

## **Community . . . at a distance?**

It has been about six months now--distancing, masking, not meeting. And why is this so difficult? Because we were created to interact, to love and be loved, to be in relationship with God and one another.

In the beginning God . . . our loving, three-Personed God . . . each Person loving perfectly the others; each Person receiving love perfectly. And God said, "Let us make man in Our image," and then with His own breath brought the man to life. And man was made in the image of Love. Then God created a woman and there would be a family, a family which is the cradle of community, a family where one learns to receive love, to reciprocate love, to share and tailor one's own wants and needs for the good of the family. And there were loving relationships, man to woman, and they with God. What happened? With love God gave freedom. Love cannot be forced. Love must be chosen. The loving relationship with God was broken and Adam blamed "that woman that You gave me." That had to have put a strain on the new family!

Throughout the Old Testament there are such beautiful passages illustrating God's gathering of His people, His community. He sends patriarchs, and judges and prophets to teach and gather them, "a people consecrated unto Me." In Deut. 6:5 he says they must love Him with all their hearts, minds, and souls. They must imprint this on their hearts, teach it to their children, think about it upon lying down and rising up, discuss it with friends, inscribe it on their door posts. And in Lev. 19:18, He says to love one's neighbor as oneself. He is reminding man that he is a member of a community including and depending on Himself. He reminds man that he was created by Love to love.

In the fulness of time He sent His only Son, born of the Virgin Mary, true God and true man. Jesus, God Incarnate, would show us how to live in communion with His Father and one another. He gathered about Himself a community, He taught that the way to the Father was through loving Him with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and one's neighbor as oneself. At the Last Supper He said, "I call you friends," and "a new commandment I give you; love one another as I have loved you," also, "no man can show greater love than by giving his life for his friends." And we know that shortly He did exactly that.

Now let us view the human Jesus in community, in the kind of loving relationships with God and man which we were created to enjoy. We can imagine Jesus growing up, loving His family with tender human love, His mother Mary, His dad St. Joseph, His Aunt Elizabeth, His cousin John, His grandparents Anna and Joachim. Imagine His camaraderie with the Apostles, how He enjoyed little children, how He enjoyed Mary drinking in His conversation while her sister Martha fussed over dinner, how He wept at the death of Lazarus, how He must have wept at the death of St. Joseph, and how His last thoughts on the Cross were for His mother's care. Those are human relationships, and He also worshipped according to Jewish law. Jesus is ever teaching and demonstrating community, loving relationships, close ones, and those in the wider community. He cared when the crowd was hungry, He cared about the wine at the party (with a bit of prodding from His mother). He healed physical suffering. And then he taught us to pray, to restore that familial relationship with God that had been given to Adam. He said, "Say, Our Father," and He used a term that was familial and affectionate, "Abba." He said, "Who loves Me, loves the Father; whatever you do for someone else, you do for Me." That is how we are created to love, taught by Christ to love.

Our Seven Holy Fathers believed this and they had confidence and support in their love for one another. They accepted the Rule of St Augustine, as our friars do today, in the beginning of which he says, "Above all things, let us love God and one another, for this is the great Commandment." In our Rule of Life given to us by the friars, Article 16 says "we seek to make our own the experience of the Seven Holy Founders." They were known for their deep and loving friendship and how together they were motivated to serve the sick and the poor. Our communities today are not just built on our baptismal union in the Body of Christ, or on our Marian promise to stand with her at the crosses of those most in need, but very much on the warm and loving friendships we share in community. Just as loving friendship was the glue of the Founders' building the Order, so our love for one another is the glue of our communities, and also one of the Order's gifts to us.

The distancing and masking have been difficult for most of us. We sorely miss communal worship, meeting in our communities, visiting with our brothers and sisters in Mary's family, in our own families! We miss handshakes, hugs, seeing people smile. We do not know how long this will go on. We do not know even if it may happen again. But we, in the spirit of

our Founders, must keep the bonds of love and friendship growing. We are a smart and creative people. We have phones and computers and iPads and stamps. We can still communicate, pray with and for one another, and be especially aware of our more isolated brothers and sisters. Let us be sure we know how others are coping, or just spread a bit of cheer.

In summary, we were created in community to be community, loving and receiving love. This is a community of God and man. We have a choice! As St. Augustine exhorts us, "Let us be one in mind and heart on the way to God" and add to that from our own Rule of Life "with the abiding inspiration of Mary."