

Group methods, structures, norms for parish faithfulness and health

Define and Shape a Parish Culture with Benedictine Characteristics

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What we are trying to do is help the community understand itself in terms of certain characteristics. So that when parish leaders say, “This is how we do things at St. E’s,” what we hope to hear is a self-definition that is rooted in the characteristics of Christian community rather than the habits of a religious club.

I’m going to discuss four such characteristics: listening, not grumbling, deciding to be in community, and healthy stability.

Listening

Benedict writes of listening carefully with “the ear of your heart” and wants what is received in the listening to be “put into practice” or accepted “willingly and carried out vigorously.” It is about translating what we have heard into action. This process of listening and responding is obedience. An assumption in organization development (OD) is that information that is engaged will create pressures and expectations in systems, that information has a catalytic effect on organizational change. OD consultants have all heard the advice to “let the data speak.” If we are to hear God, the society we live in, one another, and ourselves the parish needs structures, processes and a climate for listening. If the data is to “speak” the parish needs to be a listening community that nurtures listening people.

We need concrete ways to do that listening and responding. There are several ways parishes might “listen to the world.” Each year use a different method to engage in a disciplined contextual analysis. One year do a broad analysis that identifies the forces and trends that impact the parish. What is happening in the wider society (global, national), in the region, in the wider church? As part of this process invite your city/town planner to come to the part of the process related to regional trends. Another year look at a way of segmenting the population by values orientation or generational groupings. How does this show itself in the congregation? What groupings will be most drawn to this particular parish? Many parishes have study groups that explore issues present or emerging in the society or church. That’s a way to help the parish stay sensitive to trends. Or we might ask members with experience in various sectors of society to share their view of the trends. Listen to people from health care, government, education, and business. Expect them to do some research so that what they share is based in its own listening process. Another form of study group would be to have leaders read a book that relates to some issue the parish needs to address. It might be around spiritual life, the parish as an emotional system or membership growth. The process would need to include some reflection about the parish’s related patterns and an attempt to apply the ideas in the book to the parish.

As a consultant I was asked to lead such a session in two parishes using Peter Steinke’s *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*. The one parish had an acknowledged pattern of reactivity when people disagreed with a direction. The other had an unacknowledged pattern of overloading life with too

many good things to do and ending up burdened and frustrated because they had a hard time saying “no.” There are forms of prayer and worship that play a role. Train and coach the congregation to include in their prayer life the concerns of the workplace and civic life along with those of the family and self. For example, help people learn how to imaginatively engage the offertory of the Eucharist with the whole of their life. Or, teach and have people practice a form of contemplation and intercession that attends to the broader society. Relate this to the Prayers of the People in the Eucharist. Work with the congregation on offering thanks for the signs of God’s movement in society. Beware of the tendency for prayers related to the world to be focused on what people see as the “negative” part of their life. Another way of using prayer to listen to the context is to conduct a contemplative walk around the town or neighborhoods the parish serves. Walk in silence. Invite participants to simply listen, see, and feel. Return to a meeting place to share what you have experienced. Explore any surprises, places of pain or joy. Celebrate the Eucharist or say an Office.

There are also structures, processes and a climate involved in learning to listen to the parish community. When leaders talk about “communication issues” in the parish they usually mean—“How can we communicate from the top, or center, to the rest of the parish?” While we do want to do that well it’s the wrong starting place. The first issue is how the parish community can better listen to itself. Leaders have a responsibility to help the community communicate with itself and to take what is explored into account as they make decisions in vestries and committees. The leadership will want to establish listening processes within the vestry and other groups. Not all issues belong in front of the whole parish community. Here are a few ideas.

Leadership Conference or Retreat

Each year have a leadership conference. The idea is for leaders to take the time to get their “heads above water” and to see the parish in broader and deeper ways. This can be at a retreat center or at the parish. It might just be the rector and vestry or could be open to anyone who was willing to participate and help with follow-up work in the three months after. It helps to use an external consultant at least every two or three years. I’ve recently been working with one diocese and several parishes to do this with three parish vestries. All three vestries attend the same weekend. Working with all three at the same time allows them to afford the services of a more experienced consultant. It’s a three-year contact which both allows us to build on what was done the previous year and gives me the opportunity to understand and get perspective on each. I take the vestries through an agreed process of some work together and a lot of time in for each vestry to work on its own. A leadership conference needs to include time in prayer and activities that build connections among those present. It’s a time to explore parish dynamics, strengths, and opportunities in relationship to the primary task and core processes. Use tools such as the core frameworks—Renewal-Apostolate Cycle, Christian Life Model, Benedictine Promise, and Shape of the Parish. Consider using one or two models each year. These processes can include ways of looking at dynamics such as trust and inclusion. There can also be a long-range assessment of the parish’s institutional life including finances and property. All this can be the base for identifying strategic issues and goals. My own bias is to avoid creating elaborate plans. Focus on developing a sense of direction and a deeper appreciation for the community’s life. In one parish I was the consultant for their leadership conference for fifteen years. That helped me and them gain a sense of the broad dynamics present in the parish. That parish required the vestry to attend and invited any members to participate as long as they would attend all the sessions and help with the follow-up work. By being that open about participation they did three things. First, it expanded the amount of listening and response. More people contributed to and owned the direction. Second, it helped build a sense of community by creating stronger relationships among people. Third,

it allowed them to identify people with the gifts for leadership. The rector and wardens could see who had the gifts and would tap them later to be on the vestry or take on projects.

Channeling Process

Parishes require more ways to identify and focus on needed conversations and issues than just yearly leadership gatherings. Some have established a “channeling process” that allows the parish to gather people’s concerns, new ideas, and insights about emerging issues and put them in a channel, a pathway, toward decisions and action. One way of doing that is at every third vestry meeting, and at most meetings of the parish community, set aside time to have small groups record on newsprint “concerns” and “wish we would do” lists. Share the lists and have the whole group prioritize items. If the group is small and/or has good group discipline and skills, this could be done as a whole group. The process can be done about the totality of parish life or a segment. The key is for the community and its leaders to carefully listen and respond. We don’t want to miss opportunities or to allow issues to fester or become centers of anxiety.

