

What Makes a Religious Community?

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April 1976



Community is a sharing of common life together. Normally it implies a geographical proximity (i.e., living in the same house), but in our age of mobility and communications this is not an absolute necessity. There are different levels of sharing in a community. We may distinguish five levels in an ascending order of intimacy:

1. Sharing the same house, environment, facilities.
2. Doing things together, e.g. meals, recreation, etc.
3. Sharing the same job, mission or goal.
4. Sharing one's philosophy of life; deep convictions on the basic religious, social, and political issues of the day; or artistic and cultural sharing.
5. Sharing one's deep, personal inner self; a full openness of thoughts, feelings, ambitions, fears, etc.

The first three levels tend to be an external sharing, a "being alongside one another," an external togetherness. The last two are a more internal sharing, a "being inside of one another," a being "apart" of other people. Authentic community aims for the final, personal sharing wherein each person experiences the understanding and unconditional acceptance of the community and thereby has the freedom and the "inspiration" to unfold, to reveal, to become his authentic self. Because of this acceptance of the community, he can accept his depths (e.g. unconscious) with its negativities and its creative potentialities.

A Community of Love

Religious community is a sharing of a common life together, both as a sacrament of the Kingdom of God and to share in the mission of spreading that Kingdom of God. The religious community must become what it proclaims. It must be the community of love and acceptance, actualizing authentic human beings, before it can preach the message of God's love and be a catalyst of love for the human community. Thus there is no conflict between working to deepen the level of community life and working to develop the apostolate or mission of that community. Both are equally important. The members of a Christian religious community share a common faith along with a commitment to a common "life style" and common mission. This "commonality" has been in large part disrupted because of the re-interpretation of the Catholic faith that has come out of Vatican II and its subsequent repercussions for the reinterpretation of religious life. Nevertheless, at the core of Christian faith is the conviction that God must be our ultimate concern and the focal point of our lives and that all men are called to participate in a communion

of love in God.

Obstacles To Community

There exist, however, some obstacles to an authentic religious community life: The first is that all men have two basic fears. Fear of others and of life includes fear of death; accidents; illness; and on a personal level, the fear of rejection (also the fear of failure and the fear of meaninglessness).

Fear of self is fear of one's negativities, which makes it hard for others to accept me or for me to accept myself. Part of this fear is the fear that the conflicting elements of my life will not be able to be integrated harmoniously on the conscious level so that I may have an emotional breakdown or become insane. The level of acceptance in the community must be sufficiently deep so that the members will be able to overcome these two basic fears.

The second obstacle we find is that the spirituality of religious life tends in practice to be geared towards a "functional service" of another's need rather than a personal love response to the other. For example, in monastic communities, in an attempt to protect the vow of virginity and to control one's sexual powers, one was warned against "particular friendships" which could have homosexual overtones and against heterosexual relationship which could lead to love and marriage. Hence personal relationships with both sexes are discouraged; what you have left is a generalized concern for everyone without the rich sharing of one's inner life with a friend.

Thirdly, *too much* restriction, self-denial, rigidity, or legalism prevents free growth of a human person. It leads to many frustrations and unfulfilled needs; it makes people unhappy and therefore very critical and judgmental of one another.

Prerequisites

I would like to point out what I think are some prerequisites for an authentic religious community. *Compatibility*: sharing a common life demands a certain degree of commonality or compatibility. I distinguish three areas of concern: "religious-philosophical," cultural and personality.

"Religious-philosophical" differences of opinion are very important since they decide many particular issues. Cultural differences may influence ideas on spirituality, style of life, customs, attitudes, etc.

Finally, certain personality traits naturally clash. One should become aware of some of the basic personality polarities: aggressive-passive; intellectual-emotional; independent-dependent; flexible-structured; reserved-open; competitive-conformist; leader-follower.

Dedication to the Community and to its Members: Members of the religious community must be committed to community life in order to make it an authentic community. Authentic community will come only through a great deal of patience, understanding, listening, sacrificing, challenging, fidelity, honesty, openness, etc.

Intellectual and Emotional Maturity: Members should have a broad horizon which includes many different possibilities in the three areas of compatibility: religious-philosophical, cultural, and personality. They should have a minimum degree of emotional maturity. They should be "big minded" and "big-hearted" people.

The Process of Developing Deep Community Life: Unfortunately, most people must be trained and formed in the process of facilitating deep community life. Sometimes this requires a catalyst, preferably from within the community, to help the community process.

Steps Along The Way

An essential step is trusting the group by risking *openness*: the process of self-revelation of the real me both in my words and behavior; honest presentation of the real me. I reveal myself not so that people will have knowledge about me but that I might let my true self emerge.

Also required is the art of *understanding*: getting into another's inner world of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes so that I can put myself in his shoes. This means understanding the person from the "inside" rather than from the "outside"-by observation of his external behavior.

You must also have respect for *the freedom* of the other, and learn the art of letting other persons be themselves. Show *responsiveness* to another person's needs and desires by responding not just to their external needs but to their inner needs.

In community life, you also experience the freedom to *express negative feelings* and the freedom to

accept them. Honest expression of negative feelings and the attempt to get at their most fundamental (not superficial) cause is called for. This involves, also, the freedom to criticize and challenge one another in a spirit of love,

Unconditional acceptance and positive regard means accepting the other person totally -- in their good qualities and in their negativities. This is not a pseudo-acceptance which hides negative feelings.

Interdependence means living together, sharing internally and externally, with everyone free to be themselves, avoiding the extremes of neurotic dependence or egotistical independence. We become ourselves in the encounter with others; our authentic nature is realized in our communion with others. Hence there is no contradiction between my freedom to be for myself and my commitment to be for others. It is only in my being for others -- using my freedom for the love of others and not for selfish concerns -- that I find my true humanity. Hence I avoid the extremes of giving up my freedom in a neurotic conformity to the community nor do I use my freedom egotistically and thereby isolate myself from a genuine love and communion with the community.

Philosophy of Community Life: A healthy and wholesome community requires people who are freed, individualized persons with deep self-acceptance and self love; who are able to participate in the lives of other members of the community in deep, personal communion; and whose ultimate concern is God. He is the source of their power to love self and others; the source of their hierarchy of values; and the goal of their drive to go out of self to participate deeply in life and people.