

## *Retrieving the Tradition*

# COMMUNIO—A PROGRAM

• Hans Urs von Balthasar •

“The universal (catholic) community is not just one among many. Bestowed on us by God, freely given, it is the only one that is unrestricted in scope.”



What standpoint is our new review to adopt to scan the turmoil and confusion of battling ideologies and the clash of philosophies of life at the present day? What vantage point is there from which to flash its guiding signals? During its long history, the community that takes its name from Jesus the Christ time and time again has had to reflect and reconsider the position it occupies between God and the world. Yet its own nature entails that whatever concept it uses to define itself must always remain open and dynamic. In the first centuries its consciousness endured the tension of almost contradictory themes. The Christians were indeed conscious of themselves as forming a little group in the face of the darkness of the hostile world around them, a community (*koinonia*, *communio*) of love, founded and nourished by God's love manifested and bestowed in Christ. Nevertheless that community also knew itself from the first (already in Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrians*, 8, 2) to be “catholic,” that is, universal, and therefore normative for the whole world. What a paradox! It was only endurable in a “naive” outlook of faith, conscious that the wind of the Holy Spirit was driving the little vessel forward (cf. Acts of the Apostles), that despite all persecution the teaching was spreading in a wonderful way, that finally the emperor himself was converted, which opened up the prospect of a

correspondence in principle between the Christian community and the world, even if the full penetration of the world by the Christian leaven were to remain a problematic task which could never be completed. In the Middle Ages the tension slackened, because the boundaries of Empire and Church came to coincide and the two together formed a single Christendom. Spirit and structure matched in principle, the inevitable discrepancy providing occasion enough for ever new efforts at reform. As a consequence, the deeper problems concerning the Christian empire in relation to the heathen world surging on its borders threatened to fade entirely from the mind. Hence the well-known faulty developments in the transition to modern times, the fatal coupling of power colonialism and the missions, the Counter-Reformation emphasis on the (hierarchical-institutional) formal structure of the Catholic Christian community at a time when the medieval unity of Empire and Church was finally shattered. The Protestant communities, however, were fundamentally in no better position, as missionary practice shows, because they adopted once more and sharpened the early Christian dualism of Church and world, and established a static dichotomy between elect (predestined) and reprobate (cf. also the dualism of death-bringing Law and vivifying Gospel). The garments were too tight and burst at the seams. The consciousness of being “catholic,” that is, universal, was a continual stimulus to the best minds to engage in a concrete and living dialogue with all that was externally separated, in order progressively to overcome the contradiction between “catholicity” and particular denomination (“Roman” or otherwise). When, as a result of the Enlightenment and the Idealist philosophy, the Protestant and Jansenist idea of predestination was superseded, Protestants had the inverse problem of justifying anything along the lines of an organized Church, on the basis of an abstract, general concept of the Kingdom of God.

For Christianity today there is no escape on any side from this tension. If it is not of universal (catholic) importance, it falls with all its claims (whether they are made by the word of the Bible or by an ecclesiastical ministry) onto the rubbish-heap of religious lumber. Yet in order to be of universal importance, it has to be something special, definite, unique, as opposed to what falls within everyone’s range of vision. And not only “something” special among other special things, but *the* special thing, so much so that it can claim universal importance precisely on the ground of its uniqueness. This time we have reached a stage of reflection which no longer evades

the original tension, but must withstand it without lessening its force. We can make this stage explicitly conscious by using a word to designate it: *Communio*.

Only an old word can be of use here. It occupies a central position in the New Testament, with the entire breadth and openness to which it points, yet with all its uniting and concentrating force: community formed by God's Spirit in Christ, who essentially lived and rose from the dead for all men. In the creeds, the phrase "*Sanctorum communio*, the communion of saints," constantly accompanies, though perhaps rather unemphatically and without being made fully explicit, the other affirmation, "I believe in the one holy catholic Church." The time has come nowadays to bring out the full implications of these words. They contain, it seems to me, a key to the present historical situation in world and Church, and to their mutual relations. The word in its full range of meaning contains a program. The review as a whole is proposing to develop and display this. Here, by way of introduction, we can only indicate something of its scope and dimensions.

