



March 31, 2014
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In this issue:

The Kindling for the Fire is the Will
Leadership as Conversion
to God's Will



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The Kindling for the Fire is the Will

A Discussion of the Attributes of Leadership in the Church

By *Patrick O'Meara and Patrick J. McCloskey*

In the business world, the idea that leadership is the exercise of the will upon an organization is not a new thought. Much has been written about how a leader's vision empowers an organization by harnessing the talents and energies of all personnel. Within the Church, this idea of leadership is largely absent from consideration. In discussions about what makes a leader successful, particularly in the Church, conventional wisdom cites superior intellect and charismatic personality. This view is reinforced in the media and especially by business journals focusing attention on remarkable CEOs, such as Steve Jobs and Jack Welch. The truth, however, is that leadership is primarily a function of the will: the capacity to act decisively—based on the best available information and analysis, guided by prayer—and keep acting. It is not enough to simply initiate. Follow-through is the lifeblood of an institution seeking accomplishment.

The typical discussion of leadership in the Church focuses on a person's intellect, charismatic gifts or even expertise in administration. These gifts can be effective tools, but only when they serve the leader's endgame: to nurture and direct the will of the People of God towards the achievement of a vision for the local church. The leader's first task is to transcend the difficulties of the here and now to become the bridge to the envisioned future reality. This is accomplished as the leader informs the intellect, stirs the emotions and calls the People of God into action—into applying their wills in community towards building that future reality. This activity becomes effective and long-lasting if it is the love of Christ that compels the People of God.

A recent study of European corporations that are at least 100 years old, published by Stanford University Press, found that charisma is a more likely personality trait in low performing companies than in high

performing ones. This would seem to be counterintuitive but actually makes sense. The problem with leaders possessing Mensa-plus intellect and/or a magnetic personality is that these gifts enable them to more readily persuade boards and other stakeholders to embark on disastrous courses. According to the study, if an organization happens to be already heading in the right direction, charisma is helpful. But if an organization is in trouble, charisma will likely make matters worse. A high-functioning *individual* in a leadership position tends to over-rely on his skills, in contrast to a high-functioning *leader* who focuses on building the organization's capabilities.

If charisma and high IQ falter as leadership's primary governing attributes, then how does a Christian leader achieve success? In our experience, there are six critical components to the right application of sustained action. These factors are outlined below and will be written about in detail in a series of articles in *Tertium Quid*, along with in-depth interviews with successful religious and lay Church leaders. The articles will focus on articulating the best ways of implementing these elements of success.

1. **Prayer:** As Christian leaders know well, all endeavors must begin, end, and be imbued throughout with prayer. Receptivity to the right goals for the Church for Christ and for one's proper role in reaching those goals is fostered by an active approach to prayer. This involves the primary — and often most difficult — task for a leader: the subordination of one's will to God, the diminishing of self so that He may increase, so that His will be done.

Prayer's receptivity is also an act of the will. Once this opening for the Lord to speak to individuals throughout the organization occurs, prayer confers on the organization the ability to speak with confidence born of the Holy Spirit, versus talking solely out of the leader's strengths or authority, which can



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mislead. When rooted in praying fervently for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the organization can become a conduit for the Church's prophetic voice, which speaks vibrantly in thought, word, and deed. The prophetic voice of the Church in the world must, in fact, be inspired by the Holy Spirit, which is dependent on a robust life of prayer.

Blessed John Paul II describes this vividly as: "Prayer can progress as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the Divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially on the Father's heart. This is the lived experience of Christ's promise" (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 33). The goal for the leader must not only be the personal attainment of this reality, which he or she models, but also the attainment of a community of believers. Otherwise a leader and perhaps the entire organization succumb to temerity, and the leader is reduced to giving pep talks limited to the prosaic power of positive thought or serving up clever regurgitations of the mores of the day.

2. **Vision:** Leaders must be visionaries with a clear sense of excellence for the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit. The journey begins with a clear vision inspired by the mission, without which as Proverbs teaches, the people perish. The leader needs to behold his organization as other than self, as the lover beholds the beloved. If, in contrast, the leader self-identifies with his organization, the danger is that vision could become messianic. Worse, the entire organization could become self-referential about how it reinforces its identity, thereby neglecting how it realizes its mission.

Once the mission, God's calling, is understood, the leader must articulate clearly how it would look incarnated in this place for this organization. This declaration must be prophetic, a vision of the future that can be realized if

participants cooperate with God and act effectively.

The leader must then seek to define excellence for his organization. For the Church, this must be understood as the realization of the Church's mission; that the world be set ablaze, that everyone hears the Gospel and is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It follows that excellence for the Church includes the corporal works of mercy, such as feeding the hunger, clothing the naked, and visiting the imprisoned.

Fittingly, "excellence" at its Latin origin converges with "virtue" and "virility." The local leader must describe what the specific organizational virtues are for members at this time, what activities the organization's members must engage in to achieve the desired outcome. Then realizing the vision becomes the People of God practicing these organizational virtues again and again.

