

## NEW LIFE COMMUNITY

In Melbourne, Brother Tom Clark is striving to provide a spiritual oasis in modern society — a place where young people can come together to pray, sing and exchange their ideas about Christian life. He has formed a group called the New Life Community, which evolved for secondary students, and now includes about fifty boys and girls between fifteen and twenty.

As a teacher of Religious Education, Brother Tom saw a great need for young people to look more deeply into their faith than they were inclined to do in the classroom, or in the Church on Sunday. The formidable pressure of the peer group seemed to make his students reluctant to seriously address those topics which are central to Christianity — relationships, the Scriptures, and prayer. He wanted to create an environment where religious conviction was accepted and affirmed instead of scorned.

### The origins of New Life

With the assistance of other brothers, and some members of a local Charismatic prayer community, Brother Tom conducted each year a ten week seminar. This seminar was similar in concept to the Life in the Spirit seminar which is used in Australia to introduce adults to Christ, but it was directed at young people, with a view to a deeper understanding and faith in God. The attendants were mainly senior students from St. Bede's College and of a neighbouring Brigidine girl's school. These seminars are continuing to provide a profound experience of Christianity. It became evident, however, that the impact of the seminar rarely lasted beyond the ten weeks, and that some sort of follow-up was essential.

The New Life Seminar of 1984 concluded with a Mass, after which Brother Tom invited the participants to return the following Sunday for an evening of prayer. This small group continued to meet for several weeks until they decided to form a community — something more permanent than just ten weeks. A logo was designed and in-

corporated into a banner, an identity evolved, and the group grew both in size and commitment.

One of the most striking things about the New Life Community is the nature of the young people. Something almost all new-comers comment on is the welcome they receive. The friendly atmosphere is often so different from anything they have experienced that they want to stay. They meet people who are generous, out-going, confident, but still within a sphere to which they can relate. These factors are vital, for they contribute to an environment which promotes freedom and self-esteem. This environment makes one's search for God so much easier; it allows for failure, for questions, for expression, and it returns love and acceptance instead of derision and contempt.

While most of the New Lifers are at secondary schools, many of them are pursuing tertiary study, apprenticeships, vocations, marriages or jobs. The values and images projected by society often conflict so strongly with Christ's teaching that the adolescent is swayed constantly from one view to another. New Life is a firm foothold in sound values which last, and weather periods of searching and questioning.

### The meetings

The Community meets on Sunday evenings to pray and sing, to mix and talk. The meeting can take various forms, but usually begins with songs of praise, followed by some sort of presentation. Everyone in the group is encouraged to give a talk or present something on a Sunday night at least once. As well as providing an ideal learning experience, it ensures variety and interest. Brother Cal. Cusak also attends the meetings, and recently presented an insight into the life and philosophies of St. De La Salle. Each year he also shares some very profound thoughts on Lent and Easter. The issues of faith, prayer, community, the Eucharist, relationships, sexuality and family, as well as more immediate events like the Pope's visit to Melbourne, the La Sallian Youth Festival in Sydney, along with major events in the Church's calendar are presented in original and provocative ways by the members themselves. They then like to discuss the topic, either altogether or in small groups. About half an hour of shared prayer concludes the formal part of the meeting, then tea, coffee, biscuits and 'Milo' circulate with the conversation and news.

## Other activities

These Sunday night gatherings, however, are not the only contributor to the invaluable growth and development that take place within the New Life Community. A great deal of careful thought goes into the planning of many other activities. An important feature of New Life is the weekend camps and retreats which take place each year. The success of these is increasingly due to the young people themselves, who dedicate their time and creativity to choosing a theme, and presenting it through music, prayer, talks, discussions, reflections, booklets and a Mass. About fifteen of these camps have been held already. They invariably build a phenomenal community spirit, and bring each person closer to the Lord.

The practical details of running New Life are entrusted to the members of a council, who are elected by the group and meet each week with Brother Tom to plan the meetings and bring forward new ideas. This council was only initiated about six months ago, but has proven extremely successful. In addition, there are several smaller groups which meet fortnightly for prayer. These cater for the older members of the group who now need more than New Life offers. Instead of leaving the Community for want of a deeper experience, they have formed strong, lasting bonds with each other; together they pray for one another and the Community, they discuss problems that arise, and they minister to each other's needs for support in their struggle to be like Jesus. The faith of these people has grown remarkably through their association with New Life.

## Ministering to youth in crisis

Brother Tom is also the director of 'Vaugirard', a home which welcomes young people with family difficulties or personal problems, who need some time to reflect and sort things out. These people come mainly from the La Sallian schools in the area, but boys and girls are also referred by local parish priests, social workers, counsellors, Community Policing Squads, the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau, the Department of Community Services, school principals and the Children's Court. Vaugirard, named after La Salle's property in Paris, is very much a community centre. The New Life members are encouraged to drop by often, and they have a profound influence on the guests who stay there. New Life has also been the instrument of many fundraising initiatives for the hostel, such as cake-stalls in the parish, competitions, raffles and a Charity Ball.

The New Life Community has been active for almost four years. Much of this time has been spent learning the needs and attributes of young people. One can look back over this time and begin to understand exactly what New Life is doing. These people will surely help to renew the Church, for they are taking Christ with them into the future. At New Life they listen and discover what God is calling them to, as individuals and as members of a larger body, the Church. They are finding encouragement to go out and do their Father's work.

### **Miss Beata J. MOLONEY**

Beata Moloney is a student teacher at Melbourne College of Advanced Education. She has been committed to New Life since its outset and as a leader she has contributed actively to the growth of the community.

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