



Engaging Aging

Building Healthy & Life-giving Communities

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“Community life is a grace of the Holy Spirit. We have come together without choosing one another, so we accept one another as the Lord’s gift to us.”

Marist Constitution

During the last half century, more than a few religious congregations have called upon psychologists and others working in the field of mental health to help them implement the process of renewal. Consider for a moment, the area of community life. Prior to Vatican II, most local communities were large, their day-to-day life regimented, their authority structures hierarchical. Individual members had little input into decisions that affected the direction that their life might take.

Today we face a very different reality. In most congregations, communities of active members are small, sometimes made up of as few as two people. Local groups are free to determine their own schedule, manage a budget, and decide on the structure of their life together. In an effort to help their members strengthen the skills necessary to live together in a manner that is harmonious and life-giving, many congregations have turned to social scientists for advice.

In this brief article, we will focus on religious community life and describe some of the structures and skills that need to be present for a group to embrace a way of life together that is psychologically healthy and apostolically effective. Some awareness of these elements is important at any age, but today, perhaps, particularly so for many older religious as they return to



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larger communities after a number of years living singly or in smaller groups.

Keep in mind, though, that neither the size of a community nor the age of its members should be factors in determining its psychological health. A far better measure is the presence of skills such as an ability to make decisions, communicate feelings, negotiate and arrive at consensus, agree to disagree without rancor, and a habit of reconciliation.

Before we address our topic directly, we will first outline some fundamental principles about community, look at different understandings about what constitutes life together, and examine the various stages through which a community moves in its process of growth.

Life in community: important principles

Here at the outset of our discussion, a few fundamental notions about community life. First, the topic is seldom addressed directly during initial formation. Instead, this assumption is made: if you have lived in a family, you have the skills necessary to live in a community. However, religious communities are not families. Rather, they are made up of adults who have come together around the gospel message. Families include people of unequal status: parents and children; in a religious community, everyone is equal. The skills needed to live in a community of adults are not the same as those necessary for family life.

Second, there is no such thing as a perfect community. Just as there are no perfect families, we will never find an ideal community. And just as there are good enough families—places where we get what we need to set out on the adventure of adult life—there are good enough communities. Perfect families and communities are the work of fiction. Why is that so? Because you and I are members of both groups and we know full well that we are not perfect.

Third, a spirit of reconciliation must be at the heart of any community that calls itself Christian. Learning how to ask for forgiveness and to forgive are necessary skills for adult living; life together with our sisters and brothers is meant to help us form and nurture a loving heart.

Different understandings about community life

Definitions of what constitutes a religious community also vary today. Some maintain that community does not necessarily mean life together under the same roof. But groups where most of the membership live independently more closely resemble associations than genuine communities.

Others have a legalistic understanding about community life. They cite the congregation's Constitutions and Statutes when discussing the topic. Community living, however, does not automatically become a reality through the observance of rules governing common life; community is more of an attitude than a place or set of guidelines.



Marist Novitiate community, Poughkeepsie, NY.

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Still others have perfected the skill of living alone together. While community members may live under the same roof, they might as well be living alone.

Finally, today there are obvious intergenerational and, at times, intercultural differences among the members of many local communities. This diversity must be recognized and respected if members are to live together in harmony.

Purpose of religious community

When all is said and done, our religious communities come into existence so that we can live the gospel and proclaim the Word of God. Our primary mission is to love God and to make God known and loved. Religious community life should be oriented toward mission.

The model of an “intentional” community is best suited for helping a group to achieve this goal. And what do we mean by an intentional community? One in which the members freely commit themselves to live, pray, relax, and work together with a specific group of people, people who can make extensive demands on their time, energy and talents.

These communities share common practices and traditions and are marked by a spirit of sacrifice; members manage their personal needs in light of the group’s transcendent mission. Put simply, in an intentional community, my sisters and brothers have a claim on me, they know that they can count on me.

Life cycle of a religious community

As we age, our life passes through several seasons or eras. First there is infancy, childhood and adolescence. Early adulthood follows and continues up until the early forties when midlife gets underway. Late adulthood begins during the early sixties and continues until the end of life.

Likewise, religious communities have a predictable life cycle. Its first, or forming, stage occurs when the group comes together initially. This is a time of orientation. Members are on their best behavior as they size up each other and search for their place within the community. They also wonder if they will be liked, rejected, respected or ignored.

