SHARING WISDOM

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Transcript of a video recording produced by the Catholic Education Office, Wellington NZ
I’m Sr Mary Benet Mc Kinney. I’m a Benedictine Sister from Chicago Illinois in the States and I’m here to talk to you about a model of decision-making that really is a discernment model but that I have come to name a Shared Wisdom model. The whole thing really flows from our understanding in Vatican II that we, the people of God, are the church. Say that another way the responsibility for Church is the responsibility of the Baptised. Admittedly before the Council we thought of Church as being basically the responsibility of the ordained. But we know now, having gone through these 37 years of renewal, that what that Council was calling us to was a far greater personal responsibility for “being” and “doing” church. Say it another way, to be Baptised is to accept the responsibility for the Church - her mission, which is to proclaim the “Good News” and her ministry, which is how we proclaim that “Good News”.

In the early years of trying to work out what that call really was, little by little we came to recognise it as a call to collaborative ministry and we came to understand the big piece of that was this whole idea of making decisions about ministry in our church. As a result of that, Pastoral Councils grew up and Boards of Trustees for our catholic schools. They were ways in which the laity would share that responsibility. I was working in Chicago during those years with an enormous number of Boards. We had 357 parish schools, at the time and I was lucky enough to be responsible for all those boards and it became clearer and clearer to me that the parliamentary model that we were all so familiar with in terms of making good decisions was not working in Church. That somehow or other Robert and his rules just refused Baptism. You know, the waters just sort of fell off. This was a secular model of decision-making and it refused conversion. I remember trying to bookend the meetings with prayer. That’ll do it. Hey! Not so! They erupted in the middle. So I came to realise that not only did we need a specific process for making decisions in Church structures but that that process had to be about much more than
just asking the Spirit for guidance. Say it another way, God wanted to be part of the equation.

Fortunately I was called to study the first Council of Jerusalem and to recognise what happened in the dynamic of that Council as Peter and Paul had struggled in those early days of what we now call church with whether church was just for the Jews, as Peter seemed to think or was also for the gentiles, as Paul was experiencing. After many attempts to figure it out and failing, Peter called the first Council of Jerusalem. The Acts of the Apostles tell us who came to that council - Peter, Paul, James but the significant thing that we read in that little story is that Paul brought with him the converted Christians. The Christians - those who had been gentile and now were Christians. They came, they told their story. They said “This is what it’s like to be gentile; to believe in Jesus and to receive the Spirit” and out of that, the whole concept of discernment as a decision making process evolved. Gathering the wisdom of the people who have the lived experience of whatever it is you are about and then allowing that wisdom, all its varieties to interact, to impact some of your initial thoughts and to make adjustments in order to hear the new wisdom. That’s what my shared wisdom model is about.

It’s allowing everybody who is interested, who is a part of, who is involved in the decision making process, to bring their piece of the wisdom and to let all those pieces interact with each other until you arrive at something that is quite different from what any individual piece would have been. The shared wisdom model of “doing” church and of making decisions in church basically walks right out of Matthew’s Gospel. In that Gospel, Jesus says, “Whenever you come together I am with you.” When you come together to break the bread of Eucharist. When you come together to pray. When you come together as a family, a faculty, a staff, a Board of Directors – I am with you. The theology of that then says our God is the God of the gathering - whenever you gather - so we have to learn to listen to the God of the gathering - to listen beyond our own limited wisdom. Just like Peter had to learn that in those early days of Church.

Now, not only is our God the God of the gathering, but at the very end of this gospel of Matthew,
Jesus says “I, Jesus, will be with you always.” It’s the promise of Baptism. It’s the promise of the Spirit that the Spirit of Jesus will live with us always. No condition on that – always. And we call that reality the God of our lived experience. So we have the God of the gathering and we each are in touch or try to be with the God of our lived experience. The theology of that is what we call incarnational theology. It’s a theology that tells us that our God is a personal god. A God who cares and calls, who challenges, who affirms who touches who loves us in a million different ways throughout our lifetime - a God who walks every journey with us.

