

# Faith at Work

## A Spirituality of Leadership

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## Introduction

**M**y aim in this book is to explore the nature of leadership and to outline a spirituality which can support authentic leadership. I am particularly concerned with how leadership is exercised in religious organizations of all kinds and in voluntary or nongovernmental agencies. However, I believe that much of the spirituality of leadership that I outline here would also be relevant in the business world as well as in the public services and in politics—if those in leadership roles there were willing to take it on.

I write out of my own background as a Catholic and a member of a missionary society. But the views I express here are also based on my experience of working with the leadership of many different religious congregations and agencies of my own church and other Christian churches, as well as with the management of voluntary groups and with management consultants. So I am confident that what I am saying is not just unrealistic theory but is based on practical experience.

The wider context in which I write is one where the issue of leadership has recently become a matter of considerable concern in the business world as well as in the Christian churches, in other religions, and in the political world. In the Catholic Church a crisis of leadership has been developing over the past generation. It has become more urgent with the election of Pope Benedict XVI who, prior to his election, was widely seen as somebody who exercised a quite authoritarian style of leadership. The

Anglican Church is going through a different kind of crisis of leadership. There are unresolved disagreements on moral and doctrinal issues between its different branches; and it seems that its leadership may not have sufficient authority to safeguard its unity. Meanwhile the leadership formerly exercised by the World Council of Churches is called in question by the growing power of Pentecostalism and of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant churches. In Islam, the new dominance of Shia Muslims in Iraq and the emergence of Shia Iran as a major power give rise to serious issues about the political role of religious leaders.

In the political field, the West has been seeking to promote the development of democratic governments in the Middle East, and in the European and Asian countries that were formerly part of the Soviet bloc, as well as in many of the so-called developing countries in Africa and Latin America. This has given rise to much skepticism since many people hold that the word democracy has been devalued. They believe it has come to be equated with a form of government that is pro-Western in a political sense, and is also committed to economic policies that leave these countries at the mercy of a process of globalization that benefits Western-based transnational companies. Furthermore, the increasing incidence of terrorism has led even the leaders of democratic governments to adopt repressive measures that threaten people's fundamental human rights. The question arises whether countries everywhere can find leaders who will have both the vision and the support to find an alternative. What is required is a model of governance that will ensure an adequate measure of security, while respecting fundamental human rights and finding a way to ensure that alienated minorities play a constructive role in society.

In this book I am not directly addressing these global issues of authority and leadership. I am writing primarily for those who are called to exercise leadership in much smaller arenas. Nevertheless, the material also has a relevance for the wider global issues. This is because part of the challenge for leaders of relatively small-scale voluntary agencies and religious organizations today is to provide a model of how leadership should be exercised.

The book begins with a short chapter in which I pick out certain key passages in the Bible that provide a basis for a Christian spirituality of leadership. In the following two chapters I look at various spiritualities that have been significant in the history of the Christian church. These provide the background against which we can develop a spirituality of leadership appropriate for our time. My account of these different spiritualities of leadership and authority brings out the fact that there is a strong and consistent democratic tradition within Christianity—and even in the Catholic Church, which is often seen as having a quite authoritarian structure.

This ancient and enduring democratic spirituality is far more profound than the simplistic version of democracy being used—and frequently misused—in the Western world at present and that the United States government is attempting to export to other parts of the world. Rather it is one that takes freedom of personal choice very seriously and respects the sacredness of conscience.

The understanding of authority and leadership that permeates the spirituality of the major religious orders in the Catholic Church and some strands in the Protestant tradition is one that takes it for granted that the Holy Spirit speaks to each individual, providing guidance to anybody who is prepared to listen. Furthermore, it assumes that the Spirit provides guidance to whole communities and congregations, leading them into a deeper understanding of their faith and inviting them to relinquish out-of-date attitudes and practices and to step bravely into challenging new ministries.

This understanding of personal and corporate guidance has obvious implications for what is involved in leadership. It puts the emphasis on the dialogue of the Spirit with individuals and whole communities, rather than on the kind of maintenance tasks that tend to occupy most of the time and energy of many of those who were elected or appointed to give leadership. Of course the task of leaders includes maintaining order, filling the existing job vacancies, and ensuring that all the members of the group do their work and are reasonably content in doing so. But something more

is required. Leadership is fully authentic only when it is exercised by those who are inspired and inspiring. But they must at the same time be willing to recognize the wisdom and inspiration of others. And they must be able to work with others toward a common vision that unites and inspires a whole community.

Within this ancient Christian democratic and Spirit-inspired tradition there are different approaches, giving a wide variety in the manner in which leadership is exercised in practice. For instance, the Dominican tradition in the Catholic Church and the Congregational tradition among Protestants, value a decentralized approach. The Ignatian tradition, on the other hand, uses a highly centralized model of authority, combined with an emphasis on personal and corporate discernment. But such differences should not distract us from what all these spiritualities of authority and leadership have in common. Nor should they allow us to overlook the challenge they pose to the way authority is exercised at present in most business enterprises as well as in the Catholic Church by Rome, by most bishops, and by many of our pastors on the ground. The contrast between the two styles of leadership has been growing wider in recent centuries and is particularly evident at the present time.

The leaders and members of religious orders and churches where the traditional democratic models of governance are practiced have much to teach the sectors of the church where a more authoritarian style of leadership is practiced. They also have a mission to the wider society that is in sore need of more effective, more sophisticated, and more respectful models of leadership than we find in the global and local political world of today.

