Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Religious Life

Members of Giving Voice attend the group's 2023 20s & 30s Retreat at Our Lady of Guadalupe Monastery in Phoenix, Arizona. Eilis McCulloh is pictured in the front row, second from the right. (Courtesy of Eilis McCulloh)

by Sr. Eilis McCulloh

Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

January 20, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

We all have different entry points into community. Some of us belong to religious communities as vowed members or associates/co-members. We may also associate with the local communities and neighborhoods in which we live. Others strongly identify with their parish or worship communities. Some of us are blessed to find ourselves part of a work community. We might count ourselves as members of ethnic or other identity-based communities. The list goes on and on and contains multiple levels. In truth, I am not interested in what community you belong to, but rather, what ties us together as a community.

Lately, I have found myself reflecting on questions such as: "What does it mean to be community? Where or who is my community? What will that look like into the future?" I know that we all have asked ourselves these questions. Some have easy answers and others do not. But, what I want to do is tease out what it means to be community.

In a 2016 blog for "On Being," Omid Safi writes, "Community is about much more than one person entering a space, and then another person entering the space, and so on. Community is not merely a gathering of individuals coming together. Community is an almost alchemical reaction that happens among all that we are capable of being and becoming." I appreciate his understanding of community as something more than a random group of individuals thrown together. Rather, as Safi says, it's a process of individuals coming together to become something new, together.

In the past couple weeks, I have had varied experiences of community. From gatherings and visits with my own religious community and Giving Voice to events at my parish and time spent cultivating community with my ministry colleagues, each opportunity brought time to build relationships. Each of these experiences have been varied, but have supported me on my journey as a Sister of the Humility of Mary.

Advertisement

Some years ago, I was introduced to Michael Card's song "The Basin and the Towel." In the refrain, he sings:

> And the call is to community/ The impoverished power that sets the soul free/ In humility, to take the vow/ That day after day we must take up the basin and the towel.

I think, on some level, even amid the rampant individualism that threatens to divide us, we all are called to some form of community. We all crave a place where we belong — a place and people that can hold our questioning, our dreaming, and our joy. We all long for a group of like-minded individuals with whom we can commit to a cause or a shared way of life. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described this as coming to the realization that all life is interrelated because "We [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." We long for a world in which we experience our individual communities as interconnected — as threads in that single garment of mutuality. When we experience this, we know that we are not alone — that we cannot go through life without being connected to some form of group or community. Whether we recognize it or not, we all belong to a network of individuals whether based in a single city, state, or country. Whether tied together by a desire to advocate for just federal policies or to welcome our migrant siblings at the border. Some communities form around shared meals or shared interests. Not all require. What is the common denominator in all communities? They form around relationships.

Last weekend, I spent a quick 48 hours sharing life with 11 other Giving Voice sisters. We claim membership in both Giving Voice and our own individual religious communities. We are drawn to this common life by a charism. This bond is something that we all expressed over the weekend. We recognize a single

community of religious life and a single charism that unites us despite our communities' unique interpretations of this. As we built community with one another, I found that we were holding each others' wonderings. For example, "What does it mean to be the youngest sister in a community that is discerning completion? What does it mean to profess final vows in a time of great transformation? How do we grieve the significant changes in our own communities or within Giving Voice?" In response to these hard questions, we found that community reminds us that we are not left to ask these questions alone.

Amid these hard questions, community reminds us that we are here to laugh together, to share life together, to have fun together, and to serve as kindling for each other's dreams, and to serve as bridge builders from one small community to another.

In today's world, it might just be the boldest decision to claim the importance of community. When we do this, we outwardly declare that "I am because we are." It places us in the larger context of the world and helps us to see and feel that we are not alone in the world.