Communes and Communities
by Fergus Kerr, O.P.

The ideal of communal living often fails to survive the ordeal of practical realities. A recent book by Clem Gorman[1] combines a survey of the movement towards communitarian life-styles in Britain since about 1965 with a practical manual for would-be communards which is packed with useful information and some reflective insight. At no point does the author make any reference even to the existence of monasteries and convents. It is fascinating and touching to see how, in an experiment less than a decade old, the problems and structures arise which have been familiar in religious communities now for centuries. People always have to learn things for themselves, of course; and one need not lament the fact that the hard-won wisdom of monastic experience has not been available for modern communards to draw upon. For that matter, our communities have been undergoing fairly radical changes during the relevant period, and we have not always given much attention to the proven principles we have inherited, far less practised them impressively enough to instruct others. In fact the blunt advice which Clem Gorman offers can perhaps help to cut through the pious odour that hangs about religious life and sometimes prevents its practitioners from realizing elementary facts. The sheer naïvety of the discoveries the communards are making casts fresh light on the hoary truisms of monastic life.

Clem Gorman prefers to speak of 'communes', but he allows that the difference between communes and communities is not clear. He sees a spectrum, with a left and right wing: 'On the far left are the very poorest communes, often squatting, frequently having to support a fair proportion of members who are not working, and probably more likely to involve group marriage and absence of personal property concepts. A community is on the far right, and is likely to be characterized by greater wealth, larger more comfortable premises, and a structure based on couples co-operating economically and emotionally.' As he says, the majority of British communes are somewhere between these two extremes, as convents and monasteries obviously are. In effect, then, the distinction seems to be that communes, whether urban or rural, extemporize and improvise and live from hand to mouth, whereas communities tend to consist of professional people who organize everything to run as smoothly as possible. There is, for instance, no evidence that communes are necessarily more politically conscious. The commune established by Sid Rawles, formerly of the Hyde Park Diggers, on Dorinish, an island in Clew Bay owned by John Lennon, seems an extreme of another kind: 'The island is bare and windswept, with scant topsoil

[1] *Making Communes*, published in 1971 by Whole Earth Tools, 75p.

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and hardly enough sunshine. The people live in tents, and women and children have to be sent to the mainland by small boat—the only form of communication—during the worst of winter. Some work has been done planting potatoes, and a few trees have been planted which one day will be the basis for a windbreak. Apart from that, progress has been slow.' It is a long way from this rugged primitivism to the professional families living co-operatively in a commodious mansion in Worcestershire (the house itself was very cheap at £20,000). As Clem Gorman says, the will to share is what makes a community and the forms this may take are all but infinite. A group of youngsters occupying adjacent bed-sitters can easily club together to form a co-operative, to buy food in bulk, to share equipment none could afford on his or her own, and so on, and this practice is spreading. On the other hand, groups may form primarily to share sexual experience and even to practise what Gorman calls 'sociogamy' (group marriage).

Religion continues to provide the commonest motive and motif of communal living, whether it takes the form of seeking truth by way of total eroticism or by the practice of disciplined meditation. While some groups may play sexual games simply for fun, it seems clear that many communes owe their existence primarily to the revival of ancient fertility cults and to a religious faith in the sacred power of sexual intercourse. Other groups have gathered round guru-figures and organize life and work so as to be freer to practise meditation and to go in for the mystical life by way of spirituality. The community in the caravan park at Findhorn in Moray is guided by the very detailed and down-to-earth instructions which the wife of the founder receives from God every morning—and things seem to turn out quite successfully. The Selene Community owes its existence and ethos less to the Christian tradition than to the desire to re-integrate the human personality with that of the earth: they have a farm in the Cambrian Mountains. Proximity to pre-Christian religious sites is mentioned in *Making Communes* as a factor in choosing the location of rural communes (but put second to soil quality and price of land). To have a monastery or a Christian sanctuary in the neighbourhood has clearly no relevance whatever—which testifies to how remote and unnoticeable our witness has become to a whole generation of people who are seeking forms of life very akin to what we represent. Clem Gorman mentions the Cyrenians and the communities they have established to try to integrate dossers, but it seems unlikely that he is aware of any connection between their concept and the gospel (Luke 23, 26: They seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus).

