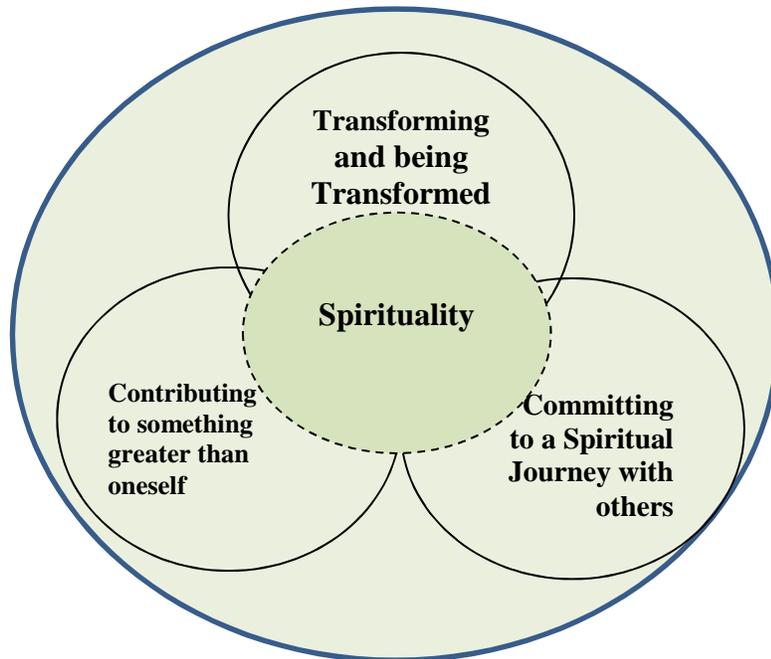


# Spirituality of Community Life

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## Spirituality of Community Life

Spirituality is at the heart of community life. While spirituality has many definitions, for the purpose of this essay, spirituality is described as seeking God, a search for meaning, connectedness, a sense of purpose rooted in our religious beliefs. Fr. Ron Rohlheiser describes it as “a way we undergo the presence of God and others in this world.” Spirituality has to do with faith, relationships, reflection, the moral fiber of our lives, as well as, awe and wonder. Spirituality opens the door to a bigger world, a cosmic world and the growing consciousness that we are interconnected with the universe beyond our immediate experience.

It is important to realize that spirituality is not a “silo” in our lives---something that needs attention along with our professional lives, our social lives, our health and well-being. Spirituality, as the above diagram illustrates, permeates our lives; it is a seeking of God and is not found in a specific “compartment.” Teilhard de Chardin reminds us that “by reason of creation and even more the incarnation, nothing is profane for those who know how to see.” (p. 30) Spirituality is a quest for and response to a holistic deeply meaningful life that recognizes the co-creating God in the immanence and abundance of life.

Just as spirituality has many definitions, so does community life. In these reflections we are looking at community life as lived primarily by vowed religious in apostolic or monastic communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States. Many of the principles noted can be applied to families or individuals who are engaged with others on spiritual journeys. Normally living in

community assumes living with others, although in some situations, vowed religious brothers, sisters or priests may be living separately, but share community life regularly through communication, shared meals, prayer, meaningful conversations and support of work or ministries. Some people live geographically distant, but share aspects of community life virtually through online media and occasionally in-person gatherings.

There are three essential qualities of healthy religious communities: commitment to being on spiritual journey with others; contributing to something greater than oneself; transforming and being transformed into a new and unfolding faith-filled awareness of a deeper divine existence, interconnected with all people, as well as all creation. It is the interplay of these three qualities in the context of spirituality and vowed life that communities embody a sense of belonging and:

- 1) Commit themselves to a journey of growth and a deepening of their foundations of faith and justice;
- 2) Contribute to the reign of God in the community, in the Church, in the world and in the universe, as Jesus did;
- 3) Transform and are transformed by the Spirit in the interactive relationships that raise consciousness to be citizens of the universe and co-creators on earth where peace and justice can reign.