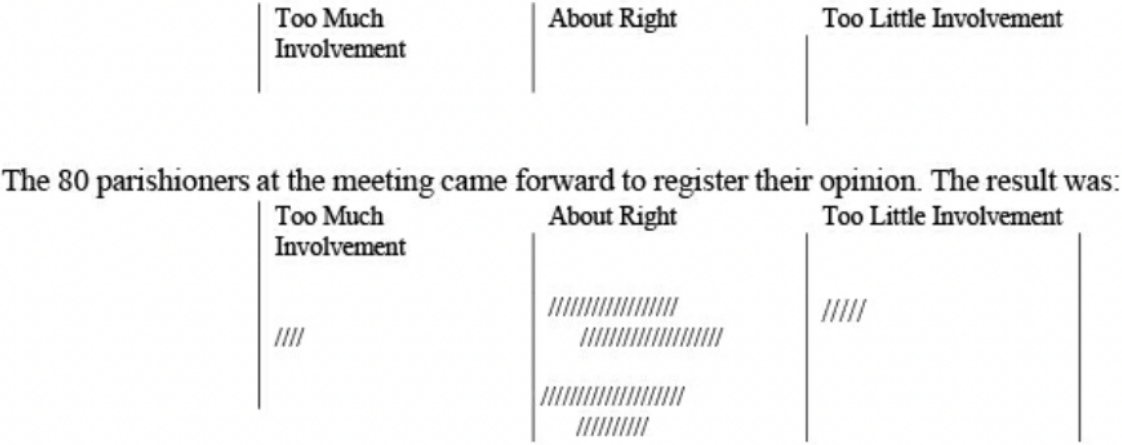
Testing Process

Another practice that can be used regularly is a “testing process.” This is used in setting boundaries on how emerging issues will be engaged. The process in too many parishes is one of listening and responding to the most anxious, cynical and passive people in the community. The clergy, wardens, the vestry, or even a whole parish community can get so caught up in trying to please or pacify a few people who disproportionate time, energy and resources get tied up in issues that are not really in the parish’s best interest. This misdirection also usually leaves a resentful undercurrent in the community while not really addressing the anxiety of those who raised the initial concern.

Even when leaders know who is raising an issue, without a broader listening process they usually do not know whether it is an interest of just those people or of a wider segment of the community. A “testing” process helps a community cope with situations in which a few persistent voices press a concern or idea that would have an effect on the community’s life. What they are saying may represent a widely shared view or it may simply be their view. Those expressing the issue may not really know how many they represent. Imagine the informal one-on-one coffee hour discussion. Someone is making the rounds, letting others know about an important problem in the parish. People are listening and even nodding. Is it agreement or politeness?

The use of a “testing process” requires leaders to use sound judgment in deciding when the process is likely to produce valid and useful information as well as help the community manage its anxiety. Overuse may result in an increase in the community’s anxiety, less listening, and ineffective action. However the danger in most parishes is not overuse but the absence of any way for the community to define itself in relationship to emerging issues. A rule of thumb might be to use a “testing process” about four times/year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry. The “testing process” can be done for a few minutes at the community’s coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered rather than in a paper survey. Face-to-face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response. A possible process is to identify the issue, and put it on a spectrum of some sort. Have people indicate where they are on the spectrum, and summarize the result, along with what the next step will be, if any. For example, in a parish where several people had been

complaining about the extent of the parish’s involvement in the arts. A spectrum was created regarding the parish’s involvement with the city’s art community:



There was no judgment that those who had raised the issue were “wrong,” only that most people in the community had a different opinion. Those who had raised the issue saw that their position was not widely shared. It was not just the pet project of the rector and a few members. This involvement had wide ownership. The process allowed the community to know its own mind. The anxiety in the community about “people being upset” was put into perspective. No next steps were needed.

Community Meetings

Some parishes have started having community meetings three times a year. These are opportunities to have all those willing to gather focus on one significant issue. I’ve seen parishes do it around things such as hospitality, membership growth, and finances. The meetings are usually about ninety minutes long. They may include “channeling” (gathering prioritized lists of issues to address and moving them into a channel for action) and ”testing” processes or some other way to gather information related to the topic.

Training in Skills and Methods

A listening climate can be encouraged by training people in how to use processes of faith sharing, circle discussions, and discernment that require respectful and careful listening. It helps to provide training in one-to-one communication skills, methods for teams to gather information and make decisions, and basic facilitation and group participation skills. Nurture the community’s competence for being together in silence and stillness is part of establishing a listening community. Encourage the practice of people speaking only for themselves. Teach people how to use “I” messages. Discourage “manipulative confidentiality” norms that allow people “to poison the community well” without being accountable for what they say. Leaders need to develop the practice that when someone comes carrying an invisible group’s message they ask, “Who is saying this? Will you join me in meeting with them?” Gathering Information Rather than Making Assumptions Parishes can get stuck in a pattern of operating off of assumptions about what people want or why they are doing what they are doing. Four members resign from the vestry within a few months of one another. Is it coincidence or is a reaction to the rector or a difficult person on the vestry? The parish averages ten visitors per month

and retains only a few each year. Is it that the liturgy and preaching are poor, that members overwhelm or ignore visitors, or is it something else? We can get closer to finding out what is really happening if we can find an appropriate way to gather information. For example, the parish could seek information from people who visited the parish but did not return. Interview them to find out what went into their decision. Explore what you hear in terms of:

- Was it a matter of “fit”? The culture of the parish just didn’t match what was being looked for. The parish was being its “best self,” but it wasn’t what this person wanted.
- The parish doesn’t have a “best self.” We were not showing our values and vision. For example, there was a lack of hospitality by either a lack of attention or overwhelming attention.
- The parish wasn’t being its “best self.”

Obedience to One Another

Obedience to one another is another thread that can make up a Benedictine fabric to strengthen parish life. This is part of developing a “listening parish.” The Latin word *oboedientia* comes from a root concerning hearing. Obedience is about hearing and responding to what we hear. In the people, circumstances and things of community life we are able to listen for God, for God’s will, God’s rhythm, God’s spirit.

Obedience is about caring for those with who we are in community. Joan Chittister’s translation of the Rule states, “Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the prioress and abbot but also to one another ...” (chapter 71) and later, “try to be first to show respect to the other (Romans 12:10) supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior, and competing in obedience to one another” (chapter 72).

