

The Blessed Community

When we are drowned in the overwhelming seas of the love of God, we find ourselves in a new and particular relation to a few of our fellows. The relation is so surprising and so rich that we despair of finding a word glorious enough and weighty enough to name it. The word *Fellowship* is discovered, but the word is pale and thin in comparison with the rich volume and luminous bulk and warmth of the experience which it would designate. For a new kind of life-sharing and of love has arisen of which we had had only dim hints before. Are these the bonds of love which knit together the early Christians, the very warp and woof of the Kingdom of God? In glad amazement and wonder we enter upon a relationship which we had not known the world contained for the sons of men. Why should such bounty be given to unworthy men like ourselves?

By no means is every one of our friends seen in this new and special light. A wholly new alignment of our personal relations appears. Some men and women whom we have never known before, or whom we have noticed only as a dim background for our more special friendships, suddenly loom large, step forward in our attention as men and women whom

we now know to the depths. Our earlier conversations with these persons may have been few and brief, but now we know them, as it were, from within. For we discern that their lives are already down within that Center which has found us. And we hunger for their fellowship, with a profound, insistent craving which will not be denied.

Other acquaintances recede in significance; we know now that our relationships with them have always been nearer the surface of life. Many years of happy comradeship and common adventures we may have had together, but now we know that, at bottom, we have never been together in the deep silences of the Center, and that we never can be together, there where the light of Eternity shines still and bright. For until they, too, have become wholly God-enthralled, Light-centered, they can be only good acquaintances with whom we pass the time of day. A yearning over them may set in, because of their dimness of vision, but the eye-to-eye relationship of love which binds together those who live in the Center is reserved for a smaller number. Drastically and recreatively, Fellowship searches friendships, burning, dissolving, ennobling, transfiguring them in Heaven's glowing fire.

Not only do our daily friendships become re-aligned; our religious friends are also seen anew. Many impressions of worth are confirmed, others are

reversed. Some of the most active church leaders, well-known for their executive efficiency, people we have always admired, are shown, in the X-ray light of Eternity, to be agitated, half-committed, wistful, self-placating seekers, to whom the poise and serenity of the Everlasting have never come. The inexhaustible self-giving of others of our religious acquaintances we now understand, for the Eternal Love kindles an ardent and persistent readiness to do all things for, as well as through, Christ who strengthens us. In some we regret a well-intentioned, but feverish over-busyness, not completely grounded in the depths of peace, and we wish they would not blur the beauty of their souls by fast motion. Others, who may not have been effective speakers or weighty financiers or charming conversationalists or members of prominent families are found to be men and women on whom the dews of heaven have fallen indeed, who live continuously in the Center and who, in mature appreciation, understand our leaping heart and unbounded enthusiasm for God. And although they are not commissioned to any earthly office, yet they welcome us authoritatively into the Fellowship of Love.

"See how these Christians love one another" might well have been a spontaneous exclamation in the days of the apostles. The Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community has always astonished those who stood

without it. The sharing of physical goods in the primitive church is only an outcropping of a profoundly deeper sharing of a Life, the base and center of which is obscured, to those who are still oriented about self, rather than about God. To others, tragic to say, the very existence of such a Fellowship within a common Life and Love is unknown and unguessed. In its place, psychological and humanistic views of the essential sociality and gregariousness of man seek to provide a social theory of church membership. From these views spring church programs of mere sociability and social contacts. The precious word *Fellowship* becomes identified with a purely horizontal relation of man to man, not with that horizontal-vertical relationship of man to man *in God*.

But every period of profound re-discovery of God's joyous immediacy is a period of emergence of this amazing group inter-knittedness of God-enthralled men and women who know one another *in Him*. It appeared in vivid form among the early Friends. The early days of the Evangelical movement showed the same bondedness in love. The disclosure of God normally brings the disclosure of the Fellowship. We don't create it deliberately; we find it and we find ourselves increasingly within it as we find ourselves increasingly within Him. It is the holy matrix of "the communion of the saints," the body of Christ which is His church. William C. Braithwaite says in the

Rowntree Series, that it was a tragic day when the Quakers ceased to be a Fellowship and became a Society of Friends. Yet ever within that Society, and ever within the Christian church, has existed the Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community, an *ekklesiola in ecclesia*, a little church within the church.