The greater part of *Making Communes* is concerned with where and how to find suitable buildings, how to buy a house, how to convert it by self-help for communal occupation, how to arrange the

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financial and legal affairs of the community, and so on. There is a final chapter on growing food. None of this need detain us here, except that it is perhaps worth noting that Gorman argues (a) that communes need big houses, and (b) that it is cheaper per person to live in a big house than to spread the community into a number of smaller houses. That is worth noticing because every religious community these days must surely contain members who feel guilty and ashamed at the size of the house: they should not assume that it would necessarily be more in accordance with the vow of poverty to move the community out into a row of semi-detacheds. Gorman writes: 'The cost of a large old house, either to rent or buy, may seem high. But for large-ish numbers of people, say more than about eight, they are more economical.' He has conducted experiments to support his view: 'An experiment was carried out to discover the width of bed necessary for ten people to sleep comfortably. It was found that the amount of space occupied by each person decreased as the number increased. If a bed three feet wide is necessary for one person, a bed lots narrower than thirty feet would be necessary for ten.' Perhaps such experiments should be mounted in religious houses to dispel the doubts of the ashamed. On the other hand, perhaps it is the 'large-ish numbers' from which monks and nuns now shrink. As the pagan young move away from the ideal of the nuclear family unit to the concept of the commune and the tribe, middle-aged religious move out of their convents and monasteries into a diaspora of self-contained flatlets.

As we have already noted, it is in the *will to share* that Clem Gorman locates the meaning of community life: 'As research for this book progressed, the various forms of sharing declined in relative importance, and the act of sharing itself emerged as more important'. Whether the sense of sharing comes from within the group or from outside, from the members' need for mutual aid and affection or from some common project, 'or from some other source' (God, perhaps), what matters is the will to share rather than the structure and the purpose of the act of sharing. 'A commune is, after all, fundamentally a spiritual entity, a dynamic and sensitive relationship between a number of people.' The services that communities offer vary as much as the institutions they evolve to express and stabilize themselves. What must always be there, however, is the will to share—what, in the wake of Vatican II theology, we might more exaltedly label the call to fellowship, the vocation of *koinonia.* Some communes place more stress on internal relationships than others, but clearly the life of the group is usually regarded as speaking for itself and requiring no further justification. This is not to say that the group is necessarily self-centred and self-preoccupied, as many religious now accuse their own communities of being as soon as serious attention is paid to the quality of internal relationships. It is surely a mistake to argue (as some religious do) that community life is

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simply a means to an end, even if the end is the 'apostolate'. The error lies partly in the debased sense we tend to have now of the relation of means to end: when St Thomas speaks of *finis* and *ea quae sunt ad finem* he certainly does not think that the 'purpose' could be brought about any other way than by 'those things which are to the purpose'. He thinks of the latter as subordinate to the former but nevertheless having their own value and point. He would be sure to say too that every end depends on *some* 'means' to such an extent that it could not be achieved without them. And he would have thought that the 'apostolate', for example, depended for its fruitfulness on certain preconditions among which some experience of fraternal charity would undoubtedly have been essential and indispensable. He could not have understood religious who thought that community life stood in the way of their apostolate. Ruthless subordination of community life to the 'needs of the apostolate' as if it were a luxury or a distraction would have seemed very strange to St Thomas, but it is a trend evident among religious today. It is all the more striking, then, to note the emphasis Clem Gorman puts on the cenobitic principle (*koino*+*bios*: common life).

Whatever its service to the public—whatever its 'ministry'—the very existence of the commune is itself already a message. Part of the communication the commune-dwellers are making is embodied in their staying together in the first place. The communes, as Gorman says, 'are laboratories of future ways of living, in which the experimenters are their own guinea pigs'. He goes on to claim that they are both a response to, and part of, a profound revolution that is transforming society. He also believes that they constitute one of the few hopes that this social revolution can be peaceful. That kind of utopian thinking is very akin to Christian monasticism. Particularly since Vatican II we have heard a great deal about how religious communities are 'eschatological signs'. What that means is that monasteries and convents are to be regarded as attempts to prefigure and anticipate here and now the eschatological form of human life: life in the new creation.

