

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY CONTINUING EDUCATION
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Transcript of
“Where Two or Three are Gathered:
Transforming the Parish through Communities of Practice”

presented on October 27, 2016 by
Dr. Jane E. Regan

Dr. Thomas H. Groome:

Thank you, Jen, thank you, and welcome everybody. We're delighted so many people could join us. It's my privilege to be able to introduce Jane, my dear colleague, this evening for this good event.

About the year 1515, Martin Luther recognized—maybe it's 1518, '19, someplace in there—Martin Luther recognized that if his Protestant reformation was to succeed, then it simply had to take education out of the hands of the Church, out of the hands of the monasteries and the monks, and put it in the hands of the public and the public realm—put it in the hands of the government. He wrote a letter in 1520 to the German nobles urging them to establish a public, government-funded schooling system. Of course they did, and the Prussian education system became, in many ways, a model for the public school system of the Western world.

But in that letter, Luther advised the princes not to allow their schools to run for any more than two hours a day, and preferably just one hour a day, because he was afraid that if the schools took on too much responsibility that, in fact, education would come out of the village, out of the family, and would be located in a school. He literally said in that essay that he didn't want the schooling to interfere with children's education. So it wasn't Mark Twain that came up with that phrase, it actually was Martin Luther in his letter to the German princes of 1520.

Luther was right. In many ways, he was afraid that education would become ensconced simply in schooling. But alas, the Western world indeed moved to that kind of consciousness, and that schooling would be equated with education, even with education in faith. In fact, we have the witness of our American Catholic bishops at the Third Council of Baltimore, 1884, they decreed that every parish must have a school, and must have a school not simply to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, but to teach the faith that couldn't be taught any other way except by a school. Then, of course, the real premier parishes and the better parishes have succeeded in establishing schools to educate in faith, and the less successful ones had to settle for some kind of a parish program, a CCD program or something. But the assumption was that some form of schooling was essential, and in fact, not just essential but comprehensive, was adequate, was enough to educate people in faith, that it would be done best by schooling.

Now, it's hard to break old institutions like the Catholic Church away from ideas like that, it's hard to wean us off of old ways. But nobody has done more to re-convince the Church that the primary way of educating in faith cannot be a form of schooling. A form of schooling of some kind—parish program, parochial school—indeed is necessary and needed, but that the primary mode of education, in fact, has to be located in the parish and in the family. It's somewhat ironic that as Catholic Christians we have all kinds of rhetoric about this and that, say that beginning with baptism when we tell the parents that you will be the first educators of your children in the ways of faith. But meanwhile we tell them to take the kid to school or to some kind of schooling, forgetting that in fact, the primary locus for faith education and formation is the parish and the home.





Nobody has done more in our country to try to wean our Church away from those old ways of thinking, in spite of its own rhetoric, by the way, than our beloved colleague, Professor Jane Regan. In a sense, she's absolutely right. Nothing will be more effective by way of education, formation, and

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So, it could be that you're on a religious education board, so the task is to provide guidance to the process of religious education. But the way that's done, the nature and direction of the enterprise only becomes clear in the doing. So that if you say to somebody, "Would you be on this committee, 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.

For example, you have a pastoral council, and the particular task for that night is a conversation about





They do things like reflect on Scripture, ask questions, experience ritual, maintain the wisdom of the group, establish traditions —all of those things are things that are part of the repertoire of the group. 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 takes part in 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





As we're doing that, don't forget to keep in mind the three levels of the enterprise. It's the task, it's the enterprise of the community of practice, and it's the broader enterprise of the evangelizing of the parish.

We've looked at this part of the definition of communities of practice: that sustained gathering of people whose interactions are marked by mutual engagement, shared enterprise, common repertoire. Now I want to touch on the second part of that definition, which is really the part that I find pretty interesting for us. That is, how does learning take place in that context? So where the collective learning involved in surviving and thriving in a community leads to practices that enhance group identity and further group goals.