### 1. Principle

"Com-munio" means community in the concrete, expressive sense of being brought together into a common fortification (*mun*: to *munio*, surround with a rampart; *moenia*: city walls), but also into a common achievement, task, administration, which at the same time can mean mutual satisfaction, gift, grace (*mun*: to *munus*). Those who are in "communion," therefore, do not enter into such a social relationship solely on their own initiative, each of his own private accord, determining its scope by the stipulations they make when they establish it. They are already in it from the start, already mutually dependent a priori, as a matter of course, not only to live together and contrive to get on with one another in the same domain, but also to carry out a common activity. The very fact of the common bond involves a title to work in common, prior to any freedom in its accomplishment. The "physical" proximity is a fact but at the same time represents a problem which can only be solved in freedom, morally, thus drawing from the mere juxtaposition a human pattern, namely, a community. Otherwise, "L'enfer, c'est les autres"—"Hell is other people."

The decisive, distinctive feature is that the fact of being together, of forming a community, only provides the first impetus to freedom to build up, carry through, and, if possible, to perfect such a pattern, so as to undertake the conscious, considered steps to engage in common activity: to come together (*con-gredi*, to gather in a congress, a synod), to move towards one another (*con-cieo*, to summon to a council), to put out feelers (*con-tingere*, to make contact), to fall into conversation (*con-loqui*, to confer, to enter into mutual discussion). In this free stage of social intercourse a contrary movement will normally be set up: people's opinions will impinge on one another, conflict, and diverge (*dis-cutere*: shatter, scatter, break up: hence discussion); the phase of controversy is the "critical" one in congress and council. This has far-reaching implications, for "crisis" means separation (and therefore struggle and choice), but also decision, settlement, and therefore, in order to produce this, investigation, inquiries, procedure, and, finally, judgment. All these acts are indispensable for discovering the truth in freedom, even in the individual, whose reason must "divide in order to unite" (*intellectus dividens et componens*), and all the more in the community, in which a number of freedoms and points of view have to struggle their way through to a common and correct decision.

Everything will depend, however, on how solidly the primary foundation is laid on which all these secondary deliberative and critical processes are built. What conditions are presupposed, then, for real communication to be established at all between individuals, each of them free and endowed with reason? Is the mere fact that they are there side by side, imprisoned on the same earth's surface (though even their common genetic descent makes it fundamentally impossible to think of individuals as independent "atoms")? Or does it not also demand "communion" in their common reason and freedom, in a medium that, for lack of a better expression, we will call "human nature"? But what is this nature?

The Greeks, of course, had a communion of this kind in mind when the common nature, in which all share, was felt and thought of not as a mere idea, but, especially by the Stoics, as a concrete reality. A view of this kind, however, necessarily presupposes that this enveloping presence of reason and will is regarded as something divine, as the Logos which dwells corporeally in everything and which man can consciously and voluntarily follow as an absolute norm. Such a principle can pervade human minds and, because common to them all, can open them to one another, making

them communicate in one common concrete truth of knowledge and action. “All things are interwoven and the bond is sacred and nothing so to speak is alien to another. For all things have been set side by side and go together to form the same cosmic order. For there is *one* universe made up of all things, and *one* God throughout all, and *one* substance and *one* law, the Logos common to all intellectual beings” (Marcus Aurelius VII, 9). The common and the particular are equally basic, equally spiritual (Seneca, *Helv.* 8, 2: *natura communis et propria virtus*). The personally free and reasonable element is not, for example, rooted in a collective unconscious, for then the individuals would not communicate precisely in what is distinctively human, any more than it is rooted in a “nature” that provides merely the endowments and materials for a fate which each person must decide for himself, and then abide in, alone. The grandiose aspect of the ancient Greco-Roman idea of the community of all mankind, was that it considered it to be precisely what is distinctively human—Logos as free reason—that is actually shared in by all alike. That was only conceivable if the individuals participated in an ever actually “free” and divine principle, whose “freedom” (as superior to necessity) was then identical with human “freedom” (seen as the capacity to follow the law of the Logos or of the Cosmos).