The three vows are all vows of *total community*. The vow of obedience commits each member of the group to listen for and to obey the will of God as discovered in whatever seems for the common good of the group—however that is to be judged. Once it has been discovered, the individual does the will of the community as expressing the will of God. Some guru-figure such as the abbot may be a privileged interpreter of what constitutes the common good in any given instance, but the essential thing is for the individual member of the group to trust the *mysterion* as disclosed in the *bonum commune*. The vow of poverty places the individual in total dependence on the others for all his needs. There could be no more basic way of sharing than relying on each other for food, money, and so on. It is usual, too, that the community should adopt a fairly happy-go-

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lucky and semi-mendicant attitude to money and depend on the generosity of others (as Gorman shows that many communes do—letting the buyer put a price on what they offer for sale, for instance). This is, in effect, saying something about the nature of reality. It is saying that you can rely on your heavenly Father to look after all these things (Luke 12, 22-31). And, thirdly, by the vow of perpetual continence, the religious places himself in a condition of radically trans-sexual loving in the sense that he does not cease to be sexual but endeavours to diffuse his sexuality in a multiplicity of relationships. Long ago Freud drew attention to the way in which the erotic has been restricted to particular zones of the body and concentrated on the privileged act of sexual intercourse. He reminded us that the body is erotic in its entirety, and that the sexual 'intercourse' between human beings extends far beyond copulation. While the movement to eroticize the body as a whole and to free intersubjective relationships from the domination of the genito-sexual certainly leads directly to 'perversions' and 'promiscuity' as well as to such phenomena as sensitivity and encounter groups, fertility rituals, and sociogamy, it surely also makes for a great deal of much less portentous pleasure. But, so far as religious are concerned, shouldn't this movement help us to give some 'body' to the venerable and long-standing belief that the dedicated celibate is dedicated to loving *universally*?

This universal loving has often seemed abstract, cerebral, spiritual—in a word, *bodiless*. But this is not always so. There have always been nuns and monks (and friars and parish priests, too) with a personal radiance and energy which, while totally chaste—rather, *because* so totally chaste—have at the same time been manifestly physical and sexual. Supernatural charity is not some invisible and unobservable form of loving; on the contrary, it is physical, it shows on one's face, in one's smile, in the touch of one's hands. There is no opposition, in the soundest theological tradition, between natural love (*eros*) and supernatural charity (*agape*). It may not always be possible for the ordinary person to show much warmth and affection for some of the people whom he nevertheless feels bound to care for by the demands of charity. But we must be careful not to let ourselves off too lightly in this matter, with comforting reflections about being able to show charity to a man while shrinking with disgust from touching or even looking at him—he may have, perhaps, 'no form of comeliness that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him' (Isaiah 53, 2-3). It perhaps takes a saint to transform and diffuse the tenderness of erotic love in the passion for others which is charity. But such tenderness there can and must be, and such tenderness is *bodily*: it is smiling, it is touching, it is real warmth and affection. And it is perfectly possible, and nonetheless bodily, among human beings who have no thought of ever engaging in sexual coition in the narrow sense.

So the celibate, the consecrated virgin, need not be a cold fish

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and a barren stump. On the contrary, he or she must learn to *embody* an affection and tenderness which are in principle total and universal. And the primary locus of such embodied tenderness is the community to which one belongs. That is the measure of how total religious community is.

Now, this ideal of total community easily shatters on the ugly realities of life. Even if the members of the group all share the ideal (which should not be assumed), selfishness and conflict easily arise. According to Clem Gorman, many British communes are plagued by individual members who refuse or neglect to wash dishes or otherwise to take a fair share in daily tasks within the communal house. Failure to be fair towards the others in money matters seems a very common source of tension. While one cannot deny that such problems appear sometimes even in religious communities, perhaps particularly now that so many religious have opted for a system of personal budgets, it is perhaps the existence of conflict within the community which religious are most prone to ignore. Conflict has been thought to be so wrong that many religious have come to regard it as unthinkable and even to believe that it never occurs in religious houses. As we learn more about human groups, however, we are coming to see that without *some* tension the community disintegrates. It isn't the community in conflict that is in danger of collapsing but the community in which there is no conflict but only apathy and indifference. There is no harmony without tension, as Heraclitus said.

