

Leadership in Community: A Dance of Mutual Love

By Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE, part of the Vestry Papers issue on [Vestry Leadership](#) (January 2015)

In the fourth chapter of the Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, we express how and why we understand that all human beings are called to live together in community: "In community we bear witness to the social nature of human life as willed by our Creator. Human beings bear the image of the triune God and are not meant to be separate and isolated." All of us, as human beings, are called to share in communities of one kind or another, because we have all been made in the image and likeness of God. And God is community: "The very being of God is community; the Father, Son and Spirit are One in reciprocal self-giving and love."

The theology used to express and explain God's divine, relational community actually has fascinating implications for [all] our human communities. The Greek word "Perichoresis," which has been used in the Orthodox tradition to capture the dynamic relationship of love that is God's very essence, is theologically defined as the "co-indwelling" or "mutual interpenetration" of the three persons of the Trinity. It's often been understood imaginatively as a kind of divine dance: three persons moving rhythmically and dynamically, distinct and yet united in a shared dance of love.

An Invitation from God

This dynamic dance does not exist independently of our lives, a theological mystery we can simply ponder. No, Jesus came to invite us *into* that loving dance of Father, Son, and Spirit. In John 17, Jesus prays: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." We are drawn into the dynamic relationship that the members of the Trinity share. "I in them and you in me," Jesus weaves us together, "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." The instruction Jesus leaves us with is quite clear: the more we get drawn into God's very being and are swept into its dance of love, the more we are called to share that same kind of dance with one another as members of the Body of Christ.

The model of Perichoresis opens up a wonderful freedom for how exactly we are invited to be with one another in our Christian communities. Surprisingly enough, it also offers a helpful answer to some of the discord and strife that such communities inevitably encounter. For whilst the three persons of the Trinity are united in a relationship of love, each person nevertheless remains quite distinct.

Learning to Value Difference

We invite you to consider this model. As a community of monks, we Brothers at SSJE try to apply this model directly to our shared life – its rewards as well as its challenges. In the case of one such reward, we recognize that SSJE's ministry does not come just from the Brothers, but it emerges out the community's relationships with friends and advisors, with whom we share in a

dance of mutual love. And for challenges within our community, we follow the model of Perichoresis as we strive to honor the distinctness of each Brother, as well as to appreciate one another's individual gifts, an ideal that is not always met without difficulty. Our Rule again guides us: "We are given to one another by Christ," we read, "and he calls us to accept one another as we are. By abiding in him we can unite in a mutual love that goes deeper than personal attraction." When we understand every member as being called by Christ and formed by Christ, we can begin to relish those personal differences that might otherwise snag us as we struggle to work and live together. As the Rule puts it, "Mutual acceptance and love call us to value our differences of background, temperament, gifts, personality and style. Only when we recognize them as sources of vitality are we able to let go of competitiveness and jealousy." As we abide in Christ, we begin to see those who are different from us through the eyes of love. And we recognize what others are contributing to the whole of the group, even (or perhaps especially!) if they have different gifts from us, because we know that we are part of a body with them, made richer by their presence alongside us. The good and the bad affect all of us, because we're bound together in this mutual love, one for the other, as Christ has called us to be.

Defining and Affirming Common Values

One practice that has helped our community as we strive, day by day, to meet this call, might have helpful implications for community leaders in other contexts: Every morning, we read a chapter of the Rule of Life aloud together. As we hear it afresh, we say, "Yes" again to how we want to live in community, which this shared document articulates for us. Reading it, we reaffirm our desire to live in the intentional community that it describes and helps to order. This Rule means that our common life is not just dependent on our moods and feelings. Instead, we have an external document that incarnates for us how we desire to live together.

For us Brothers, the Rule and the perichoretic dance are quite closely related. You might say that our Rule describes the steps of the dance we hope to share, and that, as we live by it and refer back to it, we become more adept at dancing together. At the very least, we become less likely to stand on each other's toes! Without such a common understanding, there will always be the risk that everyone is doing a different dance, which can only lead to a lot of bumping into one another, treading on toes, and falling over. The question every community needs to ask, then, is: How do we want to dance together? By laying down, as a community, the framework we mutually agree upon, we open up the freedom to love.

Try This

Does your congregation or vestry have a shared document in which you've outlined the heart of how you want to live and love and work together? This document would be not as legalistic as "by-laws," nor as practical as a meeting agenda. A Rule is the place where we can clarify our deepest values, our most important relationships, our most authentic hopes and dreams, our most meaningful work, our highest priorities. By outlining these priorities and setting concrete goals for meeting them, it allows us to live with intention and purpose in the present moment.

You might find it helpful, in your church leadership groups, to set down the common values that draw you together, as well as the hopes for how you will live and work together in that community. Remember, a Rule is not a series of rules that must be followed. Rather, it is descriptive: It articulates our intentions for the way we would like to live.

Once you have a Rule in place, you might see how reading and returning to it together, at set intervals, helps to shape your community life. Does it accurately reflect the way you live, as well as the struggles you face? We Brothers know firsthand that the process of revising a Rule, after some distance, can be just as useful as having one in the first place.

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Resources

- [Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences](#) by Gilbert R. Rendle (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998)
- [“Covenants in Congregational Life”](#) by Thomas Brackett, *ECF Vital Practices’ Vestry Papers*, January 2011
- Society of Saint John the Evangelist [Rule of Life](#)