A worldview of that kind, with its neutral position between God and men, is now, in the post-biblical age, irretrievably obsolete. An absolute reason in which all men communicate is only conceivable now, either in Christian terms as a divine Mind transcendent to the world and bestowing with true freedom, as a grace, a share in itself (and which can only be called truly divine because of its transcendence), or else as the utopian goal of a world revolution, which, taking its rise in matter, impels the individuals of the human species above and beyond themselves, in a “forward” self-transcending movement, towards a perfect communion and mutual compenetration in full reason and freedom. The attainment of this goal would then be held to permit and impose planning, if necessary by the violent revolutionary elimination of all retarding factors, which always consist in the desire to pursue private interests. The ideal, lying so close before the eyes as to be already almost tangible, must be grasped by every means and brought into reality.

In Christian terms, however, the communion established by God through Christ within humanity has two bases. One is God himself, who could not bestow personal communion with himself

and among men if he were not already in a profound sense a community in himself: loving mutual inherence, loving exchange, which presupposes loving consent to another's freedom. Wherever the divinatory vista opening out on the divine Trinity, which alone discloses God *concretely* as absolute love, is blocked, the idea of perfect community can never fully develop. The second basis is in humanity itself. If man were not created in the image of God, and for him, he would not experience in himself the urge to look for a more perfect communion among human beings than he is capable of picturing within the setting of earthly conditions. For contact, dialogue, community of goods are only means, not the reality itself, which remains unimaginable, transcendent.

Strictly speaking, in the post-biblical era there are only two alternatives. One is Christian communion in the real principle of the divine Logos, who as conclusion and culmination of the Old Testament promise has been bestowed on us in Jesus Christ, as grace yet in genuine humanity, making full communion possible. The other is evolutionary communism, which, spurred on by the passion of the forward-looking Old Testament hope, strives towards perfect community as the complete achievement of self-realization by the world-idea and humanity. It is clear that only in the first alternative is communion a really existent prior principle. In the second, communism remains, despite all striving towards it, merely ideal, and the means of forcibly compelling its achievement do not correspond to the basic spontaneity of "positive humanism." The Acts of the Apostles describe a primitive Christian voluntary communism, "The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). This verse re-echoed for a long time in the theology of the Fathers and of the Scholastics, and the new religious orders that were founded one after the other all regarded themselves as a continuation of this realistic early Christian conception of community. But the verse essentially expresses a "spirit"; it is personal property, after all, which is in question and is not thought of and treated as private. It may be that Luke here, in order vividly to picture the effective presence of the Holy Spirit, idealistically describes that "spirit" as already completely realized (but the reservations are at once expressed—in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, 5:11ff). If so, Church history speaks eloquently enough of the yawning gulf between the real principle of community bestowed on the Christians—the Body and Blood of

Christ, bestowed by God as the grace of real community with him and as the real ground of full human fraternity, with the resultant real spiritual unity of all in the one Holy Spirit—and the lamentable inability of Christians actually to live in accordance with this “body” and “spirit.” This gap is where the community endeavor finds its theological location, although the means by which it strives to achieve community can never be appropriate to that context. Why? Because the community established antecedently by God rests on the grace of the abasement, humility, acceptance of poverty by Jesus Christ in utter loving dedication, whereas the community to be built by human powers will never come about without the use of force, if indeed it ever can. The intention and goal of communism have a place in the earthly task of Christians. Its means, on the other hand, are incompatible with it, for they essentially presuppose that the principle of community is unreal at the present time. Bonhoeffer has described—in harsh Lutheran antitheses—the incompatibility of the two projects of community, using the Pauline categories of *pneumatikos* (spiritual: by the Holy Spirit of love, antecedently bestowed in Christ) and *psychikos* (“natural,” i.e., what springs from the natural drives, powers, and dispositions of the human soul):