Conflict over issues can seldom be separated out from conflict between persons. The dynamics of the average group seem to push one member into stressing one thing at the expense of something else, and this inevitably provokes someone else to trying to redress the balance. In any religious house there will always be polarization between the members who are more introspective and contemplative and those who are more outgoing and apostolic, between those who think love of one's neighbour comes first and that Christianity is social and secular and those who think love of God takes priority and that Christianity is personal and sacred—and so on. No single member, and no community, is ever likely to achieve the equilibrium between (say) apostolate and contemplation. In practice, each individual and each community will always be drawn by a variety of pressures and circumstances towards stressing one at the expense of the other, and the balance will always be having to be restored.

Clem Gorman reports on one commune in which decisions are never made but matters are left to work themselves out (it has only five members). Regular meetings are, however, so he says, 'the backbone of most British communes', and surely this is gradually becoming true of religious houses too. Gorman seems to me to understand the place of community meetings better than some religious I have met: 'At these meetings anybody must be able to bring up any issue or

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problem that is troubling him and turn it over to the group to discuss. . . . The aim should be compromise and understanding rather than an imposed solution or settlement. The best thing a group meeting can do is air a problem and suggest ways to deal with it. Groups which use meetings stress that it is only rarely that problems are actually solved, but that the meetings are an important tool for developing a new kind of group consciousness.' Each of those sentences would bear further comment but it is perhaps the last which is the most important.

Forming policy and making decisions would seem to be matters for the group as a whole. 'Total democracy', according to Gorman, can work quite well simply through regularly scheduled group meetings—'with small numbers'. If over eight seems 'large-ish' to Gorman then presumably 'small numbers' means four or five. On the whole, from what he says, it would seem that most communes are content to share power and responsibility, usually to delegate certain key tasks to particular individuals, and several are run by their founder-leaders. It seems to me that this is the weakest section of *Making Communes* (not that I am in a position to judge the chapter on growing food). 'After all', Gorman writes, 'whatever formal structure you adopt, your relationships will still basically be the same, using the structure largely as a conveniently agreed channel to save time and argument.' It is surely not true that the 'organizational structure', as Gorman calls it, can ever be as detachable from the relationships within the community as this suggests. Indeed, his own data elsewhere in the book about the variety of structures, ranging from 'total democracy' through government by committee to the 'strong leader', sufficiently indicate how much the ethos and 'feel' of emotional relationships within the group are affected by the decision-making institutions. However, this doesn't require to be debated *here*. The last thing that Catholic religious need to be told is how central the decision-making structures are and how changes at that level rapidly alter relationships in other situations (which explains why there is so much resistance to changes in the decision-making structures).

So the 'group consciousness' certainly responds to organizational changes. Clem Gorman compares it to a living organism: 'The relationship that exists among a group of people in a successful commune may be likened to the relationship between the elements of a living organism. It is a finely balanced pattern, very complex and delicate. Yet it can have surprising resilience and tolerance. It depends upon understanding, yet it can contain a great deal of misunderstanding without collapsing. Its only source of strength is the harmony between its elements, i.e. its people. It is the strength of a stretched firemen's net, a spider-web, a honeycomb, where the forces pulling the elements together must be balanced by the forces pulling apart, and neither may triumph.' That is beautifully put, and the

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final sentence is well worth pondering. Tension is *essential.* Systematic evasion of tension of every kind must finally bring the community to the point of collapse. It is also true, of course, as Gorman says, that 'the mechanism of group polarization along sympathy lines must be understood', and there might be something to be said there about who in the group is to interpret and 'conduct' the polarization.

