

Reflections on
Christian Leadership

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*In the
Name of
Jesus*

II

From Popularity to Ministry



"Feed my lambs, look after my sheep"

The Temptation: To Be Spectacular

Let me tell you about another experience that came out of my move from Harvard to L'Arche. It was the experience of shared ministry. I was educated in a seminary that made me believe ministry was essentially an individual affair. I had to be well trained and well formed, and after six years of training and formation, I was considered well equipped to preach, administer the sacraments, counsel, and run a parish. I was made to feel like a man sent on a long, long hike with a huge backpack containing all the things necessary to help the people I would meet on the road. Questions had answers, problems had solutions, and pains had their medicines. Just be sure that you know with which one of the three you are dealing. Over the years, I realized that things are not as simple as that, but my basic individualistic approach to ministry did not change. When I became a teacher I was even more encouraged to do my own thing. I could choose my own subject, my own method, and sometimes even my own students. Nobody would even question my way of doing things. And when I left the classroom I was completely free to do whatever I saw fit. After all, we all have a right to live our private lives privately!

When I went to L'Arche, however, this individualism was radically challenged. There I was one of many people who tried to live faithfully with handicapped people, and the fact that I was a priest was not a license to do things on my own. Suddenly everyone wanted to know my whereabouts from hour to hour, and every movement I made was subject to accountability. One member of the community was appointed to accompany me; a small group was formed to help me decide which invitations to accept and which to decline; and the question most asked by the handicapped people with whom I live was, "Are you home tonight?" Once, when I had left on a trip without saying goodbye to Trevor, one of the handicapped people with whom I live, the first phone

call I received when I had reached my destination was a tearful call from Trevor, saying, “Henri, why did you leave us? We miss you so. Please come back.”

Living in a community with very wounded people, I came to see that I had lived most of my life as a tightrope artist trying to walk on a high, thin cable from one tower to the other, always waiting for the applause when I had not fallen off and broken my leg.

The second temptation to which Jesus was exposed was precisely the temptation to do something spectacular, something that could win him great applause. “Throw yourself from the parapet of the temple and let the angels catch you and carry you in their arms” (see Matthew 4:6). But Jesus refused to be a stunt man. He did not come to prove himself. He did not come to walk on hot coals, swallow fire, or put his hand in the lion’s mouth to demonstrate that he had something worthwhile to say. “Don’t put the Lord your God to the test,” he said.

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When you look at today’s church, it is easy to see the prevalence of individualism among ministers and priests. Not too many of us have a vast repertoire of skills to be proud of, but most of us still feel that, if we have anything at all to show, it is something we have to do solo. You could say that many of us feel like failed tightrope walkers who discovered that we did not have the power to draw thousands of people, that we could not make many conversions, that we did not have the talents to create beautiful liturgies, that we were not as popular with the youth, the young adults, or the elderly as we had hoped, and that we were not as able to respond to the needs of our people as we had expected. But most of us still feel that, ideally, we should have been able to do it all and do

it successfully. Stardom and individual heroism, which are such obvious aspects of our competitive society, are not at all alien to the church. There too the dominant image is that of the self-made man or woman who can do it all alone.

The Task: “Feed My Sheep”

After having asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Jesus says, “Feed my lambs, look after my sheep, feed my sheep.” Having been assured of Peter’s love, Jesus gives him the task of ministry. In the context of our own culture we might hear this in a very individualistic way, as if Peter now was being sent on a heroic mission. But when Jesus speaks about shepherding, he does not want us to think about a brave, lonely shepherd who takes care of a large flock of obedient sheep. In many ways, he makes it clear that ministry is a communal and mutual experience.

First of all, Jesus sends the twelve out in pairs (Mark 6:7). We keep forgetting that we are being sent out two-by-two. We cannot bring good news on our own. We are called to proclaim the Gospel together, in community. There is a divine wisdom here. “If two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:19–20). You might already have discovered for yourself how radically different traveling alone is from traveling together. I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when I am alone. I need my brothers or sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart, and body. But far more importantly, it is Jesus who heals, not I; Jesus who speaks words of truth, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I. This is very clearly made visible when we proclaim the redeeming power of God together. Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us.

In the past I traveled a lot, preaching and giving retreats as well as commencement and keynote addresses. But I always went alone. Now, however, every time I am sent by the community to speak somewhere, the community tries to send me with a com-

panion. Being with Bill is a concrete expression of the vision that we should not only live in community, but also minister in community. Bill and I were sent by our community in the conviction that the same Lord who binds us together in love will also reveal himself to us and others as we walk together on the road.

But there is more. Ministry is not only a communal experience, it is also a mutual experience. Jesus, speaking about his own shepherding ministry, says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep” (John 10:14–15). As Jesus ministers, so he wants us to minister. He wants Peter to feed his sheep and care for them, not as “professionals” who know their clients’ problems and take care of them, but as vulnerable brothers and sisters who know and are known, who care and are cared for, who forgive and are being forgiven, who love and are being loved.