in the spiritual community lives the serene love of fraternal service, *agape*, whereas the “natural” society burns with the dark love of the pious-impious impulse, *eros*; in the former, humble subjection to one’s brother, in the latter, the humble-proud subjection of the brother to one’s own desire. In the former, all power, honor, and rule is attributed to the Holy Spirit; in the latter, spheres of power and influence of a personal kind are sought and cultivated. On the one hand, spontaneous, pre-psychological, pre-methodical, helpful brotherly love; on the other, psychological analysis and complication; there, humble, simple fraternal service to the brother, here, questioning, calculating treatment of the stranger (*Gemeinschaft* [1966], 22f).

We may add, from a Catholic point of view, that without weakening the total contrast between the two spirits, much that is “methodical,” “psychological,” and “sociological” can be taken over into the service of the Christian community. But precisely in regard to this necessary use of human means, a new problem arises.

From a Christian point of view community can only be striven for because it has already been bestowed by God in Christ and in the infusion of the Holy Spirit. All will to union appeals to a

unity that already exists, not through ourselves, not through natural human fellowship, but because God in his Son has made us his children and coheirs. The unity bestowed is not at our command; it springs from God, is realized in God, and God remains beyond our reach. The fact that even though we have received the gift of communion with God we remain at God's disposal, is a continually renewed experience of the divine judgment (*krisis*): which of us opens himself to the love of God and thereby to true fraternal love? We recognize it to a certain degree, then the criteria escape us; judgment belongs to God alone. It is precisely because we must not judge, but are to leave judgment to God, that there is so much mention of judgment in the New Testament. The God who gives us fellowship—with him and with one another (1 Jn 1:3; 6)—is in the same act engaged in distinguishing, judging (*krisis*) who is ready to receive this gift and who is not. It would be better to avoid the word “critical” for a while, instead of using it with practically every other noun; it belongs to God. And when he calls men to join with him in distinguishing and judging, it is always on the presupposition that he is the God who already has the will to bestow communion and does really do so. The fact that he reserves judgment to himself does not mean that he grants us insight into the limits (or limitlessness) of his self-giving grace in order that we may know whether any human beings are definitively outside communion. “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand” (Rom 14:4).

Ecclesiastical theology far too long played at anticipating the Last Judgment by theories about a double predestination (to salvation and to perdition); it did so in an innocence that is hard to excuse. It did not sufficiently reflect that the God who reserves this judgment to himself is the same who in Jesus Christ went down into the dereliction of the absence of God which is that of all egoists, all spiritual privateers, and the dropouts of every community, into the abyss of all godforsaken and inhuman loneliness. Consequently no human being has the right any longer to accord the same rank and dignity to the attitude and task of criticism as to the fact that communion has been bestowed. In every contact with his fellowmen, even if it fails and breaks off, beforehand, in the course of it and then even afterwards, he has to presuppose the existence of an all-embracing communion. Consequently even exclusion from the visible communion of the Church (excommunication) can only be



understood as an educative, temporary measure intended to help the guilty person (as Paul shows, 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 2:6f). And even if we do not “know” that all men are finally brought by divine grace into the definitive divine-human communion, as Christians we have nevertheless the right and duty to hope so with a “divine,” God-willed and God-given hope. The principle which justifies and supports our thought of the farthest of human beings, our dialogue with the next but one, is the communion established by God, not merely promised from afar, not merely offered, but really bestowed on humanity as a whole. Within its compass we speak and are silent, turn to or turn away from one another, agree or disagree.

