

WISDOM LEADERSHIP

from the Perspective of an American Prioress

CIB
Rome
September, 2006

INTRO:

How honored am I to be addressing you about a subject so close to our hearts as monastic leadership! Having heard Sister Aquinata's insightful and thorough treatment of wisdom leadership in the RB, I will now add my own version of the practical side of leadership in a community of sisters. I have had the privilege of serving my community as prioress for nearly 16 blessed years and will share with you what I have learned from those years – what I have been taught by my sisters with whom I share this journey.

The questions surfaced by the CIB at your meeting in Poland were sent to me and I am also making an attempt to address some of the issues surfaced at that gathering.

Because I am in some small way representing Sister Ruth Fox, O.S.B., I think it only fair to give you the main point of her wonderfully helpful book, Wisdom Leadership. Ruth begins by showing us how Jesus Christ embodies the feminine wisdom of God. She then goes on to say that “if Christ is the Wisdom of God, and the prioress holds the place of Christ, then the prioress represents divine Wisdom in the monastery.”¹ In chapter after chapter we are treated to the very practical aspects of monastic leadership in a women's community and how they tap into wisdom leadership. I certainly recommend it to you as a guide; however, I was given the task of speaking to you from my own experience so I will leave Ruth's book to your reading and talk to you in my own words.

MISSION/VISION AND MAINTENANCE

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the prioress of a non-cloistered monastery is the balance between mission and maintenance. As our North American communities age and grow fewer in number, we find ourselves as leaders, being pulled more and more to the maintenance issues of community life. Who is going to keep this ministry going? Who is going to take Sister _____ to her doctor's appointment? How long can the older sisters continue to do dishes? How many hats can one person wear? If even one person drops out of the critical work force, the strains on community can get really intense until another solution is found. How are we going to finance a new roof or a new road? Can we have a successful capital campaign to raise money for a new addition to our school? Fewer and fewer sisters are earning salaries and our budget constraints are growing. The

¹ Ruth Fox, OSB Wisdom Leadership: Reflections on the Ministry of Monastic Leaders
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hardest and most time-consuming, of course, are issues that have to do with difficult persons in our communities – persons who are dysfunctional and require the lion’s share of the prioress’s attention. With these heavy burdens facing us every day, it is hard to find the light of vision and yet we must be committed to doing so. We must enliven a sense of mission in the community, constantly work on our Benedictine presence in our local area and society, mindfully tend our dreams, or else our communities will surely die with no legacy to leave.

In order to keep the charism alive, we write philosophy statements, mission statements, vision statements – all of which express our Benedictine values in relationship to our culture, our world, our particular time and place on this planet. In other words, we have learned to process well but we must be careful that this process is internalized and not just an exercise to go through periodically and the results put on a shelf. In order to keep the mission alive and prioritize our hopes, dreams, needs and concerns, we engage in regular long-range planning, strategic planning, direction-setting. This is usually done in conjunction with the election of prioress and with the help of an outside facilitator. Because our elections are held regularly, from 4-6 year intervals, we have new or renewed energy in our leadership and a regular cycle of planning which keeps us looking ahead and “chugging” along. We also have regular visitations, and Federation General Chapters. These provide direction, keep our feet to the path and help us to examine the quality of our lived Benedictine experience. The reality of our situation must certainly be taken into account, viability must be ascertained and monitored regularly.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE SIDE OF MONASTIC LEADERSHIP

The position of prioress has become layered with more and more administrative responsibilities. I realized that when I was having business cards made and almost put my title as president of the corporation instead of prioress of the community! There are land issues, building issues, legal issues and allegations to deal with as well as all of the administrative details that come with having community ministries. In my own community we have five corporate ministries and one sponsored ministry. Each of our ministries has its own lay board. I personally have six boards to keep up with, not counting the local Sisters’ Council, the diocesan and national Bishop’s Advisory Committees and other organizations to which I belong or have been appointed. The business of being a monastic leader can be quite intense, quite time-consuming. It requires knowledge, keeping up with trends, and knowing one’s own limitations. The big challenge in all of this is not letting these administrative duties override or completely overshadow the spiritual side of leadership. Having time for individual sisters can feel like an interruption to a busy administrator, instead of being a gift to a monastic leader.

Because of our outside ministries, hospitality in welcoming guests, and providing spiritual programs for the laity, we sisters’ communities have a fairly public face in our dioceses. With the growing trend towards conservatism in our Church, we often find ourselves in conflict with our local bishops and clergy. If we are lucky, we can stay under the radar, but often, instead of being valued by diocesan officials as the spiritual

treasure that we are, we are ignored, shunned or seen as actively posing a threat to the Church. As monastic leaders we are constantly trying to build bridges of understanding with our local church, trying to establish some kind of relationships with our local bishops, working to find some area of common understanding to build upon when, in fact, we are growing further apart in theology and practice.