Yet still more astonishing is the Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community, to those who are within it. Yet can one be surprised at being *at home*? In wonder and awe we find ourselves already interknit within unofficial groups of kindred souls. A "chance" conversation comes, and in a few moments we know that we have found and have been found by another member of the Blessed Community. Sometimes we are thus suddenly knit together in the bonds of a love far faster than those of many years' acquaintance. In unbounded eagerness we seek for more such fellowship, and wonder at the apparent lethargy of mere "members."

In the Fellowship cultural and educational and national and racial differences are leveled. Unlettered men are at ease with the truly humble scholar who lives in the Life, and the scholar listens with joy and openness to the precious experiences of God's dealing with the workingman. We find men with chilly theologies but with glowing hearts. We overleap the boundaries of church membership and find Lutherans and Roman Catholics, Jews and Christians, within the

Fellowship. We re-read the poets and the saints, and the Fellowship is enlarged. With urgent hunger we read the Scriptures, with no thought of pious exercise, but in order to find more friends for the soul. We brush past our historical learning in the Scriptures, to seize upon those writers who lived in the Center, in the Life and in the Power. Particularly does devotional literature become illuminated, for the *Imitation of Christ*, and Augustine's *Confessions*, and Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God* speak the language of the souls who live at the Center. Time telescopes and vanishes, centuries and creeds are overleaped. The incident of death puts no boundaries to the Blessed Community, wherein men live and love and work and pray in that Life and Power which gave forth the Scriptures. And we wonder and grieve at the overwhelmingly heady preoccupation of religious people with problems, problems, unless they have first come into the Fellowship of the Light.

The final grounds of holy Fellowship are in God. Lives immersed and drowned in God are drowned in love, and know one another in Him, and know one another in love. God is the medium, the matrix, the focus, the solvent. As Meister Eckhart suggests, he who is wholly surrounded by God, enveloped by God, clothed with God, glowing in selfless love toward Him—such a man no one can touch except he

touch God also. Such lives have a common meeting-point; they live in a common joyous enslavement. They go back into a single Center where they are at home with Him and with one another. It is as if every soul had a final base, and that final base of every soul is one single Holy Ground, shared in by all. Persons in the Fellowship are related to one another through Him, as all mountains go down into the same earth. They get at one another through Him. He is actively moving in all, co-ordinating those who are pliant to His will and suffusing them all with His glory and His joy.

The relation of each to all, through God, is real, objective, existential. It is an eternal relationship which is shared in by every stick and stone and bird and beast and saint and sinner of the universe. On all the wooing love of God falls urgently, persuadingly. But he who, having will, yields to the loving urgency of that Life which knocks at his heart, is entered and possessed and transformed and transfigured. The scales fall from his eyes when he is given to eat of the tree of knowledge, the fruit of which is indeed for the healing of the nations, and he knows himself and his fellows as comrades in Eden, where God walks with them in the cool of the day. As there is a mysterious many-ing of God, as He pours Himself forth into the universe, so there is a one-ing of those souls who find their way back to Him who is their

home. And these are in the Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community, of whom God is the head.

This community of life and love is far deeper than current views based upon modern logic would suppose. Logic finds, beneath every system of thought, some basic assumptions or postulates from which all other items of belief are derived. It is said that those who share in a system of thought are those who hold basic assumptions in common. But these assumptions are of the intellect, subsequent products, efforts to capture and clarify and make intelligible to ourselves and to others some fragment of that immediacy of experience which is the soul of life itself. Such assumptions we must make, but they are experimental, variant, conditioned by our culture period. But Holy Fellowship reaches behind these intellectual frames to the immediacy of experience in God, and seeks contact in this fountain head of real, dynamic connectedness. Theological quarrels arise out of differences in assumptions. But Holy Fellowship, freely tolerant of these important yet more superficial clarifications, lives in the Center and rejoices in the unity of His love.

