

of communities

in each area.

Members of each community "pray together, reflect together and plan action together," Father Aragon said. "They serve as leaven for the parish. They transform the parish."

Although he doesn't "keep a record," the pastor noted that numerous kinds of apostolic action have been initiated by the "comunidades de base."

"They've rebuilt a house that burned down. They've roofed a house when the family didn't have money. They're always helping people. And they often start the ball rolling that eventually involves others who don't belong to the small groups," said Father Aragon.

The New Mexico priest said he thinks the idea of small groups within parishes is becoming more popular in the United States.

"In some places they're called Bible study groups, or reflection

groups. But every place I go I hear this concept being expressed. There is the feeling that this is our future," Father Aragon said.

Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, founder of the New Jerusalem Community in Cincinnati, Ohio, agrees that smaller groups are important for the church. New Jerusalem is a 13-year-old lay community in the archdiocese, a community whose members share a high level of Christian commitment to each other; many of the people live near each other.

Father Rohr has given retreats in Latin America and Africa. "'Comunidades eclesiales de base' are grass roots developments that emerged out of need and out of prayer," he suggested.

As the shortage of priests in Latin America became more acute, he explained, the laity were urged to band together. Now lay-administered small communities are found there. Visiting the sick, praying with others, distributing the Eucharist — all these are being carried out by laity.

In these small faith communities, Father Rohr sees "an explosion of life and energy."

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

a people...

guided humanity to that victory by forming a people, a community. "I will take you as my own people, and you shall have me as your God" (Exodus 6:7)

Envisioning the ultimate outcome of this, Ezekiel puts these words on God's lips: "My dwelling will be with them. I will be their God and they shall be my people" (37:27).

When Jesus came as savior of humanity, an essential part of his mission was the formation of a community, not isolated followers but a group of disciples. And he promised to be with them:

"Again I tell you, if two of you join your voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted you by my Father in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst...And know that I am with you always, until the

end of the world" (Matthew 18:19-20; 28:20).

The notion of community was vital in the thinking of the great St. Paul. Indeed, it has been said that community is the overriding concern in his letters. For instance, when he talks about how Christians are "baptized into Christ," he means the whole Christ: head and members, the Christian community.

As Paul goes on to say, "There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one (person) in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

A person's individuality is not obliterated in community. We remain unique, with personal responsibility.

But we are individuals in community.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Things happen in communities. Wherever two or three are gathered, events are bound to occur. Those events become the stuff of memories.

One man, asked if he had a special memory about the church and its people, reached far back to his teen-age years for a story that still means a lot to him. It was a time when his father was suffering and dying of cancer. It was not an easy time.

It happened that the 16-year-old boy met a monk, who was in his 30s. And the monk, who must have understood well the pressures placed on the boy by his father's illness, befriended the boy — managed to make himself and his monastic community sources of ongoing moral support to the boy.

The boy, now a man in his 40s, remembers it well. He realizes that the monk's positive action on his behalf made a real and lasting difference in his life and in his outlook. It changed him for good!

This man has a memory he holds on to, a memory of a friend. But, says the man, for him this is also a memory about the church — about how much it can mean when members of the Christian community take action on each other's behalf.

Memories of the church and its community come in all sizes and

shapes. The memories serve as reminders of what a Christian community is.

—There is the memory of children's faces in the crowd of hungry people who line up whenever the parish serves dinner at the Catholic Charities soup kitchen. Perhaps it is a reminder that the community's service is urgently needed.

—There is the memory of a period when a divided community began to feel whole again, even though some differences among its members remained. Perhaps it is a reminder that powerful forces of reconciliation are present in the community.

—There is the memory of a time you discovered how generous members of the community can be; there is the memory of a time you discovered that, though you hadn't realized it, this community really matters to one of your friends.

Many people have a memory stored up somewhere about the church and its community. The memory helps to remind them of what the Christian community is.

Do you hold on to a special memory of something that happened among the church's people?

What is the stuff of your memories?

...for discussion

1. Have you ever feared that it might be risky to become too much involved with a community — as if you might lose some of your individuality in the process?

2. Why do you think the church feels that the experience of community can enhance your individuality? What might people in a community, such as a parish, have to offer each other?

3. For a community to work well, the people in it need to have a certain commitment to each other; they need to care about each other's real needs. What else is needed in communities that thrive?

4. Can you recall an event that helped make the meaning of the Christian community, as a community, clearer to you?

5. Why do you think God calls on Christians to celebrate their faith together?

SECOND HELPINGS

"The Parish Help Book," by Father Herbert Weber. This is a guide to social ministry in the parish. This practical book spells out the kinds of community needs confronted by a parish and its people — homelessness, hunger, loneliness, pain, unemployment. And it offers help for the people of a parish in serving social needs. "The work of social ministry is not really anything new for men and women of good will. Yet, it may be very new in the sense that the times and circumstances of the 1980s are unique," writes Father Weber. In his view, social ministry is integrated with the spiritual journey, linked to the community's development and to a lifestyle of detachment. The author is associate director of Catholic Social Services of Toledo, Ohio. (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556. \$3.95 Paperback.)