise contained any who volunteered on a specific occasion. After a series of steering group meetings to work out a possible programme, they would present this at one of the Faith Alive meetings to the wider group, for comment. If it was acceptable with whatever modifications were thought necessary then the task of allocating responsibility would begin.

106 Ibid.

First there was to be a welcome extended to all by a local resident, followed by a word of scripture - John 14:27 read by another resident. Following this, the idea was to distribute badges of peace - however, there was a "technical hitch" as instead of the locally designed badge denoting peace, CND badges had been delivered by mistake. These were felt to be inappropriate to the occasion, so on the day there were no badges. A hymn was then sung by all the assembled, followed by a slide presentation on the plan and harmony in all created things accompanied by the reading of Psalm 104. There followed a talk by Gerry Hughes SJ, the matter for which had been suggested by residents at the local planning meetings. These included world conflicts, the Gulf, famine in Africa, isolation and brokenness within our own local community, our need for friendship and support, the ignorance which leads to a lack of understanding and appreciation and which sometimes results in prejudice, aggression, even war. It was unusual to have an outside speaker on these occasions, but there was a sense that the people had helped to set the agenda for the talk. This was followed by a rendering of the hymn Amazing Grace by another local resident. The scripture passage Mark 10: 46-52 concerning the healing of the blind man of Jericho was read and dramatised. There followed another hymn by the assembled gathering, and this was to have been followed by various personal testimonies, where individuals contributed whatever they wanted to with regard to life on the estate. However, these were also subject to a technical hitch - the individuals concerned did not turn up. Finally, one resident talked about our need for physical, mental and emotional healing, forgiveness, and wholeness, at a personal level and in our broken world. There followed a prayer of anointing and one local resident anointed any who wished to come forward. The event concluded with a sharing of the peace of Christ and tea and sandwiches.

Perhaps the most "miraculous" feature of the event was that it took place at all considering the numbers of "drop out" due to the flu etc. Still there were enough local members to step into the breach and apart from the badges and the testimonies, all the features outlined above were present. There was a very strong undercurrent of support most notable in that, very shy, generally inarticulate individuals made a contribution in public to share something of themselves and their ideas, their hopes and their fears with regard to peace. The local resident who welcomed everyone, had obtained a new outfit for the occasion, and just before she started she muttered to me,

"me stomach's turning over I'm dead nervous. Welcome to the Hope Community celebration."¹⁰⁷

And the resident who introduced the anointing, in a very thoughtful manner said

"I need healing and we invite any of you who would like to come and be anointed with a little oil and our prayer will be for healing."¹⁰⁸

There were also those who shared without words: the young single parent who anointed all who went forward, and did so with real reverence for individuals, while her niece - also a single parent - held the oil for her. Another who contributed without words was the man who played Jesus in the drama of whom it was remarked,

"I've never thought of Jesus as limping, with a fag behind his ear and a flat cap - it gives a whole different slant to things."¹⁰⁹

And the man who had the task of announcing the final item, namely refreshments.

"It's been good to see you all here, refreshments are at the back of the hall. You are always welcome to the Hope Community."¹¹⁰

There was an ongoing dynamic through the proceedings, a move from being welcomed, to feeling at home.¹¹¹ Listening to scripture, moved into the visual images of the slides, and the hall was also decorated with the artistic contributions of some of the residents. The theme was drawn together by Gerry's contrasting of the peace of the world and the peace of Christ, which led into the notion of peace requiring our interior need for healing; leading ultimately into a powerful and reverential administration of a "sacrament". Certainly there was a powerful quality of silence. Finally it seemed like a natural leading into the sharing of tea, and though it was easy to see, on the day, when the celebration began, it was not easy to see where it ended.

Relationships were "good" on the occasion. Old and young combined to be at home and to "celebrate". There was little particular tension and conflict at the time, the frustrations and anxieties had come before. The role delineations were not obvious at the time, the local people were nervous, but required little prompting. The presence

107 Resident J. Community celebration, February, 1991.

108 Resident M.

109 Fieldworker B.

110 Resident X.

111 It is always important to provide ash trays as once the local people begin to feel comfortable and at home in the environment, they like to smoke.

of the sisters was not in an organising capacity. My intuitive sense was that peace meant a little more to the people present at the end of a moving occasion.

There was very positive feedback from many individuals who had attended with regard to their appreciation of the event. There was a good sense of participation by the people, and a qualitative sense of "spirit". It was recorded as being "the Best celebration so far" - five years to compare with! It was certainly a sense of a moving experience for those who were involved and something of a celebration of God amidst the people.

"The people themselves over the years have become more self-confident, and so are more willing to come forward to lead parts of it. We always try to change the faces of those who welcome the people, or who come forward to give a testimony. We try not to depend too much on particular individuals to do that, the temptation is there, because it takes them so long to become confident, to say T. will do this or M. that, knowing they can now. We do tend to fall back on them all the same, because when people are nervous etc they tend not to turn up, so the old reliables come forward. It's a question of waiting for people until they're ready to do their bit, so we sometimes fall back on people, but that is not our policy, but you saw how it was last time." ¹¹²

There had been a serious attempt by the fieldworkers to wean themselves and the people away from clergy presiding in anyway at the celebrations. The sacred principle espoused in theory, and endeavoured for in practice is that the celebrations should be from the people, by the people, for the people. However, this had not always been the case. The early days of the local liturgies had seen the sisters present more of the programme and focus their attention upon utilising the talents of the local children. Since all three founding members were teachers this was both a natural resource for them, and one they found relatively easy to handle. In these initial stages too their natural inclination was to involve the local parish priest to confer some ecclesiastical approval upon what was taking place, by blessing the assembled "congregation".

"In the early days, we did things like father came and gave a blessing at the end. Now we don't, not any more; we do keep the focus off the clergy - perhaps too much so. I know the last time with Gerry I felt a certain reluctance about him being there. It was right that he should, but then when it came to the anointing, it took us a long time to convince D and M and the group that this might be a new element that we could introduce. I had a bit of difficulty in convincing the Community that it would come off! But because I believe that we should be introducing the traditional elements of liturgy, I thought it was something worth doing. We talked about oil and the significance

112 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

of it, and then it was an opportunity to talk about baptism, there were many spin offs actually. I remember M. saying "I don't think I'm good enough , I don't think I'm worthy to do that", but he never suggested the priest".¹¹³

It is apparent in the above that the preparations for the celebrations can in themselves be almost catechetical situations, with regard to introducing the people to traditional elements of liturgy. Yet at the same time the immense importance given to safeguarding the people's celebration from clerical dominance seems to be an attempt to guarantee the ideas and fragile self-confidence of the people. On this point there is ongoing tension within the Community. For the leader there is a sense that they have inclined too far in the direction of the ideas of the people, and she sees the need to contribute the gifts and skills which lie within the Community.

"I think we have bent over backwards and perhaps too much so to make it the people's liturgy and standing back from it ourselves. We have a responsibility and a duty to share our gifts, accumulated knowledge over the years. When it comes to planning, I'm a lot more ready to put at people's disposal at least some suggestions, some resources from which people may draw. Now I know some other members of my Community wouldn't agree with that."¹¹⁴

Other members of the Community insist that taking the leader's stance would inevitably lead to the celebration becoming the Community's liturgy and not the liturgy of the people. For the leader there is the frustration of agonising over the ideas arising from the residents when "there is often so little in them"¹¹⁵, for her the matter is primarily one of finding the right balance between the views of Community and residents. Here she maintains that the Community are also part of the proceedings, and that their contribution has equal validity with that of any other resident. Paradoxically she sees the very reticence of the Community as a perverse exercise of power.

"You can be in a terrific position of power because you can be planning the liturgy and they know you have the ideas and are holding back. When they explore their ideas and find there is little there, because they don't have the experience, then we are putting them into a greater position of powerlessness."¹¹⁶

One of the avowed aims of the fieldworkers is to try to bridge the gap between the institutional church and the lives and experiences of the people. In order to facilitate the accomplishment of this aim they make a point of inviting local clergy to the

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

celebrations, not as any principal actors in what occurs but rather to participate as a member of the "congregation".

"There are various way that we do that. We invite a lot of our clergy friends to attend, and we make sure the Oscott students who come here on placement in the Summer come back sometimes for celebrations, and that sort of thing. We're not making a whole lot of progress on it. We've certainly had some positive feedback from clergy who have attended. It's a two way thing really; the celebrations are celebrating that God is amongst the people, and it's an occasion for the church to be evangelised. It's a way of ministering to the clergy; they're not coming to lead, but to receive."¹¹⁷

The response to this invitation is variable. Of the five celebrations that I was present for, generally only one local Anglican clergyman was present. The one which involve Gerry Hughes included two other clergymen. However, I was not present during the Summer months which always see a major movement of individuals coming to help the Community, when it is probable that more clergy attend such events. The principle of a reciprocal effect in terms of the institutional church learning from the people's liturgy is an important one. Yet one of the local clergy who is supportive of the Community's work has very ambiguous feelings about attending a celebration.

"I've never yet managed to get - and that's partly slightly deliberate - to a Community celebration. Partly, I wouldn't know how to fit in. I'd feel like I was a voyeur. If liturgy is actually coming up from below, instead of being dropped on from above, and then you start coming to watch. To participate but not be involved in it as the one formulating it. I would find it odd."¹¹⁸

For the fieldworkers the lack of clerical participation in the celebrations has had profound repercussions for their own deeper involvement in the events which take place. One spoke of her own experience of the particular celebration outlined above. The most poignant moment for her was the anointing of people by a woman who lived on the estate.

"I remember the time we had the anointing. It was a most moving time for me. If the person doing the anointing had been a priest I would not have been moved in the slightest. But because I know this woman, because I know some of the pain she has suffered in her life. I know too that she didn't study for five years in theology. It just touched me very deeply. I can't put it into words, I express it best through tears. Her anointing me was so deep and real for me, like God through her anointing me. That for me is what church is about. And watching a stream of people go up to be anointed. That was one

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Clergyman V. interview, March, 1992.

of the many times when I have been touched by what goes on in a Celebration."¹¹⁹

Again there is the realised experience of a sense of God being communicated to the fieldworkers by the people. This was made evident within the discussion concerning visiting, there was further ramification in the prayer meetings discussed, and here when the local community gathers for the celebrations, once more the same feature recurs. Indeed, this appears as a most profound dimension to the involvement of the Community with the people, that the effect of their lives and presence is a reciprocal one, but that they may be far more deeply touched by the reality of God among the people, than the people may learn of the reality of God from the Community.

"Through the Hope Community I've made numerous friends throughout the years, poor and rich: doctors, nurses, sisters, television producers and many others. Whatever their status, God brings them together as equals in Jesus Christ. The seed has been planted in Heath Town and other areas by God and in time he will nurture it and it will grow. Indeed its fruits are evident already."¹²⁰

119 Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

120 Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

Chapter 4 The Reaction of the Institutional Church

"People who are living in old industrial inner cities and post-war housing estates ... are important to God, to the Church, and to the Nation, and their needs must be met."¹

"All in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness. .. This holiness of the church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful and so it must be; it is expressed in many ways by the individuals who, each in his own state of life, tend to the perfection of love, thus sanctifying others."²

¹ Living Faith in the City, para. 4, London, Publication of General Synod of the Church of England, 1990,
² Lumen Gentium, para. 39, in Flannery A. (ed.), Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents,
Worcester, Fowler Wright, 1975, pp. 350-440.

In the previous chapter it was apparent that the involvement of the Hope Community with the people of the estate necessitated the expense of time in patient and attentive listening to individual lives. Such listening was actualised on a pragmatic basis in the continual daily exchange in visiting and in more formally structured meetings and celebrations. The effects of this upon the people of the estate appeared to be a growth in self-esteem and self-confidence and a willingness to share their own insights into the presence of God both as a personal and communal experience. The reciprocal effect upon the Community is an awareness of receiving through the people a deepening appreciation of God at work in their lives. The mutuality of this exchange is analogously related to the conversational model expounded within Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics.

Local clerical involvement

There are other interlocutors in this conversation within the locality. The local churches are involved within this converse in a variety of ways. There is a monthly ecumenical prayer meeting held at rotating venues, including the Hope Community. There is the practical outworking of involvement with local management committees on the estate and the establishment of a project specifically aimed at reconciliation within the community. Most importantly there is the ongoing pragmatic contact at an individual level where individuals are personally supported and encouraged in their ministry. The range of involvement covers a spectrum from polite and encouraging interest to deep commitment. Exemplary of the latter is one of the local Anglican clergy who considers his involvement with the Community to be one of ongoing inspiration and enrichment, particularly with regard to team ministry and ecumenical engagement.

"One of the most enriching aspects of the experience here is that I've learned so much through the Hope Community and learned a tremendous amount about the corporate approach to urban ministry."³

This cleric has a regular pragmatic involvement with the Community at many different levels of its activities, and thus a clearer picture of the Community's interaction with the local community. His own working partnership with the leader of the Community has provided reciprocal support on numerous occasions. His conviction has grown that the only viable approach to urban ministry must be a co-operative ecumenical one.

³ Clergyman U. interview, March, 1991.

"There is no place any longer for trying to carve out your own turf on your own. To try and paddle your own canoe is ridiculous, and it presents a muddled picture to a world not concerned with the debate about the intricate differences between denominations. It further confuses them if they see the divisions between Christians."⁴

There is a degree of confusion amongst some of the local clergy who have less contact, with regard to what actually occurs within the Hope Community, and what each individual's commitments might be. This was clearly expressed by one clergyman who stated,

"Basically I would be unable to say what most members of the community are actually doing all the time."⁵

This cleric's acquaintance with the community was initiated by another who is more deeply involved. For the former however, his visits to the estate are rare occasions and his first meeting with the Hope Community left him with the impression that the members were there with a broad brief of evangelisation and the promotion of "good works". Only later did he realise that there were different dimensions to the community's involvement on the estate.

"My first thought and first meeting with the Hope Community was that they were there to evangelize or to do good works. That may have been my preconceptions coming out. I had that vague feeling if anyone needs a visit drop the sisters a line and they'll go and visit. Only later when I started to meet predominantly A. on management committees and that sort of thing that I realised there was a slightly different dimension and impetus to the community life."⁶

The movement of different personnel in and out of the community increased this cleric's general uncertainty about the purpose and infrastructure of the Community. There have been a number of teachers with different forms of involvement in local schools and this raised a question for this particular clergyman about the nature and purpose of what appeared to be differing and potential conflicting life styles within one community.

"I've never worked out whether that's a useful financial input to help the others maintain their lifestyle or whether it's actually another kind of life taking you off the estate."⁷

4 Ibid.

5 Clergyman V. interview, March, 1992.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

This sense of confusion about how the Community functions, its purpose and aims, was echoed by the local Roman Catholic priest who frankly acknowledged that,

"I don't really know where they are going."⁸

This man has been far from well over a number of years, and his assistant priests have been very transitory. Accordingly, there has been little stable and ongoing involvement with the estate. Initially when the sisters arrived to begin the Hope Community, the priest thought at least one would minister in a traditional way as a local parish sister. This however, was not the aim of the Community, and was considered to be a possible hindrance to the new initiative being undertaken. The lack of involvement with the local parish has been a source of regret to the local priest, who still finds it difficult to understand what the members of the Community are actually doing. He feels that an opportunity has been missed to assist within the mainstream parish.

"I realised that they wouldn't be part of the parish. The parish was a bit disappointed that one sister hadn't been deputed to liaise with the parish. I soon realised we weren't going to get what I wanted ie a parish sister. They've lost their impact on the parish."⁹

The parish priest gives real financial support despite the fact that he does not receive the benefits of a parish sister. However, he still continues to wonder about the fruits of the work of the Community. For him this is seen in more traditional terms of any possible increase in baptisms, weddings, or people coming back to the church. The unstructured approach of the work of the Community, as compared with the structured forms of the institution, he finds difficult to comprehend and impossible to assess. For his part, the lack of involvement between parish and estate is not a denial of responsibility to serve the people on the estate, but rather an admission of a vast area of involvement far beyond the physical capabilities of the two men at present ministering in this area. The parish is divided into two or three distinct areas, of which the estate is only one part. Because the Hope Community are present, the inference is that the people on the estate are in some way being served by the church. The local curate explicitly stated this.

"I can't be here and my view is broader. This is only one part of the parish and there are other areas and needs. Yes we have an option for the poor but it doesn't mean that we neglect any others. I see my particular role to support the sisters. My first job is the hospital. The sisters have their own role and work by themselves. The difference

⁸ Clergyman P. interview, February, 1992.

⁹ Ibid.

here is that the Hope Community are here, and assumed to be doing something about it."¹⁰

The major omission in the above comment exemplary of the degree of confusion about the community is the reality that of the seven members at the time he was speaking, only four were religious sisters. One of these was a French sister whose prime commitment to being in England was to learn English; one was a part time teacher. The other three members were young lay women who lived and worked with the core community for differing periods of time, and one of these was a full-time teacher.

There is a unanimity of support amongst local clergy for the Hope Community. The very presence of the community on the estate is seen as its most valuable contribution. That presence is a contribution not made by any clerical denominational representative. Yet it is an overt and not covert Christian presence. The sisters are identified as part of the institutional church, and all who live with them are accorded similar credentials.

"The crucial thing about the Hope Community and it's greatest good is the actual fact that it's there, even if it's not actually doing anything, or achieving anything. Just the sheer fact that it is there, that there is an identifiable Christian presence on the estate which is not attempting to proselytise or direct attention to itself. Living in the same grotty flats, is saying something about identification and incarnation. That's the greatest good the community achieves. The rest of us live in our church set-ups as the identifiable face of the church. None of us lives on the estate."¹¹

Although occasionally the Roman Catholic curate and one of the Anglican clergy make visits to the estate, primarily at the instigation of the Hope Community, other clergy are rarely if ever seen around the shopping precinct or more particularly visiting in a general way. Estate project meetings draw clerical attendance, but this is at the level of middle management and the organization of resources - primarily financial - and personnel. One of the local clergy made the point that, although his church is the nearest to the estate, he has very few members living in that area. Indeed his congregation is drawn from a very wide area across the town.

"There is no close relationship with the estate. There are one or two people I visit, but really it is a very loose relationship. I have the desire to minister more to that area but we have not impacted on the estate as much as I would want to."¹²

10 Clergyman L. interview, November, 1991.

11 Clergyman V. op. cit.

12 Clergyman I. interview, March, 1992.

This is a local Black Pentecostal Church which is situated on the very boundary of the estate. Here the attitude of the church towards the Hope Community seems handicapped by particular doctrinal issues. These make closer ecumenical co-operation and collaboration more problematic, especially in terms of more realistic involvement with the local people via increased involvement with the Hope Community. However, this doctrinal stance has received personal modification in the understanding of the local Pastor of the Pentecostal Church and does not detract from the support and encouragement that is verbally accorded to the Hope Community initiative.

"I don't know enough about Catholicism, but I was brought up to detest Catholics. I've modified my opinion in recent years, but there are still doctrinal difficulties. But what is important is to go into the community and to make the word of God become alive there, that is life. It is courageous of those ladies to go and live on the estate."¹³

By contrast to the above views, a Free Church clergyman was so impressed by the life and work of the Hope Community, that when the time came for him to move from the place where he was living, he specifically requested a flat on the estate in order to share more fully in the work of the Community. He continues to maintain a full-time job, but joins in community events whenever he is able so to do. His initial contact came through one of the sisters, and then he began visiting the Community every two or three months, and finally moved onto the estate.

"My impression from my occasional visits was that here was a really good ministry. The sisters seemed to be accepting people where they were at. They didn't seem to be saying you ought to be going to church or doing this or that. There was a great sense of acceptance of people, which I liked very much. I wanted to take more of a part in that."¹⁴

Having lived on the estate for two years when interviewed, he was able to confirm that his initial perceptions had been reinforced during that time, as he lived in closer proximity and became more involved. For him, at that particular juncture in 1992 the Hope Community was "my number one spiritual home and source of support"¹⁵. He felt able to call on the Community for support in such times as the death of a parent; at the level of sharing his dreams for the future; and in a more mundane form of just knowing that there would be members of the Community to talk to whenever he felt so inclined.

"I've been able to put these initial perceptions to the test. I've called on various members of the Community, and that call has always been answered. I've received the support I was looking for at each

13 Ibid.

14 Clergyman Resident D. interview, March, 1992.

15 Ibid.

particular time. That is my perception of my interaction with the Community."¹⁶

From his vantage point on the estate he has been able to view also the interaction between the other residents and the Hope Community. Here he has been impressed by the way in which in particular the sisters have made themselves accessible and have endeavoured to undermine the barriers which may have been erected in terms of perceptions of them as religious. The automatic assumption of close association with the Institution, and with a particular form of life and series of expectations, he perceives as an inevitable element within the subconscious experience of any resident with even the most minimal awareness of church. However, he asserts that the sisters have endeavoured to minimise this emphasis.

"I sometimes hear in the way the sisters are talked about, that the people do not feel that they must do things in a certain way, or attend all their meetings. They have done a good job in trying to break down the barriers of people's perception of them as religious and minimising the effect."¹⁷

The interaction of the local clergy with the Community is generally a major determining factor in the possible involvement of the members of local congregations. Thus the very limited involvement of the local Pentecostal pastor is mirrored in the lack of involvement of his congregation. Likewise, one of the Anglican clergymen who rarely manages to visit suspects that few of his congregation know what the Hope Community is or what it is doing on the estate. For him the only link is between himself as an individual and the Community, although he occasionally considers whether it might be important to establish a real link between his congregation and the Community. He endeavours to give prayerful support on a regular liturgical and informal basis.

"At least once a month I offer mass for the community, so it's on our intention list. It makes me stop and think for that day that in one part of our parish there is a Christian presence which is not just caught up with only the holy people, but is basically there for the not particularly holy people. I occasionally wonder whether I ought to make some kind of link between the Hope Community and the church. I've talked about the Community and lent a couple of people A's pamphlet to read. The majority I suspect don't know what the Hope Community is or what it's there for, partly because a number don't live around here."¹⁸

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Clergyman V. op. cit.

This interesting distinction between the "holy" and "not particularly holy" people of the area, the former being those who go to church and the latter those on the estate somehow outside the parameters of church involvement, is one which was of particular concern to this clergyman. His perception was one of being confined by the constraints of pragmatic reality. For him, the vision of his ministerial calling was to be of service to a whole community, yet the very mechanics of being a local Anglican representative meant he was encumbered by certain preordained structural responsibilities which often precluded this wider involvement.

"We get very caught up in the structures of church life; in the maintenance of buildings; and in the pastoring of small congregations. This tends to direct your attention away from direct pastoral care and involvement with the whole community; so that your prime consideration instead of being, as mine was meant to be, the cure of souls of the people in this parish, tends to become the cure of souls of the people of this church. The theory of the establishment is that my pastoral concern is for everybody who lives within the boundaries of this parish all 4,500, regardless of colour, creed or whatever; that they have, all of them, equal call on my time, if they wish to make it. What you end up doing is looking after the 100 pious souls who basically make up the congregation."¹⁹

For the other Anglican priest involved with the Community, his own predilection for contact with the community has on occasion outstripped the enthusiasm of his congregation. The support and encouragement which both he and his curate give to the Community has meant that members of his congregation have made real contributions to community events. This has been particularly appreciated on the occasion of local celebrations when those involved in the church music groups have freely given of their time to come and play for the community event.

"We perhaps ran ahead of the congregation, meeting regularly with the sisters for prayer once a month, and asking questions where is everyone else in regard to this. So we've encouraged others to get involved with the celebrations and different folk have got involved and in many other ways."²⁰

Within the Roman Catholic parish despite any regret that the congregation might have concerning the lack of a parish sister, there has been the traditional support accorded to the sisters. Also individuals are ready to be called upon and to offer their services for more specialised matters, such as accountancy, while the St Vincent de Paul society, a traditional source of Catholic charitable giving, has contributed generously in material form to help both the sisters and the people of the estate. The

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Clergyman U. op. cit.

local curate considers himself to be the Community chaplain and regularly visits to preside at the Eucharist.

However, it is clear in the comments already cited that the presence of the Hope Community on the estate has raised for the local clergy issues requiring further reflection and consideration of the very nature of the church and parochial ministry. This is particularly acute in consideration of the local Roman Catholic parish. The sisters as religious occupy a traditional position within the church. Yet they are not involved in a traditional ministry. This may pose questions for the local parish, but more particularly for the clergy. For the local curate, the community "raises questions by being there". In a very frank discussion he owned to his own frustration, and the limited nature of his own efforts when contrasted with the vast needs within such a large parish. It is intrinsic to the very structure of the present parochial system that whether the parish is rich or poor the structure is the same. One uniform structure is still expected to cope with any and every possibility in terms of local situation.

"It's very easy to become depressed, our model is too vast. I'm only one person. I'm not going to change anything by my work. There are things we can do but no clear answers."²¹

For this priest the church appeared to be in continual slow transition. Following the changes of Vatican II and the diminishing numbers of clergy, the latter could no longer perform all the tasks they had previously undertaken. Yet the structure was slow to modify to this new situation, and although some clergy were keen to involve the laity to a far greater degree, change was tortuously belated. He stressed the post-Vatican II emphasis that all have responsibility within the church for the care and nurturing of members. Yet this development paralleled the traditional emphasis on church attendance as the most important ingredient of the faith life of any individual. This he saw as the vital factor in establishing community, and in order for that to occur there must be a building to meet in and maintenance of the building required adequate finance, which led inexorably back to the traditional stress on people in the pew giving a financial contribution.

"Without people in the pew putting money in the plate the church building wouldn't be there and the church enables us to be community. What we're about is being community. The church building is vital. About getting them to mass, that's all we've got. For Catholics the centre of our worship is the mass. Indeed the hierarchy would be quite shocked that anyone could think otherwise."²²

21 Clergyman L. op. cit.

22 Ibid.

Yet it was also clear to this cleric that if the avowed aim of the church was to see a return of numbers to the church, it was also an unrealistic and unattainable aim. Such an untenable position was seen by him as part of the general confusion pervading the church, particularly in the wake of the espousal of the preferential option for the poor. The lack of any clear guide-line meant a proliferation of varying policies dependent upon the different personal priorities of clerics.

"It's muddled .. there are different gifts and different points of view, and different ways of approaching these things. This is the result of different personalities and different priorities due to the phenomenal change in the church which is only still working its way through. The option for the poor is strange for many priests still. There are no clear answers; people do their own thing and are different."²³

The view of this particular priest finds echoes in the views expressed by other Catholic priests in the diocese. This was vividly revealed in a report looking at the needs and expressed views of local parish priests throughout that area.²⁴ At the grassroots parish level, where time and attention are concentrated on dealing with the many and varied internal parish matters, there is considerable disillusionment. Faith and loyalty keep many within the church, but the greater awareness and involvement of the laity in the post-Vatican II church has also led to a heightened sense of expectation with regard to participation in and influence upon, policy and decision-making.

"Lots accept the church, warts and all, are carried along by faith. But they are conscious of a debate in the church; they read a lot, see the hierarchy, not as serving as they used to be, more trying to dominate. The way the church is being run at the moment puts people off; the leaders can't see themselves as part of the problem. Many here don't agree with the debate on ministry being closed down; many have no objections to women taking ministries. People don't expect Rome to be an accelerator, they now expect little from Birmingham. There is a sadness about ecumenism; it's being blocked. We are not growing. The Catholic Church is in need of healing if it is to go forward."²⁵

There is a sense of disillusionment and lack of progress apparent in these remarks. The desire for a more inclusive attitude with regard to collaboration with the laity, is intermingled with a sense of sadness that the local focus of ecclesiastical authority appears no more helpful than the Roman authorities. Indeed in the areas of the development of lay ministries, ecumenism, and the specific ministry of women, there

23 Ibid.

24 Ryan D., The Catholic Parish: Decline and Development in an English Diocese, unpublished manuscript, 1991.

25 Ibid. p. 34.

is an official silence which is found deafening at a local level, and which effectively blocks both discussion of these possibilities and any effective action.

The ongoing emphasis within the church upon attendance figures appears to exacerbate such a situation of disillusionment. Although it seems theologically disastrous to equate the church with those who attend, and though it is palpably obvious that the Kingdom of God is not to be equated with institutional churches; still, the actual practice of the church as institution is to continue to operate as though these undeclared assumptions retained some validity. Such a *modus vivendi* maintains the paranoia associated with church attendance figures as signs of success, although the Faith in the City report clearly refuted such an emphasis.

"The church must beware of using numerical attendance as a sole criterion."²⁶

Indeed a focus of the report was to bring to the attention of all in ministry the necessity of reflecting on the manner of Christian presence in urban life. Such sentiments find an echo in the views of one of the local Anglican clergy, who sees the Hope Community as assisting his own reflection on how to be Christian when living in a very exposed situation on the margins. It also acts as a sign of hope for him that, on behalf of the church, the Community is endeavouring to become involved in a way others might find impossible. The price of this is to be also marginalised within the church.

"To the church as a whole I don't know what effect the community has. To me as an individual, it gives me a degree of hope that the church is attempting to get involved in a way that many of us would find very difficult. I see the Community as trying to work out for the rest of us how to be Christian when they are living in a far more exposed situation than most of us. Being an innovative community means slightly "on the edge", not just marginalised with the marginalised of society, but marginalised within the church."²⁷

From his own stand-point he finds himself ambivalent about increased involvement. This ambiguity has already been indicated with regard to his lack of participation in community celebrations. His own preference is for a clearly delineated role to be fulfilled. He owns that he does not himself try to "get alongside" the people of the estate.

"I go in and do things for them, sometimes with them."²⁸

²⁶ *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation. The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas*, London, Church House, 1985, p. 31.

²⁷ Clergyman V. *op. cit.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

He highlighted another fundamental dilemma which he felt must be shared by the Community, namely how far to determine events in relation to the people on the estate, and how far to let events be determined by the people. This key issue has already been raised in the previous chapter, when looking at the functioning of Community meetings and celebrations. How far to include what may seem determinative ideas, and how far to resist that in favour of contributions from the people of the estate. In this case the situation in question is that of local management meetings on the estate. On these committees both the Community and some of the local churches are represented. Here the frustration of the educated professional cleric attains fever pitch.

"I think it's very difficult to work out for yourselves how much you do for people and how much you allow people to make their own mistakes. I know it's one of the things I find intensely frustrating, especially with some of the management committees on the estate. I just want to get in there and run it, because I know I could do it more efficiently and know that, given the structures you are working with, the way I would run it would be the acceptable way of doing it. Even though it might be that the other methods that people are using, irritating as they are to me, might have an efficiency in themselves. I know that given that they have to relate to the Civic Centre or whatever, a lot of these things are just not going to work in the way they want them to work. I find that frustrating."²⁹

The dichotomy between the interests of the people and the best way of serving those interests cause profound ambivalence. In the above, priority is given predominantly to working within prevailing structures, and the most appropriate means to facilitate this. Such an attitude has a natural corollary in an appreciation of, and adherence to, the structures and forms of both civil and church life. By contrast the other local Anglican clergyman finds himself more fluid in his relations with the same structural forms.

"I do tend to sit a little loose to the institutional church; nevertheless it's important to me, and I think that one ends up in a kind of love/hate relationship with the institution."³⁰

For this man, there are times of real conflict with the established nature both of the church and society. However, he sees the local bishop as having a crucial role with regard to supporting initiatives outside the normal practice, and as already indicated his bishop has committed himself to this area.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Clergyman U. op. cit.

At times in urban ministry I feel a greater confrontation. A lot is dependent upon the stance of bishops in particular and I think we're blessed ourselves here. Our bishops are seeking to understand. There is a dilemma as you go up through the institution of getting more and more removed. Bishops are conscious of that and want to be able to speak from the position of the marginalised."³¹

However, given the institutional allegiance of the Community and the local clergy, there are certain dilemmas which hover, scarcely veiled, over any ecumenical involvement with the marginalised people of the estate. Given the underlying agenda of the institution which requires formal church attendance as the measure of "success" there is a degree of unacknowledged pressure to ensure the formal commitment of residents of the estate to a particular denomination. This underlies the remarks of the local parish priest recorded above in the stress laid on the numbers of individuals returning to the church, or the sacraments. The prominence given to such tangible and numerical commitment is one which appears inimical to the practice which has been developed by the Community and indeed within the ecumenical initiatives undertaken. Consequently, there has been an avoidance of either acknowledgement of, or discussion about, this issue.

"There are dilemmas for both the Hope Community and to a certain extent ourselves in a sort of official way. The relationship between what we're doing and the established institutional church. What do you do about the question of membership and the traditions that you introduce people to? I think we've skirted around this question because it is fraught with difficulty."³²

For this cleric, clarity appears to lie within the area of enabling individuals to give their own expression of Christian faith. A sharing of the Christian tradition for him does not imply an assimilation of the particular rubrics of a tradition but rather assisting the development of what is most appropriate in the form of Christian expression governed by the circumstances and situation.

"There is a sense deep down inside of me that we should be in the business of passing on the tradition to those around us and allowing them to develop the situations which are appropriate for their expression of Christian faith in these places and not of bringing with us the trappings of what is pretty much entrenched middle class culture, in the Anglican church at least."³³

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

This approach is particularly applicable in consideration of community celebrations. This cleric's attitude towards liturgy is again one which is seen as more flexible and fluid than the pervading institutional norm. In his conviction,

"If you really are serious about a bias to the poor, then you have to begin the planning and expression of liturgy there too."³⁴

Having previously been in a parish where the very nature of the building within which worship took place was conducive towards a more informal service with participation by the congregation, arriving in his new parish it was a shock to find,

"a place where they were still in the seventeenth century with regard to worship."³⁵

The whole architecture of the church increased the difficulty and it was virtually impossible to utilise a novel format. The occasion of alterations to the church, and a move into the church hall for Sunday worship assisted an alternative dynamic, but change occurred only slowly. For this cleric, the ideal situation would be full participation by the laity at all stages of planning and practice of worship.

"For a service to happen as I'd really like it to happen, groups in the congregation would plan it, and we clergy would be acting much more as a catalyst. We would be told by the people what they wanted us to do. But that's all about risk taking and things going wrong. And we always think if something goes wrong we ought to sort it out. But as the leadership developed among the congregation, they should be able to handle that."³⁶

For the Free Church clergyman living on the estate, the involvement of the local people in the planning of the Community celebrations is very important. Coming from a tradition where the ministry of the laity is assured, he appreciates the way in which the celebrations are organised. He realises that the local people need encouragement both to share their ideas and to participate, but he has been impressed by the way contributions from the people were actively sought and valued without any overt or covert imposition by the sister facilitating the meeting.

"The sister who happened to be facilitating the meeting was just doing that and not trying to impose her views through the back door with some kind of sham of involving others. They were genuine participative experiences. It would be quite possible to devise a sham participation. But it would be fairly obvious and would quickly provoke a negative reaction if that was the case."³⁷

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Clergyman Resident D. op. cit.

Hierarchical Mystification and Demystification

A focus on church attendance figures effectively acts as a form of defence mechanism circumventing the necessity of addressing external problems. By focusing attention firmly on those within the institutional fold, there is an implicit denial of any need to look further afield. Such an attitude is most clearly illustrated at the more senior levels within the church. It does appear that the further a cleric progresses within the institution the more likely he is to become increasingly removed from the grounded reality of ordinary life. There are some notable exceptions to this generalisation as the witness of senior clergy in Liverpool³⁸ and elsewhere make clear.

With regard to the Roman Catholic Archbishop within whose jurisdiction the Hope Community lies, by his own admission, his impressions of the life and work of the Hope Community are,

"Vague, I've not actually been there."³⁹

He considered that the opinion within the diocese would be "favourable" towards the Community but declined to expand on that comment. He emphasised that students from the local seminary were regularly sent to the Community on placement. He did not consider that work being undertaken in the Community influenced in any way either ongoing reflection with regard to priorities for ministry within the diocese or his own reflection with regard to the church and the "option for the poor".

In an interview with another senior clergyman the reception of questions was very genial, but the responses were only slightly less guarded and more informative. He has visited the Community and generally approved of what was undertaken there. However, his knowledge was somewhat outdated with regard to the Community's activities. He found a helpful comparison in the work undertaken in the "Barios" of Central America. His concluding opinion was that the Community was somewhat limited in its activities and effect. They were,

38 An illustration is the following extract from an address delivered by Archbishop Dereck Worlock in Lichfield Cathedral, 4th May, 1992. "I have walked the streets during urban riots in repeated efforts to restore peace, calm, reconciliation and an end to violence from either side. I have struggled in company with a local community to achieve possession of the site of an abandoned factory to enable a co-operative to build their village of 150 houses within our city. With Bishop Shepherd, I have bull-dozed in one way or another buildings and authorities to help communities to stay together on grounds other than racist discrimination or religious sectarianism."

39 Clergyman M. telephone conversation, July, 1992.

"not doing anything else other than being there, helping community development on the estate."⁴⁰

He had actually visited the community and been impressed by the ecumenical prayer meetings, by which he was referring to the celebrations. However, he felt that the work on the estate was without great effect in terms of people attending church, and he acknowledged the importance that is still attached to the numbers of people "returning to the pews". Yet at the same time he was able to say that he considered the aim of all Christian outreach is,

"To put people at peace with God."⁴¹

He appeared to see no potential conflict between these two aims. Rather he seemed to feel that the latter was perhaps the ideal while the former was geared to the pragmatic situations of daily life. From my own observation, individuals coming to a sense of peace with God was something considered vital to the life of people on the estate, while their attendance at church services was something far less real and possibly in the realm of the ideal. Thus here, there seemed a stark contrast between the everyday practical reality for clerical members of the institution and that of the marginalised people on the estate.

I was referred to the pamphlet published by the Committee for Community Relations Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales From Charity to Empowerment⁴². This cleric had been part of the committee which produced the document. Within it there is a brief inclusion referring to the life and work of the Hope Community. Here fact, aims, actuality, and misapprehension are the inevitable result of such cursory consideration. The conjunction of this document and his previous remarks indicated that, although the Hope Community's work on the estate was considered favourably, it was not seen as having any significance with regard to the practice or policy of the church at a local or diocesan level. The parish was seen to have other concerns, of which the estate might be one; there was no sense of it being given a priority with regard to time or personnel or indeed involvement in ongoing reflection. It was also made quite clear that the issue of the option for the poor, and the work of the Hope community, and other such communities within the diocese, came far behind other more important issues such as Catholic Schools.

40 Clergyman A. interview, February, 1992.

41 Ibid.

42 From Charity to Empowerment The Church's Mission alongside Poor and Marginalised people, London, Committee for Community Relations Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1992.

Within the Anglican diocese, the Bishop is both appreciative and supportive of the community's work. His involvement has been predominantly at the level of encountering the leader of the community at various meetings, although he has also visited the community on a few occasions. He gives real encouragement to the involvement of the local Anglican clergy with the initiative, and expects to hear of the developing relationship in any report from the local parish. However, he freely admitted that the presence of the Community within his area had not led to a dramatic change in his own life style and practice. For him there is a clear distinction between those who live in an area amongst marginalised people and those who do not. The traditional model had seen mission as primarily moving into an area from an exterior base. In contrast, the very presence of the Hope Community upon the estate is seen as the most vital contribution to any mission activity. By implication, he saw the role of Bishop as inevitably drawing away from any form of direct involvement and solidarity.

"So much of mission work is from the outside. My own basic life style hasn't changed. I'm not incarnated in amongst the poor. There is a qualitative difference being in and out of such an incarnational enterprise. One of the difficulties of Faith in the City is that one gets trapped into and overtaken by fund-raising, which is a different exercise from being directly alongside the poor. Bishops become caught up with strategic directions, management etc."⁴³

Consideration of the future was for him the difficult path of trying to encourage new initiatives that were emerging, while at the same time realistically acknowledging that those who engaged in such initiatives would always be in the minority. However, he saw the vital role of the church as being to give real encouragement and support to those so engaged.

"Looking ahead, my hunch is we're so weak as Christians that the cultural shift and sacrificial move that needs to be made is not given to all. It's easy to talk about the poor, but to walk alongside that's different. To think of this as a norm for Christian living is unrealistic. But the Church needs to offer prayer, support and encouragement to those who can do so. The Hope Community continues to keep the poor on the agenda for me, which is so important, especially for the Anglican church in England. We've tended to be the middle class at prayer, and Anglican Christianity has been reduced to moral behaviour. It's easy for Anglicans to ignore the poor in this country. The struggle to get "Faith in the City" into being was symptomatic of this."⁴⁴

43 Clergyman O. interview, March, 1992.

44 Ibid.

The relationship of the local churches and the hierarchies to the Hope Community is for the religious sisters involved only one part of their involvement with the Church. Another vital area is the commitment they have to their own order. Accordingly, the sisters were asked what kind of support they received from their own religious congregation. Answers stressed the general sense of good will that accrued to the community throughout the Province, but raised questions particularly concerning the lack of involvement of other sisters in the Province. The Community leader expressed her own sense of isolation within this.

"There's a lot of good will to support what we're doing and a lot of claps on the back. Most are aware that we're doing something in keeping with the Institute and which might be important. But there's a lot of fear and most don't understand. There's a tendency to play down a bit what we're doing because there's a lot of public recognition. So I tend to play down a little bit at regional meetings. Sometimes I feel very alone in the Province also. Why aren't other I.J's coming here, when it is so much in keeping with our original charisma?"⁴⁵

Another sister mentioned how she had first heard about the Community in Heath Town; her description indicates the nature of the difficulty of communication across a widespread Province, which in this case covers England and Ireland.

"We all get involved in our own jobs. Things start and finish and you might not know what goes on in between. I knew A. was doing a job up here, but I didn't see it as the Hope Community doing a specific job. I heard that A. and a group were living in Heath Town on a housing estate, but it didn't strike me as anything spectacular."⁴⁶

This comment also illustrates the perceived reality that the work of the Community in Heath Town is one among a number of projects with which the congregation is involved. Indeed in a written response from the then Provincial of the congregation, a similar point was emphasised.

"The ministry of the Hope Community in Heath Town is one of a number of our ministries in poorer areas which emerged as a direct response to the priority we took to the poor."⁴⁷

One sister actually involved in the Community commented that the support accorded to the Hope Community by the senior members of the order was of the same substance as that given to any other work. It was not seen as different from other

45 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

46 Fieldworker D. Interview, November, 1991.

47 Provincial Letter, October, 1992.

activities occurring within the congregation. Again the Provincial appeared to concur with this understanding.

"Heath Town, like our other similar involvements, began in a very small way by a vision from the grass-roots.⁴⁸ Right from the beginning, the Provincial Council supported and encouraged it to evolve in ways no one could have imagined at the beginning."⁴⁹

It is the opinion of one of the sisters that the way in which information about the Hope Community reaches members of the Province is really by personal contact. It is disseminated in this way at Regional and Provincial meetings. In one such meeting this sister recalls particular approval being accorded to the Community.

"Quite a few mentioned the Hope Community as a group carrying out the aims of the congregation. It came out spontaneously that there is deep grass roots support for the work itself. Like other congregations we are an ageing group, so few would feel able for the work themselves."⁵⁰

This view was again echoed by the Provincial, who laid stress on the elderly nature of the congregation and the demanding nature of this particular apostolate. However, the assertion that all the young sisters in formation had spent time in Heath Town did not appear to correlate with the understanding of the leader of the community.

"The reality of our Province is that we have a very high percentage of elderly sisters .. We have not many young sisters. However all our young sisters in formation have had direct experience of the Hope Community at one time or another during their initial formation. Different ministries require different abilities and sisters are placed in those situations where they can best contribute. These projects in the inner city areas are always a priority for us when sisters are changing ministry or are coming into the Province. At the same time we are also very careful to choose people who can cope with the demands of the various ministries involved. .. Our obvious concern is the very few I.J.'s available to form part of the core group. But this is our weakness and somehow the Lord seems to work through it and with it."⁵¹

The possibility of other members of the Province visiting the Hope Community and staying a few days to experience something of the life and work, was one espoused by the oldest sister in the community. She had found that those who had actually visited were those who gave the strongest support to the Community's efforts, for they had a better understanding of the real context. Another sister in the core

48 Presumably this is meant to indicate Fieldworker A. who surprisingly is never mentioned throughout the letter.

49 Provincial Letter op. cit.

50 Fieldworker D. op. cit. It is perhaps pertinent to note that this sister is actually 67 herself and most concerned to remain involved and part of the community as long as she is physically able so to do.

51 Provincial Letter op. cit.

group⁵² shared this desire for more members actually to visit the Community and the sense that the Community's work was not fully understood by the province. She attributed this also to a failure on the part of the Community adequately to communicate something of their life and work.

"There is a lot of good will towards the Community and we receive a lot of material gifts. But people don't really understand the mission. They think it is something which it is not, something not for them. We haven't yet succeeded in fully communicating it properly. We have decided we can't do it fully in words or slides. Now we tend to make personal invitations to people to come and stay a while. The response hasn't been great yet, but it's the only way forward."⁵³

The Problem of Publicity

One of the criticisms levelled against the Hope Community is that of accruing too much publicity. Behind this charge appears to be the fear that as the Community becomes more well known this will detract from the work on the estate, and also disrupt that work. In addition there was the fear of a form of publicity that might alienate the Community from the local residents by laying stress upon the sacrificial nature of the involvement of the Community with the people, rather than the emphasis that members of the Community give to what they have learned from the people during their time on the estate. One cleric expressed his concern in the following terms.

"My fear possibly is publicity. At one level you need that to be effective as a sign of the kingdom. Danger could come in that it becomes something which almost destroys the Community by separating you off from the estate as those heroic women who've gone from wonderful middle class backgrounds to live in the midst of the poor and deprived - that could be very damaging."⁵⁴

For another cleric there was a feeling that the question of publicity was not a future threat to the community, but a problem that already existed and which needed to be addressed. He perceived an attitude which assumed that the Community was at the forefront of innovative work, particularly by contrast with another community of sisters of the same congregation which was situated on the far side of the town. This

52 Although during my time with the community there were for the last year 4 sisters present. The French sister who was learning English, though sharing some of her insights with regard to the community life and work, declined to have these recorded, feeling that her comments from a totally different cultural milieu would be inappropriately conjoined with the rest of the community. To the extent that her participation in the community activities was limited by the limitation of language, she did not share fully in the life and outreach of the community. However, her involvement in the Community meetings, and her general perceptiveness, meant she was a helpful neutral presence in terms of validating my own observations.

53 Fieldworker B. interview, March, 1992.

54 Clergyman V. op. cit.

appeared singularly divisive and, he felt, led to tension within the different communities.

"My criticism is that the Community have too much publicity. Sisters here think they are at the cutting edge of the work. I think there's a tension with the other community in Wolverhampton. But there are plenty of front lines and I think we have to be aware of a diversity, a tension. My greatest fear is that it becomes insular."⁵⁵

This fear of insularity was one he felt the Community was particularly susceptible to, since the focus of their concern was precisely those who lived on the Heath Town estate. For him the wider parameters of a parish necessitated a wider vision. Any other alternative was liable to be deficient, and unreal given the nature of the modern church.

"The strength and the limitation of the Hope Community is Heath Town itself, these blocks. Here the community are sharing the joys and sorrows and frustrations of life, and trying to live gospel values amidst it all. But this is only part of the parish, and my view is broader."⁵⁶

The endeavour of the Hope Community to live in a manner according to the gospel in the reality of the Heath Town estate, was seen as a vision possible for a small group, but too limited for the official church which had to consider the manner of living of all areas within a parish. Thus to focus in any exclusive manner upon the life and work of the Hope Community was he felt a form of publicity which was ultimately detrimental both for the Community and the locality.

"So many people say the Hope Community is wonderful, marvellous, and make too much of a big thing out of it."⁵⁷

The concern about becoming part of the public domain is one which some of the Community share with members of the local clergy. There exists a degree of fear that if the Community becomes too well known then the invasion of visitors might begin to have a disruptive and even damaging effect on the life and work of the Community.

"Maybe it would be better if nobody else knew that this place existed. If there was not all the publicity. If people know they want to find out more, then they come, then they change things. In a way it's false."⁵⁸

55 Clergyman L. op. cit.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Fieldworker E. interview, November, 1991.

Another vital consideration for this member of the Community was the stress engendered by constant visits from those who wished to know more about the life and work of the Hope Community. The policy of the Community as espoused by the leader is to enable anyone who wishes, to come and learn from the Community's life and work. Consequently, individuals may come for varying amounts of time all through the year, although the Summer months tend to be the most busy. Visitors are shown around the estate and introduced to residents. They engage in the Community activities and participate as fully as possible in the life and work. However, in order to cater for the needs of the visitors, added pressure is laid upon the members of the Community and this member found such a policy a somewhat questionable exercise. In particular she considered there was the tension of a potential rift in the Community's relationship with residents due to the misplaced remarks or actions of visitors.