The group as a whole must decide whether to allow a new member to stay. Such a decision cannot take place without some kind of 'probation' and Clem Gorman proves wiser about this than some religious: 'Disagreeable though it sounds for a group of people to sit in judgment on another person, it is very often necessary in the interests both of the group and of the proposed new member. Getting a new member in is a big step for any group, the bigger the longer the group has been together, and a big dislocation for the new member too. Probation works both ways and gives the new member a chance to see if communal life suits him or her. Perhaps the greatest danger of using probation with new members is that they will try to conform to what they think is expected, and the group may tend to accept people too readily simply because they do not like to sit in judgment.' One senses here the wish that there should never be any occasion to 'judge' because every one should 'fit in'. But the facts have plainly taught the commune movement that unstable and indolent people are attracted to communal life and should never be allowed to stay. Perhaps the communard's reluctance to judge people stems from a Romantic philosophy of human nature; it is the equivalent, then, to the pious belief held by some religious that God must have sent the newcomer and that supernatural grace will eventually overcome his manifest unfitness for the life.

Many communes are bent on breaking down the difference between work and play, either by finding enjoyable work or by making their play lucrative. This means, in practice, either cottage industries (making toys or candles) or some form of entertainment (such as Principal Edwards' Magic Theatre, a rock group operating from a seventeenth-century farmhouse in Northamptonshire). Less (or perhaps more) radically than this, however, humour and play do a great deal to set the tone of the community and to liberate and communicate the group consciousness. Gorman reports that several British communes attribute their survival entirely to the development of a peculiar sense of humour all their own. Life in a religious community would certainly be impossible without humour and outsiders are often struck by the gaiety and high spirits. As Gorman says: 'Humour is a very useful device in a small group of people who are constantly together. It can be used to gently remind one member that he or she is playing authority games which are unacceptable to the others. It can be used to gently remind a member that he or she is being selfish and separatist. It can relieve the strain of a sudden argument between two members in front of the others. And it can

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always help to create a feeling of group identity, or solidarity, which an outsider may penetrate only by permission.' That all bears out one's experience of religious life.

Certainly every religious community requires its fund—its tradition—of private jokes and anecdotes, and perhaps the best criterion for the suitability of a new member is his properly modest and yet aptly creative participation in this game. And perhaps it is much nearer the heart of the matter than might at first appear. A sense of humour is, after all, a sense of perspective and of proportion, a sense of the penultimacy of all human values and dignity. This is surely akin to and interwoven with liberation from the spell of our own idols—release from the solemn grip of our egocentricity and fanaticism—into the exhilarating freedom of gospel joy. What glee has ever surpassed that of the original disciples when Jesus appeared to them as Lord? 'The disciples were glad', so we read (John 20, 20), 'when they saw the Lord.' What an understatement. Faced with Jesus now absurdly and impossibly bearing the glory of the living God what could they do but rejoice, *echarēsan*. We must not suppose they merely exchanged quiet smiles. They must have leapt about, dancing and singing and crying with laughter, their bodies romping with delight and vibrant with the grace of his being among them. Everything had suddenly been placed in an entirely new perspective. That was the gospel, the good spell, and merry-making is the only possible response to it. Did the Jews and the Greeks have a sense of humour? Read the Old Testament and Homer and see for yourself. It is arguable that humour (as distinct from horseplay and derision) originates in the gospel. At all events, it is to be expected that a religious community in the gospel tradition should develop its own style of humour.

'The group that plays together stays together', Clem Gorman says, with perhaps a Catholic reminiscence there. . . . He says that the high failure rate among British communes and their proneness to disintegrate may be partly due to 'the Protestant ethic', by which he means that they put a great deal of stress on the *work* they have in common and refuse to see that playing together may be an equally rewarding and enlightening way of renewing and sustaining the group. There would certainly be something odd about a monk who persistently absented himself from convivial occasions in the monastery.

Play connects on one side with ritual and Clem Gorman places great stress on the value of ceremony in community life (he lists a previous book of his own: *The Book of Ceremony*, Sydney, 1969, which I have not seen). Ceremony is often associated with pomp and formality, and left to Church and State and the Armed Forces. 'But from a communal and alternative life-style point of view it is the necessary extension and framework within which all the other manifestations of communal culture can thrive.' What Gorman is

