

Appreciative Discernment

This morning we are beginning the very important work of this Assembly- discerning a vision of the future and discerning and electing the leadership team that will help us to live our hopes and dreams for the future into reality.

The process that we will use is Appreciative Discernment. This is an approach to this activity that is based on an organizational dynamics theory of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Many of you are familiar with this process from the work of discernment in your own units. For others this will be a new theory and new experience to this faithful work. We will begin this morning; during this session:

1. I will explain the theory and I will try to strike a balance between giving enough information to those who do not have any previous experience and not boring those with that knowledge already. I'm going to move quickly and I need you to let me know if I'm not explaining adequately and if I need to give more information to be clear.
2. Very briefly, I'm going to give you a preview of the path that our discernment journey will follow.

A. Discernment of Leadership

Fr. Francesco and the General Council proposed to the MMS, which they affirmed, that we use this approach for the General Assembly. Appreciative Discernment has been at the center of much of the work of this administration, because it embodies a view or understanding of community and community leadership.

As we enter into the process of elections, it is important that we share a common understanding of community and the activity of community leadership. We believe that for us to discern faithfully the election of leadership, we need to create a new culture about how they think about leadership.

This understanding is very simple and straight forward: We think/believe:

1. Leadership always happens in context.
2. Leadership is more a relationship than a set of tasks.

Leadership is not generic, but lived in a specific time and place. And it is the context that helps to determine the form of leadership that is needed. Leadership is for something—what kind of a community do we want to be? Where are we trying to get to? What is the vision that we want leadership to help us arrive at?

Before we can hold an election, we need the answer to these questions. So our first task during this assembly is to discern a vision for the congregation. We will work together and we will draft a vision or dream for what we believe God calls us to be and we will articulate that vision in a brief statement that describe our faithfulness; what are faithfulness will look like in 2019. In effect, this statement becomes the vision that we will keep before us during the term of the next General Administration. We will define this vision by lunch time on Thursday.

And leadership is a relationship- it is not something that someone does for us. This is very important because it accepts the definition of leadership found in our Constitution. C49: *The ministry of service and*

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leadership is not limited to those that hold administrative offices. Every member is to show a responsible initiative in promoting the welfare of the Congregation.

Leadership is not just an elected position, but a shared responsibility. This is necessary, because within our Congregation, the highest authority is never the one elected to the highest office of leadership; rather the highest authority is always the members of the community acting together in assembly. And while the Normative Text and Canon law does assign certain power and authority to those in elected office so that they can exercise the duties of their office that authority has to be exercised within the greater authority of the community. Simply- the one elected has to serve the community by helping them to make decisions and then to implement the legitimate decisions of the community.

B. AI & Appreciative Discernment

Appreciative Discernment is a 'baptized' version of the change theory of Appreciative Inquiry. While AI is not a theological theory, it is useful for Church groups because it recognizes the uniqueness of every organization and the importance that the organization creates its desired identity. For us, it allows us to use the religious values and principles that are important to us, as a guide for our planning. The basic question for guiding an Appreciative Inquiry planning process is: Who do you want to be? For us the answer is: We want to be a faithful community. The Appreciative Discernment process helps us to envision what that means for us and helps us to begin to live that faithful vision.

Appreciative Inquiry Explained

AI offers an understanding of the nature of an organization (community) that is radically different than our current cultural understanding. A community cannot be understood as a big clock (Newtonian physics)- but must be seen as an organic whole. In AI theory, an organization is viewed as a whole system that is more than just the sum of its parts. AI change theory says that you can't dismantle an organization; rather you need to effect change and improve the organization by engaging the whole system.

Appreciative Inquiry theory of organizational dynamics holds that an organization will move towards that about which it most persistently inquires. So to bring about change/reconciliation, you don't focus on the problems that you might want to identify. You don't ask: What's the problem and how do we fix it? Instead, AI theory suggests that you must inquiry about that which gives you life and your dreams for the future and then design a way to live into that vision. That is what we are going to do.

A. Some key principles of AI

1. The Constructionist Principle: we create our own reality.
 - an organization's inner dialogue.
 - An important task of leadership is to help the community to have a focus the dialogue
 - God creates us to be co-creators of creation.
2. Poetic Principle: the organization is an open book- we can choose our focus.
 - We move towards what we think and talk about: discuss your problems and problems tend to grow and we get 'stuck' in the problems; talk about your dreams and energy gets created and you move towards your dream.