"Maybe I'm concerned because I can see the pressures on people that exist already, without having to explain constantly what they are doing and taking people round. It's hard, because you don't actually know sometimes the person you are taking around to introduce to residents. There's a tension in thinking are they going to say something really stupid here and are you going to be left having to deal with the mess? I know the Community are sensitive and don't treat people as though they are in a zoo, but the effort required is enormous. The other thing is it can put residents off coming here. If they see a new face at the door every day, it might be counter-productive."⁵⁹

The concern to maintain respect for the residents of the estate is one which exercises the mind of another member of the Community.

"Because of the public image of the Community, more people are coming to see us, and there is a danger in that. We have to be careful. We can forget the respect due to people on the estate, and if we don't respect them, then we should not be here."⁶⁰

For this member an ideal situation would be if residents from the estate were the ones who showed any visitors around, and shared something of their own lives. For this woman the issue of publicity and the public image of the Community is a highly questionable area. She is most concerned about the potential exploitation of the people.

"I find the whole public image thing hard - for whom and for what? The image of the Hope Community is not for Heath Town and I feel

59 Ibid.

60 Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

there is a real danger in using places like this. We lose sight of important issues like the mother trying to feed five children."⁶¹

One particular incident of a television programme, which included a brief reference to the life and work of the Hope Community and involved filming on the estate, had crystallised the problem of publicity for this woman. When the recording was shown to a group of residents there was a sense of rejection. For this Community member it was important not to ameliorate the difficult conditions of life and domesticate the inhabitants.

"We were on the TV at one point and one of the residents said that it was a load of rubbish. I thought how do people see the public image which is portrayed out there. We can make "the poor" sound too much like something with icing sugar, sweet and nice. Whereas it's not like that here; it's mucky, it's manure-like sometimes."⁶²

Such concerns both for the realistic presentation of life on the estate and to be both welcoming of visitors but not exploitative of residents can lead to conflictual situations within the Community.

The actual practice of publicity predominantly involves the Community leader. On numbers of occasions she has gone to give talks to local groups or conferences, or radio or television interviews sharing something of life on the estate. Other members of the Community have been content to leave such a public profile to her and consequently the Community has come to be associated almost exclusively with the leader. This is certainly very evident when talking to local clergy and indeed is one of the concerns expressed by a number of them. The leader is seen as the lynch pin of all activities in the Community, indeed of the very survival of the community itself, any potential withdrawal being considered as the possible death knell for the Community's existence.

"A fair amount of community stability seems to devolve on A. I know this is not right, but if A. was to decide to go or her order to tell her to go and do something else, would the Hope Community succeed in maintaining its life without her? I would hope it would, but I don't know. Of those there at the moment, some are only there for a year. You need some stability in the community and also in relation to the estate."⁶³

This is a situation which the leader of the Community is both cognisant of and concerned about. For her it induces also a feeling of loneliness and potential

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Clergyman V. op. cit.

alienation. Her own concern about publicity is that very often what the Community is trying to do is not adequately apprehended by those outside, while within the Community most major initiatives are inspired and sustained by herself. In such a situation the potential for demagogic activity is great. She appreciates the dangers within the situation for building her own empire, and acknowledges the need for ongoing discernment. The spectrum of real power existing within such an area of powerlessness is a striking portrayal, and one which receives further consideration in the following chapter.

"Not many people really understand what we are doing here. They pat us on the back and say this is great. At times I feel very alone and I feel the weight of responsibility for new initiatives. One of my greatest worries is that so much of it is built around me, and there are times when I despair and think there must be something wrong in the situation that it depends so much on my contribution to survive. That's where the loneliness is. If I'm working to free people from dependency and yet here I am in a position where people are so dependent on me, it's a contradiction. The fear of building a kingdom around myself is always with me. I'm so free and in such a position to do what I like that the need for wisdom and discernment is terrific. We're blazing new trails, there's no one to ask and no book to consult. Even the community, if what I say sounds reasonable, will agree 99% of the time. So there's no challenge to me and to how I see things."⁶⁴

Within the confines of the time spent living and working with the Community, I would seek qualification for the last statement. On occasions, distinctive challenges were presented to the leader of the community. Certainly the ongoing reflection on the issue of guaranteeing that ideas for celebrations and the format of prayer meetings originated from the people rather than being imposed on the people, inspired confrontation and conflictual discussion, as indicated in the previous chapter. Yet it is certainly true to say that the exterior perception of the Community is that A. alone has the power and initiative to carry through any novel practices. For her own part, A. avows that she would welcome others within the Community taking more initiative and indeed more responsibility.

"I believe there is within the Community plenty of opportunity for individuals to be involved and to take responsibility at all levels. If I knew of any further way that could be facilitated I would do it. The aim is for us all to take responsibility, for us to recognise the gifts within the group."⁶⁵

In some ways this hope was partially realised during the time when the leader of the Community was abroad for a series of meetings. Her prolonged absence meant that

⁶⁴ Fieldworker A. *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

the other members had to cope with the pragmatic requirements of life and work and managed to do so without disaster. Since calls upon her time have increasingly taken her away from the estate, these occasions have necessitated the Community adopting a manner of proceeding which inevitably focuses upon the remaining members.

The hope of one of the local clergy is certainly that the Community can fulfil its potential in life and work without the participation of A. The realisation of this could not only bring a sense of freedom to A. herself, but could also encourage the burgeoning life of alternative initiatives.

"Possibly another hope would be that the community could find its stability without A. because there may come a time when it's actually right for her that she's not there and anything that's built around an individual needs perhaps a greater stability outside that individual."⁶⁶

A further aspiration, for this cleric, is that the Hope Community would both continue and develop in its manner of presence in the locality as a witness both to the residents of the estate and to the church. Indeed, that it will continue to be church for the people of the estate, until such time as a more effective way can be found to establish a vibrant relationship with the institution.

"My hope for the Hope Community is that it continues. There is a sense that it must answer the needs of those who belong to it as well as those who come from outside. That it will continue to be the church until we can find a more effective way for all of the church to be there."⁶⁷

For this to be possible, he considers it essential that the Community concentrates more on its presence among the people, than on the many and varied activities in which it might become involved. He feels there is a "danger in doing", and that this might undermine the very purpose of the Community's presence.

"It shouldn't be doing too much. There is a danger in doing. That it will destroy the being. The purpose becomes running or managing. The sisters are then there to run things, as opposed to just being there because they want to be there. We justify ourselves so often by work, instead of saying the purpose of the Hope Community is to live and to show Christian living in the middle of the estate, where Christian living is not thought about, or considered absurd."⁶⁸

There is a dilemma that this cleric raises. He would espouse an ecumenical collective acknowledgement of, and support for, the life and work of the Community. At the

66 Clergyman V. op. cit.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

same time he would consider it vital to protect both the anonymity and the pragmatic interaction of the Community with the local people. How to ensure adequate assistance and support while at the same time respecting the vulnerable nature of the local context is a problem as yet unresolved, but shared also by the senior Anglican cleric.

"I would welcome more of a sense in which the wider church can attempt to own what's going on in terms of the Hope Community. It may be good for the Community to feel not just on a limb doing their rather odd thing which the church doesn't really want to know about, but at the same time I don't want to say that it is there to be observed."⁶⁹

A Focus for Local Reconciliation

One way in which the local community is involved with the Community is through a local initiative involving the Churches and the Community endeavouring to promote reconciliation within the area. Following a police attempt to crack down on the drug problem in Heath Town there was a major riot in the 1980s⁷⁰. The outcome of this major public disturbance, and the coverage in local press and media made visible the degree of hurt which was festering within the estate. Living in the midst of the estate, the Community was receptive to the confidences and confusion of the residents.

"This precipitated a whole series of events which made us aware of the hurt within the local community and the Hope Community bore the brunt of that. They were in a position - the place is so important - they were placed to hear and feel the hurt of the community, and they naturally found themselves as a buffer between the police and those who were hurting."⁷¹

Out of this situation the BREACH⁷² project was born. In listening to the hurt of the local residents, key issues began to emerge. These included: a history of rejection on the grounds of race; the lack of support for mental health patients sent into the community; poor relationships with the local police; and economic and social injustice at many different levels. There was a concern amongst the local churches in conjunction with the Hope Community to rebuild relationships within the local community. It was felt that the issue of reconciliation was at the very heart of the restoration of right relationships and addressed the issues of justice and full participation in the community by all individuals. The purpose of the BREACH

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ See chapter 1.

⁷¹ Clergyman U. op. cit.

⁷² Literally BREACH refers to standing in the breach across a divide. This seemed to the management committee of the project the most appropriate name.

venture is to bring reconciliation to each and all in the community of Heath Town. A successful submission was made to the Urban Fund and a charitable trust, who donated sufficient funds to enable the project to proceed. The Hope Community, one of the local Anglican parishes and the Pentecostal church are all represented on the management group of the project, which even in the short time of its existence has had a chequered career.

The first worker appointed to the project was someone from outside the area whose term of office was only three weeks. Unable to handle the dynamic of a very volatile situation after yet another police raid on the estate, he lost credibility with the black community and resigned.⁷³ After this, the management group took longer to decide on a new appointment. They eventually decided upon employing two part-time workers, a black male and a white female both from the local area; neither possessed the professional qualifications of the first appointee, but the grass roots credibility of these local people far outweighed such an omission.

One of the major factors in the securing of finance from the charitable trust was the proviso that the project would consider the issue of the empowerment of local people. This had been a fundamental consideration in the ecumenical understanding and activity engaged in by the Hope Community and the local churches. Aware of the general malaise of powerlessness amongst the people of the estate they welcomed any initiative which might make a significant change to the situation.

"Both the Hope Community and ourselves have been seeking to stand for people empowering themselves, taking control over their lives so far as they are able so to do. The sense of powerlessness is quite strong. The BREACH Project is based around some of these principles."⁷⁴

During my time with the Community there were regular meetings with the two BREACH workers, who in their different spheres were regularly building contacts amongst the local community, in their ongoing work of reconciliation. The inauguration of their work was the occasion of a service in the local Anglican church, where the congregation numbered both those from the sponsoring

⁷³ The worker had been maintaining a very high profile in the community from the time he was appointed. He had made his way into a renowned centre for drug trafficking and was rescued by another member of the estate. With the advent of another police raid on one of the tower blocks on the estate, he was suspected of being a police informer. In walking across the estate he needed the protection of two respected members of the black community. He later stated that he had never been so frightened, though he was accustomed to the troubles in Northern Ireland. He said that he understood what it was like to stand in the breach, and realised what the project was about.

⁷⁴ Clergyman U. op. cit.

congregations, and the local police along with some members of the estate. However, though the aim of the project was reconciliation and empowerment, the very format of the service was such as to emphasise the alienation and powerlessness of the local community. This was particularly apparent in consideration of the language of the service. Language is the most common form of communication, yet it may also alienate and divide, increase isolation and frustration. It may be used to satisfy the desires of the articulate and yet never touch the aspirations of the inarticulate. It may be used to preach at God, rather than be the simple plea for openness to the word of God.

The service was held in a local Anglican church. The ecumenical nature of the occasion was marked by the presence of five clergymen in the sanctuary - one of whom was a bishop. One sister joined them, briefly, to read. The order of service included many prayers with congregational participation - for those members of the congregation who could read. All the prayers, passages of scripture, and hymns had been thoughtfully chosen for the occasion. Yet the lack of silence - in which all could participate - and the very virtuosity of some of the prayers were of a genre far removed from the group from Heath Town who had come to the service. The prayer of confession certainly expressed what many of those present felt.

"We confess that we have failed to share the good we have been given; have made the wrong choices and taken away others' powers to choose; have built barriers, called names, made war and destroyed children, women and men made in your image; we have not loved you, Lord, whole-heartedly, nor our neighbours as ourselves; we have sought refuge in the familiar, and have drawn back from the new and demanding; we have become despondent because of the world's problems and have tried to meet the world's needs in superficial ways; we have failed to offer a warm welcome to those who have crossed frontiers and come to share our lives; we have failed to cross frontiers ourselves and to share our lives with others; we have failed to recognise and receive what you offer to us in the gifts and ministries of each other."⁷⁵

Yet the "Oh dear Bloody hell" of Z. - an elderly gentleman who was recovering from a stroke, was frustrated by his inability to say more, but wanting to make his own contribution towards reconciliation - expressed perhaps more eloquently to God the reality of our human condition. It may be that the very framework of our "so many words" is but a defence against our own inadequacy and vulnerability before God and other people. In the presence of the marginalised it is difficult to evade such unpalatable insight.

⁷⁵ From the order of service to mark the inauguration of the BREACH venture, 23 January, 1991.

The BREACH venture has been a breakthrough in the ecumenical dynamic of the local area combining as it does the Anglican and Pentecostal communities with the Hope Community. The focus of the project has been to try and identify what issues are considered by local people to be important, and also identifying potential local leaders. The two BREACH workers have focused their attention on contacts with key groups and workers, not as professionals talking to other professionals⁷⁶ but as local people involved with other local people. The prime concern has been one of networking local resources to the benefit of the local people. An emphasis has been laid on the pragmatic exchange of converse in an individual's own home, and endeavouring to ascertain the potential leadership qualities which will enable individuals to be committed to a cause. Yet the very circumstances of life militate against such potential ever coming to fruition.

"So much potential is all but knocked out of them; hope is also knocked out of them."⁷⁷

The aim of the project is to harness such potential before it is snuffed out. Thus the workers affirm individuals and groups in their concerns and endeavour to act as coordinating personnel to bring people together, and then fade into the background. Accordingly, the role of the workers is essentially one of facilitating, listening, and drawing out issues that are raised for the benefit of all in the locality. In this process they are seen as promoting a deep form of reconciliation both within the local area, and between the local residents and various official bodies with whom the people come into daily contact.

Gender Specific issues

An important aspect of the life of the institutional church with which the Community has become involved is the formation of personnel for religious life. In this connection, one novice director regularly sends novices to the Hope Community on an experimental basis.⁷⁸ In reflecting on the experience he has had with various novices, and his own experience in visiting the Community, he raised the interesting point that perhaps in some way the form of Community living and apostolate might be something more easily approached by religious women than by men. His reasoning here was that most religious men were in training to be priests with a specific active role envisaged. This role prescinded from the kind of participation which might

76 Here I am indebted to Austin Smith's insight that no one uses the term professional except professionals; for ordinary people the term is a major snub.

77 Clergyman U. op. cit.

78 An "experiment" in these terms refers to a placement commitment which forms part of the formation programme of the Society of Jesus.

involve a form of activity seen as more passive and less structured than those traditionally associated with priesthood.

In his association with the Hope Community he had acquired the impression that emphasis was given to the presence amongst the people as being the major thrust of the work, in preference to any predetermined activity.

"I got the impression there was an enormous amount of sitting around drinking cups of tea, rather than getting on and doing things."⁷⁹

Although this primarily referred to the time when the community operated a policy of "open house" welcoming individuals in to chat and have a cup of tea or coffee, it could also cover a general approach to the work on the estate. Even with the demise of the open house policy, there is still a fairly regular stream of visitors during the week for one reason or another who require time spent in listening and a placebo often in the form of a cup of tea. To this novice director however, the time spent on such an apostolate was not something which men found either easy or conducive.

"It comes hard to men. Maybe the idea of a cup of tea apostolate is not what the average Jesuit goes out expecting. The novices were struck by the amount of time spent like this. Just being there to allow people to be themselves and come and talk, and be ready for whatever is offered. That doesn't come easy for men."⁸⁰

Paradoxically this openness to just being with the people and listening to their lives and all that this contained was a consideration that the novice director felt it was very important the novices should acquire. Although it was something which might not be conducive for men, still it was a vital factor in any future ministry. It was noteworthy that most novices both felt that something important was taking place within the Hope Community and also maintained a link, primarily with the leader, after they had left. Indeed they frequently returned and would take others from the noviceship to events such as the Community celebrations.

For the novice director the importance of this ministry amongst the people and the emphasis that it appeared to give to a particular ministry by women had further ramifications with regard to the development of the social apostolate amongst the Jesuits.

"I would wonder whether some groups of women religious, as opposed to priests and Jesuits, are much more able for this than we priests and Jesuits. I'm not saying that Jesuits who are priests couldn't do it.

⁷⁹ Novice Master I. interview, February, 1992.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

There seems to be something fairly normal about a group of women sitting chatting to people over cups of tea and making contacts. Groups of men could do the same thing but we've had problems when we have tried it."⁸¹

In various places in different parts of the country, the Jesuits of the British Province had tried to establish houses which had an outreach programme to the local area, but in each case it appeared other work had a priority.

"In places we have tried. They have some other job they go out to. They don't just sit there and do nothing, they go out and do something specific. The fact that they haven't tried this form⁸² raises some questions as to whether it might not be best for us simply to accept as a starting point that some women religious are able to do this much better, so let them get on with it and we encourage them. There does seem to be a sort of feeling that unless we are doing something like this there is something terribly missing in the society's apostolate."⁸³

He then proceeded to cite the example of a well-known Jesuit who had spent a short while living with the Community. The idea was that this should be a permanent commitment. However, after a brief period of time it became evident that such a living situation would be unendurable and for specific reasons, the whole life style of the people on the estate was foreign to this man, and, approaching seventy, it was very difficult to adopt an alternative life style.

"Even G. when he was there, he came back. He found the hanging around impossible. The noise when he was writing was also difficult, but he found the first four hours of the day infuriating with nothing to do. He was up and ready to go but the people were all in bed."⁸⁴

The most important feature of the Community life as far as the novice director was concerned was being available to the people. The Community did not claim to be or do more than this, an easy and normal engagement with people in the pragmatic reality of their daily lives. It was he felt a lesson that could be learned by the Jesuits if they decided to engage in a similar apostolate. Yet a particular problem still remained for them, namely what they were to do as priests. Priesthood thus acquired a major dynamic in ministry which if disavowed by the priests themselves would be open to question by the people, some of whom might well be inured in a traditional

81 Ibid.

82 From my own observation of and involvement with the now defunct Faith and Justice Centre in Liverpool 8, it would seem inappropriate to say this has not been tried. Certainly it did not appear to be sustainable in its existing form. Whether this was a gender-related issue, in the way the novice director is implying in this quotation is open to argument.

83 Novice Master I. op. cit.

84 Ibid.

way of relating to priests. Priesthood also carried with it the inevitable involvement with structure and the institution which to a degree the sisters managed to escape.

"When you are a priest you are inevitably involved in structure. To a certain extent the Hope Community is an institutionalised body, in that the sisters are members of the institution not working in a way that is part of the institutionalised set-up. They are not parish sisters."⁸⁵

Without entering into the major debate on the nature of priesthood, it does appear that the issue has a certain bearing on the possibilities of men being involved in a ministry similar to that of the Hope Community. An important feature of this kind of ministry appears to be the notable lack of structure involved. Indeed it might be seen as a ministry that precedes structure. A problem might then result if at some future point attempts were made to impose a structure, with all the consequent problems that structures are subject to. It is noteworthy that the novice director did not consider that the community's ministry was necessarily a challenge to existing structures, primarily because they were missioned by the institutional church under the auspices of the Provincial.

Further reflection on the nature of the structure of the church led this man to evince the opinion that he would seek to encourage developments of this kind in areas like Heath Town which he saw as being beyond the reach of normal ecclesiastical structures. From his point of view he would welcome the transference of some of the initiatives occurring in Heath Town into the more formal structures of the church, so that there could be greater participation by individuals other than the clergy. This was also for him both a principle and a personal preference.

"I like to sit at the back 90%, of the time until I have to do something."⁸⁶

When asked whether any of the reflections of the novices or his own ongoing reflection with regard to involvement with the Hope Community and the potential development of thought with regard to the preferential option for the poor was communicated into the policy making groups within the Jesuit Province, it soon became clear that this was not the case. Perhaps individual mention might be made to the Provincial on an annual visit, but there was no means of officially feeding in such observations.⁸⁷

The importance of the mission of women, as identified by the novice director, has a singular form of outreach in the engagement with women on the estate, many of

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 There seemed a notable similarity here with the remarks of the senior Catholic cleric of the diocese and the Provincial of the order. Perhaps one may deduce a certain common institutional lack of communication.

whom are single parents. With the advent of the oldest sister to the Community there has been a renewed emphasis on this ministry amongst the women. A women's group was established to bring together the single parents for meetings on issues of current concern to them, which might range from Easter cooking, through the possibilities of further education, to discussing the problems of estate management which directly relate to them. Trips have been organised to more distant shopping areas, leisure complexes, and other women's groups, always with adequate child-care provision. The Community minibus has been a vital resource for any such journeys. The group was under the direction of the oldest sister and one of the young lay women who had established particularly good relations with her contemporaries on the estate. For the sister there is a vehement attitude towards the abuse which she feels these women suffer in often very volatile and certainly potentially explosive relationships with their temporary or permanent partners.

"I feel the women are used and abused. They don't know their own potential. They allow themselves to be used, almost like animals really. I feel it's absolutely shameful. I strongly feel women and men are equal in the eyes of God, so why should they be existing almost like slaves, grateful for any attention from the greatest blackguard on the estate. They have lots of potential in themselves."⁸⁸

For this sister the most important feature of her work with the women's group was helping to facilitate, very gradually, a growing sense of self-worth on the part of individual women. This sense of self-esteem was slowly linked to a recognition of latent ability, and as the women worked together they began to realise something of their own gifts and talents and abilities, which might be utilised both individually and in a communal way to assist other women. Such a growth in self-awareness and self-confidence was the only way in which this sister could conceive of a change of attitude from one of servile fear towards their male partners to one of equality and potential rapport. The consequent effect on the lives of their children could be potentially transformative.

"I think if the women could reach a better awareness of their own value, they would look at their families differently."⁸⁹

Of particular concern to this sister was the way in which boys within such families were handled. The laxity of any discipline meant that they rapidly achieved a state beyond the control of their mothers in their endeavours to emulate the father figure of the household, who might or might not be their natural father.

⁸⁸ Fieldworker D. op. cit.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

"I think boys particularly are brought up badly. They disobey their mothers from an early age. They take it as their right that they should have more consideration than girls and easily abuse their mothers. So they grow up into the same type of man as the one who fathered them."⁹⁰

Another member of the community was particularly aware of the latent aggression which she experienced amongst the young boys on the estate. A product of their own deficient rearing and lack of self-discipline, such aggression was poised below the surface, ready to erupt into violence at the least provocation.

"I'm more aware of aggression amongst the boys than anything else. There's a volcano of anger. The children are like sponges, they pick up the anger and frustration of their adults and store it all at a subconscious level. They don't even know why they are angry. It comes out at the slightest hint of challenge or opposition to their viewpoints and they sometimes go berserk."⁹¹

For the oldest sister, starting the women's group was an attempt to enable the gradual growth of self-confidence and self-assurance amongst the women in order that they might eventually be able to take control of their own destiny. In this fashion there might be the hope that they could provide a greater degree of security for the children. Indeed, she felt that because the women formed a substantial group on the estate, if they could begin to grow in confidence and support one another, they could have a significant effect if they participated in the organisations on the estate.

"I think they could make a significant difference on the estate. I know it wouldn't happen that all would be involved, but if enough were, it could make a real change."⁹²

For the young lay woman in the community, her relationship with the women on the estate had been the result of feeling drawn to the young single parent mothers and their children. With a small group she has found herself able to share at some real depth.

"I've found myself drawn towards the young single parent mothers and their children. I've spent a lot of time with them. I think my relationships with them vary a lot. Over the months I've built up relationships with a handful of women where trust has grown. Where they have opened up a lot to me and vice versa. We've shared a lot."⁹³

There have been some difficulties for this young woman. Coming from the south of England with a pronounced accent she has found it difficult to be accepted across

90 Ibid.

91 Fieldworker E. op. cit.

92 Fieldworker D. op. cit.

93 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

the cultural gulf of class relationships. What has sustained her connection with the people is the reality that she is part of the Hope Community, linked with the sisters and benefiting from the credibility which the Community has established with the people over the years.

"The pain of different classes comes in. I'm from a different part of the country, the prosperous south. People react to that, so it takes a long time to build up relationships. But the fact that I'm part of the Hope Community, not just some woman coming in. For those who know the Community there is an immediate sense of "She's OK, she's part of the Community". Over the years the Community have built up their street cred."⁹⁴

The nature of her involvement with the women of the estate is often on the very practical level of taking food to homes or helping to decorate, "getting my hands dirty."⁹⁵ In this way trust has been established, and for this fieldworker both a recognition of the precarious nature of the life of the women and an admiration for the way in which the women manage to sustain life for themselves and their families.

"I have a massive admiration and respect for the women here, as to how they cope and how they survive, and they've given a hell of a lot to me in so many ways."⁹⁶

Given the comments of the novice director cited above, it is difficult to imagine how a form of interaction with this very vulnerable group, would be either conducive to or possible for men being formed for ministry. By contrast, involvement with the young mothers is considered to be a priority group with whom the Community wish to continue to work. Thus two members are willing to give time and energy in a way which may produce little obvious immediate results but which contributes to the gradual development of confidence and independent action and decision making on the part of the local women themselves.

If the particularity of the involvement of the Hope Community with the young single mothers on the estate is positively exemplary of the nature of the contribution of women in this form of urban apostolate, there is also a potentially negative example. Within the women's group the members are predominantly white, and the Hope Community's contact with the black community has been very slow to develop over the years. There are some key members of the black community on the estate who have good relationships with the Community, but from a wider vantage point, given the proportion of black people living on the estate, they are disproportionately represented in any Hope Community activity.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

When I raised this issue with the black worker of the BREACH project, his answer was illuminating in terms of the historical and cultural gulf which needed to be overcome for there to be real contact between the Hope Community and the black community. He stressed that the black community was so marginalised within society that in general members would only react to something which appears to have a clear meaning or use for them. Thus if the Hope Community were offering a specific service which was relevant to the black community's needs then more people would be involved. Thus the actual colour issue, ie that all the Hope Community members were white and European, would not be so central a factor as whether what was provided by the Community had any relevance to black people. This had particular importance with regard to the involvement of black women in the women's group. It was important that what was taking place was seen as having specific relevance to needs within the black community. In order for this to be addressed, he suggested there might need to be some further consideration about the format of the group. Was it a group already established to which black women were invited, or was it a group within which black women could play a real role in determining its form and activities?

"It may take a bit of back pedalling. Are we wanting black people to come to what is already set up, or whether we want to go ahead and do something with and for black people?"⁹⁷

He gave the example of one black woman known to him and the two members of the Community who ran the women's group. She had been invited by both members to the meetings. However, she saw the opportunity as being one of coming to talk but with nothing further involved. Consequently since she saw there would be nothing beneficial to her after that conversation, it seemed pointless engaging in such converse.

A key issue also in relating to the wider black community was the fact that all the community were women. For black men this might well prove a problem to establishing any meaningful interaction.

"I don't know how crippling it is that you are all women, nor how effective you can be. Black men wouldn't see you as being much use to them. The Black community is a complex community and it develops through just survival. Growing up as a black man, to actually confide in a woman is not the normal thing, to relate and share on that level. It is only beginning to occur in this late generation; in the past it wouldn't even have been thought about."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ BREACH Worker F. interview, January, 1992.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

The presence of Roman Catholic religious sisters could also pose a problem for the black community few of whom were of the same denominational persuasion. The media portrayal of sisters⁹⁹ had also served to adversely effect local opinion. Yet there was a clearly expressed desire particularly on the part of the leader of the Hope Community to interact more fully with the black community of the estate. On the part of this black BREACH worker, there was also the consideration of how he could more effectively integrate his work with the Hope Community. He considered that it was an opportunity for a reciprocal process of understanding between the Hope Community and the black community.

"A. shared with me that she would like to be more involved with black people on the estate. I just consider it is an opportunity for both sides to learn. I think it is also an opportunity for some of the black community to learn also what you have to bring being women and Roman Catholics."¹⁰⁰

Emphasis was given by this man to the very real positive reputation that the Hope community has amongst the Black community. Yet he stressed that good reputation is again general rather than specific. The Community leader and the young lay woman involved with the women's group have a reputation for being very concerned to help people, but there is little sense of specific achievements attributable to the Community's efforts. Thus the very presence of the Community on the estate, though valued, is not necessarily considered "enough" in itself without more tangible successful results of such involvement.

"In the last year and a half, I've heard a lot of good things about the Hope Community, but not specific things. People have mentioned A. and C. but not in the sense of specific things done. They are well known as being concerned, willing to listen and give advice. A lot of what is done is attributed to the core group being nuns, rather than women ie it's more from a Christian basis, that's what I've picked up."¹⁰¹

Such a view stands in stark contrast to the opinions of local white clergy cited above, who stressed the importance of the presence of the Community as being in itself of importance over and above anything which they might be engaged in. This is indicative of the differing priorities given to the involvement and activity of the Hope Community by the various affiliating bodies to which they are or wish to be

⁹⁹ The Australian television production "Brides of Christ" had been showing during the months of one of my visits to the Hope Community, and provoked a plethora of comments and interest amongst residents on the estate.

¹⁰⁰ BREACH worker F. op. cit.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

committed. It also illustrates the pressure upon the community from conflicting expectations and the ongoing need for reflection on their varied involvements and sensitivity to the differing needs of individuals and groups upon the estate.

Community Views of the Churches

The as yet unconsidered element in this conversation is the spectrum of understanding evinced by members of the Hope Community themselves with regard to their involvement with the local churches and their views of the institution from the perspective of their life on the estate. A general question was posed to members of the Community about their involvement with the institutional church and a supplementary question as to whether their ideas about church had changed during their time of involvement with the Community.

For one sister, her own sense of church and its relevance for herself had not changed at all, yet she stressed that the institution seemed irrelevant for the people of the estate.

"It's relevance to me is the same as it always was. I was brought up in it, I'm part of it, in a community of sisters. But it has little or no relevance to the people here as such. God has relevance but not the church."¹⁰²

For one of the young lay women, her relationship with the church had deteriorated during her time with the Community, but this appeared to have more to do with the lack of vibrancy of the liturgy at the local parish, than with any particular reflection with regard to her life on the estate.

"I like a charismatic church. In my home church there is a lot of singing and a sermon I can understand. Here they use words I don't understand and it drags on and on and the music is dead. I used to really enjoy church and get refreshed by it."¹⁰³

Such a sense of alienation from the ritual of the Church finds an echo in the lives of the local people as already indicated. Indeed, the very resonance of this opinion with the life of residents on the estate gives this young lay woman a greater feel for the forms and symbols of prayer which have meaning for the people of the estate.

For another of the young lay women there is more of a sense of frustration than alienation. Rather than causing her to lose touch with the institution, it would appear that her time on the estate has caused her to wrestle more directly with the key

102 Fieldworker B. op. cit.

103 Fieldworker F. interview, March, 1992.

issues. These appear to centre for her on the inability of the church to use the gifts and talents of those who attend. Moreover she sees the reason for this as being the fear of the church that such potential incorporation into the life of the church might lead to a situation beyond the control of its governing authorities. By contrast the activities of the Hope Community on the estate, in particular the regular meetings for prayer and scripture sharing and the Community celebrations, actually do endeavour to incorporate contributions from the people.

"The church institution as far as I'm concerned is a pain. It seems to want always to control - mostly out of fear and I think that is its downfall, because there's a lot of potential within people but this is not allowed to show. People are not allowed to use their talents. Perhaps here in this place evangelisation takes place through people who aren't tied to regulations. The same God is operative, but here things are people-directed, so it's easier for people to be involved here than going to some church where they don't know the rules and regulations."¹⁰⁴

For the other lay woman, the contrast between what occurs within the institutional church and what she experiences upon the estate has caused her to rethink her whole understanding of church attendance. In her process of reflection she had come to a stage where the most helpful thing for her own faith was not to attend the local Anglican church, which would have been the place of her denominational allegiance. She continued to attend the weekly mass in the Community chapel where she was fully participative. Apart from this she had come to give increasing value to the Community celebrations and to feel that these were earthed in the lives of the people of the estate in a way unlike any formal church liturgy that she had ever attended. What has caused her to abandon - at least temporarily - formal church attendance is the direct result of her experience in living and working on the estate. She does not see this as an irretrievable step, but rather part of her own journey in faith.

"How do I view church? That's a big one, cos I'm in the middle of that muddle. The fact that I have chosen not to go to church, whether that's right or not, whether I should go as a duty but I rebel against that idea of a duty. I think in a way church for me is the celebrations here which have spoken to me far more if I'm not involved in the planning of them but also even then. They've spoken to me in a different way from any church service I've been to. I'm tired of hearing the same sermons. I'm just very cynical about the whole thing; church for me is building, people inside it, sermons and hymns but it's really a broader thing, an earthed thing. I've got much more from home-devised liturgies when it's come from the people and not been imposed. The church too me is still so middle class and it makes me angry. It's so apart from the people.

104 Fieldworker E. op. cit.

Living here has changed me. I don't know how it has, the only thing I've noticed is that I've stopped going to church. It doesn't mean I'll never go again, I probably will. In a way I go to the other extreme now. Evangelicalism is where my roots are. Now I'm much more into the Anglo-Catholic, the extreme of heavenly music etc, that feeds me and yet it's so apart from reality here, people who are in the inner cities. I just love the way the liturgy here comes from the people and is an "altogether thing" not an imposed thing."¹⁰⁵

For the oldest of the sisters, her view of her relationship with the institutional church has changed over the years, and she associates this with the coming to maturity of her own understanding. She finds herself aware of the human reality of the church which includes individuals such as the local clergy with the pressures that they too are subject to. What concerns her most is that the church should take a stand with those who are unable and ill-equipped in contemporary society. She would welcome more involvement of those from the institution on the estate, but recognises that the form of organisation acceptable to the institution would be a far too intrusive presence for those on the estate.

"My view of the institutional church has changed over the years; perhaps it's a part of maturity that I could see the human side of the church. Here the parish is not involved so far on the estate, probably frightened to do so. There is so much need, where do you begin?. The parish priest is not well. P. the curate is beginning to come now. I know they're very busy but the church must be seen to be supportive of the down-and-out, of those who cannot support themselves, who are ill-treated. I'd like to see it more involved here but how?; without being too intrusive I don't know. People don't want to be organised. The Church could be more welcoming for those with some Church affiliation in their background. I would hope as we live here longer we might be more aware of this."¹⁰⁶

The Community leader might well be described, and indeed would so describe herself, as a conservative Catholic with regard to her relationship with the church. The liturgy of the mass is important for her, though very often her involvement in affairs on and off the estate prevent her from regular attendance. She affirms the tradition of the church and acknowledges the need for an external authority.

"I believe firmly in an outside authority or you pick and choose what suits you."¹⁰⁷

For her too the very nature of her commitment to religious life in the evangelical counsels is both a consecration to God through the Church and to the people of the estate. Thus she would re-envisage the vows through a dominant dynamic of

105 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

106 Fieldworker E. op. cit.

107 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

availability. This she sees as the key to who the sisters are and the reason why they live on the estate. For her there is no question of devaluing the traditional call to celibacy. It is a subject which is viewed as an anachronism by the people of the estate, yet perennially occurs as a topic in discussion. In the midst of often very broken relationships, and with an ethos that insists there cannot be human fulfilment without an intimate sexual relationship, the presence of a community of celibate women who appear to be normal poses questions concerning the nature of loving relationships.

"Relationships are so broken, no stability, and yet it is felt that you can't be human unless you have a sexual relationship. But here we are and we seem to be normal and celibate. It raises terrific questions regarding love and what it is. The Catholic church would make a huge mistake if it lost its appreciation of celibacy."¹⁰⁸

With regard to the vow of poverty, again she tied it to her understanding of being available not tied in to certain material securities, but the adoption of a simple life-style. In this way also she felt there was the opportunity for sharing with the local people, who have no choice but to live simply, and the chance to reflect on what were the priority factors in life.

"The people here have the opportunity to live a simple life-style, but in the main they are angry at being deprived of so much. Because of the example of our lives this could present the opportunity to look at what is important in life, what they value in life."¹⁰⁹

Obedience was seen by this sister as primarily rooted in understanding the will of God, and finding something of this through pragmatic realities.

"Obedience is for me the will of God, understanding what God wants, where he is, in our day, through people and events."¹¹⁰

During my time with the Community, the leader spoke often about her aim to build bridges with the institutional church. She saw this as occurring through inviting clergy to celebrations; through engagement with those in formation who came to stay at the community on placement; through talks given to groups of clergy about the life of the community; and through involvement in ecumenical organisations. However, though she felt personally supported by a number of clergy, there was for her an ongoing sense of disappointment that the work of the Community was not

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

really being acknowledged, valued and built upon within her own religious denomination.

It has become apparent within this chapter that the Hope Community's relationship with the Christian churches involves no stable equilibrium of approach. At a local level there is a predominant dynamic of support, although the commitment within that in practical terms is variable. At a diocesan level the divergence is more marked; within the same denomination there is both a favourable attitude towards the community coexisting with what appears to be both ignorance and low prioritising of their endeavours. A similar contrast appears to exist within the religious congregation to which the sisters belong. Grass roots goodwill appears to predominate, while the attitude of the hierarchy appears more guarded. The ecumenical support at local and diocesan level appears impressive while not denying denominational allegiances. From the viewpoint of one of the local clergy, the most important principle of his own work and his involvement with the Hope Community is the gospel principle of taking his stand with those who are powerless. If this means that he and possibly the Community are thereby in conflict with the institutional church he is prepared to accept the consequences.

"I understand the gospel if we speak from - as it were - underneath. We are closer to Christ there, in our speaking and acting. Although that's very difficult to do effectively, I know at the gut level, in my heart, that that's where I must speak from, and if it means we're going to face all sorts of difficulties and tensions with the institution, so be it."¹¹¹

The experience of the Hope Community members with regard to the institutional church has been variable but, with one exception, not static. A progressive sense of dissatisfaction with certain forms of the church, has characterised their developing relationship. If, as implied above, it is the case that the very form of their ministry is one predominantly feminine and both alien and incomprehensible to the present male clerical modus operandi, confrontation with the institution may be inevitable. Yet the avowed recent declarations of the churches concerning the involvement of women would appear to mitigate such a conflictual necessity.

There appears to be the emergence of both potential and actual theological and ecclesiological cognitive dissonance on the part of the institution. This is the subject of further exploration in the following chapter.

¹¹¹ Clergyman U. op. cit.

Part II

Chapter 5 Disabling Dissonances

I don't know if I could live with the poor
if I didn't find God in their rags;
if God was not there like a fire,
burning my egoism slowly.¹

"A lot of people feel they have to jump the hurdles to fit into any congregation. They must do the changing and must present themselves as in need. They have to look down on where they are at, at this moment in time, and this is in order to feel that they might be accepted in that church family - that's a terrible thing really."²

"The Church is the community of people that Christ calls not only to live justly with each other and with the world, but to do so in a way that acknowledges him explicitly as the Lord. In this community the poor and deprived have a place of privilege. This privilege obviously does not consist of power or wealth. It is rather the special love that Christ has for those who are marginalised. This love is special in the sense that the universal love of God cannot tolerate the exclusion of anyone, and so has particular regard for those who tend to be excluded by the rest of us."³

1 Casaldaliga Bishop, cited in Gonzalez-Faus J., "We proclaim a crucified Messiah", in Duquoc C. and Floristan C. (eds.), Where is God?: A Cry of Human Distress, (Concilium), London, SCM, 1992, pp. 82-93.

2 Clergyman Resident D. interview, March, 1992.

3 Hamilton T., Solidarity: The Missing Link in Irish Society, Dublin, Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 1991, p. 61.

The church is called to enact the inclusive love of God and in the process it challenges the exclusive nature of the systems and institutions within society. The picture emerging from previous chapters regarding life on the margins is one of individuals caught in a position of excluded marginality.⁴ This is implemented and sustained under social and economic conditions, reinforced by cultural upheaval and accommodated by the church. It leads ultimately to an exterior devaluation of their dignity within society and an interior sense of worthlessness. Such individuals have become as the flotsam and jetsam of a society which no longer requires their existence but merely tolerates their presence. The very life and work of the Hope Community, with the alternative priorities to which they endeavour to give witness, is a potential challenge both to the prevailing ethos of such a society, and to the accommodationist stance of the church within it.

Meanwhile dramatic moves within the cultural sphere appear to be moving towards a form of metanoia particularly focused in terms of postmodernism.⁵ There does appear to be a strange combination of playfulness and violence in this postmodern world. The playfulness expands across a colourful kaleidoscope of pastiche while the violence, partially provoked by increased social polarisation, acquiesces in the impetus towards the utilitarian status of individuals. The inextricable interwovenness of life ensures that postmodernism cannot simply be what exists after modernity but rather the state of being entangled in modernity, perhaps as something from which we cannot escape but in which we now no longer have any faith.⁶

4 In Britain during the last decade, there has developed within the social and economic sphere a propensity for individuals to acquire the status of disposable objects - to be utilised where and when required. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by a deepening recession demanding compulsory productivity tendering and the characteristics of flexibility and mobility primarily to ensure the possibility of employment. The unwillingness to embrace such availability has inevitably included the seemingly retributive status of unemployment. Thus anything which impeded such a flexible arrangement was not to be tolerated, and commitment to families or community proved an unwelcome distraction from the functionary purposes of a life determined by the market.

5 The ongoing debate within the serious press concerning the term postmodernism gives a clear idea of the somewhat nebulous nature of the term. Indeed, it appears to have an eclectic character in the way it moves between one mode of discourse and another. It becomes more difficult to specify exactly what it is that postmodernism is supposed to refer to as the term gets stretched in all directions across different debates, different disciplinary and discursive boundaries. Most theorists and commentators provide definitions and conceptualizations that are frequently at odds with each other and usually inadequately theorised. Certainly the term postmodern is not synonymous with contemporary. Most arguments around postmodernism tend to fall into the category of seeing it as a counter to or in opposition to modernism - thus in some way rejecting the modern emphasis on the progressive world of scientific objectivity and politico-economic rationality - or as some kind of bizarre continuation of modernism.

6 This tragic demise of faith is depicted by Hebdige in a chaotic image as modernity without the hopes and dreams which made modernity possible. "It is a hydra-headed decentred condition in which we are dragged along from pillar to post across a succession of reflecting surfaces drawn by the call of the wild signifier." Hebdige D., *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 195.

There is a problem in endeavouring to make any statement with regard to postmodernism. This inbuilt linguistic problematic, resulting in a degree of incoherence, would seem to be one of the most distinctive attributes of postmodernism, indeed arguably its defining feature. Such incoherence linked with the sense of existential insecurity it is contended, gives the potential both for a reappraisal of, and an entering into solidarity with, those in a marginal existence within our inner cities. However, there is also an insidious potential for exploitation here. For the "marginal" within postmodern thought has ceased to be peripheral but rather has moved to a novel intellectually applauded position, thereby often acquiring the subservient role of a pawn utilised to score some particular subversive point. According to Yudice,

"Contemporary poststructuralist thought has apotheistically reclaimed "marginality" as a liberating force."⁷

Thus those who have had the status of marginality thrust upon them, by exclusion from mainstream society, suffer the further indignity of the exploitation of their position in order to further the purposes of novel social theory which intellectually espouses the marginal, but pursues no critique of social and economic injustice. No longer accorded the respect of individual identification, those on the margins are considered en masse as a potential pressure group to be utilised for the acquisition of power.

Contemporary Forms of "Empowerment"

The potential for exploitation resides not merely in forces outside the marginalised themselves. It is possible that a particular example of this reclamation and utilisation of marginality within the primary source may be the pursuit of Community Organising as a potential effective power source for those living on the estate. Based on the methods and models of power as outlined by Allinsky⁸, the basic philosophy is that the poor must utilise the only means they have at their disposal, their numerical strength and potential to achieve publicity, in order to promote change in their material environment.

"The poor who lack the money or authority to challenge the "power structure" must use the only weapon they have at their command - people and publicity."⁹

7 Yudice G., "Marginality and the Ethics of Survival", in Ross A., Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1989, pp. 214-236.

8 Allinsky S., Rules for Radicals, USA, Vintage, 1972.

9 Ibid. p. 171, fn.

The leader of the Hope Community is very committed to the ideas of Community Organising, believing that it may be an effective way to see real improvement in the social fabric of the lives of people on the estate.

"With regard to Community Organising, this is for me a chance to offer a model, a way forward for people like us at the bottom. We've got a lot of power here, and on the estate, we could change, actually change, things with Community Organising if it gets going. We could look around and say what's happening here say with regard to the heating on the estate, the awful local medical services. If we are part of an organisation because we are a big group with one voice, we could change things."¹⁰

She would like the Community itself to be a cell for Community Organising¹¹, seeing this as a possibility of being involved in direct action to change policy at structural level in a way that the Community had not previously experienced.

"It's the only thing I've come across which really seems as though it might change structures. We're not doing that here in Heath Town, but if this takes off, I'd like the Hope Community to be a base community, not just the local church or whatever."¹²

Given the nature of the important ecumenical links that the Hope Community have founded, it is significant that their most enthusiastic supporter, a local Anglican priest, has serious reservations about the involvement with Community Organising. For him, the more important areas requiring support are the local initiatives already being undertaken, and foremost among these the BREACH venture.¹³ Although he found conducive the realistic assessment of the problem of power within society, he felt happier working with smaller groups at local level with a potential larger scale effect, than working with mobilised large numbers in the way advocated under Community Organising.

"It takes seriously the problem of power and the complex nature of power. I like some of the Community Organising principles. There is

10 Fieldworker A. conversation, February, 1992.

11 The process of Community Organising begins with approaching persons called "gatekeepers", so in terms of the churches, a hierarchical approach is made and substantial financial commitment is sought. After this has been achieved, local clergy are approached. It is argued that congregations will support their local ministers. The aim is to mobilise local people to campaign on specific issues, but this may mean that a group is not necessarily dealing with issues that are immediate to their own environment, e.g. the people of Heath Town might be asked to mobilise to assist a campaign on the other side of Wolverhampton. Community organisers do endeavour to address local issues and help people to analyse and identify local problems. However, they will only work with issues which they are convinced have a good chance of success. This involves a particular form of strategic planning. There is then a residual question, what about those issues which are deemed unwinnable but would be of vital local concern? Community organising also takes seriously the question of accountability, and local organisers are accountable to the local community.

12 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

13 See previous chapter.

something in me though which hesitates to take the plunge. I measure it against what others are doing. Some will argue that what we're doing in BREACH is not different from what community development workers have done before. Yet if there is transformation in terms of small groups, hope can be generated in terms of larger groups."¹⁴

The contrast between working from the microcosm or the macrocosm is particularly clear in terms of the contrast with the BREACH project, and indeed the work of the Hope Community members themselves. The very individual and small group nature of the work of both the Hope Community and BREACH project has particularly focused on the aim of reconciliation within the locality. This has been seen in terms of long-term commitment, patient and attentive listening; the growth in self-esteem and self-confidence amongst individuals; and the gradual articulation of hope and action within local groups. By contrast the method of Community Organising is to mobilise local people to exert pressure on businesses, councils or power structures where there is felt to be a local grievance. However only issues which are likely to be successful are addressed. Yet it may be important to address contentious issues and possibly fail, not all goals with which the BREACH venture or the Hope Community become associated are potentially "winnable" issues. The ethos of the Hope Community has seemed to place more value on the process of involvement with the people, no matter what the outcome, and with perhaps an alternative understanding of success, failure and efficiency. Here, the principles of Community Organising may come into potential conflict with previous practice, and lead to the evolution of a different ethos. A stark illustration is the understanding of reconciliation in Allinsky's work.

"In this world .. "Reconciliation" means that when one side gets the power the other side gets reconciled to it, then we have reconciliation."¹⁵

Other members of the Community are both less informed about the nature of Community Organising and less committed to the process. A question arises not about the nature of Community Organising itself and involvement therein but rather the reasons for the Hope Community being so involved. Previous chapters have revealed the pressures upon the Community from expectations of the church and the congregation to which the sisters belong, with regard to some tangible signs of "success" in the work of the Community. Although she has resisted such pressure, in terms of the numbers formally incorporated into church structures, the Community leader may still be susceptible to a process which appears to promise more obvious

¹⁴ Clergyman U. interview, November, 1991.

¹⁵ Allinsky S., Rules for Radicals, op. cit. p. 13

practical results. The motivation for entering into the process is what is being called into question. It is possible that the desire to enter into this is prompted by a frustration with the slow pace of change and the attraction of engaging in an organisation which appears to produce results and which consequently might relieve some of the pressure from church and congregation. The alternative may appear bleak by comparison, ongoingly dwelling with a sense of powerlessness and actively waiting to see what may emerge from the people.