The second stage of growth in any healthy community gets underway when members start to disagree. Attention shifts from concerns about acceptance and approval to issues of dominance, power and control. This is a time when “oughts” and “shoulds” begin to appear within the group; negative comments and criticisms are more frequent; judgments about others emerge. Those members who are new to the community, and “don’t yet know their place,” become a threat to those with established positions of control and power; the “old guard” is often resistant to new ideas.

During this stage, the leader also becomes the focus of criticism. Whereas previously she or he may have been viewed in a favorable light, her or his limitations now become a topic for discussion.

This second stage of growth is an important one. Every member of the group is responsible for navigating it well. Communities of adults need to learn how to disagree, fight fairly and live with differences of opinions and outlooks. In contrast, groups where one person controls the house, or a small group resists any change, develop a way of living and acting that stifles growth and gives rise to tension and frustration.

Communities, though, that move successfully through this second stage develop a quality called cohesiveness. A “community spirit” emerges and the group comes together around some common goals. Cooperation, mutual sup-

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port and a sense of unity are evident; communication is free and easy. The community's chief concern becomes intimacy and closeness. Morale increases, trust is possible, self-disclosure common. The community has become a "safe" place.

When the members of a community are able to work through conflict and forgive and reconcile, the group reaches a level of maturity worthy of religious life. At this point, its members are also able to set up realistic norms for their life together. Since they can disagree and work toward consensus, the guidelines they agree upon will emerge from the lived experience of the group and not feel as though they have been imposed from outside. Once these norms are in place, the community moves on to its next stage of growth: living and working together.

Qualities found in a healthy religious community

A healthy religious community exhibits at least six distinct qualities that help its members live together in a way that is both challenging and life-giving. Let's look at each in turn.

First, a healthy religious community is a center of faith and spirituality. A rhythm of prayer is part of the group's life; those who come to visit

or spend time in the community, even if they don't pray personally with the group, become aware of the fact that they are among people who pray.

Second, the members of a healthy religious community are aware of the many ways in which their family-of-origin influences their day-to-day behavior. When we come to religious life, we bring our families with us. And that means the best aspects of our family's life together as well as some behaviors that might best be described as idiosyncratic.

Third, a sense of humor among the members is a necessary part of any healthy community. To begin with, humor is a wonderful tool for diffusing tension. It brings out the playful side of many community members and contributes to an overall good spirit within the group. Humor also helps us to not take ourselves too seriously.

Fourth, in healthy religious communities, members demonstrate an active concern for one another. While respecting privacy, they are interested in what is happening in the lives of the other members.

Some, for example, may have a relative who is sick; others may be especially close to their nieces and nephews; still others may be trying to adjust to a new ministry, dealing with a problem of health, passing through a life transition. A word of interest or encouragement, a listening ear, the offer of some helpful advice can strengthen the bonds that exist among community members.

Fifth, the members of healthy communities also practice a set of "little virtues" that build up the life of the group: answering the door or phone, not leaving dishes in the sink, taking out the garbage, straightening up after yourself. Members of these communities demonstrate concern for the common good.

Eucharist at Marist General Chapter



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Sixth and most important, a spirit of reconciliation always exists in a religious community that is psychologically healthy. Its members don't hold on to injustices and are quick to forgive others when offended. Quite simply, they forgive what was done to them because of the person who did it.

Are there some disappointments and hurts in life that are impossible to heal? Not if we are open to God's grace and willing to take the time to be reconciled. In all of this, we do well to remember the Lord's directive about forgiving seventy times seven. In a psychologically healthy religious community, those who make up the group take seriously Jesus' commandment to love God and others.

Consequently, community members don't act out in ways that are passive-aggressive or stop talking to one another when they feel slighted. Instead, honest and direct discussion is used to clear the air and to foster a spirit of reconciliation.

Traits of personality that foster healthy community life

Just as certain qualities help foster a positive spirit within a community, there are traits of personality that can do the same. Flexibility, for example, is a valuable characteristic to have when living with other people. It helps us deal with the unexpected and cope with change. Most of us are creatures of habit: we get up and go to bed at a certain hour each day, drink coffee rather than tea, take the same route to and from work. Habits permit us to do things quickly without having to think through every action. At times, however, circumstances call for an ability to adapt and change. On those occasions, those of us who are rigid and inflexible struggle to adjust to most new situations. When a community has members who are inflexible, issues of



Marist novitiate community and guest, from left, Brothers John Nash, Sean Sammon, Michael Flanigan, and Novice, Luis Ramos

power and control often become a challenge for the group.

