

**National CLC (Canada) Assembly  
May, 2004, Lethbridge, Alberta  
John Sumarah, CLC Truth Given, Nova Scotia**

I have been asked to share a few reflections on the theme of the Assembly, “One Apostolic Community: Our way of Life.” The theme for our Assembly is taken from the CLC World Assembly gathered in Nairobi last year.

In the World Assembly, delegates were led through a process to receive and embrace the call to be an Apostolic Body. In the history of CLC, which is long and rich in substance, the consistent theme throughout our 400+ year old history is our desire to cooperate with the will of the Trinity.

While CLC can be viewed as both a “community of apostles” and an “apostolic community” much of our formation in CLC, to date, has been around the notion of “community of apostles.”

Those of us in CLC have often described our groups as more than a prayer group, more than a Bible study group and more than a support group. As a group gathered in the name of Jesus, we know well the value of prayer and sharing. We know also the value of Scripture and the importance of mutual support, especially in time of need. To date, and for the most part, individual members of CLC have been called to apostolic action and we know that much is being done to contribute to the Realm of God on earth through our individual apostolates. I could spend considerable time sharing with you the individual apostolates of the nine members of my CLC group in Nova Scotia. Our activities are more than volunteer activities. They are apostolates clearly discerned by individuals as a calling from the Trinity.

My hope, in this presentation, is to clarify the meaning of “Apostolic Community,” to understand why we are invited to embrace this call at the regional, national and world levels and how we might promote CLC as an apostolic community.

Let us, together, look first at the word “community.” All over the world people are gathering together to form Christian community, some in organised settings such as religious and some where people do not live together. Why? Political, social, economic and even religious forces have mitigated against community and decades of individualism have left us feeling alone and lonely. If in fact, as many of us believe, we are relational by nature, then there is no “I without a You.” That is, we need each other. Who are we without each other? I believe that today we are searching for a way to experience both individuality and community, which need not be exclusive of one another. The question of relationship between an individual and a community is resolved if the community promotes the individual and the individual promotes the community. The individual sacrifices something to promote the communal and the community is stretched to continually promote the well-being of the individual.

Community is always in need of being re-created. This rebirth is important for a number of reasons. Some people think that all they need to do is find a community and fit in. But their mere involvement in the community changes the community. Our CLC charism helps us understand the value of community.

The first part of our Charism addresses the question of identity. We are blessed in so many ways as followers of Jesus. We know that we are not alone and we know that we are called to work with others in the service of Jesus. A number of issues are clear for us. Our identity is clear, is it not? We are the sons and daughters of God. This revelation itself has extraordinary implications. What does it mean to be a son or daughter of God? God sent us Jesus so we would have a tangible answer to this question. This revelation means that we strive to live like Jesus. It means that we model our lives after him, loving and forgiving as he was and is. We know that there is a gap between how we want to be and how we are. This should not frighten us or make us despair. We acknowledge that such a gap exists and that we are called to pray and recognise God in the gap so that we can carry on and pray. The reason we carry on and pray is not to be more perfect but to be in communion with Jesus who carried on and prayed. I mention “the gap” here because often people give up on community. It is not exactly how they had envisaged community would be. Many Christians have given up on community. The fact that community is difficult should not surprise us. Community is our identity, nevertheless. We are called together to be sons and daughters of God. Even God can be thought of as community. Witness the Trinity, three in one. Imagine the creator, redeemer and inspirer all creating community with each other and with us.

The second part of our CLC charism addresses the question of vocation. As sons and daughters of God we are called to be with Jesus. This means, of course, getting to know Jesus and

spending time with him. There is no better way to know someone than to spend time with them. We learn this in community. I want to know you and you want to know me and we begin to love each other as we get to know each other. Sometimes, of course, we do not immediately like or love the person we are getting to know. Our vocation in life, though, is spending time with Jesus and spending time with the people Jesus places in our life. The real issue around vocation is to be still enough to know this. Scripture says, “Be still and know that I am God.” For me, this Scripture quote is a way of saying that we can know someone only by being still enough to welcome them and spend time with them. If I am not still, then my heart has many barriers to opening itself up to another. Our vocation then is to be with Jesus, to be with others. Our vocation is community.