Let us conclude this first line of thought by noting that of the two alternatives, the project of establishing community by mankind’s unaided strength would never have any possibility of success whatsoever. If the dream of antiquity that the best element in the human individual, as in the community, is something intrinsically divine, was nothing but a dream that has faded, then it is impossible to point to any all-embracing medium in which all men commune with one another in freedom and rationality; for if it were real it would compete with their own liberty and reason; and if it were merely ideal it would be too weak to unite them. It is clear, for example, that a collective unconscious is not an adequate medium and basis for an ultimate community of destiny (*con-sortium*) among free persons. But neither is a Hegelian world-spirit that comprises individual subjects only at the cost of their surrendering their own definitive character. At that price individuals can commune with one another in the divine in the eastern religions, but the price is too high; identity destroys communion. The price is not high enough if communion is made a mere object of eschatological hope for mankind and not a real antecedent gift. For then all generations which were only on the way to it are left behind; they are only material and have no access to the great communal festival.

## 2. Scope

The universal (catholic) community is not just one among many. Bestowed on us by God, freely given, it is the only one that is unrestricted in scope. We must be clear that this wide scope and range depends on the realism of its presuppositions: (1) The reality of God’s trinitarian being (impenetrable though it of course is); God

in himself is absolute communion and has created man to his image and likeness and to participation in his nature (2 Pt 1:3); (2) The reality of God's self-communication to all in assuming (total) human nature in Jesus Christ, in order to save all in accordance with his plan for the world (1 Tm 2:4), to take upon himself the perdition of all (2 Cor 5:2), to reconcile the whole world to himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:18f), in the Crucified to break down the dividing walls (Eph 2:12ff), and in the Risen Christ even to break through the bounds of futility, death, and the solitude of the dead in order to bring all securely into a final, deathless, eternal life (1 Cor 15:22); (3) The reality of Jesus' eucharistic self-communication at his Last Supper and in the communion of those who take part in the meal which is established—not in any sense magical, but sacramentally objective and inseparably constituting both communion with God in Christ and communion with one another (1 Cor 10:16ff); this opens out a possibility of living for others which exceeds purely human capacity because it is a sharing in Christ's vicarious suffering for the Church (and thereby for all men) (Col 1:24), involving sharing a common lot with the Lord ("live with," "suffer with," "be crucified with," "die with," "be buried with," "be raised up with," "be made alive together with," "be glorified with," "be fellow heirs with," "reign with") which all along is open to a universal human participation, and for that reason alone explains and justifies the difference between "Church" and "world." (4) Finally and without any break in continuity, communion in the Holy Spirit must follow from this sacramentally objective sphere. For God's antecedent establishment of community does not annul human freedom, but from the start incorporates it (and here Mariology has its place, and definitively removes any suspicion of magic). The common Spirit that is bestowed upon us is neither merely "objective spirit" nor merely an "eschatologically promised spirit"; it is the absolute Spirit poured already into our own free spirit (Rom 5:5; 8:8f, 15, 26f; Gal 4:6, etc.), whose scope in us becomes as limitless as in God: "All things are yours" since in Christ you belong to God (1 Cor 3:21). It is he who, completing the work of Christ, unites all those endowed with the gifts of the Spirit "into one body" by making them all "drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13). He does not work only from above inwards, but from within outwards, from the core of human freedom (1 Cor 2:10–16; 7:40; Rom 8:26f). This presupposition of universal scope and range is completely without analogy in the history of religions or of ideas; it suppresses no element, but takes account

equally of the human and of the more than human. It justifies every boldness but also makes the most inexorable demands.

In Christ, “peace” has been established in principle between *heaven and earth*, between the standpoint of the Creator and that of the created world. In the abstract the created world can experience and announce in itself its own separation from heaven, an absence or death of God, and its dominant principalities and powers can act and commend themselves as aggression, will to power, and so on, and therefore as hostile to a God of mere love, of noble but powerless values (Scheler). Whatever air of reality such an opposition may assume and in its own domain actually possess (Book of Revelation), it is nevertheless ultimately eliminated at the point where, prior to any conflict within the world, the dividing wall of hostility between God-heaven and man-earth has been broken down (Eph 2:14f). Precisely because God in Christ gave himself up to the power of darkness and all destructive cosmic powers, he thereby made the Eucharist-flesh consumed, blood poured out—to be a communion between what appears absolutely mutually exclusive. In John, the morsel is actually given to Judas (Jn 13:26). In the spirit of this communion, the Christian is “sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come (!), nor powers, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 8:38). It is forthwith permissible to translate the representational forms linked with the old cosmology into the new: evolutionary and technological laws, power complexes and planning, ideological superstructures and depth psychology, nuclear weapons, cybernetics, genetic manipulation and anything else that may yet emerge above the world’s horizon. All that is already comprised in the communion that has been created, the peace that has been established, “which passes all understanding” (Phil 4:7).