This is not to promote a policy of passivity, far from it, but a discerned activity which may need to find its foundation in a severe experience of powerlessness and failure, rather than as power wielders. It is also to value the work that has been done at local level by the Hope Community with the people of the estate. It is to promote a cautious concern not to devalue that work by the adulation of a process which may promise more obvious material results, but which may not of its very nature assist the increase in the growth of self-esteem, dignity and faith of the people of the estate. The task before the Hope Community may be more of a socio-spiritual one where they endeavour to see the whole entity of society, and not just the shifting of power blocs within that.

It is also difficult to perceive how such an involvement, with the time and energy required, enters into the model of evangelisation espoused by the Community and referred to in chapter three. Every human person is considered uniquely important. To be a person is to have an intrinsic value, and not merely to be important because of something extrinsic such as a source of potential power. It follows therefore that no human being may be used merely as a means by somebody else. If there is indeed a process of reciprocity whereby Christ is encountered in the people and proclaimed to them, it becomes more apparent that there is obscurity as to what evangelisation might mean. The response to such obscurity may mean a waiting in powerlessness with ongoing reflection on the experience and patient discernment of future activity. Alternatively, a response may involve the evasion of such seeming passivity by the advocacy of more immediately active policies.

Power and powerlessness, activism and non-activism are central to the recent document from the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales "From Charity to Empowerment". It is intended for widespread discussion, and in that context it appeared to be an innovative move on the part of the hierarchy. The avowed aim of the document is to initiate a discussion about power, and it endeavours to raise some of the complex issues involved.

"We choose power as the centre-piece of our reflection because difficulties about power can come between the Church and the poor in a variety of ways. As Christians we are often ambivalent about power, and we sometimes find ourselves approving of power in the hands of authorities while disapproving of it in the hands of ordinary people."¹⁶

Conflicting power situations continue to be a feature of the interaction between the institutional church and the poor - the power of the former and the powerlessness of the latter. Indeed the very term "empowerment" can be yet another example of this. It still seems to be in the traditional mode of those who empower others. The definition produced by the Bishops seeks to avoid this, but despite their best efforts, the honest admission that there may indeed never be the equitable distribution of power that is the goal, appears to denote the underlying tone and theme. There is almost a sense of resignation that the poor will never be able to shape their own destiny in a way that is accessible to others.

"Empowerment gives priority to allowing the poor to be shapers of their own destiny. It begins by creating space in which "the poorest people" can come together, clarify their ideas, make sense of their experiences, practise speaking publicly and then communicate to people around them. Empowerment helps people to understand the underlying causes of poverty and to organise themselves for purposeful activity. It helps the poor to create organisations of their own and to gain access to the institutions of the wider society. In working to empower the poor, the non-poor impose upon themselves a self-denying ordinance such as "never help people do anything that they can do for themselves". Positively empowerment is based on solidarity and mutual respect and strives for an equality of relationship which it may never fully achieve."¹⁷

It is possible that the failure to achieve this relationship may be partially caused by the approach to the marginalised still coming from the realms of a benevolent paternalistic philanthropy. Difficulties arise also in working with those who are unable to enter into this kind of educative process, but who nonetheless have something to contribute by the very uniqueness of themselves, their lives, their understanding, even if they are formally inarticulate. No consideration is given to this issue. It is perhaps tangentially approached as the document glances at a number of individuals and groups who are working with the poor and marginalised, and considers the life and writing of Austin Smith. The latter it describes as a "via negativa" way of empowerment, a way of being with the poor involving reflection and contemplation - an "asceticism of non-activism". There is little exploration of

16 From Charity to Empowerment: The Church's Mission Alongside Poor and Marginalised People, London, Committee for Community Relations Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 1992.

17 Ibid.

this possibility with regard to Urban Priority Areas. By contrast much more space is given to three examples of active community engagement, which appear more comprehensible to the authors of the document.

It may be that the only decisive counter-force to the social, economic and cultural pressures of our time is the power of communities proposing alternative priorities for living. In a world characterised by the proliferation of images and so many forces vying for our attention, even the struggle together to know what deserves our attention is an important communitarian form. For our lives are defined by that to which we give most serious attention. The proliferation of New Age communities, both formal and more loosely-connected associations give credence to the deeply felt need for some alternative to the consuming market impulse. Likewise the growth of interest groups and support groups, among whom the multiplication of women's groups in all sectors of society is particularly apparent.

Traditionally it is the church who has given the lead with regard to communitarian forms, always upholding the family as the basic unit of society. Hauerwas in Resident Aliens¹⁸ argues that the church, as those called out by God, embodies a social alternative that the world cannot on its own terms know. His assertion is that theology since the Enlightenment has tended to ask the wrong question - how do we make the gospel credible to the modern world? - and by so doing has allowed the said world to determine the corollary questions and thereby limit the answers. From this arose an apologetics based on the political assumption that Christians are committed to transforming our ecclesial claims into intellectual assumptions that will enable us to be faithful to Christ, while still participating in the political structures of a world that does not yet know Christ. However, it is Hauerwas's assertion that in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, all human history must be reviewed. So the theological task now, unlike previous centuries is to make the world credible to the gospel - an important inversion.

The Christian faith for Hauerwas is the invitation to be part of what he terms an "alien people", a group who base their entire Lebensgeschichte on the reality of their faith in Christ. Christianity is asserted to be mostly a matter of politics but politics as defined by the gospel, and thus a countercultural phenomenon. Accordingly the challenge of Jesus is the political dilemma of how to be faithful to a strange community which is shaped by a story of how God is with us. Thus there is the constant reiteration through Hauerwas's work of this call for the church to renew

18 Hauerwas S. and Williman W., Resident Aliens, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 20ff.

itself as the distinctive community that it was called to be, and in which it will enable others by its witness.

For Hauerwas the church is the one comprehensive community: the one political entity in our culture that is global, transnational, transcultural. Thus the church does not have a social strategy; the church is a social strategy. He looks to Yoder's three-fold definition of the church as activist, conservationist, and confessing. With increasing urgency he reminds his readers of the need for a faithful community rather than an efficient organisation. Yet this is seen as requiring a lifelong call to conversion a long process of being engrafted into a new people. Thus might the church become a counter-cultural social structure, which seeks to influence the world by being church, being something the world cannot be, lacking as it does faith and vision. The most credible witness of the church is a living breathing visible community of faith. Here the church needs leaders who can help to form such vision and pragmatic reality, and it is in the formation of ministers, and indeed in the theological rationale for ministry, that Hauerwas sounds a clarion call for change.

"What pastors and laity need is a theological rationale for ministry which is so cosmic, eschatological and therefore countercultural that they are enabled to keep at Christian ministry in a world determined to live as if God were dead. Anything less misreads both the scandal of the gospel, and the corruption of our culture."¹⁹

The gospel is so demanding that there must be the expectation that we will need to suffer and sacrifice for it. This is no masochistic vision, but a calm perception of reality. However, today's church suffers from an oversurfeit of suffocating niceness and domesticated metaphor. It has lost its vitality and vibrant engagement with pragmatic reality. Hauerwas raises the question - how do we help people to survive as Christians? There is a sense in which our world recognises the challenging nature of the Christian faith and subverts it either by ignoring Christians or by giving them the freedom to be religious within the private domain. The challenge facing the church is political, social, and ecclesial - the formation of a visible body of people who know the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay it.

The fundamental endeavour of Christian social action, Hauerwas argues, is to create a community that makes it possible for people to live by the truth rather than to exist by what is false. Our materialism and self-deceit are ways we appropriate for trying to deal with our insecurity. Most of our social activism is formed on the presumption that God is superfluous to the formation of a world of peace with

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 145.

justice. Yet the moment that life is formed on the presumption that we are not participants in God's continuing history of creation and redemption, we are acting on unbelief rather than faith. Therefore Christian politics has come to mean Christian social activism. Hauerwas argues that the political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world. He argues that the church gives us the interpretive skills whereby we come to see the world for what it is.

"much of what passes for Christian social concern today, of the left or right is the social concern of a Church that seems to have despaired of being Church - led into ersatz Christian ethical activity."²⁰

Within such a society, it is important for our purposes to consider the particular position of the Roman Catholic Church. Here according to one authority, the potential for challenging the prevailing ethos is available particularly in the lives and work of its clergy and religious.

"Theologically speaking it ought to be the Catholic Church that has the fullest resources to combat the moral atomism, the belief in the primacy of individual desires, the readiness to reduce human lives to material, .. It holds that vocation in the form of a life long commitment expressed by solemn vows is still possible, and indeed an obligation; the relative social and economic independence of its celibate clergy and religious has enabled them and could still enable them, to stand as a sign of contradiction to the pretensions both of the state and of the forces of cupidity that the state has unleashed."²¹

However, it has become clear from both Archer²² and Boyle's work, that in the desire for respectability the Roman Catholic Church in Britain has adopted a middle class oriented, elitist and secularised mode of being. Such criticism finds its corollary in Milbank's²³ criticism of the two opposite wings of the international Roman Catholic scene: the theological conservatives and the third world liberation theologians for being the bearers of secularisation in their respective fights for democracy and equality. For him, political and liberation theology has moved beyond the position where reflection and evaluation are possible, because of their association of Marxism with a Christian coming-to-terms with Enlightenment freedom, they are therefore inevitably wedded to a positive evaluation of the secular.

Williams supports Milbank's critique of liberation theology. His conviction is that liberation theology is insufficiently political in that it has given up on the traditional

20 Ibid. p. 80.

21 Boyle N., "Understanding Thatcherism", New Blackfriars, Vol. 69, No. 818, July/August, 1988, pp. 307-324.

22 See chapter 2.

23 Milbank J., Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990.

political practices. He sees it as caught in a trap of projecting the only way forward in terms of some cataclysmic social change. For some liberation theologians this would appear to be the only possible condition for real social justice. Such liberation theologians have no perception of creative social change emerging within their present political processes. However, he also clearly states the difficulty of making any helpful generalisations about liberation theology in terms of applying practice in any pandemic manner.

"Increasingly, it has become impossible to generalise usefully about liberation theology as a project that makes Christian language and practice instrumental to a programme whose norms come from elsewhere."²⁴

However, the recent work of Rowland and Corner²⁵ provide an ameliorating codicil to the above view. Here it is asserted that liberation theology cannot be properly understood if its close contact with action in favour of the poor is ignored. Indeed, once liberation theology becomes solely a matter for academic debate, and thereby a subject which merely becomes part of the university syllabus, its power is reduced. Emphasis is given to the fundamental change in the way in which persons, personal relationships and therefore political relationships are conceived and structured in liberation theology. It presents a challenge to those who wield power with a theological method which states that the only way to derive theological truth is by starting where people are, because it is paying attention to the lives of poor and particularly oppressed people that one will find God.

"If you want to do theology, you have to start where people are, particularly the people that the Bible is primarily concerned with, who are the dispossessed, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the prostitute, the pimp, and the tax-collector. Find out what they are saying, thinking and feeling and that is the stuff out of which the glimpses of God will emerge."²⁶

There is presented a two-fold dynamic: that in the experience of oppression, hunger, poverty and death, God is speaking to all people today; and that God's presence amongst the millions unknown and unloved by humanity, but blessed in the eyes of God, is confirmed by the witnesses of the Christian tradition. Rowland argues that the only way to fill the vacuous European edifice with insight and power is to be

24 Williams R., "Saving Time; thoughts on practice, patience and vision", *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 73, No. 861, June, 1992, pp. 319-326.

25 Rowland C. & Corner M., *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, London, SPCK, 1990.

26 *Ibid.* p. 42.

attentive to the experience of the poor and the injustices of their environment. The privileged status of the poor in the divine perspective is an evangelizing force operative within those who approach them. The Hope Community members have given eloquent testimony to this dynamic and further verification is given by Rowland as he cites an assertion made by Sobrino.

"Those who approach the oppressed get the real feeling that it is they who are being evangelised and converted rather than those to whom they seek to render service .. going to God means going to the poor."²⁷

It appears that the poor in the church are the structural source that assures the church of really being the agent of truth and justice. Since very few of the poor in Britain today find a home within the church, this would appear to necessitate the conversion of the historical church to which Rowland refers.

Rowland emphasises the life-experience of the individual as both the starting point and the validating factor for reflection. He stresses that most liberation theologians are engaged in costly small-scale protests and programmes at the grassroots, which offer a glimpse of God's eschatological kingdom amidst the injustices of the old order. Indeed, the dominant concern amongst liberation theologians is the dialectic which must take place between the story of the people of God and the tradition as a whole.

Rowland suggests that one of the contributions of a British liberation theology could be to interest ecumenical bodies in social questions around which different denominations might achieve an orthopraxis and divert their concerns from their search for an orthodoxy reflected in common consent to a series of doctrinal propositions. He asserts that the poor in Britain, as elsewhere in the world, are increasingly being seen as the objects of private charity rather than state provision. Thus society passes the task of listening to and articulating the concerns of the poor to private individuals who may or may not be thus inclined, but who will have comparatively little influence on the functioning of political policy, which determines much of the oppressive structures under which the poor continue to suffer. Indeed, a particularly insidious feature of such private charity is that emphasis is given to a reconciliation which breeds subservience, apathy and despair amongst the poor.

The harshness of the Christian gospel is easily made subservient to an ideology of reconciliation, which manipulates the principles of Christian love into a means of resisting any real challenge to the established order. Yet the uncompromising

²⁷ Sobrino J., The True Church and the Church of the Poor, London, SCM, 1984, p. 222, cited *ibid.* p. 49.

character of the call to discipleship sits uneasily alongside the comfortable "sitz im leben" from which the contemporary church in Britain so often presents the gospel. It seems inevitable in our contemporary context that reconciliation first involves conflict. Yet,

"the negative is always the condition of a greater positive, the cross a condition of the resurrection."²⁸

The consciousness of a need to seek within British shores for something that might engage the preferential option for the poor has led to many and varied forms of adopting liberation theology. From academic fellowships to adoption of procedures designed for the third world, such as "Training for Transformation", a whole spectrum of possibilities has been attempted. One conference, endeavouring to search for a British Liberation Theology, invited two members of the estate along with the Hope Community leader to a meeting in Crewe. The participation of the residents from the estate was reported as being a vital part of the conference, and on their return they endeavoured to convey something of what had happened to those attending one of the Faith Alive meetings. For one of the participants it had been a very significant experience.

"The last few days have really changed my way of thinking. It really is radical. In the past when I was politically involved I went to all the meetings of the Labour party you know, and then I decided to make my way into religion and do things through that way, but that didn't seem to be involved in meetings and that sort of thing. Before I went to the conference at the weekend, I thought that conferences were tied in with meetings and that was politics, but now I think people working together, they can do something."²⁹

Just as he considered that meetings and conferences were inevitably tied in with politics and not religion, so he had anticipated that those who attended such events were inevitably highly educated. It was both a surprise and a delight for him to realise that on this occasion the variety of participants meant a wide spectrum of experience and ability.

"It was brilliant. I thought they'd all be educated, and with degrees and that, but some were working with the homeless, some in Toxteth. A bishop who would have been arrested if he went home, and a peace campaigner from the 60's who said everywhere she went people looked after her. There were priests and nuns and sisters and ordinary people. They all seemed to have a vision but no one knew what it was. We were all looking for it. I kind of grasped it. They were saying change is going to come but it's just happening. I'm committed to

²⁸ Ibid. p. 198.

²⁹ Resident M. meeting, January, 1992.

changing it somehow. I still don't know what liberation theology is, but I'd like to be a part of it."³⁰

The commitment of all present at the meeting to an undefined notion - liberation theology - did not seem to impede this man's own concern to be involved. He had obviously perceived a common vision though the practical details might be obscure. A more cynical friend involved in this conversation made a suggestion with regard to the likely nature of any liberation theology, based on his experience of the institutional church.

"It'll be polite ... have a cup of tea first. It's like a teacher explaining things to a child, you can put religion across as a polite thing or a jackboot one or a loving one."³¹

Later in the evening when asked to expand this opinion he stressed that the church seemed to be involved in the first two possibilities. He felt that religion had been imposed in the past, that today it was rather a polite affair but that it had not yet reached the stage of a loving open possibility. He considered the churches to be still too enmeshed in disputes about details that seemed irrelevant to him, such as forms of liturgy and ritual. This view was further substantiated by the other participant at the conference who described the occasion of an informal eucharist.

"Some parts of the conference were terrific. The best bit was when we all took the bread. Basically we all took a bit of bread broke it and gave it to your neighbour and said "The body of Christ" - no fancy titbits etc. No one saying we don't do it that way in our church. No fancy trappings - that was the best. We ought to do it at our celebrations sometime."³²

This inclusive eucharist obviously made a profound impression on this resident. It was interesting to note that this part of the conference was not redescribed in the feedback to the wider group, nor did it arise in discussions amongst the Community. To include such a possibility in the paraliturgical occasions of Community celebrations, could be to invoke a stormy involvement with the mainstream traditions. Passions swirl around anything which might appear to detract from authentic liturgical practice. By contrast this resident was endeavouring to appeal to an interior sense of authenticity and integrity which he felt guarantees truth.

"People know the truth inside themselves, but some stand up and say you can't do things this way or that way. They make it up. I slagged off all the priests at that conference and they took it very well."³³

30 Resident M.

31 Resident P.

32 Resident T.

33 Ibid.

Both the residents were surprised at the way their views were listened to and respected, even when offensive. It was rare for them to encounter members of the churches who accepted criticism and even more rare to encounter an atmosphere of mutual trust.

"He did too and all from different denominations. They were the type who accepted criticism. One I liked from Bradford had 90% Muslim and 10% students in his parish. He was bogged down in issues; he had a sense of humour though. Everything about it was great. All were friendly and trusted each other."³⁴

Liberation appeared to one of the residents to have more to do with a certain unity and solidarity - opposed to any degree of individualistic factionalism - which could then lead to freedom for individuals. The other participant was concerned to emphasise the radical Christian nature of such moves for solidarity.

"They kept on talking about liberation theology .. basically it's hoping that sooner or later all people, races, creeds, feminists etc will be free and equal at all stages. What came out was that all cliques are fighting their own corners but if all stuck together, everybody would be liberated. If you're fighting your own corner, you need help from others to be liberated."³⁵

"That's the way I saw it as well but you should point out the Christian bit. They seemed radical to me not conservative - a lot of the left too."³⁶

The more outspoken participant was concerned to promote a form of exchange which could be clearly appropriated by all those present, and insisted that this should be the manner of converse, even when it proved disruptive to the flow of discussion.

"I think I was a bit of a nuisance in most groups. Most of the people there were very well-educated, one was teaching at Oxford. All used long words, most of the conversation was over the top of my head. I got into the habit of stopping them and saying explain that. After that all spoke at a level we all could take in and digest. When people use some big words I've got the drift of what they're saying. When I stopped them in full flow, partly it's messing about, to see if they're hiding behind them long words they might not know themselves or use it out of context."³⁷

Each of the participants were asked to contribute by relating something of their own journey of faith, and these were characteristically different, and emphasised their

34 Resident M.

35 Resident T.

36 Resident M.

37 Resident T.

varied preoccupations with regard to the church. For the first, his concern that the hierarchy of the churches were alienated from their grass-roots membership was of paramount importance. For the latter the possibilities of contented living in poverty was the point he wished to stress.

"I did a small talk on my faith story and ended up slagging off most of the priests there, but they thought it was interesting what I had to say. I was talking about how the hierarchy of the church is always saying this is my church, you must be like this, another clique saying you must do things my way. At the end of the day it's the same God. People at the grass roots are the ones who are mixing and the hierarchy are not involved."³⁸

"I did a talk on my faith too. A lot of people told me I challenged them, a few people told me they'd never forget me. I just told them what it was like living in Heath Town. While all were trying to give their description of liberation theology, I said I didn't know what it was but that I felt I was living it. I said I didn't have a big flashy car and house, and a woman said to me she had both, so what about her? I said well you'll die like the rest of us. At the time she was upset, at the end she gave me a hug, so I don't know whether I liberated her. I didn't feel the pressure on me. I felt natural amid everyone."³⁹

It was apparent to the leader of the Community, who also attended, that the presence and contribution of the residents had a profound influence both on the course of the discussions and on other individual participants, whose thinking and commitments were challenged by listening to the experience of those from the estate.

The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Contribution

Within the situation of Heath Town, particularly as outlined in chapter 3, what is evident in the lives and words and actions of the people is God at work among them. This sense of God actively at work in the world was affirmed by the deliberations of the Conciliar fathers at Vatican II. Indeed the hope and inspiration aroused by the Vatican Council appeared to promise a deeper identification with the mystery of God at work in this way.

"The great spiritual movement within the Roman Catholic Church inspired by John XXIII is a manifestation of the dimension of depth of religious existence. It already has opened many hearts and unlocked many precious insights."⁴⁰

It would seem appropriate to look briefly at both Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes to give some sense of the way the Conciliar fathers regarded the role of the

38 Ibid.

39 Resident M.

40 Heschel A., The Insecurity of Freedom, New York, Schocken Books, 1972, p. 18.

church and its involvement with the mystery of God at work in human lives and particularly in the lives of the poor.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium⁴¹ begins with a section devoted to the "mystery" of the church. As Paul VI described it "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God."⁴² This preliminary emphasis on the presence of God within the church, focuses attention away from the hierarchy and the institutional church, and challengingly gives priority to the mystery of God present in a much wider sense in the church. This emphasis is reinforced throughout the document by the dominant image of church as the "people of God". Indeed, an entire chapter is devoted to this image, and the very fact that it precedes the chapter on the hierarchical structure of the church gives added importance to the image, such an emphasis meant that the church was now seen as,

"primarily a people in whom God is present and through whom God acts on behalf of all humanity. The Church is not primarily a hierarchical institution, nor can it speak and act as if it were."⁴³

Such an emphasis appears to stand in stark contrast to an authoritarian approach within the hierarchy. It does not re-emphasise the hierarchical dominance of all matters of reflection and policy making. Yet in practice one is forced to agree from experience with Adrian Hastings that the term people of God has not been welcomed, and indeed its practice appears to have been eroded in recent Vatican communications.

"Nothing has been more ominous in the doctrinal shift of the 1980's than the actual hostility to this term which can now be found in Roman teaching."⁴⁴

Lumen Gentium teaches that the lay apostolate is a direct participation in the mission of the church and not simply a participation in the mission of the hierarchy. It also presents the church itself as a sacrament "a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all."⁴⁵ The church is seen as both a sacrament of our union with God and with one another, but more than this, the same sacramental nature is also a witness to the world, and thus, "for each and everyone

41 Lumen Gentium, Vatican II, November, 1964.

42 Pope Paul VI, 29 September, 1963 .

43 McBrian R.P., Lumen Gentium, in Hastings A. (ed.), Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After, London, SPCK, 1991, pp. 84-95.

44 Ibid. p. 58.

45 Lumen Gentium, para 1, in Flannery A. (ed.), Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Worcester, Fowler Wright, 1975, pp. 350-440.

the visible sacrament of this saving unity."⁴⁶ Indeed, the call to contribute to the sanctification of created reality, our ordinary pragmatic living, is a fundamental mission that all are required to embrace, and "proclaim, and this by (our) own example, humility and self-denial."⁴⁷ Even more emphatically the church is called to encompass with her love as her first priority,

"all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognises in those who are poor and who suffer, the image of her poor and suffering founder. She does all in her power to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ."⁴⁸

Church renewal and reform are an ongoing mission given fresh impetus in Lumen Gentium. The church is both holy and sinful and, in the pursuit of holiness, individuals and the body are called to follow "the path of penance and renewal". It is stressed that there is a "common dignity" amongst members deriving from the egalitarian nature of their oneness in Christ. With unwonted clarity the Council fathers also emphasise the importance of the gifts of all to be used for the building up of the church. All are called to holiness, and thus the fundamental mission of members of the church is to sanctify reality.

A renewed appreciation of the local church has reinforced the positive estimation of pastoral diversity and led to a new dynamism effecting pastoral practice. This has also resulted in a parallel move to impose a recentralised policy. The consequences for our study is that with the impetus given to a more centralised role, the local diocesan hierarchy keep determinative control of the growth of local initiatives. In this way, though the Hope Community are encouraged at a local level, beyond this first stage of support, affirmation becomes at best avuncular and at worst what appears to be toleration. In neither case is the effect at local level held to be important enough to have any consequent effects with regard to ongoing reflection and policy making. The latter resides firmly in the hands of the clerical hierarchy.

The document Gaudium et Spes⁴⁹ pre-eminently expresses the dominant motif of Vatican II. It is important to stress the development within the document of a Christian anthropology which involves a pastoral sensitivity, a loving awareness of humanity in its actual condition and a loving sense of responsibility to it. Such an understanding is also seen to proceed in a circular motion being indeed a source of understanding and knowledge and not merely derived from them. An attempt is

46 Ibid. para. 9.

47 Ibid. para. 8.

48 Ibid.

49 Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II, December, 1965 .

made to integrate the personal quality of each human as created in the image of God with the equally constitutive social dimension of the human in relationship and structures. However, following the modern cultural sway within the West, the individual perspective still appears dominant subordinating the social. As McDonagh indicates,

"A more complete Christian anthropology would have recognised that the person may only be person as person-in-relationships-in-structures, as person-in-community, and as in an immediate dialectic with a community-of-persons."⁵⁰

There appear here echoes of Hauerwas's plea for a church which will really be a church, a community or persons established by radical Christian belief, and bearing witness by their very presence as community. The model of the church as servant is prevalent within this document. A servant who shares intimately in the the world, such that the joys and hopes, griefs and anguish, indeed all aspects of humanity, particularly the life of the poor, are vital ingredients of its concern.

"The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts."⁵¹

There is a strong emphasis within the document on the importance of culture, and an openness to attempts to define or describe it. The Conciliar Fathers were concerned to stress the importance of cultural variation and the need to link religion with different cultural settings. This acceptance of a form of pluralism was focused on the many different parts of the world where, prior to Vatican II, the imposition of Western culture, perhaps best exemplified by the Latin liturgy, was comprehensive. Here, there was a genuine attempt to open dialogue with particular cultures, and the non-European nations were the focus for this concern. This process of inculturation was considered necessary to assist interpretation of the signs of the times and discernment of the God's activity in the world.

Within the West, and specifically Britain, the possibility of inculturation was not officially promulgated, being seen as most particularly pertinent to practice among the non-European nations. Yet an insidious collusion with the secular culture prevalent as a dominant ethos has become evident, as already indicated. The

⁵⁰ McDonagh E. *Gaudium et Spes* in Hastings A. (ed.), *Modern Catholicism*, op. cit. p. 102.

⁵¹ *Gaudium et Spes* para. 1, in Flannery A. (ed.), *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, op. cit. pp. 903-1014.

consequences have been an increased polarisation, not merely within British society, but specifically within or rather without the church. Those outside are, as it were, kept there by the very form of life which prevails within. Yet a more authentic inculturation with British society would mean involvement with the culture of the urban poor, to the extent that this might have some determining effect upon the life and work of the church within Britain.

"A thorough, rather than a well-meaning and general, understanding of processes of socialisation as they impinge on real people in real situations seems to be mandatory if there is to be authentic inculturation of the gospel across cultures. And unless that understanding modifies the ways in which we evangelize and our responses to the people, it is difficult to see us doing anything other than imposing and enforcing our "package" on others."⁵²

These two fundamental documents⁵³ of Vatican II have been the source of ongoing contention, since their initial promulgation. Yet John Paul II's later encyclicals draw heavily upon them for authoritative reference.

The incomplete anthropology of Gaudium et Spes is specifically addressed by John Paul II in his first encyclical Redemptor Hominis.⁵⁴ At the heart of this document is a theological anthropology which defines Christ as the full measure of the human. In Christ is revealed the full potentiality of human beings. The church is declared to be a "sign and safeguard of the transcendence of the human person".⁵⁵ Simultaneously, the human being in the concrete circumstances of existence is the "primary and fundamental way for the Church".⁵⁶ Thus the church understands the human in the light of its fulfilment as revealed in the mystery of Christ, proclaimed and protected by the church.

In Sollicitudo Rei Socialis⁵⁷ the transcendence of the human being is re-emphasised, and the preferential option for the poor, which applies not only to the internal life of the church but also to its social responsibilities.

52 Gittins A.J., Gifts and Strangers, Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1989, p. 50.

53 There were two important omissions within Gaudium et Spes which will be seen to have an influence on the kind of policy being adopted within the local diocese to the Hope Community: the absence of a theology of the cross from gospel reflections on social sin; secondly, the lack of any clarification with regard to the church's role in discerning, promoting, and realising the Kingdom. The world proves very difficult to focus without a clearer vision of the relation between creation and new creation and the emergence of the Kingdom in myriad ways beyond, but not unrelated to, the visible church, i.e. the reality of God at work upon the estate, in ways very different from our traditional understanding.

54 John Paul II, Redemptor Hominis, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1979.

55 Ibid. para. 13.

56 Ibid. para. 14.

57 John Paul II, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1988.

"The option or love of preference for the poor. This is an option or special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian in as much as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living."⁵⁸

The encyclical urges action to be undertaken according to local circumstances. It asserts that all concern for the poor must be translated into some form of meaningful action.⁵⁹

More recently, in Centesimus Annus⁶⁰ John Paul II concludes the encyclical with a presentation of Christian anthropology which grounds the church's social vision and mission on the basis of a transcendent human dignity.

"The Church's social teaching ... proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that very reason reveals man to himself. In this light, and only in this light, does it concern itself with everything else: the human rights of the individual, and in particular of the working class."⁶¹

"The Church receives the "meaning of man" from divine revelation. In order to know man, authentic man, man in his fullness, one must know God." said Pope Paul VI.⁶²

In stressing the mystery of God constantly at work within human lives, John Paul II is today cited as one of the foremost thinkers of conservative postmodern theology. Within his various encyclicals and other writings there are constant references also to the crisis of modern culture and the birth of a new cultural form. Indeed, as Rocco Buttiglione, a close friend of the Pope, stated,

"... The Pope is not "premodern", as many of his critics portray him, but "postmodern". He doesn't attack Marxism or secularism because he thinks they're the wave of the future ... He sees their time as already having passed. He's looking beyond them, to the future."⁶³

58 Ibid. para. 42.

59 "The motivating concern for the poor - who are in the very meaningful term, "the Lord's poor" - must be translated at all levels into concrete actions, until it decisively attains a series of necessary reforms. Each local situation will show what reforms are most urgent and how they can be achieved." *ibid.* para. 43.

60 John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1991.

61 *Ibid.* para. 54.

62 *Ibid.* para. 55, c.f. Veritatis Splendor, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1993, para. 38.

63 Buttiglione R., cited as saying this by Dionne E., in "As Pope Confronts Dissenters, Whose Catholicism Will Prevail?", New York Times, December 23, 1986, cited in Holland J., "The Cultural Vision of Pope John Paul II: Toward a Conservative/Liberal Postmodern Dialogue.", in Griffin D., Beardslee W., Holland J. (eds.), Varieties of Postmodern Theology, New York, New York University Press, 1989, pp. 95-127.

Aware of the vast cultural deficiencies of East and West, John Paul II has been profoundly critical of both modern socialism and modern capitalism as socially mechanistic, geopolitically imperialist, and ecologically destructive. Within his writings he has increasingly distanced himself from both liberal and collectivist modern ideologies. In his analysis of society, unlike that of his Latin American brethren, the realm of politics follows that of culture. Accordingly, since modern culture exhibits such signs of turmoil and crisis, the primary task for him is not to struggle politically within the modern framework, but rather to seek a transformation at the cultural root. In consequence he continually reasserts the transcendent human dignity. This appears to stand in contrast to the emphasis on political rather than cultural transformation within certain liberation theologians.

Holland indicates in some detail⁶⁴ how the Pope's critical analysis of modern culture is the key to his profound and urgent focus on the role of society as a tool of redemptive work. He outlines what he considers from the Pope's writings to be his potential strategy for the church, centred on the themes of culture, the laity, family and work, which aims to be a response to the contemporary cultural crisis. It is interesting to note the emphasis on the laity, building once more on the foundations laid by the Vatican documents Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes. Culture is seen as the vital ground, the laity those who must embody this new vision and the family and the work-place the areas where it must be enacted. The context of this new vision is set in a framework which is both premodern in its attempt to restore the importance of the Christian transcendent meta-narrative, and postmodern in its stress on co-creativity with the divine.

Holland's own vision⁶⁵ takes into account the dramatic transformation in the Catholic Church, change he feels implicitly containing a postliberal, post-Marxist, and even a postmodern, social and religious paradigm. He considers this contains the seeds of a new ecumenical Christian theology. Catholic transformation remains open to liberalism and to Marxism, but it begins to transform both from within. It does this by profoundly shifting the fundamental vision. Community is at the foundation of this new vision, formation of community, tapping the roots, stirring the creative imagination.⁶⁶ For the postmodern paradigm, secularism is rejected and the sacred is

64 Ibid.

65 Outlined in Holland J., "The Postmodern Paradigm and Contemporary Catholicism" *ibid.* pp. 9 - 27.

66 "He sees the theme of community revealed both in Latin American Catholicism's pastoral priority for the basic Christian community and in Polish Catholicism's communitarian concept of Solidarnosc. It is noteworthy that both models see that the classical hierarchies of authoritarian domination are repugnant, that liberal individualism produces alienation and loneliness, and that collectivist policies prove sterile. For Holland the governing ideal of postmodern Catholicism will not be authoritarian but communitarian. The

rediscovered, disclosed in the creative communion across the natural and social ecology of time and space. Leadership remains important, but governance becomes the service of communal creativity. A new important root metaphor - the work of art.

"The root metaphor of the classical premodern period was organic (the body), housing a fortified, transcendent soul. The root metaphor of the modern period became mechanistic (the machine), initially in liberalism only a physical machine, later in Marxism a cybernetic machine. The root metaphor of the postmodern period becomes artistic (the work of art), expressed in the creative ecological communion of nature and history, across time and space, and flowing from the religious Mystery."⁶⁷

John Paul II's vision of the laity as the embodiment of a counter-cultural force is a call to the faithful within the church to effect such change through their exemplary manner of family life and work. In a not dissimilar manner, Hauerwas appeals to those within the church to focus their efforts on actually being church and in forming a real community where effective Christian witness will be enacted. In each case the attention is focused on the faithful within the Christian community fulfilling their Christian commitment in a more exemplary fashion. Meanwhile as the forces of modernism and postmodernism swirl within contemporary Britain, individual desires seem paramount for those with the financial means or acumen to achieve them. Those outside this enclave, estranged by the very existence of those within, continue the slide towards non-person status. It is within this group, those outside the numbers of the faithful that it is here suggested a focus might be found for the counter-cultural dynamic which both John Paul II and Hauerwas in their different ways espouse. The Pope sets the context for the action of the laity against the background of the recovery of the Christian meta-narrative, and the reality of their co-creative experience with the divine; while Hauerwas gives no clear indication of a spiritual dimension to his vision, which seems rooted in a new theological rationale for ministry, a ministry which will enable the faithful to become a more effective community of witness. Here it is contended that whatever consideration is given to the formation of the laity and clergy as specific tasks, a more particular focus for

focal energies of Christian counterculture are not on the individual or the state, but on the community. Holland proposes that elements of the new global praxis of the Catholic Church contains implicitly a vision of history as the creative yet rooted power of living tradition, of structure as the creativity of community, of the holy as experienced through human participation in the ongoing divine creation and re-creation, of governance as the institutional mediation of communal creativity, and beneath it all of a postmodern artistic root metaphor." *ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*

attention with regard to the activity of God in the world must also be the lives of the marginalised themselves.

"Many parishes have little room for the poor. Many local parishes help the poor, feed the poor, clothe the poor - but do not want the poor to become the parishioners or, even more threatening, the parishioners to become the poor."⁶⁸

The dire local situation portrayed in this comment gives some indication of the obstacles impeding any deeper involvement of local parishes with the poor or marginalised who live within parochial boundaries. Given the absence of such folk amongst most congregations, and with little encouragement from church leaders to associate with them, it is not surprising that alienation often based on fear is the consequent result. Yet within the Roman Catholic tradition, the apparent detachment of the local hierarchy from life at the margins is not something advocated by either the Conciliar Fathers or the present pontiff. It would appear that Episcopal practice is more reminiscent of the apparel of power conveyed in a pre-Vatican II era, while the theory articulated is firmly rooted in Vatican II documents. Of John Paul II's more recent vision, particularly re-emphasising the transcendent dignity of all human beings, there is little evidence of a comprehended view among the clergy. Thus the sense of ecclesiological and preceding theological cognitive dissonance is revealed.

It would appear that there is a need to look more closely here at the particular conflicting situation within the Roman Catholic Church. The Church's self-understanding is theoretically grounded in Vatican II and later papal documents, which redescribe the nature grace relationship or the old dualism of God and the world. Human history and experience is stated as being an indispensable locus revelationis for the church. This has radical implications for the church which, as the previous chapter indicated, in its hierarchical, institutional, sacramental form still tends to operate on the Vatican I "ecclesia docens, ecclesia discens" model, with its implicit dualism predicated upon the division of nature and grace. Yet it is important to recall, as John Paul II asserted before his translation to the papacy, that the Council,

"at no point repeats the traditional distinction between the Ecclesia docens, Ecclesia discens: this is evidently because it wished to avoid an insufficient consciousness of the universal sharing in the manus propheticum of Christ."⁶⁹

68 Faucher T., "Outsiders need not apply", *The Tablet*, 12 December, 1992, p. 1566.

69 Wojtyla K., *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, London, Collins, 1980, p. 253.

It does appear that by virtue of their own discovery of the transcendent, the group in Heath Town are celebrating grace but have come to it in and through the sacrament of their own lives - their own "categorical imperative". Chapter III illustrated the sense of faith evident amongst the people on the estate, and the effects of this upon the members of the Hope Community. It also gave a clear indication of the way in which through the Community celebrations a regular attempt was made to celebrate the transcendent human dignity of the individual and grace in the daily life of the people.

Foremost exponents of this emphasis on the transcendent within the context of ordinary life were de Lubac and Rahner whose insights permeated the deliberations of the Conciliar fathers at Vatican II. For de Lubac, human beings are a mystery in the very essence of their natures, because of their inherent relationship with God.

"Not because the infinite fulness of the mystery which touches him is actually in himself, for it is strictly inexhaustible, but because he is fundamentally a *pour-soi* purely in reference to that fulness."⁷⁰

De Lubac maintained that human beings could only be understood against the reference of the incomprehensible God and were always moving towards the obscurity of God. Thus a certain gratuitousness of the supernatural order is true both individually and collectively. It is gratuitous in itself. It is gratuitous as far as each one of us is concerned. Its gratuitousness always remains both complete within itself and for ever new. It remains gratuitous at every stage of preparation for the gift and at every stage of the giving of it.⁷¹ God's freedom is characterised by this gratuitousness. Human beings exist as those who are the possible and potential recipients of immediate communication with God.

Interaction with Rahner

Rahner's work is complementary in that his intention appeared to be to disclose the ultimately mystical character of all human subjectivity. His primary hermeneutical principle was a transcendental theological anthropology. Here he was concerned to show that being moved toward or "referred"⁷² to the absolute mystery of the self-communicating God is the condition of the possibility of human desires, actions and existence. According to McDade, Rahner's theological anthropology attempts,

⁷⁰ De Lubac H., The Mystery of the Supernatural, trans. Sheed R., London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1967, p. 275.

⁷¹ A fuller explanation of this point may be found *ibid.* pp. 309ff.

⁷² "referred" in the sense of a basic existential.

"to provide an ontologico-metaphysical account of the correlation of the mystery of the triune God and the mystery of humanity."⁷³

What actually constitutes the creatureliness of human beings is the self-communication of God. Rahner describes the revelation of God in Jesus as the "grammar" that brings to articulate expression the mystery of the God-world relationship. In an interview in 1974 he stated that the fundamental and basic conception within Christian theology was "the divinisation of the world through the Spirit of God".⁷⁴

"Transcendental anthropology does correctly characterise my theology, but under the following two presuppositions: that a religion which is essentially historical, which has become historical, also carries within itself elements which are not necessarily deducible a priori, but are accepted as concrete historical facts; that I hope I see this and to some extent incorporate it into my theology."⁷⁵

The mystery of faith for Rahner consists in Mystery itself; indeed, the proximity of holy Mystery is the leitmotif of Rahner's entire theology. Human beings by their very nature have a dynamic drive towards mystery - inevitably have to do with mystery. Everyone has some experience of God's offer of himself at least implicitly and as such can also be the source of perceived experience of God. Thus there is the condition for reciprocal evangelization.

"Man is therefore, because his real being, as spirit, is transcendence, the being of the holy mystery. Man is he who is always confronted with the holy mystery."⁷⁶

According to this anthropology all are inescapably religious. Our experience of God is given with and through human experiences in the world. This conception far from being ahistorical, as a number of his critics have argued, is actually rooted in concrete history where this transcendence is experienced as operative. Indeed, there is a basic reciprocal relationship between transcendence and history.

"I am convinced that history only becomes history in contrast to nature through what one calls transcendence. And I am further convinced that transcendence is not the business of human beings alongside history, but is lived and realised in concrete history and in freedom."⁷⁷

73 McDade J., "Theology in the Post-Conciliar Period", in Hastings A. (ed.), Modern Catholicism, op. cit. pp. 422-443.

74 Imhof P and Biallowons H. (eds.), Karl Rahner in Dialogue, Conversations and Interviews 1965-1982, trans. Egan H., New York, Crossroad, 1986, p. 126.

75 Imhof P. and Biallowons H. (eds.), Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of his Life, trans. Egan H., New York, Crossroad, 1990, p. 21.

76 Rahner K., "The concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology", Theological Investigations 4: More Recent Writings, trans. Smyth K., London, DLT, 1966, pp. 36-73.

77 Imhof P & Biallowons H. (eds.), Faith in a Wintry Season, op. cit. p. 22.

This lived reality in temporal entitative historicity involves the given dynamic self-communication of God.

"Right from the outset the human being is not only radically unequivocally open to God as the absolute mystery, surrendering to it, but also because the dynamism of God's self-communication, what we call grace, the Holy Spirit, is also at work from the outset."⁷⁸

Such an emphasis when applied to the concrete circumstances of the life of the people of Heath Town is able to authenticate the experience of grace at work in the lives of individuals and the corporate celebration of that in the paraliturgical gatherings. For it is to affirm the ongoing mysterious reality of God at work in the ordinary lives of the people. The very accessibility of the Community Celebrations in Heath Town to the everyday life of the people is a feature that Rahner himself advocated in his work.

"We could organise the liturgy to make it much more accessible to people and far less removed from ordinary persons than is in fact the case. We could preach the real heart of the Christian message in a much more lively, joyful and courageous way."⁷⁹

The vitality, joy and courage spoken of here as synonymous with the Christian message appear an integral part of the paraliturgical events in the community centre of Heath Town.

This is to appropriate a new theological approach in pragmatic affairs, which underlay the proclamations of the Vatican council but which has yet to be concretely affirmed amongst local hierarchies within the church. The latter appear still to be operating under a previous theological imperative - as Rahner made clear - one which was founded upon a different appreciation of grace at work within the world.

"At least at one time, grace, assisting grace, and the outward circumstances shaped by God's grace in human life were conceived extrinsically, as discrete realities that occurred now and then, and which could be lacking completely in the sinner or the unbeliever. My basic theological conviction is in opposition to this. What we call grace is obviously a reality which is God-given, unmerited, free, dialogical - in other words - supernatural. But for me grace is at the same time a reality which is so very much a part of the innermost core of human existence in decision and freedom, always and above all given in the form of an offer that is either accepted or

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 25.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 175.

rejected, that the human being cannot step out of this transcendental particularity of his being at all."⁸⁰

Indeed, *Gaudium et Spes* itself stated that "all persons of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way .. (are) associated with the paschal mystery in a way known to God."⁸¹ Accordingly, the operative fact of grace at work within the lives of the people of Heath Town cannot remain in the realms of abstract theory, but must fall within the reflective consideration of praxis. The mystery is that human beings are able to grasp that the incomprehensible really exists and is active in the everyday situations of their lives. It is at this level that it achieves a dynamic evangelistic thrust in the lives of the Hope Community members. It is at this level that it presents a challenge for reflective evaluation at all levels within the churches. It is precisely at this level that the institutional church in its actual pastoral practice, with its legalism and ritualism and what seems its concern about itself instead of God, can be an obstacle to such an experience of God. It is important that the church be both conscious of this possibility and take measures to avoid it.

"If the Church preaches the properly central features of Christianity in a thoroughly orthodox way, but at the same time in a completely modern way, then it avoids the danger that the Church is living for itself, instead of being a sign of salvation for all."⁸²

For Rahner the church still remains as the legitimate though not the sole embodiment of the pneumatic. Rahner himself subject to censure at different stages of his career endeavoured to give some solace in such a situation of confrontative suffering. He stressed the importance of an ongoing relationship, despite its problematic quality.

"For the person for whom the Church constitutes an inner moment of final existential decision and attitude, ie an inner moment of faith, it is not surprising that in relation to it we can have all kinds of experiences that are unfortunate, annoying and nerve-wracking, and that provoke us to protest. Such offences caused by the Church are and remain provisional and in the last analysis secondary. .. The point for me is that Christians remain in the Church in spite of all the anger that they might feel about it."⁸³

The ongoing commitment of the Hope Community members to remain within the church at a personal individual level, and work towards building bridges with the institution, has consequentially entailed the suffering which comes from being both

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 21.

⁸¹ *Gaudium et Spes* para. 22, in Flannery A. (ed.) *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, op. cit. pp 903-1014.

⁸² Imhof P & Biallowons H. (eds.), *Faith in a Wintry Season*, op. cit. p. 174.

⁸³ Ibid. pp. 142-143.

misunderstood and ignored by the institutional church. In this context Williams helpfully brings to the fore the very fallible nature of the British church in its institutional form. He also stresses the theological reality that grace does not give innocence, it gives absolution to sinners. The church's peace is a grace-filled healed history, not a total harmony whose constructed and wounded character does not show. Today as at other times in its history, the church stands in need of that freedom of God drawing it towards metanoia.

"And in our history, healing is repeatedly imperiled and broken by new decisions. The Church actually articulated its gospel of peace by speaking the language of repentance: failure can be "negotiated" into what is creative. But this means that the peace of the Church as an historical community is always in construction. It does not promise a new and finished innocence in the order of time, but focuses the freedom of God constantly to draw that order back to difference that is nourishing, not ruinous."⁸⁴

Williams goes on to express his concern to keep in view the danger of setting the common life of the church too dramatically apart from the temporal ways in which the good is realised in a genuinely contingent world. He emphasises that this is not undertaken by minimising the mistakes of the church but rather by incorporating into its theological reflection its past failures. The consequence may be to highlight ongoing areas of dispute and conflict, but only in this way may there be moves toward real reconciliation. To utilise covert euphemisms in order to avoid contentious issues is to increase the possibility of festering sores within the body.

"But this suggests that a theology of Church history involves theologising the risks taken by the Church in constructing its peace; and so too theologising about its misconstruals, its repeated slithering into premature totalisations, and ultimately, theologising about the victims of the historical Church - even where this risks sharpening some of the particular conflicts of the Church's present life. The imagining of "total peace" must somehow be accessible to those whose history is not yet healed by the Church."⁸⁵

In this connection we might see not only the history of those who are marginalised, but for the purposes of this research also the history of those who work with the marginalised. The ambiguity surrounding the response of particularly Roman Catholic Church personnel to the work of the Hope Community - as detailed in the previous chapter - raises a peculiar problematic given recent pronouncements by the hierarchy of England and Wales. With the exception of the issue of ordination, the previous

⁸⁴ Williams R., "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision", *New Blackfriars* Vol. 73, No. 861, June, 1992, pp. 319-326.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

decade has witnessed a more positive attitude towards and appreciation of the ministry of women in public pronouncements. In 1980 the response of the bishops to the National Pastoral Congress indicated that they were both concerned to value the abilities of the female members of the church, and to offer support in the development of the ministries of women.

"We thank God for the many distinctive gifts and talents that women offer to the Church. .. Your particular gift for relationships makes you invaluable in any attempt to create communities. We believe that the time is overdue for more positive attitudes about your participation in the life of the Church and we recognise with regret that you have often been permitted to play mainly a limited, and often inferior part in the Church. We welcome the evidence that change has already begun. .. Traditional and unquestioned attitudes towards women and your role may have to be changed. We ourselves and our clergy may well have to be persuaded gently of our insensitivity and our assumptions of male dominance. .. You must not be excluded from the process of pastoral planning and decision-making. We assure you of our collaboration and support as you achieve your genuine role in the Church and society at large."⁸⁶

Such an emphasis on the experience of women being brought to bear in a collaborative fashion upon pastoral planning and decision-making finds no echo in the previously recorded lack of enthusiasm by the local hierarchy for utilising the experience of the women of the Hope Community. Indeed, it was apparent that there was a singular lack of dialogue between the hierarchy and the experience of those involved on the local estate. Yet the idea of dialogue as it has developed in modern theology implies a mutual exchange of views between diverse parties who do not fully agree, but who respect and are prepared to learn from one another. Indeed the presupposition for dialogue is the openness to the possibility of modification of views through the undertaking of such converse.

