



## Wisdom and Leadership

*Declan O'Byrne*

In her inaugural speech of the Sophia experience, Chiara Lubich said that the task of the school is to "teach you wisdom". We think that the same is true for the task of Together for a New Africa.

In Italian, the verb "to teach" comes from the Latin "Insignare", and means "to mark", "to fix" or "to impress" inside. The word therefore does not only mean transmitting information or knowledge, but leaving an approach to reality imprinted within. To understand the purpose of what we are about to undertake with Together for a New Africa, then, we must not think first of all about the contents or ideas we will talk about, but rather about what will be marked within us in these days. We propose a school of life and thought, where life and thought are not separate things, but are integrated with each other.

The school must teach "wisdom". Today, in these short comments, I want to say something about what wisdom it is. In reality, the success of Together for a New Africa depends on whether it is Wisdom that speaks and thinks in us - lecturers and students - about the task of being leaders of a new Africa.

Even if every human culture has its own idea of what wisdom is, we look in particular at the Jewish and then Christian idea of wisdom. In the Hebrew Bible there are 5 books that together form what is called "wisdom literature": Proverbs, Sirach, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Wisdom. The biblical idea of Wisdom is not limited to these books, of course, and – as we will see – is revolutionized in the New Testament.

Today comes from Proverbs 8: "wisdom is better than pearls, and all you can desire is not equal to it" (Proverbs 8,12). The text speaks of the incomparable value of wisdom.

Here is the text (Proverbs 8,1–21)

- 1** Does not wisdom call  
and understanding raise her voice?
- 2** On the heights, beside the way,  
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
- 3** beside the gates in front of the town,  
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:



- 4** “To you, O people, I call,  
and my cry is to all who live.
- 5** O simple ones, learn prudence;  
acquire intelligence, you who lack it.
- 6** Hear, for I will speak noble things,  
and from my lips will come what is right,
- 7** for my mouth will utter truth;  
wickedness is an abomination to my lips.
- 8** All the words of my mouth are righteous;  
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.
- 9** They are all straight to one who understands  
and right to those who find knowledge.
- 10** Take my instruction instead of silver  
and knowledge rather than choice gold,
- 11** for wisdom is better than jewels,  
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.
- 12** I, wisdom, live with prudence,  
and I attain knowledge and discretion.
- 13** The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.  
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil  
and perverted speech I hate.
- 14** I have good advice and sound wisdom;  
I have insight; I have strength.
- 15** By me kings reign,  
and rulers decree what is just;
- 16** by me rulers rule,  
and nobles, all who govern rightly.
- 17** I love those who love me,  
and those who seek me diligently find me.
- 18** Riches and honor are with me,  
enduring wealth and prosperity.
- 19** My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,  
and my yield than choice silver.
- 20** I walk in the way of righteousness,  
along the paths of justice,



**21** endowing with wealth those who love me  
and filling their treasuries.

It is clear from this text that the author thinks of wisdom not just as a private fact, but about a wisdom that wants to influence the world, even in the public and - even - political sphere.

Wisdom "calls" (1), and her voice is heard at the top of the hills, along the road, at the crossroads of the streets, at the gates, at the entrance to the city, on the thresholds of the exits she cries out. (2–3).

In all of this, wisdom is presented in a personal way, "exhorts", "calls" "shouts." She addresses men and women (4), telling them to listen and learn (6).

Wisdom demands that women and men listen, because she can teach "noble things", what is "right" (6), "the truth" (7). What she teaches is simple, her words are clear and "straight" (9).

After the exhortation, Wisdom begins to talk about herself: "I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion." (12), "I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight; I have strength" (14 ).

The importance of wisdom to leaders is particularly underlined: if the kings and rulers of the earth rule righteously it is because they have listened to wisdom (15–16).

Wisdom says that to have Wisdom you must seek it: "those who seek me diligently find me". (17).

What is, I think, interesting about this text is that it speaks about Wisdom as a person, and presents her as seeking us. We often think that it is us that should seek Wisdom, as if it is our activity. In a certain sense, this is true.

But this text speaks about the priority of Wisdom. It is she who seeks us. And when Wisdom finds us, we will be able to become wise and effective leaders.

