

October, 2007 Five Essential Ingredients of Comm - unity

What does it take for community to “work”? What are the essential ingredients for a collection of individuals to become a thriving, healthy group of people that shape each other into a whole stronger than the parts, and whose way of life itself is attractive and infectious to those who come near? We might imagine that a successful community depends on the quality of the individuals, the depth of interpersonal sharing, or a creative model of life together. I think not. These features are the spicing of the community, but not the “essential ingredients.” I would encourage communities first and most importantly to incorporate five essential ingredients into their life. These ingredients are key to developing a common unity of life, a comm - unity:

1. Common Proximity - First, it helps to live together, or at least close enough together where sharing on a variety of different fronts becomes a way of life. It is one thing to get together for meetings once a week. It is another to share laundry facilities. The “making room for another” needed for a thriving community life requires the sharing of heart, mind, and hand. It requires sharing the mundane as well as the profound. We err, especially today, when we expect to share our confessions when we have not shared a meal. If we do not live together, communities can share possessions, expenses, transportation or more. Ask, “How long does it take for another member of the community to come to my aid when I am in need?” The degree of “common” life available to a community is often (though not always) limited by the proximity of its members.

2. Common Values and Practices - Second, it helps to share common values. No, let me say it more strongly. A community survives by its commitment to central values, expressed in key practices. Some monastic communities take “vows.” Many groups share a common “covenant.” Others make “commitments.” These are not optional. They hold the community together. Communities may need time to establish appropriate values and practices. Prospective members may need time to get a feel for the values prior to making a commitment to the community. But however things are done, a set of central common values must guide the community life. And they must be lived out concretely in some common practices. Without this, the perennial question of “who is in and who is out” becomes nearly impossible.

3. Common Decision-Making - Third, the group needs to know how decisions are made. Are we going to allow a new member into the group? How will we organize the work of the community? What about this problem over here? The community will collapse without a clearly understood means of making decisions on matters that regard the group. It does not matter whether a single person makes all of the decisions, or everybody votes on every decision, or you decide by some loose consensus. What matters is that all members understand how decisions are made and willingly agree to that process.

4. Common Prayer - Furthermore, healthy communities affirm their most central values through common prayer. The daily office of prayer has been a pillar of Christian monastic life for millennia. Successful secular communities also incorporate common rites celebrating key

values. But in all honesty, I think it is not just common ideology, but the regular rehearsal of core, religious beliefs that is essential. Communities founded merely on socio-economic values are often short-lived. Common life comprehended in a religious world-view and enacted in prayerful ritual gives a meaning to the common life acted in the ordinary world that transcends place and time.

5. Love - The items listed above only provide a structure within which Christians can practice a life of love together. But it is love that holds the community together. Geographic proximity, common values, common decision-making, and common prayer only ensure that the group has enough in common to make a real “go of it.” But common values without the willingness to give another space when needed will not, a community make. To reword sacred text, “If we have thought through our values in detail and we pray together twice a day; if we share the same house, and even donate our money to a common purse but have not love we are only a collection of bodies and a useless witness to the world.” Love is patient and kind. Never jealous or envious or rude. . . . (see 1 Corinthians 13). These are the virtues and practices that transform a group from an awkward collection into a living community.

So what makes community work? While some look to plans, or purposes, I recommend looking elsewhere. Are you living in sufficient proximity to facilitate real sharing on a variety of levels? Are you making mutual commitments to core values lived out in common practices? Do you have an agreed-upon means of making decisions? Are you praying together on a regular basis? And most of all, are you walking in these in a growing spirit of love. I say, do these and you shall live.

May God the Father bless you with His riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.

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