

Building communal life through prayer

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[Go Back](#)



The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet of Los Angeles gather with associates and St. Joseph Workers. Photo courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

Living community is an art and a work! Community and its relative, communion, come from the Latin words *com* + *munio*, which mean working together, or building something together. What does it mean to truly build life together? This question artfully and persistently explored and seriously worked on yields a profound mystery. In fact, it reveals the Mystery that lies in the depths of each person's being and ultimately in that of the communal self. To build a life together means asking what it means to live; and, what it means to undertake this work of living together.

First, let us explore the context for this work together. Not long ago I ran across an intriguing sentence from *The Go-Between* by L. P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." The enigma here is the way the idea is stated. You'd expect the statement to be:

The past is a foreign country; they did things differently

there. Generally that's the way we think about the past, in the past tense. The past is now foreign because that's where they did things differently. Instead the author, and in fact, his book, shows how the past might be foreign to us, but it remains with us.

This enigma is also at the crux of what it means to work together toward true community. Although we understand rationally that the past is the past and we long to do things differently, as a matter of fact, the past is always with us, ready to entice us into the same old behaviors. As we live into each day's new world with its new set of challenges and responses we cling to the past where they do things as they always did—differently than what the now calls for!

Into the communal cavern of desire

So what has this to do with true communal living? Perhaps everything, if we are as we say we are: Christians for whom the only thing necessary is following Jesus the Christ, to be in relationship with Jesus and with one another. What does this require? The easy answer is charity, the love that is agapic, without prejudice or bias, totally inclusive. How do we live this agapic love as a community?

Let me assume that the reader who takes up this essay is already motivated to move deep into the cavern of his or her personal desire. I propose that this is also true at a communal level: we must move into the communal cavern of desire. This is a profound need, a critical exploration, an active search for Jesus, the Christ, and a difficult journey of discipleship. In these times we cannot do this alone.

These times, times of general fractiousness! Chaos, indifference, intense poverty and equally intense wealth, locations of unrelieved violence, violence of attitudes and actions, relentless oppositional stances among people in politics and government, resistance to forgiveness and reconciliation. Such is the world in which we live.

However there is something else! Thomas Merton, in his poem "Hagia Sophia" has this to say:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, "*Natura naturans*." There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness, and flows out to me from unseen roots of all created being.

Thomas Merton lived during the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, the cultural upheaval of the 1960s, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. And in this milieu, this

naturally toward a hidden wholeness. Nature natures, in English. Nature does what its intrinsic meaning calls it to do...that is, nature always moves toward wholeness. Romans Chapter 8, verse 22: "All creation groans and is in agony" ... all creation stretches, bidden by the invisible fecundity, toward a wholeness that it perceives intrinsically. There is in every thing, says the scientist, a strange attractor that calls the creature to be what the creature is meant to be, that orders chaos and gives meaning.

This source of meaning lies within our deepest human self. It is the inner cavern of desire where God awaits to do God's thing in and through us. It is where our desires are mirrored in God's desire. This strange attractor that keeps all things moving toward their fullest meaning permeates every creature, from the smallest particle or wave to the so-called most sophisticated being, the human being. This strange attractor is the author of our unrest, of our struggles with ourselves and others for our own wholeness. It is the most hidden and subtle part of us, buried deep below the egoic self and most often subject to the egoic self's own designs for control, power, affection, adulation, and security.

In the language of faith we call this unifying energy the Holy Spirit of Love. This Strange Attractor sifts, sorts, and combines matter and energy. For us believers, it is the fundamental expression of the Trinity—that self-communicating, "self-giving community of love," as Father George Maloney, S.J. put it. As members of religious communities our work, the art of *communio* in our collective life, is to recreate this self-giving community of love. It is a community that creates and recreates that which God desires for the world and the planet—a wholeness—that is as yet hidden. It is the work of *communio* to bring this wholeness to light. This requires that each person of the community have access to her or his deepest inner self, the cavern where God awaits. Access requires discernment—a discerning heart that is open and loving, that has been gentled, tamed, if you will, so that compassion becomes the habitual fountain out of which flows joyful action.