“Obedience to one another” is a process of listening and responding to what we hear. That calling, if heard by a literalist spirit and an unskilled community, can become a pattern of communal dysfunction. Training people in skills for contemplation, discernment, and intercession are part of the competency base needed. A related understanding is of how organizations develop and express unhealthy cultures in patterns of dependency and counter-dependency, over involvement and under involvement, enmeshment and distancing and can improve by moving into patterns of interdependence, self-differentiation, and engaged detachment.

Face-to-face, Two-way Communication

One method that might be especially useful for leaders to hold in mind is the power of communication as a face-to-face, two-way process. Earlier I mentioned how in many parishes when there is talk about “communication,” what is meant is communication from the leaders to the members, for example, newsletters and sections of the website. When leaders receive complaints about “communication” in the parish the discussion frequently moves to how the leadership can increase the methods and amount of information being shared with parishioners. We need a broader view of what is happening if we are to improve communication in the parish. To what extent does the leadership need to change how it offers information and what is offered? To what extent do the members need to be directly challenged to pay attention to the information already available? Even more important may be exploring how the communication takes place. Try expanding the occasions of face-to-face, group, two-way communication, for example, “testing processes” at coffee hour, regular parish town

meetings that include a “channeling process” and a process for the community to focus its attention on some matter of common interest.

To increase the amount of face-to-face, two-way communication:

- Use survey-feedback processes rather than a survey closed-discussion processes. Four rules of thumb: (1) If you survey people, report the results back to them—don’t gather information that only a leadership group then explores, (2) Report back in a face-to-face manner, such as in an open meeting, (3) Don’t ask for data you are not really open to hearing and acting on, and (4) Increase the relationship between data gathering, analysis, setting direction, and taking action by doing it all at the same time. The immediacy creates more ownership and investment that can translate into understanding and action.
- Develop your ability to decide when it is appropriate to just receptively listen and when there is a need for conversation.
- Use the methods, for example, “testing processes,” “channeling processes,” parish town meetings, external consultants from time to time.

The more immediate the data collection and feedback, the more likely you are to increase the community’s energy for follow-through. For example, if you hold one meeting in which you survey, report back, and also begin initial thoughts about planning, you are both more likely to engage those who have expressed an interest and to able to use that energy to get something accomplished. Delays between data gathering and feedback are not necessarily deadly but they will create an energy drain as people have to be brought back up to speed. Also avoid the compulsion to survey everyone, thereby focusing on artificial inclusion rather than action and energy. The people who show up for the open meetings are the ones more likely to be involved and participate in subsequent actions.

Focusing on making sure everyone was surveyed usually results in leaders feeling a need to accommodate all those opinions. It’s healthier and more likely to lead to effective action if those filling out survey forms are the same people gathered in a face-to-face setting that allows exploration and the possibility of being influenced by others. Survey-feedback processes do require small group follow-up activities. Working groups begun at an open meeting can stay with the project for a few months and leaders will need to monitor movement and make adjustments.

Grumbling or Murmuring

A second theme that has a strong connection to the listening climate is how leaders and members deal with the grumbling in our hearts. Benedict’s passion for listening and mutual self-giving in community is made clearer and tougher by his objection to “grumbling” or “murmuring.” Parish leaders know all about this way of complaining. New ideas and problem-solving will not create, in themselves, a healthy community that stays healthy. The parish must attend to its spirit. Grumbling is often the manifestation of communal cynicism and passivity, of a victim stance. In individuals it can become an addictive behavior that eats away at the person’s integrity.

Our listening and responding build community when freely given to one another and to the whole community. In the Rule our obedience is only “acceptable to God and agreeable to people” if it “is not cringing or sluggish or halfhearted, but free from any grumbling....” The Rule also speaks of responding gladly because if people respond only “grudgingly and grumble, not only aloud but in their

hearts, then even though the order is carried out, their actions will not be accepted with favor by God, who sees that they are grumbling in their hearts” (chapter five of the Rule of Saint Benedict).

Addressing the issue of grumbling might include at least seven elements.

1. Develop those listening and problem-solving processes mentioned above. There needs to be a healthy process for people to cope with the feelings, frustrations and ideas they have; a process that is an alternative to the grumbling. This is a way of doing what Benedict did in taking counsel with others in the community around truly significant matters.
2. Establish a “no grumbling” norm. We need to ask people to honor each other and the well-being of the community. If the community has ways to listen and to work together in improving its common life, members need to be asked to use that process. There needs to be an explicit invitation to exercise self-discipline over what and how we speak in addressing issues and especially when things don’t go our way.
3. Actively nurture emotional and spiritual maturity. There are a couple of very conservative women I have frequently talked with during the years of fighting in the Episcopal Church. They are a minority in the Church and in their own parishes. One is a priest, the other a lay woman. Here’s what I have heard from them about what allows them to remain in a church that they disagree with over several very important issues. In reference to our friendship, “I would not want to be part of a church that would not include you.” (We have different opinions.) “I don’t want to do anything to harm the unity of the Church.” And, “I have changed my mind before, so I don’t want to be so arrogant as to assume that I might not change my mind about these things.” They each exhibit humility and self-awareness. The parish’s work of formation needs to include shaping this kind of maturity. We need to be clear about what we are doing in formation. It is about the virtues and Christian character. It is not about getting people to agree with our view on current issues in the Church or society.
4. Train and support leaders in their ministry with chronic grumblers as well as those who are especially insistent around a particular issue. Train leaders in how to: listen to upset or anxious members, explain the parish’s position, and invite people to participate without trying to take responsibility for convincing people. Have leaders learn to be firm in inviting members to offer their concerns and ideas in the community’s normal processes for channeling and testing rather than having the leader accept responsibility for the member’s issue. Make sure that leaders know that polling members behind the back of the rector is a big “no-no.” The destructiveness of such behavior lingers in a parish community and poisons relationships.
5. Accept that grumbling will take place. Even in parishes that have done all the above there will be times of grumbling, times when the pressures within the community will erupt. Responding with a legalistic “we have a no grumbling norm,” or a moralistic, “This is very harmful behavior,” is likely to only make the situation worse. Even the most mature communities will have difficult emotional and spiritual periods. We are all “grumblers” sometimes.
6. Confront the chronic grumblers. Every parish seems to have a few people who live under a cloud of unhappiness with the clergy and/or the parish. At some clergy gatherings there is occasional joking about trading grumblers or asking the diocese to establish a special parish to transfer all these people into. In one parish the leadership identified two people fitting the category. Each had an idealized parish they carried in their head. For the one it was an innovative parish that attracted “funky” people; for the other it was several Anglo-Catholic “flagship” parishes. Each

had their complaint about “inclusion.” The one wanted an approach to communion allowing the non-baptized to receive; the other felt “conservatives” were not welcome enough. Each had particular issues they would name when engaged. If an issue was addressed the complaining would shift to a new topic. The parish leaders noticed two constants. The first was that there was a history to the behavior. Years could pass, leaders could change, but the grumbling stance was maintained. The second was that each was unable to cope with the authority of the wider community. Neither could graciously live in something real that was larger than themselves and their own imagination.