Now there exist great tensions which, from the earthly point of view, are to all appearances irreconcilable, provided their true import is not superficially minimized (which never pays). Not primarily the opposition between capitalism and communism on which so much has been written, but between *Jews and “Gentiles.”* Under the surface, but centrally, this has commanded world-history right down to the present day and still does so (cf. my *In Gottes Einsatz leben*, 1971). For here an ultimate *Sic et Non* has to be seriously accepted and lived; it has still to come (say the Jews) and must be longed for with all our might as that which is “to come.”

This *Sic et Non* cuts with deadly edge through the Gospels; it is not overcome in the discussions they contain, but in the silent fact that Jesus was crucified for his nation, and not only for this “but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered” (in the world) (Jn 11:52). Peter, the denier, leaves judgment to the Lord and expresses his solidarity with the Jews, “And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers” (Acts 3:17). And so he leaves a place open for the age-old eternal Jewish hope for the future: in common with you Jews (he is saying), we Christians are waiting for the (second) coming of the Messiah (Acts 3:20–26). And although Paul turns from the “Law” to the “Gospel,” from human self-achievement to action following from gift bestowed, he remains a “Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” and is on trial “with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6); he is aware of the election of the Jews, the mysterious alternation between Church and Synagogue (Rom 11).

Dialogue can certainly help to bear and resolve tensions between Christians, but only communion will bring an end to them. First among them is the rift between *Eastern Church and Western Church*. Between them, of course, *communicatio in sacris*, sacramental community, does indeed exist as a sign of deeper unanimity. But is this most important and most intimate communion vividly present to western theology, whether Catholic or Protestant, in its plans and discussions? Or is this western theology (with a few exceptions, such as that of Louis Bouyer) not becoming more and more rapidly alien, in its understanding of tradition, liturgy, and ministry, to the venerable Church of the origins, as though the latter no longer seriously counted, were a negligible quantity in the world’s debate? This can only be to the great detriment of those who unthinkingly despise it. Moreover, don’t we still much prefer (perhaps for political reasons?) to engage in discussion with the Orthodox Church, passing over the eastern Churches in communion with Rome as though they scarcely existed, although western churchmen are alone responsible for their artificial western character (where it does exist)? There is such a thing as genocide among Christians.

Only then is it the turn of mutual discussions with *Evangelical Protestants and Anglicans*; they can only pertinently be engaged in within our communion in Christ, and only then with the consciousness that we ourselves do not have that communion at our disposal, but have to allow ourselves to be encompassed by it. Right will be on the side of those who understand that communion more deeply

and realistically, more demandingly, who are able to delve deeper than superficial arguments and one-sided points of view into the more universal. It is not by tinkering away at unions in calculating and political fashion that we shall meet at that deeper level, but by recognizing the demands made by the communion which has already been bestowed on us by God's communication of himself.

The transition to non-Christian and opponents of Christianity follows next in order, for the atmosphere of the world is permeated with effects of Christianity, some still recognizable for what they are, others already unrecognizable. And with opponents the first thing is always to make sure that they are not really attacking caricatures without a remnant of Christian truth in them, but which prevent its being seen for what it is. Or they may in fact be trying in their own way to catch up with essential tasks which Christians had a duty to deal with but failed to. At the very limit are those who deliberately "stand apart" (*apo-states*), from whose contact the apostolic Church gave such frequent and explicit warnings, but certainly as a precaution, for even the most obdurate denier can relent, the loneliest begin to feel the chill of death and secretly long for a helper. The fact that someone renounces communion does not mean that he can ultimately escape it. He may abandon it, but he is not abandoned for all that. But the Christian for whom communion is the watchword, accompanies his Lord, who does not abandon.