### **Commitment to a Spiritual Journey—Walking Together**

Commitment is rooted in prayer and reflection. It mirrors the continual unfolding of the response to the initial call to the spiritual journey to be taken with others. The call and response to be more deeply connected to the divine presence in our lives is expressed differently at various stages of life. Four factors are common elements of commitment to a life that seeks deeper relationships and works for a more just and peaceful world:

- working for the common good;
- appreciating the giftedness of each person;
- participating in meals and being nurtured by each other;
- being open to share everything we have and our common home, earth.

There are times on the journey where the road is unclear and where the road has many twists and turns. The spiritual journey is often a wilderness zone. We need one another to journey together.

Our image of God changes as we change and as the world changes. No one image is adequate. Teilhard de Chardin points to the Divine in our midst. “By means of all created things without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us. We imagine it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.” (Divine Milieu p. 89) One of the gifts we have in community life is accessibility to spiritual resources. We are encouraged to explore, to discover, and rediscover the ever expanding and life-giving death into life reality with others. Teilhard reminds us: “Let us leave the surface, and, without leaving the world, plunge into God.” (Divine Milieu p. 92) Miriam Therese Winter, building on Teilhard, challenges us to, “Take the plunge, into God, into a world teeming with need and suppressed divinity. Soak it in, surface then dive again, dive deep into the heart of the divine milieu and release unconditional love.” (Winter p. 55) This is the work and blessing of our communal journey.

Another image that may be helpful for walking together on our journey is that of a dance. Thomas Merton talked about spiritual practice as a dance—“a Cosmic Dance in which we discover that we do not have to take the lead.” We need to give ourselves to the dance and let go of where we want to go, but acknowledge as we enter the dance that each one of us is needed for the Dance of the Universe. (quoted in *The Rebirthing of God* by John Philip Newell, p. 73)

### **Common Good**

Commitment to community living does not look primarily at what is in it for me. It has an element of an unconditional promise to work for the good of the whole. It is a commitment to belong with the expectation of mutual support and affection. It has the possibility of sharing the mystery and wonder of the oneness of all people and the unity of all creation on a regular basis. It is a pledge to be inclusive to take people where they are with their uniqueness and varied experiences. The hallmark of committed communities is having conversations that matter, often moving away from problem solving and fears, and toward possibility—what if we...? what would it take to...? Conversations around justice and peace, the growing awareness of the “universe story,” deepening and broadening our image of God, etc. are issues that can mobilize a community to heighten its unfolding consciousness and engage in action.

Pope Francis challenges us to look very broadly at the common good and to understand all creation as a loving gift and as a “reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.” (LS #76) He stresses the connection between care of the environment and “sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.” (LS #91)

### **Giftedness**

Living grace-fully in community, whether physically or virtually, calls for the recognition of the giftedness of each person and organizes itself so that the gifts of all can meld into a whole that is greater than the total of each of its parts. Authentic spirituality nudges the community to be open to each person and her/his truth. Hospitality, not only welcoming those outside of the community, but also being very open to those within the community is an essential mark of a vibrant community. Creating space for different personalities, diverse opinions, unusual world views and various modes of operation can be challenging. Hospitality creates space for variations that can bring about new thinking and innovative action.

### **Breaking bread**

Breaking bread, sharing meals and good conversation is life-giving and can transform a waning community into a vibrant one, where the blessing of food is a memory jogger for all the gifts we have received. It is living the pattern of the Eucharist—gathering the folks, sharing the stories and breaking the bread. It is at meal times when we can share our disappointments, our hopes and dreams and our concerns about things we may have no control over. Dinner can be a time when isolation fades and the human pain of disconnection recedes.

The energy we receive by continually realizing our interconnectedness with each other, with people across the globe, and with all creation sustains us and propels us into deeper consciousness of the Divine in and around us. Communities thrive on the commitment to share what matters and to listen well to the sorrows, hopes and dreams of others—truly to create a

web of communal relationships. When ministry or geography make physical presence at meals difficult, “virtual” presence via electronic media, at least occasionally, may help bridge the gap and lessen the sense of aloneness.

### **Holding all things in common**

Living out of the practice of the early Church to hold all things in common and to care for those in need is embedded in our community mission, values, and spirituality. It is the manner in which we live our lives according to the Gospel; it is our commitment to each other and those in need; and our way of finding meaning and purpose in our lives.

