

Rivendell Community

Study & Formation - Unit E

Hospitality and Community

Part 3: Community life

From the Rule of the Rivendell Community:

We recognize and embrace our interdependence within the Communion of Saints, and joyfully accept the privileges and burdens of community life. We consent to bear one another's burdens freely, in whatever ways are given us, visible and invisible, known and unknown.

We commit ourselves to love one another, and others whom God gives us to love, as we love ourselves; that is, to desire, serve and work for the fulfillment of God's purposes in the other. We agree to give and receive encouragement, challenge, comfort, correction, guidance, and provocation to holiness.

Intercession: We will pray daily for one another, and for others who become part of our "extended family."

Conversation: We will meet regularly for the purposes of mutual support and accountability.

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In the celebrated lines of William Blake,

And we are put on earth a little space
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.

John of the Cross wrote, "When the evening of this life comes we shall be judged on Love." The implication of these quotations is that the purpose of this mortal life is to learn to love, to become beings capable of love. All the commandments are contained and fulfilled in loving God with our entire being, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Love (to paraphrase John) is what's on the "final exam," and if we're not enrolled in the School of Love, we're just spinning our wheels, wasting our time.

Life itself affords us many opportunities to learn to love; in fact, it may be that these continuing, generally unavoidable opportunities—welcome or unwelcome—are among the chief signs of the Creator's hands shaping and forming us human creatures through the events and circumstances of our lives—making us free beings capable of love. Both parish life and marriage and family are among the great schools of love, providing innumerable occasions for learning and practicing component skills, such as active caring for one another, appreciation of difference, mutual interdependence, courtesy, listening, compassion, patience, humility, forbearance, and forgiveness, given and received.

Like family and parish, religious community is a school of love. Although most people don't enter into family and parish life with learning to love as a primary conscious goal, this is typically a very intentional goal of religious communities. This is explicit in our Rule, patterned as it is on the Great Commandments of love. Worship and prayer are chief ways in which we learn the love of God. Community life provides a powerful, intentional way of placing ourselves under the tutelage of Love. Practicing the "component skills" and virtues mentioned above are explicit expectations for our life together—though of course "practicing" here is more like a young piano student practicing scales than a doctor practicing medicine!

Remembering this helps remind us that our life as the Rivendell Community, and as Chapters, is not simply a matter of friends with some common interests hanging out together (as worthwhile and enjoyable as this generally is). The quality of mutual love to which we commit ourselves in our Rule is quite rigorous: it is to love one another as we love ourselves, seeking the same great good for one another as we ourselves desire, that is, "to desire, serve and work for the fulfillment

of God's purposes in the other." This doesn't come easily; after all, often enough we don't seem to love *ourselves* very well, desiring, serving and working for lesser, partial goods. How can we expect to love others like this?

One way is that "we agree to give and receive encouragement, challenge, comfort, correction, guidance, and provocation to holiness." (The latter phrase has been the subject of much merriment: am I actually "provoking to holiness," or just provoking?) Most likely all of us have times (and they may be *most* of the time) when we don't actually *want* to be challenged, corrected, provoked, or maybe even comforted, and of course tact, sensitivity and timing are also necessary forms of love. But we agree in advance that we at least *want* to want these things! And we persist; we make the commitment to hang in there with each other, and continue to trust the work of God which takes place in community. Another wise and annoying saying of John of the Cross, that the other people in your life (and specifically in your community) are God's instruments to shape and chisel you, might well be remembered when the "chisels" are being particularly sharp or irksome!

More often, as we hope, we'll take delight in being together, and give thanks for the operations of grace in one another's lives. We'll have fun together, exchange stimulating insights, laugh, support one another through difficult times, and share the joys of human and Christian life, great and small. When one of us falters, another will hold her up. We will be true and trustworthy Companions (those who share bread together, and who share the journey). We'll break bread in many ways, in the Eucharist and at festive Saturday night gatherings, by feeding the hungry and making room at the table for the marginalized, contributing whatever we have to the common good, sharing crumbs of comfort when that's all we can find, and, probably, discovering sooner or later that even stones can be bread after all, and tears can be food.