7. Watch out for scapegoating. It’s often a sign of something being “off” in the parish’s listening process when there is a pattern of scapegoating by the leaders. In some parishes a “no grumbling” norm is used as a cover for not listening and engaging fully. Face-to-face discussion is avoided and members are either forced out of the parish or marginalized.

A healthy parish confronts the constant grumblers. It’s a process of challenge and invitation. A challenge to change the stance they have taken, to put on kindness and patience. In John Gardner’s terms it’s to become loving-critics, rather than unloving-critics, toward the parish and its leaders. The invitation is to a fuller and more real life, to experience the embrace of the Blessed Trinity from within the parish’s life. This work is in the best sense “pastoral.” It is pastoral care for the individual, and pastoral oversight of the parish’s life. It’s also pastoral self-care for the clergy and lay leaders.

Few things wear on a priest more than parish habits that enable and reward the constant grumblers; that some clergy grumble in return only adds to the problem. The need is for skills in listening, trust development, and conflict management. We also need to take note that Benedict has a bias. He’s a leader of a community and he writes from that perspective. Parish rectors get it—how nice to eliminate the constant noise of people complaining and suggesting all their new ideas. For a no-grumbling norm to have integrity Benedict’s call to consult with others needs to be effectively implemented. There are at least three things needed.

1. Availability. This is accomplished by a pattern or routine of listening processes. People need to experience survey-feedback, testing processes and community meetings as things that happen regularly. When I know the time to say my piece will come I can hold my peace. When the issue has urgency and importance, or there is possible harm to a person or community, that calls for a more timely response.

2. Appropriate to the issue and circumstances. Some issues are best dealt with by the routine listening processes. Ideas about how to improve parish life or add some new element may be managed by asking people to bring them to the next community meeting when we will collect all such thinking. A person enraged about something the rector did to them requires a more personal and immediate response. At times we need a face-to-face conversation. Other cases call for a third party to mediate or facilitate.

3. Genuineness. Listening and its benefits are not just accomplished by using the right methods and skills. The listening needs authenticity. It must be real. People can tell when the leadership has no “inbox.” Some rectors function in a strongly narcissistic manner. In *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, Peter Steinke points to a pathological narcissism. He defines that by quoting Alexander Lowen, “excessive investment in self at the expenses of others.” Then he notes seventeen characteristics, a few of which are reproduced below.

- “The person is capable of seeing only her own perspective, is intolerant of disagreement, doesn’t discuss ideas but imposes them, is single-minded, believes in her own superior wisdom, and doesn’t need help from others.”
- “The person is ruthless toward those who do not reflect back his projected image of specialness. He is vindictive, vengeful, devaluing, and abrasive. He publicly humiliates others and wants others to be wholehearted supporters.”
- “The person is prone to lying and an expert at disguise.”
- “The person presents herself impressively. She is clever, charming, seductive, persuasive, self-assured.”
- “The person is more interested in being admired than loved.”

If the vestry avoids availability, appropriateness, and genuineness in what it does then the priest can be the balancer. More often it will be the wardens who need to help the priest get perspective and engage what needs to be engaged. This doesn’t need to be a confrontation with the priest but an empathetic intervention when the stress of the work and life gets overwhelming.

In general wardens function best when they see themselves as the rector’s collaborators and supporters. They can help the priest be his best self. At other times they need to ask hard questions, challenge and occasionally insist on alternatives with a strong rector. That can require wisdom, courage and a high degree of social intelligence. We’ve seen wardens who want to micromanage the priest and those who sidestep any confrontation with her. When the priest cuts off listening and communication it may be up to the wardens to intervene and help the priest move toward a more open and listening stance. When lay or clergy leaders cut off two-way communication for any reason they risk more conflict in the parish.

Not being receptive in spirit, lack of empathy, or refusing to meet with someone, may set off troubles that could have been avoided. Speed Leas has a model of conflict levels that assumes that if we fail to skillfully address conflict at one level it is likely to press on to a higher level. For example, we can take what he defines as a level two disagreement, in which the energy is about solving the problem, or a level three “contest” in which the parties want their way but don’t want to hurt others, and push it to a level four of five. Level four is “fight/flight” in which people are willing to hurt others, and level five is an “intractable situation” in which significant damage can be done to someone’s reputation, position, and well-being.

If leaders fail to listen when a person or a group connected to the parish requests it, they become responsible for what happens when those people seem to go crazy. It’s easy to blame the “crazies” because their behavior seems so over-the-top or “emotional.” But what choices have we left them with? They need to submit to a situation that seems mistaken or even unjust or they need to press their case at the risk of damaging himself or herself or the parish. Leaders need to work at keeping level two and three conflicts at those more manageable stages by empathetic listening, a collaborative spirit, and an attempt at mutual problem-solving. This is about the well-being of the whole parish community and about each individual’s growth. The community needs to not have its attention and energies constantly taken away from its common life and work by having to deal with the complainers. The single most important thing a parish does to manage this is to have reliable listening processes and genuineness in the listening. It is these processes and that stance that sorts the healthy challenges from the chronic grumbling. The individuals most given to complaining need to be in an environment in which they might come to terms with themselves and life in community. For that to happen leaders need to help the parish learn to tolerate discomfort at those times when there is tension and conflict.

It is at those times that a community can develop its ability to persevere and live in stability of life. And it is the stability of the leaders and the parish community that offers its most troubled members a chance to find a new life.

Decide to Be in Community

The parish will be a healthier place if members can own that they have decided to be in community and that they have decided to be in this particular parish community. Benedict's position about grumbling is in chapter five where he reminds members that they have chosen to live in community. The Rule seems to assume that some things come along with a person's decision to join, things like no grumbling, balance, worship, silence, and humility.

