



What the Monks Taught Me about Community

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A few years ago, wanting to learn more about spiritual disciplines, I started reading the early monastic writers. I expected to find some great lessons about being with God in silence and solitude, but I was surprised to learn that monks were also really good at doing life together. In fact, the quality of community that they experienced is enviable.

Many of us long to experience authentic, meaningful community in our churches and small groups. And at times we do. But more often, I suspect, we experience what Larry Crabb describes in his book, *The Safest Place on Earth*: “We arrange our bodies in a circle, but

our souls are sitting in straight-backed chairs facing away from the others.”

The New Testament makes it clear that cultivating authentic relationships with other believers is vital to living out the Christian faith. In response, early monastic communities worked hard to create an environment in which real spiritual connection could occur. Their writings leave us with several valuable lessons about community.

No one grows alone.

It is striking to see just how precious spiritual community was to the ancient believers. Even the Desert Fathers, who were renowned for their radical pursuit

of solitude, made a point to spend time with other solitary monks so that they might encourage one another through table fellowship, common prayers, and celebrating Mass together.

In the monastic communities that developed later, people rarely traveled alone. They recognized that two fall into sin far less easily than one (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). These “spiritual loners” understood that their spiritual edge would grow dull if they didn’t invite others to help them sharpen it.

Today we are fond of saying that God should be enough for us—that God alone should meet our every need. This simply isn’t true. We were made

to need other people. In the very beginning God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18). Paul’s picture of the church as Christ’s body reminds us that we are organically connected to one another (1 Corinthians 12).

When my schedule prevents me from meeting regularly with other believers, my soul soon feels dry and achy. My personal times with Christ lose their luster, and my spiritual vision gets myopic. Without fellow Christians to speak to my life, my flaws grow, and my blind spots go unchallenged.

That’s why, even though it means some pretty early mornings, I make time each week to meet with a couple of Christian brothers. As we talk about the Scriptures, confess sin, and pray for one another, I invite them deeper into my life.

What the monks teach us is true: no matter how strong our personal relationships with God are, we also need to cultivate deep spiritual connections with others to be significantly strengthened in our faith.

Rules can be good.

Monks recognized that spiritual formation is methodical. Each monastic community established a pattern of life called a rule to ensure that their life together would result in the deliberate movement of their members toward Christlikeness. The rule quoted heavily from Scripture and described the activities, relationships, and experiences that the members of the community would pursue to help each other grow spiritually. Far from being a burden, the rule was seen as tool for achieving the quality of life the community desired. Aspiring monks considered it a privilege to be admitted to a monastery and to live under a rule.

The content of these rules surprised me. I expected them to be full of guidelines on how to pray, fast, and practice solitude. While instructions for individual practices were there, most of the rules focused on communal living. One of their chief concerns was nurturing

and protecting spiritual friendships.

The church’s oldest rule (Augustine’s) emphasized simplicity and other-centeredness as a way of life. The community was seen as more important than the individual, and many of the practices (such as making possessions community property) aimed at preventing a sense of individualism within the community. As God’s people, members of the monastery were to be of one heart and one mind (Acts 4:32). Love for God and love for one another were not separate—rather one’s love for God was measured largely by the love one showed the community (1 John 4:20).

When I was in college, six of us moved into a house a few blocks from San Diego State University with the goal of sharpening one another in our faith and reaching out to our community in the name of Jesus. One of the most important lessons we learned is that spiritual community, although hard, is greatly simplified by establishing some agreed-upon rules. I am bit paranoid about rules—because of a fear of lapsing into legalism—but I can’t deny that in everything from helping each other keep our spiritual commitments to deciding who would do the dishes, adhering to a “rule of life” led to a much higher quality of life together.

Introducing a rule (of sorts) into church small groups can also be beneficial. In addition to agreeing on basic expectations—such as confidentiality and commitment level—a rule can identify the spiritual practices that we value most. For instance, my church values compassionate service as a means of spiritual growth and outreach. Consequently, most of our small groups volunteer regularly in ministries such as Habitat for Humanity. In the weekly small group I participate in, each member has identified practices that are important to his or her spiritual growth. For me, this means taking a monthly day of solitude; for another member, this means using commuting time to pray or listen to the Bible on CD. In this way, we’ve become more intentional in helping one another grow.

One size does not fit all.

For Augustine, community did not equal uniformity. Even though everyone in the monastery lived by the same rule, individual differences were not obscured by a one-size-fits-all approach to spiritual growth. The rule made provision for differing needs, desires, strengths, and weaknesses. For instance, a person entering the community from a wealthy lifestyle who was accustomed to living in comfort was allowed to have better food or more comfortable bedding than a “stronger” person who came from a more austere background. The monks did not see this as giving unfair privileges to special members, but as making accommodations to carry the burdens of those who were weak.