"Dialogue is a reciprocal relationship in which each party experiences the other side so that their communication becomes a true address and response in which each informs and learns. .. the other is a partner, someone to be taken seriously, whose point of view must be understood and whose meanings must be examined; both are aware of the possibility that the meanings of one may cause those of the other to be revised."⁸⁷

The picture thus presented is of the Hope Community as a group of women who have chosen to enter into the marginal status of the people on the estate by living

86 The Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales., The Easter People London, St Paul Publications, 1980, para. 178.

87 Howe R., The Miracle of Dialogue, New York, Seabury, 1963 pp. 49-50, cited in Dulles A., The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1992, p. 189.

alongside them, being also in the position of marginality within their own Christian affiliations. For the sisters within the Community the situation has a double poignancy the ambivalent nature of their support within their own province, is mirrored in the volatile nature of the support accorded by their official denominational representatives. The evident concern that has been expressed by the group with regard to their own sense of power and powerlessness with regard to the people with whom they live has an ironic counter-balance in their evident powerlessness in the face of the bureaucracy of their own church. As they continue to feel the need to authenticate the experience of the people on the estate, by listening to their stories and incorporating their experience into the activities of the Community; at the same time their voice appears to be denied in the counsels of their church, and their experience almost negated.

"The final indignity for anyone is to be forbidden one's own voice or to be robbed of one's own experience."⁸⁸

Accordingly, for the Community there is the possibility of a deeper sense of solidarity with the people with whom they live, whose own experience is so often denied and whose voices are rarely heard within the counsels of those who hold authority in state or church.

How can there be an adequate communication of experience at a local level into the reflective evaluation and policy making of local dioceses? The question of present church structure and the dependence upon a uniform parish model is one which was raised by local clergy in interviews. There is no indication at a hierarchical level that any consideration is being given to the present and potential functioning of parishes and possibilities of alternative structures. Yet this very question was one which concerned Rahner as he sought to promote the Christian message, and for him the formation of alternatives not in opposition to but complementary with existing parishes appeared to be one possible way forward.

"How can these two aspects be combined, radical commitment to an open and ecclesial Christianity and universal optimism toward the whole world? .. I think in our present concrete situation we ought to stress the formation of lively basic Christian communities not in opposition to normal parishes, but as lively, missionary communities from below that reach out beyond the purely ritual."⁸⁹

However, this issue also led him to question the dominant structure within the church and the predominant emphasis on parochial structure. His poetic suggestion

⁸⁸ Tracy D., *Plurality and Ambiguity : Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, London, SCM, 1987, p. 106.

⁸⁹ Imhof P & Biallowons H. (eds.), *Faith in a Wintry Season*, op. cit. p. 176.

was for Christian communities strategically placed to be "oases" to refresh surrounding areas.

"One particular point for me concerns my old question whether the Church is well advised to maintain its system of local parishes, or whether it wouldn't be better, granted the problematic character of my metaphor, to create flowering oases even if thereby, from a pastoral and ecclesiological point of view, there would be many areas of desert in between."⁹⁰

Rather than attempting to provide overall coverage, Rahner's ideas centred on the attractive nature of living Christian communities which would provide a cohesive and recognisable Christian presence in certain areas. Given the nature of his already expressed emphasis on the graced self-communication of God, the absence of such communities would not preclude the presence of God.

"Given our concrete historical situation, I may not trust that God will make the Church present everywhere, even if there is no longer anywhere an unchallenged Christianity of a regional character. I hope with a Christian realism that God also really lives where I myself am not present."⁹¹

"I would maintain that we should calmly try to create living, radically cohesive communities that resemble the life of the early Church, and I would hope that from their feeling of being something special there would arise a pronounced sense of mission. The future will show whether we have created truly modern communities inspired by the early Church or simply insular ghettos that produce a lot of warm nests which don't warm the rest of the world at all. They'd be like thermos bottles that keep warm what is inside but leave everything outside cold."⁹²

Rahner's very practical concern was the pragmatic reality that a church of limited resources could not tackle all possibilities. Nor could it be present everywhere. His concern was that where the church was present it should be a vital vibrant force, not a presence handicapped by an agenda it could not possibly fulfil. The situation of the over-worked clergy outlined in previous chapters give added weight to his arguments.

"The Church of today really has to have the courage to follow a certain strategy, instead of starting every imaginable approach on all possible fronts, approaches that immediately fail because they were undertaken with limited resources."⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 192.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 193.

⁹² Ibid. p. 193-4.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 194.

"I'm arguing that the Church should judiciously employ its available, but looked at soberly, very limited potential for religious communities in the right places. That's where the weakness is."⁹⁴

To undertake such an evaluation and new initiatives in the area of the reform of the parochial structure would be a major change within the British church. It could be the potential for widespread communication and dialogue between clergy, laity and religious in an unprecedented form. It would certainly involve a degree of risk and commitment to the potential within the church both within and without its boundaries. It would also involve the church re-evaluating what may be seen as its exclusive ecclesiology and the theology of grace which informs it.

If the contemporary church really does proclaim God at the deepest roots of a human being, forming and shaping things to reflect back his glory, this implies that divine grace is both personal and concrete and evinces the importance of solidarity on the part of the church with the most vulnerable in society. There are already various examples of such initiatives - of which the Hope Community is but one - which could act as both exemplary modes of presence and evaluated experiments for further reflection within the church. At the heart of any experimental⁹⁵ aspect of option for the poor lies a deliberate choice to enter in some degree into the world of those who are deprived - to share in a significant way in their experience of being mistreated, by-passed, or left helpless. It springs from compassion and involves a choice to deepen this compassion by sharing to some extent in the suffering of the poor. But the experience is not totally negative: by entering the world of deprived people one begins also to experience their hopes and their joys. Such engagement, as the example of the Hope Community illustrates, can be the source of reciprocal evangelisation and a deepening appreciation of the presence of God active within the world.

94 Ibid. p. 195.

95 Experiments as Rahner indicated are far from being adequately recognised in the concrete life of the church. "For the most part experiment is understood as dependent on a (more or less) express concession of the ecclesiastical legislator. And the latter offers only a certain choice of already (more or less) clearly known alternatives for experimentation, in order to decide which of them is better suited to a goal already fixed, so that the result cannot surprise the legislator. In his eyes the choice to be made as revealed by the experiment is purely selective, not creative; the result is the adaptation of something already existing and as such clearly known to a new situation (which we are determined from the beginning not to change, either because we simply cannot change it or because we are tired and think we can't): it is not the mutation of a being into a new entity. ... We frequently close ourselves up in the face of such experiments, if they become really serious, with an appeal to the unchangeable principles and convictions of Christianity." Rahner K., "Experiment in the Field of Christianity and Church", in Opportunities for Faith: Elements of a Modern Spirituality, trans. Quinn E., London, SPCK, 1974, pp 214-222. and "It is only by experiment, taking a risk, feeling our way, that we learn whether a way of life, a thought-form, a terminology etc. are compatible or not with the "permanent" element in Christianity. whether it would mean the death of Christianity (and therefore in the last resort would have to be rejected) or would be the very means replacing the older means, tested by tradition - by which Christianity will stand its ground in a new age." *ibid.*

However, it may be that the church within its institutional form is trapped within a particular form of articulation of religious issues to such an extent that it is unable to appreciate the full religious significance of new questions. It does appear that the official church is failing people by not articulating their deepest religious instincts with them or even for them. This drawing forth of the gifted inner reality of a human being and affirming such God-given interiority might be likened to a form of empowerment, but one far different from empowerment as envisaged by the document produced by the Bishops' conference and at a level other than Community Organising. One element lacking in both of these suggested moves towards empowerment, but of vital necessity to the holistic reality of marginalised people, is the spiritual dimension and the ability to articulate explicitly deep Christian instincts. However, unlike the emphasis on the mobilisation and use of power in Community Organising, this kind of power inspires people to action but does not give any guarantee of immediate success. Yet there is a hunger for a coherent articulation of what the Spirit of God is saying in individual hearts. Although commitment to social change may be enthusiastically acclaimed, at the heart of the expression of the presence of God among the people of the Heath Town estate is a primary desire for and sense of God at work within the pain and sorrow and joy and hope of their ordinary lives. Certainly this is apparent in the individual interviews and group discussion.

Fruitful Marginality

It does appear evident that if theology is not deliberately used to give power to people in this way, then it will almost certainly be used to take away power from them. A crucial question is whether those who hold authority in the church are prepared to trust the experience of the "ordinary" Christian. A theology that is imposed makes slaves of people. A theology that is drawn out of people's own Christian experience by sensitive facilitation helps to set them free to be fully Christian, fully human, fully alive. This sensitive facilitation it is argued would include a profound critical listening to the people and their experience of God, and would be open to being transformed by such converse. For such a practice is to assert the recognition that change, renewal or reform is super-eminentely the work of the Holy Spirit. He is present in all living members of the church, in those "above" as in those "below". He is above the one, below the other, and breathes where he will. This is the ground of mystery upon which Rahner takes his transcendental

anthropological stance. Bishop Nichols made a similar assertion when he spoke of the spirit-led journey of the church into new modes of being.

"The patterns of our discovery of truth are Spirit-led. To know the truth, to be possessed by it, we must be open to it, and follow the Spirit. Following that Spirit will lead us by paths of death and resurrection: death to treasured half truths and self-understanding; resurrection to new life given in unexpected places, at the margins of our societies, in the shocking and unexpected, in pain and distress, and even in the routinely familiar. Our notions of power and security will be overturned for this Spirit-led search demands continual conversion, a radical re-orientation throughout our human family. Yet the truth, given in love, but often received only in pain, will set us free. ... The Church, that embodiment of the truth, is both a place of discovery and a focus for conversion and repentance. The Church stands constantly in need of reform, seeking new coherence, renewed patterns of life, in conformity to the truth which it is given but by which it is not yet possessed."⁹⁶

There does appear to be a wide gap between the proclaimed social teaching within the Roman Catholic Church and the actual structures and policies of the church. However, this gap between theory and practice has widened, as Dorr indicates⁹⁷, precisely because the churches really listened to prophetic voices and through them allowed the Spirit to challenge the church. It is thus, in this way, a sign of hope. The contemporary need is to undertake the painful task of correcting our inadequacies and failures. It is proposed that this be undertaken by a concrete commitment to learn from the experience of those already involved amongst the marginalised and a willingness to let their experience reflectively effect evaluation and policy decisions.

As Hastings⁹⁸ so well illustrates those who live and work on the margins do not fit within a precise category; they are not quite clearly in or out of mainstream society. They can be viewed as unpredictable, bearers of power but also of possible pollution to the society as a whole.

"People in such a position may be thought, often rightly, to be upsetting, or endangering the society; they need to be guarded against; but they may also be a source of blessing, of new strength and wisdom. Marginality may be a danger to the Church but it may also be a way in of divinity. The prophet who can keep just his foot in the door may let in the light, irritating and out of order as he will surely seem to the hierarchs and the canonists."⁹⁹

96 Nichols V., *Closing Reflections*, Gospel and Culture Conference, 11-17th July, 1992, Swanwick.

97 Dorr D., *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power and the Church*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1991, p. 39ff.

98 Hastings A., *The Faces of God: Essays on Church and Society* London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1975.

99 Ibid. p. 19.

Marginal ministry Hastings sees as a main locus for the evangelical counsels. Here his views coincide with those of the leader of the Hope Community, situated at the social periphery there is the possibility to challenge and revitalise society because there is the offering of a possible alternative. Freely chosen celibacy for the kingdom is significant by the sheer quality of meaning and joy it can radiate and for the potential protest power inherent within it. The vows of poverty and obedience are the opportunity for further sources of liberation from the restrictive practices of contemporary mores. However, there are dangers with regard to manipulating the power play of the society it seeks not to emulate. How long can such a freely chosen marginality exist and indeed be perpetuated beyond the life-span of the dedicated enthusiast, or the span of their committed ideal? The problems associated with too much dependence upon a charismatic leader in this field have given cause for concern with regard to the Hope Community. Such risks however, do not nullify the valuable potential in such life and work upon the margins as the voluntarily marginal respond to the involuntarily marginal. In this way, Hastings asserts, the freedom of Christian living is manifested.

"and it manifests it precisely by taking seriously the socially marginal position in an evangelically creative way; and it can do so precisely because that position is in the very order of things a position both of weakness and of special power, it is therefore naturally fitting for the manifestation of the mind and power of God to whom all human systems belong except in their corruption but whose freedom and transcendence require continually that we have an outside-the-system-spokesman to prevent the divinisation of the establishment."¹⁰⁰

The patterns of fruitful marginality are many and varied¹⁰¹ despite all the pain and opprobrium and perhaps the personal disaster that the state of marginality can bring with it. True marginality is inevitably painful and frustrating. Yet it is also a state which is necessary for the health of the church. The insight of those on the margins, particularly those who have chosen marginal status, has the value not only of the partial dissident, the anomaly, the person who has moved out from the regular working of the system without sundering all formal links. It also has the potential to bring to the attention of the church the richness of the life of God at work in very different ways from those within the institutional church, uncomfortable and messy as this may be to the hierarchy.

100 Ibid. p. 21-22.

101 The state of marginality as here expressed has resonance with that of liminality as particularly outlined in the work of the social anthropologist Victor Turner. The liminal individual faces the same kind of ambiguity in terms of the position vis a vis the society with which they co-exist at the boundary. Such persons also provide a potential challenge to the existing mores within such a society.

"Instead of the Church questioning the world's assumptions about itself and posing to it the question of God, it is the world that today questions the Church about the authority of the God it proclaims."¹⁰²

The experience of Kane within the North East of England led her to propose an alternative model for viewing the church in the world. Rather than seeing the church as centre stage going out and applying the gospel, she suggested that the Kingdom be seen as central and the church as having a vital role in proclaiming this and discovering the activity of God already at work within the world. Thus the task of the church is then to be a sign, by demonstrating within its own life the nature of the kingdom and an agent for that kingdom in the transformation of the world. For her the dynamic impetus within all ministry is dialogue, and here she finds a particular difficulty within the clerical ministry, where individuals are far more accustomed to talking rather than listening.

Dialogue presupposes real conversation unless it is to become a form of abstruse discussion. Such conversation in its turn presupposes the ability to listen, in a profound and critical way. It is important that such listening be critical in order that a priority or option for the poor, whereby transformation for all participants within such converse is possible, is not hardened into an ideology which of its nature can distort and exploit the very basis of such exchange. It is not suggested that such attentive listening be in opposition to other ongoing active involvement in the life of the marginalised particularly in social and political terms. However, this dimension is one which is a vital ingredient and indeed presupposition for such active engagement. For it is asserted that such profound listening reflectively evaluated can promote a deeper appreciation and indeed responsible appropriation of the motivation for such activity. This dimension is not unknown within the life of the institutional church, indeed it receives in some quarters overt intellectual adherence. Yet within the pastoral practice and policy making of the church there is little sign of it receiving adequate consideration. If there is to be a real engagement of the church with those who live on the urban margins of society a revitalised understanding and practice of this dimension is imperative and a very real consequence could be the revivifying of those very social, political and economic initiatives already being undertaken by the church on the margins.

If human beings in their very essence are a transcendence towards mystery this must be an operational principle within all our engagement with individuals. For Rahner

¹⁰² Kane M., What kind of God?: Reflections on Working with People and Churches in North East England, London, SCM, 1986, p. 21.

the profound choice with which everyone is confronted is whether they will try to ground their own lives and cling to their own securities, or whether they will surrender their lives into the silent and often terrifying dark Mystery whom we call God. This choice is also one which faces the church in its dealings with those on the margins, where God may often appear to be at work in a disconcertingly novel form. Here the question arises will the institution continue to cling to known secure ways of relating to those on the margins, ways which serve to alienate rather than include? Or will the church risk the relational mode of listening through those already established contacts on the margins? In so listening will those in authority within the church allow the possibility of transformation and policy modification by virtue of that experience?

For Rahner as O'Donnell¹⁰³ maintains, there is an ongoing paradox. On the one hand Christian existence is surrender to the Mystery beyond all things but on the other hand it is also finding God in all things. The Christian is neither merely ascetical and contemplative nor merely secular and active. Rather she must be contemplative in action. Only the lived integration of this tension adequately expresses the paradox of Christian existence. It is here in the dimension of spirituality that we may encounter the facilitative tool for such a mode of profound listening to which the church is called to give attention.

103 O'Donnell J., "The Mystery of Faith in the Theology of Karl Rahner", Heythrop Journal, XXV, 1984, pp. 301-318.

Chapter 6 To Dialogue with the Outsider

"Christianity ... had its roots in humanity and is consequently human. Ah yes; it had its roots in humanity. But where does humanity have its roots? It is human, precisely because there is in humanity something of the divine. And if there is something divine in humanity, under what conditions and in what manner is it to be found there? There you have the question that must never be lost to sight."¹

¹ Laberthonniere L., cited in Daly G., Transcendence and Immanence, Oxford, Clarendon, 1980, p. 231.

The previous chapter, in establishing as fundamental the transcendental anthropology of Rahner, contended that we approach all individuals as already standing within the orbit of the mystery of God's self-communication. It was further asserted that in order to apprehend this reality a profound critical listening is an imperative for the church both to advocate and to incorporate. This chapter will endeavour to give further justification for such a model of a listening church, and postulate a means of facilitating this in terms of encouraging awareness of the contemplative dimension. It is important to emphasise the lack of polarisation within what is asserted. The recommendation of a mode of listening is suggested as an underdeveloped dimension not an alternative to anything or everything else: a critical listening and hearing which leads into discerned action.

A further question which is addressed is the nature of the relationship of this proposed mode with the teaching authority in the church. A crucial consideration is how to assure the reverence for hearing what is coming from marginalised people and being open to transformation by that; alongside reverencing the reality of what the tradition enables us to carry forward via the magisterium. Here again what is emphasised is the lack of polarisation: both features are considered essential for an authentic expression of contemporary Christian involvement on the urban margins. There is no attempt to divorce listening from action undertaken or to assert an individualistic listening option which supersedes tradition or the teaching authority in the church. Yet it may be that a priority option to prior listening may be necessary in order to guarantee the integrity of our active teaching and participatory modes of being.

"So often the Church can act like another professional agency, deciding what can be done for the poor without ever consulting them, and possibly finding God at work there."²

If the mystery of God at work on the margins is to be apprehended by the church, then in order to listen and hear members must engage in conversation with those who are deprived of a voice in any other arena of society. Individuals can so often become the objects of language and a converse from which they suffer exclusion. Indeed it becomes a prominent responsibility for the church to be engaged in such conversation, as Austin Smith asserts, the greatest act of marginalisation is,

² A Religious sister in a comparable peripheral housing estate in Scotland, interview, Glasgow, 1990.

"the control and manipulation of the conversation which is both at the heart of and indeed creative of the world in which we find ourselves."³

Smith sees the avoidance of such responsibility by the Church as a radical failure, for the word of God requires both the engagement of human experience and of its very nature gives added depth to such experience.

"I do believe there to be a radical failure to bring alive a conversation, based upon God's word and the word of human experience in harmonious reciprocal service. There is a sense in which the word of God must be articulated by the word of God spoken in human words. And there is also a profound sense in which the word of God must deepen human experience, stretch it to its transcendent horizons, when it is expressed in human words."⁴

Human experience as here indicated is that which occurs both within and without the institutional church, and includes the outsider - even the stormy petrel heralding the approach of troubled times. A conversation involving such potentially disturbing elements requires a flexibility which cannot be predetermined. In the concrete such interaction may be messy, provisional, inexact, frustrating and full of unintended errors. A conversation which offers hope of fulfilment in action and arises from action, tests the depths of our sincerity and commitment. In authentic conversation we are challenged at a very profound level about our language. We are challenged to examine our language, to be precise, to avoid evasive formulations, to say what we mean - what we really mean - to speak as authentically as is given us to be able to do. There is a particular difficulty about intimate conversation which is only possible between two or three individuals, as soon as numbers mount to more than six or seven a collective language can begin to dominate.⁵ Accordingly, with regard to the engagement of the church upon the margins it is not advocated that the institution should engage in major direct involvement advocating new and populous programmes, but rather might encourage the converse already actively present. Here there might be a certain "entrusting" of those already at work in this area and an openness on the part of the institution to being transformed by the fruit of this exchange.

3 Smith A., Journeying with God: Paradigms of Power and Powerlessness, London, Sheed and Ward, 1990, p. 145.

4 Ibid.

5 Simone Weil, in speaking herself of collective language maintained that it was the natural tendency of collectivism to abuse power. c.f. Weil S., Waiting on God, trans. Cranford E., London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951, p. 31ff.

It is because language is the middle ground for understanding and agreement between people that conversation is of such importance as the potential for real discourse. For Gadamer, language always of its nature is conversation. The ontological characteristic of hermeneutical conversation he cites as the concept of understanding as a transcendental and universal reflection.⁶ The conversation of humankind with its tradition is for Gadamer the inexhaustible source of new instances of self-understanding. Such understanding is envisaged as guaranteed by necessary processes of critical revision, critical and by implication also fallible, thus ongoing reflection becomes a vital requirement for the process.

Interaction with Tracy

This process, Tracy considers, is one in which we are in pursuit not of certainty but of understanding, and in our following of this course we have the knowledge that our interpretations also will prove inadequate and will need to be supplanted. As one of the Hope Community members emphasised, there is an ongoing revision of understanding.

"I've learned so much from the people since I've been here. And my ideas about church they are only gradually developing."⁷

Indeed, what may seem a weakness here is rather the strength of a reflective sense that is able to continue the process of interpretation towards an ever fuller understanding according to the signs of specific times.

"The groping, tentative even sometimes stumbling character of the interpretations of both the tradition and the signs of the times ... are not therefore a weakness but a strength."⁸

Tracy asserts that discerning the signs of the times can lead to interpreting the tradition anew, both to retrieve often forgotten, even repressed, disclosive and transformative aspects of the tradition, and also to interpret the tradition not only with a hermeneutics of retrieval but also of critique and suspicion. He stresses that in any concrete case of theological interpretation there is need to allow for the kind of interaction that occurs in all true interpretation as genuine conversation - a real interaction between the tradition and the situation. A critical interpretation of the

⁶ Here we might note in passing the criticism of the ontological self-conception of hermeneutics which Gadamer explicates as formulated by Habermas. However, as Ricoeur has stressed, Habermas's critique does not invalidate Gadamer's claim. His desire for a depth hermeneutics still is, as Ricoeur maintains, a form of hermeneutics.

⁷ Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

⁸ Tracy D., "Project X: Retrospect and Prospect", Concilium, 170, 1983, pp. 30-36.

best expressions of the past and an open-ended conversation among all interested people about the results of these acts of interpretation and appropriation.⁹ Here in a novel form he sees the correlation of the results of all these interpretations as mutually critical in both theory and praxis. It is significant that he,

"does not suggest either the dilution of Christian experiences into general human experiences or the "Christianisation " of all human experiences."¹⁰

Rather he acknowledges that both of these distinct though related sets of experiences are ambiguous and both call for critical interpretation. In The Analogical Imagination¹¹ Tracy emphasises that the heart of any hermeneutical position is the recognition that all interpretation is a mediation of past and present, a translation carried on within the effective history of a tradition to retrieve its sometimes strange, sometimes familiar meanings. He sees a predicament here not just for the theologian but a common human predicament: how to deal with the risk of interpretation both of the Christian tradition and the world in which that tradition finds ongoing development.

He explores the difficulties surrounding authentic conversation as distinct from idle chatter, mere debate, gossip or non-negotiable confrontation. For him, real conversation occurs only when the interlocutors in the conversation move past self-consciousness and self-aggrandisement into joint reflection upon the subject matter of the conversation. Real conversation occurs only when the participants allow the question, the subject matter, to be of prime importance. In such circumstances, anxiety about the individual's self-image becomes unimportant and understanding can ensue. This occurs not as the result of any personal achievement but in the ordinary give-and-take movement of the conversation itself. Thus understanding happens in a,

"deeply subjective yet intersubjective, shareable, public, indeed historical movement of authentic conversation."¹²

Within such a dynamic interaction, there may also be the added element of what Tracy terms a "classic".

9 For Tracy, as Jeanrond maintains, the context for his theory of human conversation is a postmodern one. See Jeanrond W., "Review of Tracy D., *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope*", Religious Studies Review, Vol. 15, No. 3, July, 1989, pp. 218-221.

10 Jeanrond W., Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance, London, Macmillan, 1991, p. 174.

11 Tracy D., The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism, London, SCM, 1981, pp. 99-229.

12 Ibid. p. 101.

"Every classic is a text, event, image, person or symbol which unites particularity of origin and expression with a disclosure of meaning and truth available in principle to all human beings."¹³

According to Tracy, any classic employs some explicit model of Christian self-transcendence, implying some form of intense journey. This involves a risk that the subject matter of the classic articulates a question which is worth asking and a response worth considering. Classics he cites as those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet which always resist a definitive interpretation. He stresses that it is important to be open to converse with the classics of our tradition. This conversation might then enable the manifestation of new modes of being in the world, and of potentially new projects for our common life in this world. For him there is the conviction that if the religious classics are classics at all, they can be trusted to evoke a wide range of responses, including the shock of recognition of God religiously named faith. He states that explicitly religious classic expressions will involve a claim to truth as the event of a disclosure-concealment of the whole of reality by the power of the whole - as in some sense, a radical and finally gracious mystery. This involved the realized experience of a recognition as that response of trust called faith to the reality of the whole disclosed in the religious classic. This reality is experienced as liberating the individual to trust that there is an ultimate wholeness - that how we ought to live, and how things in reality are, are finally one.

Though the classic referred to by Tracy is predominantly a text, analogously I would argue it may be used in reference to an experience, and in this case the experience of those on the margins of society. Here, just as in a text, there are demands necessitating constant interpretation and the actual experience bears a certain kind of timelessness - namely the timelessness of a classic expression radically rooted in its own historical time and calling to any individual historicity. However, it is vital that there should be ongoing reflection and indeed constant reinterpretation by later finite, historical, temporal beings who will risk asking questions and listening, critically and tactfully, in order to elicit responses to actualise and guarantee authenticity. In the same manner with regard to the experience of those on the margins, there is a primary need for ongoing reflection and critical reappropriation of that experience in the light of the church's contemporary understanding. Within the Hope Community evaluation meetings are given high priority by members:

"The evaluation is very important and we have gone away for a week-end sometimes to just have that time to reflect and evaluate."¹⁴

¹³ Ibid. p. 133.

¹⁴ Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

To interact with a classic text Tracy asserts is to be subject to a generative and evocative power and to converse with difference and otherness. It is asserted analogously that in contemporary society otherness and difference are primary characteristics of those who live on the margins of society. The experience here manifested is such as is apprehended by those who have chosen to live and work there as both disclosive of the reality of the mystery of God at work there, and involving a transformative truth, if approached in openness and reverence. Here is encountered Tracy's emphasis upon truth as event of disclosure, the manifestation of truth.¹⁵ Here also liberation theologians insist that the preference of God is revealed, namely a preference for the poor, oppressed and marginalised.¹⁶ Within this context, Latin American liberation theologians have come to reappraise what they once dismissed in terms of the popular expressions of religion and what might be learned from these. Within the British churches there may be a need to learn how to be open to the challenge of what Tracy describes as "less intense classics"¹⁷ - the ordinary practices, beliefs and everyday rituals. Genuine conversation, according to Tracy, can only occur when the participants are prepared to face the reality of otherness. It is here that he recommends an "analogical imagination"¹⁸ as the most appropriate strategy for a genuine participation in such conversation, and reasserts the need to use the language of "disclosure-concealment".

15 According to Tracy, "It is by conversation alone that we are freed from epistemological solipsism for a dialogical life, with others and with all the classics. Dialogue is both a mode of human life and a manifestation of the dialogical reality of all human life." Tracy D., Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope. London, SCM, 1988, p. 28.

16 It is important to state, as Tracy clearly does, "This is not to say that option for the poor is translatable into the distinct claim that only the poor can provide proper readings of these texts, any more than it suggests that only the poor can experience revelation or find salvation or only the poor are the objects of that radical love of neighbour that is the heart of the Christian gospel. That option does not translate into the position that says, once the poor make their interpretations, all others are to sit back and passively read them. For this reason, I consider claims for the "hermeneutical privilege" of the poor ambiguous: that they are the "privileged ones" to God, yes; that they are the ones whose interpretations the rest of us most need to hear, yes (and a yes which acknowledges the repression of those readings in past and present); that only those readings are "privileged" to be heard at all, clearly and firmly no." *ibid.* p. 103 and fn. 56, p. 141.

17 *Ibid.* p. 97.

18 "The phrase can remind conversation partners that difference and otherness once interpreted as other and as different are thereby acknowledged as in some way possible and in the end analogous. Anyone who can converse can learn to appropriate another possibility. Between person and person, as well as between person and text, there exists in every authentic conversation an openness to mutual transformation ... Authentic analogical language is a rare achievement, since it attempts the nearly impossible: an articulation of real differences as genuinely different but also similar to what we already know. On a more existential level, an analogical imagination suggests a willingness to enter the conversation that unnerving place where one is willing to risk all one's present self-understanding by facing the claims to attention of the other. In any conversation we may find ourselves called to change either radically, as suggested by the religious language of conversion, or less completely but genuinely, as in any acknowledgment of the once merely different as now genuinely possible." *ibid.* p. 93.

"The people reveal God to me most when they come out with things that are so simple and yet so profound, and when they seem to put that understanding into little acts of generosity, when there is no incentive to do that."¹⁹

Tracy emphasises that there is a natural hermeneutical competence, which is available to all those who are willing to risk their own present understanding being subject to change. Within such a sphere there is no room for elitism since any human being can interpret the religious classic.²⁰

"That competence does not wait upon the results of debates over methods and hermeneutical theories. That natural competence belongs to all those who assume that, to understand any classic and its claim to attention, we must be prepared to risk our present understanding. That competence knows that we cannot simply distance ourselves from the classics as objects-out-there available for either passive contemplation or domination by means of the latest method. It is the competence of anyone willing to confront critically and be confronted by any classic."²¹

Tracy, following Gadamer's precedent, utilises the notion of a game to assert the importance of a respectful involvement of all participants. If one player endeavours to dominate, in order to assure control, not only is the game not being played, but that player has limited not only the possibilities for the other players but also his own potential growth in freedom of response. In a not dissimilar manner if the church approaches those on the margins solely through the medium of a controlled framework of reference, in such a proscribed setting there is little opportunity for an effective give-and-take which might prove to be beneficial to all parties engaged in such potential converse.

19 Fieldworker D. interview, November, 1991.

20 c.f. "Any human being can interpret the religious classic because any human being can ask the fundamental questions that are part of the very attempt to become human at all, those questions that the religious classics address. Among the fundamental questions are those peculiar questions named religious or limit questions: questions provoked by radical contingency and mortality; questions evoked by the transience of all things human; questions attendant upon an acknowledgment of the historical and social contingency of all the values embraced and all the convictions lived by; the question of suffering, that contrast experience par excellence, which enters every life at some point to interrupt its continuities and challenge its seeming security; the question of the meaning of that ennui that can erupt into a pervasive anxiety, even terror, in the face of some unnameable other that seems to bear down upon us at certain moments; .. the question of the need to understand what possible meaning might be present in the profound love and joy we experience; the question of why I possess a fundamental trust that both allows me to go on at all and is not reducible to all my other trusts; the question of why an occasional sense, however transient, of the sheer giftedness of reality can be experienced when I finally stop clinging and sense the truth in Wittgenstein's statement "That the world is, is the mystical"; the question of whether I too experience moments that bear some family resemblance to those "consolations without cause" of which the mystics wrote." Tracy D., *Plurality and Ambiguity*, op. cit. p. 86.

21 Ibid. p. 103.

"When I enter a game, if I insist upon my self-consciousness to control every move, I am not in fact playing the game. Rather I am playing some curious game of my own where self-consciousness is the sole rule, while any vulnerability and any ability to transcend myself are the forbidden moves in the only role or game I am willing to play. - Here the back-and-forth movement of every game becomes the buoyant dialectic of true freedom; surprise, release, confrontation, shock, often reverential awe, always transformation."²²

Although within the hermeneutical tradition, as Tracy re-emphasises, priority is given to understanding in the process of interpretation, yet there is an essential dialectic of understanding-explanation-understanding. In this manner the process is always incomplete, because leading on to the next stage which is either the attempt to understand or to interpret based upon such understanding. A prior dimension, as previously asserted, is that of listening in order to hear in order to understand. However, at each stage what is required is that openness which refuses to foreclose on any stage of the process, but which is continually open to transformation. Such a mode of being, it is argued, does not lead to a paralysis of indecision, but rather to discerned action, which of its nature is open to ongoing reflection and thus to ongoing discernment.

In such a process it is necessary to be attentive to the concrete religious experiences and expressions both disclosed and stated in particular situations. Here, Rahner²³ has helpfully focused attention on the existence of God's absolute mystery as the ultimate horizon to all thinking and living. Thus, as already emphasised, the human being is understood as always already within that horizon of ultimate mystery. At this point Rahner has redescribed such a person as a potential hearer of a possible revelation from this horizon, namely the self-manifestation of the mystery of God by the power of ultimate mystery itself.

"In the actual experience of that self-manifestation of God in Jesus Christ, the Christian believer now, according to Rahner, recognises that the concrete revelation is a pure gift or grace from the incomprehensible God of Love. Then the believer "recognises" that all reality is graced by that gift: that all reality partakes in a "transcendental" revelation disclosed in the categorial revelation of God's own self-manifestation in Jesus Christ; that revelation as "transcendental" is always already present in this concretely graced

²² Tracy D., *The Analogical Imagination*, op. cit. p. 113.

²³ "Rahner's insistence on the radical incomprehensibility of both God and ourselves understood through and in our most comprehensible philosophical and theological speech; Jungel's powerful theology of the Christian understanding of God; the "God beyond God" language of Tillich and all theologians who acknowledge how deadening traditional God-language can easily become; .. there is no classic discourse on Ultimate Reality that can be understood as mastering its own speech. If any human discourse gives true testimony to Ultimate Reality, it must necessarily prove uncontrollable and unmasterable." Tracy D., *Plurality and Ambiguity*, op. cit. p. 109.

world; that revelation as "categorical" is present in the gratuity of God's self-manifestation in the events of "salvation history" decisively present, for Rahner, in the event of the manifestation of who God is and who we are in Jesus Christ."²⁴

Accordingly, since we are always already in the presence of absolute mystery, we are thus all in fact hearers of a possible revelation or self-manifestation from the freedom of absolute mystery. Indeed, we are all therefore open to understanding that mystery in attending to the reality proclaimed through each other. Here we find ourselves in a world beyond the domain of technically controlled comprehensibility, but encountering the uncontrollable incomprehensibility of an experience of radical mystery.²⁵ Yet a growing awareness of our inability to control, but our openness to, such mystery evokes a freedom which is sensed as gracious gift, and which further empowers life. Here we move into the dimension of growing trust, wonder and an increased reverence for the reality of that mystery at work in the lives of all human beings.

"That same sense of radical giftedness both fascinates and frightens as it shocks and transforms the self to believe what one dare not otherwise believe: that reality is finally gracious, that the deepest longings of our minds and hearts for wholeness in ourselves, with others, with history and nature, is the case - the case granted as gift by the whole the case expressed with relative adequacy determined by the intrinsic inadequacy of every classic religious expression."²⁶

Tracy emphasises the all encompassing features of this mystery and the consequences for ourselves as individuals - primarily the shattering of false illusions - and the world which we inhabit.

"When it is believable, religious faith manifests a sense of the radical mystery of all reality: the mystery we are to ourselves; the mystery of history, nature, and the cosmos; the mystery above all, of Ultimate Reality. When it is plausible, religious hope frees us from our temperamental inclinations to either pessimism or optimism. When it is active, religious love frees us from the illusion that to be a human being means to become an ego attempting mastery and control of all others."²⁷

Such a revelation of the mystery of our reality and the interaction with Ultimate Reality may lead through greater obscurity to manifest a deeper sense of ultimate mystery. Within such a context, silence may be the most appropriate kind of speech

24 Tracy D., The Analogical Imagination, op. cit. p. 162 c.f. Rahner K., Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity, London, DLT, 1978, pp. 153-62 and 206-228.

25 For one of the Hope Community members life on the estate was "like a secret that was going to unfold". Fieldworker C. op. cit.

26 Tracy D., The Analogical Imagination, op. cit. p. 177.

27 Tracy D., Plurality and Ambiguity, op. cit. p. 107.

for evoking this necessary sense of the radical mystery. Silence may indeed be the final and most adequate mode of speech for religion. Or at best, dialectical speech like silence may prove the only relatively adequate form of expression. For that sense of mystery personally appropriated will take the respondent beyond all previously realised experiences and beyond the powers of expression possible to any finite human being caught up in a disclosure of the infinite by the infinite. One of the lay women in the Hope Community endeavoured to articulate this when she stated:

"When I first came here I was totally silenced. I didn't know what to think or feel. So the coming before God in that silence is just a relief."²⁸

Here the experience is one of radical reverence, drawing the individual beyond anxiety and wonder, even beyond both trust and alienation ultimately towards greater freedom.

"The most refined theological discourse of the classic theologians ranges widely but returns at last to a deepened sense of the same ultimate mystery the same amazing freedom."²⁹

Indeed, it would appear that at this juncture there exists an obligation to hear what is being said, even if such hearing obliges an encounter with what is different and possibly lacking in civility. When engaged with those on the margins the middle class mores of polite courtesies may be singularly lacking. The reason Tracy gives for the importance of such engagement is that,

"the oppressed are the ones most likely to hear clearly .. Among our contemporaries their readings are those the rest of us most need to hear."³⁰

Such a need to hear is also rooted in the need to acknowledge our ambiguous relationship towards power and knowledge in our own converse. This implies also the willingness to enter into critical conflict with our own experience.

The Complementarity of Tradition and Experience

The interrelated nature and challenge of the tradition and contemporary experience, which only in this mutual exposure and confrontation can form converse which addresses contemporary men and women, is emphasised by Jeanrond.

²⁸ Fieldworker C. op. cit.

²⁹ Tracy D., Plurality and Ambiguity, op. cit. p. 108.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 104.

"Only if the interpretation of the Christian tradition reveals the power of this tradition to be a continuously meaningful challenge to our understanding of being in this world, and only if this interpretation is a critical act of appropriation ie an activity guided by a hermeneutics of retrieval and suspicion, will the disclosure of Christian revelation have any possibility of succeeding to address contemporary men and women."³¹

Yet this appears to be a call to a renewed freedom at the heart of Christian proclamation. A freedom rooted in a revitalised experience of faith. Here Jeanrond sees the apparent withering away of formal support structures as something to be welcomed, a necessary breaching of the walls which have precluded real responsibility being collaboratively exercised.

That the formal dogmatic support structures of this faith are more and more losing their authority is not a disaster, rather this situation provides all Christians with the unique possibility of accepting their critical and constructive responsibilities for participating in God's creative project. The primary Christian concern cannot be the mere survival of an old tradition - the Church as a museum - but the actualisation of a challenging message in our generation according to our best abilities - the Church as a community of responsive and responsible fellow builders."³²

In order to assist the reality of co-responsibility, it is necessary to appreciate the prevailing modes of analysis within the church. It does appear that there are distinctive types of clarificatory processes or analysis which are peculiar to religious institutions. However, as Douglas perceptively highlights, these can be misconstrued, and what may look like weakness and inability may be in fact an active attempt to protect a particular status quo.

"Persistent short-sightedness, selectivity and tolerated contradictions are usually not so much signs of perceptual weakness as signs of strong intention to protect certain values and their accompanying institutional forms."³³

If the church's tradition is to be a dynamic rather than a static partner in the dialogue with human experience, it requires a renewed sense of its own transformative heritage. As O'Donoghue argues,³⁴ by its very nature tradition is dynamic, selective and creative. Indeed he asserts that the more dynamic a community is, the more faithful to the tradition it is.

31 Jeanrond W., Theological Hermeneutics, op. cit. p. 175.

32 Ibid. p. 173-4.

33 Douglas M., Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 3.

34 O'Donoghue N., Heaven in Ordinarie, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1979.

"Tradition is no mere passive receptacle of experience but a vital process that bears the stamp of the individual or communal character. .. Tradition is the past as enduring. Christianity of its very nature is always growing and renewing itself by the creative assimilation of the past. However, the process of growth and renewal is at any stage only true to itself if it emerges within the living process of tradition."³⁵

There is a simple and obvious principle that all genuine renewal must present a vital link with the tradition. However, in the past, tradition appeared to be associated with much that was both negative and proscriptive. The language and tone of "anathema sit" appeared integral to the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church prior to Vatican II. Indeed, it was this feature of church life which contributed to Weil's reluctance to commit herself to Christianity and in particular the Roman Catholic tradition. She had little patience with pronounced anathemas on all who did not conform to selective spiritual mechanisms. She stressed that the insurmountable object for her was not the existence of such terms but the way they had been employed. She preferred to identify herself with the outsider.

"I remain beside all those things which cannot enter the Church."³⁶

She loved the church as a guardian of truth, but as an institution she abhorred it.³⁷

With a new impetus given by the Council Fathers at Vatican II, the rigidity of such an approach has been ameliorated. However, like any growing organism, ordinary growth within the church is gradual and often almost imperceptible. Yet post-Vatican II has seen a period in which critical growth has occurred involving perceptible transformation of the Church. Indeed, for many it has appeared to involve a period of crisis in which the organism seems to be breaking up or destroying itself. Rather than seeing such a time as destructive, O'Donoghue maintains that this is the time for the true potential of the church to be realised.

"Yet it is in these times of critical growth that the organism is most truly identical with itself it is opening up its own proper dimensions. Those who would see its identity in static terms are in fact falsifying its nature and if they were allowed to have their way the organism would die."³⁸

35 Ibid. p. 123.

36 Weil S., *Waiting on God*, op. cit. p. 28.

37 "I do not recognise that the church has any right to limit the operation of intelligence or the illuminations of love in the domain of thought. I recognise that, as the steward of the sacraments and guardian of sacred texts, she has the task of formulating judgments on a few essential points, but only as a guide-line for the faithful. I do not recognise her right to set up as being the truth the commentaries with which she surrounds the mysteries of faith, and much less still the right to use intimidation when in imposing these commentaries, she exercises her power to deprive people of the sacraments." Raper D. (ed.), *Gateway to God*, London, Collins, 1978, p. 72.

38 O'Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie*, op. cit. p. 130.

For O'Donoghue, the church rather than dominating by prohibitive rigidity was called to influence by charity, by service, by self-sacrifice. His conviction is that the deepest bond which binds together the people of God is the bond of charity, and this bond, being of its nature universal, is alone capable of binding the world together. Yet this is not to diminish the place of the institution and to exalt the experience of the individual. As Von Hugel was concerned to emphasise, the institution, individual experience and tradition were all essential for the well-being of the Christian community.

"Never has religion been purely and entirely individual; always has it been, as truly and necessarily, social and institutional, traditional and historical. And this traditional element, not all the religious genius in the world can ever escape or replace: it was there, surrounding and moulding the very pre-natal existence of each one of us; it will be there, long after we have left the scene. We live and die its wise servants and stewards, or its blind slaves, or in futile, impoverishing revolt against it: we never, for good or for evil, really get beyond its reach."³⁹

In a not dissimilar manner, Sykes⁴⁰ emphasises the interaction of internal and external forms of Christianity and the dialectical tension between individual experience and general experience. Indeed he defines the identity of Christianity as a process of interaction between the inward element and the external form of Christianity.⁴¹ What appears necessary is a renewed ecclesial authenticity, only possible within the creative tension of human experience interacting with authority and tradition.⁴²

For O'Donoghue there is an additional element in the correlation of tradition and experience: this is the dimension of mysticism. Here he asserts there is always an inherent tension with formal theology. The mystical tends to find the limits and structures of systematic theology confining and usually moves more easily in the open spaces of fundamental ontology. It may be, as O'Donoghue so poignantly asserts, a question of looking afresh and with steady gaze towards the distant horizon which unfolds into infinity, while at the same time allowing the inward eye to grope falteringly down into the interior depths.

39 Steere D. (ed.), Spiritual Counsels and Letters of Baron Friedrich Von Hugel, London, DLT, 1964, p. 133.

40 Sykes S., The Identity of Christianity, London, SPCK, 1984.

41 Ibid. p. 261.

42 This interaction may at times result in a withdrawal from the institutional church for a period of time, as was the case for one of the lay women at the Hope Community. "I tend not to go to church these days .. a deliberate choice .. I find I just leave feeling very uptight. I rebel against the idea of a duty. The Community celebrations have spoken to me much more. .. The church is still so middle class it makes me angry." Fieldworker C. op. cit.

"a lowering of the eyes into those depths downwards that become as we look heights upward and a refusal to allow one's vision to be obscured by the clouds and mists that lie over the human landscape. .. A refusal to accept the finite or negative as final."⁴³

Attentive Waiting and Listening

A vital ingredient in the stance of both the institution and those engaged on the margins in this converse is the ability to wait. A reverent waiting upon the people and the reality of God at work within their lives.

"It takes a long time for relationships to build up. Slowly, slowly, slowly, trust is built up."⁴⁴

Such waiting, as Weil powerfully asserted, is a presence within the experience that is open, in silence, to the divine initiative. She regarded waiting - a spiritual variant of what she termed "attention" - as the very foundation of the life of the soul.

"Waiting is a higher form of attention; it is then an ability to "read" what is supernatural in things."⁴⁵

This superior form of reading she asserted to be essentially a mystical experience. She believed that prolonged waiting in an outward and inward void would necessarily be followed by mystical experience. For her, waiting involved a tension, it was not a state of passivity but of readiness, an asceticism leading ultimately into the supernatural reality that underlies the emptiness of natural desire. She was certain that if waiting were sincere and thorough it could not be frustrated, and taken to its highest degree it was the same as prayer, presupposing faith and love. There was also for her a link with humility, which she saw as both the root of love and also as attentive patience. Waiting silently and patiently was for her the attitude of greatest humility, and in this stance the individual is conformed to the divine image.

"God waits patiently until at last I am willing to consent to love him. Time is God's waiting as a beggar for our love.⁴⁶ By waiting humbly we are made similar to God. Humility is a certain relation of the soul to time. It is an acceptance of waiting. Humility partakes in God's patience. The perfected soul waits for the good in silence and humility like God's own."⁴⁷

43 O'Donoghue N., Heaven in Ordinarie, op. cit. p. 191.

44 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

45 Cabaud J., Simone Weil: A fellowship in Love, London, Harvill Press, 1944, p. 286.

46 This sense of the divine vulnerability into which the individual is drawn is a theme taken up again in the following chapter.

47 Weil S., First and Last Notebooks, trans Rees R., London, OUP, 1970, p. 141.

This waiting encounters the limits of human horizons and awaits there the divine initiative. For Weil there was no possibility of apprehending the transcendent mystery at work within the world without awaiting the leading of the spirit of God into that mystery.

"There is no entry into the transcendent until the human faculties - intelligence, will, human love - have come up against a limit, and the human being waits at this threshold, which he can make no move to cross, without turning away and without knowing what he wants, in fixed, unwavering attention."⁴⁸

Yet it is important to stress her insistence that "earthly things are the criteria of spiritual things", and here, as Winch⁴⁹ asserts, it is very clear that she is not attempting to construct a metaphysics of the spiritual but rather a certain way of regarding the earthly. Thus analogously, the waiting stance of the church through those engaged on the margins is to perceive the divine initiative at work there. Here, through individuals or groups such as the Hope Community, it is possible for the church to engage with those on the urban margins and await the manifestation of the presence of God at work there. In being open to receive the fruit of this experience of interaction, there is the possibility of incorporating this within the life of the church.

To remain within this stance of motionless waiting does not mean, as Weil was concerned to reiterate, an abstaining from action. It was rather an attentive spiritual immobility that did not preclude from material action but gave added impetus to such action. For her the hardest effort was to maintain such a steady gaze directed towards God, bringing it back when it has wandered and fixing it sometimes with all the intensity of which any individual might be capable. This required, for her, a constant conversion.

"We must constantly renew within ourselves the vow of adherence to that part of us which calls for God, even when it is still only infinitely small."⁵⁰

For Weil, such a stance was a form of obedience to God and was one to be adopted whatever the vicissitudes of life.