In deciding to join a community we also decide to live within the particular ways of that community. How do we help people accept responsibility for the decision they have made? Be explicit with potential members of the parish that to join is to decide to be part of a living community, to open oneself to the process of being influenced and shaped by others, and to participate in the mystery by which you will influence and shape others. It is to enter into the rhythms of the community's life that will, in time, work their way into your mind and heart. We lose life to gain life, die to rise, become empty so we might be filled. The central mystery of Christian life is lived in the context of community, community with others and with God.

The Rule's assumption is that the community is the setting within which conversion takes place. That conversion is shaped by the give and take of life together; in the example of others; by giving oneself to habits of listening, balance and humility; and by the occasional confrontations and upheavals that life with others always brings. That conversion is a gradual process; that holiness comes bit by bit, and it is best when not noticed. Parishes need to tell new members about how it works. New members often need a picture of what is possible in a parish and guidance in how to engage those possibilities.

The Rule's approach toward new members may seem strange, even wrong, to parish leaders who have been encouraged to go all out in bringing people to Christ and the Church. Benedict writes, "Do not grant newcomers to the life an easy entry ..." (chapter 58). The process of admission includes: knocking at the door for four or five days to test patience and desire, a few days in the guest house, then time with those in training. The Rule is read to the person after two, six and ten months. The person reflects on the Rule (you need to think about what you are getting yourself into). Only after all this comes the commitment of the person and the community.

What the Rule is getting at is the need to "Test the spirits to see if they are from God" (1 John 4:1 and the Rule, chapter 58). The community has an interest in maintaining its capacity to be a place of formation. That means it can't constantly be struggling with new members over the central culture of the community. There needs to be an adequate degree of stability. The potential new member needs to be a wise steward of her or his time and energy. Is this a place (a climate, a culture, a people) in which the person's spirituality will grow and mature?

Or should another community be considered that would be more of a fit with the person's needs? For example, the Order of the Ascension is a Benedictine community of Christians in the Episcopal tradition that I've been part of for over twenty-five years. Its members take a three-year Promise "to seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things and circumstances of my life through stability, obedience and conversion of life." The Order has a shared commitment to parish revitalization and

the struggle for justice. Its members gather yearly for five days of retreat, education and social time. All its members have received a significant amount of training in congregational development. In its Rule, the Order lays out a process of entry that includes: a five-month discernment period of reflection on the Rule, developing an understanding of the relationship between the Promise and the person's daily life, and a series of questions for both the applicant and the community, including the following:

- Is there obvious common ground between the person's and the Order's orientation to parish life and the spiritual life?
- Does the person have an adequately disciplined spiritual life, and sufficient self-esteem and support from colleagues, family and friends, so as to be able to benefit from what the Order does offer in vocational support without holding to unreasonable expectations of the support such a life will provide?
- Is membership in the Order likely to have beneficial effects on the person's work, family, friendships?
- What does the person bring to the Order?
- To what extent is the person making an act of free commitment, choosing to devote energy in this way and pattern? To what extent is the commitment "clouded" and "divided"?

A parish church is not a monastic community. It may be a dispersed community in the same way as the Order of the Ascension, but it doesn't have the same purposes and therefore doesn't require that level of training and commitment for membership. However, parish leaders do need to explore the same underlying and interdependent issues, such as:

- The parish is an instrument of God's mission of Holy Unity and people becoming fully alive. The parish's purposes emerge out of God's purposes. The life that glorifies God and forms women and men in the divine image is shaped in the rhythm of what I've called the Renewal-Apostolate Cycle.
- Given the purpose and task of a parish community, what is needed from new members so they are in relationship to the community in a manner that advances the community's purpose, as well as the person's growth?
- What does the community need to communicate to potential members so they can make an informed decision about membership? What does the community need to ask of the potential member? What training and education need to be provided to incorporate the person into the way this community lives its life and forms people in the Christian life?

So, if the parish is striving for a culture in which people are both accepted and challenged, people need to see this early in their relationship with the community. It should not be all acceptance with the challenge appearing after you're "hooked." If the parish is serious about its task of Christian formation, then visitors and people considering membership need to experience opportunities for faith sharing, exploration of questions and doubts, and for training in eucharistic worship and living. They need these experiences early on in the relationship rather than the all-too-frequent experience of being recruited into parish groups and jobs, and given a sense that the focus is on the institutional life of the parish rather than on its purpose. If the parish is really a place of deep prayer, then the environment of the space, the community's competence for worship, and offerings to train and coach people in prayer life need to strike new people early in their time with the parish.

The reason most people leave places of work is a lack of "fit" with the organizational culture. The person may be seeking a work environment that is participatory and empowering while the company's

management style is more controlling. The same thing happens in parishes. Cultural issues (e.g., the style of spirituality and worship, the range of leadership styles commonly used, the degree of acceptance versus challenge as part of the climate, openness to differences, the way in which the dynamics of closeness and separation are managed, and expectations about participation and giving) are matters over which people commit themselves or withdraw.

The entry and incorporation process needs to assist potential members and the parish community in making educated choices about a particular person's membership. The issue is not one of creating artificial or high standards. A parish church is by its nature a relatively open system. For the most part people make a decision to join and we accept them. We want people to make a right discernment, a wise choice about the parish they join. Parishes are not interchangeable.

Healthy Stability

Most organizational life cycle models suggest a development that moves from creation through formation to a place of maturity or stability. The model I frequently use differentiates between healthy stability and static stability. Healthy stability is maintained by addressing the tasks of parish formation in a spirit of, and with the behaviors of, obedience, and conversion of life. The parish's stability doesn't come about by pursuing stability in itself but by being a listening community and engaging the issues and people that invite us to consider when we need to let go of loved ways and secure places.

In times of healthy maturity, some people will yearn for those times of institutional formation with the adventure of dreams and significant work to accomplish. Some will so miss the excitement of institution and community creation that they will avoid the work needed during the healthy stability phase. Others simply get anxious during this phase because they don't know how to live in it and may lack the associated competencies. They may be tempted to focus on institutional and administrative goals. The work of membership growth, building projects, special attention to financial management, and great service ministries all need to be addressed at some points in a parish's life. At other times these projects substitute busyness and a desire for institutional success for the ongoing and primary work of Christian formation. The primary task is the formation of the People of God at all stages of their life. It is always a needed ministry but it is all too often done as though it were simply one program among other programs. There is a kind of half-life that is generated in churches that stay caught up in some institutional scheme. There are clergy and parishes that find themselves always seeking a new challenge in a new project, a project defined by a sense of numerical or physical accomplishment. Instead, choose to make the liturgy an experience of delight and enchantment; choose to create an adult foundations program that equips people with a capacity for spiritual discipline and ways of thinking that rise from what is eternal. Choose to have many opportunities in which those who are Christ's own come to know themselves and each other as people of curiosity and discernment, of courage and perseverance, of joy and wonder, and lovers of God.

