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Elected neediness

Rich Heffern | Aug. 11, 2009 NCR Today

Our modern culture has taught us that dependency on others, the need for friendship and community, are signs of weakness. Just think of one very popular cultural icon that we all grew up with -- those characters Clint Eastwood has always played in films (either the Man with No Name or Dirty Harry). Tough, flinty-eyed, hard-jawed independent men, they would single-handedly restore order to one of our crime-afflicted communities and then ride off alone just before the closing credits, while the rest of us clutched each other in wimpy embraces.

Our spiritual traditions on the other hand tell us that dependency on others is a sign of strength. Indeed, in the Christian tradition and in its theology, even ultimate reality, the very underlying matrix of being itself, the true source of all that is, is ... well, a community, a Trinity, three persons who need one another.

The central ritual of Catholic Christianity is the Eucharist, the breakiing of the bread together. Buddhist monks pray every day the words of the Buddha himself: "I seek refuge in the Sangha (the community of seekers)."

Elected neediness is a way of reflecting that ultimate design in our lives, of deliberately setting ourselves up for the pursuit of wholeness in the midst of community. Intimacy and community are important elements of the spiritual life. For thousands of years now we humans have been moving toward increased isolation from one another. From big rowdy hunting-gathering tribes we went to an agricultural society, then moved into cities and huddled in neighborhoods. The extended family broke down, and then so did the nuclear one. With this progression to isolation, perhaps now we need a "Declaration of Dependence" to restore some much needed balance after the long march to complete independence.

It is no accident that in the midst of our consumer culture we live in such isolation. Ideally each one of us dwells in a separate housing unit. It's simply good for business when each must have his or her own television, washer and dryer, lawn mower. But we pay a steep price in the coin of alienation from one another, loneliness, with elders who feel useless, with teenagers who have nothing worthwhile to do with their time. Households, neighborhoods and communities have suffered terribly.

"The real meaning of a poor life," says Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, "is a life of radical dependency, so that I can't arrange my life in such a way that I don't need you." This gospel call to elected neediness summons us to be satisfied less with material wealth and more with human community, with developing creativity, friends, with simple craft and art and making-do, with conversation, lovemaking and play together, knowing what is enough, knowing with certainty that we can't live without others or thrive apart from the community of life on earth.

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