"In our acts of obedience to God we are passive: whatever difficulties we have to surmount, however great our activity may appear to be,

48 Ibid. p. 335.

49 Winch P, *Simone Weil "The Just Balance"*, Cambridge, CUP, 1989, p. 199ff.

50 Raper D. (ed.), *Gateway to God*, op. cit. p. 83.

there is nothing analogous to muscular effort; there is only waiting, attention, silence, immobility, constant through suffering and joy."⁵¹

For Weil, attention animated by desire was the whole foundation of religious practice. Indeed O'Donoghue stresses that the importance of Simone Weil focuses on her message of waiting and her whole spirituality centres around the Abba prayer as the way into the fullness of waiting. Here she speaks of attention rather than listening - loving attention.

There is a call for an ever deeper and ever more finely tuned listening. A new depth of listening, an inward listening from the foundation of the human heart. Here a childlike open-eyed wonder and the ability to wait are fundamental dispositions and are essential in an individual's openness to God and to other human beings.

"Man open to God, that is one description of the Christian. But man open to God is man open to man. And this means listening as it means seeing."⁵²

This listening is not a merely passive or receptive stance, but it is rooted in the activity of being, and in this mode it shares in the divine initiative.

"In the appropriation of my listening self, I am not passive or merely receptive. I am active not according to the lesser and derivative activity of doing but in the primary activity of being. Listening is a primary aspect of being, so that we can describe infinite being as infinite listening. God is perfect listening, the perfect listener. Our listening is a participation in his listening."⁵³

If this is a call to a new depth of listening, it is a call to ever deeper, ever finer listening - involved human listening - listening from the heart. At this level is encountered the contemplative dimension where all reflection has its proper place. It is to be in touch with the infinity of inner space within which individuals are drawn on, not into passivity, but into a more attuned and deeper listening. This too is the level of divine reciprocity, where we both hear and are heard as we listen and are listened to.

"We are in our listening as being towards him, as being towards Being; he is in his listening as Being towards us. For all true listening is loving."⁵⁴

51 Weil S., *Waiting on God*, op. cit. p. 126.

52 O'Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie*, op. cit. p. 111.

53 Ibid. p. 114.

54 Ibid. p. 117.

This inner sanctum is the place where freedom may be found and so emphasises the importance of listening to the resonances within which the voices of conscience mingle with the subtle whisperings of self-deceit.

"And so my freedom expresses itself, reveals itself as an ever deeper listening, an ever deepening being as listener, a discovery of my being in its aspect of listening being. The achievement of freedom here as elsewhere is the achievement of being oneself. In listening to my own being in its self-disclosing fullness, I become more fully listening being, more fully open to my own centre, to that Being in which I am centred and grounded."⁵⁵

The vital necessity of listening to one's own inner reality is interrelated with the ability to give effective utterance. It is only those who are able to listen at the different levels of self, others and God who are able to speak of any of these realities.

"it would seem that only those who know how to listen know how to speak. For in order truly to speak, from out of my own truth, I must be able to listen to myself. If I do not listen to others I won't listen to myself and vice versa. As the inner depths reveal themselves we are forced into the ways of the mystics or we turn away."⁵⁶

Powerlessness and Prayer

It is at this juncture that we become aware of that radical weakness which is the foundation of strength and we find ourselves upon the ground of the passion, where the anguish of Gethsemane leads inevitably to the agony of the cross. To some extent this is the experience of all those who risk the reality of that interior journey. Yet it is a progress always to the ultimate reality of resurrection.

"In the inner "garden of the agony" we can only wait and listen where listening is prayer and prayer is listening. In this darkness, in great anguish, freedom and love are being, as it were, reborn in us. I am utterly alone in this final darkness, completely free, for there is nothing to plan or do to distract me from my freedom. And in the deepest darkness, God has vanished. As I listen to the beating of my heart, in that immeasurable poignancy of the end of my little being, the only voice that reaches me is that of love, love that is fully gratuitous, entirely free, that goes forth naked into the eternal void, into the primal chaos. This is indeed a narrow gate beyond which (but not yet seen) lies the Kingdom of Heaven. In entering this Kingdom we share in creating it, we share in creating ourselves. In losing life we find it. We have listened to his voice in the very depths of our inner self, where he is entirely himself, not as power but as utter giving, as love."⁵⁷

55 Ibid. p. 118.

56 Ibid. p. 120.

57 Ibid. p. 119.

Von Balthasar has powerfully explicated the importance of this radical weakness of God in the person of Christ and the lesson apparent throughout his ministry.⁵⁸ He states that the boundless love of God, as Jesus discloses this and portrays it, is poor. It is not only meek and humble but powerless. The father in the parable "must" let the younger son go. It is only to the sinful woman whose life is shattered that "much" can be forgiven. Prayer appears to be in the air, and as it were the protective covering, in which the "poor son" can live in its "defencelessness". He also asserts, that as with the apostle Paul so with ourselves, the apostle's weakness is not a human weakness, but the weakness of Christ: the paradox of the relationship between human failure and God's power is ultimately not an anthropological paradox, but a christological paradox.⁵⁹ In a not dissimilar manner, O'Donoghue asserts that the true listener sifts things as Mary did, and perceives something of the breath of the spirit of God. Such a contemplative attitude may be more akin to wrestling with God than with any intellectual envisioning of the world.

This tussling in darkness with powerlessness and helplessness is a feature of life on the margins with which those who choose to work there are inevitably confronted. One religious sister, in a comparable situation, who has lived 15 years on a Scottish council estate expressed her own experience in the following terms,

"Fundamental to any spirituality is powerlessness and helplessness. It was only when I came to live here and when I'd been here sometime, that for the first time in my life I realised what Christianity was about, and I didn't like it. I find it very hard to face powerlessness and helplessness. All my life I've some kind of control, some kind of support, some kind of security, and I still have it. I'm a sister and there's an order behind me. ... I live and work with people who are helpless at least in the system, not in person. What really is spirituality for me is how these people go on, going on, helping one another, are so caring, so cheerful, how they celebrate - not in church. But every little excuse we celebrate, and they have so little to celebrate with, but they do."⁶⁰

Many who have no choice but to live on the margins become trapped in a cycle of fear and alienation. Within the dependencies which are common to all people, it has become clear that they may become doubly dependent because so many choices are removed from them, and the power of choice is such a basic human freedom. The power to choose divides us, and communion in a truly shared spirituality will

58 Von Balthasar H., *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics VII*, trans. Davies O., Louth A., McNeil B., Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1989, p. 351ff.

59 *Ibid.* p. 492.

60 Fieldworker in a comparable situation of living on a peripheral housing estate. Interview, Glasgow, 1990.

necessitate a struggle mutually to share power over destiny. Certainly, it appears tied to contemporary work on the theology of weakness, brokenness, vulnerability and failure - the cross. The gospel story witnesses to the power of God situated squarely within the reality of powerlessness. The paradox of cross and resurrection, death and life defies manipulation, and challenges evasion. Here we encounter the meaning of Christian hope and simultaneously the stark reality of human suffering. As one fieldworker working with prostitutes stated,

"Learning not to run from pain is a process for me. I'm aware, as I listen to others speaking, of their life's pain, of the sense of helplessness. This is what I notice most, when I'm helpless, I am vulnerable; somehow then the pain can be absorbed, integrated, productive, if I give it time, gentleness, and patience."⁶¹

The gospel calls us to a new translation of the reality and experience of power. This may include a trusting vulnerability, which of its nature transforms everyday situations, releasing the possibility of change and growth. It may be a presence which exists and suffers with the people. The character of love in presence is fundamentally an offer of self to the other person, in ways that often resist the cold conceptualizations of language. Indeed, God's incarnate love knows no boundaries and the body of Christ is alive in the most unexpected places where humble service meets human need. And perhaps this is poetically described by one man who has lived all his life on the margins who stated,

"There's a power in weakness as though God's made some gentle folk weak but as though he's given them a little magic dust for emergencies. It's a beautiful thing. They've got a hidden supply. Even though they appear to be weak and don't trouble anyone, should an emergency come, they've got the strength. That's what God wants us all to be, I think, weak in that sense - that the niceness comes out. The strength is really in the weakness."⁶²

This awareness of powerlessness and helplessness on the part of those who have chosen to work on the margins has prompted a deepened awareness of the need for prayer. Accordingly, the very structure of the Community's week has been determined by such specified times for prayer. Thus they meet together every weekday at 7.30 am for some form of morning prayer, involving either the use of the Divine office or an alternative form, devised by whoever is responsible for prayer that week. Tuesday is generally given to a time of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament; here amidst the silence those in particular need are remembered. On a Monday evening, there is a regular Community Eucharist which a local priest comes

⁶¹ Fieldworker secondary source. Interview, February, 1991.

⁶² Resident P. Interview, November, 1991.

to celebrate. This basic prayer structure is seen by core members as very much a support or a framework for their weekly activities. This view is shared by both the sisters and the lay women who live and work with them. As one sister indicated, the prayer is an integral part of the team work which she finds so supportive.

"I appreciate team work when it's working well; you will have pitfalls, being human, but when it's working well it's a great asset. What I value most as part of that is the prayer life; this is very good and the peak of the team work. I find the prayer meetings together very sustaining and life-giving. That may sound like a platitude, but it gives a dimension and an anchoring to the group without which we wouldn't be the same at all."⁶³

One of the older lay women who lived for two years with the Community, expressed her own understanding of what such structured community prayer means to her in the following terms,

"The regular prayer on a daily basis is very important to me, although at times it's a drag every morning. I know that I need that space. Personally, prayer is a struggle; whether that's life or me as a person and my own personal journey, I know it's integrated. I find it can get squeezed out quite easily, my own personal time that is, because of the busyness and there's a danger in that and I've fallen into that trap many times. But I know that I need the Community prayer. I think of all the days probably the most important time for me is the Tuesday morning exposition time. When I first came I was totally silenced by what I saw. I didn't know what to think or feel. I was numb, so the coming before God in that silence is just a relief, in a sense that someone has it all in his hands, one who knows and understands and perhaps has the answers and that we can come before God and hand all the gunge over to him. There's very rarely any answers to give to anybody I find. We all do carry a lot of people's questions, hurt, anger, pain, whatever, so Tuesday morning this naming of people before God, knowing he knows them intimately. I can bring people who are on my mind and my heart to God. I struggle to know how to use the silence, sometimes I've needed the time to yell out at God, to cry before God, to say exactly what I think, because this place makes me angry. I'm at the beginnings of struggling to find how God is and where in all this, especially in the pain and a lot of the questions. I've thousands of unanswered questions. Group prayer is important and somehow centres our day."⁶⁴

It was very evident during any more contemplative prayer times with the Community, that individuals generally commented upon the benefits they found from the reflective silence, and the fewer words, and this appeared to be so, whoever was leading that particular form of prayer.

63 Fieldworker D. op. cit.

64 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

"I really find the quieter prayer times with the Community very helpful. It feels right and sensible too. Surrounded by such a lot of noise, it's good just to be able to "be there."⁶⁵

A deepening contemplative stance is crucial, for those who work amongst the marginalised. This is particularly acute if there is to be a real attunement to what is emerging from the poor. In order to be able to listen at such depth, it appears important to be prepared to risk the ongoing darkness of one's own inner depths. Here, in the acknowledged reality of one's own incoherence before the mystery of God at work, there is the foundation for a deeper involvement with God and with other human beings. From that position of essential vulnerability and powerlessness in our own contemplative depths, the clarity of resonance with others is peculiarly powerful. The powerlessness of that level extends to our inability to articulate any understanding of our position. Such incoherence and powerlessness is the common lot of many who live on the margins.⁶⁶

In the life of faith there comes a time when prayer life shifts from a more active sensible form to one where the emphasis is more on receptivity. When this shift occurs within those working on the margins, it is a shift which may give deeper insight and receptivity both to God and to the people with whom they work. The great temptation may be to run from this into more frenetic activity, for what the individual is being called into is something beyond the realm of sensible comprehension, something which is not controlled and where the sense of God may be less and less apparent in prayer.

Mansfield gives added emphasis to the development of prayer in this way.⁶⁷ While acknowledging the uniquely personal way God works with any individual, he outlines the movement of prayer from a more active meditative/discursive phase to a more receptive and contemplative way. He elaborates by stating that at the more ordinary level of experience, contemplation seems like nothing at all in comparison to the earlier, satisfying time. But with regard to the working of God, it is, if one remains perseveringly and with longing, allowing God to come more immediately - God who is mystery, who could never be encompassed by our knowing or reached by our

65 Fieldworker E. interview, November, 1991.

66 Perhaps the analogy of fasting may be useful here - undertaken prayerfully, this practice may not only give greater freedom in prayer, but may also lead to a greater attunement and clarity when involved in spiritual direction or indeed undertaking theological reflection. It is something to do with being less cluttered, and consequently more open to receive.

67 Mansfield D., "The Exercises and contemplative prayer", in Sheldrake P. (ed.), The Way of Ignatius: Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises, London, SPCK, 1991, pp. 191-202.

effort to live, but who will now deeply communicate God's own understanding and love in the more intimate divine self-giving. In the active, more outward orientation of one's life, it is where all that is done will be more directly under the influence of grace, being ordered more purely and consistently to God.

The time of prayer is a matter of just being there in weakness, but coming to it with belief and hope in the faithfulness of God, the divine purposes and mysterious approach in love. This is but the beginning of an endless road, the whole landscape of the mystery of God, hardly glimpsed before, and over which we are to travel with even purer faith, being led onward to a greater communion in the divine life. There will be deeper suffering, due to increasingly painful self-awareness, to the wound of the longing for God, and to the extreme aridity arising from the sense of God's seeming remoteness as even our depths are purified. Yet God, unceasingly faithful, enables us as God alone can do, to abide more and more in divine life. Everything is given by God, but in a way which is dark and difficult, because so utterly beyond what can be comprehended, until our knowing and loving is taken up more fully into that of God. All of the concrete circumstances of life are involved in this transformation, so dark to us, but being accomplished divinely, as we are brought to let go of our own direction in life and can therefore be led securely. This is not a recipe for inactivity! This contemplative dimension, it is suggested, is to facilitate the greater attunement a more authentic hearing of what is emerging from marginalised individuals and groups in terms of their experience of God. It is from this level of contemplative insight that a finer discernment may be made with regard to the various action and activities to be undertaken.

For one of the sisters the evidence of God at work amongst the people was very palpable, and her concern was how this might effect both the response of the Community and the response of the people themselves. Her concern was how to make the transition from a non-reflective response to an ongoingly reflective attitude, which might then motivate action.

"There are all sorts of flashes, signs from the people of God. E. is sometimes so generous. Y can be very loving. Why? They have no cause to be so. There is also a very genuine care for one another amongst many of the people. They help one another out. We need to make the transition, or for them to make the transition, from what is at present non-reflective response to something that is more personally reflective."⁶⁸

68 Fieldworker D. op. cit.

This grappling with the presence of God mysteriously at work in the world, and a growing sense of powerlessness and helplessness before both that mystery and the mystery of individual inadequacy is always related, as Rahner powerfully asserts, to the living God,

"who has revealed himself in the history of humanity, who has established himself in his most ultimate reality - even as basic ground, as innermost dynamism and final end - at the very heart of the world and the humanity created by him."⁶⁹

It is before this God and in the face of the reality of the cross that the darkness of much that appears a chaotic void on the margins begins to have some inchoate and imperceptibly conscious form. This primary scandal appears to speak across the centuries to all situations of gross inhumanity.

"His incomprehensible cross is set up above our life and this scandal reveals the true, liberating and beatifying significance of our life."⁷⁰

The passion of humanity is taken up into God's passion, and where there is passion, there is love and suffering; and where there is love and suffering, there a Trinitarian pattern is evident. For Moltmann, to know God is to suffer God.

"To suffer God means experiencing in oneself the death pangs of the old ... and the birth pangs of the new .. The closer people come to the divine reality, the more deeply they are drawn into this dying and rebirth .. Christian meditation and contemplation are therefore at their heart meditation on the passion."⁷¹

In such contemplation, it becomes evident that there is a deep desire within God to be united with humanity. A growing conviction of this reality is what enables a deeper entry into the pain of the world and the sorrow of God. In such a process there is the experience of what Moltmann terms an "open wound". Here it is the divine pathos which engenders compassion, and the vision of a radical weakness which is the ground of strength.

It is here that the analogical imagination, once religiously engaged, can provide space within which some resonance of divinity and humanity finds deep echoes within the individual.

"We may finally hear each other once again, where we may yet become willing to face the actuality of the not-yet concealed in our

69 Rahner K., "The spirituality of the church of the future", in Theological Investigations 20, trans by E. Quinn, London, DLT, 1981, pp. 143-153.

70 Ibid.

71 Moltmann J., cited in Jones A., Soulmaking: The Desert Way of Spirituality, London, SCM, 1985, p. 203.

present inhumanity in all its darkness - a deepening encroaching darkness that, even now, even here, discloses the encompassing light always-already with us."⁷²

According to Julian of Norwich, the Lord is "the ground of your beseeching". If our beseeching had its place and its influence at the very source itself, then all influences do in fact flow peacefully together. By prayer individuals are involving themselves in the providence that guides the lives of all. Here it is important that to rediscover a religious hermeneutics of suspicion within religion itself. Such a discovery was one which O'Donoghue asserts Teresa of Avila was cognisant of when she attempted to reformulate the stages for the mystical journey and warned about ecstasies and visions. In a similar manner John of the Cross insisted that a dark night of the soul awaits any attempt to follow the mystical way. Such paths are only advocated for the mature and oft humbled spirit. At this juncture it is the drawing recognition of the wild glory of God's love for which the heart was made which determines the path, and along this way it becomes increasingly apparent that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, as Hopkins so eloquently asserted.

A Possible Way forward

According to Rahner, the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all. This implies a genuine experience of God, emerging from the very heart of our existence.

"The ultimate conviction and decision of faith comes in the last resort from the experience of God, of his Spirit, of his freedom, bursting out of the very heart of human existence and able to be really experienced there, even though this experience cannot be wholly a matter for reflection or be verbally objectified."⁷³

Within this context of faith, Rahner stresses the importance both of the individual and communal experience of God. The former is necessitated in order to confirm the courage necessary for those decisions which are contrary to public opinion. Such a solitary courage however can exist only if it lives out of a wholly personal experience of God and his Spirit. However, the communitarian dimension is also necessary and the possibility of a communal spiritual discernment. This communal element includes an integral commitment to the church. Such an attachment avoids the possibility of elitist arrogance based upon arbitrary opinions or the uncertainties of unbelief.

⁷² Tracy D., The Analogical Imagination, op. cit. p. 455.

⁷³ Rahner K., "The spirituality of the church of the future", in Theological Investigations 20, op. cit.

In order to guarantee this open form of spirituality in the church of the future, it is suggested that a unified formation experience for ministry is necessary in order for the church to find a deeper way to enter into the yearning of the human spirit in the world. The way in which we structure the educational or formation system of any institution will determine the way in which that institution will pursue its mission in life. Thus there is the need for a whole programme of formation development for total ministry in the midst of the poor.⁷⁴ Indeed, Rahner proposes that the criteria for choosing those who should be called into ministry and given responsibility in the future will be very different - possibly shocking - to more conventional minds.

"If in the immediate future we want to choose a capable parish priest or bishop from a number of men, we ought not to ask so much whether the candidate has adapted himself very smoothly to the traditional machinery of the Church or whether he has done well what people expected of him in the light of the traditional behaviour-patterns of office-holders in the Church; we ought to ask rather if he has ever succeeded in getting a hearing from the "neopagans" and made at least one or two of these into Christians, but not merely by bringing them back to old familiar ways - which is often the result of merely psychological influences. The best missionary in a non-Catholic diaspora situation would be the best candidate for an office in the Church, even though he has hitherto acted perhaps very unconventionally and - for some merely traditional Christians - "scandalously".⁷⁵

Rahner builds upon this novel insight by insisting that the preacher of the future will need the sensitivity to proceed with gentle caution feeling the way step by step. This stands in stark contrast to what he portrays as an attitude which is too easily prompted into hasty and ill-advised words, without the grace to recognise the difficulty there is in attesting to real faith and not merely its historical and social objectivities and relics.

In order to promote the necessary sensitivity and attunement to the reality of God at work in the world and in the mystery of human lives, both Rahner and Tracy advocate a return to the study of the spiritual classics. Here, in the very foundation of the masters of the spiritual life, there is the call to reverence the working of God and the directing force of the Holy Spirit in human lives. Thus engagement with the spiritual classic texts is a vital dynamic, prompting further engagement both with an individual's own experience and growth in openness but also in propelling that deeper involvement with those who are marginalised. The minimal priority given to

⁷⁴ Austin Smith maintains that the voice on the pavement decides for you what and where the Kingdom is and what it should be about.

⁷⁵ Rahner K., The Shape of the Church to Come, trans. Quinn E., London, SPCK, 1974, p. 33.

consideration of the spiritual classics within formation programmes is bewailed by Rahner.

"Where in the priests' seminaries are the ancient classics of the spiritual life read with the conviction that even today they still have something to tell us? Where is there an understanding of the logic of existential decision in which, over and above all purely "objective" reasoning, a person asks about the will of God as it holds precisely for him and is every time unique?"⁷⁶

This is the means which Rahner advocates in order to ensure that the church remains as it must remain: the church of mystery and of "the evangelical joy of redeemed freedom". Only when human beings know that they are worth infinitely more than is immediately evident - namely, as loved inheritors of the infinite God of unlimited freedom and bliss - can they really grow and flourish. Otherwise they slowly stifle in their own finiteness and all lofty talk about human dignity and duty comes to sound increasingly hollow. Accordingly, the church is concerned always and at all times with God and with the reality of his presence amongst real human beings.

Within this context, Rahner asserts the importance of trust within the church - trust as given to concrete human beings: such trust being in terms of those with whom we cooperate in the service of the church's mission. In the particular instance of the context of the research, trust in those who in the name of the church choose to live and work on the margins. Trust however also has to be placed in the office-holders of the church. Here trust has something to do with granting another a prior claim on our own life and action, a placing of ourselves at another's disposal without an ultimate reinsurance. Yet this must be a reciprocal process, particularly when looking towards any possibility of reconciliation between the church and the urban margins. A principle of trust is that we venture out to "the other", forsake ourselves and our own security, and advance towards the other. On behalf of the church, those who work on the margins have made such a commitment, and here trusting involves an advance without security. It is essentially the risk of being disappointed, exploited, and of having their own uprightness turned into a weapon against themselves. If the church is truly to "entrust" in its name those who work upon the margins, then a

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 85. An additional concern for Rahner is the lack of spiritual direction available in these formation centres for priests. "Where are there still the "spiritual fathers" the Christian gurus who possess the charisma of initiating into meditation and even into a mysticism in which man's ultimate reality - his union with God - is accepted in a holy courage? Where are the people who have the courage to be disciples of such people? Is it then really obvious that this master-disciple relationship exists only in a secularised form, in depth-psychology?" *ibid.*

truly human effort involving the institutional hierarchy and the fieldworkers concerned will also require the ongoing provision of grace.

"Trust is possible to the Church but this is a miracle of God's grace, the folly of the cross, the imitation of the crucified, the faith that unarmed, foolish-seeming love will be victorious."⁷⁷

Tracy⁷⁸ indicates that a new solidarity of human beings is necessary as a foundation for the transformation of the world and as the context in which historical experiences are interpreted and eschatological possibilities conceived. Tracy's model of a conversation, both with contemporary human beings and with the classic expressions of past centuries, represents a constructive attempt to provide a basis for human solidarity in thought and action in our somewhat chaotic culture. I have suggested an extension of this model both to conversation with those on the urban margins and by a re-engagement with the classic spiritual tradition.

For Tracy, the unclear cultural situation entails possible opportunities for social reform and for individual transformation. Here, his concept of truth has certain social implications. He is opposed to any exclusive organization since such exclusion of a person, a group of persons, an entire people, members of another sex, or even an entire race, will destroy the possibility of the manifestation of truth. He also asserts that any communicative situation that is not based on a mutually critical respect of all participants makes genuine conversation impossible.

If truth in its primordial sense is manifestation, then it is imperative to listen more profoundly in order to perceive all aspects of that mystery in our universe. Tracy insists that any responsible "analogical imagination" must respect the otherness of the fellow interpreter, of God, and occasionally even of the interpreting self. Only that respect can release the energy for genuine conversation and also for such possible manifestations of the truth of all reality. For Tracy "truth as manifestation" is a lifting of the veil covering our perceptions of reality, which may happen in genuine conversation. Yet the demands of such authentic conversation are costly both in terms of participation and the effort of solidarity so involved. Although the Roman Catholic Church is the context out of which Tracy develops his thought, it is a context which still appears to refuse to recognise the communicative equality of all.

77 Rahner K., *Opportunities for Faith: Elements of a Modern Spirituality*, trans. Quinn E., London, SPCK, 1974, pp. 199-203.

78 Both Habermas, arguing from a social-scientific horizon, and Tracy, arguing from a theological horizon, agree here as Jeanrond makes clear in his "Review of Tracy D. *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, and Hope*", in *Religious Studies Review* Vol. 15, No. 3, July, 1989, pp. 218-221.

Rahner also indicates concern that the perspective of the Christian and the church is one that recognises such equality of communication grounded as it is in the mystery of God's prevenient grace operative above and beyond the boundaries of the church. Throughout his work the threads of this understanding are operative, and in his later years the theme is renewed with added vigour.

"The Christian message of God, who offers himself as himself ... as our eternal life, is offered and brought to us as a message beyond earthly hopes and fears, beyond optimism and pessimism, but only on the absolutely indispensable condition that from first to last we do not make this God the instrument of our concern for the future and the amalgam of our neurotic fear of life, but succeed by God's grace in leaving God's transcendence (if we may put it this way) unexhausted."⁷⁹

For him the manifestation of this truth in the lives of men and women reconfirmed the mysterious reality of God's presence within the world, a presence which is both inexhaustible and uncontrollable. Yet which may be perceived through a willingness to enter into conversation, to listen, to await the gift of recognition. Here the cultivation of the contemplative dimension, the willingness to be drawn beyond the frontiers of our intuitive insight, is the precondition for such recognition and the root of all energy for engagement in action. Here in the contemplative dimension reflection is consubstantial with action.

"Look at the eyes of the man or woman who has pondered the word of God in his heart night and day, see the depth, the peace, the contemplative quietness and gentleness, deeper radiance."⁸⁰

It is from the wellspring of the contemplative dimension that compassion is born, and this provides the existential dynamism for action. For God mysteriously calls all human beings to himself, the very ground of existence yet intimate and personal, but he does so in order to send them back with renewed energy into the action necessary for the building of the kingdom.

"The man of prayer enters ever more deeply into the human condition and he knows that the "living water" which he receives is not for himself alone but for the whole world."⁸¹

Such willingness to enter into an individual's own interior depths was the path Weil advocated. Her preoccupation with the Lord's prayer evinces her sense that this

79 Rahner K., "The inexhaustible transcendence of God and our concern for the future", in Theological Investigations 20, op. cit. pp. 173-186.

80 O'Donoghue N., Heaven in Ordinary, op. cit. p. 113.

81 Ibid. p. 95.

prayer enables our deeper listening, for we can listen fully only in the atmosphere of full forgiveness - purifying darkness.

This dimension of forgiveness is vital to the life of the church both in the acceptance and the giving thereof. It is here that the church crucially witnesses to the God whose very nature it is to forgive. Thus the absence of this sphere or its restrictive employment evinces a pharisaical community as opposed to the church of the kingdom. As O'Donoghue emphasises the readiness to forgive and to be forgiven are signs of real maturity.⁸²

"A paradox is that it is only in so far as we learn to be forgiven that we can thus radically forgive, and conversely it is only when we learn radical forgiving that we can open ourselves to the light of radical forgiveness that bears not on this or that offence or ugliness of behaviour but rather on our innermost secret self, as needing acceptance in its very being."⁸³

Forgiveness is founded upon truth and sincerity and has a personal and communitarian dimension. In its celebration it can usher in creativity, since it is a reflection in human terms of a central divine attribute. The way into forgiveness is the way of prayer, and here reconciliation is only real in an atmosphere of truth. Yet it is reconciliation that lies at the heart of forgiveness and for this to be effected it requires that willingness to own vulnerability and to be open to either rejection or acceptance. It is also to gain an increasing clarity of sight with regard to the reality of God at work in those around us, and to own both the dark energy in opposition to, and the deep desire for, God within us. It is to become aware of our own deepest selves and the potential for true freedom and for enslavement within us. Here we encounter the forgiveness of Christ.

"The forgiveness of Christ is the bringing forth of that deeper self where our true freedom dwells. To accept this forgiveness is to cast away all masks and pretences, and to walk free and entirely vulnerable both to the light of Christ and the menacing darkness of the world. To accept forgiveness is to accept my deepest truth and my deepest freedom. But this truth is that of myself I am absolutely nothing; my deepest freedom is the freedom to be loved, to be, as it were, at the mercy of those who love me."⁸⁴

God's reconciliation becomes available to us, as we place ourselves within the tension of these apparent opposites. However, there is a tendency within the church to want

82 O'Donoghue N., The Holy Mountain: Approaches to the Mystery of Prayer, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1983, p. 80ff.

83 Ibid. p. 89.

84 Ibid. p. 88-89.

to resolve all dilemmas neatly, to remove tensions, to draw back from situations which are ambiguous. Such a path of privatised and controlled existence constrains and restrains the interior life, and removes the individual from involvement with others while creating exclusivity amongst any group or institution. By contrast, it does appear that a basic movement of the spirit of God is one from contradiction to paradox, from looking at life in terms of irreconcilable opposites to seeking a deeper reconciliation through all, and this, as Moule asserts, is an infinite process.

"There can never be an end absolutely to this reconciliation, for it is the living God at work, and it is part and parcel of the fellowship which issues from his work and in which it is perpetuated."⁸⁵

Reconciliation is not a once and for all event, but a way of psychological and spiritual formation that takes a lifetime. As with an individual, so with the church. It will always be the church in need of reconciliation, a church of sinners called to offer reconciliation to others. This task is entrusted to her as Rahner makes clear only by the grace of God, which enables the church always in need of reconciliation to be also a church which is indefectibly holy.

"Even the most "objective" and most "institutional" element in the Church is only accomplished, and rightly accomplished from every point of view, under the grace of God. And if the Church is holy not only institutionally but also "subjectively" and her holiness is a reality already present here and now, and not a mere juridical claim or an eschatological hope for future credit, then God gives this holiness to the Church in so far as he grants to her and her members the possibility and the reality of constantly fleeing from their sinful state to the mercy of God which alone makes holy."⁸⁶

A feature of such reconciliation is also the ability of the Church to move beyond its boundaries to welcome those without. In our contemporary world it does appear that the delicate balance between mystery and meaning, reverence and action, has been perilously upset. It is difficult to hold firm to the view that reverence of God implies that same reverence being extended to the whole of humanity. Heschel⁸⁷ emphasises the Jewish view that wherever one sees a trace of man there also is the presence of God. Yet our vision proscribes that possibility being extended beyond the range of those we consider "acceptable". We do not expect to encounter unwashed saints for example! Such limited vision makes it profoundly difficult to be more than merely "charitable" to marginalised individuals we encounter. The consequence of such

85 Moule C., *The Sacrifice of Christ*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1957, p. 32 cited in Leech K., *True God: An Exploration in Spiritual Theology*, London, Sheldon Press, 1985, p. 106.

86 Rahner K., "The sinful church in the decrees of Vatican II", in *Theological Investigations 6*, trans Karl-H. and Kruger B., London, DLT, 1969, pp. 270-292.

87 Heschel A., *The Insecurity of Freedom*, New York, Schocken Books, 1972.

behaviour is that those on the margins are only really known, by those prepared to spend time and energy living with and listening to them - most of us prefer more comfortable berths elsewhere. Yet when it comes to that communication with God which we call prayer, and which Heschel refers to as a "condensation of the soul"⁸⁸, it would seem that it is the weakest within our society, those who may be less in control of their personal lives - the elderly, those with less education, women and those with less income - who are more likely to enter into deep prayer.⁸⁹ It would seem that our capacity to recognise the reality of the transcendent wholly Other who is God is in proportion to our ability to recognise the image of God in the person who is not like ourselves - indeed who is the human wholly Other.

In our complex cultural matrix, redolent with polysyllabic platitudes and vacuous hyperbole, it seems that only childlike simplicity can shake our complacent arrogance. The child as the essential symbol of one who is powerless, dependent, needy, little and poor. Few acts of Jesus are more radical, or countercultural, than his blessing of children. An individual of this simplicity is open both to forgive and receive forgiveness, elements essential for any real spiritual growth. This openness may also stand as a sign of prophetic witness, and, as Heschel reminds us, prophecy is the voice that God has lent to all silent agony "a voice to the plundered poor, and to the profaned riches of the world."⁹⁰ As for the person who sounds such a note of prophecy,

"A prophet is a person who holds God and men in one thought at one time, at all times. Our tragedy begins with the segregation of God, with the bifurcation of the sacred and secular. We worry more about the purity of dogma than about the integrity of love. We think of God in the past tense and refuse to realise that God is always present and never, never past; that God may be more intimately present in slums than in mansions, with those who are smarting under the abuse of the callous."⁹¹

The faithful prophet is a lonely calling, focused around a theology of the cross, and looking to a Kingdom which involves the ability to see God within those people and experiences which society regards as ordinary and of no account. It is a dynamic, prophetic spirituality which will sustain life on the margins. The foundation for any operational practice must necessarily include such a spirituality which provides the ontological grounding for ongoing discernment.

88 Ibid. p. 254.

89 Poloma M. and Gallup G., Varieties of Prayer - A Survey Report, Philadelphia, Trinity Press International, 1991. Here such findings are statistically revealed.

90 Heschel A., The Insecurity of Freedom, op. cit. p. 11ff.

91 Ibid. pp. 92-93.

"The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one - that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing."⁹²

This path is one which leads to reconciliation within an individual, amongst individuals, in a communal celebration and pushing the boundaries of the church to an inclusive encounter - involving a renewed interaction with the Christian tradition and a revitalised engagement with the contemporary world.

⁹² Lumen Gentium, para. 41, in Flannery A. (ed.), Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents Worcester, Fowler Wright 1975 pp. 350-440.

Part IIIChapter 7 Re-engaging the Spiritual Tradition

Reply of Eternal Wisdom: "If thou wouldst see Me in My uncreated Divinity, thou shouldst learn to know Me in My suffering humanity."¹

¹ Suso H., Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth, trans Clark J., London, Faber & Faber, 1953, p. 49.

Synopsis of Parts I and II

It has become evident that in the lives and words and actions of the people of Heath Town the presence of God is at work. It does appear that by virtue of their own discovery of the transcendent, the people are celebrating grace but have come to it in and through the sacrament of their own lives - their own "categorical imperative." Chapter 3 illustrated the sense of faith evident amongst the people on the estate and the effects of this upon the members of the Hope Community. It also indicated the way in which through the Community celebrations a regular attempt was made to celebrate the transcendent human dignity of the individual and the reality of grace in the daily life of the people.

This operative fact of grace at work within the lives of the people of Heath Town cannot remain in the realm of abstract theory, but must fall within the reflective consideration of praxis. The mystery is that human beings are able to grasp that the incomprehensible really exists and is active in the everyday situations of their lives. It is at this level that it achieves a dynamic evangelistic thrust in the lives of Hope Community members. It is also at this level that it presents a challenge for reflective evaluation at all levels within the churches. It is precisely at this level that the institutional church in its actual pastoral practice, may be an obstacle to such an experience of God. Here it is important to acknowledge the fallible nature of the Church in its institutional form, called always to conversion and holiness and needing to incorporate into its theological reflection the reality of past failure.

The original question underlying this research - whether it is possible to have a shared spirituality between those who work on the urban margins and marginalised people themselves - has a positive response. However, though positive, the response is not unequivocally so. The empirical work has revealed that where time is expended in listening to the experience of those who live on the margins, the potential for reciprocal transformation exists. As an individual's life experience unfolds and is heard and sustained in ordinary daily contacts, the growth in self-worth, self-confidence and the ability to articulate experience of God becomes more evident. At the same time those who listen and hear are aware of themselves being evangelised as they recognise God at work amongst the people in ways very different from the forms they may have traditionally encountered. Nevertheless, ambiguity marks this inter-relationship. The Hope Community ongoingly encounters the tension of maintaining the egalitarian nature of the interaction, such that they do not fall into the dual disasters of either imposing their own views in any given situation or, conscious of this possibility, abnegating any personal contribution which in turn may

contribute to a state of paralysis into which both Community members and residents are inextricably drawn.² The very consistency of this internal debate helps to validate the authenticity of the core group response. However, this internal forum is also effected by the pressures from external forces, notably the hierarchies of the Congregation and denomination to which the members of the Community who are religious sisters belong. Here, there is a persistent expectation of some tangible signs of success emerging in predictable forms, namely the increase in church membership through the efforts of the Community. Although at local level such expectations have ceased to be a primary focus, and support has been given for what is regarded as novel forms of involvement with the local residents, at a diocesan level little is known of the actual working of the Community and less understood.

There does appear to be a gender specific issue here. The all female composition of the Hope Community, both religious sisters and lay women is a significant factor in the primordial feature of the life and work of the Community, namely the willingness and ability to exercise the listening faculty. Indeed, this fundamental approach is the foundation for all the many activities in which the Community are involved. The dynamic for the latter resides in the energies expended upon the former. It is the very prominence given to this listening which enables the Community to engage in activities with real credibility from the viewpoint of local residents. This approach stands in stark contrast to the existing mode of involvement of representatives of the institutional church in the area, who are constrained by the traditional forms they have inherited - even the physical forms of the buildings they must endeavour to preserve.

It may be that this mode of listening is, as suggested by the Jesuit Novicemaster,³ a characteristic more usually associated with women. He saw it as a vital form of availability to the people from which the official Church might learn. The Community does not claim to be or do more than this, an easy and normal

² With regard to the Community celebrations, the leader of the Hope Community commented, "I think we have bent over backwards, and perhaps too much so, to make it the people's liturgy and standing back from it ourselves. We have a responsibility and a duty really to share our gifts and accumulated knowledge over the years. When it comes to the planning I'm a lot more ready to put at people's disposal at least some suggestions, some resources from which people may draw. Now I know that other members of my Community would not agree with that. They would say: it's not the people's, it's ours. I know there is a balance. We agonise about how to draw together the people's ideas and sometimes there is so very little in them and we are sitting there with loads of experience, and we don't say, "well how about such a thing" because we're afraid we might dominate the programme. I know we can't identify with the people here, but I think that when it comes to preparing the liturgy, we are the people too and our ideas and suggestions are as valid as anyone else's." Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

³ See discussion Chapter 4, p. 24-26.

engagement with people in the affairs of their daily lives. Yet it does appear a vital ingredient, if there is to be a real possibility of a shared spirituality on the urban margins. An important feature of this kind of ministry appears to be the notable lack of structure involved. Indeed, it might be seen as a ministry that precedes structure, yet not in a way that poses a threat to existing structures within the church, primarily because the Community are missioned by the institutional church under the auspices of the Provincial of the Congregation to which the sisters of the Community belong.

Further exploration of other individuals and groups working on the margins might give other corroborative evidence of the gender specific nature of such involvement. If an operative feminine dynamic proves to be the case, then it is certainly a factor which requires both acknowledgement by the official Church and could be valuably incorporated in the recognition and encouragement of such a ministry by women, and in the attempt to learn from women's experience in order to incorporate such an approach into male ministry.⁴ The consequences of this could have far-ranging repercussions not just for those who work on the margins, but all engaged in any form of ministry within the Church.

It is important to emphasise the lack of polarisation within what is proposed. It is suggested that the listening mode is an underdeveloped dimension, not an alternative to anything or everything else. It is a critical listening, leading into discerned action. An important question here involves the relationship of this proposed mode with the teaching authority of the church. A crucial issue is how to interrelate the reverence for hearing what is coming from the people and being open to transformation by that, with reverencing the reality of what tradition and authority enables us to carry forward. Again there is a potential false polarisation here: it is not either/or, but crucially, in the language of the Vatican documents, together/with. Yet it may be necessary to make a priority option for prior listening in order to guarantee the integrity of active teaching and participatory modes of being. Conceivably the official church can exercise its divine authority without nervously clutching control. The need to keep control of a process is not something that is required by an authentic authority. Both the gospel and a sane pastoral strategy would appear to exclude the need to keep control.

⁴ As the Jesuit Novice master stated, " .. it might .. be best for us simply to accept as a starting point that some women religious are able to do this much better, so let them get on with it and we encourage them." *ibid.*

Such a listening mode involves ongoing engagement in dialogue through conversation. Dialogue implies a mutual exchange of views between diverse parties who do not fully agree, but who respect and are prepared to learn from one another. Indeed the presupposition is the openness to the possibility of modification of views through the undertaking of such converse. Dialogue presupposes real conversation unless it is to become abstruse discussion and such conversation presupposes the ability to listen, in a profound and critical way. It is important that such listening be critical in order that a priority or option for the poor whereby transformation for all participants within such converse is possible, is not hardened into an ideology which of its nature can distort and exploit the very basis of such exchange. It is not suggested that such attentive listening be in opposition to other ongoing active involvement in the life of the marginalised, particularly in social and political terms. However, this dimension is one which is a vital ingredient and indeed presupposition for such active engagement. For such profound listening reflectively evaluated can promote a deeper appreciation and indeed responsible appropriation of the motivation for such activity. This dimension is not unknown within the life of the institutional church; indeed it receives in some quarters overt intellectual adherence. Yet within the pastoral practice and policy making of the church, there is little sign of it receiving adequate consideration. If there is to be a real engagement of the church with those who live on the urban margins of society, a revitalised understanding and practice of this dimension is imperative and a very real consequence could be the revivifying of those very social, political and economic initiatives already being undertaken by the church on the margins. It is important to emphasise that, although commitment to social change may be enthusiastically acclaimed, at the heart of the expression of the reality of the presence of God among the people of the Heath Town estate is a primary desire for and sense of God at work within the pain and sorrow, joy and hope of their ordinary lives.

The actual form of this listening is engagement in conversation and dialogue and the facilitating tool of this is a deeper engagement with the contemplative dimension. These factors point inexorably towards a spiritual hermeneutic of the urban margins. In conversation there is the potential for real discourse and here the incorporation of the "classic" element unites the particularity of origin and expression with a disclosure of meaning and truth available in principle to all. Indeed, Tracy argues most convincingly for a natural hermeneutical competence which is universally available. According to him, any classic employs some explicit model of Christian self-transcendence implying some form of intense journey. This involves a risk that the subject matter of the classic articulates a question which is worth asking and a

response worth considering. In developing Tracy's use of the "classic" to cover the experience of the marginalised, I have argued that, just as in a text, there are demands necessitating constant interpretation and the actual experience bears a certain kind of timelessness - namely the timelessness of a classic expression radically rooted in its own historical time and calling to an individual historicity. However, it is vital that there should be ongoing reflection and constant re-interpretation by later finite, historical, temporal beings who will risk asking questions and listening, critically and tactfully, in order to elicit responses to actualise and guarantee authenticity. In the same manner, with regard to the experience of those on the margins, there is a primary need for ongoing reflection and critical reappropriation of that experience in the light of the Church's contemporary understanding.

To interact with a classic text, Tracy asserts, is to be subject to a generative and evocative power and to converse with difference and otherness. I have argued analogously that in contemporary society otherness and difference are primary characteristics of those who live on the margins of society. The experience here manifested is such as is apprehended by those who have chosen to live and work there as both disclosive of the mystery of God at work there, and involving a transformative truth if approached in openness and reverence. Here there is always the need to wrestle with the common human predicament: how to deal with the risk of interpretation both of the Christian tradition and the world in which that tradition finds ongoing development. Yet this human dilemma lies, as Rahner maintains, always within the ultimate horizon of God's absolute mystery within which human beings already reside.

If human beings in their very essence are a transcendence towards mystery, this must be an operational principle within engagement with individuals. For Rahner the profound choice with which everyone is confronted is whether they will try to ground their own lives and cling to their own securities, or whether they will surrender their lives into the silent and often terrifying dark Mystery whom we call God. This choice is also one which faces the church in its dealings with those on the margins where God may often appear to be at work in a disconcertingly novel form. Here the question arises will the institution continue to cling to known secure ways of relating to those on the margins, ways which serve to alienate rather than include? Or will the church risk the relational mode of listening through those already established contacts on the margins? In so listening, will those in authority within the church allow the possibility of transformation and policy modification by virtue of that experience?

An insidious collusion is evident within the secular culture prevalent as a dominant ethos. The consequences of this are increased polarisation not merely within British society but specifically within or rather "without" the church. Those outside are, as it were, kept there by the very forms of life which prevail within. However, a more authentic inculturation within British society would mean the reality of involvement with the culture of the urban poor to the extent that this might have some determining effect upon the life and work of the church within Britain.

Looking at the contemporary Christian calls to renew the face of the church, it is evident for example that the Pope is not struggling politically within the modern framework of cultural debate. Rather he is seeking a transformation at the cultural root. In consequence he continues to reiterate a fundamental feature of the Vatican II documents, evident within his later encyclicals - namely the mystery of God at work within the world and the transcendent human dignity of every person.

John Paul II's vision of the laity as the embodiment of a counter-cultural force is a call to the faithful within the church to effect such change through their exemplary manner of family life and work. In a not dissimilar manner, Hauerwas appeals to those within the church to focus their efforts on actually being church and in forming a real community where effective Christian witness will be enacted. In each case the attention is focused on the faithful within the Christian community fulfilling their Christian commitment in a more exemplary fashion. Meanwhile as the forces of modernism and postmodernism swirl within contemporary Britain, individual desires seem paramount for those with the financial means or acumen to achieve them. Those outside this enclave, estranged by the very existence of those within, continue the slide towards non-person status. It is within this group, those outside the numbers of the faithful, that it is here suggested a focus might be found for the counter-cultural dynamic which both John Paul II and Hauerwas in their different ways espouse. The Pope sets the context for the action of the laity against the background of the recovery of the Christian meta-narrative, and the reality of their co-creative experience with the divine; while Hauerwas gives no clear indication of a spiritual dimension to his vision, which seems rooted in a new theological rationale for ministry, a ministry which will enable the faithful to become a more effective community of witness. Here this research has contended that whatever consideration is given to the formation of the laity and clergy as specific tasks, a more particular focus for attention with regard to the activity of God in the world must also be the lives of the marginalised themselves.

How can there be an adequate communication of experience at a local level into the reflective evaluation and policy making of local dioceses? One problem centres on the church's dependence on existing parochial structures. A church of limited resources as Rahner maintained - and as local clergy confirmed - cannot tackle all possibilities. Rahner's concern was that where the church is present, it should be a vital vibrant force, not a presence handicapped by an agenda it cannot possibly fulfil. This points the way to a suggestion of evaluation of contemporary parochial needs and the encouragement of new initiatives alongside the possible reform of parochial structures. Here there is the potential for widespread communication and dialogue between clergy, laity and religious in an unprecedented form. However, this involves a degree of risk and commitment to the potential both within and without the boundaries of the church. Also this might lead to the re-evaluation of what may be seen as its exclusive ecclesiology and the theology of grace which informs it.

There is a contemporary need to undertake the painful task of correcting our inadequacies and failures. It is proposed that this be undertaken by a concrete commitment to learn from the experience of those already involved amongst the marginalised and a willingness to let their experience reflectively effect evaluation and policy decisions. A question arises whether those who hold authority within the church are prepared to trust the experience of those who live on the margins and those who work with them. A theology that is drawn out of people's own experience by sensitive facilitation helps to set them free to be fully Christian, fully human, fully alive. This sensitive facilitation would include a profound critical listening to the people and their experience of God and would be open to being transformed by that converse. For such a practice is to assert the recognition that change, renewal or reform is super-eminently the work of the Holy Spirit.

There is necessarily a dialectical tension between individual and general experience. Here Weil's emphasis upon the attentive waiting stance may be of crucial importance. Those who work on the margins are called to wait attentively in their listening to those with whom they work before embarking upon discerned action. Analogously, the waiting stance of the church through those engaged on the margins is to perceive the divine initiative at work there, while the stance of the institution is also to receive back from those so engaged the fruit of their experience. Within such a dynamic there might be a deepening solidarity of the church with the marginalised in the form of the kenotic community to which Anderson gave such emphasis with its obvious rooting in Christ in solidarity with the world in a living tension.

