

Comment by Fr Herbert McCabe OP (editor)
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Quite a lot of this issue is devoted to a discussion of the meaning and structure of religious life and so it seems opportune to describe a new form of religious community that has developed in England during the last quarter of a century. There probably are parallel movements in other countries, but it is of the English one that I have personal experience. The communities (there are up to half a dozen of them) take no vows though they adhere very firmly to poverty, chastity and obedience. They normally consist of between twenty and thirty men and women of whom most are Roman Catholics though other denominations are there as well. They have no permanent home, they sleep usually on the bare floor and live on the cheapest food available. The most remarkable thing about them is that though they are perfectly genuine religious communities they last for just one week. The whole arrangement is called Student Cross; it is organised mainly through the Catholic societies at the British universities and it exists only during Holy Week. During that time five or six groups set out from various points and walk about one hundred and twenty miles, converging on Walsingham in Norfolk, a mediaeval shrine of Our Lady.

Each group carries before them a fairly heavy, full size, plain wooden cross - it takes three at a time to carry it. Apart from this silent witness, no attempt is made to influence spectators and no leaflet or explanatory material is available for interested enquirers. Faced with questions in casual encounter each participant does his or her mumbling best to explain why it seems sense to spend a week in this curious way. The thing is not like a week's retreat spent with an established community, because here the point is to establish a community from scratch, nor is it like a study week or conference because the sheer business of putting one blistered foot in front of another discourages prolonged discussion, moreover the continual changeover of those who carry the cross makes for a constant re- shuffling of the group. Once every three or four miles there is a brief rest, after which one of the group says a few halting words, trying to articulate what the thing means to him or her.

Despite its brief life each group has a certain continuity of membership from year to year and has developed its special tradition and distinctive spirit. Some are more overtly "religious" than others, but this is an English institution and there, is a general tendency to understate the deeper meaning and the deeper feelings of the participants. Occasionally the songs they sing are religious but probably the most popular one turns out to be *Avanti Populo*, the Italian Communist anthem - simply because it makes such a splendid marching song. A number of East Anglian eyebrows have risen as a ragged group limps through the village bearing a cross and singing "evviva il comunismo e la liberta".

The experience provides a crash course in the meaning of Christian community: the difficult and extraordinarily rewarding business of learning to live with people with whom you are thrown together, learning to tolerate those who walk too fast or too slow, those who complain too much or who try to organise everyone or who seem offensively immune to sore feet and aching muscles, learning to love the most unexpected people. An important element, both positive and negative, in all this is the shared hardship but there emerges gradually through this a shared prayer and a shared vision of the gospel, in fact a rudimentary shared theology, the process forges a genuine order of preachers.

Students of group dynamics will not be at all surprised to learn that the intense community experience of each group makes for traumatic difficulties towards the end of the week when

the different groups encounter each other, as the "little churches" discover they have to be members of a greater church. A whole history of relationships and rivalries between different religious orders and different national churches is re-enacted in an East Anglian village - so far always with a successful, if painful, resolution. The week culminates in a common celebration of the Easter Vigil in the tiny village church, a litany that moves from the first slow and primitive handling of ancient symbols of fire and water and darkness and Light with increasing momentum into a climax that can only be described as ecstatic as the congregation comes out into the street clapping, dancing, laughing and embracing each other.

Those who believe that religious life in its traditional form is finished should pause to consider Student Cross, for it is a highly traditional operation centred on the Holy Week Liturgy and the preaching of the gospel, and its attraction for young people (many applicants have to be turned away each year) owes nothing to any trendy gimmickry or even to the natural appeal of social good works. It offers nothing but the discovery of community through a sharing in the cross. It would be a valuable, and perhaps disconcerting, experience for many in more established communities who are seeking the path of true renewal.