As we pursue spiritual growth with other believers, we need to allow wiggle room for individual differences. For example, not everyone may practice spiritual disciplines in the same way you do. Some people connect with God best through contemplative activities, others through the relational give and take of regular fellowship, and still others through swinging a hammer. Though we all practice foundational disciplines like prayer and time in Scripture, we should allow individuals to tailor these disciplines to fit the way God has designed them.

Community must be cultivated.

Augustine also recognized that communities of grace don’t just happen. They must be nurtured through forgiveness and confession.

Daily prayers in the monastery included the communal reciting of the Lord’s Prayer. The monks took very seriously the line about forgiveness: “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12, TNIV). As they prayed this line, the monks confessed their sins to God and consciously forgave any in the community who had wronged them. To pray this prayer without forgiving, Augustine said, is to lie on two counts: “First,

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because what we say is not true; and second, because we do not keep to our agreement with God.”

Forgiveness was only one side of the coin. These monks also regularly confessed their sins to others in the community. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer contended that in a community where confession of sins does not occur, only a thin veneer of fellowship can exist. Grace will not mark the community as it should because no one dares to be real: “The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner,” he wrote.

In the accountability groups in our church, we encourage people to confess their sins to one another as openly as they can. Other members of the group listen, extend grace, and pray. Such confession is difficult, but it brings deep healing. Many in our church can testify to the freedom they have experienced through this practice. Long-standing patterns of sin have ended, addictions have dried up, and deep wounds have been healed. In addition, grace has permeated our fellowship in a way that wouldn’t have happened without regular confession.

Lead as a fellow traveler.

The early religious communities developed from friends coming together to help one another live holy lives. Their origins are reflected in their leadership structure. The leader of the community—at least in the Augustinian tradition—was not a “superior” who stood above the community, but a “prior” or “one who is put forward.” Priors were not exempt from any function of the community. The only difference between them and other members of the group was that they had been “put forward” to give leadership and to exercise modest authority in helping the community stay true to its vision. The rule explicitly instructed priors to avoid lording their leadership over others. Instead, they were to lead by serving members of the community. Priors gained authority through love, not fear.

Those who are leaders in our churches and small groups continually battle the temptation to exercise

authority based on our positions rather than close relationships with Jesus. We can easily put on masks to conceal our sins and communicate to others that we are above being questioned. Too often in my own leadership experience, I have—through my words or tone, or by a timely reference to my education or spiritual résumé—shut down someone’s loving attempt to correct me.

Such authority may evoke conformity in those we lead, but it produces little lasting spiritual change. In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen writes: “When the members of a community of faith cannot truly know and love their shepherd, shepherding quickly becomes a subtle way of exercising power over others and begins to show authoritarian and dictatorial traits.”

Like the priors, we need to lead as fellow servants. We must be humble and teachable, and in no way think ourselves superior to those we lead.

Good community is good evangelism.

Small groups and churches in which people truly love one another and experience life transformation serve as a powerful witness. When we invite non-believers to investigate and join such communities, we offer them unique opportunities to see Christianity lived out. Jesus said: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13: 34-35).

Celtic monks in particular recognized this. Monks in this tradition cultivated community with special care because they understood that a loving, grace-filled community was more than an important means of spiritual growth—it was a powerful evangelistic tool in a pagan culture. When they evangelized Ireland, Celtic monks formed small monasteries and used them as bases of hospitality from which to reach out to the surrounding population. The Celtic apostolic teams engaged the local people in conversa-

tion, prayed for their needs, counseled people, healed the sick, and interceded for the demon possessed. St. Patrick was even known to pray blessings on the local rivers so that the people might catch more fish.

I discovered the effectiveness of this approach when I led an effort to start evangelistic Bible studies at the university near our church. We recruited great leaders, promoted the groups, and managed to launch at least one study in every dorm. To our surprise, however, we found that more seekers were finding their way into our church’s other small groups—the ones that were for believers, the ones we hadn’t even promoted.

Further, people were coming to Christ in these groups more often than in the evangelistic Bible studies. As we heard their stories, we realized that they had been attracted to the loving relationships in these communities. These groups embraced them, and over time they became convinced of the reality of the gospel. The groups consisting entirely of individuals who didn’t know Christ lacked such loving community.

This experience changed the way our church approaches small-group ministry. We now encourage our groups to focus on staying lovingly involved in one another’s lives, helping each other be transformed by God’s word, and reaching out to bring seekers into the group. Like the old monk who built his monastery with courtyard walls that were only two-feet high, we want to create places of spiritual growth and connection where everyone can easily enter.

The monks understood an important reality: we were created for community. God designed us with a need to connect with others at a significant level, and as Christ’s church he calls us to live out our faith together. As we strive to cultivate this type of transformational community in our churches and small groups, we follow in the footsteps of the ancient spiritual masters who devoted their lives to pursuing a deeper intimacy with God and one another. □