Opinion
NCR Voices
Voices of Sisters




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Mahatma Gandhi, a seriously spiritual figure, wrote "Where there is love, there is life." But is that true of celibate religious communities?

To seriously consider joining a religious community is a life-changing decision, yes. But there are important questions to be resolved before we do. As in what is it like to live a spiritual life? Or even more impacting: What is the place of love in the spiritual life, if any?

The trouble with today's world is that it acts as if there were only one kind of love. And so, we are inclined to overlook the others. Whether we know it or not, that can leave a lot of life very empty.

For instance, the sound of a baby crying had become common in our monastery. Sister Judith, a woman with a soft voice and an even softer look on her face, had a reputation by now. She was known across the social service network in the city as "the sister who took in babies" from the time of birth until the completion of a successful adoption.

This particular morning, Sister Judith was at her desk in the office, as usual. Next to her desk, an electric swingset rocked methodically back and forth. Visitors to the monastery were delighted to see it but were also startled. The baby was the child of a drug-addicted mother and the baby showed the signs of drug withdrawal. She fussed and screamed, sobbed and kicked a bit.

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Sister Judith stopped at every point, took the baby out of the swing, hugged her to her shoulder and walked up and down the hall till the sobs lost their energy and slowed to a halt.

Was she spoiling the baby? Not according to the latest research.

The amygdala of a baby's brain, science tells us, only completes its development after birth. But this happens best only if the baby gets the attention and affection necessary to stimulate it. Development of the amygdala determines the difference between a child that grows up peaceful and one that demonstrates serious agitation or aggression throughout life.

That baby had a special need for someone to hold her as the withdrawal from her birth mother's drug addiction went slowly, painfully on. This was clearly a very important kind of love.

In fact, Sister Judith did "take in babies." At the same time, every baby she took in meant that the rest of us took in another baby, too. The community enabled it, supported it and saw it as a direct outgrowth of our own corporate commitment to world peace.

Clearly, this first kind of love is love that culminates in service, the love of Jesus for the forgotten. And we did it, too, because religious life is also about self-giving.

The second kind of love, the physical bonding of two people, is meant to give life both to the world and to the relationship.

True, religious life is not about sex, but it is all about love. The confusion comes from the fact that contemporary society is all about sex and thinks it's the same as love. But love is much deeper than physical coupling. Otherwise, how do we account for the fact that sex is, at best, only a small part of even the healthiest life? It's only love that is beyond sex, more than sex, that is really about forever.

If sex were essential to love, then sickness, age, accident and disability would be the end of it. But the truth is that sex can't keep a marriage together and it can't end it either. Not a real one.

If anything, religious life, too, is a sign of real love. It shows us that love is possible without sex and that love that asks for nothing in return is the purest, most dramatic love of all.

It is love itself, not sex, that is the bond of life. Which explains why it is as real in a religious community as it is in any marriage. Sex is the nature of nature. But sex will never be as consuming — as important — in anyone's life as love for its own sake.

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The third kind of love is friendship at its highest, deepest level. It is the spiritual bond between people that makes all the great things of life, both personal and spiritual, possible.

Strong communities are made of those chains of friendship that cross generations and tie us to one another, however distant we may seem. Like the ropes of mountain climbers, the love of sisters holds us fast when everything in life around us — our health, our work, our very faith, our spiritual life, and the depression that comes with change and loneliness — threatens to leave us unmoored.

It is holy friendship that grows us up emotionally. When still unsure of ourselves, it is the warmth of the community that makes our journeys to new growth possible. It is holy friendship that shows us the way out of our own inner imprisonment, that helps us, sees us through our insecurities, and brings us love and stability.

When we reach for the stars and fail, it is the presence of a loving other, the sister-friend, who helps us stay the road. In this kind of holy wisdom, we learn that there is more love around us than we ever knew we had. It is one holy friendship that is enough to help us see the larger picture, the way back into the group and on with the journey.

The issues at hand and all the various positions on them will come and go in community life, but the people who make the community a community are its bedrock. Its sign that the sacrament of peace is possible. Even among strangers.

The challenge of spiritual love is to go through each phase of our lives and come out even more committed, more holy and more mature than we were when we began. It's that kind of growth and spiritual development that is the byproduct of religious community.

During the years of change and renewal when life careened from point to point, from change to change, and community feelings ran deep and divided, votes designed to bring unity were dangerously close. Then someone suggested that we stop voting for the particular matter at hand and make a different kind of decision. Instead of trying to achieve a universal agreement once and for all, we were asked to decide if we would trust our sisters to do what they each thought best for their own growth at

this particular time.

I remember looking slowly around the room at the community in solemn chapter assembled. The faces were drawn and the bodies were taut. But at the end, the vote was 121-1 in favor of trust and love. Community had triumphed over conformity one more important time.

Holy friendship had demonstrated what is and is not important in a community.

Let there be no doubt about it: Love is the essence of religious community life.

From where I stand, this is the love of the listening ear, a guide through the nights of every soul. Then someday, like our married friends, when that light leaves us, we come to know the power of death. And then, without doubt, in the midst of the pain of the loss, we realize that we have known the love that is needed here and now, also.

Or as Gandhi says, "Where there is love, there is life."

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