

Transforming Lives Through the Witness of Community

One might ask: how a group of men, with ages spanning six decades, living in a religious community can actually transform lives? Fair enough. Let's take a little closer look at what a religious community is, or endeavors to be, and see if the answer to that question becomes clearer...

First of all, while the model of any community, religious or otherwise, might be that of a *family*, and a good model it is, there is a fundamental difference in the way these two entities, family and community, come to be. All of us are born into our family, we did not choose each other. Even when new members enter, by marriage for example, it is usually through the choice of a single member, not all of them. Thus, the natural unity that the family denotes is not one that was initiated by each member. Rather, members find themselves joined, by no choice of their own, simply by virtue of their naissance. Of course, as time goes on, each will need to affirm that unity, if those bonds are to last. Thankfully, our nature tends to value highly this natural bond and even extend that bond to newcomers to the family, in a sort of "naturalization" as in marriage and adoption. Though there is more than a little dysfunction in this bond, the family unit is still the source and result of much grace.

In communities, people also find themselves intermingled with others, some or many of whom they may not know. Yet, unlike the family bond, which exists even before it is accepted and acted upon, the bonds of community cannot exist without a person's positive choice. One's *willingness* to give oneself to be a part of the community, with all its rights and obligations, is necessary for there to be true community life. There is no natural or pre-determined connection, since it requires a conscious decision to commit oneself to live as an integrated member of the community. Nevertheless, lived well, both family life and community life are true sources of vitality, love and growth, even if both have their challenges, and surely both require grace.

Members of a religious community, in choosing to live together with "one heart and one mind" commit themselves to conform their lives for the benefit of the community, of its mission, and in mutual support of each member. The saying: "For each, according to their ability, and to each, according to their need," is a fitting general description of what it means to live in a community. When the richness of the Gospel, lived radically, is added to that, the community moves from being simply a humanistic endeavor, to becoming a sacred project, a way of bringing the Gospel into concrete application in the individual and collective lives of the members.

The marvelous result of all this is that the living Gospel is very contagious. So, when a community embodies the Good News, in word and deed, it cannot help but spread that Gospel, and with it, transmit transforming Grace. Those who choose to live in true religious community, be that as lay members of a parish community, or as vowed members of a religious congregation, have the power through grace, to give witness that the Gospel is alive and relevant today. This is a compelling testimony. This is our calling.