3. **Love:** Although the will is central to successful leadership, it's not the imposition of will on others that proves effective. The Church leader especially must compel through the force of love, which is the highest Christian virtue. This must be a personal love that embraces both the organization and each individual for whom he is the shepherd. He seeks to provide for the highest aspirations and spiritual needs of his beloved parishioners and clergy, as he also seeks to act in accordance with the will of the Christ for His Bride.

This proactive shepherding contrasts sharply with the highest virtue of today's neo-pagan culture: tolerance. In reality, tolerance constitutes a failure to act on behalf of others. Tolerance expresses pure indifference about how various forms of behavior affect the wellbeing of individuals. Tolerance constitutes a refusal to utilize the will, which can only



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be described as a self-imposed condition of impotence.

While tolerance makes allowance for emotion and intelligent discussion about behavior, the direct involvement in others' lives through love is anathema. Being non-judgmental, so highly prized in academia and the media, amounts to a moral frontal lobotomy. The entire point of learning is to acquire the capacity to make sound judgments, not only about self but others.

The antithesis of governing by love is the creation of an image of personal omnipotence and focusing the organization exclusively on making money in business or on fundraising in the non-profit arena. In *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril*, former CEO and business reporter Margaret Heffernan notes that wearing this mask of personal omnipotence creates a "psychological solipsism of power." This isolates the leader or he becomes surrounded by people who want only to please. Focusing solely on making money, she observes, also crowds out ethical considerations.

4. **Learning (with Humility):** Determining the vision of excellence for the Church is not about seeking an epiphany in a single moment. This might occur, but more likely the vision will form in stages over time. Next to prayer, the most important factor in the process of forming the right vision (and then concretizing it in a comprehensive strategic plan) is an active openness to relevant data and accurate analysis. This openness must also incorporate the wisdom of everyone involved in the endeavor and most importantly, build on organizational wisdom achieved along the way.

Effective planning must be based on real analytics, and the larger the organization one leads, the greater the need for information and analysis to guide

decision-making. Analytics cannot substitute for prayer, but properly guided analytics leads to the establishment of institutional excellence or virtue. Once reasonable benchmarks are established, the widespread habit of acting effectively in accordance with goals of excellence can be measured and promoted.

Specificity is a key requirement. As we cited in "Vision," excellence must be articulated in the organization with specificity, where each is called to lead. For leaders, specificity means ordering the particulars of time, place, resources and other concrete details, which constitute the essence of strategic planning. In other words, the wedding of vision to data produces a coherent future picture, which includes financial sustainability, and the tactical campaign to realize that end state. Accordingly, the one who orders, the bishop, is referred to as the Ordinary in Canon Law.

Ironically, although contemporary society is the best-informed in history, leaders and entire organizations often tend to deliberately ignore obvious problems and even dire threats over long periods of time. Heffernan attributes this in part to what she calls "organizational silence," which often results from a fear among participants of being seen as not sharing the common goal. Indeed, she found this pathology to be remarkably common in a variety of historical disasters, from the collapse of Lehman Brothers to the BP oil disaster, to Abu Ghraib, to Robert Murdoch's News Corp. debacle, to sex-abuse scandals in the Catholic Church.

"Leaders of organizations who lack the wisdom gained from reflection, analysis and, yes, humility "inhabit a bubble of power," Heffernan wrote. "The powerful also communicate differently. Academic analysis of their language shows that, confronted by risky situations, the powerful think in more abstract terms, are more optimistic and more



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certain that they are right. They're both mentally and physically cut off from the reality most people would recognize." Significantly, *Willful Blindness* documents that after a major calamity, voices always emerge saying they warned leaders of the clear signs of impending danger but were ignored.

Thus, it is clear that the antidote to failure and road to success begins with a proactive willingness to listen to all members, employees and stakeholders regardless of rank. Paying careful attention to data also guards against pathological altruism, which "can be conceived as behavior in which attempts to promote the welfare of another, or others, results instead in harm that an external observer would conclude was reasonably foreseeable," according to Dr. Barbara A. Oakley in a paper published by the National Academy of Sciences in 2013. Ideology and overblown empathy create an egocentric belief that proponents know what is best for others, which empirical data and careful analysis if consulted would show to be irrational illusions.

"Indeed, truly altruistic actions may sometimes appear cruel or harmful, the equivalent of saying 'no' to the student who demands a higher grade or to the addict who needs another hit," Dr. Oakley wrote. "However, the social consequences of appearing cruel in a culture that places high value on kindness, empathy and altruism can lead us to misplaced 'helpful' behavior and result in self-deception regarding the consequences of our actions." This empathy, or false charity, can create a milieu in which criminal behavior is tolerated or ignored in the name of a false sense of saving the "Bella Figura" of the Church.

5. **Implementation:** As the oft-quoted Chinese proverb says, "to know and not to do is not to know." At the

conclusion of the strategic planning process, the true leader commits to executing the plan in its entirety over its multi-year timeframe, however inconvenient. Again, success comes down to sustained will, the ongoing effort to practice all components of successful leadership on daily basis.

