



Collaboration is a popular concept in church circles, but how exactly do we carry it out gracefully?

Collaboration is at the heart of the Encuentro Project, an effort at the United States-Mexico border spearheaded by several religious institutes. Pictured here is Brother Todd Patenaude, F.M.S. (right) with a colleague in the Encuentro Project. The project has several components, from direct aid to education.

Reprinted with permission from HORIZON, journal of the National Religious Vocation Conference

# Seven keys to Christ-centered collaboration

BY FATHER FRANK DONIO, S.A.C. AND BARBARA MCCRABB



Father Frank Donio, S.A.C. is the executive director of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and is the founding director of the Catholic Apostolate Center. He also serves on the leadership team of the Immaculate Conception Province of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottines). Barbara



McCrabb is the Assistant Director for Higher Education in the Secretariat of Catholic Education at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

**A**S WE DISCUSS the seven keys to Christ-centered collaboration, we want to encourage you to begin your initiatives with collaboration in mind from the very beginning. In that way, you can proceed in an inclusive and communal fashion that engages those who want to be involved—those who recognize the need to act, who are prepared to analyze the situation, discern how best to act, and who are ready to collectively move forward. Ideally the collaborative approach is the starting point.

While starting with collaboration is the ideal, sometimes people encounter resistance to collaboration and resistance to the possibility of change associated with it. Often such pushback comes from a lack of familiarity with one another, fear of the unknown, or simply from the comfort people have with how things are now. So we need to keep in mind that there can be resistance to collaboration.

Sometimes when we look at change, a single person might try to impact a situation. A person might try to change things on their own by making decisions and then trying to get others to agree and work with

them on a particular effort. That approach describes collaboration *for* something, which focuses on the task.

Another approach involves gathering influential people and those with a stake in the outcome of a project. That describes collaboration *with*, where the emphasis is on who is around the table helping make decisions. In both approaches, if we think about collaboration from the beginning of a project, it becomes a more wholistic method for working together. A third way engages all those who want to play a part, especially those impacted by the decisions to be made. Let's unpack some keys to this third approach.

## 1) Christ

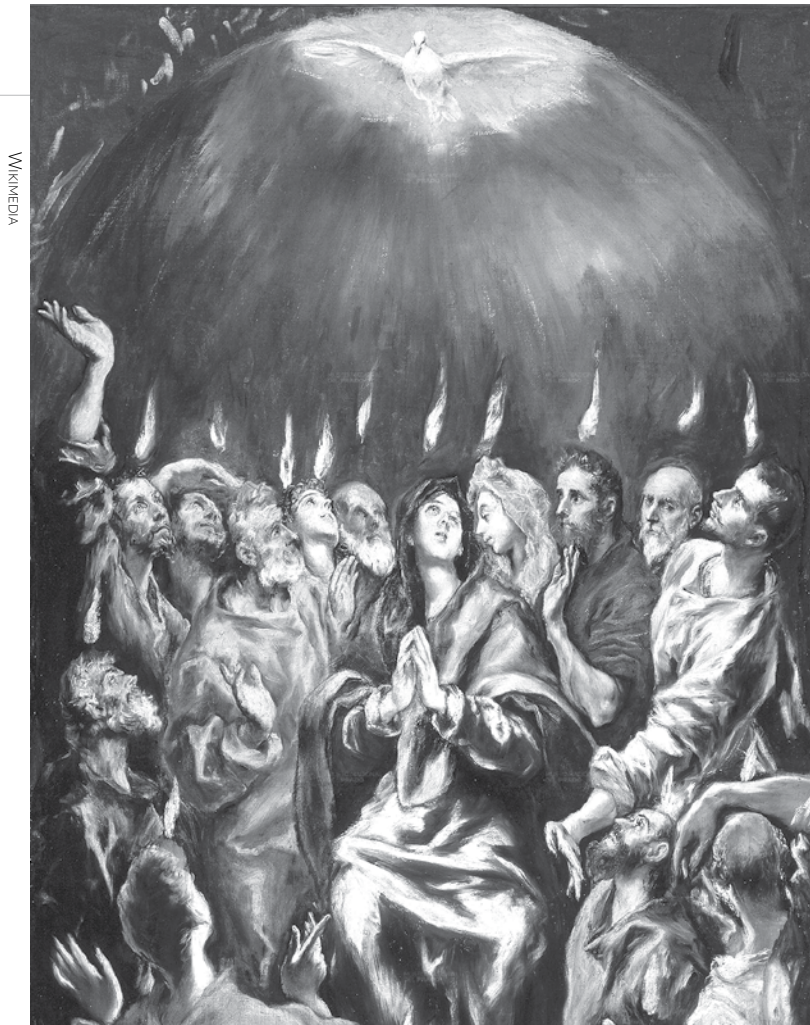
The first key to collaboration is, of course, Christ, the one whom we, the baptized, want to place at the center of our lives, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Christ is the center of all we do, and he is the one who sends us out and accompanies us. Being centered on Christ helps us to recognize that we are part of his body, the church. We are not just individuals on our own journeys, separate from one another.

