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Collaboration between Congregations in the field of Mission and Formation

Introductory Talk



It is my privilege to say a few introductory words to open our deliberations and sharing on this very interesting topic chosen for our SEDOS Spring Seminar this year:

Reflecting on this topic in preparation for today, a number of areas strike me as being particularly important and in this brief introduction I will just briefly mention three.

The Call to Collaboration

There is the understanding of the call to collaborative ministry... from where does this call emanate?

Understanding of Collaboration

There is also the understanding of collaboration itself which may seem straightforward but in fact needs to be unpacked as there are myriad possible understandings that need to be explored.

Conditions for Fruitful Collaboration

And the third area I would like to highlight is the necessary conditions or the favourable setting for collaboration in ministry to be fruitful...

Before I briefly touch these three areas, I would like to say a word about the understanding of mission – because this also is crucial for fruitful collaboration.

José Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, CMF, whose writings on this topic are inspiring and informative, highlights the importance of a clear understanding of mission. He cautions that we must be careful not to confuse mission with our apostolic activities... because if mission is defined through the prism of apostolic activities, then perhaps the setting for collaboration becomes a little bit more ‘territorial’, if I can use that word.

However, if our Missiology is rooted in the Trinitarian understanding of Mission, i.e. we

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We are delighted that so many people have joined the seminar, here in presence at UISG where we have over 60 people and online where we have at least 30. We are grateful to UISG for the use of the facilities and to all our translators who will facilitate the sharing in the different languages.

Our theme focusses on *the Field of Mission and Formation* - during the afternoon session we will hear testimonies from these different dimensions.

Two collaborative experiences in the area of formation will be presented - covering both initial and ongoing formation.

The other two experiences are mission focussed – one African-based collaborative experience, the Solidarity with South Sudan project and one Latin American - the Pan Amazonian Network.

To set the background for these testimonies, in our morning session our two speakers will introduce us to the theme speaking from their own particular experiences and areas of interest.

I think we can all agree that it is set up to be a very interesting day.

understand Mission as *Missio Dei*... then as Paredes describes it:

Mission is a movement coming from Heaven to the earth, to humanity, in which we are called to participate. And it is only this understanding of mission that can lay the foundations or to use the more organic term that Paredes uses, it is only this understanding of mission that can **create the eco-system** in which collaborative ministry can thrive.

This is an important distinction for collaborative initiatives. For more fruitful and authentic collaboration, it is important that that collaboration evolves from the Trinitarian, relational, understanding of mission as *Missio Dei* and not from the narrower perspective of an already defined apostolic activity.

The Call to Collaboration

‘Collaborative ministry is not an optional extra but the manner in which the ministry of the gospel is a gospel ministry’. This is a challenging statement from Paredes signifying that the call to collaboration is inherent in the Christian call to ministry. Authentic ministry is collaborative... Since the Christian identity is fundamentally relational, “collaborative ministry” has to be rooted in the relationality of the Trinity.

Stephen Pickard, writing from an Anglican Australian perspective, emphasizes that collaboration is not a passing fashion, but is rather “*a practical demonstration of Gospel shaped relationality and an expression of the true sociality that characterizes the created order.*” Collaboration is not limited to laity and ordained working together. There are deep theological foundations for collaboration – it is an expression in mission of the example of the relational Trinitarian God. It flows from an ecclesiology that is respectful of the call and giftedness of all the members of the Body of Christ.

Collaborative ministry for mission concerns therefore the *‘dynamics of relationships’*

among all agents (clergy, religious, lay faithful), each contributing from their own particular call and giftedness. This working together in mutually respectful and supportive ways for mission creates a synergy that is more than the sum of the parts.

Pickard in a very challenging way, suggests that individualist and isolationist approaches are contrary to the practice of Jesus, and to Paul’s understanding of what it means to be members of the one body and to belong to each other. (Romans 12:5)

The call to collaborative ministry then is a call to just and authentic relationships between the different collaborating agents, focused on participation in the *Missio Dei*, creating a synergy in mission from their unity in diversity.

Understanding of Collaboration

Collaboration for mission or in formation requires a common understanding of what it means to collaborate. At its simplest, to collaborate means **to work with** others. A very simplistic definition perhaps but the little preposition in this sentence is vitally important – working **‘with’** is not the same as working **‘for’**. Already the use of **‘with’** creates a sense of the mutuality of the relationship between collaborating parties... Paredes helpfully offers three approaches to ministry which help to hone our understanding of collaboration.

- (i) He speaks of the dominant paradigm within the Church which is still the traditional model where the ordained minister is the sole minister and people receive that ministry. However, it is not the same to “work with” as to “work for” someone in a hierarchical relationship.
- (ii) In the second example he speaks of ‘Help and delegation’. In this approach there is still the sense of a hierarchical order of others helping the one in charge of the ministry.
- (iii) Collaborative ministry: In this approach there is a sense of mutuality and

partnership; there is respect for differences; a common approach to conceiving the approach to ministry with open communication and feedback.

Perhaps for many of us we have to move from the 'help and delegation' approach to ministry to the '*with*' ministry, to a more authentic collaborative approach.

Conditions for Fruitful Collaboration

Finally, something about the conditions necessary to facilitate a collaborative approach to ministry. '*The joy of ministry resides in collaborative practices, where all play a part and regard the ministry as a truly shared task rather than the monopoly of one particular group*'. (Paredes)

So how can you ensure that it is genuine collaborative ministry? How do we ensure it is not the monopoly of one group?

Given our history of being quite individualistic and isolationist, we cannot presume to automatically be able to tap into the necessary skills for collaborative ministry. We must devote time and energy to cultivating these skills.

Collaboration in mission through very different charisms and ministries is not easy. It requires a lot of spiritual maturity. It requires work on developing a sense of common purpose; It requires authentic teamwork; It requires an understanding of the power dynamics inherent in collaborative approaches. In relation to the power dynamics, Paredes suggests - *a collaborative approach to ministry requires both sharing of power and a generous bestowal of power*. This is both counter intuitive and counter cultural in our competitive world of today.

Perhaps a key dimension for collaborative approaches to work is to cultivate intercultural competence among the partners. Intercultural skills of openness, respect for diversity, acceptance of others, awareness of prejudice and bias are all helpful competencies when engaging in collaborative initiatives. Each partner has their own strong sense of identity and traditional ways of proceeding which will be challenges as the collaborative initiative takes root and evolves.

These are just a few thoughts to whet your appetite for the sharing we will enjoy for the remainder of the day. All that remains for me to do is to wish you an enjoyable and inspirational Spring Seminar.



Photo from the SEDOS Spring Seminar at UISG