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- Inner dialogue of an organization is like a movie that unfolds and pulls us towards that future; that is what we are doing these three days—we are creating the script of the movie- creating the vision that will pull us towards a desired future.
 - God gives us the freedom of will to choose our focus.
3. The Anticipatory Principle: we create what we expect.
- Not I'll believe it when I see it- But I'll see it when I believe it.
 - This is the power of faith; it can change what we believe is our reality. Often in the healing stories of the gospel Jesus tell the one who was healed: *It is your faith that has healed you.*
 - We use our faith to imagine and create a faithful future.
 - *So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Lk 11:9-10)*
4. The Positive Principle: a positive focus leads to positive action.
- Keep a vision before you and you will move towards that vision.
 - *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil. 4:8)*

5 D Process (Use the figure)

Definition: Our AD process will revolve around this topic: **A prophetic, multicultural communion for the renewal of the Church and the reconciliation of the world.** This topic was defined at the 2012 meeting of Major Superiors. This is a simple and somewhat generic description of what that group determined to be our most faithful identity.

- As a religious congregation we acknowledge the traditional role of institutes of consecrated life to be a prophetic voice within the Church and world; to be a voice that is able to speak with the authority that is rooted in a vocation from God.
- That we value the giftedness that we have as an international community and a desire that our diversity be brought together and celebrated as a communion in which God is our center and around which our community life is a prophetic sign of unity.
- We acknowledge the foundational vision of St. Gaspar, whose great love of the Church filled him with a desire to bring together a community that would help the Church to be her very best self.
- And we claimed again the belief that we have discovered in our own congregational renewal that our spirituality gives us a mission in the world as agents of reconciliation and ambassadors of Christ.

It is these things, this grand and overriding topic that we want to explore through our dialogue and to discern together what this calls us to be in today's Church and world.

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Discovery: The starting point is discovering the positive core- what does 'us at our best' look like? For us this is an exploration of how our charism is being lived today. This is not a theoretical or even a spiritual look at charism, but a look at the lived experience of charism.

This part of the process has already begun. Because AD has a principle that we involve the whole system, the MMS determined that we would engage the entire membership in an exploration of our charism and our dream for the future. In a variety of ways, but most through district meetings, we asked the members to tell the stories of how they live our charism and to envision a faithful future and to share their hopes and dreams for the future of the congregation. As delegates you were asked to be familiar with the results of that community wide dialogue so that you can be a true representative of your unit in the process that we will do here at the General Assembly. You are here, not to just speak for yourselves and to share your opinions, but to be the voice of your brothers back home.

Dream: Just what it says- what is our dream for the future? Where do we want to go? A vision for the future that stretches us beyond the good that is already present as we try to imagine what it would look like for us to take all the gifts/blessings that God gives to us and then using those gifts to the fullest. This is about accepting the responsibility to be the co-creators of our community. We are able to construct/create the community that God calls us to be. It is in this stage of the process, that we define the community that is the context in which we want to elect leadership. Here we answer the question: Leadership for what?

Design: What has to happen for the dream to be realized? Are there changes that we need to make to our: Structures, policies, procedures, practices etc; so that the dream can be realized?

For us, this will begin on Thursday afternoon. Thursday morning we will affirm our vision- in the afternoon we will ask the question: **What kind of leadership do we need if we are going to achieve and live into reality our vision.**

We will talk specifically about leadership as a preparation for the dialogue we need to have as we do the discernment in the election process. Thursday afternoon we will develop a vision of the leadership that we need and desire; and we will take that vision of leadership with us to a time of prayer.

Friday and Saturday we will prayerful begin to think about who we need to elect for the general leadership positions. We will go to the birthplace of the congregation, San Felice in Giano for prayerful reflect and dialogue. During these days we will also begin the election process and we will have a straw ballot for the election of the Moderator General and a straw ballot for the 4 Councilor position. These straw ballots are not nominations, in the legal sense; but will allow us to focus the dialogue and to engage those being considered for leadership election in a concrete way.

Doing: We will return to the Appreciative Discernment process after the elections and on Wednesday and Thursday of next week we will continue the process of designing the future and start to implement the design. This will take us into the Doing phase of the process. We want to be as concrete as we can in developing action plans for realizing our vision, with a shared commitment from all to implement those plans. Here we begin to acknowledge the ways in which the leadership relationship is lived out and the various faithful ways that individuals share in the responsibility. We do not want to create a 'To Do' list for the next General Administration. We want to create a concrete plan that expresses a shared congregational commitment to the ways in which we will be: **A prophetic, multicultural communion for the renewal of the Church and the reconciliation of the world.**