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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY CONTINUING EDUCATION
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**Transcript of “Communities of Practice,” Video Segment 2
Transforming Parishes through Communities of Practice**

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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. But I want to propose that. How do we transform them into communities of practice? How do we recognize them as communities of practice, and develop those elements? So community of practice, three elements: shared enterprise, mutual engagement, common repertoire. I'm just going to talk about these real briefly.

In terms of a shared enterprise, the community itself defines the enterprise, or maybe better, shapes the enterprise. Now the actual task of a group or the actual job or enterprise of a group may be defined from outside. It may be defined by the pastor, it may be defined by you, it may be defined by whomever.

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,

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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.

For example, you have a pastoral council, and the particular task for that night is a conversation about concerns raised within the parish because of the closing of a factory and people being out of work. So you're trying to figure out, what are we going to do as a parish around that? That's the task for that night. That task is part of the wider enterprise. The enterprise is to provide advice and guidance to the pastoral staff. But that is part of the still wider enterprise which is being and becoming an evangelizing Church. So if the way you do the task isn't evangelizing, then you're missing the enterprise. See what I'm saying? How we do what we do is, in fact, part of what we do. It conveys what we do.

When we think about a parish, we can think about a parish as having a community of practice with enterprise that contributes to the evangelizing parish, but we have several within the parish. What unites them, potentially, is they're all about being an evangelizing parish. This really can work against or help to counteract the effect of a silo thinking where I do youth ministry and don't do anything else. I do adult formation and don't talk to anybody else. I talk to them only to find out if the gym is free or if there's coffee. So this is saying no, if each of the communities of practice aren't connecting with that broader parish enterprise of being and becoming an ever more evangelizing parish, then it's inherently less effective and it's not fulfilling its shared enterprise.

Mutual engagement—we talk about mutual engagement—what we're talking about here is a clear sense of mutuality, that there's a shared sense of commitment to the enterprise and that that mutuality is based on recognition of the gifts and talents of everyone who participates; so everybody brings different gifts and talents, and how do we recognize, affirm, and respect those? That there's a complementarity within a community of practice where different skills are brought to bear and different people bring different skills and different ways of doing things. And that maintaining the group is an important part of the community, so the person who does the members' birthdays and sends cards to people who aren't there—very important part of the community as well. So how do we maintain those communities?

So shared enterprise, mutual engagement, and this common repertoire. In other words, how do we do what we do? What are the patterns, words, rituals, stories, forms, books that shape how we do the enterprise? So we think of an RCIA team, for example, that can be a community of practice, OK. 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.

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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?