

# OUR STRUGGLE FOR COMMUNITY

BY RON ROLHEISER, OMI

We all ache for community and tend to be dissatisfied with what we're actually experiencing in our lives. Everywhere, it seems, people are looking for community and complaining that their families, churches, and workplaces are disappointing them.

There is a general frustration about community, at every level. Today, it seems, community everywhere is in trouble. Marriages, families, religious communities, associations, and even business and civic communities that sustain themselves over the long-range are the exception more than the rule. As well, many people have tried to start new communities and in almost every case have failed, despite much initial passion and good will.

Why is that? Why, when we so desperately want community, do we find it so hard to achieve and sustain?

Perfection is the enemy of the good and what we over-idealize will invariably disappoint and frustrate us. And that's exactly our difficulty with community – with marriage, with family, with church, with friendship, with civic community. Simply put, we're often unable to sustain community because we have false notions and false expectations as to what constitutes it. An overly romantic notion so much clouds our vision that we rarely even recognize real community when we see it. Allow me an example:

Several years ago, I was serving as spiritual director to a very idealistic young man. He was a member of a religious order, but spent a lot of energy complaining about his particular community. Constant was his gripe that there wasn't enough intimacy within the community, that people didn't share deeply enough with each other, that the real issues were never addressed, and that he felt lonely and isolated.

No doubt there was some truth in this. Active religious communities tend to be addicted to their work and ministry and they often sacrifice the needs of the community to the demands of ministry. As well, at a point, all communities (including marriages) struggle with real, heart-to-heart, sharing. Tiredness, fear, distrust, private wound, and every kind of reticence conspire together to generally keep the table conversations focused more on sports, the weather, current events, fashion, and entertainment than on what's really on our minds. I didn't doubt the substance of this young man's complaint.

But, at one stage, worn out by his complaining, his community sent him to a psychologist. After delivering his regular litany of complaints, the young man was surprised at the psychologist's reaction. Instead of re-enforcing his theories about how dysfunctional the community was, the psychologist told him, gently but firmly: "What you're looking for you won't find inside a religious community because what you're looking for is a lover – not a religious community!"

This is a parable, of sorts. It points out what real community is by flushing out some of the things that it isn't. What is community?

There are many kinds of community – of which being lovers is in fact one kind. However community as Christ defined it – Christian community, apostolic community, life together in the Holy Spirit – is, as this psychologist made clear, something quite other than what the romantic imagination spontaneously imagines. What is it? Before defining it positively, we need first to dissociate it from some of the things with which it is commonly confused.

By a certain *via negativa*, one might say that Christian community is not:

Mutual compatibility, like-minded individuals gathering together on the basis of liking each other.

Huddling together in fear or loneliness, lonely or scared people ganging up against a cold and hostile world.

People rallying around a common task or cause, people brought together because they share a common passion or ideal.

Family, understood in the romantic sense, people brought together through psycho-sexual attraction.

Family, understood in the biological sense, people bonded through blood.

A common roof, people brought together because they live in the same house, eat at the same table, or sleep in the same bed.

None of these are bad and each in fact makes for a certain kind of community. However none of them touches the essence of Christian community. What is that?

Simply put, it is a gathering around the person of Christ in a way that displaces our selfishness so that we begin to live in a charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long-suffering, faith, constancy, mildness, and chastity that make it possible to precisely live with each other beyond differences, fears, and incompatibilities.

The kind of bond that withstands the test of time within marriage, family, religious community, civic community, and friendship, is ultimately rooted in something beyond liking each other, huddling in loneliness, working for a common cause, feeling erotic attraction for each other, or sharing a blood-line, a neighbourhood, a house, or even a bed.

Community means staying together even when we don't like each other, aren't attracted to each other, and struggle with hopeless differences. Only when we understand and accept this will romance, a beautiful thing in itself, cease being an obstacle to real community.

[http://ronrolheiser.com/our-struggle-for-community/#.VFupN\\_nF91E](http://ronrolheiser.com/our-struggle-for-community/#.VFupN_nF91E)