Our vocation, our search for meaning and purpose, our vowed lives in God, led us to commitment and now refreshes our on-going commitment through deepening relationships.

### **Contributions to the Greater Good**

There is a lot of “give and take” regarding contributions to community living. The well-being of each individual member affects and is influenced by the general well-being of the community.

### **Practical level**

In varying concrete ways, depending upon the circumstances, community members may contribute by praying, by expressing care and concern, sharing positive attitudes, cooking, cleaning, keeping budgets, and doing general maintenance. In larger institutions some tasks may be done by non-community members, but in every situation, normally, individuals contribute to the common good by sharing their gifts, praying, and, when physically able, doing household tasks.

### **Mission**

Apostolic communities exist for the sake of the mission. Missions vary depending on the charism of the founders and the needs of the Church and world. In a local community all the members may be involved in the same ministry, such as education or health care or some may be ministering in a variety of situations—serving those who live in poverty, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, parish work, running social work agencies, etc. Some members living together may be retired and their mission is to support those who have a specific active ministry. Monastic communities focus on prayer and community and sometimes serve where there is need.

For others ministry may be that of being an active pray-er for those more fully engaged in outside ministry and for those being served. Still others carry out the mission and ministry of the community by caring for each other, engaging in projects for the good of others and witnessing to the Gospel by doing such things as writing to prisoners or those away from home, tutoring, mentoring, etc. Contributing to the mission, whether internally or externally is helping to build and sustain the community.

The root of all ministry is connectedness to others. The advent of “quantum physics” and its insights into the interconnectedness of all matter and life lead us to the broadening of our sense of relationships and a renewed realization that the Divine is never static, but is energy which holds all the interrelationships of the universe together. We are just beginning to discover the

implications of “quantum thinking” on our life together, our ministry together and our own incarnational existence.

### **Reflection, Study, Prayer and Solitude**

The “eye of the heart” is the quest for God, for the divine in our lives, for more than meets the eye. As busy as Jesus was serving others, he knew the importance of solitude, reflection and prayer. In his busyness, he often got up early to pray. (Mark 1:35) Jesus was connected to the past, understood its implications for the present and was energized to create an engaging future which met the needs of his time and catapulted people into new ways of thinking and being.

It is in solitude that we find inner strength, discover new connections, fresh insights, energy for building a more just and peaceful world. We contribute to the essence of community life through prayer, study, reflection, and solitude. It is in the quiet meditative parts of our lives where we become truly open to the other and radically hospitable. In community, “we are challenged to exchange all those empty ideas for the depth of reflection, the calm of thought, and clarity of insight that silence brings in its wake to the soul that longs—in silence—for it to come. Silence protects us from our noisy selves and prepares us for the work of God in us.” (Chittister p. 43 *Monastery of the Heart*) An important part of our spirituality is searching for truth and sharing the fruits of our contemplation. It is part of discovering the emerging wisdom of God based on the dynamic flow of energy connecting past, present and future.

### **Capacities to Contribute**

Research points to some capacities of an effective community. The core elements which need to be visible contributions of members of the abundant community are: kindness, generosity, cooperation, forgiveness and the acceptance of fallibility and mystery. (McKnight and Block pp. 83-90)

**Kindness** embodies, love, care and respect and is aware of the vulnerability of others.

**Generosity** takes kindness to the next level. Generosity is the opposite of “tit for tat” and arises out of abundance, not scarcity. The practice of service creates the landscape for generosity.

**Cooperation** is the opposite of competition. I always look for a “win-win.” It is the commitment to work something out in a mutually satisfactory way.

**Forgiveness** recognizes woundedness. Often for hospitality to happen forgiveness is the door opener, especially when we are talking about hospitality—open, warm, welcoming space—for those internal members of the community. Sometimes it is easier to welcome the stranger than the neighbor we know. Forgiveness is often related to accepting **fallibility**—tolerance to accept the human condition. Making mistakes, not being perfect, being responsible for unintentional consequences are part of the fallibility backdrop. Our fallibility is one of the things in community that everyone shares. It is part of who we are.

