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CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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Being a leader is tough—the best ones I know consider it a burden more than an honor, a responsibility more than a promotion, a sacrifice more than a perk. Leaders of Catholic schools, in particular, find themselves today in situations of increasing complexity and vulnerability. More and more scholars and practitioners are thus linking leadership to spirituality precisely because of this, perhaps, a connection that was, quite frankly, unimaginable a few decades ago.

This multi-disciplinary approach to leadership—one that includes not only the disciplines of psychology and sociology but also spirituality in particular—has led to deeper investigations into the motivation, values, and behaviors of both leader and follower.[1] Based on my own

[1]See, for example, M. Benefiel & B. Lee, *The Soul of Higher Education: Contemplative Pedagogy, Research and Institutional Life for the Twenty-first Century* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2019); R. Burke, "Leadership and Spirituality," *Foresight* 8:6 (2006): 14–25; L. Fry & Y. Altman, *Spiritual Leadership in Action* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2013); M. Kriger & B. Hanson, "A Value-Based Paradigm for Creating Truly Healthy Organizations," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 12:4 (1999): 302–317; F. Markow & K. Klenke, "The Effects of Personal Meaning and Calling on Organizational Commitment: An Empirical Investigation of Spiritual Leadership," *International Journal of Organizational Analysis* 13:1 (2005): 8–27; Y. Meng, "Spiritual Leadership

practice and the experiences of those I have worked with, I have come to believe that spirituality serves as a valuable source for the courage and clear thinking so essential to the challenging task of leadership today.

Walking on Water: Courage in the Midst of Vulnerability

> And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." (Matt. 14:28–30)

Simon Peter, when one thinks about it, was the candidate least likely to be the leader of the apostles. Always the first to speak, he often ended up with the proverbial foot in the mouth. He rarely thought before he jumped. Indeed, we see this literally in the episode where the disciples were out at sea and witnessed Jesus walking on water. Not content to wait for Jesus to reach their boat, Simon volunteered to meet him halfway, only to be overwhelmed eventually by fear when he realized what he had gotten himself into.

Despite his impulsiveness, however, he was Jesus's choice to be the leader. I suspect it was because Jesus recognized something valuable underneath—namely, Peter's willingness and courage to be vulnerable. Leaders today need the courage to be vulnerable more than ever because they inevitably put themselves on the line, whether they like it or not.

The Viral Video

On the last day of class at an exclusive all-boys' high school, a video clip of a bullying incident was posted online and immediately

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at the Workplace: Perspectives and Theories," *Biomedical Reports* 5:4 (2016): 408–412; and L. Reave, "Spiritual Values and Practices Related to Leadership Effectiveness," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16:5 (2005): 655–687.

went viral. It showed a teenage boy taunting a classmate in school and daring him to a fight. When the latter refused, he was punched several times until his nose bled. Even more disturbing, however, was the presence of bystanders who did nothing, with one of them even documenting the incident on video.

The clip ignited a feeding frenzy among the social media mob that lasted for almost a month. The bully was bashed online (never mind, as some correctly pointed out in their comments, that he was only a minor) as were his parents; one netizen even challenged the boy's father to a fistfight. The school and its newly appointed principal, Mr. Thomas Santos,[2] were, needless to say, also bashed.

Immediately after the video broke out, Mr. Santos released a memo with the intention of "claiming the narrative." It was a statement that risked fanning the flames, but for him it was a risk that was unquestionably worth taking. Mr. Santos wanted to warn the community about the video, assure its members that a proper investigation would be conducted, and, most importantly, request the public to desist from sharing the video for the sake of the students involved. Yet hundreds of online critics believed they knew better: they condemned the school, nitpicked on the principal's memo, and shared the video anyway.

When asked how he dealt with the tremendous pressure of those days, the principal had this to say:

> I think what helped me most was my effort to maintain a safe emotional distance throughout the experience, but it also meant knowing when to be emotionally involved. I remember advising my colleagues who found themselves in the social spotlight that there are times when we need to be like the thick-skinned government officials who care little about public opinion. There are times, however, when we need to put ourselves in the shoes of others in order to better understand them. It was not easy deciding when it was time to detach and when it was necessary to be involved. Here's where prayer helped a lot.

[2]Not his real name.

Mr. Santos turned to spirituality for courage and clear thinking in such a vulnerable situation, at a time of personal vulnerability and chaos.

