

A SENSE OF BELONGING

It is important to keep ourselves from thinking about community only in terms of living together in one house, or sharing meals and prayers, or doing projects together. These might well be true expressions of community, but community is a much deeper reality. People who live together do not necessarily live in community, and those who live alone do not necessarily live without it. Physical nearness or distance is secondary.

The primary quality of community is a deep sense of being gathered by God.

When Francis Xavier travelled alone across many continents to preach the Gospel, he found strength in the sure knowledge that he belonged to a community that supported him with prayer and brotherly care. And many Christians who show great perseverance in hard and lonely tasks find their strength in the deep bond with the community in whose name they do their work.

Here we touch one of the most critical areas of the Christian life today. Many very generous Christians find themselves increasingly tired and dispirited not so much because the work is hard or the success slight, but because they feel isolated, unsupported, and left alone. People who say to themselves or even aloud, "I wonder if anyone cares what I am doing. I wonder if my superior, my friends at home, or the people who sent me ever think about me, ever pray for me, ever consider me part of their lives," are in real spiritual danger.

We are able to do many hard things, tolerate many conflicts, overcome many obstacles, and persevere under many pressures, but when we no longer experience ourselves as part of a caring, supporting, praying community, we can quickly lose faith. This is because faith in ministering God's compassionate presence can never be separated from receiving God's presence in the community to which we belong. The crises in the lives of many caring Christians today are closely connected with deep feelings of not belonging.

Without a sense of being sent by a caring community, a compassionate life cannot last long and quickly degenerates into a life marked by numbness and anger. This is not simply a psychological observation, but a theological truth, because apart from a vital relationship with a caring community a vital relationship with Christ is hardly possible.

At this point, the question arises, "How can we build community?"

What do we have to do to make community happen?" But perhaps such questions come from an anxious heart and are less practical and helpful than they appear to be. It seems better to raise the more contemplative question, "Where do we see community emerging?" Once we have become sensitive to the reality of community in our midst, we may find it easier to discover the most appropriate starting point for its growth and development. It makes more sense to sow seeds in soil in which we have already seen something grow than to stand around worrying about how to make the soil fertile.

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