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Simple living: the Green Triangle

Rich Heffern | Jan. 20, 2011 Eco Catholic

We?ve all seen the bumper sticker that reads ?Live Simply So that Others May Simply Live? ? a ringing call to a sustainable life. Such a life involves in the words of Mennonite author Doris Janzen Longacre, ?cultivating a gentle way of handling the Earth, versatility in the face of shortage. Inner provision for contentment and more than all that commitment to live justly in our world.? A sufficient and sustainable life means being a bright and creative part of the solution rather than one more cog in the wheel of the dreadful turning wheels of the problem.

Sufficiency involves the virtues of thrift and frugality. Sustainability comes from innovation and creativity. It looks something like this. A friend reuses her bath and dishwater, hauling it out to the garden for her vegetables in the summer. It?s a lot of bother, she says, but she doesn?t mind. She gets exercise and cuts down on her water bill, while at the same time deriving a rich satisfaction from this way of living lightly. Once she drew out the Green Triangle for me on a napkin.

Ecologist Ernest Callenbach devised the Triangle to illustrate a principle of simple living. At the three points of the triangle are Money, Health, and Environment. Any time you do something beneficial for one point on the triangle you also will almost inevitably do good for the other two. For example, you decide to do something helpful for the environment: bicycling rather than driving your car on short trips. You thereby cut down pollution emissions, you reduce smog and lung damage, and you may help postpone damage from greenhouse gas emissions. But you?ll also help your health in the bargain because you get more regular exercise and you?ll also save money on gas and car depreciation.

I would go further and add one more point to the triangle, squaring it. I?d add Community. In addition to benefits for our budget, health and the immediate environment, living lightly both eases the burden on the Earth?s resources and necessarily connects us more directly and solidly with others. Simple living thereby becomes an energetic step toward a more just and equitable world, especially if we can utilize our own resources ? time and money ? to join in the struggle for a fairer distribution of the Earth?s limited resources. Living lightly can set us free to rebuild community, and conversely healthy communities can support us in our effort to live simply.

By our sustainable way of living, our striving after sufficiency we connect ourselves by means of strong cords to the community around us. Simple living can involve a kind of elected neediness and a radical dependency that strengthens us and our communities together. 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 on another. However, our Catholic spiritual tradition tells 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.

Franciscan preacher Fr. Richard Rohr said: ?One religion, Christianity, even dares to call God a lamb.? What is the nature of a lamb if not simple, vulnerable, and dependent upon others? Spirituality often turns the cultural message upside down and inside out. To be human is to be insecure, dependent. Even God chose community ? both in the Trinity and in choosing to be a weak and gentle lamb in our midst.

NCR's Eco Catholic Blog

Eco Catholic is an exploration of the green Catholic imagination and ecological spirituality. Contributors include Rich Heffern, NCR staff writer, columnist and author, and Carol Meyer, executive director of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition.

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