An Online Arena of Critics

In his 1910 speech at the Sorbonne, Theodore Roosevelt famously reminded his listeners that "it is not the critics who matter … but the man in the arena."[3] He was criticizing those who had "a cynical habit of thought and speech, a readiness to criticize work which the critic himself never tries to perform." Now, thanks to social media, the critics booing from the bleachers today have multiplied a thousand-fold. It is a scary thing indeed—leaders find themselves at present on center stage with a virtually boundless arena of online detractors, making the landscape where we practice our leadership particularly difficult to navigate and rendering leaders particularly vulnerable.

Mr. Santos thus told his colleagues, "What happened to us may well be the shape of things to come in the future." Yet the future is already here. Every decision that leaders make these days—whether they like it or not, whether they choose to do so or not—can possibly be thrust into the social media spotlight.

In his book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, Jon Ronson investigates how victims of social media bashing not only lost their reputations and jobs but also barely survived the traumas they were subjected to.[4] What is remarkable about this new phenomenon of online public shaming is that it is committed not just by professional trolls but also by ordinary folks like ourselves. People have developed a tendency, because of social media, to weigh in on every sort of matter, with their apparent anonymity online encouraging them to do so. It is a small

[3]T. Roosevelt, *Citizenship in a Republic*, speech delivered on April 23, 1910 (Paris: Sorbonne University).

[4]J. Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016).

surprise, then, that the most frequently re-tweeted emotion is anger.[5] The result is an unforgiving "call-out" culture; indeed, one writer even described outrage as the "sweet spot in the collective psyche."[6] Leaders find their decisions subjected to the most public—and often most cruel—of scrutinies almost overnight.

Leadership these days is risky business it seems, inevitably requiring the occasional exercise in vulnerability. The best leaders need to be willing—and courageous—enough to be vulnerable, to walk, as it were, on stormy waters. It is when we find ourselves in these situations that it helps to do a Simon Peter: to turn to spirituality for the courage and direction we need.

Crossing a Different River: Clear Thinking Amidst Uncertainty

> Ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers.
> – Heraclitus (B12)

More popularly translated as "You cannot step into the same river twice," this quote about the constancy of change in the world and metaphor of the ever-changing river captures an important reality about leadership. Each situation that a leader faces is novel and unique; the rivers that we cross are inevitably Heraclitean.

In my youth, I often wished that I had access to some kind of blueprint on how to make sound decisions. I believed then that all I needed was the expertise to enable me to make all the right choices. I soon learned, however, that no amount of technical knowledge or skill that could possibly be acquired in any training would be enough to prepare leaders for the decisions they have to make.

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[5]J. Berger & K. Milkman, "What Makes Online Content Viral?" *Journal of Marketing Research* 49:2 (2012): 192–205.

[6]S. Scibona, "The Industrial Revolution of Shame," *The New York Times* (March 9, 2019). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/opinion/sunday/internet-shaming.html.

"I'm afraid you did, Father."

I encountered a unique and truly unexpected incident at the very first graduation ceremony that I attended as head of school. We had invited one of our own to give the commencement address: an alumnus who was considered one of the youngest and most promising elected public servants in the country at the time. He impressed us as someone who exemplified everything that we wanted our graduates to be: smart, articulate, and courteous.

When it was his turn to deliver his message to the graduates, we all leaned forward in anticipation—the graduating class, their parents, and the teachers (including some for whom the speaker was a former student). Nothing could have prepared us for the speech—his first sentence included an expletive, a four-letter word that I thought—and wished—I had misheard. Seated beside me on stage was an elderly man, the chairman of the school's board of trustees; I leaned over to him, wide-eyed and open-jawed, and whispered incredulously, "Did I just hear?…" "I'm afraid you did, Father," replied the wise man to me in the calmest of tones, without even waiting for me to finish.

The speech, unfortunately, included more than just that one word. During its entirety, moreover, the phone in my pocket vibrated indignantly, and I knew whom the messages were from—my seat onstage afforded me the view of outraged faces of parents bristling behind their sons and typing furiously into their phones. As it turned out, all the young man intended was to connect more effectively with his young audience, and so he thought—quite wrongly—that he should resort to using such colorful language. The well-intentioned speaker, however, miscalculated; unfortunately, yet to their credit, the graduating class winced at the words they considered inappropriate.