Static stability is characterized by an inability to effectively address being on a plateau in membership or spiritual life; seeing planning methods as a way to control the future; fussing over small things; not responding to new opportunities; losing a sense of vision and purpose; and an identity that is increasingly focused on the past and can seem bland. If that condition isn't turned around the parish will usually slide into decline characterized by denying that we are really in trouble; avoiding the needed conversations and resources to have the conversation; increased levels of stress; a nostalgic climate; low or fragmented energy; and a "fear-blame" cycle in which people begin to search for someone to blame (the priest, the diocese, the people who left for another parish, the change in the neighborhood's

demographics). Leaders may step away from accepting responsibility. Or new leaders may emerge with a narcissistic orientation in which they are all too ready to take control and “save” the parish.

The ministry of parish development frequently involves helping churches move out of static and declining lives and engage the tasks of formation in a manner that fits the here-and-now life of the parish. But it also is about how to serve the many parishes in a state of health stability. How do we help them stay healthy and faithful?

The work of formation whether from a place of decline or of health includes shaping a new vision or sense of direction and managing the polarity of maintaining parish identity and integrity while making adaptations that serve survival and mission. Parish formation embraces the task of grounding the parish in its organic reality as a microcosm of the Holy Catholic Church, attracting new members, developing new leaders, and nurturing a deeper inner life among individuals and the whole parish community. This work is always with us.

A stable and healthy parish can find itself no longer hoping for a new and better life. It can stop being attentive to the movement of the Spirit. The fact of its health and faithfulness can undermine its continued health and faithfulness. We can lose touch with Newman’s, “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” How does the healthy, mature parish do just that? How do we change often and be stable?

In most cases the starting place is among the current members. Leaders and consultants can provide an environment and processes that help members identify and give voice to their deeper hopes and longings. This work takes some care. It’s easy for traditional exercises to generate either an image of the new that is really just the current way repackaged or a radical and utopian dream that brings more judgment than hope. As useful as mutual ministry reviews and leadership retreats can be they are rarely tools that bring a parish closer to its depth and uniqueness. The longings and energy of the People of God need a gentle space in which they can emerge. We might try more of these kinds of things:

- Interviewing processes with individuals and then shared in small groups. Use ways that invite people to come at the parish’s life indirectly and through their own experience. So, don’t begin with “What are your hopes for the parish?” but with “What is God doing with you that is making you more human?” or “What has happened in your life this year that caused you to want to run away from people or things that you need to face into?” or “What has died in your life that you need to bury?”
- Increase the times and places of silence and stillness in parish life.
- Allow more space for mystery and awe in liturgy. Increase the gracefulness and beauty both in what happens around the altar and among the congregation. Pay attention to movement, music, and silence.
- Help families make space for wonder and awe, especially with children. For example, it is critical that young children participate in late-night or predawn liturgies at Christmas and Easter. The experience of this being something very special, something that is part of the adult world that they get to participate in, can provide needed experiences and memories of mystery. Children may, even more than many adults, “get” the power of rhythms in darkness—light, movement—stillness, silence—sounds.
- Create a parish history that is a narrative of how this local expression of God’s people has experienced the presence of Christ in stability, obedience, and conversion of life. Tell the true story with kindness but honesty. Step away from the history being about the buildings and

rectors. Tell the story of how we have faced occasions of defeat and decline and persevered into new life, of how we have been estranged and in conflict and brought to new trust and life in community. If the parish has some real saints in its history, tell their stories, speak of how these fragile beings were used as instruments of God's love.

- Pay attention to times of receptivity and fear. There are moments in parish life that are like the period between darkness and dawn, sleep and awakening, in which something new might be seen. This can be especially true in times of transition, including before and after the departure and arrival of priests, the death or departure of parish saints, a noticeable trend in the membership of the parish (up, down, stuck on a plateau, demographics), significant conflict, the destruction of parish property, and major financial threat.
- When holding leadership retreats and ministry reviews, seek out a third-party facilitator with significant skills in congregational development and consultation work—someone with an awareness of the hidden parish dynamics and a vision of what is possible in the Body of Christ.

If we have the eyes to see, a new energy will break into parish life during times of health and stability. The first expression may come from the chronic complainers or those driven to fix everything around them. They may not have the emotional intelligence or political smarts to make much happen on their own that is truly fruitful. But if you listen closely to what may be mostly an expression of anxiety you may also hear a yearning that comes from a deeper place within the parish system. Pay attention to the moments of confusion and trouble, to the accidents and missteps, to the parish fools, strangers and enchanters, especially those who have been with the parish for some years. Notice times of loss, death and grief. Listen to those who see life as an adventure. Take in the way in which the polarities present themselves in times of maturity. Believe that the people of the parish carry within themselves those polarities. They long for the journey and for home, seek intimacy and solitude, and want change and stability. If you believe this you will see it and you will stir up those forces within the community. By allowing, affirming and pointing to the polarities leaders can create within the parish a climate that provides the freedom for individuals to be where they need to be and to move when ready to move. Within what may appear to be the carefully controlled life of maturity can surface the new security of a transformed home, of new love, new friends, and new work.

Participating in Community

From Chapter 5: Participating in Community, *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish Through Spiritual Practice*, Robert Gallagher, Ascension Press, 2011.

The starting point

The starting point is to accept responsibility and begin. If the trust level is to improve, and a healthy community developed, we need new ways of listening and talking along with new ways of meeting and decision-making.

Listening & Talking

Building healthier communities requires a kind of talking often avoided in parishes. We live in the “safe-zone” where “all is comfortable” instead of the “better country” of deep acceptance and

significant challenge where “all is well.” Our communities can increase the conversations that involve self-disclosure and engage our mutual responsibility for this community of which we are members.