In our global culture where so many people are victims of fractured lives, where the economic structure caters to the individualism of silo-style living, where people are lonely, disaffected with their own lives and desiring community even though they might be fleeing it or unable to name it—that is where *communio* is situated. Working together at the common work of being together—not as a static self-contented entity but as actively joy-filled disciples who witness to the kin-dom that Jesus spoke of and gave his life for in their every word and action. That kin-dom is a self-giving community of love.

How does this happen? One way is a prayer style that is effective in communities of St. Joseph throughout the world. Our technique is generally applicable, even though it was given to us by our 17th century Jesuit founder, Jean-Pierre Médaille. Médaille called us to examine weekly the "state of the Congregation and the works of zeal ordinarily done." Research has shown us that this weekly examination of the communal heart and the accompanying works of zeal are nothing more nor less than a communal discernment directed toward creating a deeper understanding of the life to be lived through the works that each person undertakes. This discernment is to be the foundation of their work with others that fosters community among themselves and among themselves and all others.

Begin with discernment

Let's first examine the concept of discernment. Discernment is probing our inner lives in order to find and articulate our most fundamental desires. It is listening to one another in this probing, observing and listening to and participating in the world around us, probing the scriptures, following Jesus' journey in his world, sharing how it relates to our journey in our world, how it touches our deep desires and registering or tracking our resistances and what we easily embrace. This discernment is naming our challenges, our resistance to let go or take up, supporting one another in the grief of loss and through the mourning time, generously rejoicing when our community partners rejoice, discovering the new thing God is doing in and among us, coming to clarity about the truth and path for us as a community as well as for each of us individually.

How does this happen? Médaille proposed a framework that he received from his Ignatian origins. The framework implies a weekly meeting.

First, it is important to recall the way God has been working in our individual life during the past week. Where, when, and how did God encounter me in the events or engagements that comprised my life during the week? This can be anything from a simple act of kindness you received or a great project that you engineered. The question is: where did God reveal the Godself in this "work"? We think most of our days are perfectly humdrum. Not so! The Holy Spirit of Love is consistently at work—in us. We must honor this by recognizing how this happens and what happened as a result.

Second, we describe this meeting of ourselves with God. What happened? When? Where? How? We describe this in as much detail as possible.

Third, once we have told the story of our encounter with God we re-member the feelings we had; the movements within us. Were we moved to joy? Sorrow? Resistance? Challenge? Heartbreak? Action? Confusion? How were we moved at the time? And now as we re-member this instance? How is this encounter perhaps a pattern in my life? Or how is it remarkably different than other encounters?

After each member of the community speaks his or her story through these four points the community begins to consider together what seems to be moving within the community itself. As a whole how has God been active within the community during this past week? As a community can we name the grace or graces that have permeated the group?

Once these graces have been named the community considers together how they want to respond. What is their response to grace going to be now and during this coming week? What is the prayer they will say to remind themselves of this moment of grace and that will inspire and encourage them as they move in response during the coming week? Sometimes it's good to name a symbol of this response that can be posted somewhere as a reminder.

What I have described is a template for considering the "state of the congregation" through remembering ordinary works of zeal that our founder spoke of. It is actually a picture in time of how the Holy Spirit of Love, the Strange Attractor, has been at work throughout the week in this particular community. We can easily see that this community has been moved by the Spirit and is ready and willing to respond in word and action.

At work in the prayer process

Now let's look at what has actually happened. I have described the mechanics of the process. But what has happened in the heart of the community that gathered for that prayer? First of all, each person has expressed her faith stance in her life. If faith is a relationship, then she has described how she and God were in relationship during this past week. This candid admission is a profound act of courage and humility. First of all, it takes enormous courage to tell the story of God's action in our individual life. It is an act of complete trust in the persons listening. It is an act of profound humility as we recognize that, yes, we were an instrument of God's communication of love in a given situation—either through our very weakness or through our aptitude for the message. We abandon ourselves—the egoic self—in the telling of this story. Marguerite Porete, a late 14th century mystic, says that in this kind of abandonment the "soul is dangerous, noble, and delicious" (as quoted by Evelyn Underhill in *The Essentials of Mysticism*). That is, the person who dares to reveal her or himself in this way is vulnerable as never before in the conversionary grace that God wishes for that person.