This requires an expansion of the dimension of listening involving a new depth, and an ever finer attunement. It impels towards a level of darkness powerlessness and helplessness. Here the facilitating tool for such a listening critically involves a deepening contemplative stance.⁵ This is a particularly acute need if there is to be a real attunement to what is emerging from the marginalised. In order to be able to listen at such depth, it appears important to be prepared to risk the ongoing darkness of one's own inner depths. Here in the acknowledged reality of one's own incoherence before the mystery of God at work there is the foundation for a deeper involvement with God and other human beings. From that position of essential vulnerability and powerlessness in our own contemplative depths, the clarity of resonance with others - particularly the marginalised - is peculiarly powerful. Indeed before God, and in the face of the reality of the cross, the darkness of much that appears a chaotic void on the margins begins to have some inchoate and imperceptibly conscious form.

Re-engaging the Tradition

Within this chapter further consideration is given to the engagement with the "classics" of the spiritual tradition and the integrated nature of contemplation and action as advocated by previous generations. A particular focus of attention is the contribution of Ignatian Spirituality with the classic text of the Spiritual Exercises. Discernment is a keynote, as the potential is explored for a renewed spirituality and a renewed asceticism arising from the tradition in interaction with the contemporary world. Here reconciliation, both individual and communal, proves to be a dynamic for deeper contemplation and propitious action. Authentic interpretation of either the classic text or the experience of the marginalised depends on the moral authenticity of the interpreter. However, I have argued that beyond moral integrity, authentic interpretation requires a purification of the spirit.⁶

The context of consideration of the spiritual tradition is the experience of encounter upon the margins.

"I was coming up the road from the church one evening when I met up with G. I've known him for a number of years we both come from the same town and he is always asking me about the local people. Now

⁵ Conversation with Dr Noel O'Donoghue has indicated, there are three levels of contemplation as outlined within the spiritual classics: active, passive and mystical. Within this chapter no attempt is made to outline all three in detail. What is indicated is that the inner journey may involve all three and, across this contemplative spectrum, there is the possibility of a more powerful encounter with an individual's own powerlessness and vulnerability before God and a subsequently more acute "hearing" and consequent listening to the experience of the marginalised.

⁶ Veale J., "Dominant Orthodoxies", Milltown Studies, No. 30, Autumn, 1992, p. 62,63.

G., well, he's permanently drinking and always filthy, but if you approach him courteously he's fine. We were talking and he mentioned Fr T., a priest who'd been good to him, he said. I had to say "G., I've some bad news for you. Fr T. had a heart attack last week and he's dead." But he just looked at me for a while and then said "Never say that ... he lives on in those who knew him well, in you and in me." That touched my heart. I walked on with tears in my eyes. What could be more profound and who could be more marginal?"⁷

The mysterious presence of God at work amongst the marginalised, evangelising those who live and work on the margins, has been the focus of consideration in these chapters. For fieldworkers interviewed, reflection upon their experience has produced a convergence of opinion that they have received so much more than anything they may have given in any particular situation.

"As I look back on my experience, time and again I am faced with what I have received, what I have learned of God through the people."⁸

This epiphany of God within the poor and marginalised is perceived and responded to by those who come from very different backgrounds, from the security of religious life, or from the potentially equally secure shelter of middle class family life. Each appear to encounter something of the "power in weakness" that Resident O. claimed to be a special provision of God for gentle folk.⁹ Indeed for one of the young lay women in the Hope Community, it was her own search for God which led her to the marginalised.

"I felt much nearer to God, the God whom I was seeking, looking for, when I was with these people who were in the dirt in a sense."¹⁰

Yet this search was fuelled by and interactive with an encounter she had with the spiritual tradition.

"I came across a quotation just by chance: "If thou wouldst see Me in My uncreated Divinity, thou shouldst learn to know me in My suffering humanity." This really intrigued me, I wanted to know if this were true."¹¹

Having focused upon the interactive experience of life and work with the marginalised, it is appropriate now to attend to what the classics of the spiritual tradition emphasise as key factors in the integration of contemplation and action.

7 Rev. J. conversation, August, 1993.

8 Fieldworker living on comparable Scottish housing estate, August, 1993.

9 c.f. chapter 6, fn. 62.

10 Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

11 Ibid.

According to Underhill¹², the germ of that same transcendent life of the great mystics is present, latent within all human beings. Thus each in his or her own measure may, according to the capacity for openness to the grace of God, be drawn into a mystical trajectory.

"This spark of the soul, once we permit its emergence will conform in little and according to its measure, to those laws of organic growth, those inexorable conditions of transcendence which govern the mystic way."¹³

For Underhill, the possibilities for such a drawing into the contemplative way demand great love and desire for God coupled with self-discipline, courage and generosity. Yet she asserted that the writings of the cognoscenti of the spiritual life evoke a chord of recognition, for they speak of a reality embedded deep within us.

"It were hardly an extravagance to say, that those writings which are the outcome of true and first-hand mystical experience may be known by this power of imparting to the reader the sense of exalted and extended life. "All mystics" says Saint-Martin "speak the same language for they come from the same country". The deep undying life within us comes from that country too; and it recognises the accents of home, though it cannot always understand what they would say."¹⁴

Historical Transcendence

In a commensurable manner is Rahner's emphasis on the commonality of the mystery of God at work in human beings. Both Underhill and Rahner reassert the deep chord within human beings which resounds to a divine note.¹⁵ There is at this depth an ontological unity¹⁶ between God and the deepest self. Here the work of Anderson¹⁷ may be of particular significance in his assertion that it is not the immanence of God which has the deepest bond with humanity but rather the transcendence of God, seen in terms of historical lived transcendence. Thus he inverts the traditional metaphysical framework for one in which transcendence not immanence is the key factor for divine human relations and the axiomatic point of departure. He does not envisage the "otherness" of God creating a great gulf between God and humanity but rather as sustaining the work of creation through the incarnate Word and the Spirit in real historical terms. Thus the transcendence of God does not involve a remote

12 Underhill E., Mysticism, London, Methuen and Co Ltd, 1940.

13 Ibid. p. 445.

14 Ibid. p. 80.

15 One of the members of the Hope Community a young laywoman made the point that "I felt much nearer to God when I was with .. people who were in the dirt in a sense." Fieldworker C. op. cit.

16 Here ontological unity is not equated with ontological identity.

17 In particular Anderson R., Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1975; and Anderson R. (ed.), Theological Foundations for Ministry, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1979.

abstraction from the world but rather a direct engaged presence with humanity in the world.

"Divine transcendence is not a quality of being which is defined by abstracting from a non-divine creation or nature. Transcendence is difference in solidarity, and as such, it is the extrinsic rather than the intrinsic reality of being."¹⁸

This solidarity is both personal in terms of the individual's involvement with God and also communal in terms of the interrelatedness of all humanity with one another and with God.

"The image of God is rooted in the transcendence of God which means that man is capable of experiencing absolute difference in solidarity ... the "difference" or the transcendence of God, can only be expressed in solidarity with humanity. Lived transcendence is an incarnational life which involves complete solidarity with an absolute difference."¹⁹

Kenosis becomes revealed as the depth of divine transcendence experienced as an intra-divine relation into which human beings are incorporated with their full humanity. Anderson speaks of the "kenotic community" as the solidarity which the church has with all human beings. It is the incarnational solidarity which permits no distinctions to be made between the Christian and the world by limiting the incarnation to the church. Indeed he stresses that the church which denies its involvement with the world has ceased to be true to its Lord.

"The Church which denies its solidarity with the world becomes a "untruthful" Church and no longer has the "incarnational credibility" that is the mark of Christ himself."²⁰

The Christian is seen as incomplete without the world loving within it as Christ loved. The kenotic community is cited as being not just the church assuming a position of humility, rather it is Christ in solidarity with the world in a living tension.²¹ This calls into question whether it is possible to make distinctions at the boundaries of a church which is called into such a solidarity.

18 Anderson R., Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God, op. cit. p. 260.

19 Ibid. and p. 261.

20 Ibid. p. 274.

21 "The distinction between Christ and man is absolute while at the same time there is a solidarity with man which is permanent. This is the implication of the kenosis when considered as the historical transcendence of God through the Incarnate Logos. The kenotic community therefore cannot be distinguished from the world by splitting the solidarity of all humanity in Christ and thus cannot take the form of one entity within humanity set against another ie the distinction cannot be either an organisational or a spatial one in terms of the Church as entity. The kenotic community, considered incarnationally, is the foundation of all human community and the Church can never deny its common participation in this community without denying Christ himself." *ibid.* p. 259.

"The Church (the body of Christ), a refugee with the refugees, with no outer wall to separate saint from sinner, with no inner sanctuary to be guarded against profanation, is nonetheless the place which is also the presence of the living God. But here too the Church is radicalised by the very fact that it has no place of its own, for its place is bound up with the humanity of Christ and is therefore the place of the kenotic community. Whatever structures the Church erects will be no more than "disposable containers" for disposability is the test of eschatological reality."²²

In this manner Anderson ties the possibility of hope for the world directly to the reality of the eschaton as the gift of God's own life to humanity. Thus lived transcendence also radicalises the conditions under which humanity lives for it has its source in the life of God.

Underhill emphasises that true mysticism²³ is active and practical not passive and theoretical. For her it is an organic life-process not a speculative project. A keynote of mysticism seems to be that eager outgoing activity driven by the generosity of love to an ongoing engagement with the world.

"Over and over again the great mystics tell us, not how they speculated, but how they acted. The paradoxical "quiet" of the contemplative is but the outward stillness essential to inward work. Their favourite symbols are those of action: battle, search and pilgrimage."²⁴

Classical criteria stress the inter-relatedness of contemplation, mysticism and action. Indeed action is seen as the overflow of mysticism and "non-action" as the most powerful action of all. This paradox lies at the heart of mysticism and indeed at the heart of all contemplation. There is a peculiar fecundity about this contemplative dimension which flows forth into discerned action. Within Augustine's work, the study and pursuit of wisdom lies in action and in contemplation, so that one part may be called "active", the other "contemplative".²⁵ Gregory the Great lays it down that the one who ordinarily carries on the good works of the active life, but also

22 Ibid. p. 450.

23 Underhill cites three elements which characterise the mystic way: "1. Mysticism is a transformative approach to life rather than a theoretical "playing" with ideas. 2. Mysticism involves spiritual activity representing the individual's absorption and deepening relationship with God. 3. The mystic's dominant life-emotion becomes love leading to progressively strengthened dedication of will toward the things of God: the expression of his will in daily life; service to him through work, relationships and everyday choices; and sacrifices of the physical/mental body." Sinetor M., Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics, New York, Paulist Press, 1986, p. 77.

24 Underhill E., Mysticism, op. cit. p 83.

25 It is important to acknowledge that within the Fathers action does not necessarily signify "ministry". Often in the Fathers the "vita activa" refers to the ascetical aspect of the Christian life, viz what we can do, what we do. As distinct from receptivity before what God is doing.

strives to recollect himself and raise himself to contemplation, is not failing in leading a contemplative life. Meanwhile it is St Bernard who carries on the imagery of spiritual marriage to spiritual fecundity. The ensuing zeal for souls and work for souls is not merely a process of needful repose and recuperation of the spiritual forces of the soul after contemplation, but is positively the direct effect of the highest kind of contemplation, that of the spiritual marriage, which propels the soul to leave its quiet and go forth to bear spiritual offspring to its Lord.

It is Ruysbroeck who stresses that contemplation is highly intellectual and yet mystical. Though he does not use the imagery of "fecundity" for him also, as for Bernard, the final state, the result of the highest contemplation, is that the contemplative is inspired with zeal to labour actively for God's glory.

"In contemplation God comes to us without ceasing and demands of us both action and fruition, in such a way that the one never impedes but always strengthens the other. And therefore the most involved man lives his life in these two ways, namely in work and in rest. And in each he is whole and undivided and he is perpetually called by God to renew both the rest and the work."²⁶

Interaction with Eckhart

Although, as Woods²⁷ indicates the levels of comprehension are severely strained by Eckhart, nevertheless through that very pressure upon the intelligibility of language, he sought to walk a precarious course along "The nether borders of the unnameable Mystery we call God."²⁸ In terms reminiscent of the way in which it has been seen that God is at work amongst the marginalised, Eckhart explicates the paradoxical mystery of God, who is both utterly beyond human comprehension and yet who is the ground of all human reality which, as created in the image and likeness of God, enjoys a privileged region of communion with God that Eckhart often referred to as the ground or abyss of the soul. Indeed, Woods cites him as stating,

"I have a power in my soul which is ever receptive to God."²⁹

Yet within such mystical intuition and direct apprehension of the mystery of God, Eckhart stresses the very ordinary nature of God's appearing in the world. For him God does not generally ravish the soul with ecstatic delights, but rather communicates his loving presence through the pragmatic events of ordinary

²⁶ Ruysbroeck, Adornment ii 65, cited in Butler C., *Western Mysticism*, London, Constable & Co Ltd, 1922, p. 273.

²⁷ Woods R. *Eckhart's Way*. Wilmington Delaware, Michael Glazier, 1986, p. 10.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 58.

experience. In a similar way, a member of the Hope Community explains the normal human intercourse which brings her into contact with the residents of the estate.

"It is bumping into people on the walkways, carrying shopping, just chatting."³⁰

This includes both the natural elements within the environment and the church seen as the body of Christ with the ensuing authority and sacramental life. It is striking that in Eckhart's writings there is a consistent emphasis upon the Christian's work in this world, and this is so even after an experience of union with God.

"Far from being a dreamy speculative idler pining for some other world, Eckhart insists that "perfected" disciples, the true mystics, pass back unnoticed into the human milieu where, one in will and work with God, they energise and hallow the experience and activities of their fellow citizens and saints."³¹

Eckhart asserted that true holiness was more a quality of being, and this very being is the source from which flows all the good we achieve in action. For him, contemplation was brought to perfection through loving activity in the world, amidst ordinary human concerns. Indeed, he urged his disciples to cultivate a mystical spirituality that expressed itself actively in the world. This insistence on the priority of contemplation in action, and the reality of the presence of God throughout humanity, motivated the conclusion of one sermon when he stated,

"I say humanity is as perfect in the poorest and most wretched as in pope or emperor, for I hold humanity more dear in itself than the man I carry about with me."³²

For Eckhart the individual was capable of a simple receptivity to God and by the grace of God was gradually transformed into the shape of the one contemplated and drawn into his mission within the world. This was no mere private interiorisation of a Christian vocation but a recognition of the integrated nature of activity, motive and desire. Thus a contemporary Dominican gives articulation to the voice of the Meister for the twentieth century,

"We hear the Meister's voice today still preaching in accents comprehensible of homecoming, of the flow of love and creative energy from God, of the awakening deep within us of something uncreated dwelling in our souls - a seed, a spark, an unnameable Presence that wells up into the realization of the wholeness of experience, the blessedness and warmth of personal solicitude and love. .. He calls us freshly to transformation, to a rebirth into God-

³⁰ Fieldworker C. op. cit.

³¹ Woods R., Eckhart's Way, op. cit. p. 84.

³² Ibid. p. 216.

centred contemplation of the world's weals and woes, to a greater, freer commitment to social justice, inclusive love and effective action."³³

Many medieval writers wrote about the relationship between action and contemplation in life. Yet these were not necessarily seen as competitive features of life, but rather there was discussion around the proper relationship between the active and contemplative dimensions. As Cook³⁴ makes clear, Francis was pulled towards both active and contemplative forms of life. Cook cites Thomas of Celano, saying of Francis, that after praying he,

"chose not to live for himself alone, but for him who died for all, knowing that he was sent for this that he might win for God the souls the devil was trying to snatch away."³⁵

However, despite this decision having been made, the question of the right relationship was raised again at different times and in different contexts. For Francis himself, however, the primary motivation was always the example of Christ. Although Christ went apart to pray, the majority of time was spent in a very public ministry. Accordingly, Francis is reported as saying,

"Because we should do everything according to the pattern shown to us in him as on the heights of the mountain, it seems more pleasing to God that I interrupt my quiet and go out to labour."³⁶

The paradigm of such an example as seen in the life of Francis himself is described by Bonaventure, and reveals a synthesis of the way action and contemplation were integrated in Francis.

"Therefore when in his compassion he had worked for the salvation of others, he could then leave behind the restlessness of the crowds and seek out hidden places of quiet and solitude, where he could spend his time more freely with the Lord and cleanse himself of any dust that might have adhered to him from his involvement with men."³⁷

The highest mystical experience has, as one of its effects, the sending back of the one who achieves it to the active life with an enhanced zeal to work for the good of others. Catherine of Siena was not concerned with the soul's ascent to God in itself, but rather with the means by which personal sanctity could help the church in the world. Her concept of holiness was the self-knowledge and awareness of one's own

33 Ibid. p. 219.

34 Cook W., *Francis of Assisi*, Wilmington Delaware, Michael Glazier, 1989, p. 78ff.

35 Ibid.

36 Bonaventure *Legenda Maior* XII, 1, cited *ibid.* p. 81.

37 Bonaventure *Legenda Maior* XIII, 1, cited *ibid.* p. 82.

nothingness before God, which could lead to a love which was united to Christ's own saving love, and to his mission bringing to others the good news of that redemptive love.

The reason for this overflow of the contemplative dimension into the realm of action lies in the very nature of that deepened relationship with God which - rooted and grounded in love - cannot be confined but involves a participation in the loving work of God. It is a question of entering into a participation in that love of which God himself remains the only possible subject. It is a "luminous darkness", as Gregory of Nyssa indicates³⁸, a paradoxical discovery which is inexhaustible. It is most often experienced not in the ecstatic visions of the few but in the habitual performance of the humblest daily duties. Here there occurs a vivid consciousness of the presence of God within all the circumstances of life. In a similar manner members of the Hope Community find themselves involved in the daily lives of the residents of the estate.

"I call it creatively wasting time with people, being in their own homes and listening to what they have to say."³⁹

Interaction with Julian of Norwich

An outstanding example of such an integrated Christian, for whom daily life and religious experience and reflection on that experience were all aspects of one whole, is Julian of Norwich. Her emphasis on experience was as day by day contact with the love of God which enables individuals to make steady unspectacular progress both in the knowledge of self and in responding to the love of God which liberates individuals to respond in turn to others. During her time as an anchoress at Norwich, she appeared to divide her time between prayer and worship and a quiet ministry to the local poor who sought her presence. One author⁴⁰ surmises that Julian wrote especially for women and particularly those who suffer from exploitation or from situations of hopelessness or helplessness.⁴¹ Here the situation of the single women on the estate might be particularly exemplary in a contemporary sense of the women for whom Julian wrote. There is a large group of single parents on the estate who are subject often to the whims of transitory partners. As one of the sisters in the Hope Community emphasised,

38 See Bouyer L., The Christian Mystery From Pagan Myth to Mysticism, trans. Trethowan I., Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1990, p 215.

39 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

40 Pelphrey B., Christ our Mother: Julian of Norwich, Wilmington Delaware, Michael Glazier, 1989.

41 In this she seems peculiarly appropriate for those whose ministry involves them with the lives of single mothers, girls on the streets, and any area in which women are exploited.

"I feel that the women are used here, used and abused."⁴²

For Julian the path to life is one of humility and compassion which she sees as rooted in the "kindness" of God, which is built into human nature created by God. For her the message of love which she received was intended always for the poor and uneducated, who would have been most troubled during her times by the questions of judgement, death and suffering and how to live amidst a world beset by turmoil and uncertainty. Julian's message of hope was that by our very creation we share in the divine nature through the love of God. This love is the foundation and meaning of all things.

"From the time that it was shown to me, I often desired to understand what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years later, and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding saying: "Do you want to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love. Hold yourself in it, and you shall understand and know more of the same; but you will never understand or know anything else in it, forever."⁴³

Julian's central message appeared to be that the most one could say of God was that he loves. It was this love which Christ offered to sinners and outcasts within the society of his time and which has been the compelling attraction across generations. The paradigm of the crucified Christ is the focus of her spirituality and of her advocacy of the inward quest. This is not undertaken as some self-indulgent exercise, for the improvement of her own soul, rather the reflection upon her experience, and the sharing of that with others within the book of her revelations, was to communicate her insights to others who might thereby come to share in the loving compassion of God.

Accordingly, human lives are meant to be a process of growing into maturity in that love, and being drawn increasingly into the likeness of God in whose image all are made. For Julian human nature is inextricably "knit" to God, hidden there as God is also hidden within our nature. Thus God was for her the ultimate substance of all things. Even sin, according to Julian, does not destroy the union of our essential substance with God, for she sees the image of God as the inalienable essence of what it is to be human. Sin may cloud or distort such relatedness but it cannot be utterly destroyed.

⁴² Fieldworker D. interview, November, 1991.

⁴³ Julian of Norwich, Long Text chapter 86, cited Pelphrey B., Christ our Mother, op. cit. p. 258.

Julian's awareness of sin was focused in a sense of fragmentation between what she referred to as the substance of the individual, which was inextricably bound to God, and the sensuality, which was often distorted by the motions of sinfulness. Yet still she asserted we long for God in our inmost being, even when our lives are so fragmented and misfocused such that we do not recognise the longing for what it is. For Julian, the church's reason for existence is to enable human beings, broken and distorted, to be made whole in the love of God. In order for this to be effected, she saw it as necessary that there should be a concrete means of the renunciation of sin enabling real repentance. Here she stressed the value of confession and penance as a means to facilitate this.

"The Holy Spirit leads him to confession, willing to reveal his sins, nakedly and truthfully, with great sorrow and great shame that he has so befouled God's fair image. Then he accepts the penance for every sin imposed by his confessor, for this is established in Holy Church by the teaching of the Holy Spirit; and this is one meekness which greatly pleases God."⁴⁴

Julian saw the sacramental means of the church as the way of renewing that longing for God to which she would always respond. Indeed three keynotes of her writings are found here. The desire for true contrition, compassion and a deepened longing for God.

"By contrition we are made clean, by compassion we are made ready, and by true longing for God we are made worthy. These are three means, as I understand, through which all souls come to heaven, those, that is to say, who have been sinners on earth and will be saved. For every sinful soul must be healed by these medicines. Though he be healed, his wounds are not seen by God as wounds but as honours .. For he regards sin as sorrow and pains for his lovers, to whom for love he assigns no blame."⁴⁵

As Pelphey makes clear, Julian was convinced that God was dynamically involved with all things. Indeed, that it was part of the unchanging humility of God and a feature of his divine compassion that he suffered with humanity and that the desire of God was for all humanity to be brought to a state of holiness.⁴⁶ Accordingly, even in her emphasis upon the importance of penitence for the individual, it is not for the individual alone. Rather she sees the true penitent as one who is not only sorrowful

44 Julian of Norwich, Long Text chapter 39, cited in Jantzen G., Julian of Norwich, London, SPCK, 1987, p. 199.

45 Ibid. p. 200.

46 This egalitarian sense of all humanity brought before God is echoed in a contemporary form by the stress that one of the Hope Community members lays on the equality of men and women. "I strongly feel that women and men are equal in the eyes of God .. so why should the women here be existing almost as slaves, grateful for any attention from the greatest blackguard on the estate?" Fieldworker D. op. cit.

for his own sins, but for the sins of all and thus shares in something of the divine sense of contrition. Here individual passion and suffering become part of that divine compassion which longs for the whole world to be redeemed. Here too, there is awakened something of the joy and inner peace seen as gift of the spirit of God.

"For Julian inner peace stems from the encounter with God at work in all things. It is therefore an engagement with everything in this world, loving it as God loves it, for the sake of God who is at work there."⁴⁷

These words of Julian recall the vision of the leader of the Hope Community, who spoke of the long time spent in listening to the stories of the lives of the people on the estate and building on the seeds of hope of the life of God therein. Seeds of hope both perceiving the life of God at work amongst the residents and within the leader of the Community based on what she listens to and sees evidence of among the people.

"One of the reasons we call ourselves the Hope Community is that you still believe in people no matter how much of a mess they may have made of their lives or how hopeless their situation is that they still are made in the image of God, that they deserve respect, that they have a contribution to make to their own becoming and to the human community."⁴⁸

All experiences of suffering Julian saw as potential opportunities to learn more of the grace of God. They are a call to a greater dependence upon God and a corresponding deeper faith in the loving compassion of God for all.

"And these words: You will not be overcome, were said very insistently and strongly, for certainty and strength against every tribulation which may come. He did not say: You will not be troubled, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted; but he said: You will not be overcome. God wants us to pay attention to these words, and always to be strong in faithful trust, in well-being and in woe, for he loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him, and all will be well."⁴⁹

The incomprehensible dignity of ordinary life is reiterated time and again in the work of those known as spiritual masters in the Christian tradition. It is amidst this reality that true faith is enacted. Faith does not add to life an alien dimension of supernatural reality to supersede mundane reality. Faith and grace are not alien. Neither does it abolish the often dull ordinariness, where there can be more sadness and disappointment than success and happiness. Yet what it does do is to draw our

47 Pelphrey B., Christ our Mother, op. cit. p. 220.

48 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

49 Julian of Norwich, Long Text 68, cited in Jantzen G., Julian of Norwich, op. cit. p. 213.

attention to the roots of this life which might be overlooked. Faith is a response that God elicits by his presence and grace. As Rahner states,

"Faith proclaims the radical character of freedom, of responsibility, of love, hope, guilt, forgiveness, and the ultimate ground of their radicalness it calls God. It is God who has always established himself within this life as its ultimate depth. But this divine rootedness is that of our life in the concrete: ie of our relationship with our neighbour, of our miserable daily duties, of our capacity for forgiveness, of our acceptance of life's dark disappointments of our resignation in the face of death."⁵⁰

Interaction with Teresa of Avila

This focus on the ordinary was one well understood by Teresa of Avila. For her the attempt to stammer out the unutterable with regard to her relationship with God was rooted amidst all the problems and ambiguities of daily life. In a not dissimilar manner, one of the Hope Community emphasised the importance of working together with the residents and gradually building relationships.

"It takes a lot of time, working together on things, but the base line is relationships and friendships made for working with people, encouraging and being alongside people. A huge part is celebrating things together."⁵¹

Teresa's advice to others was to focus on the reality of what true love of neighbour might mean for them in daily life rather than endeavouring to examine the quality of their relationship with God.

"We cannot be sure if we are loving God, although we may have good reasons for believing that we are, but we can know quite well if we are loving our neighbour. And be certain that, the further advanced you find you are in this, the greater the love you will have for God; for so dearly does His Majesty love us that He will reward our love for our neighbour by increasing the love which we bear to Himself, and that in a thousand ways."⁵²

This love is focused in the heart, and it is this level which is the ground of all mystical experience for Teresa as O'Donoghue makes clear⁵³. He stresses that preparation for this is in the form of a pedagogy of the heart, as Teresa's writings exemplify.

50 Rahner K., Opportunities for Faith: Elements of a Modern Spirituality, trans Quinn E., London, SPCK, 1974, p. 8.

51 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

52 Teresa of Avila, The Interior Castle, fifth mansion, chapter 3, cited in Peers E. A., The Complete Works of St Teresa, Vol. II., London, Sheed & Ward, 1946, p. 261.

53 O'Donoghue N., Mystics For Our Time, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1989, p. 48ff.

"The Interior Castle traces the steps of this pedagogy, its phases, its pitfalls, its basic principles, its point of crisis when ordinary prayer yields place to mystical or, as Teresa calls it, supernatural prayer. The heart is now a garden on which the rain begins to fall, first in drops, then lightly, and steadily, then abundantly. Prior to this experience it was as if the garden had been watered laboriously, first by buckets, then by irrigation. A whole new world opens up as the Holy Spirit flows in and abides in the heart."⁵⁴

This use of water as a motif for the growth of prayer, and indeed the given nature of contemplative and mystical experience, dominates Teresa's writings. It is God himself who, as the source of water refreshes the interior life of the individual. Such a source of life may be earnestly sought and yet cannot be commanded or controlled. So Teresa emphasises the gratuitous nature of prayer and consolation therein. As O'Donoghue explicates,

"The water stands for the glow and power and illuminative splendour of the Divine presence, which can be touched and glimpsed painfully in the ordinary ways of prayer beginning with the early fervours and sweetnesses which have a light and transient quality. This presence of God is greatly sought and deeply longed for in the ordinary ways of prayer, but it comes only painfully and grudgingly as one waters or irrigates the parched earth, until the time comes, when the heavens open, the rain falls and the whole garden of the soul is filled with the life-giving water of the Divine presence."⁵⁵

The stature of her teaching on contemplative prayer and the mysticism of ordinary life was assured when she was made a doctor of the church. Yet even the heights of mystical union namely the spiritual marriage, Teresa emphasised, had as its effect to cause in the soul an intense longing to serve God by striving to gain souls for him. This irrevocable bond between the highest contemplation and the involvement in active service⁵⁶ of others is a recurrent feature through the writings of all those acclaimed in the spiritual tradition.

With regard to the more dramatic phenomena associated with mysticism and indeed present in the life of Teresa herself, she makes it very clear, as Williams⁵⁷ emphasises, that the criteria for authenticity either of a life or of phenomenon associated with that life lies not in the nature of any particular experience, but rather in the way it is related to any pattern of concrete behaviour and the development of dispositions and decisions within that life.

54 Ibid. p. 49.

55 Ibid, p. 76.

56 There is a revered tradition also that pure union with God is itself the best service of other members of the Body of Christ. This is fundamental for cloistered contemplatives.

57 Williams R., *Teresa of Avila*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1991, p. 147ff.

"Mysticism is demystified and mystical experience as such is accorded no particular authority. Its authority - as Teresa implicitly argues in the Life - has to be displayed in the shape of the vocation of which it is part."⁵⁸

The incarnational mode of God's working with humanity is to the fore in Teresa's work, according to Williams, and he asserts that her view of her calling focuses on that kenotic move which led to the abandonment of divine status in order to become "defenceless, dishonoured and unprivileged". The heart of her commitment to reform the Carmelites, Williams maintains, lay in the desire to imitate Christ. Within this very active phase of her life, there is a call out of the purely contemplative domain to become at times a nomad in her attempts to reform the Carmelite order. Yet here again there is the emphasis upon the union that matters most being union with the divine will and not in itself an experience of divine absorption. In this manner Teresa is likened to Eckhart.⁵⁹

"For both, intimacy with God is conceived as assimilation to a God whose life is itself a move to mission. God is not God except as the one who sends the Son."⁶⁰

Teresa's focus in her espousal of the need to learn the ways of prayer, and to be able to discern amidst its consolations and desolations, is to be more adequately prepared for loving service within the world. If God should draw an individual into the way of mysticism it involves no position detached from the world. Rather it calls for an attitude of detachment which refuses to accept anything less than God and by God himself is led back into the concerns of the world. Thus an individual continues the creative action of God within the world through any increase of faith, hope and love.

"We may and must detach ourselves from all that keeps us from God: but the God with whom we are finally united is the God whose being is directed in love toward the world which we must then re-enter equipped to engage with other human beings with something of God's own wholeheartedness because we have been stripped of certain modes of self-protectiveness; of an understanding of our worth or lovableness as resting on prestige, achievement or uniformity. The way of perfection leads back to taking our active place in the human community."⁶¹

For Teresa there was nothing contradictory about being actively absorbed in the world and at the same time wholly exposed to the reality of God.⁶² For her there was

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 148.

⁵⁹ There is also a comparable emphasis in Ignatius - see later in the chapter.

⁶⁰ Williams R., *Teresa of Avila*, op. cit. p. 160.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² cf "Behind the competent practicality of the person living in union is a continuing experience (so Teresa sees it) of living on the edge of ecstasy, undergoing moments of piercing intimacy and seeing into the heart of

no attempt to use activity as a form of defense against God or conversely to use the contemplative focus as a defense against the inherent risks and tribulation of activity. In a similar manner the leader of the Hope Community is often unable to attend daily mass because of the calls upon her time; yet she makes a point of praying through the readings for each day. At the same time there is a concern expressed by other members of the Community that, "I do feel when we're going in 66 different directions that we're trying to do too much."⁶³ Or from another, "I get caught up in the whirlwind of activity."⁶⁴

Here also, like Julian before her and Ignatius after, Teresa emphasises the indispensable nature of the church in the developing spiritual life. The sacramental action of the church witnesses to the love of God made manifest in Christ. Yet this did not mean that Teresa felt the church was above criticism, rather the church was criticable in the manner in which it was exercising its authority and remaining faithful to its Lord.

"There is no hint of an appeal from the Church to a "pure" Christianity outside it. But the Church's mediation is performed through the sacramental action which witnesses to God's unchanging commitment; this presents Jesus sacramentally and in its retelling of Scripture, as the way for all people to find their way to the knowledge and love of God and to have their will and desire bound to God. The Church in short, guards and transmits those possibilities that Teresa and those like her realise. If the contemplative radical like Teresa questions the Church's practice, even in some respects the Church's method of practising authority, she does so in the name of what the Church itself "authoritatively" does and says."⁶⁵

Interaction with John of the Cross

Teresa's contemporary and collaborator in the reform of the Carmelite monasteries, John of the Cross, also stressed this fundamental link between action and contemplation. There is no real spirituality which is not deeply concerned with the poor, suffering, and marginalised. Yet time and again John appears to be drawing his readers back to the mode of waiting upon God prior to any doing. He stressed that the Christian experience of growth in relationship with God is growth in obscurity involving pain and struggle. It is a movement into darkness and dispossession, but it is in this manner a following of Christ and in being thus dispossessed the individual is shared out for all, in imitation of Christ. Yet the foundation for what appears a

theological mysteries. The point is that such intensity and such perception are no longer alien to the soul that has completed its journey, and so no longer interrupt the flow of thought and action." *ibid.* p. 162.

63 Fieldworker D. *op. cit.*

64 Fieldworker C. *op. cit.*

65 Williams R., Teresa of Avila, *op. cit.* pp. 169-170.

dour programme is love and though John appears uncompromising in his demand for individual renunciation, paradoxically this is aligned as Collins⁶⁶ makes clear with his manifestly overflowing joy in created goodness and beauty.

Always the initiative belongs to God, and the writings of John re-emphasise the total gratuitousness of all God's gifts. Indeed the very disposition of receptivity is itself a feature of prevenient grace and establishes that attentiveness which it also sustains.⁶⁷

"A certain loving gaze into the dark reaches of faith where God is known to dwell, an activity which, for all its simplicity and its "confused and general" nature is something which the person can discern and faithfully maintain, sustained by the now considerable grace of God. It is a condition of strong sensitive spiritual attunement to the divine mystery."⁶⁸

In this attunement - this simple dark gaze of contemplative faith - there is a deeper openness to God and to other human beings. For John there is no other way for a person to become whole than by committing self to God's loving and transforming will. Here the false darkness of unmortified desire must give way before the pure and simple light of God. Within this new mode of attentiveness, a novel form of spiritual ascesis comes to the fore, involving a deeper acceptance of an inner austerity which God has initiated. There is the need to discern the authenticity of the contemplative darkness experienced at this time and indeed the finely discerning nature of John's experiential knowledge is apparent in his writings.

There is no curtailment of the exterior form of asceticism during this time of deepening contemplation, but John makes clear that this should become a more sensitive and discerning tool in drawing towards a purification which aims at the root causes of sin. Here again this is the operative grace of God at work rather than an individual's own efforts.

"The requisite capacity for receiving passive mystical graces is not simply the fruit of active ascesis. Such graces cannot be earned and in fact, to the mystic himself the gift of prayer will always seem to be vastly disproportionate to his poor preparation or merits."⁶⁹

66 Collins R., *John of the Cross*, Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1990, p. 60ff.

67 There is a resonance here with one of the Hope Community members remarks concerning her need for space and time to herself. "I know that I need space. I need to have more of that - time out to restock. I need a lot of time to myself to ponder things. .. I'm very greedy for those times of being quiet, being with God, being alone." Fieldworker C. op. cit.

68 Collins R., *John of the Cross*, op. cit. p. 70.

69 Ibid. p. 66.

Throughout his works, as Collins makes clear, John always emphasises the working of grace as a living personal relationship between God and the human person. It is this intimacy which draws the individual to an "habitual sense of the need for purification."⁷⁰ John's most renowned image is that of night and the two dark nights of the senses and the spirit. Without undertaking a full exploration of the literature abounding on these, it is important for our purposes to give them some consideration. Although two nights are described, they are - as it were - interwoven. The purification of the senses begun in the earlier phases only comes to its perfection in the radical refinement of the spirit. As Collins states,

"If we envisage the grace of God moving progressively inwards, then the divinisation of the outward sensitive life is not accomplished until the light has reached the innermost substance of the soul and from there irradiates the whole person."⁷¹

In this process there is a move into what is referred to as the passive night of the spirit. Here there is ultimately an ontological purification to which, John asserts, few are called. It appears to involve a true experiential knowledge of one's real lack of spiritual integrity. Finally full mystical union brings into one the work of God and the individual's free co-operation with that work. Here there is the fulfilment of human life and freedom in the freedom and life of God. Yet the way to this final freedom is through the reality of an individual's own weakness and deep poverty.

"Spiritual nakedness and poverty of spirit and emptiness in faith is what is needed for union of the soul with God."⁷²

Although an orientation towards transcendence is a fundamental feature of human life, as ongoingly asserted in this work, individuals are themselves unable to realise that transcendent life or even by their own efforts to dispose themselves for this. Again it is the graced gift of God which draws them to holiness and paradoxically the more they are drawn into a humble awareness of this reality the more they are infused with that divine spirit. Such awareness, far from breeding a spirit of worthlessness, depression and disintegration, flowers mysteriously into real spiritual growth in joy and peace through this apparent emptiness.

"In the way of spiritual emptiness the soul asserts nothing of its own. It recognises the voice of the Beloved as the unique source of all meaning, and so, freely relinquishing control of its life to Him, enters into a region not of uncertainty but instead of great mystery."⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 90.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 81.

⁷² John of the Cross, *Ascent II* 24, 9, cited in *ibid.* p. 85.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 95.

Indeed it may be that the hope which is able to risk all is the sign of a profound security. This drawing towards self-transcendence is seen by John as a sign of authenticity for any particular experience of God. On the part of the individual it consists in this steady attentiveness to the dark and sensorily-deprived region where God is spiritually "sensed". For John this is the stance of contemplative faith and is the only means both to union with God and to true knowledge of oneself and the world which one inhabits. Yet always John ties this understanding to the normative guidance of the church, stressing that the genuine mystic will always have a concern to avoid self-delusion and thus will want to test any individual experience against the belief of the church. Thus what may be seen as an intimate personal dark night of the soul has also a necessary ecclesial dimension and context.

It is the graced gift of faith which creates both an implacable thirst for God within the individual and also assists that vision of the mysterious unseen presence of God in all such that all creation is "charged with the grandeur of God", as Hopkins so powerfully portrayed. It is an ongoing paradox of this state that the more the individual is aware of his or her own emptiness and powerlessness - drawn into real spiritual poverty - the more consistently the power of God is operative within that life. It is a consistent theme in John's work that,

" .. by being true, through free consent to his necessary ontological passivity under God, a person enters into the full possession of his own powers. For, like everything else, these are held only as a gift from God, and their truly effective exercise can be realised only by a constant docility which allows them to be subsumed into His power."⁷⁴

There is here enacted the ontological reality of an individual being changed by the power of divine love. It is that love which works the transformation and which draws the individual into that purifying trajectory where desire, born out of love and sustained by love, brings to light the roots of sin which vitiate that mysterious union with the divine.

"The deep reaches of the "deep caverns" - the ground of desire co-extensive with the soul's very being made in the image of God - are revealed by the light of grace. The more a soul is purified by the fire of love, the clearer will be its spiritual vision of all things, including itself. It becomes aware of its own unsearchable capacity, knowing experientially how totally it is made for union with God, but also how completely that fulfilment lies beyond its own resources. This is not a speculative philosophical insight. It is the experience of radical "emptiness" by which love prepares the will, straining its capacity to

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 140.

ever greater limits in anticipation of an ever greater fruition. It takes the form of consuming desire."⁷⁵

The suffering involved in such transformation is thus the result of loving desire not masochism. It is a mysterious sharing in the being of Christ, and in its reconciling reality it witnesses to the transformation of the disfigurement of sin into the marks of love. It is a deep involvement in the forgiveness of Christ.⁷⁶ The eventual "logic" of this progression is the emergence of true action from such passivity, of flourishing life from death and of an abundant fullness from the emptiness of dispossession.

Interaction with Therese of Lisieux

The divine love is most supremely expressed in the light which issues from the Cross, such was the inspiration of the later Carmelite Therese of Lisieux. Her vision of that radical weakness which is also the foundation of strength echoes the work of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. The condition of this divine love into which human beings are drawn is that humility and lowliness which rejoices in the infinite capacity of God to both delight in and work through such "nothingness". As O'Donoghue asserts,

"For Therese one thing alone remained when all was gone: love. Love, naked, poor, unsupported by the promise of future joy and glory. It was, I think, this that issued forth in power at the end, finding its complete support, its indestructible eternity within itself, where all the time, mysteriously, God was being born again."⁷⁷

The insistence and re-insistence upon the primacy of love was the foundation of Therese's own understanding of her vocation, her "Little Way", and the context for all her instructions to others. A child-like trust combined with a deep sensitivity, vulnerability and openness to a God she imaged as simple, clear, intimate and loving, stood in stark contrast to the piety of the age in which she lived. For her the offering of an individual to God was as an act of loving trust not a desire for suffering. Such loving trust was crystallised for her in an inner attitude of "remaining little", knowing that God sustained her at each moment.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 143.

⁷⁶ c.f. O'Donoghue remarks "The forgiveness of Christ is the bringing forth of that deeper self where our true freedom dwells. To accept this forgiveness is to cast away all masks and pretences, and to walk free and entirely vulnerable both to the light of Christ and the menacing darkness of the world. To accept forgiveness is to accept my deepest truth and my deepest freedom. But this truth is that of myself I am absolutely nothing; my deepest freedom is the freedom to be loved, to be, as it were, at the mercy of those who love me." O'Donoghue N., The Holy Mountain: Approaches to the Mystery of Prayer, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1983, p. 88/89.

⁷⁷ O'Donoghue N., Heaven in Ordinarie, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1979, p. 80.

"To remain little is to discover one's own nothingness, it is to always await the good God, it is not to afflict oneself with one's faults. Finally it is to win no fortune, to be disquieted about nothing."⁷⁸

Therese's realisation that her vocation was one of love was rooted not in a volitional act of the will but in a personal relationship of trust in God. Here she used so often the familiar scriptural texts⁷⁹ which spoke of the trust of the young child who sleeps without fear in a parent's arms. Prayer for Therese was a simple turning of the heart towards God.

"For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus."⁸⁰

Yet this sense of union, this simple gaze of love, which appeared to stand in stark contrast to the more pronounced notions of growth in the spiritual life, as advocated by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, was not arrived at without the familiar way of purification. For Therese this took the form of an emphasis upon detachment. John cautioned against dependence on anything that might weigh down the spirit, and particularly anxiety, guilt and fear. Therese adopted a habit of detachment which she adhered to strictly, which was incisive and all-inclusive but which was not seen as an end in itself. The end was the freedom of a greater openness to God. For her this detachment meant a continuous resistance to clinging to things, people, emotions, impulses, ideas, habits, preoccupations, indeed anything. She said of herself,

" .. Jesus has given me the grace of not being any more attached to the goods of the mind and heart than to those of earth."⁸¹

It was the way of love which drew her along the path of detachment, and this love was to find its flowering in relationships with others, such that it could be seen as a pathway to sanctity for ordinary people. Her emphasis was always to look for the positive good in others rather than the negative capabilities.

"Charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice."⁸²

78 Therese of Lisieux, cited in O'Connor P., *In Search of Therese*, Wilmington Delaware, Michael Glazier, 1987, p. 96.

79 c.f. Isaiah 66 12; Psalm 131.

80 Therese of Lisieux, cited in O'Connor P., *In Search of Therese*, op. cit. p. 114.

81 Ibid. p. 44.

82 Ibid. p. 165.

Therese saw that it was in the darkness of littleness and weakness that the greatness and glory of God could shine more brightly. Thus she could state that she was not only reconciled to her weakness and imperfections but could also find her joy in them. Within her practice of detachment can be seen the paradox of all Christian asceticism that all the focus is upon making more room for the God whose goodness she always relied upon.

"Sanctity consists in a disposition of the heart, which leaves us little and humble in God's arms, aware of our weakness and trusting unto folly in His fatherly goodness."⁸³

However, as O'Donoghue emphasises⁸⁴, such a progress involves the actuality of the Father consistently being of supreme importance. That is why the way of detachment was so important and indeed in this lies the true greatness of the "Little Way" for true detachment and the consequently purified spirit is great through the enrichment of grace. This process, just as the way outlined by John, is a never-ending one drawing beyond all finite limits, as O'Donoghue makes clear.

"[Therese] understood that she could not be taken up to where the Father is, that she could not enter into that union with the Father for which her whole being yearned unless she were ready to be taken beyond all finite limits and all the security and comfort of the human. She knew that she had to go by way of Gethsemane and Calvary, that the image which she had to receive into the depths of her being was the image of Jesus crucified."⁸⁵

O'Donoghue argues powerfully that at the end of her life Therese underwent such a "death of the spirit" as that of Gethsemane and Calvary. Linked with her terrible physical sufferings, there came an inner darkness which quenched her little way of trust and plunged her into the terror of non-existence, and non-belief.⁸⁶ This experience though rare,⁸⁷ has peculiar relevance for those who work upon the

83 Therese of Lisieux, cited in Von Balthasar H., Therese of Lisieux: The Story of a Mission, trans. Nicholl D., London, Sheed & Ward, 1953, p. 175.

84 O'Donoghue N., Heaven in Ordinarie, op. cit. p. 72ff.

85 Ibid. p. 73.

86 "Central to the Gethsemane experience is a sense of loss and forsakenness. It is only because one has, somehow, opened out to the (positive) Infinite that one discovers within that space whereby the awful chasm of the negative infinite opens up." *ibid.* p. 80 c.f. "Therese did not simply accept the night of nothingness for her ownmost self; she lived this annihilation day after day, hour after hour, sometimes in the total aloneness of nights of pain, alone with the pain of total unmaking and undoing. .. all through this time she had to support the faith of the whole world as it surrounded her in her enclosed convent, microcosmically and therefore cosmically. It is almost terrifying to see, as one reads her last conversations so carefully preserved by her sisters, how they have unconsciously succeeded in pushing her into the position of being their guide and support. More and more she is the one source of light for them all, ever more profoundly so as she sinks ever more deeply into physical dissolution and total inner darkness." O'Donoghue N., Mystics For Our Time, op. cit. p. 123.

87 There are gradations of participation in such a contemplative grace or vocation.

margins, particularly in situations where goodness and generosity can co-exist with the most perfidious violence and vice. An interior contemplative living with, experiencing of, the desolation of the violent and the addict (of whatever kind) and the un-faith and the disenchanting with religion, is a necessary condition for effective Christlike presence to the marginalised. One example of this may be the very real risk and anxiety which surrounded the leader of the Hope Community's visits to a notorious drug-dealer. A general awareness of the pervasive influence of violence is the awareness of aggression announced by one of the fieldworkers.

"I'm more aware of aggression amongst the boys than anything else. There's a volcano of anger. The children are like sponges. They pick up the anger and frustration of the adults. They store it all at an unconscious level. They don't even know they are angry. It comes out at the slightest hint of challenge or opposition to their viewpoints and they go berserk, totally irrational. I sometimes find myself shaking, trying to defuse⁸⁸ the situation."⁸⁹

An actual incidence of violence involving the breaking of all the groundfloor windows of the flats in an outburst by one psychotic resident was an isolated occurrence. Yet the very prevalence of such violence and aggression on the urban margins draws inexorably those who choose to live there into a participation in this contemplative grace.⁹⁰

Interaction with Ignatius Loyola

Von Balthasar draws attention to the striking resemblance of Therese's views with those of Ignatius Loyola, especially in the emphasis given to the paradox underlying human actions and dispositions and connecting human and divine choice. Thus the stress which Ignatius laid upon the discernment of spirits aims at this disciplined testing of an individual's feelings, emotions, values, heart. The human heart is envisaged by Ignatius as a battleground where God and evil are drawing to conflicting discipleship. An individual can notice the repercussions of these dialogical relationships in his or her own experience, and is able to discern what is of God from what is not. However, in order to develop such discerning ability, it is essential to become aware of all that goes on within the heart trusting that God will lead.

88 It is worth noting here that the Ignatian Contemplations on the Passion of Christ in the Third Week of the Spiritual Exercises involve an absorbing of the darkness of the Passion experience of Jesus analogous with the experience of introjecting the anger, frustration and pain of young, angry boys.

89 Fieldworker E. interview, November, 1991.

90 It is important to recall here as Von Balthasar indicates the importance of the training in detachment or indifference which Therese underwent. This ensures that no individual shall make the choice of the Cross through personal preference or momentary enthusiasm, but in the sober, objective knowledge that God has made this choice for him or her. Von Balthasar H., Therese of Lisieux, op. cit. p. 225ff

Ignatius believed that an inner spiritual dynamic resides in the heart, originating from the working of the Holy Spirit within.