In *Community: The Structure of Belonging*,⁴⁹ Peter Block makes the case that one thing we can do to overcome the fragmentation of our communities is have different conversations than we usually have.

He notes the conventional pattern we usually engage in— what he calls “just-talk.” His examples of “just-talk” include telling the story of how we got here, giving explanations and opinions, blaming and complaining, making reports and descriptions, seeking quick action.

These conversations can help us get connected to one another and allow us to understand something about our community. But they don’t tend to produce an inclusion that is sustainable over time and under pressure or the kind of accountability and commitment needed for a healthy parish.

Block proposes a new set of conversations. The first two conversations are:

Invitation

This sets up the conversation. Whom do we want in this conversation? What is the conversation they are being invited to join? Is it about a “possibility?” Emphasize freedom of choice in their attending or not.

Possibility

Having conversation about how to bring into being a new thing. This conversation is about developing a description of the new reality that those who have gathered will set out to create. The starting point is not about problem solving and improving what is. It is not goals or a blue-sky vision.

I’ll explore just the first conversation—invitation. This approach to “invitation” signals both the importance and genuineness about what will happen at the meeting. If you are invited, it’s because someone believes you have something to bring to the discussion. There is some thought behind the invitation; it’s not open to all comers. We want “you” to be with us. The invitation is also offered in a manner that asks the person to consider if they really want to be there. This approach to invitation sets things up for human connection and productivity.

But this approach also means violating the norms of politeness and inclusion common in many parishes. Some will feel excluded, even hurt, and it’s important to understand the thinking behind the approach and its appropriate uses, including the extent of exclusion in any given situation. Different situations require different levels of inclusion, voice, and commitment. See additional information, below, in the section on Internal Commitment, Discernment and, especially Regular Community Meetings.

Using Block’s method in beginning groups, whether for mutual spiritual guidance or a finance committee, means that those in the room are more likely to be ready for a significantly higher level of productivity and accountability than is often true in our parishes. Invitation and possibility are followed by the conversations of ownership, dissent including doubt, commitment, and gifts.

For Block, this is a process that has the effect of building community. Stephen Covey said, “Nothing is more exciting and bonding in relationships than creating together.” It’s important that we combine this with appreciation for what has already been created and is now part of parish life. Receive the

tradition and innovate. Do both. Create new ways to engage the ancient. This is an emphasis on putting our energy into creating and shaping our life together.

Self-disclosure is another community building method involving talking and listening. Helene Oswald described two forms of self-disclosure⁵⁰ that she called personalness and openness. Her view was that both could increase trust. Each can be useful in establishing and maintaining relationships. It's a matter of emotional intelligence to understand each and know which best fits a particular situation or relationship.

Personalness is “revealing intimate, personal details of your private life.” Openness is “revealing how you perceive and react to the present situation[sharing what you are feeling or thinking or wanting at that moment; telling another person how his/her behavior is affecting you.”

Oswald continues:

Some people mistake being personal for being open. They try to get emotionally close to another by making highly personal confessions about their lives. Sharing information about one's past may lead to a temporary feeling of intimacy, but a relationship is built by disclosing your reactions to events you both experience or to what the other person says or does.

A person comes to know you, not through your past history, but through encountering you in what you do and say in the present. Openness requires a willingness to risk rejection. However, being open also carries the potential for being recognized as authentic, for gaining respect, and for establishing a norm of integrity in the relationship. Being open with warm positive feelings and reactions communicates caring and affirmation. The other person(s) doesn't have to wonder about being heard or feeling supported.

Internal Commitment

The community's commitment to its own decisions is directly related to its health. The internal commitment of a critical mass of members to the parish's direction and culture is interdependent with a variety of other things—trust, collaboration, and the willingness of people to accept responsibility. All that is connected with the parish's ability to stay focused on its primary task of formation.

Commitment is built upon information and choice. The social scientist Chris Argyris developed a theory⁵¹ that assumes we want as much internal commitment as possible in an organization. The more people have such an ownership of the decisions made, the direction we are going in, the more it will be sustainable and survive under pressure. When there is internal commitment it's more likely that people will have energy for it and act to implement the decision.

Leaders develop such commitment not by exhortation and pressure but through attention to the decision making process. The more people get engaged with information about an issue (ideas, feelings, research), the more equipped they are to see the options available and make informed decisions. The more they are making decisions based on a free choice, rather than from coercion or habit, the greater the likelihood they will have the commitment necessary to follow through.

Obviously it's not possible for the whole community to be involved in all the decisions any parish needs to make. The priest, vestry, or those with designated authority need to make the routine decisions that keep a parish working. Leaders also need to accept responsibility to act in situations of crisis when timely action is essential. On occasion leaders also will need to be the emotional circuit

breakers when the community is extremely anxious. This is the legitimate case for hierarchy in any organization or community.

Argyris's theory isn't a case for having the whole community involved in any particular decision. It's simply to say that, to the extent people are involved, the information they are working with is valid and useful, and they have real choices before them, the likelihood of ending up with strong internal commitment is increased.

Discernment

Discernment has become a frequently misused concept in the church. Some clergy and parishes get carried away thinking that all decision-making is discernment. One parish was going to discern what kind of copier to purchase, as though God had a particular brand and model in mind.

One way of thinking about discernment processes in the community is that they have to do with decisions requiring us to see what's not obvious[maybe to be able to see "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, and whatever is commendable." (Philippians 4:8). Discernment suggests the desire and ability to look beyond what is apparent, to use our capacity for reflection, empathy and practical judgment so we might see clearly.

Discernment and decision-making are interrelated processes. The parish needs valid and useful information, clarity about its choices, freedom from coercion and destructive repetitive patterns, and emotional maturity in its leadership. We also need an understanding of the spiritual life, ways of being reflective, and a functional spiritual discipline.

It is a destructive and mistaken assumption to think that God has one right answer or path for us and we are to "discern" it. It's a misguided view to think of discernment as "uncovering" what God wills for us. Real discernment is an engagement with God, at times a wrestling with God, leading us to holiness as a community and as individuals.

Discernment is collaboration with God in shaping our common life. Thomas Merton expressed it this way, "Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny—to work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls 'working out salvation,' is a labor which requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears."

Communal discernment is the process by which a community of faith seeks to see God's movement in the world and in that community's life. It is our attempt to see "rightly;" to see our experience and our goals through the eyes of Christ. It is our striving to listen deeply and grow in our conformity with God's love for us.