Some people understand vocation as action. I understand it to as a calling. The action in vocation is to be in relationship with Jesus and others. This notion of “being with” is central to CLC and should not be thought of as a passive state. We know that relationships are active and effort. Spending time with Jesus and others, in prayer and in community, are essential ways of living the CLC charism and discerning our way of life. “Being with,” then, is the foundation upon which we discern our decisions about mission.

The third part of our Christian charism is mission. Since we know who we are and what our vocation is, we know also that spending time with Jesus and with each other will lead us somewhere, since there is much to do in the Realm of God. What we are called to do will

depend on the circumstances of our lives, our health for example, our disposition, the gifts that God has given us, etc. What I want to share here is that spending time with Jesus and others is the way to discern the mission to which we are called. Mission changes from time to time, of course, but there is no holiday from being a follower of Jesus. That does not mean that we are busy every moment of every day but we can be certain that Jesus is continually active in our lives and in our world today and we are likewise called to be active. One of the many benefits of community for me is that it is a place where I can share with others the yearnings of my heart. There, others help me in my discerning. There, others listen carefully and help me discern the will of God.

Many people ask how we can know God's will. I want to share a short story from a writer by the name of Parker Palmer. He was a highly regarded university teacher with an extraordinary ability for communication. One day he was asked by his university to consider allowing his name to stand for president. He was a member of a Quaker group so he brought this question to the group for discernment. The members listened as Parker shared that this invitation was a wonderful opportunity to make a positive difference in the life of the university. He could reach more people and have a greater impact than simply in teaching. He was then asked to be completely honest with the group regarding his deepest motivation. He said that his deepest motivation was to be recognised, to be famous and to have his picture in the paper. The group said humorously that there were simpler ways to have his picture in the paper. Parker said later that the group saved him from making a huge mistake. No doubt he would have performed well

as president and done many good things but he was born to teach, not to administrate. The group helped him to be true to his gifts and talents. His mission was and is to teach and as a result of the group's discernment Parker Palmer is considered, by many, one of the great teachers in the realm of spirituality.

Celebration is the fourth part of the CLC charism. That is, we acknowledge that God has created us to be sons and daughters, has given us the gift of Jesus, has enlightened us as to our vocation and our call to join in the creative act of the Trinity. There is much to be grateful for and to celebrate. Our celebrations are incomplete, however, because we, as humans, are not yet entirely reconciled with one another. We celebrate, nevertheless, as a sign that we are part of the Christian story, the story that God is with us, wants to be with us, and that God lovingly asks us to live and walk the path of love. God's vision and desire for us is community. While all images of the Absolute Mystery are limited we can image God as community; we are made in the image and likeness of God, thus, we, also, are community.

Let us move now to the "apostolic" part of "apostolic community." The CLC way of life is essentially apostolic. What I have learned in the last several years is that the decisions for individual apostolates are best made with the help of the community. That is, if the individual decision is discerned with the aid of the community there is a better chance that the decision will be well discerned. The community should be clear about its role in discernment, not simply to support the person but rather to discern with the person his/her call, to send the person from the

community, so that he/she experiences the support within the group where questions and prayers are offered. Once a decision is reached the community takes responsibility for sending the individual to fulfill the mission much as Jesus did in sending out his apostles. In the days following the discernment, the individual is responsible for updating the community on his/her mission so that the community may support and evaluate this mission.