Recall if you will Christmas and the words that we sing and say so often during the celebration of Christmas. “The word was made flesh.” That’s history! It’s a good statement of history but it’s not good theology. The verb is wrong. The theology tells us that word is made flesh. That incarnation continues because you and live. That scripture continues to be revelatory because you and I continue to break it open and find out what it means to let it walk through our lives. Gene Laverdiere a scripture scholar from my country has this wonderful insight: “the greatest presence of the Risen Lord is another human being.” Think about that. Yes we find that Risen Lord Jesus in Eucharist; in Scripture; possibly in nature or poetry or music. But the greatest presence and the most available presence is the person sitting next to you right now. Is your child or your spouse or your colleague; your co-worker. I’ll grant you once in a while you’ll look at somebody and think, “Well, if that’s the presence of the Risen Lord you could fool me!” Well that’s life. That’s reality. But the fact remains that is the presence of the Risen Lord. It’s a Faith response and it’s very important to this model. You say “Why?” Because that’s how we understand our piece of the wisdom. We have to understand that this promise to be with us always a promise that says, whenever you come together in this gathering, I give to each of you a piece of the wisdom. That’s called lived experience - a piece of the wisdom - its whatever life teaches us and its own piece.

Obviously the emphasis here in on a piece; nobody gets it all. I think that’s called “Being God”! Most boards of directors and parish councils and staffs and faculties don’t have to rent a
messiah. They have one! It’s called somebody who knows everything about everything all the time. I always say to groups be very good to your messiahs. They know more (or at least they think they do) so they work harder than anybody else. Its tough stuff being a messiah. You’ve got to convince everybody else you’ve got all the wisdom. That’s hard work! You say “Okay Mary Benet, how do you know about that?” I know about it because I have been a Messiah. I remember saying to a group of sisters back in the States not too many years ago I am a recovered Messiah. And somebody in that group who knew me very well said “No way! It’s like being an alcoholic. You’re never recovered you’re a recovering!” And of course I know that to be true.

Messiahs have perfected a certain tone of voice. I bet you recognise it. It goes like this – “God and I know that’s the way to do it”. That’s called Messiahship. Now what do you do with Messiahs besides being nice to them. Well I’ll tell you what not to do with them – don’t argue with them. Don’t try to change their minds. You waste time. It won’t work. They know they’re right. You know however, that even if they sound like God what they’re saying is only one piece of the wisdom so thank them and move on. Groups spend inordinate amounts of time arguing with Messiahs and it’s useless.

OK so that’s the Messiah. That’s one issue but the major issue in this “everyone has a piece thing” is that we all have slightly different pieces. Why? Because our piece is what the Spirit teaches us. It’s all the daily experiences that we call life. Every once in a while somebody will say to me, “I don’t have any wisdom.” And I say to them, “Do you breathe?” If you’re alive you have wisdom. The challenge then is to recognise the Spirit in the wisdom that comes from our lived experience. To find God deep within ourselves waiting to be heard, always there, wanting to teach us and to call us always present. If we’re attentive; if we allow the spirit to speak to us, wisdom will be ours. If we will take a little time each day, just maybe 5 or 10 minutes out of every 24 hours and say to God “How have you touched me today? What have you taught me today? What have you shown me? How have you loved me? How have you confronted me or challenged me?” And have faith that the thoughts that
come into our head after those questions; those thoughts are God’s voice saying, “Here’s what I’ve taught you. Here’s what I want you to recognise. Here’s what I want you to understand.” That’s lived experience that produces wisdom. And its personal and it’s unique and it’s gifts.

Now as important as it is to recognise our lived experience it is equally important to recognise that we are limited by our own experience. I’ve only got mine! I don’t have yours, and I don’t have yours, and I don’t have yours. Just mine. So I need the God of the gathering. We all need the many voices and experiences of those who gather in God’s name. Put it another way, we need to allow the Spirit to lead us: to teach us. We need to let other people’s wisdom and gifts work for us. Instead of seeing another idea as a threat we need to see it as – “Oh not bad let me think about it!”

In other words we need to learn from each other. You see, this whole model is built on faith obviously - the faith conviction that the Spirit speaks through the group – the God of the gathering. The faith conviction that we cannot come to individual wisdom without listening to the Spirit in each other because none of us really are Messiahs. None of us know it all.

Unfortunately, for too many people dialogue means an opportunity to air their position instead of an invitation to risk rethinking them. Ask yourself what you think of when you’re invited to dialogue. This is not an easy model for us because we - especially I think as we get older - we come to really like our own ideas. I like my own ideas. I’ve worked a long time to get my to my ideas, I think they’re pretty good.