INTERACTION WITH THE LAITY

A most grace-filled aspect of our non-cloistered communities is a high level of interaction with and dependence upon the laity. One of the blessings that has come from the challenges of diminishment is that we have really grown in our ability to incorporate the laity into our ministries. Of our six ministries, four are under the direction of a lay person. We work very hard at what we call “mission effectiveness,” which means keeping our Benedictine charism alive in our ministries, even if we are not personally present to them. It is a challenge but an exciting one. I believe that we are strengthening the role of the lay person in our church by exposing them to Benedictine spirituality for their own personal formation and so much more. It can be a beautiful relationship and partnership.

We have growing Oblate programs, which, I think has its source in several cultural phenomena:

- The fact that lay persons are incorporated into our ministries and learn of the Benedictine spirituality through mission effectiveness programs
- The extensive hospitality that we offer on a regular basis, especially in our openness to having the laity join us for prayer and Eucharist
- The proliferation of books that are now being written by Oblates as well as Benedictine religious on the Rule of Benedict.
- The availability of information on our websites.

Because of our interaction with the laity, it is incumbent upon the prioress to be actively engaged in identifying and forming the message that we want to entrust to our lay partners. This is a critical area of wisdom leadership: always being on task and conscious of the way we express the charism of the Benedictine Order.

THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF MONASTIC LEADERSHIP

In June 2000 a car accident took from our midst one of the most gifted Benedictine leaders of our time – Sister Helen Lombard, former superior general of the Good Samaritan Sisters in Australia. During his homily at her funeral, Michael Casey said about Helen that “in the leadership she gave as superior, the concern for a deeper attachment to God’s Word was paramount. So much of what she did was geared towards fostering authentic growth in that inner discipleship that is called wisdom. Helen’s vision

of religious life was of a communion of disciples – committed adults gathered around the Word... Each member of the community was called not only to receive the Word but to minister the Word faithfully to others. She saw this shared discipleship as the prime source of unity and as an energy for accomplishing the purposes for which religious life exists.....”² You only had to be with Helen for a short time to know that Michael Casey’s words ring very true. She has long been an example to me of a monastic leader of great heart and wisdom and devotion to the Word. We Benedictine women in non-cloistered communities greatly value our contemplative tradition. Our contemplation flows from prayer and work, from liturgy and word – from an all-encompassing mindfulness. For me, monastic mindfulness means being aware of God’s presence and action in everything, every way, every person that life puts before me. It is incumbent upon me as a monastic woman to be faithful to prayer and *lectio* above all else so that I can be open to the voice of God and listen with all my being for that voice in the members of the community.

A huge area of concern, then, for the monastic leader of a non-cloistered community is the balance of prayer and work for herself and for the individual sisters. If a sister goes out to work for an eight-hour job, she needs to find her own rhythm of prayer and leisure and time for community. It is very difficult. Every year, we negotiate our daily horarium to fit the schedules of the sisters. We have Morning Prayer as early as we need to in order to accommodate the first sister out the door. Right now that means a 6:00 a.m. start to the community’s day. We have Evening Prayer after the supper meal so more sisters have a chance to get home from work. We have learned to live in a spirit of grateful flexibility as we change our schedule on weekends, on holidays and snow days, and in the summer to give us more rest when we can grab it. A good practice, which I encourage my sisters to develop, is that of taking what we call a “desert” day or retreat day off by themselves so that they can find some solitude and quiet in the midst of busy lives.

All that we do as leaders and individuals has to reflect our mission of having the Gospel as our guide and bearing that sacred Word to the world through ministry and hospitality, through the witness of community and the faithfulness to prayer.

THE PRIORESS AS COMMUNITY BUILDER

As prioress, I take care that apostolic ministry and lifestyle yield to community life, prayer and presence. We must spend quality time in building the community and its network of relationships. I do believe that our presence in community is a sacrament based on the commitment expressed in our monastic profession.

In Wisdom Leadership, Ruth Fox spends a good deal of time speaking of the teaching role of the prioress as leading by word and example. In her section on “Teaching by

² Michael Casey, OCSO, Homily given in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Sydney, Australia for the funeral of Sister Helen Lombard, SGS, June 2000

Example”³ in which she explores the impact of the example given by the prioress, Ruth says that the prioress “cannot escape the role of teacher because she teaches at all times by her way of life. The manner in which the prioress responds to the sisters ...seeking her attention manifests her love, respect and concern for each sister. Her joyful, consistent participation in liturgy, meals, meetings, and recreation teaches her sisters how a monastic woman enjoys and participates in community life. Her kindness and patience in difficult situations portrays the goodness of Christ. Her response to interruptions and requests teaches the community how they ought to respond in charity to one another. Every little word, every miniscule deed, is a smidgen of yeast that invigorates the flour of the community.”⁴ I interpret Ruth’s words as meaning that the prioress’ fidelity nurtures the community’s fidelity.