As a project begins, we might ask ourselves whose mission we are on together. Certainly, we are on the mission of Christ. That is apparent in the gospels and also in the history and teachings of the church. We need an ongoing encounter with Christ in order to move forward in service to him, together with one another.

## 2) Cenacle

We might think of the Cenacle as a particular way we experience this idea of collaboration. In the image of the Cenacle by El Greco on this page we see Mary, the Holy Spirit (in the form of a dove), and the disciples and apostles gathered together. All are in the presence of the Spirit. It is that communal experience of prayer, discernment, and action that should root our collaboration. It is the upper room experience where we receive the Spirit and are sent out with the gifts we have been given. Collaboration is meant to be done in unity with the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, the differences between people and between communities prove uncomfortable. But it is the Holy Spirit who transforms the experience of fragmentation and even conflict into an experience of unity. We might look at how we promote inclusion when we try to incorporate the full diversity of the church into our efforts. If we become too self-focused in that process, we can lose the larger picture. If

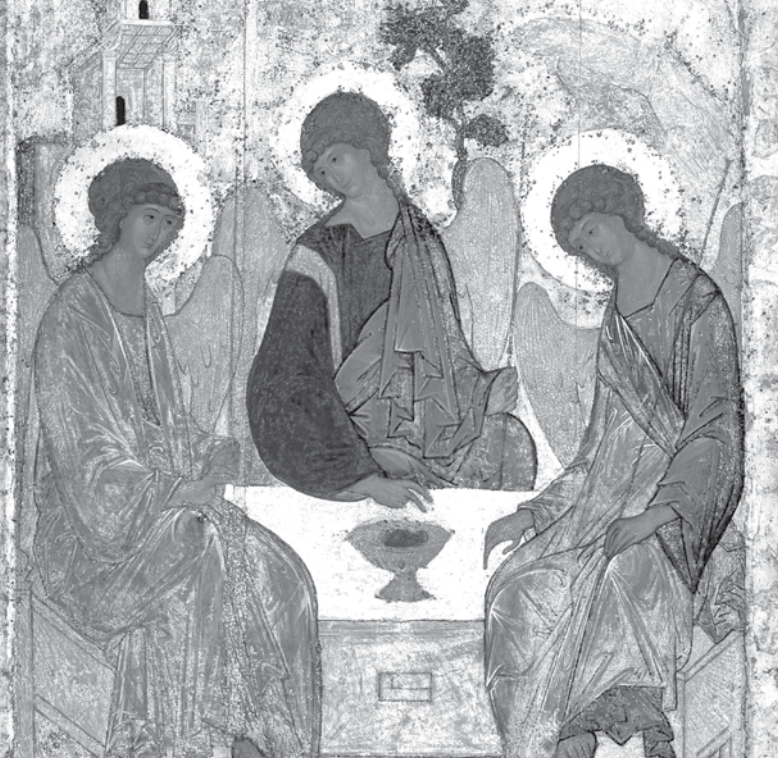


The Cenacle, by El Greco

we're overly focused on representing each difference, we can end up magnifying what divides us. Pluralism and diversity are great things, but when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit can transform our diversity into a unitive experience.