Closely related to forgiveness is mercy. Pope Francis talks about being enveloped in God’s mercy, trusting God’s patience, feeling God’s embrace to become more capable of mercy, patience, forgiveness and love. “Jesus shows us the merciful patience of God so that we can regain confidence and hope—always.” (April 7, 2013 Homily) Cardinal Kasper in his book called

**Mercy**, looks at empathy and compassion as starting points to understand mercy. By walking in the shoes of another, we are stirred to deeper understandings and to use our energy to be compassionate and merciful. Throughout his book he describes in different ways, drawing on the Biblical tradition, that another name for God is Mercy and that God's justice is God's mercy. Jesus not only proclaimed God's mercy, he lived it and demonstrated it. (p. 12, 50, 67-72)

**Mystery** is the last of the elements which contribute to abundant communities. McKnight and Block define mystery as:

“Mystery is the answer to the unknown. In actualizing its abundance, a community welcomes mystery, for that is a catalyst for creativity. Mystery gives us freedom from the burden of answers. Answers are just a restatement of the past.” (p. 91)

We would probably associate mystery with the presence of the Spirit in the community, a Spirit which both comforts and challenges, a Spirit that sustains us through the tough decisions made for the good of the whole and an ever abiding presence of the “more” than meets the eye in everyday life. Reverence is related to mystery—a deep respect for self, for others and for the Spirit's presence in the everyday, in the unknown or inexpressible elements of life that both draw us forward and plunge us more deeply into mystery of life. Reverence increases our capacity to give of ourselves supported by the Spirit and connect with all creation.

### **Peace and Justice**

One cannot talk about contributions without mentioning peace and justice, which was noted above in terms of mission and described, there, in terms of different ministries of service related to justice. Here, however, let us reflect on peace and justice as an outgrowth of an abundant community life. Assuming for the moment that all ministries have an element of peace and justice, let's move beyond individual ministries and look at how vibrant community life can enhance the community's sense of peace and justice.

The *Joy of the Gospel* reminds us that the “Gospel offers us the chance to live life on a higher plane, but with no less intensity: ‘Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others.’” (EG #10) Pope Francis goes on to remind us, “Any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticize governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk.” (EG #207)

By living community life as described above, the community itself becomes a microcosm, a living example of what the world could become. It demonstrates how the world might function, if it were to be committed to communal living, kindness, cooperation, forgiveness, vulnerability, generosity, and mystery. In such a context peace and justice are not actions of a community but ways of being community. Such community life is built upon the strengths and gifts of the members not on the problems and fears of individuals. John Philip Newell reminds us that “Part of what can prevent us from carrying out compassionate action is not only the complexity of what needs to be done in our lives and our world, but the sheer amount of mess and even chaos

with us and between us.” Well-honed interpersonal communication skills and deeply held trust enable us to understand and learn from some of the chaos, if we reflect on it from different perspectives. The divine can be found in the chaos, if we see it with new eyes.

Spirituality is embodied in the “Contribution” aspect of communal life. It is like the air we breathe. We are connecting our beliefs to practical activities, mission, prayer, and enhancing our capacity to continue contributing by sharing different world views which enrich community and deepen relationships.

## **Transformation**

Communal transformation, according to Peter Block (p. 73-79) emerges when people across boundaries gather to talk about significant questions. It is important to have the questions right or more accurately to structure the gatherings in such a way that the right questions emerge—questions which lead people to discover possibilities, not focus on problem solving; gatherings which focus on depth, not numbers; and meetings that emphasize appreciations and understandings, not just actions. Communal transformation occurs when members are truly engaged in creating the future.

In a religious context, transformation happens when we accept invitations to enter uncharted waters, to ask, and to be in conversation around powerful questions. Listening well to others and the Spirit speaking to us through events, people, and the wonders of the universe can transform our thinking and increase our appreciation of the divine presence.

In our great sacrament of transformation, the Eucharist, Jesus asks us to do four things to be transformed: receive, give thanks, break, and share. (Rolheiser pp.95-118) All these are very engaging activities. We are transformed by community and we contribute to the transformation of the community by seeing and living the interconnections among receiving, thanking, breaking and sharing.