Delegation is a critical factor in execution. Many endeavors fail because the leader won't share responsibility. Equally, projects fall apart when the leader gives a strategic plan his blessing and delegates all responsibility to the point of abdication.

A coherent strategic plan creates a small number of specific objectives and eliminates many others. It is not a to-do list but rather a set of goals and priorities, which enable the organization to be effective in implementing the strategic goals in the local environ at that moment. The chosen goals must be given top priority throughout implementation, which means a leader must say "no" to worthwhile endeavors or at least put off allocating significant resources in other directions until target goals are reached. This can be very difficult since the impulse to address all needs tends to be strong among Christian leaders. But riding "madly off in all directions," as the humorist Stephen Leacock wrote on the cusp of World War I, gets one nowhere in particular (or everywhere in particulate).

Focus also gives emotion its proper role as exciter for self and others. If a leader isn't passionate about a proposed goal, it's more difficult for those in lesser roles to devote themselves fully. The lukewarm don't fare very well in Revelations.

Execution involves putting in place all the needed management, human resources and financial processes. As well, the implementation process teaches Christian leaders that successful administrative and financial leadership do not depend on pastoral abilities. Both temporal (secular)



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and spiritual gifts are essential but they are distinct.

6. **Communication:** Often overlooked is how crucial communications are to effective leadership. The People of God need to hear from their bishops and priests. Similarly, bishops and priests need to be positioned so they can hear from the People of God. The laity wants to be informed about changes to Church liturgy, clarifications of Church teachings, and the state of temporal affairs locally and throughout the diocese. Parishioners and Catholic school parents also want to be involved in solving fiscal, management and related challenges.

Transparency and accountability, which involves listening and inviting the laity to participate, is critical to getting distributed ownership of the organization's vision, which in turn is critical to success. Leaders aren't leaders without followers. Nor are they simply community organizers who merely facilitate majority consensus. They must involve the organization's members, especially those with expertise in relevant areas, in the process of determining the vision of excellence for this parish and/or diocese going forward. At the same time, Christian leaders must speak from the proverbial helm, which in the era of digital communications and social media has become a much richer and easier task in community.

Yves Congar noted that all heresy at its core is a denial of the incarnation. Contemporary society would have us believe that the life Christ offers is pure metaphor and cannot be incarnated in our lives today. This amounts to saying that the Church as it ought to be can no longer exist in today's society. To declare that Christ cannot work through his Bride relieves personal responsibility for the leader with a fatalistic passivity. But Christ calls us all to use our will in the assent to

Him and then to act, or He doesn't call at all. This is even more poignantly the case with those the Christ has called into leadership. As St Ambrose reminds us, "Hope is an incentive to Labor."

Some Church leaders love the Mystical Body of Christ and merely tolerate the human. But Jesus revealed the Transfiguration prior to the Passion for a purpose. Christ allows us to love the Mystical Body so that we will help incarnate the Mystical in the here and now. As we give thanks for Christ's presence, we must also give thanks for the vision of what that looks like incarnated in the human. The Church is the Mystical Body on earth as the Church militant precisely because we struggle against temptations of flesh in a hostile world. We are not called to reject the human nor accommodate evil as "tolerant" citizens, but to love as Christ loved seeking for what is best for others. He did not just hope we would find the Father but provided the way.

Half a century ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. criticized the Church for being an "archdefender of the status quo" in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Dr. King was admonishing religious leaders for giving silent consent to civil rights injustice. No doubt he would agree the charge applies today when passivity is the response to contemporary failings surrounding the culture of death. Passivity takes many forms but always seeks to silence the Church, lulling Her into complacency or resignation in the face of languishing sacramental observance and deteriorating fiscal health. Dr. King wrote:

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.... Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound.

"I have only to raise a finger," said Neville

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Chamberlain, Great Britain's prime minister just before the outbreak of World War II, "and the whole face of Europe is changed." Tragically Chamberlain refused to act and the face of Europe was largely obliterated. In crisis, ineffectual leaders often become passive, believing inaction to be the most prudent course when in truth it is the most costly.

"I am the light of the world," said Christ in the most astounding statement in history. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." There is no easy way to lead as a follower of Christ. What is the price of living and leading according to the Light of Christ? Everything else.

In future issues of Tertium Quid, detailed articles focusing on the implementation of success factors will be published, along with interviews with successful Church leaders who achieved excellence in the administration of their offices and effected significant positive change across their entire organizations. The first four leaders are:

1. *James F. Cardinal Stafford, former Bishop of Memphis and Archbishop of Denver, currently retired at the Vatican where he serves as Major Penitentiary Emeritus of the Apostolic Penitentiary.*
2. *Francis E. Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago, and former Archbishop of Portland, OR and Bishop of Yakima, WA.*
3. *Terry Polakovic, co-founder and executive director of Educating on the Nature and Dignity of Women (ENDOW).*
4. *Sam J.G. Jacobs, former Bishop of Houma-Thibodaux, LA, and Bishop of Alexandria, LA, currently retired as Bishop Emeritus of Houma-Thibodaux, LA.*

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