Communion exists and must be practiced with all who know about God or something divine or an Absolute, and with all who think they cannot accept anything of the sort. Once again the border-lines are elusive—think of Buddhism. Two things, however, are required of the Christian; he has to speak with real seriousness, not because it is fashionable or out of a feeling of missionary superiority, with the adherents of other religions, for example Islam, with which he is linked by much that is biblical, and with Indian and Far Eastern forms of the predominantly negative theology, at which every Christian religious endeavor understandably arrives, and which we must treat with the same reverence and understanding as did the Fathers of the Church in their day. And on this basis the Christian will have to enter not only into dialogue but into communion (which includes the former) with the various forms of Marxism, because the communion already exists in Christ. In the communion of his enveloping love they must try to carry on an honest, critical, and progressive discussion without succumbing to fascination or infection but also without hatred and prejudice. This time it is

perhaps the Christian who will be abandoned; but he has no permission from his Lord to give up, for He does not.

It is clear once again that the reality of communion as such is not at the disposal of the Christian or even of the Church. It is, of course, a horizon toward which all Christian experience with God and fellow-men is moving, but it cannot be measured by that experience. It is important to emphasize this nowadays because the Church community appears to many as a mere framework of institutions, within which the small group in which Christian community can be experienced is more and more becoming the criterion of Church vitality. Church as catholic—universal—for these people hangs high above the floors on which they live, like a roof no longer attached to the house. Group experience of community certainly contains the great hope of a regeneration from below, but also the danger of disintegration into charismatic sects. Paul's whole endeavor was to rescue the Church communion from the clutches of charismatic "experience" and through the apostolic ministry to carry it beyond itself to what is catholic, universal. Ministry in the Church is certainly service, not domination, but it is service with the authority to demolish all the bulwarks which the charismatics set up against the universal communion, and to bring them "into obedience to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). Anyone who charismatically (democratically) levels down Church ministry, thereby loses the factor which inexorably and crucifyingly carries every special task beyond itself and raises it to the plane of the Church universal, whose bond of unity is not experience (*gnosis*) but self-sacrificing love (*agape*). The former ultimately destroys, the latter builds up (1 Cor 8:1).

*Agape*, however, is first of all a gift from above; only then can it tentatively be imitated by us. Consequently the horizontal interpersonal communion can never set the standard for the vertical established by God. Otherwise we should be back once again with a Church self-generated in a pharisaically interpreted Law. Or else in the Pelagian heresy (which is probably more dangerously prevalent than ever at the present time), according to which each Christian is capable of giving as much as he actually achieves.

Communion is the most distant horizon, which we can never reach by experience or achievement; it remains a gift gratuitously bestowed. Precisely for that reason, prayer is never superfluous and never becomes identical with action: "Pray without ceasing"—explicitly (like all biblical figures, including Jesus) and

implicitly in dealings with our fellow-men, but also in private. Speech is man's privilege, because he is the image of God who essentially is Word; without conscious free communication in speech, communion would remain cosmic and magical. Our actual effectuation of what *is* from God has to be asked for; we always have to give thanks for everything that is given; the fact of communion always has to be adored with praise.

