

The Father's Heart for My Brothers and Sisters

I don't know about you, but all this talk about the Father's love for *me* and what a cell group should look like is great. I mean, really, over the course of the last year I have learned so much at the leadership conference and the general gathering along with this weekend about what a cell group should look like and what the leaders should be doing. But can I let you in on a little secret. Jeanne, plug your ears. I am soooo glad that I am not our cell group leader so I don't have to do all this work. I mean really, if you are not the cell group leader or even in a cell group I am guessing you feel like me. Thankful to dodge that responsibility and happy to just show up on Wednesday nights. Just don't tell Jeanne. You can uncover your ears now.

As much as I like to set back and be like "that's not my job." And dismiss all responsibility in my cell group. Something has been tugging at my heart. In fact, I don't doubt that God placed it there. If the primary charism of the Brothers and Sisters of Charity is Love. And love is the emptying out of oneself for the sake of another, you know, like as in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, ie our rule. Then ***how am I showing God's love in community, especially within my own cell group?*** My brothers and sisters who should be closest to me? Ouch. I needed to stop saying that it was not my job. I needed to look at what my role was as a cell group member.

This simple but deep question started me out on a quest to learn more. As I take you on my own personal quest I would like you to walk by my side. Because God has placed this very question on each of our hearts and we must as individuals answer Him. I view this like we are walking the Camino together. We can walk side by side helping each other, but I can not walk it for you. And I sure can not carry you.

As I started this quest the first thing that popped into my mind was the quote from St. Mother Theresa "Do small things with great love." Mother Theresa, like so many other saints show us that to love can be as simple and small as just being fully present to those who need us. In this case it could be as simple as making cell group meetings a priority so you are physically present. Or it might be to be mentally present and not distracted during the meetings. For those who don't have a local cell group it could mean joining a virtual one or starting to call

other isolated members one evening a week to just journey with them. One small step from where you are today can make a huge difference, especially if we all do it!

In the Domestic Directory under community life it says "... Ideally, the cell group meets weekly **to build real community relationships based upon the charism** and guidelines of the Brothers and Sisters of Charity." When I think about relationships based on love, I don't think of relationships that are isolated to a specific time and location. Can you imagine having a deep love relationship with Jesus if you only prayed during Mass once a week? Or what if you only talked to your spouse in a formally structured meeting for an hour and half once a week? Would you call that a relationship based on love? Of course not! Cell groups and cell group meetings are not the same thing. Community and gatherings are not the same thing. We can not contain our call too community in a box that is only opened a couple times a year. If I only show love to my Brothers and Sisters during meetings and gatherings am I building real community relationships based on our charism? Or am I a pharisee that clings to the letter of the law missing the whole point of the law. The point is not to attend a meeting or a retreat weekend. The point of attending, according to the domestic cell group document is that "Within the cell group the rubber meets the road, that we really begin to draw closer to God and to one another concerning faith and morality and living these out. A certain accountability exists in the cell group which both strengthens, supports, and challenges." Attending a cell group meeting or gathering in itself does not accomplish any of that. What does accomplish it requires action on my part. Am I strengthening, supporting, and challenging my brothers and sisters in a healthy way? Or am I sitting back and silently judging their weaknesses while not reaching a hand out to them? Am I watching them slip away from community life and not saying anything? In the general Directory #8 it says "let the brothers and sisters anticipate each other in mutual love. Let them serve each other with a ready heart. Let them encourage wholesome undertakings, and let them genuinely find joy in the success of one another's work." Am I anticipating the needs of my brothers and sisters? Do I celebrate their success? Do I even really know my brothers and sisters enough to know their needs and their successes?

As I delved deeper into the question of **how am I showing God's love in community**, and my own self reflection I grabbed my copy of Community and Growth off the shelf. A quick glance at the table of contents led me straight to a section named "From 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community' (pages 55-60). The title alone had me thinking which one

describes me best. The community for Emily or Emily for the community? Which one am I living out on a daily basis? The author describes this as a movement from egoism to love, from death to resurrection. If I was not sure what he meant or if it really applied to our community and charism the author cleared that up rather quickly. Saying “Love is neither sentimental nor a passing emotion. It is the recognition of a covenant, of a mutual belonging. It is listening to others, being concerned for them and feeling empathy with them. It is to see their beauty and to reveal it to them.” With this new perspective I went back to my original question. How am I showing God’s love in community? Do I truly listen to my brothers and sisters? When they share their concerns with me do I take it seriously? Do I follow up outside of meetings and gatherings to show that I really do care for them? Do I encourage my brothers and sisters and affirm them when I see God’s beauty shining through them even in small ways?

I will admit that when taking a quest like this seriously, one like myself, might feel like I am far from being that ideal person. The reality is that I fall short. I don’t always follow up when I know someone is sick or had surgery. I don’t drop a card in the mail every time I feel called to reach out to a sister. I sometimes go to cell group not because of a desire to love my brothers and sisters but out of a dutiful obligation. And those nights my mind might be far from in that room. Sometimes I know that I should volunteer to help out with a task that would lift some of the burden off my cell group leader and others, but instead I sit there quietly.

Maybe you have struggled with that as well. Or maybe you are an isolated member who struggles with making the effort to reach out to other community members. Maybe you are the isolated member who is receiving calls and emails but not making the time to reach back out and show that mutual love. Or God has put it on your heart to try and start a cell group in your location or to move closer to an existing cell group but fear is paralyzing you.

I personally fall short. My quest brought me the answer to my question. But the answer was not what I wanted to hear. I want to be served more than I want to serve. As depressing as that reality is, there is a different reality I must turn too. As much as I need to let go of my past shortcomings and ask for forgiveness, I need to remember that every moment of everyday I have the opportunity to be created anew in Christ’s image through the cross. I can be the one who shows the Father’s love to my brothers and sisters in a real way. I can live by the words

of St. Paul to the Romans 12:10 “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

Now that I have shared my quest with you, it is time for you to start your own. Let’s continue this journey together, walking side by side.