So when I come into a group I have to nurture in my own head and heart an attitude of openness. I can’t come into a group that’s supposed to make a decision as a group and pre-decide. Yes I can figure out how I think it would be best but I must recognise that that’s only how I think it would be best and I have to be open to whatever will happen in a group that might change radically or just a little bit what I think, but I can’t pre-decide. If I come in there saying, “This is it. I know. I’m not going to change”, I have already aborted the process of a shared wisdom model.
So what do we have to do? We have to strive for a head and a heart in neutral. We have to be open to the possibility that things will change, even in our own heads and hearts, as we genuinely listen to each other. This is a belief in the Spirit present in our own and others’ experiences - present in the God of the gathering.

Do you remember that story in the Acts of the Apostle where St Peter said “We and the Spirit have decided”? For years I used to think, “Oh, how can he be so sure?” Well let me tell you, in the years that I’ve worked with this model; that I’ve seen it work time after time after time again in all kinds of groups and in all kinds of situations, I believe that statement and I understand it.

I also don’t think that’s the way Peter said it. I think he said it with awe. With amazement in his voice you know. “We and the Spirit have come to this decision.” That’ll happen. It will happen if you allow the Spirit to work. If each person can come into the group, share his or her piece of wisdom, thereby contributing to the wisdom of the group. The challenge of course is to recognise that awesome reality, to recognise it in our selves - indeed I have some wisdom - and to recognise it in one another.

The Discerning Tradition has a beautiful way to say that. The Discerning Tradition says we must learn to listen with the ear of our hearts. I love that! It’s beyond the words that you hear in your ear. It’s a prayerful wholly faithful gentle listening.

Now let me bring all that theory into a very simple image for you. A shared wisdom model is like making a pot of vegetable soup. We can all do that! You get a pot. You fill it with water. You put in the meat, the carrots, potatoes, onions, the beans, the peas and whatever. You put it on the fire. You let it come to a slow boil and then immediately you put the fire down and let it simmer. And we all know that it’s while it’s simmering that all the good stuff happens. All those different ingredients somehow interact with each other.

No carrot cooked in a pot of vegetable soup will ever taste like a carrot cooked by itself! Now, of course, you’ve got to put your carrot in and leave it there. You can’t keep pulling it out to make sure it’s a carrot. That’s what messiahs do because they’re so afraid you’re going to lose their carrot. But if you let it
stay there, if you let all those things interact, you’re going to have good soup. That’s what happens in this model. You bring your ideas together. You put them on the fire of the Spirit. Sometimes you put in new ingredients. You’ve got to have the patience to let it simmer, and then, of course, you have to be willing to risk trying it – especially if you’ve put in something new.

So my friends we come together as the people of God, seeking to make decisions guided by the Spirit. If we truly understand that; we truly believe it, then something different happens in this dynamic than would happen in the normal parliamentary model that we’re accustomed to. In this model there’s no room for competition. There’s no need to prove a point - to win, to be right. That’s not where it’s at. The need is to bring your wisdom to the group - let it become part of the pot soup and let all that good stuff happen. Until finally you come up with something that is truly worthwhile.

What are the implications of this model? There are three of them – at least three! One is – if we all have a piece of the wisdom and I’m saying we do because we all live, then we have a serious moral responsibility to share that wisdom. We can’t come to a board meeting and have the luxury of just sitting on your wisdom. You have to get off it. You have to share it. You have to tell folks. And that’s true even when your wisdom seems very different from other people’s and you know sometimes that’s kind of hard, but it’s part of what you need to do.

The other thing that sometimes gets lost, however, is that you also have to share your wisdom when lots of other people seem to be saying the same thing. In other words, somebody says something and I think to myself “Oh I agree with that. I don’t have to say anything”. Wrong! You don’t have to repeat what that person says but you need to do something to indicate you agree. It may just simply be saying that I agree with what so and so said. It may be something less formal than that like “Oh Yeh”, “Uh Uh”. But somehow we need to know where the Spirit is moving in the group.

Now warning, there is a distinct difference between sharing wisdom and shoving wisdom. Messiahs shove. They’re so afraid you are not going to get it so they say it and say it and say it. And that’s always dysfunctional behaviour and my
personal theory on dysfunctional behaviour is that it needs to be confronted kindly, clearly, consistently. So Messiahs should not be allowed to shove wisdom. We say it once. We let it go.

The second thing we have to do is hear other people. Now sometimes we think we’re very good at that and we’re really not that great at it. It’s the motive that makes the difference. Why do you listen to what other people are saying? To learn? Well good for you if that’s what you do. But there are an awful lot of us who are not trained in that. We are trained to listen for what we disagree with so that we can get in there and fight for what we agree with. That’s the old Parliamentary model and we learned it probably when we were young kids. Especially if we were in debate, we really learnt it. Here we’re saying no - listen to what’s new. Listen to what’s different - not so you can argue with it, but so that you can learn from it. The other way we sometimes listen is through what I call filters. We have a negative image of this person from some past history, from their role or whatever it might be and so we hear them out of their image – which means we don’t really hear them!