### 3. *What it demands*

Anyone who realizes the range and extent of this communion is also faced with the most arduous demands. He need not be a brilliant thinker who (perhaps in virtue of Hegelian dialectic) can occupy any standpoint and set it discerningly in its due place—a man who understands everything. He must, however, be a man who will hold out and see a situation through, even if intellectually and even humanly speaking he cannot, or can no longer, understand it. For the ultimate horizon of community is of course beyond his reach. Not absolute knowledge, but absolute love comprises both. In it, even those who no longer understand one another, who perhaps can no longer bear the sight of one another, are reconciled despite everything. In the body of the Crucified, God “killed enmity” (Eph 2:16), so that strictly speaking from a Christian point of view there is no love of enemies anymore: the supposed enemy does not know that (in what is in truth the only valid sphere) he is no longer an enemy. Now, of course, a Buddhist or a Stoic can subscribe to this proposition taken literally. The difference is in the attitude of heart. Buddhists and Stoics train themselves to enter a sphere without suffering and hate; the impact of contradictions does not affect them, for they communicate with the enemy in a supra-personal absolute. The Christian, however, must open his heart and allow himself to be most intimately affected, challenged, hurt. God in Christ went to the place of the loneliest sinner in order to communicate with him in dereliction by God. Christian community is established in the Eucharist, which presupposes the descent into hell (mine and yours). No flight into an abstract unity is permitted there. It demands the courage to penetrate into another's best defended fortress and, in the knowledge that it is, fundamentally, already conquered and surrendered, to contact its very center. That may provoke the other to the most savage resistance, and this must be endured. But it can only be

done by completely humble faith in what God's love has already done, and without any kind of triumphalism, even of love. There will not even be any time left for anything of that sort, for I must of course side with the other in his imperviousness if I am to prove to him that there is community even in the loneliest, and somewhere to turn even for the most alienated. Communion is established on Good Friday, *after* the cry of dereliction, and *before* the tomb is burst open; in the wordless silence, beyond speech, of being together in the alone. "Alone with the Alone," Plotinus said; strangely penetrating words in view of the ultimates in which Christianity is grounded.

This does not have to be explicitly evoked in every conversation, which would be most indiscreet. But since it is the reality of the communion, it must always be presupposed as a reality, otherwise, any dialogue will be vain. After a little talk together, when things start to be difficult, and hopeless for the moment, people desist and each goes his own way. But there is no such thing as double truth, not even in the age of pluralism; in a Christian view there is only one, but it manifested itself as truth not in power but in powerlessness of solidarity with the last of men. All arguments produced in dialogue—and they may be convincing arguments—ultimately converge on this last point. The whole of Marx's harsh theory ultimately springs from a heart torn by the wretchedness of the poorest. The Christian must allow himself to be stirred by such a response, and dialogue can then clarify what is to be planned and undertaken now.

This, however, means what is possible in this world. It does not mean the destruction of all structures in the utopian hope of a totally different earthly future. Against this lack of realism stands the greater truth of the community that is present and real even now. In any dialogue the greater truth is always right, and both partners always have to take it as their point of reference. To accept this, to allow oneself to be called in question by *this* greater truth, is precisely what it is to be catholic. This tremendous demand is the condition on which we advance towards real communion and come to participate in what already comprises us. Besides, who knows yet who is poorest? Are the rich not poorer than the camel which cannot go through the eye of the needle? The gift of critical discernment and all dialectical arts of thought and eloquence must come into play in the context of philosophies of life. Augustine was not afraid of the loftiest Greek philosophy, nor Aquinas of the sophisticated speculation of the Arabs, nor Nicholas of Cusa,



Leibniz, Kepler, Teilhard de Chardin of the cosmologies of modern times. They point the way, but do not replace the renewed effort called for day after day. But how conscious these great men were of the greater reality of the community. For we are all in the same boat.

We shall make the attempt with *Communio*. Not to speak with reservations, on the basis of a capitalistic ownership of “truths of faith.” We have already said that this truth we believe in strips us bare. Like lambs among wolves. It is not a matter of bravado, but of Christian courage, to expose oneself to risk. People begin to commune with one another when they are not afraid of one another and are not ashamed of opening their hearts to one another. Then it is no empty paradox to say, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).—Translated by W. J. O’Hara.<sup>1</sup> □

*Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) was a co-founder of Communio.*

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<sup>1</sup>This translation was originally published as “Communio—A Programme,” in *International Catholic Review* (the forerunner to *Communio: International Catholic Review*) 1 (January-February, 1972).