## **Receive**

Sometimes it is difficult to receive something. It is hard to admit that we cannot obtain everything we need and want by ourselves, that we need to receive the graciousness of others to live whole and enriching lives. The need so many of us have is to “chart our future” to achieve our goals. Often this does not leave room for the blessings that can be bestowed by others in community, by the God who is within us and the God who calls us to be transformed not only as an individual, but as a community. Eucharist is a sacrament of receiving for the purpose of being transformed. It is often difficult to receive new information or receive new people that may require us to think differently, to see differently, and to act differently. We must be open to doing these things, if we are to be transformed by the Divine.

## **Give Thanks**

Eucharist means thanksgiving—gratitude for the chance to be transformed into a more gracious person, into a deeply grateful community. The transformation is not just about changing bread and wine, it is about transforming a community to be what we receive—the living communal body of Christ. Gratitude is for all blessings—friends, family, life. Gratitude is the foundation for hope. Hope contains the seeds of transformation. We thank the giver by enjoying the gift.

Which one of us is not pleased when we see a gift we have given to another be used and enjoyed? The energy of the gift of the Eucharist is for our gratification—the joy one gets when seeing another’s life become more whole, more appreciative, more grace-filled, more out-going, more divine. Gratitude is at the heart of the community—it is the pulse that continues to pump new life into the community.

### **Break**

“Eucharist is meant not just to celebrate our joys and gratitude, but also to break us open, to make us groan in anguish, to lay bare our mistrust, to lesson our jealousies and break down the distances that separate us. What the Eucharist asks of us is vulnerability, humility, contrition and forgiveness. Bitterness, hatred, and suspicion are meant to disappear at a Eucharist.” (Rolheiser p. 111) Building on I John 4, 16, Rolheiser translates the passage as “God is shared existence, and those who break open their lives and gratefully share them with others already live inside of God.” (p. 117)

Sharing our vulnerabilities, our hurts, our pain, our woundedness and our shortcomings is not easy. Providing safe places for such sharing of brokenness is possible in communities of support, openness, and caring. The fiber of the community is strengthened when all can share themselves and break open their yearnings, fears, and weaknesses in an environment that is gracious, forgiving and welcoming. Part of activating hope is embracing pain for what it is—an invitation to name it and go beyond it, to see it with new eyes and active hope. Serving, washing each other’s feet, being attentive to the pain of another sustains us and focuses us on our journey.

### **Share**

Christ shared his life with us, his joys, his anguish, his high expectations and ultimately his death and transformation to new life. Eucharist makes that present today. When we share our lives, we share our energy, our affirmations, our hopes, and struggles. Eucharist, taken in slow motion—is about coming together, gathering as a community of faith; sharing the stories of the heart in light of the stories of those who have gone before us; and connecting with all in the sharing of the meal, the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

The celebration of the Thanksgiving holiday in many homes is a reflection of a celebration of “Eucharist without walls.” It patterns the Eucharist: gathering the folks; listening to the stories of hopes, dreams, disappointments, pain, sorrow, loss, and being transformed by them; sharing the blessings of our times as well as the food we are about to eat. It is here that we encounter the living God of Eucharist—celebrated in our treasured rituals. It is in sharing that we are given opportunities to “see anew,” to see differently, to continually activate hope which sends us forth to continue being transformed and transforming through unconditional love.

Spirituality of Community Life is rooted in continuing commitment, contributing members and transforming processes. It is a spiritual journey which we do not take alone; it is a journey that brings new vistas, new challenges, new opportunities to see and be the interconnections that can continue transforming the world. Spirituality, embedded in community life, can be structured in many ways in an ambiance of receiving, thanking, breaking, and sharing.

## Questions for Reflection and Sharing

1. Of the three areas described which relate to the Spirituality of Community Life, what one is most challenging for you? Which brings the most joy? Which would you describe differently, based on your experience?
2. What concept or sentence spoke to you in a way that you might consider it the *Heart of the Matter* regarding the Spirituality of Community Life? What makes you consider it so significant?
3. What is emerging for you as you reflect on the article? What new connections are you making?
4. What aspects of community life have you found most stimulating related to spiritual growth?
5. What had real meaning for you from what you have read or heard in discussion?
6. What are some implications for you and your experience of community life?

## Resources

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