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describing here is, of course, the liturgical life of the community, and contrary to the thinking of many religious today he clearly sees how essential such ceremony is as the context within which the life and work of the members go on. 'There can be ceremonies for new members joining and old ones leaving, the birth of a child to the commune, the death of a member, moving to a new house, the harvest of crops, and so on.' The point is sufficiently clear. 'Communal ceremony is ritual play, spontaneous yet channelled group movement and dancing. It can be used, as in pre-Christian times, to mark all the important events in the communal year.' It is sad that there again Gorman assumes that you have to go behind Christianity to discover rituals and patterns of worship. He very rightly says that such ceremonies should have roots in play as well as in trust and love. I take it that he means they do not simply articulate and deepen the sense of group solidarity but that they are also enjoyable. Wearing liturgical vestments can be fun. Indeed, those who dislike wearing them should not be allowed to do so. It seems to go with a certain neo-Puritan humanism in Catholicism since Vatican II that liturgical vestments are being abandoned in some places.

The sense of group solidarity as expressed in such ceremony is 'an evocation of a group spirit', and unless I am mistaken Clem Gorman understands more by this phrase than simply an evocation of the spirit of the group—he speaks of ceremony of this kind as 'an imitation of the most fundamental organic rituals of nature', and I think the 'spirit' evoked is simultaneously the spirit of the group and the spirit of the earth. He certainly has some mystical participation of the group in its natural environment in mind: 'While a ceremony is being celebrated, mundane time is said to cease flowing and timelessness prevails. Total harmony and oneness exist among all members; there is no alienation.' And even without the story of Jesus and its possible bearing on such matters, what is so wrong in all that? Mankind does belong to the earth, and ecology is not just a vogue word. The earth is all mankind has got, and to heed its message would be a lot saner and safer for us all than running after spirituality and progress and history and profit-making.

Long before mankind appeared the earth was a whole system of communication. Shape and movement and rhythm, colour and sound and smell—all these beckon and solicit, exclude and scare, signal nourishment and mortality, and so on. Wherever there are organic forms, there is a world fraught with meaning. Speech, and all that derives from it, is only one particular case of meaning. It is conceivable, and perhaps even likely, that the earth will continue to bear meaning long after mankind has become extinct. It is possible, and perhaps even essential, that the language of mankind, for its own good, must remain consistent and consonant with the language of the earth. Surely this is the insight attested in the ancient homologization of the *logos* that marks humanity and the *logos* that both

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hides and reveals itself in the cosmos. Dance has always been regarded as the form most appropriate to articulate this sense of the bond between mankind and life. And dance means ceremony and ritual and is inseparable from choral song and group celebration.

So, while one may certainly hold that the gospel has broken the power of nature-worship, need one conclude from this that the earth and the body are irrelevant? Are they superseded, as organs of meaning and foci of revelation, in the Christian dispensation? There is a theological approach which creates such a fierce dichotomy between the cosmological and the historical—which makes such a to-do about 'history' and 'decision'—that the earth and the body drop out of consciousness altogether. Can such unearthly and bodiless theology really be evangelical?

The glory of God—the 'weight' of the presence of the living God—became manifest uniquely in the transfigured body of Jesus when he appeared so jubilantly among his disciples in the kind of situation mentioned above. Now, of course, this is all but incredible and few there are who believe it. How could it ever be conceivable or imaginable, however, without some preliminary sensitivity on our part to the *possibility* of any such disclosure of divine glory? Without some pre-sentiment of the presence of the glory in *other* situations, how could one expect to see it in the case of *Jesus*? As the psalmist says, the earth is full of the glory of God. However polymorphous this hierophany may be, then, it occurs to mankind in the 'language' of the earth—according to the biblical tradition, in the 'message' carried by the wind and the cloud, the volcano and the burning bush. And unless such hints of the presence of God continue to occur to us, however ambiguously and fragmentarily, in events, places, persons, in music and in art, and so on, it is difficult to see how we can recognize the glory of God in the tradition about Jesus. All these other hierophanies must finally be judged by the crucial instance, but surely they should not then simply fall away into oblivion. In a time like ours, then, when many believers seem tempted to practise a non-ritualistic and nearly a-liturgical religion, it is perhaps another service that some of the communes can do for us to point out that ceremony is essential. For one of the main reasons for the existence of religious communities at all is surely to create stable and permanent worship-groups to perform the ceremony in which the body celebrates its bond with the earth—but the earth as now illuminated by the glory of the body of the Lord.

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