Two vital characteristics within Ignatian spirituality are "indifference" and "finding God in all things". As Rahner makes clear⁹¹, the first is the presupposition of the second. Indifference is that state of attentive equanimity which stands in readiness for every drawing from God, realising that since God is always greater than any way in which we experience him, there must be ongoing detachment from all particular ways of encountering him. As Rahner states,

"The characteristic of Ignatian piety is not so much situated in a material element, in the promotion of a particular thought or a particular practice, is not one of the special ways to God, but it is something formal, an ultimate attitude towards all thoughts, practices, and ways: an ultimate reserve and coolness towards all particular ways, because all possession of God must leave God as greater beyond all possession of him."⁹²

From this kind of detachment, this indifference, there arises the openness to being continually available to changing situations, seeking God in and through all. It involves the tension of always being open to the leading of the spirit of God and finding rest only in this attentive mobility.

" ... prepared in indiferencia to seek him and him alone, always him alone but also him everywhere, also in the world: in actione contemplativus."⁹³

The more deeply one is united with God, there is a consequent deepening of that relationship with all God's creation. Thus the contemplative individual becomes creative, totally self-giving, radically concerned about others - in short spiritually fecund. Such indifference is the foundation of discernment - a way of life - the basis of mysticism in action. This inner alertness was an essential part of Ignatius's mysticism of discernment. To seek and find God's will requires an acute sensitivity, a mystical sensitivity, to the least sign of God's will. Obviously, in order to hold oneself poised in that openness of spirit, in readiness to follow the leading of the spirit, there is the need for liberation from inordinate affections and attachments.

91 Rahner K., "The Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world", Theological Investigations 3: The Theology of the Spiritual Life, trans. Karl-H. & Kruger B., London, DLT, 1967, p. 277-293.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

Accordingly, Ignatius, as with the other mystics under consideration, advocated the necessity of being open to the healing of all that was inwardly fragmented, in order to be more open to service in the reconciling mission of Christ within the world.

"Ignatian spirituality and mysticism find God in all things in order to love and serve God in all things. It is a mysticism of joy in the world because it serves God in and through this world. This meticulous search to find God's will and to carry it out perfectly accounts for Ignatius' frequent examination of conscience and for his sensitivity to his least fault. All mystical gifts converge upon being with the triune God in Christ to serve."⁹⁴

What appears unavoidable is some form of purification and illumination, whether this is seen in terms of a dark night as in John of the Cross or in the more homely terms of Julian of Norwich. In this connection, the Spiritual Exercises⁹⁵ are as Rahner indicates a "mystagogical help."⁹⁶ They are a departure, not an end in themselves. They assist the flowering of a disposition that of "discreta caritas" which is ongoingly open to being purified. Thus they are able to lead individuals at whatever stage of their spiritual development into deeper dimensions of the spiritual life. Here, the more deeply individuals are united with God, the more deeply too they are united to others in loving service within the world. Thus there appears a mysticism of daily life requiring radical fidelity to pragmatic demands and through all radical surrender to the mysterious God who grounds all life. Here again is presented the truth that God's self-communication grounds all reality not as an extrinsic pervasive force but as intrinsic to human nature.⁹⁷ For Ignatius this realisation led him to the desire to follow God's will through all the circumstances of life.

Loving reverence for God, reverential surrender to God, and reverential humility for God and others were graced gifts that Ignatius himself sought and advocated for those who made the Spiritual Exercises. For such gifts moved the focal point of life from the individual to God. These gifts of reverence, humility and loving surrender also set the context for discernment, decision and confirmation. Reverential love for

⁹⁴ Egan H., *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*, Wilmington Delaware, Michael Glazier, 1987, p. 122.

⁹⁵ "By the term "Spiritual Exercises" is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities .. For just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and running are bodily exercises, so we call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul." Puhl L., *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1950, Ex. 1.

⁹⁶ Rahner K., *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Ockenden R., London, Collins, 1979, p. 16.

⁹⁷ "Contemporary theology stresses that God communicates himself as the mystery who haunts, illuminates and loves us at the roots of our being, even before we begin to seek him." Egan H., *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*, op. cit. p. 108. c.f. references to Rahner K. in chapters 5 and 6.

God and all creatures is a deeply mystical view of creation and its proper relationship to God. As Egan makes clear,

"A person with the contemplative view of loving reverence uses creatures as God meant them to be used. Reverential love of creatures is actually their fulfilment. .. The contemplative in action finds God in all things and all things in God. Hence a mysticism of joy in the world fulfils this world through reverential love, so that God may be all in all."⁹⁸

Ignatian mysticism - particularly as witnessed in the Spiritual Exercises is focused upon a progressive simplification of prayer, a growing transparency towards deep contemplation.

"The Exercises are a paradigm of Ignatius's sacramental, kataphatic contemplation and may culminate in genuine sacramental mysticism. Rahner writes: "the basic incarnational structure of the unconfused unit of God and his creatures gives to understand that we can apprehend God in the sign .. only if we do not cling to the sign .. as if it were the ultimate reality, God himself. The sign must be welcomed and passed by, grasped and relinquished."⁹⁹

It is significant that what caused one of the young lay women to join the Hope Community for two years was an experience of making the Spiritual Exercises.

"It was a really a search for God. I was seeing a spiritual director in Oxford and doing the Ignatian Exercises and then she put me in touch with the Hope Community."¹⁰⁰

The Exercises were also an aid for the leader of the Community and an ongoing influence for her in life.

"There is no doubt that I have been influenced very much by the Spiritual Exercises."¹⁰¹

The more an individual becomes aware of the presence of God within their lives, and a sense of that loving drawing to God and others, the greater will become the awareness of the lack of indifference and sensitivity to sinfulness. This is an unending process but one of deep consolation.

"In the continuing experience of finding God in all things, the further discovery of unexpected sinfulness can become, in the light of the

98 Ibid. p. 131. c.f. "Reverential love is also the attitude sought in the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love, ie "a deep knowledge of the many blessings I have received, that I may be filled with gratitude for them, and in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty." Puhl L., The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, op. cit. Ex. 233.

99 Egan H., Ignatius Loyola the Mystic, op. cit. p. 144.

100 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

101 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

First Week grace, a joyful means of entering into a deeper knowledge of God."¹⁰²

As Veale maintains, the grace of the first week of the Exercises leads to a realistic sense of self and an openness that can stand without dissimulation before the loving goodness of God. It involves both a radical appropriation of personal involvement in sinful social structures which may well - and beneficially - evoke a sense of complicity and powerlessness; and consideration of an individual's own personal sinfulness. With regard to social sin, recognition of the responsibility to bring about change and a failure to exercise that responsibility may bring deeper feelings of guilt and helplessness, knowing that, as a forgiven sinner, an individual is called to discipleship not in their own power but in the power of the Lord. What is desired in prayer is a deep interior knowledge of the particular sinfulness that lies at the core of all an individual's sins.

"The conjunction of "the disorder of my actions" and "a knowledge of the world" may find some affinity with a contemporary theology of sin that sees men and women as structuring their world by their choices and being made by the world they structure."¹⁰³

Complicity in social structures which are inherently sinful affect individuals in the form in which they have directly benefited from a system which has proved unjust for others. To acknowledge that reality is also to be open to the potentially daunting awareness that if those same others are to be truly benefited it is likely to involve direct material discomfort. Within the Exercises, the personal and the social sense of involvement in sinfulness may be heightened.

"There is a constant dynamic linking the retreatant's recognition of the sinfulness of the world with an unease at what has been going on in his or her deepest self."¹⁰⁴

Thus conversion in these circumstances involves a fundamental shift from the illusory assumptions of autonomy involving those self-sufficient egocentric behaviour patterns to a reflective openness and commitment of love to God which involves an outworking in the lives of others. This is authentic growth in freedom.

"We can only be free if we surrender ourselves to God. We can only enjoy life if we surrender our illusion of control over it to God. We can only enjoy our friends if we surrender them to God. To the extent that we are gripped by the illusion that we can control our own

102 Veale J., "The First Week: Practical Questions" in Sheldrake P. (ed.), The Way of Ignatius Loyola: Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises, London, SPCK, 1991, pp. 53-65.

103 Ibid.

104 McVerry P., "The First Week and Social Sin", in Sheldrake P. (ed.), The Way of Ignatius Loyola, op. cit. pp. 66-76.

destinies, to that extent fear for ourselves predominates over love for others and God and when fear predominates we are not free."¹⁰⁵

As Egan makes clear, Ignatius offers within the first week an "architectonic view of the mystery of iniquity."¹⁰⁶ This mystery of sin is presented in the context of the crucified Christ. The movement of this week is towards profound wonder at the loving mercy of God and personal re-appropriation of redemption history. Within this can be seen the importance of the cross in Ignatian mysticism, in continuity with the Christian spiritual tradition, ie one who adopts the pattern of Christ and in whose ascesis there is a constant drawing to imitate the way of Christ - the way of renunciation and becoming a fool for Christ. The discernment of spirits is ultimately not a discernment of the heart on the basis of generalised moral criteria, but an attunement to the will of God and endeavouring to seek that will within the circumstances of daily life. This inevitably leads to embracing the foolishness of the cross.

"Because Ignatius encounters this God in Jesus Christ, he commits himself to the cross and to the foolishness of Christ. For all this foolishness of the Cross is for him only an expression and a putting into practice of the readiness to follow that free God even when he calls us out of the world, out of its inner meaning and its light into his own light, in which it seems to us as though we were entering into the night."¹⁰⁷

This is to acknowledge that the cross of Christ is an inevitable part of Christian existence. Indeed it is the Christian symbol of success shattering the illusions of other forms of success. So a young lay woman in the Hope Community can freely own,

"In recognising my own weakness and vulnerability, I've felt I can identify much more with the people here .. in the suffering .. in that joint vulnerability."¹⁰⁸

The gospel call is to live in freedom from illusions, to question assumptions that cripple the imagination and imprison in fear, to challenge injustices.

"To be a fool for Christ's sake means to risk being honest in a world where dishonesty seems in favour, being courageous where caution is a way of life. Those who choose to follow Jesus will suffer some dying, but death is not what they choose."¹⁰⁹

105 Barry W., Now Choose Life - Conversion on the Way to Life, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1990, p. 111.

106 Egan H., Ignatius Loyola the Mystic, op. cit. p. 99.

107 Rahner K., "The Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world", in Theological Investigations 3, op. cit. pp. 277-293.

108 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

109 Barry W., Now Choose Life, op. cit. pp. 94-95.

The second week involves consideration of various mysteries of the life of Christ from the Incarnation onwards, and within this context certain key Exercises. The Kingdom of Christ exercise emphasises that to be with Christ is to serve and brings to the fore this mysticism of service which was prefigured in the Principle and Foundation which began the Exercises. The Two Standards meditation continues this dynamic drawing of the retreatant into focus upon Christ's call and the ramifications of enlisting under his standard, where even poverty insults and humiliation may be a vital way of experiencing the reality of God at work in the world. What the individual making the Exercises is seeking at this time is a basic discernment - to know the deceits of the enemy in order to resist them and the way of Christ in order to follow. The important Triple Colloquy is the solemnising of a desire to follow more closely along the way of Christ in the highest spiritual poverty, and if it is in accord with the will of God into the way of actual physical poverty and humiliation. The Three Classes of Person and the Three modes of Humility complete these key meditations. They involve the retreatant in a concretisation of desire in terms of decisions in life for the greater glory of God. The Three modes of Humility, involve a drawing to a more literal following of the poor and humble Christ. Here is stressed the importance of that radical humility which always has a social dimension. To be with Christ to serve means to embrace the poor, humble reviled Christ of the Kingdom, the Two Standards and the The Three modes of Humility in the circumstances of life. In practising such a discipleship of the poor and humble Christ, it may involve the acceptance of life on the fringe of society. As Rahner indicated when he had Ignatius address contemporary Jesuits,

"You should be men who seek to forget themselves for God's sake, who are disciples of the poor and humble Jesus, who preach his gospel, who stand by the poor and homeless in the fight for more justice for them."¹¹⁰

The Ignatian mysticism of service is focused upon the poor and humble Christ. Indeed, the specific concrete decision or "election" to be made during the Exercises involves some deepened following of the poor and humiliated Christ. It was during this time of the Second and Third weeks that the leader of the Hope Community in her retreat found herself constantly being drawn back to her experience on the estate, and in this way reflective clarity also began to emerge.

"They led me back to Heath Town and were rooted in my own experiences here. I had the experience first and then I made the

¹¹⁰ Rahner K., Ignatius of Loyola, op. cit. p. 35.

Exercises. One interacted with the other. The Exercises helped me make sense of my experience."¹¹¹

The exercises of the third and fourth weeks deepen and confirm the decision of this second week. In the third week the context is the Passion and death of Christ, whilst in the fourth the background is the Resurrection. Thus there is a drawing into both the sorrow and joy of Christ whilst maintaining that openness for confirmation of a decision made.

The dynamic throughout these weeks is a Christocentric one. The grace desired from the second week is "an intimate knowledge of our Lord who has become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely."¹¹² The inner awakening of this deeper relationship with Christ has a correlation with an exterior outworking, namely service. Yet the dynamic is one, an interior Christocentric appreciation and exterior Christocentric operation.

"Ignatius uses the outer word of salvation history to deepen, and set in motion the inner word of God's universal self-communication. Only the inspired outer word of revelation correctly interprets the inner word, but only in the light of the inner word can the genuine salvific meaning and significance of the outer word be found. .. The awakening of the inner Christocentric word through the outer Christocentric word, as well as the illuminating of the outer through the inner, grounds Ignatius's Christocentric logic."¹¹³

Throughout the Exercises there is a gradual growing appreciation of the need for discernment as a life-long process. Genuine docility to the spirit of God is an art which is only learned through many years of trial and error. Only gradually does there emerge a delicate sensitivity to the inner motions of grace so as to be able to distinguish and be moved by the spirit of God. Consolation without previous cause¹¹⁴ is the standard against which all other consolation and desolation is measured, when it comes to affective discernment. It is a touchstone experience of undoubtedly and exclusively divine origin, and therefore free from all deception.¹¹⁵ Thus, as Egan indicates, it serves as the first principle of Ignatius's supernatural logic. However, it would be important to note as Ignatius does in his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits the need to distinguish carefully the immediate action of God in the soul from the reactions which follow and are influenced by habits, prejudices etc. It is expected

111 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

112 Puhl L., *The Spiritual Exercises*, op. cit. Ex. 104.

113 Egan H., *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*, op. cit. p. 109.

114 See Tracy's remarks, Chapter 6, fn. 20. One might note that this phrase appears unique to the writings of Ignatius.

115 Puhl L., *The Spiritual Exercises*, op. cit. Ex. 330.

indeed, treated as ordinary in the Exercises that there should be considerable interior movements, and sometimes violent alternations of consolation and desolation. Both affectivity and reason are engaged in discernment. Ignatius's rules for discernment take this into account as Egan clarifies,

"The rules for the discernment of spirits .. focus not only on affectivity but also on knowledge, understanding, the unmasking of "false reasonings, seemingly serious reasons, subtleties" (Ex nos 315, 324) and the thoughts that spring from consolation and desolation (Ex 317) The exercitant must discern that the evil spirit counsels during desolation (Ex 318) that God gives "true knowledge and understanding" (Ex 322) that the evil one may suggest "good and holy thoughts" (Ex 322) and that "we must pay attention to the course of our thought" (Ex 333-334)."¹¹⁶

Ignatius sought to find the will of God primarily through docility to interior lights and motions of grace, but without neglecting the use of reason, enlightened by the truths of faith.¹¹⁷

The stress which Ignatius laid on exterior confirmation should not be minimised, particularly as on many occasions he saw this confirmation as coming from the church. Here is glimpsed something of the ecclesial dimension to his mysticism. For example, though he steadfastly opposed Francis Borgia being raised to the Cardinalate, yet he was able to accept with equanimity the fact that others felt the preferment should go ahead. He did not make the mistake of equating his own feelings with the will of God, indeed he wrote to Borgia as follows,

"I do not see that there would be any contradiction, since the same Divine Spirit could move me to this action for certain reasons and others to the contrary for other reasons and thus bring about the result desired by the Emperor. May God our Lord always do what will be to His greater praise and glory."¹¹⁸

For Ignatius even the most convincing interior mystical experiences had to be congruent with the doctrinal and sacramental reality of the church. His loyalty to church authority, doctrine and practices ensured that his mysticism like those individuals already considered was validated by the church. For Ignatius the church was the visible embodiment of the Lord to whose greater service he was committed. He experienced the will of God though the authority of the church. Yet his was a

116 Egan H., *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*, op. cit. p. 164.

117 In this context it is important to refute attempts at too marked a separation between the operation of the Holy Spirit interiorly and the intelligent operation of the subject. Ignatius maintained a healthy reverence for the operation of intelligence.

118 Young W., *Letters of St Ignatius*, Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1958, p. 258, cited in H. Egan, *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*, op. cit. p. 148.

critical reverence for church authority. This is seen most clearly in Ignatius's own life and his involvement with church authorities. Here, his own mystical experiences united him not only with the Trinity but also with the "true Spouse of Christ our Lord, our Holy Mother, the hierarchical Church."¹¹⁹

"Ignatius' felt knowledge, .. is neither a subjective, pious sense of an invisible Church nor an extrinsic, voluntaristic attachment to an ecclesiastical bureaucracy. It is the genuine Christian experience in the mystical, or spiritual senses of full union with every dimension of a Church that is inseparable from the incarnate Christ."¹²⁰

Ignatius always remained a man of the church in its tangible institutionalised form. Unconditional loyalty to the institutional church and a critical detachment towards her spiritually was a genuine possibility for him and his companions. His reason for such devotion to the church, as Rahner explicates¹²¹, was his desire "to help souls" desire which reached its fulfilment when others were helped to grow in faith, hope, love - a deeper relationship to God. All else was subordinated to this end and was subject to change and left to the gradual revelation and prompting of grace. Rahner's suggestion of what Ignatius might say to contemporary Jesuits about their relationship with the church and indeed with the structural forms of power which accrue therein, focuses significantly upon the example of the poor and humble Jesus. Discipleship in these terms would prove irreconcilable with a way of life dependent upon secular or ecclesiastical power.

"[Jesus] alone can preserve you from the fascination of power which exists in a thousand forms in the Church and which will always remain there; he alone can rescue you from the only too plausible thought that basically you can only serve mankind by having power; he alone can make the Holy Cross of his powerlessness understandable and acceptable."¹²²

This powerlessness, Rahner indicated, also accrued to that vital relationship with the institutional church which at times might even have to be "endured" in the forms in which it was historically manifested.

"There will always be men who will stand by the Church in this faith in God and Jesus Christ, who will form it, carry it and even endure it, an historically tangible, institutional entity, which is at its most real (and so hardest and bitterest) for me in the Roman Catholic Church."¹²³

119 Puhl L., *The Spiritual Exercises*, op. cit. Ex. 353.

120 Egan H., *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*, op. cit. p. 174.

121 Rahner K., *Ignatius of Loyola*, op. cit. p. 26.

122 Ibid. p. 23.

123 Ibid. p. 38.

The all-consuming desire to be with Christ to serve is a hallmark of Ignatian mysticism. Discernment lay at the centre of this understanding, a guarantee of integrity and assisting what Egan calls the "ascetical dimension of mysticism and the mystical dimension of asceticism."¹²⁴ This was a discerning love, the determining principle governing mission and eventually the spiritual vitality of the Society of Jesus. This discerning love was the interior law of love inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹²⁵ Ignatius lived and harmonised the tension of mystical familiarity with God and pragmatic service. In this way Egan sees him as a "creative prototype" for contemporary theological reflection.

Speaking of the contemporary members of the Society of Jesus and their ongoing discernment of mission, Veale makes the point that the primary instrument of authentic interpretation is the living body of its members when they are united with God, with one another and with the spirit of the Ignatian legacy.

"To the extent that the members are not united with the source, the spirit that is incarnated is inauthentic. The sources are not for speculative contemplation or for academic discourse but for contemplative decision and action. It is discerning love made concrete in apostolic action that embodies the original spirit, gives flesh to the word."¹²⁶

This insight could also be applied more widely to the church, particularly for all involved in ministry on the margins, but also extended to those in any form of ministry. Here, it is seen as essential that there is ongoing union with the source in terms of experienced contemplative prayer, and involvement with the tradition of spiritual guidance within the Church. Such ongoing engagement assists the consistent purification of spirit necessary for authentic discernment with regard to action. "The authentic source is a daily rediscovery and an unending search." Here the traditional Ignatian dispositions are imperative. These include,

" .. a thoroughly right and pure intention, which in turn presupposes in the searcher "his greater abnegation and continual mortification in all things possible". Freedom from self-serving motivation is given only in the context of a continuing affective and contemplative relationship with the one who is "the way that leads men to life". What constitutes the Ignatian charism is the habitual exercise of discerning love in the work of the Kingdom now. In that ongoing process, the only guarantee of authenticity, of not being misled or deluded by the stratagems of the Enemy, is a continuing contemplative adherence to the Jesus of the Gospel in his poverty and rejection. The grace of the

124 Egan H., *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*, op. cit. p. 205.

125 c.f. Loyola St Ignatius, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans. Ganss G., St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970, para. 134.

126 Veale J., "Dominant Orthodoxies", in *Milltown Studies*, No. 30, Autumn, 1992, pp. 43-65.

meditation on Two Standards and the desire of the Third Degree of Humility are the preconditions of being made free to be led by the Spirit. The final hermeneutic is the Cross."¹²⁷

The very term "mystical" has become a designation for an obscure knowledge of God beyond the reach of the intellect. It is conceived as appertaining to the deepest level of an individual which is open and submissive to the activity of God at work. Yet as a term it has, as Williams indicates,¹²⁸ become too loosely associated with various peculiar forms of experience or states of mind. Mysticism has also been juxtaposed over against other more rational and particularly institutional forms of religious life. This concentration on a particular phenomenological core and states of consciousness is not the focus for the spiritual writers that have been under consideration. Instead, clearly presented from the tradition, is the interrelated nature of contemplation and action and the spiritual fecundity of the deeper forms of contemplation and mysticism. Integral to this is the need for that ongoing purification of spirit which safeguards authentic discernment and thus subsequent action; and a fidelity to the Church which expresses itself in critical loving reverence. The importance of the grace gift of humility within such an outlook is starkly evident enabling a deeper drawing into the kenosis of Christ.

"The self-knowledge of humility is a condition in which we know ourselves by looking at God. We see the neediness or the wretchedness of our state when we see the abundance and beauty of God. And to see our miserable state in this light is to be given some impetus to move, whereas the dead and false humility that simply presents us with our wretchedness can lead to self-indulgent and self-excusing despair."¹²⁹

Humility as graced gift of God dissolves self-conceit, chastens arrogance, and pierces self-absorption. It opens an individual in greater simplicity to others. In this way, it in some small measure mirrors God's humility and faithfulness in being unconditionally accessible to human beings.

Growth in this gifted understanding is an inexhaustible path, as Underhill so clearly indicated.¹³⁰ It is to accept the unlimited possibilities and also the responsibilities of such a way of life. It involves ongoing tension in an unrelaxed effort to be open both to the call to deeper union with God and to co-creative activity in the world. Indeed the effect on the individual is a transformation of being.

127 Ibid.

128 Williams R., Teresa of Avila, op. cit. p. 143ff.

129 Ibid. p. 115.

130 Underhill E., Practical Mysticism for Normal People, London, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1940.

"The spark of spiritual stuff, that high special power or character of human nature, by which you may first desire, then tend to, then achieve contact with Reality, is as it were fertilised by this profound communion with its origin; becomes strong and vigorous, invades and transmutes the whole personality and makes of it, not a "dreamy mystic" but an active and impassioned servant of the Eternal Wisdom."¹³¹

All the mystics here considered demand this determined deliberate action, the insertion of the ongoingly purified and transformed individual within the commonplace minutiae of life. There is a call to participate in the redemptive work of God in reconciling what is in discord.

"They want to heal the disharmony between the actual and the real; and since in the white-hot radiance of that faith, hope and charity which burns in them, they discern such a reconciliation to be possible, they are able to work for it with a singleness of purpose and an invincible optimism denied to others."¹³²

This vocation to participation in the redemptive work of Christ is particularly apparent upon the margins. Here, in a very specific way, it would appear that there is a call for individuals to become agents of God's love to a despised and rejected people. However, this risky enterprise inevitably involves a degree of unplanned and uncontrolled suffering. As already considered, this can take the form of physical discomfort with the deterioration of health due to poor living conditions. It may occasionally involve the threat of physical violence. It certainly involves the misunderstanding and lack of support evinced in the hierarchical levels of a religious congregation and the local hierarchy of a denominational tradition. Finally it may involve the stark confrontation of an individual's own basis of faith and understanding of a spirituality which is rooted in powerlessness and vulnerability. Here the willingness to embark upon the personal inner journey and the openness to ongoing purification of desire are the guarantees of authenticity of life as contemplation is gradually integrated with action. From this vantage point, discerned action and a fidelity to the Church, which is expressed in critical loving reverence, may arise and be transformative both of the individual and the institution.

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 151.

¹³² Ibid. p. 156.

Chapter 8 Towards a Spiritual Hermeneutic

"The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing rear,
Retreating to the breath of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

...

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night."¹

My beloved spoke, saying to me:

"Arise my love
my fair one, come away.
for see, the winter is past,
the rains are over and gone;
the vines appear on the earth,
the season of birdsong is come
and the coo of the turtledove
is heard in our land."²

¹ Arnold M., *Dover Beach*, 1:21.

² Song of Songs, chapter 2 v 10-12, trans Munro J. unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1992.

Winter or Spring are two contrasting seasons. One appearing to be the denuding of life and an entry into the barrenness of slumber and death, but in reality the precursor to the new life of Spring. Thus Winter may be seen as pregnant with Spring and no matter how long the gestation period, the promise of life is contained within the semblance of death. Matthew Arnold's bewailing of the lack of faith within the land, in contrast to previous generations, seems far removed from the joyous acclamation of the writer of the Song of Songs. The former a wail of seeming desolation, the latter the heralding of true consolation. In a not dissimilar manner, the immediate impression of the Heath Town Estate is one in which Arnold's sense of a loss of faith might appear an accurate description. Even the physical impression of the place serves to convey this, as the residents so powerfully indicated³. The sense of a penal institution where hope has long since been abandoned appears prevalent. When the sisters first came to survey the area, this impression was reinforced.

"A whole series of tower blocks in one twenty-two storeys high only two people opened their doors to us."⁴

Yet during the time of the existence of the Hope Community, the members have seen a gradual but remarkable transformation take place in the lives of some of the people of the estate. This includes a growth in self-esteem and in the ability to articulate the experience of God in their lives; and a realisation that "they have a contribution to make to their own becoming and to the human community."⁵ Such a transformation has more resonance with the note of hope and joy prevalent in the words of the writer of the Song of Songs. This hope is fundamental to the existence of the Hope Community, and is the guiding light of their aims and policies.

"People have got those seeds within to actually build on, and that's one of the reasons why we call ourselves the Hope Community, that you still believe in people no matter what kind of a mess they've made of their lives."⁶

However, this transformation is a reciprocal process. Engaged in conversation with residents and employing the critical listening faculty, Community members have been confronted with the presence of God amongst the people. Thus the hope so poignantly expressed in the very name of the Community is not only centred on the potential within marginalised people for growth and development; but also the hope

3 See chapter 1.

4 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

that is engendered amongst Community members by their deepening appreciation of God as experienced through their encounter with the people of the estate.

It is this experience which inspires hope and has renewed a desire for prayer. Thus the incarnation of this hope amongst Community members has been both facilitated by, and given further impetus to, that personal and communal willingness to engage more deeply with the contemplative dimension. This openness to risk the interior journey and encounter the powerlessness and emptiness that humbly awaits God's plenitude has profoundly nourished the sense of prayer and forged a deeper solidarity with those who are marginalised. In turn the very being and presence of the Community members impelled by such a dynamic has drawn forth further evidence of God at work amongst the people, and enabled the residents to celebrate something of this reality in their lives.

A choice is increasingly presented to contemporary individuals and the church whether to be motivated by a depressed sense of the lack of faith within society and particularly amongst those on the margins and to confine effort and vision in an introverted focus upon a diminishing group of devotees; or whether to look closely, listen intently and be open to surprise and wonder as the mystery of God already at work upon the margins is apprehended. If the latter vision is but glimpsed, it leads into paths of more profound risk for individuals and the church. It leads deeper into the contemplative way, not as a withdrawal from the world into an enclosed environment, but rooted firmly in and with the marginalised and giving fresh impetus to proclamation of the gospel. It leads increasingly to a humble awareness of God at work beyond institutional boundaries enticing individuals to believe.

"When I was with those people who were, in a sense, in the dirt I felt this closeness to God .. the God whom I was seeking ... there was something drawing me."⁷

The previous chapter illustrated how the spiritual tradition substantiates the integrated nature of contemplation and action. Indeed there is abundant evidence that the deeper individuals are drawn into their own contemplative depths the more empowered are they for authentic and effective ministry, particularly amongst the marginalised. Openness to some form of ongoing purification of desire I have argued is a crucial factor upon this inner journey, assisting that consistent discernment of motivation which supports authentic action with and on behalf of the marginalised, without succumbing to manipulation or exploitation. In this chapter it is necessary to

⁷ Fieldworker C. interview, November, 1991.

consider in more detail the process of that interior journey and the qualities engendered along the way vital for a contemporary spiritual hermeneutic. In such consideration, interaction with the work of Merton proves invaluable.

Unless there is a more profound human understanding derived from that exploration of the inner ground of human existence, loving activity will tend to be superficial and deceptive. Thus there is a direct correlation between the deepening of an individual's interior life and the expansion of the capacity to understand and serve others. There are no short-cuts in this process, for it appears part of the human condition that we are slow to relinquish either mental or material comfort.

"God's will is for us to become agents of love, and this is sufficiently difficult and risky for us to be sure that it will involve suffering, the kind of suffering we cannot control. It is no use choosing crosses that look congenial, because the point of the true bearing of the cross is the displacing of our self-oriented desires by openness to God."⁸

This openness is the starting point for the interior journey. It involves some generosity even magnanimity in the risk of embarking upon something unknown and uncontrolled. Here there is a drawing into a depth of solitude which confronts the fear of loneliness. Gradually there emerges a developing sense of powerlessness and helplessness, even apparent emptiness as the level of contemplative prayer deepens. Here a process of purification of motivation, desire and ultimately spirit, leads into a growing freedom. At the heart of the journey the arrogance which sought to bring God to the marginalised is transformed through the shock of recognition of God already present into a humble receptivity of God's presence. At this juncture, the possibilities for reciprocal transformation are most evident, as those who work on the margins are evangelised by the people with whom they work and are in this process enabled freely to contribute to a shared spirituality.

The Risk of Beginning the Journey

Those who seek authentic action on the margins are bound to risk exploring the inner waste of their own being and here to know the seasons of their own hearts, the fullness of consolation and the emptiness of desolation. Ontological reality lies here. There is a call to an integrating acceptance of the mystery at the heart of life and gratitude for the dimension of giftedness within. Here is encountered the paschal mystery of the contemplative dimension, where one lets go of needs and fears in order to receive gratefully the mystery of God's gift of self. Knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge of self as utterly dependent on God's saving knowledge. In

⁸ Williams R., Teresa of Avila London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1991, p. 95.

its essence, it appears as more akin to an ongoing discovery of something mysteriously concealed. This is how one of the fieldworkers described her own experience of being led more deeply into this contemplative way through her experience of living with the people on the estate.

"Somehow it seemed like a secret that was going to unfold .. and I didn't know what the secret was but I wanted to stay with it all."⁹

This interior exploration requires the listening heart. As already indicated,¹⁰ listening necessitates hearing, and both lead into understanding and reach into interior truth. For there to be understanding it must be found within a shared context involving participation and the shared taking of time. The leader of the Hope Community made this very clear in regard to the time spent just listening to the stories of the lives of the people of the estate.

"It isn't easy to find the sparks of hope in people's stories, their particular magic, it's a long slow process."¹¹

Understanding of its very nature is both practical and credential, prompting appropriate responses, and the best of such responses is always a furthering of the understanding or a gesture in this direction. The ambience for this hearing, listening and responding involves patience and the spending of time. Understanding is always an open and provisional matter with an unfinished quality promoting further effort and denying the possibility of foreclosure or complacent arrogance. It is always reformable and corrigible and only by denying this interior freedom can it be said to have arrived at some complete or privileged point. The process is characterised by a certain raggedness and unfinished nature as the attempt is made to connect with what is not self. It involves a constant reappropriation of self and extension of self in a way that is always unfinished and provisional.¹²

The risk of vulnerability is an important preliminary step upon the interior journey. Shared provisionality and shared vulnerability are near the heart of conscious selfhood. There must be a renouncing of the self as a solitary claimant. Always, what individuals say and do depends also on others. Thus the speaking of one may be the silencing of another in a power-play or struggle for dominance. The aim sought is a single simple story giving life not competing monologues. The way of such a

9 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

10 See chapters 5 and 6.

11 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

12 I am indebted for this insight to Bishop Rowan Williams and notes made during the Gunning Lectures of 1993, delivered at the University of Edinburgh Divinity Faculty, New College.

community is learned patiently over time by trial and error and the willingness to forgive. Over time there arises a discovery of the mysteriousness of selfhood out of trying to communicate and taking time trying to be less opaque. Here the very core of humanity is revealed in the difficulty. The leader of the Hope Community made a similar observation when reflecting upon her own years of living on the estate.

"You know if you've been around long enough you see so much growth in people's lives ... it takes years."¹³

We bring ourselves to speech and consciousness by struggling to see the other. Ourselves and the other are interrelated. We are constantly deciding what can and cannot be said in a world of listeners. The interlocutor is of vital importance here for we do not know what we want consistently without the mediation of others. We are constantly on the brink of adversarial conjunction. There is an unavoidable separateness in order to have a sense of distinction. It is important to stress the other who listens, perceives, respects with the solidity of human otherness. This is what the church is called to mediate, an interest beyond rivalry and a deep reverence for the mystery of God at work within the other.

The personal response is essential here. There is always a risk involved and the journey is endless. Upon this way there is required a disposition which is willing to accept more perfectly what is already known and glimpsed though obscurely - re-realised interior truth. Thus the contemplative way into which God himself draws individuals is not an escape from potential conflict, anguish, doubt and even in some forms death. Rather it involves the willingness to live with ongoing questions, questions which paradoxically appear to bring life-giving energies.

Many people suffer because of the false supposition on which they have based their lives: that supposition is that there should be no fear or loneliness, no confusion or doubt. But these sufferings can only be dealt with creatively when they are understood as wounds integral to the human condition. Therefore ministry is a very confronting service. It does not allow people to live with illusions of immortality and wholeness. It keeps reminding others that they are mortal and broken, but also that with the recognition of this condition, liberation starts.

"Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish, or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish

13 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

and opens many questions in the depth of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding."¹⁴

The risk of beginning the interior journey is mirrored in the risk of active involvement with those on the urban margins. In each case there are common characteristics. An open disposition is the invaluable foundation for acceptance of others, and interiorly leads to growing self-acceptance. The willingness to spend time listening to marginalised individuals is paralleled by the desire to spend time waiting upon God. The messiness and provisionality of life on the margins finds its counterpart on the interior journey where divine imperatives appear far removed from human tidiness. Finally, the raw revelation of vulnerability in daily life is also a necessary interior prerequisite for that mysterious discovery of selfhood rooted in divine intimacy. It is imperative that both forms of engagement are seen as necessary for the individual or the church if seeking involvement with the marginalised.

Loneliness and Solitude

"What do I find most difficult? The loneliness of it. I sometimes feel very alone. Where are we going and what are we doing here? Not many people really understand. At times I feel very much alone."¹⁵

The experience of the leader of the Hope Community in her work on the estate at times results in a deep sense of loneliness. In a similar manner one characteristic of the inner journey is the experience of loneliness; each individual walks a solitary path. Yet loneliness if honestly acknowledged and confronted can come to be a gift which is transformed into solitude. The truest solitude is an abyss opening up in the centre of the soul only encountered through "hunger and thirst and sorrow and poverty and desire".¹⁶ In a similar manner, one of the lay women of the Community stressed how during her time with the Community she has become aware of a deep need for time alone.

"I'm very greedy for those times of being quiet, just by myself, being with God, being alone."¹⁷

This drawing to solitude is an invitation to transcend limitations. In this loneliness the deepest activities may begin. It is here that one may discover act without motion, labour that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and beyond all desire a fulfilment whose limits extend to infinity. Here, it is possible to live in a deep and peaceful

14 Merton T., New Seeds of Contemplation London, Burns and Oates, 1962, p. 12.

15 Fieldworker A. op. cit.

16 Merton T., New Seeds of Contemplation, op. cit. p. 62.

17 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

interior solitude even in the midst of the confusion of the world. Such a disposition meets the very core of need of those who live and work on the margins. Loneliness when honestly confronted reveals inner emptiness which of its nature can be destructive of personality if misunderstood, but can be vibrant with promise for one who is prepared to explore its dark pain. Thus, loneliness may become a source of human understanding and a source of healing to others who are lost in the darkness of their own sufferings. In this sphere, a contemplative stance towards others is vital because paradoxically, by withdrawing into ourselves, not out of self-pity but out of humility, a space is created for another to be himself on his own terms and potentially to grasp his own life more keenly.

"We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet."¹⁸

Paradoxically, true solitude draws individuals into communion with others and in turn true communion with others draws individuals into true solitude. Thus the authentic self can embrace both solitude and other real human beings.¹⁹ A certain depth of disciplined contemplative experience is a necessary ground for fruitful action. Traditionally, contemplation has been associated with the deepening of a person's personal life and the expansion of the capacity to understand and serve others. Far from being essentially opposed to each other, interior contemplation and external activity are two aspects of the same love of God.

"He who attempts to act and do things for others and for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-controlled ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas."²⁰

The example of John of the Cross is again of importance here. John speaks of the important benefits of solitude upon the soul and the attitude of attentive listening to God. Such attentiveness to God is the very heart of the experience of love in

18 Yeats W.B., From his collection of prose - source unknown - an unreferenced handwritten text is kept at the Jesuit Centre of Spirituality, Manresa House, Dollymount, Dublin, Eire.

19 Merton tells us the true solitary is one who "realises, though perhaps confusedly, that he has entered into a solitude that is really shared by everyone ... what the solitary renounces is not his union with other men, but rather the deceptive fictions and inadequate symbols which tend to take the place of genuine social unity. ... He (the solitary) realises that he is one with them in the peril and anguish of their common solitude: not the solitude of the individual only, but the radical and essential solitude of men - a solitude which was assumed by Christ and which in Christ becomes mysteriously identified with the solitude of God." cited in Finley J., Merton's Place of Nowhere, Notre Dame, Indiana, Ave Maria Press, 1987, p. 47.

20 Merton T., Contemplation in a World of Action, London, Allen and Unwin, 1971, p. 164.

everyday life. Here there comes a growing awareness of direct dependence upon God and a realisation that everything comes as pure gift. It is the honest acknowledgement of the existential condition of loneliness in daily life, and the willingness to confront this reality on the interior journey which enables the transformation of loneliness into fruitful solitude.

Contemplative Prayer

The life of contemplative prayer is first of all life and life implies openness, growth and development. According to Merton, it is often more perfect to do what is simply normal and human than to try to act like an angel when God does not will it. Here a daily discipline can be a vital ingredient. This is why the core Hope Community meet together each weekday at 7.30 am for some form of prayer and a regular Community Eucharist is celebrated once a week. For one of the sisters this prayer life together is the most important part of the Community's time together.

"What I value most is the prayer life ... it gives a dimension and an anchoring to the group without which we wouldn't be the same at all."²¹

At the same time for individuals "prayer is a struggle".²² It does appear that the experience of struggle, self-emptying, letting go and subsequent recovery by grace in peace, on a new level, is one way in which lives are transformed through the Paschal mystery. This involves the discipline of interior listening, a difficult ascetical discipline hard to maintain, but vital for that inner journey and for engagement with those who are marginalised.

The heart of such contemplation is always beyond knowledge and reasoned understanding, beyond systems and explanations, beyond our very self; for it reaches out to the knowledge and experience of the transcendent inexpressible God. It is realised only by the sudden gift of awareness, an awareness that will always be incomplete and partial but which is an awakening to the truth of God within all reality. This awakening has a deep resonance in the inmost core of the spirit. A questioning spirit which simultaneously has within it the source of response. In this manner, Merton finds within human beings both question and answer. The question is, itself, the answer and individuals are themselves both.

²¹ Fieldworker D. interview, November, 1991.

²² Fieldworker C. op. cit.

"It is as if in creating us God asked a question and in awakening us to contemplation He answered the question, so that the contemplative is, at the same time, question and answer."²³

However, this is not to suggest that contemplation is a solitary activity rather the goal of contemplation is a sharing with others, an overflow of the gift given such that the lives of others are affected and gifted also. Again such an over-abundance affecting the lives of others depends on the degree of any union with God.

"The contemplative is not isolated in himself, but liberated from his external and egotistic self by humility and purity of heart. Therefore there is no longer any serious obstacle to simple and humble love of others."²⁴

Indeed, it is in that deepest ground of an individual's being in love, that is found both the individual, other human beings and Christ. Not one of these alone but "all-in-one": thus the same ground of love is found in everything. Merton himself states,

"Whatever I may have written, I think it can all be reduced in the end to this one root truth; that God calls human persons to union with Himself with one another in Christ."²⁵

For Merton there is an important reciprocity in our involvement with others, and this is particularly forceful in encounters with the marginalised as the leader of the Hope Community remarked.

"I am evangelised by the people, they teach me more of the reality of God."²⁶

This inter-relationship whereby experience of involvement with the people fuels relationship with God was a common experience amongst Community members.

"There are all sorts of flashes, signs from the people of God."²⁷

Merton assumed the interconnection of authentic spiritual growth with the challenge to live up to the pragmatic demands of love as necessarily incarnated in those who are marginalised. Here, the contemplative, for Merton, is both prophet and marginal person.

"He does not belong to an establishment. He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience .. We (marginal people) are

23 Merton T., New Seeds of Contemplation, op. cit. p 3.

24 Ibid. p. 51.

25 Merton T., cited in Finley J., Merton's Place of Nowhere, op. cit. p. 60.

26 Fieldworker A. Conversation, February, 1992.

27 Fieldworker D. interview, November, 1991.

deliberately irrelevant. We live with an ingrained irrelevance which is proper to every human being. The marginal man accepts the basic irrelevance of the human condition, an irrelevance which is manifested above all by the fact of death. The marginal person, the monk, the displaced person, the prisoner, all these people live in the presence of death, which calls into question the meaning of life."²⁸

Here, the importance of prayer cannot be minimised. It is no coincidence that the emphasis within the weekly programme of the Hope Community is upon prayer both with the residents on a weekly basis, with the Community on a daily basis and the time ascribed by individuals to personal prayer. For the leader of the Community this personal time generally in the early morning is a priority, especially as she is often unable to attend a regular daily liturgy.

"Many times I can't get to mass, but I will pray through the scriptures of the day always."²⁹

Prayer if authentic is an acknowledgement of finitude and need, of openness to being changed and of willingness to be surprised. Prayer leads to a greater sensitivity to the plight of others. Such involvement then nourishes the ongoing prayer. Ultimately both interior and exterior life are transformed.

"Only when we are able to "let go" of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste, and to experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionise our entire inner life."³⁰

The kenotic quality of this prayer, the willingness to stand naked and empty before God leads to an openness to being filled with God's own life, a union which finds its fulfilment in authentic action. Merton saw this mystical union as a vital dimension of the holiness of the church. Yet the precondition for such sublime heights is the simple presence of desire. Only in great desire, in earnest prayer and in selfless love can freedom be found. True contemplation is not a psychological trick but a theological grace.

"It is the will to pray that is the essence of prayer, and the desire to find God, to see Him and to love Him is the one thing that matters. If you have desired to know him and love Him you have already done what was expected of you, and it is much better to desire God without being able to think clearly of Him, than to have marvellous

28 Merton T., "Thomas Merton's view of monasticism," in Burton N., Hart P., and Laughlin J. (eds.), The Asian Journal, New York, New Directions, 1973, pp. 305-306, cited in Finley J., Merton's Place of Nowhere, op. cit. p. 51.

29 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

30 Merton T., Contemplative Prayer, London, DLT, 1987, p. 111.

thoughts about Him without daring to enter into union with His will."³¹

Here openness leads into simple awareness and humble prayer. In prayer the confrontation of poverty and helplessness become evident. Here the true self is secure within humility, and attentive expectancy in faith brings the individual to the brink of the insight of the true self in God.

"Prayer as the distilled awareness of our whole life before God, is meant to lead us to a radical transformation of consciousness in which all of life becomes a symbol. All of life is seen as God sees it. All of life is seen simply as it is."³²

Contemplative prayer as the integrating agent throughout the whole of life, generating renewed vision, attuning the listening faculty and inspiring action is the experience articulated by Merton and resonant with the experience of Hope Community members.

Emptiness

According to Merton, this contemplative prayer is a transcendent gift. It involves direct docility to the light of truth and to the will of God. It is always the divine initiative at work within human beings. Indeed for Merton, individuals become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in them.

"In order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new way, not only in His creative power but in His mercy, not only in His greatness but in His littleness, by which he empties Himself and comes down to us to be empty in our emptiness and so fill us in His fullness."³³

This may involve "coming before God in the silence"³⁴, as one fieldworker insisted with such relief, or handing "all the gunge over to him".³⁵ In these cases the contemplative stance of receptivity within the active apostolate is the vital focus. Merton cites a paradox of the mystical life as being that an individual cannot enter into the deepest centre of himself and pass through that centre into God unless,

"he is prepared to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to the people in the purity of a selfless love."³⁶

31 Merton T., Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, New York, Doubleday, 1989, p. 173.

32 Finley J., Merton's Place of Nowhere, op. cit. p. 127.

33 Merton T., New Seeds of Contemplation, op. cit. p. 31.

34 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

35 Ibid.

36 Merton T., New Seeds of Contemplation, op. cit. p. 50.

The simplicity of infused light leads into those depths that leave an individual inarticulate. For Merton the way to contemplation is an obscurity so obscure that it is no longer even dramatic. Here the importance of poverty and emptiness cannot be over-emphasized. The true mystical experience of God and renunciation of everything which is not God coincide.

"The surest asceticism is the bitter insecurity and labour and nonentity of the really poor. To be utterly dependent on other people, to be ignored, despised, forgotten."³⁷

Such a scenario is a daily physical reality for many of those who live on the Heath Town estate. Here the questions do not revolve around what to forfeit as a spiritual discipline, but what is possible given an increasingly limited income.

"I ended up with a choice. I could buy food to eat or some food and some electric tokens to cook it with or I could leave the electric tokens and buy food you could eat cold. So that's what I did."³⁸

The materially poor have much to teach those who are not so constrained, as the members of the Hope Community are quick to insist. They encounter individuals within such circumstances who, "have taught me so much more about the reality of God, than I learned in other more affluent circumstances".³⁹ The result of this is to pose a question for individual members about their own ascetical practices and more deeply about their own interior darkness. "I found myself having to look at my own ... shit."⁴⁰

The great freedom with which human beings are challenged arouses fear in the face of a potential vacuum that must be filled. This interior emptiness is the seed ground for mature growth and yet it can appear as the prelude to disintegration. According to Merton in the end this fear re-emphasizes the importance of renunciation. He refers to this as the "infinite binding" without which one cannot begin to talk of freedom. Yet such renunciation is not mere resignation or abdication; rather it is an active asceticism into which an individual is drawn by a deepening attachment to the imitation of Christ and the discernment of any motivation for action. This involves a deeper and more interior exercise of the listening faculty.

"There is a higher kind of listening, which is not an attentiveness to some special wave-length, a receptivity to a certain kind of message,

37 Ibid. p. 194.

38 Resident M. interview, November, 1991.

39 Fieldworker D. op. cit.

40 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

but a general emptiness that waits to realise the fullness of the message of God within its own apparent void."⁴¹

Though, at this time, prayer may seem qualitatively poor in an affective sense, yet its very poverty is real wealth. Its very emptiness is plenitude if open to transformation by God. Indeed Merton asserts that "the deepest prayer at its nub is a perpetual surrender to God".⁴² Here, contemplative prayer is a resting in God who constantly draws the heart⁴³ of an individual to himself.

What Merton consistently emphasises is that the deepest level of the individual is core-related to the crucified and risen Christ. Here lies the mystery of God at work within each one. This for him was the impetus behind the desire to bring into one integrated whole the entire human life. At the same time, he owned the inadequacy of any attempt to articulate the reality of this depth of the interior life.