There may be many faithful pathways for a parish or an individual. Discernment isn't about finding the one right way. It is about grounding our life in prayer, reflectiveness, and community. It is also about testing the spirit of our decisions: can we see the Spirit's movement, the influence of the church and a consistency with history and gifts?

Communal discernment is already happening in all Christian communities. It may be more or less skilled, grounded or intentional in various communities. To the extent a community is grounded in Eucharist and the daily prayers, and has ways of being reflective, that will show itself in the decisions made and the life lived.

In any case, our discernment is only confirmed over time. It is confirmed by the experience and acceptance of the community.

The measure is whether the decision brought us to holiness rather than whether the decision was “correct.”

Regular community meetings

The parish community needs regular meetings over the course of the year. At times the whole parish, at other times a congregation within the parish. That will depend on the issues to be engaged. These meetings need to make use of the methods known to facilitate dialogue and listening. Having three or four such meetings each year provides the opportunity to engage more people in the significant questions of the community’s life.

It is important that these not turn into “town meetings” with their image of a contentious and argumentative spirit. It’s also important that they not undercut the responsibility of the rector and vestry for decisions they have to make. They are a chance for leaders to test things with the community and for the community to hear its own voice. The effect of such regular gatherings is usually increased trust and commitment.

Wait for all to arrive

You may recall the 2010 experience of the 33 miners in Chile. There had been a cave-in on August 5. For 17 days no one above ground knew if the miners were alive. Engineers drilling in search finally found them. They were underground for 69 days and they all survived.

In their time in the mine they developed a working community that included smaller groupings of eleven, and involved prayer and an interesting norm around meals. As of early September the hole through which all materials, food and messages had to pass was just 4 inches across. Luis Urzua, the shift leader, insisted that all the miners wait until everyone got food through the borehole before anyone began to eat.⁵²

This is an act of community that we see in First Corinthians, 11:33 (“when you come together to eat, wait for one another”) and Benedict’s Rule. Benedict wanted all to gather for the meal so they could all “pray together and sit down to table at the same time.”

In the same chapter of the Rule a similar expectation is applied to the Office. Along with that expectation comes one about personal responsibility.

As soon as the signal for the time of the divine office is Herbert let everyone, leaving whatever he has in his hands, hasten with all speed, yet with gravity, that there may be no cause for levity. Therefore, let nothing be preferred to the work of God. Rule of Saint Benedict Chapter XLIII

A parish can engage several related spiritual practices that can build up the community.

- Arrange meals in a way that easily allows all to begin eating at the same time.
- Wait for all to arrive before beginning a meeting. When a person needs to leave the room, suspend the discussion until all are together again.
- Don’t have any other activities taking place at the times of Eucharist and Office. The parish business office can take a break and meetings can begin after the times of worship.

Around the circle

This is a useful method of allowing everyone to be heard, and is something I've used with up to 45 people. Participants speak in turn around the circle. The comment is to be brief and on one point. The method helps equalize the voices in the room so the more hesitant are heard along with the more assertive. It can be especially useful when dealing with controversial issues.

Variations include the fishbowl and the Samoan circle. The methods are defined in different ways by various facilitators. In both cases there is a group that sits within the larger circle of participants and engages in a conversation. The inner group is to consist of the various positions on an issue, or might be an "expert panel."

Depending on your objectives and issues, such as the time available, the outer group might remain silent, or there might be an opportunity for comment or questions from the outer circle, or there might be a way for someone from the outer circle to join the inner circle.

Testing

In a testing process an issue is identified and a spectrum, scale, is created to reflect the views present in the community. For example:

The "testing process" can be done for a few minutes at coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at parish community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered and can respond and discuss the result, formally or informally.

Face-to-face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response. A rule of thumb might be to use a "testing process" about four times per year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry.

We need to do less of this	We need to stay with the current amount	We need to do more of this
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The testing process is a way to find out where the larger community stands on certain questions or issues. It helps both the community and the leadership get a sense of where the group is collectively.

It's important for parish leaders and the congregation to understand that the testing process is *not* a way to shift decision-making authority to a vote of the congregation. The results do not mean that any particular change will take place.

Examples of useful areas to test: satisfaction with the amount of silence in liturgy; sense of understanding and competence with using the Daily Office; satisfaction with existing methods of Reflection; overall satisfaction with parish life.

Examples of ways of framing questions or the discussion that are *not* useful include setting up binary responses, such as, "I would prefer piano music to the organ at 10:30." Similarly, you don't want to test in areas where the group is not competent to respond.

Context matters. It might, for instance, be very useful for the rector to gather specific feedback about liturgical issues or her sermons from a small, trusted group of parishioners who know something about

liturgy and about homiletics. This would not, however, be a useful exercise if expanded to the parish as a whole.

Arrangement of space

Peter Block maintains that in arranging meeting space we are trying “to build relatedness, accountability, and commitment.” “Physical space is more decisive in creating community than we realize. Most meeting spaces are designed for control, negotiation, and persuasion...Community is built when we sit in circles, when there are windows and the walls have signs of life, when every voice can be equally heard.” Block prefers that there be no tables.⁵⁴

Circles provide a sense of closeness, allow people to better notice body language, and invite people to lean in toward one another. When the work involves processes such as brainstorming, group problem solving or strategizing, or the use of a method such as force field analysis or SWOT, the circle can be opened at an end to allow the use of newsprint pads for recording the work. In those cases the objective is to maximize the ability of people to see one another and the workspace with the newsprint pads.

Use of newsprint (flip chart pads)

Using newsprint pads to record the group’s thinking can improve participation, reduce repetition, and help people feel heard.

The best arrangement is to have pegs in a wall allowing several pads to be hung. It’s better use of space, reduces the number of flip chart easels a parish needs, and eliminates the temptation to “flip” the page over and thus hide the work just completed.

Reflection & Community: Integration

Rising from the “ground” of Eucharist and Daily Office are two activities that serve to integrate life: reflection and community. The weekly practice of Eucharist, along with the daily practice of Office, familiarize us with the ways of heaven. Abraham Heschel saw worship as “a way of seeing the world in the light of God.”

Community and reflection are part of what makes life whole. What we have become acclimated to in worship, the habits of good liturgy (listening, engagement, patience, and so on), shape our contemplation and are enfleshed in our life with others.