

Transcript of “ Communities of Practice ,” Video Segment 2 Transforming Parishes through Communities of Practice

presented by
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We're going to look at St. Odo the Good, just a regular parish, a lot like your parish, or maybe not, but lots of stuff going on at St. Odo the Good. So you think about all the time that adults gather at that parish. The catechists gather, the RCIA team, Eucharistic ministers, pastors, etc., all of these groups of adults gather, at some point in the course of a month or whatever, and all of them have tasks to do. If you were to look at them from the outside, it would look like they were all doing basically the same thing: they're praying, they're talking, gossiping. They're talking about their faith, they're keeping track of decisions that they then change at the next meeting, they accomplish set tasks, they talk about the parish, they remember when, they have coffee. Those are all the things that a group of people do as they're doing the task that they have before them. What I want to argue is that each of these gatherings has the potential of being a community of practice that if we pay attention, can be part of what transforms a parish. If we see these not simply as doing the task that they've been assigned to do, but as being about being Christian and about intentionally reflecting on that, then we have the potential for that kind of transformation of the individual as well as of the parish.

So communities of practice, that's what we're going to talk about now. Here I'm going to give you a definition of communities of practice, then I'm going to take apart for the next few minutes. Here's the definition: a community of practice is a sustained gathering of people whose interactions are marked by mutual engagement, shared enterprise, and common repertoire (I'm going to return to those and talk about each of those for a minute) where the collective learning, which is involved in surviving and thriving as a community, leads to practices that enhance the group identity and further the groups goals.

We engage in communities of practice in order to engage and to address our shared enterprise, but in doing that, we shape our enterprise and we shape ourselves. We come to know who we are in the doing. When we talk about things going on at St. Odo the Good, these are all potential communities of practice, they're not inherently communities of practice. We're going to talk about that in a minute.

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and we're going to do this," and they say, "How are we going to do it? You are totally in place to say, "I don't know." Because, in fact, that's why you're inviting people to be on the committee, because they, in fact, are the ones who are going to decide, how we do this?

If by chance —probably nobody in this group, undoubtedly —but if by chance you know how to do it and you already have it all planned out in your mind, don't bother with a committee. Isn't that helpful? They think they're going to contribute something, but if you already have it all figured out, then they're not. That's frustrating everybody, you and them, so just find something else for them to do.

While it may be named from outside, it comes to expression within the group. Because of that, that leads to a shared commitment and a shared sense of accountability because it's defined by us; it's given shape by us. That's that notion of a shared enterprise, something we do together. What are we doing? So when we talk about a shared enterprise within the Christian context, then we recognize that any group that gathers has a particular task.

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And again, the way they do those, they're called to be in a way that's evangelizing—that whole notion of connecting the evangelization.

Just to get a sense of this, I want you to step back for a minute and think about what are the communities of practice in your life? Don't worry about parish yet. Just step back. I just want to be sure you have a sense of what a community of practice is about. So, it can be related to your interests, it could be your role, it could be about your faith. I have a friend who is part of a sailing group. I have other friends who are involved in Mahjong; they brought me into that little group that I'm clearly on the periphery of right now as I'm learning it. But you get a sense of what are some of the communities in your own life. Then I would invite you, as we continue, to think a bit about how might these three categories of mutual engagement, shared enterprise, common repertoire help you to understand and to engage more fully with that group.

Let me just give you a really quick example. I had been part of a book club for a number of years, which I enjoy very much, and we read pretty good books and we went from one house to another. Over time, the people who belonged changed. Any time people who belong change, since the people who belong direct the enterprise, the enterprise is at least twitched, tweaked, changed a bit. Well, this group, we had some new people coming in, some past people leaving, and this group shifted from being a book club to being a dessert club, which isn't an evil, obviously. There's something good about that, too. But it really became a competition to see who could have the fanciest desserts and the nicest spread. Great, excellent. But that's not what I wanted. I wanted a book club. So it was my ability to say, what's changed here? To say, OK, the enterprise has changed, I don't want to be part of this. It was a good enterprise, and many people—they got lots of people to join and it was great, but that just wasn't what I wanted.

So I think it's helpful when we look not only at parish situations, but even at our lives and the communities that we belong to that shape our identity to ask the question, how do these three categories help to think about that?