First of all, in terms of learning as a participant in the community of practice. Practice here means engagement in the shared enterprise. That's what we mean by practice. It's through engagement in the shared enterprise that we become competent, let's say. Example I have here is a third-grade catechist. Third grade catechist, that's the task that that person does. But the enterprise is that they're engaged in the faith formation of the whole parish. While their job might be about working with their graders, their fifth graders, or seventh graders, or high school, or college people, their work and their responsibility is the formation of the parish. That person becomes an ever more effective evangelizing Christian.

So we learn on all three levels, so that each of those is part of that process of learning. With that, our identity is formed: who we are and who we are in that community is formed by our participation in that. For example, we take on the identity inherent to the shared enterprise.

Let me give you an example. In a parish that I was in, the lectors met. Now the lectors, as a group, probably isn't a good example of community of practice. It's a big group, they don't really relate to one another, there's not much mutual engagement. But this particular parish had weekly opportunities for the lectors to gather and do a breaking open of the Word before each week, each Saturday morning or Sunday, Sunday or Saturday afternoon. So for them then, they became eventually their identity was formed as ones who engage with the Word. They engage with the Word at three levels: as a lector—their task, as a parishioner, and ultimately as a person of faith.

So each of the ways in which we're formed within these communities of practice expands beyond the one task that we have. Those then become the way in which we engage in doing the task and engaging in the enterprise, and ultimately in being and becoming a more evangelizing context.

But we still don't know how are these communities of practice going to be faith formative? Because again, probably not in your parishes, but I've been in parishes where the only thing that the lectors do when they gather is they practice how to use the mic. Or when to bow before the altar after the person who does the Psalm comes, and you meet in the middle and when to do that. And that's all important, but . . . Or, the catechists really focus on how to keep this group of third graders entertained for the duration of the class. Or whatever. Again, maybe not in your place, but I've known of places where those kinds of things happen.

So how do we make, then, these places not just *potentially* communities of practice, communities of faith practice, but *fully* communities of faith practice. This is where I think the intentionality with



dimension of each parish group. It means being intentional about recognizing the role of the communities of practice as welcoming and of belonging and contributing to that; intentional about facilitating collaboration across communities, and intentional about providing opportunities for people to discern their gifts.

What I want to do is to spend the next block of time talking about what would that look like? How might you do that? What would be some of the ways in which we could foster that sense of





we had people who had been lectors forever and ever and never found other ministries they wanted to do.

How do we do that? How do we create a context in which, like the parish council, there is a term limit? Even to our catechists, as a person who's been a DRE, I know how frightening that is to think that you're going to say to some of your catechists, "Thanks, what else do you want to do?" I know, I can see the panic. But I think for the vitality of the group that it's an important thing to think about.

Intentional about facilitating effective collaboration between communities of practice within that constellation of the parish and even beyond. Again, I think one of the important points is, first of all, to reaffirm the shared enterprise in which all the communities of practice within the parish are engaged, so that we be and become, as a parish, more effective agents of evangelization.

When planning events that involve more than one community of practice, engage more than just the leadership people. We often say, well, we want the youth ministry kids to be involved with the second graders for first Eucharist, making the connection between confirmation and Eucharist; lovely. But generally, that's not the best way to do it.







Dr. Regan:

I think one of the challenges, and I think it's connected in part, again just to return because it's the Archdiocese we're involved in here, is that we're putting parishes together without much imagination, so there's often a case of the pastor, unfortunately for him, all he knows is the parish that he grew up in or the parish where he was pastor where there was just the one pastor for one parish. That's his experience, legitimately. Then he's put in three parishes and then he thinks he has to do the same thing, but now in three parishes. So I think it's the lack of the opportunity to engage in an imagination, because in some ways this model or this potential, I think, is perfect for those parishes where, in fact, that the pastor simply can't do it all. We don't like that to be the reason, in fact, that the pastor invites others into the work, but it often is, in fact, with that recognition that they simply can't do it. So that's one aspect, is how do we create the context in which imagination is possible?

The second is —this is where you lean into it if you can't move in the right direction. It's like, think of where you have influence. Think of where you have influence and do something there. Because I