What I have described thus far is a community which discerns, sends, supports a person and evaluates this person's apostolate. Why is this important? We know from our experience that we need help with discernment. We desire to do the Trinity's will but we need help with this. Some communities have experience with personal discernment; others need to introduce this notion into their formation and their meetings. The importance of discernment is evident to us since it is at the heart of our charism. Discerning involves being honest about our motivations, fears, hopes, desires, etc. and trusting that the community will welcome involvement in our decision. Not all decisions require community involvement. The decisions that do, I believe, are the decisions around apostolic mission.

Why is it important for a community to send its members outward? We experience a spiritual connection when we are sent. Our experience is different from simply doing what we feel called to do. Last year I was sent by my community to lead another group for one year. Because I was sent, I remained very much a part of my CLC group even though I was leading another. I knew that I was supported by my group and that they carried me in prayer. My community also met

with the new group on two occasions for a meal and a liturgy. In a real way, my CLC group shared responsibility for assisting the other group even though I was the one who led the weekly meetings.

Why did the World Assembly discern a call to apostolic community? Few important events happen in a vacuum. When we review the history of CLC we observe the movement of the Holy Spirit throughout its history. Briefly, Ignatius founded the Jesuits in 1540 and the Jesuit Jean Leunis founded the Marian Congregation in 1563. This name was changed to Christian Life Communities in 1967. If we review previous World Assemblies we understand more fully the call of Nairobi's Assembly. In 1973, for example, the theme of the Assembly was: "the liberation of all men and women." In 1976, the theme was: "poor with Christ for a better service" and in 1979, "at the service of one world." In 1982 the theme was: "the challenge to be one world community on mission to bring about justice." In 1990, the theme was, "an international community at the service of the kingdom, to go out and bear fruit." In 1994, the theme was, "CLC Community in Mission" and in 1998, "deepening our identity as an apostolic community, clarifying our common mission." Clearly, the Trinity is speaking to us about the importance of apostolic community and its focus on mission, that is, reaching out to a world in need.

The message is clear, therefore, and the context in which we find ourselves is clear. In the Ignatian process of formation, the starting point is the real world. All are invited to be exposed

to the pain, the poverty, and the anguish of our world. Every minute, the nations of the world spend 1.8 million dollars on military armaments. Every hour 1500 children die of hunger related diseases. Every day a species becomes extinct. More people are being detained, tortured or made refugee than any other time in history. Much of the kingdom on earth is poor, lacking the essentials of clean water, hygiene, education, health and housing. Diseases such as AIDS are killing millions of people, especially in Africa. The strategies for working for justice have to change. Working together in a common effort is the way at this time to work for justice. We need to find ways to cooperate with other CLC's as well as other organizations interested in justice for the world.

In the second half of this talk, I would like to suggest how we, in this time and place, are called to respond to an invitation to receive and embrace the call to apostolic community. To do this, I would like to reflect for a few moments on the life and teachings of Jesus. We are, of course, followers of Jesus and it is to him that we look for the questions and concerns life presents to us and the answers we seek in life.

The starting place for the public mission of Jesus was his baptism by John. His discernment was confirmed - he had a mission to fulfill. He began his mission by choosing others to join him. Given the context in which Jesus found himself, he had to decide how he would go about his mission. There were options available to him. A military leader, religious leader or a civil leader were the obvious choices for many who looked to him for leadership. He rejected all of these

ways, to the disappointment of many, no doubt. Regarding the military option he said, “They that live by the sword shall perish with the sword.” The path he chose was to live a true life of human community and to transform the human community from within. His mission was to proclaim the good news of the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth. His mission then was an earthly one. Jesus’ outlook and his mission were clearly stated in his prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” He demanded, as John the Baptist did, a repentance, an acknowledgement that something was wrong in the world and that the minds and hearts of everyone needed to change. Jesus was not distracted by sin since the real issue for him was the blindness and stupidity of people missing the real point of the kingdom of heaven on earth. He was declaring, I would suggest, that there is much more significance to life here and now and it is time that people started behaving differently towards one another. Jesus makes many references in his lifetime to fear and faith, knowing that fear prevents people from believing and acting as though the kingdom can be realized on earth as in heaven. The answer to fear is love and his mandate becomes: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus knew that the way to bring about his mission was through community. He came from the Trinity, a community, and was born into a Jewish family, the focus of which was community. The building of the Kingdom required followers who would know him, love him and share in the work of his mission. They would become Church, a community. Jesus knew that community was an alternative to military conquest and power as the way to transform human society. Jesus called forth a community and trained them to be different from the structures around them. He

chose ordinary people and instructed them in a way of living that will point to a transformed society. Today he does the same.

