

# The Spirituality of Leadership

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Jesuit educator Charles Beirne, whose broad experience includes secondary and university education, has suggested two models to consider with regard to Catholic education administrators. One is John the Baptist, "the prophet who prepares the way of the Lord." The other is Peter, "the spontaneous ex-fisherman trying to help advance the Kingdom, but who rather constantly puts his foot in his mouth."

These images, and many more, do fit the role at times. Today's administrators, like the models in Scriptures, must admit personal weaknesses, reflect on their experience, and continually rediscover their calling by the Lord. Like other forms of ministry, administration is a service to the community, and a challenging way to respond to the Lord's call. Through educational institutions the administrator serves within the church, but for the world (Beirne, 1986, pp. 1-2).

I would add two elements to Beirne's overall description of the administrator's mission. First, the greatest service of administrators is to lead, and second, the direction of that leadership is toward mission. Indeed, the defining mission in the Catholic enterprise is to sustain and to further the Reign of God preached, taught, and exemplified by Jesus and donated through the Spirit to the church. That enterprise—the mission of Christ entrusted to the church—demands the Spirit's attentive presence. Leadership requires a particular spirituality: a reflective way to guide decisions and to evaluate their effectiveness in terms of Christianity.

Today, the term "spirituality" has become a diffuse and burdensome term symbolizing a variety of philosophies, techniques and strategies. It embraces a horde of interests, from sports to sexual preferences. Cherished Christian symbols—the Cross, stained-glass windows of saints, rosaries, Gregorian chants, and angels—have been adopted as jewelry, home furniture, cafe fixtures and refrigerator magnets. All are remote from the tough simplicity of the pilgrimage to God in the likeness of Christ.

Spirituality, as I define it, is the way women and men journey to God, the human pilgrimage through mystery to the Ultimate mystery. Christian brothers and sisters have drawn many maps to chart that journey, but ultimately, each of these maps is a variant on the One who is the way—the Christ who showed the way. Nonetheless, it is this pure definition of spirituality that governs what I mean here. And in discussing this journey, I must make the distinction between a tourist and a pilgrim. Tourism is tempting—to collect souvenirs, to hurry along to the next destination, to take pictures, to try to find

familiar terrain in an otherwise foreign environment. But we must become pilgrims to become better viewers, more contemplative to establish partnerships with our fellow pilgrims, and to find in the Eucharist the food and drink that keeps us moving along, impatient, to find the Kingdom.

The second term, leadership, is similarly burdened by conflicting descriptions, slick reductionisms, and pseudo-religious language like "transformation for lasting success," or "the Gospel is good business." Borrowing from Howard Gardner (1995), I define leadership as an empowerment for influencing people toward ways of thinking, ways of action, and ways of renewing a tradition. Adapting Gardner's generic description to Christian leadership, I speak of the power of the historical Jesus to influence people for the Kingdom and the power of his Spirit to sustain that mission.

We can derive structure for leadership from Christ's own methods. His teaching mission incorporates four actions: he teaches people how to see, how to feel, how to confront evil, especially public, structured evil, and he teaches people how to move beyond enmity into a community of reconciliation, as in this example:

*Now, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who had an infirmity for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately, she was made straight, and she praised God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." Then, the Lord answered him, "You hypocrite! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and head it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham who Satan found for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" As he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him. (Luke 13:10-17)*

There is a structure—a method—to the lesson. Jesus sees evil, from his later explanation clearly feels evil, then confronts evil on two levels (action and interpretation) and creates a new community of liberation. Similarly, true Christian leadership finds a method and acts for its mission. Christian educational leadership goes beyond academic and professional excellence. The "beyond" leads people to be attentive, to learn how to see, to have hearts ready to respond to need, to be courageous enough to name what dehumanizes and enslaves, and to help form a common ground of reconciliation. In this community of reconciliation oppressors and oppressed, victims and tyrants, strong and weak can learn how to live along side one another.

How does this work at a practical level? How does an administrator help faculty, students, parents, and board members see and respond to this Christian structure? I agree with Gardner that every leader has a story, an audience, an organization, the chance to embody what he seeks to accomplish, direct and indirect ways to present this message, and the exposure to give credibility to his vision. In Catholic organizations, whether the diocese, school, parish or religious community, our story is the Gospel and the rich commentary to enliven the meaning of that gospel. Our audience is a constituency that has chosen to be there, some because they have no place else to go. Our task is to embody that gospel in the difficult choices and often over-whelming tasks of administration. How, for example, does our gospel-based spirituality affect our fiscal priorities, our decisions on hiring and promoting personnel, our support of colleagues and those under our care, our ability to delegate to others? How do we balance our spiritual gifts with our professional and native abilities? The structures of seeing, feeling, confronting, and reconciling are elements of Christian mission. The more leaders live with their priorities, the more they find their potential.

To "see" in the light of God, leaders must develop a contemplative habit, the time to dwell with reality. Prayer, walking, reading poetry, gardening, music, and journaling are all ways to bring this about. One needs "Sabbath Sight" to "feel" in the light of God. One needs time to develop care, memories and understanding in order to confront fear, biases and prejudices. Maybe an occasional explicit service to others is called for. One needs conversation to touch the Christian imagination.

To feel and to voice indignation is another central element in the spirituality of leadership. I don't know of any area of spiritual life that we ignore more than indignation, by which I mean attention to reality, taking time to see and to voice my care, sharing my values with those I trust, uncovering moral and religious evil. Cultivated spiritual discontent and well-argued prophetic protest are Christian. While too frequently the neurotic and chronically unhappy employ protest as therapy, the deeper redemption of Christian public confrontation has a place in our spiritual life. Christians are supposed to mourn and to be indignant about injustice, victimization, and tyranny.

Finally, leaders live in reconciliation: a Christian ability to be tolerant, to forgive, to see the greater common good and to work for it, even with people they may not always want to lead or share a vacation with, much less a pilgrimage. Reconciliation is the essence of leadership.

## References

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