Now, after over a decade of experience in school administration, I still know that nothing could have prepared me for that incident. There simply exists no available template for handling such unpredictable—and, in this case, unimaginable—situations. Since we as leaders deal with people, the scenarios we face are rarely black-and-white. They get predictably complex and messy; indeed, each situation remains

unique and novel even though it appears to be like others previously encountered. Every situation that a leader faces is an "indeterminate zone of practice," one characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and conflict.[7]

The Intrinsic Complexity of Problem-Solving

In their book *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz and Linsky distinguish what they call adaptive problems from merely technical concerns and caution us against the mistake that leaders commit most often—resorting exclusively to technical solutions to address adaptive problems.[8]

Unlike their technical counterparts, adaptive problems do not have single, self-evident, or verifiable solutions given that they involve people, mindsets, and behaviors. It is never the same river when it comes to them, just as it is never the same case when it comes to leadership. You never get to say, "Been there, done that"; as the psychologist Erik Erikson puts it, "Every case is a universe of one." Theoretical and technical expertise is rarely adequate, therefore, precisely because leadership is leadership of *people*. One needs to develop the aptitude for dealing with ambiguity, not to mention the more fundamental disposition of feeling comfortable with it in the first place. Leadership involves embracing uncertainty and exercising clear thinking in the midst of uncertainty.

There is an informal tradition that emerged among the high school seniors of the school that I used to head, one that grew organically into a rite of passage for our graduating students. At the last hour of the school fair, their final major student project before graduation, the seniors would gather spontaneously in the field and, with music blaring, celebrate together by running as a batch.

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[7]D. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

[8]R. Heifetz & M. Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

As the school fair approached closing time during one particular year, however, the senior class that gathered in the football field as expected suddenly broke into a spontaneous dance. They jumped around as music blared, and soon found themselves forming a human train that began snaking through the fair grounds. Unfortunately, one thing led to another and their exuberance got the better of them: one student started tossing things around; another, caught up in the moment, began to smash things; and others followed. The adults watched in amusement at first and then—as the vandalism escalated—in increasing horror.

When it was all over, a number of booths had been damaged and the school found itself with a clear case of vandalism involving unidentified culprits. An investigation was conducted, yet, no matter how thorough it was, the most important question remained unanswered: who actually did it? Predictably enough, none of the seniors was willing to talk. The school was left with two options, and both were *impossible:* either sanction the whole batch (too harsh and unjust because it would include many of those who were innocent) or simply turn a blind eye to the incident (equally unacceptable due to the scale of the vandalism involved).

Someone on our leadership team then suggested to cancel the upcoming senior graduation ball as a consequence of the incident. It seemed like the perfect solution—no one would be unjustly sanctioned and the school would be able to make a strong statement condemning the violence. With the decision left to me as head of school, there was overwhelming pressure to bite the bullet and cancel the ball—the school *needed* to assert its authority and send an important message to the entire community that the seniors' behavior during the fair was unacceptable. The seniors themselves, as expected, were stunned when they heard of the possible cancellation. Yet the technical solution was self-evident: teach the students a lesson for insisting on a graduation ritual by depriving them of another. An eye for an eye.

What concerned me, however, was whether or not we should allow the seniors to leave the school with the resentment—perhaps even bitterness—that such a decision would surely breed. Would the

school's reassertion of its authority be worth the reaction, one that may leave the students even less likely to learn from their mistakes? If the students leave their alma mater with resentment, what would happen to the values we tried to teach them and hoped that they would live out, values that included tolerance and forgiveness?

As is the case with the most difficult decisions that leaders have to make, this situation entailed not a simple choice between what is self-evidently right or wrong but a carefully discerned decision between two choices that both appeared to be right. In situations like these, leaders are faced with an opportunity to define both the kind of leadership they choose to wield as well as the kind of leader they choose to be.

Power or Popularity

Leaders need self-knowledge. They must be sufficiently aware of their own needs that might unwittingly shape their decisions. In the particular case mentioned above, two basic human needs came into play: the need to assert control (power) and the need to be affirmed (popularity).

Leaders too often make the mistake of lapsing into either of these two extremes: those who insist on getting their way and those who let others get theirs—in short, those who exercise what I call "lordship" and those who simply lapse into "laidbackship" (Figure 1). The former would have a tendency towards decisiveness at the expense of consultation while the latter would tend towards consultation at the expense of decisiveness.

LORDSHIP ⟷ **LAIDBACKSHIP**

Figure 1

Either option is appealing for different reasons yet inadequate on its own. A leadership characterized by lordship would tend toward meting out a proper punishment to the students while one marked by laidbackship would be inclined to succumb to pressure from either the students who wanted the ball or the faculty who felt strongly about a

sanction. Effective leadership thus entails careful discernment of how one's needs may create a bias for particular courses of action. This will ensure that decisions are the result of clear thinking rather than of the unconscious and powerful needs of the leader.