How does Jesus prepare his followers for mission? The first part of this question has to do with the structure of a community itself and the second part how a community relates to the outside world. For the first part, the structure of a community, it is clear that Jesus determines the mission. The followers are to simply undertake the stated mission. There is no need for them to agonize over the nature of the mission. The mission is revealed to Jesus by the Trinity of whom he is part. He reveals the mission to his followers. The mission is revealed to Jesus out of love and he reveals it to his followers in a similar manner. The community that he gathers together must love one another and try to live like Jesus, knowing persecution and trusting that even death will not deter the mission. Others will follow. Jesus creates a new human family not based on blood ties but on listening to the will of God and doing it. When there are failures in the community there will be forgiveness. The mutual affection of one for the other will overcome fear and bring about the creative action of the Trinity. Jesus models for his followers how to live more simply and how to align themselves with those in need. The challenge remains the same today with the added knowledge that the earth's resources are limited and need to be shared more equitably. Working for justice means also living more simply!

The Christian Church, that is the followers of Jesus, exists in the world to serve the world. It is a missionary community. If this community lives only for itself then it ceases to be the mission of

Jesus. While life within the community demands a faith that overcomes fear, likewise in the world at large, the Christian Church is not to be afraid, not to be defensive. Jesus says, “love your enemies.”

Let me summarize where I am in this presentation. Throughout the history of CLC and the history of the Church we know from the life and teachings of Jesus that we are called to receive and embrace the call to apostolic community. Why? Because it is the way of Jesus and the Trinity. The invitation is to cooperate with others in working for the mission that was revealed two thousand years ago and is still relevant today. So what do we do as followers of Jesus?

The first action, I think, is to contemplate the mission given to Jesus and then to us, to ponder it and give thanks for all that is revealed. Gratitude is often the best prayer.

Secondly, we can grow in awareness of the way we are contributing to such a mission, that is, to see how we and others are enacting the work of mission. Sometimes we fail to see the significance of small acts that are huge contributions to the mission. I am speaking here of an attitude towards our apostolic activities. As part of an apostolic community I need to carry this image of one community to all that we are called to do. In some cases the issue is not so much doing more but doing what we do with awareness of our charism and mission. I am part of a local group, a regional group, a national group and a world group all working together with the Christian Church of which we are part.

Thirdly, we can start thinking of our individual apostolates in reference to our CLC group. Is there something related to my apostolate that I need to talk about with my community? Do I need to review what I am doing and why? How can my community help me? Will I grow to be open to the questions of my brothers and sisters who may offer me not only supportive comments but challenging questions? In this regard I should share with you that when I received the invitation to attend the Assembly in Nairobi, my inclination was to say no; too much time and too much work. I have been in CLC long enough to know that the decision to go was the kind of decision needing discernment with others so I brought it to the group I was leading. My fears and concerns were brought to light. Insightful questions were asked and prayerful support was given. After a couple of weeks the answer became clear and a peace followed the discernment, a peace that remained with me in Nairobi and to the present. I believe that a properly discerned decision bears fruit for both the individual and the community. Thank God for CLC and people who care about these important decisions we face in life!