"The inner self is as secure as God and, like him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. It is a life that cannot be held and studied as object, because it is not "a thing". It is not reached and coaxed forth from hiding by any process under the sun, including meditation. All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy unpredictable manifestation of his presence."⁴⁴

Such a manifestation arises in the midst of the ontological poverty of being. Here while empty, individuals are filled. While poor there is at the same time the possession of the Kingdom. The importance of the cross which ultimately transforms the world becomes supremely important. When individuals come to accept the cross within their lives there is the realisation that the inner ontological falsity is healed, and a freeing of that authentic life-giving dynamic which is the action of the Spirit of God within.

"Once we have accepted the cross ... then we become able to realise that the world is in ourselves and is good and redeemed. And we can accept in ourselves both the evil and the good which are in us and in everybody else and which go to make up the world .. We are the world .. but we are it as redeemed. The we see right away that the world is a question of interpretation."⁴⁵

41 Merton T., Contemplative Prayer, op. cit. p. 112.

42 Ibid. p. 13.

43 "The concept of "the heart" refers to the deepest psychological ground of one's personality, the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the abyss of the unknown." *ibid.* p. 38.

44 Merton T., "The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation" (unpublished) p. 6. cited in Finley J., Merton's Place of Nowhere, op. cit. p. 20.

45 Ibid. p. 56.

Such strong trust in the graciousness of God can enable life to be lived as a marginal person, one whose voice is no longer heard in the councils of the great. Here faith and trust enable a deeper entry into living the paschal mystery.

"This does demand of us a remarkable willingness to entrust our priceless skills, talents, possessions, reputation, friends and hopes into the hands of the poor, dishonoured and unappreciated Christ. The great temptation is to refuse this ultimate trust lest one lose all comfort, much respect from others, and a satisfying career, when actually this "death" through trust maybe the final and fullest growth of person in the Christian."⁴⁶

Such an entry into emptiness and death is a vital ingredient of any engagement with those on the margins. Here "leadership" is one of service rather than the exercise of power; to lead people out of confusion and into hope. Yet it is only the one who has had the courage to explore her own inner confusion and has journeyed the way through darkness, emptiness and death into hope who has the ability to undertake this form of leadership. "This Community is built upon brokenness"⁴⁷ the leader of the Hope Community stated. At this juncture compassion is the root of all authority. Such compassion arises from the depths of seeming emptiness and aridity; clinging to nothing of its own, it is enabled to cross boundaries of language, nationality, wealth or poverty, and education. Indeed nothing can be said to be alien for a compassionate individual - no joy or sorrow. For the man or woman of compassion has journeyed far into their own inner emptiness and emerged filled with the divine imperative.

Purification

The God given gifts of contemplative prayer and plenitude amidst emptiness, require an ongoing openness to purification. The Christian mind is a mind that risks intolerable purifications and sometimes, indeed very often, the risk turns out to be too great to be tolerated. Faith tends to be defeated by the burning presence of God in mystery, and seeks refuge from him, flying to comfortable social forms and safe conventions in which purification is no longer an inner battle but a matter of outward gesture. However, those whom God draws deeply to himself have an increased sense of their own sinfulness and a deepening desire that the light of God should illuminate all that impedes that light.

"Those of whom God demands the most perfect hope must look closely at their sins. This is to say that they must let God shine His lamp suddenly upon the darkest corners of their souls - not that they

46 Hassel D., Radical Prayer: Creating a Welcome for God, Ourselves Other People and the World, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1984, p. 162.

47 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

themselves must search out what they do not understand. Too much searching conceals the thing we really ought to find. Nor is it certain that we have any obligation to find sin in ourselves. How much sin is kept hidden from us by God Himself, in His mercy? After which he hides it from Himself."⁴⁸

Ironically to deny the reality of sin is implicitly to denigrate what may be the noblest qualities of human beings, namely freedom, responsibility to God and commitment to sacrifices for others. Here is encountered the importance of any prayer of admitted sinfulness which frees an individual from self-righteousness and teaches the ability to live patiently and wisely with shortcomings. Such prayer,

"knocks us off our towering, self-righteous perch, because it produces solidarity or intimacy with our Church of sinners."⁴⁹

Hassel stresses the importance of living peacefully within limitations and becoming accustomed to a sense of helplessness. Indeed, it is precisely at this point, as already indicated, that there is a new sense of solidarity with marginal people. Here the sharper the pain of poverty the stronger can be the inclusive impetus with regard to those on the margins. The more comprehensive is personal knowledge of inadequacy, the greater the potential to appreciate the working of the spirit of God through prayer and apostolate. Such prayer of sinfulness is filled with gratitude to God and with confident energy for the spreading of the kingdom.

"Out of the rich loam of the prayer of sinfulness (which is a profound awareness of one's limitations and sins amid God's love) comes the prayer and work of the apostolic "more" .. the "more" of the Holy Spirit recognisable as it empowers one to do deeds beyond one's talents and amid failings with greater than expected results".⁵⁰

Here is encountered once more the need to risk entry into powerlessness in order that God may operate powerfully. Hassel helpfully elaborates on the nature of such powerlessness. It is not simply one feature, it is a state of soul embracing an insecurity which is also a deeper interior trust in God. It is a choice to be in solidarity with "Christ's anawim, the dispossessed and marginal people"⁵¹ while at the same time recognising the living tension thus involved.

"Powerlessness is more than lack of control over events. It is choosing to let the anawim take over in one's life (eg their poverty partially dictates the poverty of the one serving them) since they particularly embody Christ. In this way, Christ and his people possess me more

48 Merton T., *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, op. cit. p. 23.

49 Hassel D., *Dark Intimacy: Hope for Those in Difficult Prayer Experiences*, New York, Paulist Press, 1986, p. 52.

50 Ibid. p. 68.

51 Ibid. p. 82.

and more. ... Inevitably such trusting dependence on God will include tension, misunderstanding, risks, perils."⁵²

Such tension is an ongoing feature of the life of the Hope Community members as one thoughtfully indicated.

"There's a lot of struggle in individual members, the struggle to be real. People are made more aware of their real natures, the fact that the only thing they have to fall back on at the end of the day is their real selves. This is sometimes painful for the individual and sometimes painful for the group, but only in the struggle will the reality be found."⁵³

With the awareness of sinfulness, repentance, according to Merton, is at the same time a complete renewal, a discovery, a new life, and a return to the old, to that which is before everything else that is old. It is a reordering, according to the image and likeness of God, which lies as an indelible imprint within the core of human beings. It is a coming home to self, a re-realisation of profound truths, a rediscovery of the authenticity of being. Thus, it is both new and yet resonant with something interiorly inherent within the heart. At the same time it is a consistent commitment to embrace the cross within life, which is above all that deep-seated rebellion against God which lies at the root of all sin. This orientation to falsity thus requires an ongoing humble willingness to bring this to God's healing grace.

"Life is, or should be, nothing but a struggle to seek truth: yet what we seek is really the truth that we already possess."⁵⁴

Truth becomes available to human beings in the pragmatic reality of life. However if the individual attitude is to take life thoughtlessly, passively as it comes, this is to renounce the struggle and purification which are necessary to gain authentic truth. One cannot simply open the eyes and see. Likewise it has been shown how difficult it is really to listen, hear and understand in any interaction with others, particularly those on the margins. The discipline of listening and of giving attention is a very high form of ascetic discipline which is difficult to maintain. The work of understanding involves not only dialectic, but a long labour of patient attentive waiting, acceptance, obedience to the deep drawing of God through the circumstances of daily life. There is always the temptation acutely prevalent on the margins of falling back into passive abstraction, or frenetic activity thinly disguised as obedience and abandonment. There is the ongoing challenge to live human life to its fullest amidst ever changing circumstances. This gives rise in the Hope

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Fieldworker E. interview, November, 1991.

⁵⁴ Merton T., Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, op. cit. p. 184.

Community to two safeguards. One is an irregular evaluation of the weekly programme which the Community undertakes. The other is the regular weekly meetings for sharing at a deep level the experiences of the previous week.

"The Monday meetings are very important for me, the fact of sharing as a Community. This brings us together again even at times when we feel very disjointed and apart from one another."⁵⁵

Paradoxically the path to the fullness of God is one of "ascetic self-emptying and "self-naughting" and not at all a path of self-affirmation, of self-fulfilment or of "perfect attainment".⁵⁶ Within this way of prayer the gift of discernment is a vital prerequisite along the way, testing the authenticity of all that occurs. Weakness and inadequacy remain upon this journey but are increasingly handed over and integrated as all is made open to the loving compassion of God. There arises a deep personal integration in an attentive watchful listening of the heart. Here the most intense and authentic purification begins.

"The only full and authentic purification is that which turns a man completely inside out, so that he no longer has a self to defend, no longer an intimate heritage to protect against inroads and dilapidations .. the full maturity of the spiritual life cannot be reached unless we first pass through the dread, anguish, trouble and fear that necessarily accompany the inner crisis of "spiritual death" in which we finally abandon our attachment to our exterior self and surrender completely to Christ."⁵⁷

Such purification is an increasingly subtle affair, at times almost imperceptible. Yet it is this ongoing awareness of the need for such activity which reiterates the interior reality of the gospel. Such asceticism purifies and liberates the inner person. Indeed, Merton asserts,⁵⁸ inner certainty is in a sense dependent upon such purification which draws to simplicity and sincerity of heart. Here there is a passage through the renunciation of all deluded images of self, those masks and fabrication of everyday living, towards an integration of true identity.

"My true identity lies hidden in God's call to my freedom and my response to him. This means I must use my freedom in order to love with full responsibility and authenticity not merely receiving a form imposed on me by external forces, or forming my own life according to an approved social pattern but directing my love to the personal reality of my brother and embracing God's will in its naked, often impenetrable mystery."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Fieldworker C. op. cit.

⁵⁶ Finley J., Merton's Place of Nowhere, op. cit. p. 81.

⁵⁷ Merton T., Contemplative Prayer, op. cit. p. 137.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 82ff.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 84.

Such ascetic self-discipline is itself subject to grace both for inspiration and to sustain the action. It is vital that this action arises from the depths of human freedom where it is sustained by divine love. Here there is gradually a drawing to deeper and more passive purification which is beyond comprehension but which serves to liberate the deep spiritual power at the centre of an individual's being.⁶⁰ Thus there is required that deeper attunement and listening which attentively waits upon the breath of God.

Service of the marginalised may at times be a calling to constant crucifixion. Here, drawn into the paschal mystery, an individual may find self identifying with Christ the fool, the worthless one, in seeking out and serving those who are suffering and risking and sometimes sharing those same sufferings. Yet this is always within the whole paschal mystery and therefore contains within it some sense of resurrection joy. From the darkness light does issue forth, from death life can emerge, indeed from the void of chaos unaccountably emerges the mysterious gift of the spirit sent by God to transform and make all things new. There is a paradox within such paschal mystery prayer,

"Its sweet dryness, full emptiness, teeming desert, light darkness and apparent denial of all intimacy promote a "homing" prayer at the centre of the praying person's being."⁶¹

In a not dissimilar manner, Aschenbrenner emphasises that the quality of any action is determined by the graced availability of heart and will to God.

"We will struggle with the fluctuating mixture in our consciousness of grace and sinfulness, of consolation and desolation and see how seriously related it all is to our service. An active apostolic spirituality, never a matter of simple busy activity, is as much a matter of this inner quality of heart expressed in a special human faith presence, as it is a matter of courageous activity and service for God's people."⁶²

For Aschenbrenner, it is important for individuals to learn to plumb the depths of experience to find God without whom being and existence would have no reality. This may at times be in the depth of the experience of pitch darkness or chilling

60 "The greatest mystical literature speaks not only of "darkness" and "unknowing" but also of an extraordinary flowering of "spiritual senses" and aesthetic awareness underlying and interpreting the higher and more direct union with God "beyond experience"." *ibid.* p. 106.

61 Hassel D., *Dark Intimacy*, op. cit. p. 146.

62 Aschenbrenner G., *A God for a Dark Journey*, New Jersey, Dimension Books, 1984, p. 92.

emptiness. Here there is the need to learn to recognise God even upon a dark journey⁶³ - such is the way of purification.

Freedom

It is the willingness to enter upon the dark interior journey and also engage with one another at a level which can be personally confronting, and which is certain to expose the vulnerability of those so involved, that is also the source of acceptance and bonding both within the Hope Community and for individuals at a personal level. This is why the regular meeting for prayer during a week, and weekly Community meeting are so important and sustain the Community's interaction with the residents of the estate. It is not that such communal interaction and personal prayerful initiatives solve all questions and issues posed by the very life and work of the community, far from it, but such a commitment enables individuals and the Community to freely confront such questions and honestly engage with the issues which arise.

"The root decision to accept my own life and to obey its demands may challenge my understanding of those demands, my honesty in their regard. The worst temptation ... is simply to give up asking and seeking."⁶⁴

It is not Christian to despair of the present merely putting off hope into the future. Such a negative eschatological view may appear to obviate the necessity of action but has no root in the real contemplative dynamic. There is also a very essential hope that belongs in the present, and is based on the nearness of the hidden God, and of His Spirit, in the present in the face and being of those on the margins. The Christian tradition continually reasserts the integrated nature of contemplation and action. Gradually, by accepting the particular place in the world and tasks as they are, individuals come to be liberated from the limitations of the world and of a restricted half-hearted milieu. Indeed here an individual may come to be content with her own moment of history with whatever depth of obscurity or prominence that might involve.

There is an imperious divine demand for a creative consent at the deepest level of human being. This creative consent is the obedience of the whole person to the will

63 "Much evidence seems to suggest that we will be led more and more to the Calvary of an apparently dark, empty stillness ... And there we must learn to find a God of love and fidelity beyond any power of evil in this world - a God of quiet joy and dogged hope patiently revealed in the eloquent beauty of a Son's faithful obedience in the dark and empty stillness. And that fidelity and obedience is always blessed with Resurrection. It always gives light." *ibid.* p. 179.

64 Merton T., Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, *op. cit.* p. 184.

of God, here and now. The inner "word" of consent is the coincidence in the Spirit, the identity of an individual's own obedience and will with the obedience and will of Christ. Such is the inheritance and depth of human heritage within the life of grace. It has been described within the Christian tradition as both a "blind stirring of love" and a "living flame of love". Yet this creative consent, is a non-action which informs the most powerful action and overflows into compassion for the poor, and marginalised.

According to Merton, to be truly Catholic is not merely to be correct, according to an abstractly universal standard of truth within a particular denominational form, but also and above all to be able to enter into the problems and joys of all, to understand all, to be all things to all human beings. This cannot be done if there is not a primary personal holistic self-acceptance by an individual which includes the reality of problems and failure. Here the experience of one of the lay women in the Hope Community is exemplary. In living and working on the estate, she was challenged to look more closely at her own deepest self.

"I didn't come to look at anything to do with myself. But it's a two-way thing now. I've been forced into looking at my own .. shit I suppose. That's how it's changed over the time being here. It's grown to effect me personally at a deep level."⁶⁵

Within such self-understanding may also be found that creative consent and responsibility that unite an individual to God's will and thus to the dynamism of historical transcendence.⁶⁶ Here lies the core of interior freedom. For this to be an ever deeper reality in life there is the necessity of a simple daily conversion, as Merton states this,

"If I am not fully free, then the love of God, I hope, will free me. The important thing is simply turning to Him daily and often, performing His will and His mystery to everything that is evidently and tangibly "mine".⁶⁷

Here a facilitating tool Merton utilises, in words reminiscent of Julian of Norwich, is the "wise heart". This hidden dynamism is at work already, the mystery of God within ready to be awakened and by which "all manner of things shall be well". To have this wise heart is to live centred on this dynamism and this secret hope. The "wise heart" remains in hope and in contradiction, in sorrow and in joy, focused on Christ. Such a focus enables the individual to see the mystery of God at work in the

65 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

66 See Chapter 6.

67 Merton T., Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, op. cit. p. 189.

humanity of friends and neighbours, children, poor and marginalised. Paradoxically it is those last groups: children and the poor and marginalised who often have a more direct apprehension of being and the quality of those whom they encounter. As another member of the Hope Community commented,

"There is no room for a great deal of pretence in the lives of the people of the estate. .. I guess it's being stripped of anything that's not essential. .. People are made more aware of their real natures. The fact that the only thing they have to fall back on at the end of the day is their real selves."⁶⁸

Sometimes it is given to children and to simple people to experience a direct intuition of being. Such an intuition is simply an immediate grasp of one's own inexplicable personal reality in one's own incommunicable act of existing. An individual's being is given not simply as an arbitrary and inscrutable affliction, but as a source of joy, growth, life, creativity and fulfilment. But the decision to take existence only as an affliction is left to the individual. By contrast in losing touch with being and thus with God, humanity has fallen into a senseless idolatry of production and consumption for their own sakes. According to Merton, the Christian accepts the "yes" of being with complete joy, docility and abandon because he believes that the "yes" of being and the "no" of man's refusal and evasion of being have been completely reconciled in Christ. The Christian choice is simply a complete, trusting and abandoned consent to the "yes" of God in Christ.⁶⁹

For Merton, one must live as a Christian, act as a Christian, with a life and an activity which spring from the free unconditional "yes" of Christ to the Father's will, incarnated in an individual's own free unconditional "yes" to the reality, truth, and love which are made fully accessible in the Person and in the Cross of Christ. An individual's life and action seek their meaning in a world which has been reconciled with its own truth and its origin by Christ's love for it and for His Father. Thus the

68 Fieldworker E. op. cit.

69 By contrast, Merton cites what Maritain calls the practical atheism of many Christians. "They keep in their minds the settings of religion for the sake of appearances or outward show ... but they deny the Gospel and despise the poor, pass through the tragedy of their time only with resentment against anything that engenders their interest and fear for their own prestige and possessions, contemplate without flinching every kind of injustice if it does not threaten their own way of life. Only concerned with power and success, they are either anxious to have means of external coercion enforce what they term the "moral order" or else they turn with the wind and are ready to comply with any requirement of so-called historical necessity. They await the deceivers. They are famished for deception because first they themselves are trying to deceive God. .. These are terrible and prophetic words, and their light picks out with relentless truth and detail the true face of what passes for Christianity and too often tries to justify itself by an appeal to the Christian past." Merton T., *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, op. cit. p. 244.

Christian response will always be one of implicit or explicit gratitude throughout all the vicissitudes of life. In like manner, Merton cites Bonhoeffer's words that,

"I am sure we honour God more if we gratefully accept the life he gives us with all its blessings, loving it and drinking it to the full, grieving deeply and sincerely when we have belittled or thrown away any of the precious things of life .. than we do if we are insensitive toward life."⁷⁰

According to Merton, what is new in contemporary theology is not the essential message, but the rethinking of it, the rediscovery of insights which had become obscured. These insights awaken the deep truth of human sinfulness and hardness of heart, overcome by the love of God and by His restoration of the world in Christ. The deepest most cogent mystery of contemporary life is that the Lord who speaks of freedom in the ground of our being still continues to speak to everyone.

If this is the fundamental presupposition of contemporary Christian understanding, then on the margins it is no use, as Merton states, trying to "get these people into the church". Indeed as has already become apparent upon the margins,

"The chief feeling about church is one of alienation."⁷¹

According to Merton, what is needed is to love such individuals with a love completely divested of all formally religious presuppositions, simply as fellow human beings, who also seek truth and freedom. This ready acceptance of individuals in the fullness of their unique humanity has been shown to be the only route for real dialogue, conversation and understanding. Within this process there is the possibility of reciprocal transformation but this appears to lie in the willingness to enter into that mutual vulnerability already discussed. As one Community member stated,

"I've received much more in being here than anything I could give. .. in that joint vulnerableness, there's a real acceptance of my own vulnerability. I've found in recognising my own weakness and vulnerability I've felt I can identify much more with people here."⁷²

Such a willingness to listen and enter into the experience of another through mutual openness and vulnerability also leads into the possibility of a deeper encounter with God; by entering into the mystery of the hidden encounter which marks the lives of others in a way that cannot be easily explained or understood. It is evident that God's will is not an external force that presses down on human beings. Rather there is a

70 Ibid. p. 316.

71 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

72 Fieldworker C. op. cit.

deep drawing from within the ontological core of human freedom - made free in the image of God. Human freedom contains in itself a demand for infinite freedom which can be met only by perfect union with the freedom of God. Such freedom comes to full maturity in that openness both to God and to other real human beings. By contrast what passes for freedom in contemporary society appears to be the flagrant compromising of authentic freedom.

"Today ... there is very little real freedom anywhere because everyone is willing to sacrifice his spiritual liberty for some lower kind. He will compromise his personal integrity (spiritual liberty) for the sake of security or ambition, or pleasure, or just to be left in peace."⁷³

Humility

For Merton the test of authentic humanity is the individual consent to receive the glory of God. Yet the condition for this openness is real humility which paradoxically ushers in the greatest freedom. In Merton's understanding, there appears to be a certain coinherence of humility with integrity. The former brings with it a deep refinement of spirit rooted in a trusting dependence upon God and facilitating openness to others; and the latter a certain peace accompanying verity of life, which combines with prudence and common sense.

One can only understand God by being in some mysterious way transformed into God. Here the obscurity of faith increases the darker it becomes and for Merton it is in this deepest darkness that human beings most fully possess God on earth. Thus the function of faith then becomes not an attempt to reduce mystery to some rational clarity, rather the need is to integrate the known and unknown into one living vibrant whole, within which an individual becomes more and more able to transcend the limitations of an external self. Here, the summit of one's spiritual being remains a pure mystery to reason. Here that hunger of spirit born of humility is conducive to silence, intellectual solitude, interior poverty, and limpid obscurity. Life in Christ is life in the mystery of the Cross and participation in the divine mystery. Here the perfection of humility is found in transforming union.

"The humble man receives praise the way a clean window takes the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see of the glass."⁷⁴

Within contemporary society the Gospel has ceased to be good news. Indeed, according to Merton, it has ceased to be news at all. If this is the case that it is not

73 Merton T., Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, op. cit. p. 83.

74 Merton T., New Seeds of Contemplation, op. cit. p. 147.

news, of its nature it must follow that it is not Gospel, for the Gospel is the proclamation of something absolutely new, everlastingly new. The message of the Gospel when it was first preached was profoundly disturbing to those who wanted to cling to well-established religious patterns, the ancient and accepted ways, the ways that were not dangerous and which contained no surprises.

"One of the great temptations of an over-institutionalised religion is precisely this: to keep man under the constraint of his own and his society's past, so that this safety appears to be freedom. He is "free" to return to the familiar constraint but this interferes with his freedom to respond to the new gift of grace in Christ."⁷⁵

The responses of some members of the established churches to the life and work of the Hope Community appear to indicate that this adherence to past securities is still a notable feature of institutional church life.⁷⁶ This might be characterised as a renunciation of the world. However, by contrast, Merton cites true contemptus mundi as being a compassion for the transient world and a humility which refuses arrogantly to set up the church as an "external" institution in the world.⁷⁷ This clinging to past securities adverts to the crucial importance of tradition, yet such an appeal is often highly selective. As chapter seven illustrated, there is an evident emphasis within the classical spiritual tradition upon the integrated nature of contemplation and action and the peculiar fecundity of contemplation in its outward working in discerned action, particularly amongst the marginalised. Thus the tradition, in this case, would appear to support the risky path of Merton's desire to seek a true integration of the life of the church in the lives of all human beings by an engagement which reverences the mystery of God already at work there. This may coincide with a mode of presence within the world which does not draw attention to itself in opposition to what Merton terms the "clerical" presence, which is both official and attention-seeking, issuing forth in "formal messages of institutional triumph".⁷⁸

A more modest presence within society involves: the willingness to stand alongside others, listening to them and thereby reverencing the reality of God at work within

75 Merton T., A Vow of Conversation, Basingstoke, The Lampe Press, 1988, p. 6.

76 See chapter 4.

77 "What a shame that all through the church the "will of God" can so easily resolve itself into the will of an Italian under-secretary in the Holy Office." Merton T., A Vow of Conversation, op. cit. p. 59.

78 Ibid. p. 66 c.f. "My one real difficulty with faith is in really accepting the truth that the church is a redeemed community and to be convinced that to follow the mind of the church is to be free from the mentality of the fallen society. Ideally, I see this, but in fact there is so much that is not "redeemed" in the thinking of those who represent the church." Merton's resolution of the problem consisted in "Complete obedience to the church and complete, albeit humble, refusal of the pride and chicanery of churchmen." *ibid.* p. 199.

them; and acknowledging personal failure and powerlessness. It appears intrinsic to the human condition that individuals fear such powerlessness, and the potential suffering involved. Yet an acceptance of shared human frailty facilitates real contact with the weak, disadvantaged members of society, and only in this way can the communication of good news be made authentic on the margins. Jaspers exemplifies this reality when he poses the choice between opposed philosophical possibilities.

"Will a person enter the limited field of fixed truth, which in the end has only to be obeyed, or will he go into the limitless open truth? ... Will he win this perilous independence in perilous openness as in existential philosophy, the philosophy of communication in which the individual becomes himself on condition that others become themselves, in which there is no solitary peace but constant dissatisfaction and in which a man espouses his soul to suffering."⁷⁹

Such willingness to embark upon the interior journey of limitless truth is itself a gift of God marked by simplicity: a simplicity that is and has and says everything just because it is simple. Simplicity is integral to real humility. Merton consistently emphasises the importance of this childlike simplicity. This quality is one which the Hope Community members have remarked upon with regard to some of those who live on the estate. It is linked with the lack of illusion prevalent in individual lives, when effort is focused upon the bare necessities needed for survival. Its effects upon the lives of the fieldworkers is both at the level of a deeper perception of God and in their own life style to adopt a notable simplicity.⁸⁰

Here the mysticism of Weil is once more helpful containing as it does a simplicity which resonates with the experience of the Hope Community and accredited as authentic by Merton.⁸¹ He recognised her intuition of the integrated nature of suffering and love and her insistence on being identified with the outsider, all those who could not be encompassed within the official church. Such nonconformity, combined with authentic mysticism, he stressed as a powerful symbol for contemporary society witnessing to the reality that the love of God must break all human pride and perforce is drawn to the humble contrite heart. This is the paradox of prayer that individuals are called to learn how to pray and yet receive prayer only as gift. It is only true humility which can wait in open expectation of such a gift. Here at its deepest level the distinction between the presence and absence of God is no longer really distinguishable - it seems that the mystery of God's presence can

79 Jaspers K. cited *ibid.* p. 20.

80 A small example: the main meal of the day in the evening would only comprise of one course, unless it was a particular celebration.

81 See Merton T., A Vow of Conversation, *op. cit.* p. 156ff.

only be touched by a profound awareness of absence. At this juncture, the disposition called for is a faithful child-like waiting in poverty of spirit, a condition indistinguishable from real humility.

This insight is echoed in the life and writings of Stein. Here she likens this surrender to being led like a child by God and committing all into his care.

"Being a child of God means to be led by the hand of God, to do the will of God, not one's own, to lay all care and all hope in God's hands."⁸²

Living in this manner meant for her the grateful receiving of all the circumstances of daily life with both simplicity and humility. In this way the outworking of that desire of the heart echoed in "Thy will be done" received its most authentic manifestation.

Such an orientation enabled Stein to live through to her death amidst the grotesque reality of Nazi persecution. In a not dissimilar manner, the Hope Community finds itself enabled to live in situations which have included: a riot on the estate, when the Community formed the only safe haven for all protagonists; the occasional violence surrounding local drug-dealing; and the psychotic violence of mentally unstable residents. Combined with this calm receptivity is an attitude of expectant openness, which enables those who work on the margins to engage with the people, who often exhibit great simplicity and spontaneity. As the leader of the Hope Community remarked:

"I love the simplicity and spontaneity of the people. I love the excitement of not knowing what's going to happen tomorrow, or even this afternoon, though in another way this is very tiring and unsettling, most of the time there's a kind of excitement about it - you never know what each day is going to hold. A lot of the time there are a lot of surprises."⁸³

A powerful principle, operative throughout the endeavour to be open to the deepest contemplative dimensions and also to the possibilities of discerned action, is for individuals to strive with all human abilities as though all depended upon themselves and yet await the divine gift as though all depended upon God. The lived tension of such a dynamic is difficult but creative. Here discernment becomes again a core foundation for any action. This is particularly operative in what Johnston calls "mystical nothingness",

82 Stein E., "The mystery of Christmas", cited in Koepfel J., Edith Stein: Philosopher and Mystic, Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1990, p. 19.

83 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

"Mystical nothingness (and in particular the apparently negative non-action) is dynamite. It is the power that moves the universe and creates revolutions in human minds and hearts. For mystical nothingness, properly understood paves the way for the dynamic action of grace - when I am weak, then I am strong."⁸⁴

Within this consciousness of weakness, which is the prelude to the grace gift of humility, there arises slowly a submission to the spirit of God. Yet this in itself is an art which is only learned over many years. However, gradually there does emerge a delicate sensitivity to the inner motions of grace and such contemplative grace may overflow into discerned action. Here the recognition of gratuitous gift is a quiet movement at the depth of an individual's being. Here too the final kenotic drawing is one which relinquishes all anxiety. Then decision for action is enabled to emerge from the depths of an individual's being where emptiness, darkness and obscurity are prevalent, but where the very emptiness is a guarantee of authenticity and fullness.

"In the mystical life one enters into the void, into a cloud of unknowing which seems like nothingness. .. God is approached in darkness and emptiness and nothingness simply because he is the mystery of mysteries.⁸⁵ .. Authentic mystical experience leads to a great compassion for the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the imprisoned, the underprivileged."⁸⁶

The way of the interior journey is to discern the leading of the Spirit of God who does not usually lead in clear-cut words and concepts but through inspirations and movements which are dark and obscure, as Johnston indicates, like "the supraconceptual knowledge of which Dionysius speaks".⁸⁷ This is the true home of the contemplative in action.

"Night is our diocese and silence is our ministry
Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied sermon
Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air
Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience
We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontiers."⁸⁸

The path of the interior journey, as presented, has a cyclical dynamic. The risk embraced at the beginning is prompted by involvement with those on the urban margins. Openness, temporal commitment, provisionality and messiness are features

84 Johnston W., *The Inner Eye of Love*, London, Collins, 1978, p. 10.

85 Ibid. p. 121.

86 Ibid. p. 132.

87 Ibid. p. 28.

88 Merton T., "The Quickening of St. John the Baptist", in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, London, Sheldon Press, 1978, pp. 199-202.

common to both interior journeying and exterior involvement. Yet the willingness to embark upon this course with the inevitable exposure of vulnerability leads into a mysterious discovery of authentic selfhood. Along the way, loneliness may be transformed into fruitful solitude while the desire for contemplative prayer deepens. As the path becomes darker and more obscure, the inner emptiness may be reflected in the reality of the external situation. Yet the space created within allows a more profound listening to marginalised individuals and apprehension of the divine initiative. This interior emptiness is the seed ground for mature growth but it can appear as the prelude to disintegration. This fear prompts that acknowledged need for purification, an active asceticism into which an individual is drawn by a deepening attachment to the imitation of Christ and the discernment of any motivation for action. A sense of weakness and inadequacy remain upon the journey but ultimately there arises a deep personal integration in an attentive watchful listening of the heart, and an ongoing free creative consent to the divine imperative. This freedom is rooted in and nourished by the grace-gift of humility. This humility involves great limpidity, as such it facilitates awareness of the presence of God in others. Thus the heart of the journey orientates the individual back to that risky involvement with the marginalised, but with an enhanced ability to listen and respond to the presence of God at work amongst the people. Here, there is a deeper appreciation of what Merton describes as "le point vierge."⁸⁹

"At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely."⁹⁰

I have argued that unless there is a more profound human understanding derived from that exploration of the inner ground of human existence, then activity will tend to be superficial and deceptive - particularly in relation to involvement with the marginalised. However, a willingness to enter upon the interior journey leads into an

89 Annice Callahan suggests that this point of poverty and nothingness by which we know God, which Merton calls le point vierge, is what Rahner calls the supernatural existential, a given in our existence.

90 Merton T., Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, op. cit. p. 158.

increasingly humble awareness of the presence of God already active on the urban margins.

This has direct implications both for those who work with the marginalised, and also for the church. This is a spiritual hermeneutic for the urban margins. It is rooted in the experience of interaction with the marginalised. Such experience reflectively evaluated propels individuals towards risking the path of their interior journey and ultimately this path leads back to deeper involvement with the marginalised accompanied by an increased perception of the presence of God at work there. Such an interpretation presents a challenge both for individuals and the church: for individuals to risk the engagement upon their own interior journey; for the church, to both encourage that individual engagement and to pray for that grace gift of humility to pervade all institutional life such that there might be a more receptive attitude to the mysterious presence of God outside the present ecclesiastical boundaries. If this spiritual hermeneutic is to be taken seriously as a potential dynamic for the church at the close of the twentieth century it has serious implications for all engaged in ministry within the church. It prompts the encouragement of the contemplative dimension as a foremost priority in any training for ministry. It gives prominence to engagement with the marginalised as a keynote ministry within the church beneficial for all members in a reciprocal dynamic of transformation. It requires a re-engagement with the classical spiritual tradition and a reappropriation of the treasures therein for contemporary availability. It may cause the church to be reinvigorated by this dual engagement with its own spiritual depths in the interior lives of its members, and its own renewed tradition; and with the contemporary manifestation of the presence of God amongst the marginalised.

Conclusion

"God is any patient old council tree choked in the cement of city streets, but showing forth so bravely, so beautifully in the Spring, and God is the grass on the waste land beside the factory, and the town sparrow born of dust and a little dew."

"That can't be right" he said

"Why not?"

"Why - well it's too much, it's too simple!"

"Yes" I said "that's how it goes - too much and too simple!"¹

"Too much and too simple". Such a remark could summarise the presence of God at work in the lives, words and actions of the people of the Heath Town estate. It is "too much" in that by virtue of their own discovery of the transcendent the people are celebrating grace, but have come to it in and through the sacrament of their own lives. It is too simple in that the operative fact of grace is expressed in ways that are often embarrassingly simple and direct for our more complicated Christian formats. In the face of the enormity of this mystery, that human beings are able to grasp the divine working in the everyday situations of their lives; and confronted by the simplicity of the presence of God at work amongst the people in disconcertingly novel forms, members of the Hope Community are themselves evangelised.

There do exist possibilities for a shared spirituality between those who work on the urban margins and marginalised people. Indeed, the empirical work has revealed that where time is expended in listening to the experience of those who live on the margins, the potential for reciprocal transformation exists. It is the patient commitment of time, the willingness to actively listen and the perceptive attunement which can hear, which are the preconditions for recognition of the presence of God amongst the people. Such fidelity in terms of temporal commitment and the willingness to listen also assists growth in self-esteem and self-confidence. Thus marginalised individuals become increasingly able to give voice to their own ideas, opinions and experience. In sharing these, there is also an articulation of the experience of God in life. Such a commitment of time and energy stands in marked

¹ Myers E., A Well Full of Leaves, London, Collins, 1957, p. 138.

contradiction to the values of a society which extols a different ethic, where time is money, and time expended - in any sphere of activity - must be shown to have a measurable return.

This is not to argue that all ministry within the church must focus in this way on the personal appropriation of time. However, it is to suggest that any evaluation of ministry needs to give priority consideration to encouraging and facilitating this dimension. Yet the giving of time is only the primary feature. Thereafter there is the need to exercise the faculty of reverential listening. Again, such an emphasis is not to negate the traditional forms of parochial ministry.² It is to suggest the possible evaluation of such ministries and the potential for a more developed form of listening to be incorporated or to be able to exist in a complementary form, exercised by diverse personnel.³

Conversation and dialogue could also have more life-giving potential for those who work on the margins in interaction with those in ministry at other levels of the institutional church. Here such exchange could serve as positive encouragement for ministerial outreach and fresh stimulus for institutional activity. It is not suggested that such attentive listening be in opposition to other ongoing active involvement in the life of the marginalised. Yet this dimension is a vital ingredient of, and presupposition for, such active engagement. Reflectively evaluated, such profound listening might also lead to significant change within the church at the level of policy making and pastoral practice.

2 In giving emphasis to Rahner's concern; that where the church is present, it should be a vital vibrant force, not a presence handicapped by an agenda it cannot possibly fulfil; I have suggested that this implies an evaluation of contemporary parochial needs and the encouragement of new initiatives alongside the possible reform of parochial structures.

3 This may not be the role of the local clergy of the area. However, the clergy may have a role in enabling others to "listen on behalf of" the churches, and feedback into the churches ~~the insights so received~~. This might then become not a task associated with any one groups but a collaborative venture of laity, clergy and religious. It might also mean a more positive process of collaboration with the laity.

Tracy has argued very convincingly for a natural hermeneutical competence which is universally available. Further research exploring such a possibility amongst the marginalised would continue to make a valuable contribution to urban theology and enrich the self-understanding of the church. In developing Tracy's use of the "classic" to cover the experience of the marginalised, I argued that in a similar manner to dealing with a text, there are demands which require constant interpretation. Thus it is imperative that there should be ongoing reflection and critical reappropriation of that experience in the light of the church's contemporary understanding. In order to inform that reflection it would be important to make more available, particularly for those training for ministry, the opportunity of direct involvement with the marginalised.

If it is indeed the case, as Rahner maintains, that human beings in their very essence are a transcendence towards mystery, this is a vital operational principle in engagement with any individual. Here the question arises will the institution continue to cling to known secure ways of relating to those on the margins, ways which serve to alienate rather than include? Or will the church risk the relational mode of listening through those already established contacts on the margins? In so listening will those in authority within the church allow the possibility of transformation by virtue of that experience? In too many discussions of the life of the church two prevalent myths still seem to be an oppressive though often unacknowledged presence; namely: that there is some ideal "right" model of the church for which Christians are constantly searching; and secondly that once that model has been achieved then the consequent result will be an influx of vast numbers into the church. The first denies the reality of early church history and humanity's defective nature. The second attempts to pre-empt the Parousia. The confrontation of these key myths is necessary if the contemporary church is to move beyond its own boundaries and engage with the urban margins where God is so actively at work. To enter into

such an engagement involves both risk and an openness to the admission of failure. I have argued that such a confession enables a concrete commitment to be made to learn from the experience of those already involved amongst the marginalised.

The facilitating tool for such a listening critically involves a deepening contemplative stance. This is a particularly acute need if there is to be a real understanding of what is emerging from the marginalised. From that position of essential vulnerability and powerlessness in our own contemplative depths, the clarity of resonance with others - particularly the marginalised - is peculiarly powerful. The divine desire to be unconditionally at hand for human beings in humility and vulnerability - most explicit within the Eucharist - draws individuals who enter upon their own inner journey into an imitative way which is fruitful in action. In this incarnational activity individuals and the institutional church are consistently invited to participate.

It does appear that a sense of church⁴ has become so alien to some that it needs to be reclaimed. Yet if this is to be the case the church is called to be attractive, inspiring, challenging and inviting. It is at this juncture that the leader of the Hope Community believes the people of the estate have something to contribute.

"I'm sure the people here have a lot to contribute to the renewal of the church."⁵

4 "Many people continue to grapple with the role of the church in their Christian identity. ... And the issue centres on the institutional church. .. For some it is a matter of conscience, whether they have to identify with some of the practices and policies of the church. Many, while believing in God and living generous lives of service, either explicitly reject membership in the church or operationally live their religion without any real relationship to church. This is a complicated matter but one that must be faced by the whole spectrum of church membership, from Pope and bishop to parishioners in the pews. A specific cause, or combination of different causes, can raise the issue for various people: a domineering clerical attitude; monotonous, uninformed preaching; a successful remarriage after divorce; the prohibition of women's ordination and many other reasons. For an increasing number of people, practices within the institutional church which they perceive to be unjust are making membership in the church more and more painful and questionable. to questions about how much one must identify with the institutional church, answers would range far and wide. Some would almost identify the church with the institution, while others would play down the institution to almost no significance - and some would even think the question otiose." Aschenbrenner G., A God for a Dark Journey, New Jersey, Dimension Books, 1984, p. 116.

5 Fieldworker A. interview, March, 1991.

This contribution can only be realised if there is a willingness to listen to the experience emerging from the margins and the facilitating tool for this listening is the openness for engagement with the contemplative dimension.

The authenticity of contemplation is to be found in true humility, and the willingness to walk the dark and insecure interior path is a measure both of the contemplative dynamic which is operative and the grace-gift of humility which has been received. This is applicable both at an individual and an institutional level. A key-note of this way of life is the appreciation of forgiveness. God's gratuitous forgiveness initiates a dynamic which inspires ministry. The individual experience of the awareness of sinfulness and God's forgiveness is a vital feature in distinguishing between the true prophet whose life is formed in the humility of forgiveness and the false prophet. Indeed it is perceptible that the character of apostolic action responds directly to the quality of the experience of being a forgiven sinner. This may also have further far-reaching implications when considering the nature of institutional involvement in this dynamic.

The dimensions of a spiritual hermeneutic of this kind potentially provides the ontological grounding for ongoing discernment. What may be most significant for the future is further exploration of the means to enable those fieldworkers who work on the margins, to be more open to, appreciative of, and ultimately willing to be changed by, the reality they experience among the people. A further step is how the institution may make more progress, in its attempts to listen, to hear, and to be open to change by, the reality of God amongst the people, by integrating the experience of those members working on the margins.

A keynote of this interior journeying to facilitate the deeper listening has been the emphasis on discernment. Not a discernment of the heart on the basis of generalised moral criteria, but an attunement to the will of God and an endeavouring to seek

that will within the circumstances of daily life - inevitably leading to embracing the foolishness of the cross. At this juncture the spiritual tradition's emphasis on purification has been reclaimed for a contemporary spirituality involving a renewed asceticism. Here reconciliation, both individual and communal, proves to be a dynamic for deeper contemplation and propitious action. However, authentic interpretation of either the classic text or the experience of the marginalised depends on the moral authenticity of the interpreter. Yet I have argued that beyond moral integrity, authentic interpretation requires a purification of the spirit. It is within such an ongoing dynamic that discernment - particularly the discernment of motivation prompting action - holds such a key position. It may be that the Spiritual Exercises as a school of discernment have a significant contribution to make here. Further research into this possibility involving those who work on the margins is envisaged.

A spiritual hermeneutic will only be truly radical to the extent that it has classical resonances. It is grounded in the tradition of spiritual fecundity where the deeper the contemplative awareness the more fruitful is the consequent action. Features of importance include the recognition of individual and institutional complicity, failure and helplessness with regard to social realities and the life of the marginalised. This difficult acknowledgement frees both individual and institution from the illusion of false realities dependent upon self-recognition, and encourages the growing risky dependency upon God and other human beings.

Within such a hermeneutic there is the potential for a challenging critique to be made available both to individuals and to institutional structures. There is also the realistic recognition that transformation of this kind takes time. A spiritual hermeneutic does not evolve by a process of osmosis. Of itself it requires a deep commitment to prayer. Contemplation may indeed become a subversive activity as Merton stated so

clearly. It is also the seed-bed for discernment and the starting point for a counter-cultural liberating position.

Real reconciliation between the church and those on the urban margins will not occur until there is a valuing of the experience of God already at work there. Such a recognition and engagement therewith is fundamental for any social, political or economic initiatives undertaken by the church. The appropriation of this reality may have transformative consequences for the life of the church, while continuing to exclude this from consciousness deprives the church of revivifying resources. Responsible appropriation requires the openness to enter into conversation and to listen through the experience of those who work on the margins. This can only be truly apprehended by bringing to bear on the situation of the urban poor that contemplative dimension of religious experience which prioritises being alongside activity.

Accordingly, this spiritual hermeneutic is vital both for those actively involved with the marginalised and for those in ministry in other areas within the church. Thus individuals may be encouraged to embark upon their own interior journey, in order to guarantee the authenticity of their listening and to facilitate the discernment of action. Such a journey will inevitably require an ongoing purification of spirit, but its potential for creative initiatives, as verified by the spiritual tradition, may be limitless. The necessity for some further formation process is apparent, if there is to be any harnessing of the potential which exists, in the interests of those on the margins and the church. One suggestion might be a two-fold possibility: the first with regard to individual development which might include individual insertion upon the urban margins combined with a nurturing of the contemplative dimension which facilitates profound and critical listening; while the second would look to the institution and the rediscovery of insights which have become obscured, that the God who speaks of freedom in the ground of human beings still continues to speak to all,

and in the light of this understanding consideration must be given to possibilities for reflectively evaluating and assisting church social outreach programmes already underway.

A very real possibility exists for revived life on the margins and a fresh dynamic within the life of the church. By contrast the alternative looks bleak, focusing on an ever diminishing group of devotees, while the spirit may be giving prophetic utterance through the lives, and stutterings of the most vulnerable in the land. The church is challenged to respond - to be a church prepared to take risks, and to enter into the sphere of marginality in forms to which those who live on the urban margins can relate - to be led by the spirit of God beyond its self-imposed boundaries.

"It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."⁶

⁶ Isaiah 49 v 6., trans. Jerusalem Bible, London, DLT, 1968.

Appendix

Guide-lines for extended members of the Hope Community

General Principles

1. Anyone of committed Christian faith, based on mainline Christian beliefs, who wants to minister among the marginalised, is welcomed by the Sisters of the Infant Jesus (Hereafter known as the I.J.'s) to join them in their community, their prayer and their mission on Heath Town Estate.

2. The I.J.'s have a particular responsibility for the long term vision of the Hope Community. They are ultimately responsible for the on-going mission statement. For as long as the I.J.'s make up the core group, this statement will always be in keeping with the I.J. charism, as expressed in the Books of the Institute. While the basic characteristics of our vision statement will remain, its expression will vary according to changing times and circumstances. At present, it runs as follows:

"Our aim is to be a reflective, Christian community presence among the people of Heath Town. Our desire is to liberate ourselves and others from over-dependency and to grow together into a fully human community, which witnesses to the dignity and self-worth of each individual and which reflects a spirit of responsible, mutual caring for one another."

3. We need time and space to be bonded as I.J.'s and to deepen our commitment to the Institute. To this end, there is a weekly I.J. meeting, and occasional regional and province assemblies, to which we must give priority.

4. The personal formation of each member of the community is also a priority concern. Accordingly, time may be set aside each week for this purpose.

Material Arrangements

5. The I.J.'s are responsible for the finances and for general maintenance. Financial statements and cash box are not available to the extended group. The "office" is for the I.J.'s. Files relevant to our ministry are available elsewhere.

6. We will decide together in community about the giving and receiving of material goods but the I.J.'s have the final decision.

7. I.J.'s only, are insured to drive the car.

8. The telephone in no 122 is to be used for the ministry and for the personal calls of the I.J.'s. Members of the extended group will make personal calls in no 60 and keep an account of the cost in the notebook provided.

Responsibilities

9. Those joining the group will negotiate the time they wish to commit themselves to the community and ministry. The I.J.'s reserve the right to discern and accept such arrangements. A formal commitment will be made by a simple service of commitment. Where it is felt necessary to ask someone to leave, the I.J.'s are ultimately responsible for such a decision.

10. Ours is a community ministry, and we encounter others, as representatives of the community. While respecting confidentiality, we share our experience of ministry

with the community. Accordingly, exclusive relationships within the wider community on the estate run counter to our vision statement. To pursue such relationships would automatically invalidate commitment to the Hope Community.

11. Every member of the community is entitled to one day off each week and regular longer breaks. These are to be negotiated with the contact person and the community. Pursuits during time away from Heath Town are the personal responsibility of the extended members. They are not accountable to the community; neither is the community answerable for their behaviour during this time. Obviously, it is to be hoped that they will continue to act according to Christian principles!

12. In the interests of safety etc, all members are accountable to the group for their movements around the estate. As a general rule, all are expected to be back in the house before 11pm (ie before the pubs close!). They must be accompanied to the door; when this isn't possible, they will make arrangements with the community.

13. Members of the community are expected to attend all relevant time-table structures. Absence will be negotiated with the community in advance. All are invited to take a share in the responsibility for prayer, cooking and household chores. Involvement is negotiable, depending on skills and experience.

14. Bedrooms are the exclusive and private space for resident members. Visitors are to be entertained elsewhere.

Meetings

15. When possible, there will be a weekly meeting with each of the extended members and I.J. nominated for this work.

16. Anyone living in the community and active in the apostolate is welcome to attend Friday's Apostolate meeting.

17. As a general rule, only members who are committed to at least a month's stay with the community, will attend the Monday night community meeting.

18. While contributions to on-going discernment will be sought and welcomed, a six month's commitment to the community is necessary to attend such meetings.

Conclusion

19. Much of the above is flexible and negotiable. It is part of an ongoing discernment and is evolutionary in character.

October 1991

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