On a practical level, the prioress holds the members responsible for their engaged presence – physical, mental and emotional – at all required community gatherings. One of the questions we were given to ponder for this symposium was that of communication between prioress, council and chapter. The prioress is available enough for the individual members to have access to her (easier said in a community of 35 than in a community of several hundred.) Council meetings are scheduled regularly – monthly is the usual practice in our community. Chapter meetings are held at least once a year, and often more frequently. Many of our communities have regular gatherings or community days on specific topics for the communities enrichment and discussion. However meetings are held, it is the role of the monastic leader to call forth the wisdom of all the members. The climate created by the prioress is perhaps the most important factor in encouraging members to share their thoughts and opinions.

Another important function of the prioress is to develop leadership within the community. I won’t say a lot about this but just offer one thought – “monastic instinct.” This is a term which I first heard from Sister Karen Joseph of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Developing leadership in the community members takes me back to Chapter 21 of the Rule of Benedict on the deans of the monastery. Benedict uses goodness of life as a criteria for the deans, who were the natural leaders of the community. Some would call it monastic instinct. Others would know such persons as those who cooperate with the spirit – wisdom figures of the monastery. Be they old or young – we know them by the choices they make every day, by the instinct that so clearly guides them. To these members we entrust responsible positions.

It is up to the prioress to remind the community constantly that each person’s faithfulness gives heart to every other sister’s monastic journey. We are all in this together.

³ Fox, Wisdom Leadership, Chapter 2 “Wisdom Teacher,” pp.28-29

⁴ Ibid, p.29

TENDING TO RELATIONSHIPS

If you were to ask me what I believe each sister in the community wants more than anything else, I would say that each of my sisters desires to be respected, affirmed and listened to. They want to know that their opinion counts, that their person is respected for all the giftedness that abides in them, that they are good women who live the life the best way that they can and, above all, that they have the community's best interest at heart. I firmly believe that this is true about my community members. It is very important for me to affirm this truth in them constantly. It is up to me to keep my ear to the ground— to know where the community is, what direction they truly seek, to nudge them, to encourage them, to bring out their gifts and best selves.

Tending to relationships requires the constant encouragement to the community to live their lives in a stance of reconciliation and forgiveness. To use a line from Isaiah, I must be a “repairer of the breach” (*Isaiah 58:12*) and call the sisters to offer forgiveness and reconciliation to one another. It is out of my own woundedness and vulnerability that I do so. As our subprioress, Sister Glenna, said in a talk to the community, “It is when I am actually feeling furious, jealous, confused, righteous, afraid – and still respond with my own truth and out of respect – that I am a repairer of the breach. What a difference it makes to respond with respect and humility. What a burden is lifted when I acknowledge my limits and my own breaches.”⁵ I believe that little tears in the fabric of community – little individual broken relationships, if left unattended, can eventually widen until the material is shredded and falls apart. I firmly believe that there is no outside force that can tear a community apart – only from the inside can a community disintegrate. How very important it is, then, for the monastic leader to call upon all of her sources of wisdom, to call upon the indwelling of the Spirit, to call upon the grace of her office, to offer her own example, in strengthening the fabric of community life.

My experience tells me that the greatest gift we monastic leaders can give our community is to work from this premise: the members have love for their prioress and for one another. If we can strengthen this circle of love so that it is the all-encompassing image for the community of themselves, they will act out of this belief. I personally try to do this by tending to my relationships with my sisters constantly. I have memorized the list of community members and every day, as part of my *lectio*, I review that list, asking myself how I think each person is doing and how my relationship with her is progressing. To whom do I need to give more attention? The dear (and sometimes not so dear) faces of my sisters are always before me.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I suggest that we remember that we are human and that the Spirit of Wisdom can only work through us when we acknowledge our own frailty. As much as we want to set all things right with our community, we have to know that this is an

⁵ Glenna Smith, O.S.B. in a talk given at Saint Benedict Monastery, Bristow, Virginia, June 2006.

impossible task and should not be the focus of our time in office. Wisdom calls us to leadership at this particular time because the community needs whatever gifts we can bring to the office. We do what we can with the energy, faith, hope, counsel and vision that is granted to us. All the time that we are in office we are trying to be the best persons we can be as simple monastics who happen to be abbesses or prioresses but who also have to tend to our own needs, weaknesses, spiritual longings, and personal search for God.

May the spirit of Scholastica and Benedict enliven us, may the Spirit of Wisdom guide us, may our own community members give us courage and inspiration.