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Somehow we have come to believe that good leadership requires a safe distance from those we are called to lead. Medicine, psychiatry, and social work all offer us models in which “service” takes place in a one-way direction. Someone serves, someone else is being served, and be sure not to mix up the roles! But how can we lay down our life for those with whom we are not even allowed to enter into a deep personal relationship? Laying down your life means making your own faith and doubt, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear available to others as ways of getting in touch with the Lord of life.

We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love

of God.

Therefore, true ministry must be mutual. When the members of a community of faith cannot truly know and love their shepherd, shepherding quickly becomes a subtle way of exercising power over others and begins to show authoritarian and dictatorial traits. The world in which we live—a world of efficiency and control—has no models to offer to those who want to be shepherds in the way Jesus was a shepherd. Even the so-called “helping professions” have been so thoroughly secularized that mutuality can only be seen as a weakness and a dangerous form of role confusion. The leadership about which Jesus speaks is of a radically different kind from the leadership offered by the world. It is a servant leadership—to use Robert Greenleaf’s term^{*}—in which the leader is a vulnerable servant who needs the people as much as they need their leader.

From this it is clear that a whole new type of leadership is asked for in the church of tomorrow, a leadership that is not modeled on the power games of the world, but on the servant-leader Jesus, who came to give his life for the salvation of many.

^{*} Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). See also Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant-Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998).

The Discipline: Confession and Forgiveness

Having said this, we are faced with the question: What discipline is required for the future leader to overcome the temptation of individual heroism? I would like to propose the discipline of confession and forgiveness. Just as the future leaders must be mystics deeply steeped in contemplative prayer, so also must they be persons always willing to confess their own brokenness and ask for forgiveness from those to whom they minister.

Confession and forgiveness are the concrete forms in which we sinful people love one another. Often I have the impression that priests and ministers are the least confessing people in the Christian community. The sacrament of Confession has often become a way to keep our own vulnerability hidden from our community. Sins are mentioned and ritual words of forgiveness are spoken, but seldom does a real encounter take place in which the reconciling and healing presence of Jesus can be experienced. There is so much fear, so much distance, so much generalization, and so little real listening, speaking, and absolving that not much true sacramentality can be expected.

How can priests or ministers feel really loved and cared for when they have to hide their own sins and failings from the people to whom they minister and run off to a distant stranger to receive a little comfort and consolation? How can people truly care for their shepherds and keep them faithful to their sacred task when they do not know them and so cannot deeply love them? I am not at all surprised that so many ministers and priests suffer immensely from deep emotional loneliness, frequently feel a great need for affectivity and intimacy, and sometimes experience a deep-seated guilt and shame in front of their own people. Often they seem to say, "What if my people knew how I really feel, what I think and daydream about, and where my mind wanders when I am sitting by myself in my study?"

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It is precisely the men and women who are dedicated to spiritual leadership who are easily subject to very raw carnality. The reason for this is that they do not know how to live the truth of the Incarnation. They separate themselves from their own concrete community, try to deal with their needs by ignoring them or satisfying them in distant or anonymous places, and then experience an increasing split between their own most private inner world and the good news they announce. When spirituality becomes spiritualization, life in the body becomes carnality. When ministers and priests live their ministry mostly in their heads and relate to the Gospel as a set of valuable ideas to be announced, the body quickly takes revenge by screaming loudly for affection and intimacy. Christian leaders are called to live the Incarnation, that is, to live in the body, not only in their own bodies but also in the corporate body of the community, and to discover there the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Confession and forgiveness are precisely the disciplines by which spiritualization and carnality can be avoided and true incarnation lived. Through confession, the dark powers are taken out of their carnal isolation, brought into the light, and made visible to the community. Through forgiveness, they are disarmed and dispelled and a new integration between body and spirit is made possible.

This might all sound very unrealistic, but anyone who has had any experience with healing communities such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Adult Children of Alcoholics has seen the healing power of these disciplines. Many, many Christians, priests and ministers included, have discovered the deep meaning of the Incarnation not in their churches, but in the twelve steps of A.A. and

A.C.A., and have come to the awareness of God's healing presence in the confessing community of those who dare to search for healing.

All of this does not mean that ministers or priests must, explicitly, bring their own sins or failures into the pulpit or into their daily ministries. That would be unhealthy and imprudent and not at all a form of servant leadership. What it means is that ministers and priests are also called to be full members of their communities, are accountable to them and need their affection and support, and are called to minister with their whole being, including their wounded selves.

I am convinced that priests and ministers, especially those who relate to many anguishing people, need a truly safe place for themselves. They need a place where they can share their deep pain and struggles with people who do not need them, but who can guide them ever deeper into the mystery of God's love. I, personally, have been fortunate in having found such a place in L'Arche, with a group of friends who pay attention to my own often-hidden pains and keep me faithful to my vocation by their gentle criticisms and loving support. Would that all priests and ministers could have such a safe place for themselves.