Fourthly, we can begin to see the value of communal apostolic action. That is, the group may discern that as a group, they are called to a particular action. While not everyone has to do the same thing within the action, it is important for each member to see how, with the gifts and shortcomings each possesses, she or he can contribute to the mission. Shared responsibility means simply that together we discern the project and evaluate the work every so often. There will be times when a particular CLC group will see a local need that it can address together. At

other times, it may be that the discerned need is within CLC itself, for example, the giving of the Spiritual Exercises or the promotion of CLC in the region. There should be times when the regional CLC together takes on a project, similarly, for the national and world levels of CLC. All action must come from prayerful reflection and discernment. Social justice in CLC requires a careful, collective, prayerful reflection.

My experience in CLC suggests that we need help with the last category of communal action. To address the topic of communal action I need to share a few comments about the place of action in the life of CLC and the Christian community in general. We know from Scripture that faith without works does not mean much and works without faith is not the Christian way. Jesus makes it clear that what we do with and for the least of our sisters and brothers we do with and for him. What the Christian Scriptures point towards, I believe, is a unity of purpose between faith and action. We need both. The best action to take is the discerned action that comes from personal and communal prayer. Justice comes, therefore, from the place where we meet God and one another. The Trinity's creative action comes out of their love for one another and the world. Action and contemplation are often presented to us as separate aspects of doing and being. We cannot so easily separate and fragment our lives. Each of us is one person with various dimensions to our life. Action for some people in the group may be committed prayer and moral support. Action for others may be writing letters, presenting briefs, challenging national or world policies. The important point about common action, project

or mission is that it is commonly discerned. While we may not all be doing the same thing we do need to see how we can contribute to this discerned action.

The question to be discerned around communal action needs to be discussed in our small groups. Some groups will listen to an individual's idea about which project the group should assume. I want to suggest that a skilful guide will ask the group to pray about and share what they think God is asking of the group. The issue is not what I see for the group but how my participation in the prayerful conversation can add to discerning God's will for the group.

Individuals in the group will have varying degrees of passion and commitment to the action but the important point is that the process that leads to the decision is respectful and open to the will of God rather than to individual agendas. The process will take time and some people may be impatient with the length of time taken. The desire of the group, however, is to explore and discover what God may be asking of the whole group. Sometimes members will become frustrated with the process and conclude that they should simply decide on "something." In this case the group risks losing the significance of praying its way through the process. When we engage in collective discernment around apostolic action we are, in fact, building community and we see the necessary relationship in CLC in the communal, the spiritual and the apostolic.

Some groups may discern a call to promote CLC in their region and I want to suggest that this is as worthy a justice issue as working for the environment or Amnesty International. Our Christian Church needs CLC. Some groups who love CLC but do not feel particularly gifted in

sharing the charism of CLC in an explicit way may discern a call to a local justice issue. It may also be that in joining other groups with similar goals we are indirectly sharing about CLC.

There is much to be done in our world so we need not compare one group's action with another's in CLC.

In addressing the practical aspects of communal action I want to say a word about the Guide's role. Our Charism document expresses it this way:

The whole process of discernment, by which we "look for" the will of God concerning our mission, requires a careful attention to personal and group rhythms, with the help of both personal and group guides. Action can be not only on a personal level, but also on the group level according to circumstances and in response to the needs perceived by the members of the community. These apostolic actions are also the expression of the personal vocation each one has received from the Lord. In this case, the community, in one way or another, will tend to translate the action, which it assumes and discerns, into mission. Therefore, we can speak of *group involvement in the mission of the Church*. Working as a team, with the grace of God, will have greater apostolic efficiency.

One of our CLC principles states the matter this way:

Our life is essentially apostolic. We each receive from God a call to make Christ and his saving action present to our environment. This personal apostolate is necessary for extending the gospel in an effective way among the great diversity of people, places and structures. We also exercise a communal apostolate in a great variety of forms, whether through group action initiated or sustained by our community or through the involvement of our members in existing secular or religious organizations and events. The Community helps us to live the different dimensions of this apostolic commitment through personal and communal discernment. We try to give an apostolic sense even to the most ordinary parts of our daily life.