And, if the person is open to conversionary grace, then so, too, is the whole community. This type of faith empowers us as a community to continue building on the presence of God at the moment within the group. The more we share, the stronger God's presence among us becomes. We tap the potential that God's presence offers. Faith builds on faith. We discover a hidden strength among us. At the same time we begin to understand that we are building a friendship among ourselves that is not based on personal preferences but on the faith that we express. We are becoming a genuine Christian community. As we learn to experience, understand, and appreciate this prayer, we realize that we are a community whose work is to continue the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. Christ as our community center empowers us through the power of the Holy Spirit to live the Trinitarian life in the world, whatever the cost. The community will hold together and it will hold us in the courage and humility we need to continue God's work in the world wherever and through whatever work we do.

Mystical power in community prayer

Karl Rahner, the late 20th century Jesuit theologian, is known for his saying that, "The Christian of the future will either be a mystic or will cease to be anything at all." This simple practice that Médaille proposed is indeed a mystical way. Bernard McGinn, another 20th century Jesuit and a scholar of mysticism, explains that the mystical life is comprised of three steps. First, we anticipate the presence of God. That is, we watch for it, wait for it, look for it, expect it, we are sure that God will surprise us somewhere along our way. Second, we recognize God's presence. Because we have learned to expect that God will surely come in some way—either easily recognizable or in disguise—we believe that we have been met with the God who loves us. Our faith reaches out and God embraces us, whether felt or not. Third, we respond. In the immediacy of God's presence, how do I respond? This, according to McGinn is how the mystical life takes shape in us. And this, says Rahner, is what it means to be a Christian. The follower of Christ anticipates, recognizes and responds to God's immediate presence—which she or he understands is constant throughout any day, whether felt or not felt.

Invitation to contemplation

Let us return to where we began—with Merton's mystical insight: "There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity." As we go through our daily life we are pitched to and fro with the exigencies of technology, consumerism, instant communication, violence, war, injustice, and words, words, words. This constant battering of our senses can leave us senseless, for the most part. Yet, in every thing that is sensed there is an invisible fecundity—a tiny seed of life that is waiting to sprout forth, grow and blossom into fruit. In every visible thing!

This is our invitation to contemplation, personal and communal. This is our invitation to attempt to articulate what we have seen. It is an invitation to a new consciousness, to step into mystery/Mystery, a mystical awareness of whatever situation I am in, whether I am there voluntarily or involuntarily, whether at peace or in pain, whether in confusion or clarity, there is buried in this "event" a seed that wants to live into its wholeness. It is also an invitation to a new conscience

relationship with God who has been active in our personal life becomes the glue that holds the community together as a body and together in its work, its highest ideals for itself. If a community of women or men religious begins to share the sate of its heart, that practice helps to order the community more closely to its charism. This prayer exercise, if you will, provides the ongoing formation of the individual and of the community.

So, for example: for Franciscans, how does this sharing of God's work in you illuminate the Franciscan way? For Mercys, how does this sharing of God's work in you become a "comfortable cup of tea?" For Dominicans, how does the weekly sharing become God's truth illuminated for others? For Communities of St. Joseph, how does sharing God's encounters effect union with others?

What this prayer together does, quite simply, is "order the house." It creates an image of how the community (house) lives out the mission most effectively (order). It also provides a means of responding in joy and gratitude for what has been and creates direction for how the community hopes it to be in the future.

Perhaps you are wondering if the community to which I belong experiences this prayer? Yes! We embrace it! And, just to be sure that it does not become a rote prayer we take for granted, we post a sign on our refrigerator door that reminds us of what we discovered in gratitude and direction during our last prayer together. We relish this time together. The community becomes a haven of faith where the sturm und drang of the world is for an hour or so forgotten. Well, not forgotten, but gathered into our communal heart where we can hear its seed growing into its fullness. It is where the past can be brought forward, not in some nostalgic way or as a resurrection of past contentions, but where it is purified and sanctified in the ground of self-revelation. The full potency of the past can be released to create within the community a new sense of belonging, a new sense of charism, and a new sense of identity—personally and communally.

For details about sources used in this article, please contact the author at marciacsj@mannahouse.org.

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