What about specific expectations? Naturally, the viability of the Community depends on all of our contributions and generous self-giving. Here are a few things to consider as you weigh participation and commitment in the Rivendell Community:

- The presence of each of us at Community gatherings (especially Chapter and the annual General Chapter) is very important. Of course there will be times when one needs to be away, but participation should be a high priority. (Novices are generally expected to be present, and Postulants may be invited by the Chapter, and usually are.)
- Every professed member should be doing the work of the Community in some specific way, in addition to the common work of prayer. (For example, this might include ministries of social justice, service, hospitality, retreats, quiet days, and/or spiritual direction, education, parish ministry, etc. You may already be doing this. If so, what difference does it make to envision it as an aspect of the work of Rivendell?) Companions have the privilege, and sometimes a responsibility, of requesting assistance with discernment (usually through their Chapter or a subgroup thereof) when considering some new undertaking.
- All professed members should be willing, as they're able, to undertake projects and responsibilities on behalf of the Community when requested, or when they see something they can contribute. This includes serving in an office, if appointed or elected. Naturally, the roles of the various members usually depend on their gifts, skills, preferences, and life circumstances; but most likely we all do something we feel less than competent at, or simply don't especially enjoy, sooner or later. And often someone discovers a talent or interest he didn't know he had!
- Everyone is also expected to contribute to the "common purse" of the Community, regarding this as part of their financial commitment to the work of the Kingdom of God. Though of course the Community needs funds for its life and work, the amount, large or small, is much less important than the fact of doing it; it's a kind of "sacramental" investment of self. Residential members to whom Article 12 of the Constitution applies normally contribute all personal income. There is, of course, no such expectation of non-residential members; however, making some contribution helps represent the community of goods to which we aspire, and the reality of mutual interdependence which we acknowledge.

Note: Some Communities in the Episcopal Church require a specified percentage of income, which is often used not only to carry out the work of the community but to assist members of modest means to participate fully, and perhaps to help with other needs of members. Rivendell has not adopted

such a requirement, but since most Companions probably use a proportionate giving pattern (a tithe or some other proportion) dividing one's contributions among Community, parish congregation, and other work of the Kingdom of God (e.g., Millennium Development Goals) may be reasonable and convenient.

- Prayer for one another, and for the Community as a whole, is a serious obligation. There are various ways of doing this: for instance, some follow an alphabetical cycle, praying especially for one member each day. In any case, when a request for prayer is made, we do it; and every member should feel free to make such requests when appropriate.
- When a Chapter is studying or discussing some topic, members are expected to contribute their thoughts and insights freely, to welcome and listen to others', and to avoid dominating or derailing the conversation.

A good rule of thumb is this: Think and pray about what you want the quality of life together of Rivendell, and your Chapter, to be like, and what you believe it should be. Then, act as if it already is! (In this way, you will be contributing to its becoming what you envision.)

Some questions for reflection and possible conversation:

- This section mentioned several "component skills" of learning to love. What would you add to the list?
- What practices, attitudes, and/or expectations, in your view, are most important in shaping the quality of a community's life?
- How might activities in which you're already involved be, or become, aspects of the work of the Rivendell Community? What other forms of ministry do you think you might want to explore?
- What are some of your particular gifts, talents and skills? (Don't be too reticent out of "modesty"; try to be frank and realistic.) How might these contribute to the life and work of the Community?
- What do you see as notable lacks of talent or skill? Some things you really don't like doing?
- Among the specific expectations listed, which do you feel are most challenging for you?
- It's not unusual, or surprising, for family members (especially spouses) to be somewhat ambivalent about one's participation in a religious community. Ideally, it's understood as beneficial for everybody, since all we ever have to offer one another is our true selves, and learning to love well in one sphere is usually transferable to others. Spouses and children may enjoy participating in some Community activities. However, commitments of time, resources, energy and emotional investment are sometimes resented, and may be misunderstood. If you are married, and/or living with other family members, to what extent have you discussed Rivendell and your participation with your significant others? How do they feel about it? If there is some discomfort, do you see ways of ameliorating it? If some tension remains, are you prepared to live with it? If this is a continuing issue, would it be helpful to discuss it with another member of the Community, and/or your spiritual director?
- What are your own hopes and expectations for community life? What ideas and suggestions do you have for improving our life together (in your Chapter, and/or as a Community)?
- What do you think of the proposed "rule of thumb" at the end of this section? Why or how might it work?