Here, then, is where spirituality comes in. While clear thinking demands an awareness of one's self and a brutally honest appraisal of one's most powerful needs, spirituality enables leaders to manage and transcend those needs. It makes possible the clear thinking that is a prerequisite for—although by no means a guarantee of—sound judgment.

Situations like this, moreover, provide leaders with occasions for values clarification. In the aforementioned case, the school needed to choose between two values: that of upholding the school's policies on the one hand, and that of making sure the seniors would be open to learning from this teaching moment on the other. Which of these two should the leader and institution consider as the higher value—or the greater good? This process of decision-making constitutes "defining moments"—opportunities for self-definition on the part of both the leader and the institution. They are moments when we can remind our community and tell the public who we are and what we are about.[9]

After two weeks of discussion and discernment, the school decided to allow the seniors—who for those two weeks worried about the fate of their graduation ball—to continue with the event but not without clarifying, in no uncertain terms, that the decision was being made in a spirit of magnanimity and forgiveness. In short, we chose to respond differently and opted for an adaptive solution to an adaptive problem instead of reacting to the students' mistake and sanctioning them (and even if doing so would have been justified). We chose to define the school not in terms of punishment but in terms of forgiveness, second chances, and magnanimity. Indeed, it can certainly be argued that foregoing any disciplinary action would fail to convey to the students that actions have consequences which need to be faced.

[9]J. Badaracco, *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose between Right and Right* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).

In our judgment, however, and given our best lights, the students' openness to learn from the experience was of far greater value than any benefit to be had from the imposing of a sanction as spelled out in the handbook.

The students, needless to say, were surprised and relieved when they learned of the school's decision. Some shared how it made them feel greater shame over the mistake they committed yet grateful at the same time for the chance to celebrate their graduation at their ball. We in the leadership team could only hope that they learned from the experience and became better individuals as a result of this decision.

The Spiritual Practice of Leadership

Leadership today entails courage and clarity of thought—the courage to embrace vulnerability and the clarity of thought to make discernment possible. Leaders must dare to walk on water and recognize that they are stepping into a different river with every situation that they face. It is a big task for which technical expertise falls short. Yet to rise to such challenges, leaders can turn to spirituality.

What, in turn, would this spirituality look and sound like, especially in contrast to religion? Here I do not necessarily mean belonging to a particular religious tradition or even believing in God. Rather, I refer to what the poet Yeats calls "soul-making"[10] or, in more contemporary language, self-making. It is the means by which one defines oneself and builds one's interiority and inner resources, equipping oneself thereby to transcend shortcomings and setbacks in the process. For many, this requires belief in a higher power like God or membership in a faith community, yet these two elements, while helpful, are neither necessary nor sufficient.[11]

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[10]J. Keats in H. Rollins, ed., *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 100–104.

[11]While I as a Catholic priest obviously believe that religion—i.e., believing in God and belonging to a faith community—is crucial to the "soul-making" of spirituality, it is by no means necessary for all.

First Lessons about Leadership

When I was a junior high school student, I missed one important planning session for a high-profile spiritual weekend activity and so was, in my absence and just as predicted, elected to lead it. I consider it my very first experience of *real* leadership because that activity was almost entirely student-led, and I knew that much of the responsibility—and blame—would fall on me.

The terror I felt, along with the spiritual nature of the activity, drove me to resort to prayer. It did not help, moreover, that the leader of the previous year appeared during the activity to express his dissatisfaction over the changes that our new team had instituted. I found myself facing this alumnus and convincing him to let us do our work our way because we believed that ours was a better way to achieve our goal. Indeed, it was not so much about "your way" or "our way" but about accomplishing the objective of the activity.

That experience taught me one of my first and most valuable lessons about leadership—namely, that leadership is not just about the relationship between leader and followers. There is a third—and, I will argue, most important—party in any exercise of leadership: the cause that is larger than both leader and follower, namely, the mission of the organization. In this triangle of leadership, the leader's primary task is to inspire the community to do as the leader is doing: to recognize and serve this higher cause. Only in making sure that the community is focused on the mission is any leader able to exercise leadership effectively (Figure 2).[12]

The spirituality of leadership thus entails, to be precise, a commitment to something beyond leaders themselves, to both the mission and the community that have been entrusted to them. Only

[12]This leadership structure is adapted from the Ignatian learning-teaching framework discussed in J. Go & R. Atienza, *Learning by Refraction: A Practitioner's Guide to 21st-Century Ignatian Pedagogy* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019).

with such a commitment will the self-transcendence demanded by leadership become possible.