And this Fellowship is deeper than democracy, conceived as an ideal of group living. It is a theocracy wherein God rules and guides and directs His listening children. The center of authority is not in man, not in the group, but in the creative God Him-

self. Nor do all members share equally in spiritual discernment, but upon some falls more clearly the revealing light of His guiding will. "Weighty Friends," with delicate attunement both to heaven and to earth, bulk large in practical decisions. It would be a mistake indeed to suppose that Holy Fellowship is chained fast to one political system, or bound up inextricably with the fortunes of any one temporal structure of society. For the swaying fortunes of democracy and of fascism and of communism are of time, but the Fellowship in God is of all times and is eternal. It is certainly true that some temporal systems are more favorable than are others to the flowering of the Fellowship. But within all groups and nations and creeds it springs up, smiling at differences, for, existing in time, it is rooted in the Eternal One.

No single person can hold *all* dedicated souls within his compass in steadfast Fellowship with equal vividness. There are degrees of Fellowship, from wider, more diffused relations of love to nearer, more intense inter-knittedness. As each of us is at a point in space which compels us to a perspective relationship to all things, some near, some far, so each of us is dear to some and remote from others in the bonds of love.

Within the wider Fellowship emerges the special circle of a few on whom, for each of us, a particular

emphasis of nearness has fallen. These are our special gift and task. These we "carry" by inward, wordless prayer. By an interior act and attitude we lift them repeatedly before the throne and hold them there in power. This is work, real labor of the soul. It takes energy but it is done in joy. But the membership of such special groups is different and overlapping. From each individual the bonds of special fellowship radiate near and far. The total effect, in a living Church, would be sufficient intersection of these bonds to form a supporting, carrying network of love for the whole of mankind. Where the Fellowship is lacking the Church invisible is lacking and the Kingdom of God has not yet come. For these bonds of divine love and "carrying" are the stuff of the Kingdom of God. He who is in the Fellowship is in the Kingdom.

Two people, three people, ten people may be in living touch with one another through Him who underlies their separate lives. This is an astounding experience, which I can only describe but cannot explain in the language of science. But in vivid experience of divine Fellowship it is there. We know that these souls are with us, lifting their lives and ours continuously to God and opening themselves, with us, in steady and humble obedience to Him. It is as if the boundaries of our self were enlarged, as if we were within them and as if they were within us. Their

strength, given to them by God, becomes our strength, and our joy, given to us by God, becomes their joy. In confidence and love we live together in Him. On the borders of the experience lie amazing events, at which reputable psychologists scoff, and for which I would not try any accounting. But the solid kernel of community of life in God is in the center of the experience, renewing our life and courage and commitment and love. For daily and hourly the cosmic Sacrament is enacted, the Bread and the Wine are divided amongst us by a heavenly Ministrant, and the substance of His body becomes our life and the substance of His blood flows in our veins. Holy is the Fellowship, wondrous is the Ministrant, marvelous is the Grail.

Frequency of personal contact in this Fellowship is not imperative, although desirable. Weeks and months and even years may elapse, yet the reality remains undimmed. Conversations within the Fellowship gravitate toward Him who is dearer than life itself. Yet the degree of self-disclosure which we are given to make to others is variable with time and place and person. And never is it complete. For as it nears completeness, words no longer help, but hinder, and the final pooling of joy and love in Him is accomplished in the silences of the Eternal.

All friendships short of this are incomplete. All personal relations which lie only in time are open-

ended and unfinished, to the soul who walks in holy obedience. Can we make *all* our relations to our fellows relations which pass *through Him*? Our relations to the conductor on a trolley? Our relations to the clerk who serves us in a store? How far is the world from such an ideal! How far is Christian practice from such an expectation! Yet we, from our end of the relationship, can send out the Eternal Love in silent, searching hope, and meet each person with a background of eternal expectation and a silent, wordless prayer of love. For until the life of men in time is, in every relation, shot through with Eternity, the Blessed Community is not complete.