There are so many justice issues facing our world today. The needs can be overwhelming. It is understandable that individuals and communities become discouraged. Jesus knows well the reality we face. We belong to a Christian Church, two thousand years old, called to share responsibility for mission. We belong to CLC, a group within the Christian Church with a particular charism and spirituality. We are not alone. Jesus calls us together and together we are called to act. We are called to join the Trinity in their action. They act through us. The reason we are asked to act as a community is because the Trinity acts as a community. The three are one and act in unison. We are thus called to act as one body, sent by Christ, sharing responsibility for service to the Christian Church and to society.

The need for continuous formation is an essential element in understanding and living as an apostolic community. Profound changes are happening very quickly in our world and we need to discern together how to respond effectively to address these needs. We need to be renewed personally and collectively if we are to know and respond to the issues we face. Our Common Mission statement puts it this way:

CLC will provide formation teams at regional and world levels, which will develop and propose formation programs, which intellectually and affectively integrate the spiritual, communitarian and apostolic dimensions of CLC life. Special assistance ought to be given to developing programmes that will enable our members to be proactive and counter-cultural whenever needed.

CLC will offer its expertise in the development of persons, integrating faith and life, touching all dimensions of daily life, with a special sensitivity to the poor and marginalized. We wish to provide formation and education programmes that will enable persons and/or communities to listen actively, to deal with conflict resolution and

promote sincere and open dialogue among our members and with other persons in society.

Formation requires a continuous conversion individually and collectively. The Trinity, model of creative action for us, knows well our need to be not only faithful to our charism but creative as we carry out this charism and respond to contemporary issues. Formation is unending so while we may have completed all of the CLC manuals we are still in need of ongoing formation. We realise the importance of acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to enable apostolic actions. The apostolic community is a place of formation, whether at the local, regional, national or world levels. This community provides the forum for serious reflection and concern for individual and communal apostolic activities. The community itself is missionary as its members strive to live in love and concern for one another and witness to the world through an apostolic life-style.

Father Arrupe, a former Superior General of the Society of Jesus wrote:

Today our prime objective must be to form women and men for others... people who cannot conceive of the love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbours; men and women completely convinced that the love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce. This kind of education goes directly counter to the prevailing educational trend practically everywhere in the world.

Father Kolvenbach, the current Superior General of the Society of Jesus writes:

The fundamental principle upon which the imperative to honour human dignity rests is this: we are all children of God, brothers and sisters, members of one human family, all due respect, esteem, human rights as persons.

To conclude, I would suggest that the model we have for apostolic community is the Trinity itself. The Trinity is community. The three roles of creating, redeeming and inspiring are conducted in communion with each other. Each of the three, while having a unique role, acts always in unison with the others. I would like to suggest that Jesus knew this model very well and offered it to his followers: one community acting in unison, for the sake of the kingdom on earth as in heaven. Apostolic community is the mission of the Christian Church and thus the mission of CLC. Our spirituality helps us discern what aspect of the mission we are called to as individuals and as community. As with the Trinity, we are called to balance community life with apostolic life. We are called inwards and outwards, that is, we are called to live both community and mission. One without the other is incomplete.

Jesus cautions us often about not being afraid or anxious. As we consider the outcome of the World Assembly and now the National Assembly, we pray that our hearts and minds will be open to deepening our understanding of apostolic community, of the way in which the Trinity is calling us in our age and time. How am I called personally, in my circumstances? How are we called locally in our circumstances? How are we called nationally in our circumstances and how are we called internationally as a world CLC? We trust that whatever graces are needed will be given to us as we join the Trinity in their work of humanizing the world for all people.

### **Dedication and Acknowledgements**

**I dedicate this talk to our founding Ecclesial Assistant, mentor and friend in CLC,**

**John English, SJ.**

A number of writers influenced my thinking about the topic of Apostolic Community: John English, SJ, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, John MacMurray, Julian of Norwich and Jean Vanier.

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