Self-acceptance is another important trait found in people who thrive in community. These men and women are "at home" with themselves. They appreciate their strengths, accept their faults and see themselves as others do. Likewise, they read other people well and their perception of reality tends to be accurate. They don't gloss over difficulties or avoid addressing unpleasant circumstances. So, too, they don't presume that the intentions of others are negative or take their comments personally unless clearly warranted. In contrast, people with low self-acceptance often magnify negative events and discount those that are positive. They are quite sensitive to criticism and sometimes have a blatant disregard for the feelings and rights of the other members of the community.

Dependability is still another characteristic that contributes to a vibrant community life. Those who possess this trait are conscientious, reliable, disciplined; they approach tasks with en-

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thusiasm, zeal, thoroughness. Most importantly, they do what they say they will do.

What about community members who are not dependable? Others are reluctant to rely on them. Consequently, a disproportionate amount of the work of the community falls on a few.

Those who have an ability to develop relationships are also an asset to any community. Hardly naïve, these men and women basically trust others and are accurate in reading their motives, feelings, and outlooks. They are able to form close relationships with those within the group while also maintaining their own autonomy. Others see them as agreeable and friendly. At the same time, while working hard to maintain a connection with the people they truly value, they are well able to end relationships that are toxic.

Being able to delay gratification and control what we express emotionally are two additional traits that help us to avoid extremes and live in community with sense of balance. People with a well-developed emotional maturity can persist at a task and wait for rewards. They can also tolerate the inevitable frustrations that arise as they work to achieve the larger goals that they have set for themselves.

Finally, setbacks, adversity, even trauma occur in the lives of us all. Those who can bounce back quickly in the face of these difficulties possess a characteristic called resiliency. Having encountered disappointment or tragedy, they collect their resources and move forward. Those who lack this quality often see themselves as victims in need of rescue. They focus on the inherent unfairness of life or on perceived injustices that they have suffered. Their ability to cope is quite limited.

Love and community life

Despite all that we have said about healthy religious community life, there is still another element that we must consider. Grace must play a central role here. Put another way: can we acknowledge that being called together by God is what transforms our life in community into a moment of grace?

You and I cannot escape the fact that building community is hard work. But doesn't anything that's worthwhile in life exact the same price? Love must ultimately be the foundation upon which we establish our communities and foster their growth.

People who believe that love is easy can be separated into three groups: one, saints who through long years of painful practice have made love a habit; two, manipulators who confuse self-gratification with real love; three, hopeless romantics for whom love is nothing more than an illusion.

This distinction is described in another way by Fyodor Dostoevsky in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. There we read about the encounter between the "woman of little faith" and Father Zosima, the holy monk. She has come to see him because of her doubts about God's existence.

Zosima tells her that he cannot prove the existence of the Almighty but that it is possible to be convinced, by the practice of active love. "Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly," he tells her. "The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you attain genuine and complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will ever be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain."

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The woman replies by telling Zosima of moments when she dreams of giving up all that she has and becoming a sister of mercy. The reason for her hesitancy? She cannot deal with the ingratitude of those whom she seeks to serve.

The priest's response goes to the heart of the matter. "Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching. Indeed, it will go as far as the giving of one's life, if it does not take too long but is over as on stage, and with everyone looking on and praising. Whereas love in action is a harsh and dreadful love." The meaning of this tale? Life in community today often requires a willingness to live a harsh and troublesome love rather than one that occurs in dreams.

As we conclude, let's remember that interest in our brothers and sisters, acceptance and respect for them, care for each one and concern for his or her well-being are the ingredients necessary for healthy community life. It is well to realize also that these qualities transcend age, culture, temperament and many other elements that work against life together.

Since the earliest days of our congregations, there have always been marvelous companions with whom to make the journey of religious life. We have example after example of good men and women living our life fully, with passion, zeal, and conviction. These were men and women whose only desire was to do God's will; men and women for whom prayer and the Eucharist and life together were central. Each of us needs to be those men and women today; marvelous companions for a new generation of religious; men and women for whom the ministry of making Jesus known and loved is all-consuming.

Resources

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Calendar 2019

April 8-10

- NRRO Workshop: Leading with Pastoral Presence, Darien, IL

May 14

- NRRO Webinar: Civil and Canon Law Issues Related to Health Care

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