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We dare to call God a lamb

Rich Heffern | Feb. 6, 2010

Residents share a communal meal at the Silver Sage elder cohousing community in Boulder, Colo. (Newscom/Jonathan Castner)

Earth and Spirit

Our culture directs us to engineer our total security, to surround ourselves with things and wealth, so that we are in no way ever dependent upon another. However, our Catholic spiritual traditions tell us that if we protect ourselves from insecurity, from vulnerability, we in turn cut ourselves off both from the Source, but also from the community we need in order to be fully human and compassionate.

Franciscan preacher Fr. Richard Rohr has said: ?One religion, Catholic Christianity, even dares to call God a lamb!? What is the nature of a lamb, if not simple, vulnerable and dependent on others? Spirituality often turns things upside down and inside out. To be human is to be insecure, dependent. Even God chooses community ? to be a weak and gentle lamb in our midst.

?The real meaning of a Gospel life,? says 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.? Dependency lead to a sense of sufficiency, for accumulating and hoarding makes no sense when you know you absolutely need other people for your life to continue and flourish. This Gospel call to elected neediness summons us to be satisfied less with material wealth 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.

Our spiritual tradition indeed tells us that dependency on others is a sign of strength. Indeed, in the Christian tradition and in its theology, even ultimate reality, the very ground and underlying matrix of life itself, the true source of all that is, is ... well, a community, a Trinity, three Persons who need each other.

The central ritual of Catholic Christianity is Eucharist, the breaking and sharing of bread. Buddhist monks pray every day the words of the Buddha: ?I seek refuge in sangha [the community of seekers].?

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 we all live apart from one another. When each of

us must have his or her own auto, her own lawn mower, his own television, her own washer and dryer, then the cash register rings happily. But we pay a steep price in the coin of loneliness, alienation from one another, with elders who feel useless and teenagers who have nothing really worthwhile or challenging to do with their time. Household, neighborhood and community have suffered terribly from this consumer-oriented design for living.

Experiments have begun in various places around the world and here in the United States with creative alternatives to our isolated ways of living. Beginning in Denmark and spreading to many other places we have seen the rise of cohousing communities in which people own their own homes but share mutual amenities. These might include gardens, a library, laundry and workshops. Many of these communities have communal dining ? a boon for singles and seniors. Parents can find child care easily. Cars are banished to peripheral parking lots. Cohousing is affordable and conducive to strengthening extended families and friendships. ?I know I live in a community,? one resident of Trudesland, a community near Copenhagen, Denmark, said, ?because on Friday night it takes me 45 minutes and two beers to get from the parking lot to my front door.?

At Winslow Cohousing near Seattle, the aim is to have ?a minimal impact on the earth and create a place in which all residents are equally valued as part of the community.? At EcoVillage at Ithaca, N.Y., the site of two adjoining cohousing neighborhoods, the goal is ?to explore and model innovative approaches to ecological and social sustainability.?

In its 2,000-year history, Christianity has given rise to many new forms of community, ways of living together. Witness the rise of monasteries and convent following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the great Benedictine, Augustinian, Carthusian and Cistercian institutions that preserved learning through dark times, or the emergence of the Beguines, a lay movement of prayer, voluntary poverty and service to the poor, or the Catholic Worker movement. Such new forms of community represented great leaps forward in both the spiritual life and in the practical world of getting by and getting along while helping others.

As we move deeper into a new century and a new millennium, with awesome challenges and uncertainties ahead, our church life will give rise to forms of community we cannot even imagine. Perhaps community will, after all, save the world.

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