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Richard Buck

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the Holy Trinity

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# Community and the Holy Trinity

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Michael Conway in his article in the September 2019 issue of *The Furrow* (“Building Christian Community in Contemporary Culture”) made important observations about how to rebuild the Catholic community, which inspires me to offer some ideas about looking to the Holy Trinity as the *model* for human communities.

Father Conway concludes that rebuilding Catholic communities requires a significant departure from the way the communities are structured today. In many cases, the renewed communities may not be centered on the parish priest; they may consist of small groups (building the community from the bottom up); people may relate more to spiritual and interpersonal experiences than to doctrine, liturgy, or sacraments; and the renewed communities may need to accommodate diverse ways of life and of thinking. Father Conway envisions the possibility of “a new form of institution (-ality)” emerging “to support the life of faith” (p. 465). He suggests that the early church may be a better model for the renewed community than the Church as it exists to today.

## ANAM CARA

I propose an approach to building spiritual communities that would foster the renewal of the Catholic community along the lines discussed by Father Conway. My approach calls for building communities through close one-on-one relationships between people and turning to the Holy Trinity as the model for human communities. John O’Donohue commends to our attention the Irish words *anam cara*, which he defines as “soul friend.”<sup>1</sup> This is a sharing between souls, “an act of recognition and belonging,” and an infinite commitment of one to another. Further, according to O’Donohue, *anam cara*, is the very nature of God: “the Christian concept of God as Trinity is the most sublime articulation of

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1 J. O’Donohue. *Anam Cara*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999, p.13.

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otherness and intimacy, an eternal interflow of friendship.”<sup>2</sup> *Anam cara* not only names the intimate connection of one human to another, but also is the connection binding the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and all of us together. With *anam cara*, the human relationship is at the level of the soul. It is not a relationship built on sensual appeal, intellectual compatibility, or family connection. All of these may be factors in attaining *anam cara*, but they are not the thing itself. *Anam cara* places us in contact with the Holy Spirit, who then guides us in building relationships together; that is, initiating community with fellow humans and with God.

### HOLY TRINITY

The Holy Trinity, which John O’Donohue observes is held together by *anam cara*, is the perfect community. Leonardo Boff, a leading thinker in liberation theology, believes that this community of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit should be the model for human communities.<sup>3</sup> Not only is the Trinity composed of separate Persons, Boff points out that each Person of the Trinity is substantially different in terms of relationships with each other and with humanity. Yet each Person is God, and the community of Persons (the Trinity) is God. They are separate, yet inseparable. The lesson for humans is that we can be diverse individually and at the same time be completely intertwined with each other in a community. Boff argues that diversity and mutual acceptance of diversity by the Trinity sets the example for human relationships. Nothing in human relationships is perfect, but people should try accepting each other as they are, be open to each other, and be willing to give their best to the relationship.

How can we imperfect humans achieve community based on the model of the Trinity? We do this by starting with one-on-one *anam cara* relationships, and expanding them into the multiple relationships of community. Jewish theologian Martin Buber works with the same type of relationship as O’Donohue’s *anam cara*, which he names *Ich und Du*, translated as I-You or I-Thou.<sup>4</sup> There is an intense mutual focus of attention between two people, a complete involvement of one with another. It is intimately personal, going beyond reason or understanding. The I-You relationship fulfills a fundamental yearning that every human has from infancy. This intense connection with another person or other persons comes *prior to* and is a requirement for forming a relationship

2 Ibid., p. 15.

3 Boff, L. *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (J. Smith, Trans.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, (2000), p. 14.

4 Buber, M. *I and Thou: A New Translation with a Prologue “I and You” and Notes* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Simon & Schuster. (1970).

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with the ultimate You: God. *Anam cara* and the I-You relationship are like the friendships of excellence described by Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> By excellence, Aristotle means that the friendship is one in which each party endeavors to bring out the best in the other person; rather than seeking to get something out of the relationship individually. With both seeking the excellence of the other, both become better people. In friendships of excellence, each sees in the other a model for him or herself. Unlike other types of friendship, there are no demands on the other. There is no yearning for individual self-sufficiency; rather, self-sufficiency is conceived as something shared with the other.

Buber sees community as formed from the collection of I-You relationships in which the participants also relate to *God* as the community *centre*: “Not the periphery, not the community comes first, but the radii, the common relation to the *centre*. That alone assures the genuine existence of a community.”<sup>6</sup> Community in the sense used here is *not* a collection of individuals who have an abstract commonality of interests or beliefs. It is a community in which everyone thoroughly knows everyone else, and where the experience of God is shared. The early Christian communities were like this.

## NEW COMMUNITIES

Communities modeled on the Trinity may be the new “institution (ality)” that Father Conway suggests is needed to revitalize Catholic community. Rather than a world of individuals increasingly unconnected to family and other institutions, it would be a world of persons intimately tied to their communities and to God. What we have known as the parish community in this scenario would become a collection of small communities of persons intensely involved with one another. *Anam cara* would unite the souls of everyone in each community. And, as in Aristotle’s friendships of excellence, people would be more concerned with helping others be better people than concerned with themselves. In helping each other the entire community comes into harmony with the Holy Spirit and the Trinity. The focus would not be on individuality separated from all others, but would be on personhood defined by relationships with others in the community. *Mutuality*, not hierarchy, would be the rule. People would deal with one another as equals in terms of dignity and respect. There would be an openness to diversity and a desire to be inclusive. Each community would be

5 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (Second ed.) (T. Irwin, Trans.). Indianapolis, Hackett, (1999).

6 Buber, op. cit., p. 163.

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numerically small of necessity, because *anam cara* is an intensely personal relationship that can only exist among people who have a direct relationship with each other; indeed, it presupposes one-on-one personal contact on a frequent basis. A number of about 150 is often cited as the maximum for a stable group held together in harmony by close personal relationships.

### ROLE OF THE CHURCH?

What is the role of the Catholic Church in this collection of small spiritual communities, which may be quite diverse in terms of world views, ethnicity, economic status, education, and religious orientation? In the etymological background of the English word “religion” is the Latin term *religare* (to bind), and religion would be needed to bind the small communities with the larger Christian community and with God. *Anam cara* works well for face-to-face relationships, but a collection of communities needs an overarching tie that spans the differences and the commonalities of the people and the groups. Father Conway observes a “diversity of belonging” among Catholics today; that is, there are differing views of the place of doctrine, liturgy and sacraments in the lives of people and, perhaps, a commitment to Christianity that is open to a variety of ways of connecting to God. The role of the Church in this new circumstance may *primarily* be one of community support and teaching. The Bible and Catholic theology would be guides for this loosely organized collection of communities and the clergy would be teachers and advisors. The experience of the clergy and the body of learning based on the Holy Bible are powerful tools for shepherding and comforting people and their communities. There would still be a role for sacraments and liturgy although they would have to change – transforming to fit the current needs of Catholics, other Christians, non-Christians and even non-believers in the small communities.