Figure 2

A leader, however, cannot *directly* cause the community to commit to the mission. Only by inspiring the community to do this *indirectly*—by exhibiting a vision and passion for the mission and by building solid personal relationships within the community[13]—can the leader succeed.

Expertise and Enthusiasm

A leader's vision and passion for the mission can be operationally defined by one's *expertise* about the purpose of the organization as well as *enthusiasm* for it. Both ingredients are equally essential for exercising effective leadership.

It is a minimum requirement for leaders to understand the mission of the community which they are leading. They are expected to spend enough time reflecting on the mission so that they have a better

[13]These two elements serendipitously correspond to the two Jesuit values of *magis* (commitment to do more and become better) and *cura personalis* (personal care).

insight into where the community should be going. The last thing a community wants is a leader who does not understand the "why" of the community's existence.

Apart from this expertise about the mission, however, the even more important task of *communicating* this understanding in a manner that inspires and *infects* followers with the leader's enthusiasm is part and parcel of leadership. Indeed, such enthusiasm sometimes outweighs the expertise for mission since the latter can be delegated to others. The leader, however, bears the primary responsibility for leading the community in committing to the mission by modeling this commitment and communicating why it is worthwhile.

Empathy and Empowerment

A leader's relationship with the community ought to be characterized simultaneously by *empathy* for the members and their *empowerment;* ideally the two must go together. A fundamentally positive regard for followers allows leaders to appreciate better the contexts of the individual members of the community and, as a consequence, connect with them on a deeper and personal level. Yet if leaders get carried away by this empathy, the community may grow overly—and unhealthily—dependent on them.

Empathy, however, though necessary, is not sufficient, for just as essential is the leader's *empowerment* of the follower. Indeed, the community needs to be loyal not so much to the leader but to the mission entrusted to them. The followers ought to commit themselves *directly* to the organization's mission and take their personal initiative in contributing to it. Anything less would be a failure of leadership.

Spirituality as a Source of Courage and Clear Thinking

One could say that Fr. Matthew Gonzalez[14] hit the ground running as the newly-appointed head of a Catholic high school. During his

[14]Not his real name.

very first year, a student sat on the ledge of their four-story building to decide whether or not to jump and end his life. It did not take long before word spread and the media appeared on the scene.

Fr. Matthew felt that he as the head of the institution could not delegate the job to anyone else, even if doing so would have been the easier and safer course of action. It was a risk that he as leader felt he had to take. He immediately appeared on the scene and, together with two or three other staff members, tried to talk the boy out of it in a calm manner for about an hour. The boy eventually listened and got off the ledge.

The call of duty did not end, however, after the boy changed his mind. Fr. Matthew had to attend personally to the boy's family, plan the de-briefing of the students and faculty, and deal with the media firestorm that followed. Asked what helped him deal with the problem, the priest named three things: 1) the decision to drop everything else and give his full personal attention to the situation, 2) his naturally calm disposition that allowed him to focus on the present moment and think clearly on his feet, and 3) his conviction that he was being accompanied and guided by God.

Fr. Matthew drew strength and guidance from his faith. He focused not on himself, the distress that he must have experienced, and the personal and institutional stakes involved but rather on prioritizing what needed to be done, and especially on providing care for those in the community who needed it the most. It was his interiority borne out of his religious faith that gave him both the courage to take necessary risks in the midst of vulnerability and the clear thinking to set the right priorities and say and do whatever the situation called for.

Conclusion

Our times call for a new spirituality of leadership especially for Catholic schools and universities. The spiritual practice of leadership can be defined operationally, I would argue, by a shift in focus from the leader's self to the mission and the community. This attentiveness

to the community's purpose and members enables leaders to transcend themselves in order to carry out the task of leadership. Moreover, while the religious faith of believers serves as an essential aid in nursing this spirituality, nonbelievers can also engage in the practice.

A spirituality essential to leadership, therefore, consists of a strong passion for the mission and a personal concern for the community. In an age of increasing vulnerability and complexity, it is this two-fold commitment to mission and community that constitutes the spirituality from which leaders can draw the courage and clear thinking so essential in the exercise of leadership.