

The spirituality of nurturing Catholic community

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

This little occasional column, called “Journey to Holiness,” is about our spiritual life, our quest to grow into the fullness of our capacity to image God. Spirituality as a body of writing and study considers the many ways and wisdom available to help us in our spiritual quest.

That said, recently Father Ronald Rolheiser gave a talk called “Spirituality Today – What Does It Need to Address?” He suggested areas that do not get adequate attention by spiritual writers, such as how the universe, and not only people, is touched and transformed by God’s love and grace. He suggested crisis areas emerging prominently in our culture which need more attention from spiritual writers, like gender issues, death and dying, and the wealth gap. And he addressed imbalances in our Catholic spirituality that need rebalancing in our pastoral and spiritual teaching, like what we say about God, and what we say about human passion and eroticism.

With great respect for Fr. Rolheiser, I believe he missed an area of our spiritual life that also must be mentioned. This missing area is community, both Church as community, and community in our society and culture. Community is a topic that does not get much attention from spirituality writers, perhaps because spirituality has traditionally been focused on the individual’s path to holiness. Community is a cultural crisis area, like the other ones Fr. Rolheiser mentioned. And overemphasis on the institutional Church has obscured Church as community. We Catholics need to pay more attention to this important element of our spirituality.

Our ecclesial community or Church is in crisis. We are like the Apostles (John 6:60-69), watching so many of the disciples walk away, to whom Jesus said, “Do you also want to leave?” If we have not integrated a good appreciation of the Church into our individual spirituality, we might well join those who have left, the “nones” who say they are now spiritual but not religious (meaning they are not “churched”).

We need to work on is seeing the Church first as a community, and only secondarily as an institution. Unfortunately, we and the media tend to focus on the Church’s bigness and organization, on the papacy and priesthood, on the bishops and defined beliefs. We lose track of the fundamental identity of the Church as the people of God through whom comes the revelation of God. There weren’t any video cameras filming the events of our scriptures; there were only witnesses, and it is their memories, their accounts, their spiritual experiences and language on which our own faith rests. There weren’t any priests in Jesus’ time, only disciples, believers. The doctrines we recite in the creed every Sunday emerged from centuries of group discussion by many believers. We hear the term “Body of Christ,” and think of the presence of Christ in Eucharist. But the early Church understood body of Christ to mean the ecclesial community.

But Church still remains problematic even if we understand it as community. Our fellow Catholics annoy us. They are not people we might choose to hang out with. They are hypocrites, self-absorbed and self-serving, too liberal or too conservative, or a hundred other things we might find problematic. But that’s OK. In our parish commu-

nities, these are the people God gives us to journey to holiness with. It wasn’t any less difficult for the first Christians. Notice how many of the epistles talk about peace, charity, equanimity and forgiving one another, and think about why that was! Spiritually, the challenge is to stay with our parish community, find what God is revealing to us through it, and invest our own insights and gifts in it. Would that parish leaders would talk to us about this and help us learn to do that instead of parish hopping!

To renew our appreciation of how our ecclesial communal is a spiritual path for us, we need also to forgive our Church. We are still not finished with the clergy sex abuse scandal and its fallout, and it is likely that more disappointment lies ahead. Continued dialogue between members and leaders and more prayer together is certainly needed, and we will need to forgive “seventy times seven,” or repeatedly so our hearts may stay open to receive spiritual nourishment from our Church.

We who are not ordained must also, with love, keep asking our pastors and Bishops and liturgists to remove other barriers that keep us from loving our Church and drawing nourishment from it. Liturgy needs to create community even while it is orienting us to the transcendent God. Our beliefs need to be stated in language that moves our hearts instead of language that seems impenetrable, unreasonable or unlivable.

Community is also a weak reality in the Western society today. Sociologists have been describing the decline of social cohesion and community affiliation for more than 30 years. Neighborhoods have disappeared in many places, replaced by privacy fences and alarm systems. Organizations have lost members and gone extinct both within the Church and within society. Small families mean fewer people sharing the highs and lows of life together, and more people dying alone.

The private individual has become the ideal human person, with individual rights trumping the common good. Pseudo communities spring up on platforms like Facebook. But as John Miller notes in an August 2021 America Magazine article, these communities are based on individual choice and shared interests. Social networks create tribes and cliques instead of communities who “endure each other’s differences.” For us Catholics, “social networks” also lack the elements of material presence — touch, voice, smell and bodily presence — which are so integral to our incarnational faith.

A renewed spirituality of community within our Catholic spirituality might become an anecdote to the loneliness and isolation many people experience in societies without robust communities. And it will surely help us answer Jesus’ question, “Do you also want to leave?”

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