The other funny dynamic in a group of how we listen has to do with the difference between introverts and extroverts. We’re very different people. Introverts think when they think. They just kind of go in themselves and it happens. Not extroverts! Extroverts think when they talk which is precisely why they talk so much. So extroverts only want air space. So the Chair says to the group “Now I want you to consider thus and so.” You can watch introverts go into themselves. They have learned to survive in an extroverted world. They may put their head down, push back from the table, fold their arms, close their eyes. They think while they think.

Extroverts start talking like crazy and if you didn’t know any better, you’d think they were talking to each other. Not on your life! They’re talking to themselves. They’re thinking through by talking. Now because of that, extroverts have a great talent that completely escapes introverts. It’s called listening for the comma. Extroverts don’t listen to each other for content. They listen to each other for commas! You’re talking. I watch you closely. Eventually you’re going to run out of breath. You’re going to gasp for air. I get
in. That’s called “listening for commas”. Now when I do that I don’t listen for content do I? So when we set up our groups for discussion we have to be sure that we allow enough time for introverts to think while they think, for extroverts to think while they talk before we allow the real conversation to begin. That’s an important thing to remember.

The third implication of this model is that we all, every person sitting around that table has to be responsible to nurture an attitude, a spirit, a feeling in the group that makes it possible to share wisdom. I know I’m not going to get laughed at or somebody’s not going to be unhappy with me - makes it possible to hear other people’s wisdom. And there are certain behaviour patterns in groups that very often mess that up. For example, most groups do not have to rent somebody who gives non-verbals. You know, a person who goes tich, tich, tich, tich when they don’t like something - or ugh, ugh - you know those lovely grunt sounds that come out of people. That’s terrible stuff, because what does that say to me if you do something like that to me when I’ve talked? It says, “Mary Benet, your wisdom is not important; I don’t like it; I don’t want it; I don’t want to hear it.”

Or sometimes you will have two people in your group and I don’t care how you set the room up, you can even put nametags around and they somehow change them. They always manage to get in direct eye contact with each other and when somebody says something they don’t like, they do this thing called “group think”. And they look at each other with an expression on their face that says, “Oh well, she’s a noodnick but we’ll put up with her”. Again that’s pretty painful if you’re the one being thought of as a noodnick.

Sometimes there are people with behaviour or speech patterns. A good friend of mine, wonderful woman, has a speech pattern or philosophy of speech that goes like this – “If you can say it in 200 words, why say it in 20?” So whenever I am in a group with her and she gets up to speak at least three or four people will go – “Aaah!” because they know they’re going to get a homily not just a sentence.

Now it sounds funny when I talk about it but of course I do that on purpose. But you and I both know when they aren’t funny.
They aren’t funny when they happen to us, - when somebody grunts or tisks at something we’ve said - when somebody gives us that “Aaah” look, or when somebody groans when we start to talk because what that says is that “I don’t want to hear your wisdom” and that hurts.

Now how you deal with that will depend on your personality. Some people say, “Okay! You don’t want my wisdom. You’ll never ever again get my wisdom” and as I move around I find people in all levels, in all kinds of groupings, who will never again open their mouths in a group because one of those things has happened to them. The only way you’ll know they’re alive at the end of a meeting, is that they will not have fallen on the floor. No other clue! But then there are other personalities who say – “You don’t like my wisdom ah! Oh Honey are you going to get my wisdom!” And they become the shovers. In both cases my friends, the group has created that problem by allowing those kinds of behaviours to happen. I call them sins against the spirit because they keep people from sharing their wisdom.

Let me say again, this is a Faith Model. The Prayer for this Model comes right out of the book of Wisdom. It is very simple and very profound. It says “Send Wisdom, Your Spirit, to be with us, to work in and through us.”

Aside from serious prayer it always seems to me that it’s helpful to add a little humour to what we’re doing. So I would suggest to you that there’s a beatitude that somehow did not get into the gospels. I’m not sure how they missed it but it’s clear to me that it’s very important. And I would offer it to you as something you might want to remind each other of frequently as you meet. It goes like this - **Blessed are the flexible, they will never be bent out of shape.**