## 3) *Communio*

The third key for Christ-centered collaboration is *communio*. The icon [on page 12] is by the Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev and it depicts the Terebinth at Mamre. It shows the angels who visited Abraham in the form of travelers seeking food. Christians have always seen these angels as a theophany, a visible manifestation of God, and a prefiguring of the Trinity collaborating together. And so, we too collaborate with the Trinity. We see this relationship of love among God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit that is poured out in the incarnation. Christ has come into the world, and the Word is made flesh. We are drawn into relationship with each other with and through Christ. The Trinity draws us into relationship. Living in cooperation with the Trinity, everything we



WIKIMEDIA

Terebinth at Mamre by Andrei Rublev.

do reflects this communion. Everything we do is a communion. As Christians we are in communion with one another. Saint Paul refers to the communion among the Trinity in his words to the early church: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:14). We are called to communion, and that calling is core to our collaboration.

#### 4) Cooperation

Let’s turn now to cooperation, our fourth key to Christ-centered collaboration. There can be a certain functionality to cooperation. I (Father Frank) have traveled and worked in a variety of ministerial settings that represent a wide ecclesiological spectrum of our church, and I wonder if we honestly take time to truly know one another and seek avenues of cooperation. Or do we prefer to work strictly with people who are just like us? Are we willing to cooperate and work with those whose vision of the church is different? Do we take time to understand their perspective?

Jesus calls us to go to the margins, and Pope Francis has emphasized this. We’re encouraged to be with people who are not necessarily like us, to share our gifts and to be open to the gifts of the other. I (Barbara) once worked to help create a leadership institute for campus ministry, and one of my best experiences of collaboration in ministry was when the national team came together to develop that project. We had six campus ministers from all

over the country, each with a student leader from their campus. In our work to prepare the institute—which was essentially a leadership-in-ministry training program for students and campus ministers—we brought our best efforts to the table. We brought our best thinking, our best experiences, and these enriched our work. We shared and critiqued each other’s ideas toward a constructive end. Through that openness, trust, and willingness to accept and give criticism, we were able to achieve a good result.

Another perspective on cooperation comes from Pope Francis, who talks about the disease of poor coordination, that once members of a church group lose communion and cooperation among themselves, the body loses its harmonious function, its equilibrium. It then becomes an orchestra that produces noise. There’s not a harmony among the members of the group creating an effective, enjoyable experience. Harmony comes from cooperation.

#### 5) Communication

Communication is another important key to collaboration centered on Christ. We’re talking about communication that is more than a dialogue between two people, rather a trialogue, communication that includes God. We don’t necessarily recognize that God is in the midst of our communication. In collaboration we’re meant to stop, recognize God’s presence, and bring it into our discernment. Sometimes we begin a meeting with a prayer, but then that’s it. God doesn’t really come into the picture unless we stop for a moment and recognize that is the case.

Again, Pope Francis provides insights on this topic. He talks about the “disease of excessive planning and functionalism.” In a 2014 address to the Roman Curia, he wrote: “When the apostle plans everything down to the last detail and believes that with perfect planning things will fall into place, he becomes an accountant or an office manager. Things need to be prepared well, but without ever falling into the temptation of trying to contain and direct the freedom of the Holy Spirit, which is always greater and more flexible than any human planning.” Pope Francis invites us to recognize that the Holy Spirit is active in our time together. We can make our plans, but many times we have to risk in order to move forward, going beyond “business as usual.”

#### 6) Compassion

When we take risks in our efforts at collaboration, we

do so in a spirit of compassion. You may recall the times that Pope Francis washed the feet of prisoners during Holy Week. In 2016, the Jubilee of Mercy called us to remember how to live mercy in our daily lives, and that call continues. We are called to witness the compassion of Christ to one another. We're called to live as Jesus proclaimed after washing the feet of his apostles: "As I have done for you, you should also do" (John 13:15)." What we do as ministers of the church is not about us; it's about Christ and his mission.

Consider those tender moments. There are days when it takes all we have to simply be in the room at a particular meeting, let alone continue with some collaborative effort. There are difficult days. We might not have much to say at a meeting because we're struggling with a personal issue. We might not be comfortable sharing our thoughts but instead turn to a friend or confidante to talk about them. It is amazing the number of people we encounter in our day-to-day lives who just below the surface struggle and suffer. On any given day, their burden can be particularly difficult. The key is compassion, our willingness to accept and embrace that people carry grief or anger or anxiety or any number of other burdens. How we share compassion with one another is very important in pastoral work, including how we treat our fellow ministers.

Now there are still those who come to the church with a desire for power—and that can disrupt our efforts at collaboration—but that power is not really our focal point when we are working together. We may find it strange but it happens often: we can move the focus away from power and back to our ministry priorities when we operate out of a sense of compassion, when we ask how we can assist each other in sharing a sense of God's mercy. How do we live compassion?

## 7) Co-responsibility

Our final key to Christ-centered collaboration is co-responsibility, the idea that we are all co-responsible for the mission of Christ. That concept, while preached from the Second Vatican Council onward, has not necessarily permeated the church community. We have been invited in recent years by Popes Benedict and Francis to engage even further in carrying out the mission of Christ. But there is a reluctance among many of the baptized to do so. Partially it may stem from an unwillingness to follow these keys as a way to greater co-responsibility.

We are all called to co-responsibility for the mission of Christ and the church, starting with our encounter

with Christ, who accompanies us, draws us into communion with one another and then sends us out. That sending out involves everyone, not just a certain few.

Co-responsibility does not diminish the diversity of roles. Not everybody has the same role; in reality people have different roles. There are many roles but one mission. Whose mission? Christ's mission. What mission? The evangelization, by the baptized, of all people. Pope Francis tells us we are all called by the Holy Spirit who enriches the entire evangelizing church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to build and renew the church. All the baptized in their diversity of roles and gifts and charisms are drawn into collaboration with one another and aided by the development of co-responsibility.

§ § § §

We encourage church ministers to choose the path of collaboration from the very beginning of their projects and to recognize the role of the seven keys we've outlined here. Healthy church collaboration is founded on three fundamental aspects: a Cenacle spirituality, a communion or *communio* ecclesiology, and a cooperation that includes communication and compassion. These elements, when combined, integrate the spiritual, the ecclesial, and the human dimensions in mission, resulting in a wholistic and pastoral way of being church that is truly Christ-centered. These six keys are critical to the final key, which is co-responsibility.

This framework fosters collaborative and co-responsible action that advances the work of the church. Remember, the mission of the church isn't simply the work of the baptized, it is also the work of the Holy Spirit. We're doing this together. A small portion of the baptized are going to be involved as full-time ministers in the church as laity, priests, or consecrated persons. But these are not the majority of the church. The majority of the church are the baptized who are sent. Equipped with these seven keys for Christ-centered collaboration, all the baptized can be co-responsible for the mission of Christ in the world. ■

*This article is drawn from a presentation originally given by Father Frank Donio, S.A.C. at a J.S. Paluch Vocation Seminar and later presented by him and Barbara McCrabb as a webinar of the Catholic Apostolate Center. View it at: [catholicapostolatecenter.org/collaboration-in-ministry](http://catholicapostolatecenter.org/collaboration-in-ministry).*