However, the leaders of these congregations, societies, and churches do not have all the answers. They themselves have much to learn from political philosophers and management consultants who may have little or no connection with the church. In chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this book I have drawn on the thinking and accumulated wisdom of some of these scholars and practitioners to suggest approaches that may be of benefit to those in a leadership role in church and volunteer organizations.



The heart of this book comes in chapters 7, 8, and 9 where, drawing on all that has gone before, I put forward my own views. In chapter 7, I outline some key elements of authentic leadership. Then I describe different kinds of leader, which I call the *lone leader*, the *emergent leader*, the *classic leader*, and the *power-hungry leader*. In the eighth chapter I go on to outline five styles or manners in which good leadership is exercised, ranging from the empowerment style to the inspiring style. I believe each of these styles is appropriate in different situations and that all of them are necessary if leaders today are to be both respectful and effective. Chapter 9 looks closely at the role of vision in the exercise of leadership.

In the final four chapters I spell out in more detail some of the ways leadership is exercised in practice. Chapter 10 offers some practical guidelines and suggestions that those in leadership roles may find helpful. In chapters 11, 12, and 13, I look closely at one of the key issues for leadership, namely, techniques of individual and communal discernment. Starting with the Ignatian approach to discernment, I go on to explore the role of intuition in discernment and decision making. The appendix deals with a rather technical issue that has practical implications: the nature of consolation without cause and how it may relate to intuition.

In writing this book I have drawn both on written materials and on my own experience. Thirty years ago I became involved in leadership training, and it has taken up a sizable portion of my life ever since then. For over twenty years my work was mainly in what is called capacity building. This means that I was involved in facilitating training workshops for community activists and would-be leaders. In more recent years my focus has switched mainly to facilitating workshops for the leadership teams of religious congregations and of nongovernmental organizations. In these workshops I have been concerned not so much with the day-to-day practical issues of management but rather with helping the participants to develop their creativity, their intuitive powers, and their relationships with each other.

All during this period I was also engaged in research and writing about issues of social justice, mission, and spirituality. This provided a background for the leadership workshops in which I was involved. It is only very recently that it occurred to me that I might write a book about the spirituality of leadership. Early in 2005 I was invited by the staff of The Religious Formation Ministry Programme (Loreto House) in Dublin to take a seminar-workshop module on leadership as part of their yearlong program. Shortly afterwards I was invited to give input on the same topic to the central leadership team of my own missionary society, St. Patrick's Missionaries (Kiltegan). These requests provided a stimulus for me to begin writing on the topic, drawing on my experience and doing some further research. Almost before I knew it, what I was writing had grown into the size of a book. So I decided to revise and further expand it, and to have it published in the hope that it may be of some benefit to a wider audience.

My hope is that this book will be of interest first of all to Christians who hold leadership roles in various kinds of organizations—religious congregations, missionary societies, and programs or institutions related to health, community organizing, social action, and informal or formal education. I would like to think it may also have something to say to those who have a leadership or management role in the business world as well as to bishops, priests, pastors, and even to the top authorities of the Christian churches; perhaps also to those who exercise authority in governmental agencies and in the strictly political world. I have adopted an explicitly Christian approach to the topic. But I believe that those who are interested in spirituality, even if they do not share my Christian faith, should find that most of the material is also relevant to their situation.

This book is not intended to cover the day-to-day management issues that arise in running any organization. There are plenty of books about management. What I think is needed is material on leadership—and particularly on the spirituality of leadership. That is what I have tried to offer here.

I am grateful to those who shared insights with me or put me in touch with resources on various traditions of spirituality: Geraldine Smyth, Tom Jordan, and Bernard Treacy on the Dominican approach, Barbara Linen and Claire Murphy in relation to Cornelia Connelly, Cecelia Goodman and Pat Murray on Mary Ward's understanding of authority, Brian O'Leary, S.J., and Noel Bradley on the Ignatian tradition, and Sean Collins for providing me with material that I have used almost verbatim on Francis of Assisi. I am particularly grateful to my brother Frank and my sister-in-law Eileen Lynch for enlightenment and many hours of dialogue about discernment, and to my friend and colleague Pádraig Ó Máille for his rigorous reading of earlier drafts and his very helpful suggestions, particularly in relation to the concept of inspiring leadership and to my treatment of discernment.

Donal Dorr  
September 2005



## Chapter 1

# Biblical Aspects

**I**n this chapter I propose to look briefly at some passages from the Old Testament and the New Testament to see what light they throw on the concepts of authority and leadership.

### *Old Testament*

One of the most important things we can learn about leadership from the Old Testament is that it comes as a call from God. We see this already in the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1) and it becomes very clear in the call of Moses: “I am sending you to Pharaoh, for you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exod 3:10).

The person who is called by God to be a leader feels incompetent or unworthy. Moses responded, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh?” (Exod 3:11) and later, “I have never been eloquent . . . for I am slow and hesitant of speech” (Exod 4:10). In fact God seems to deliberately choose unlikely people whom neither they themselves nor others would have thought of as natural leaders. This was the case when God told Samuel that Saul was the chosen one. Saul said, “Am I not a Benjaminite, from the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And is not my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?” (1 Sam 9:21). It was even more striking in the case of the choosing of David, the son

who had not even been presented to Samuel: “There is still one left, the youngest; he is looking after the sheep” (1 Sam 16:11). It is significant, however, that once these unlikely people have been chosen and anointed they become inspired and inspiring leaders and their people begin to see in them the leadership qualities that had not previously been evident.

Needless to say, we cannot interpret these passages in a fundamentalist way to draw any immediate conclusions about leadership today. But they do suggest two interesting ideas. The first is that a call to leadership, if it is authentic, is experienced as having a certain transcendent quality to it. For the Christian believer this means that even though the call is mediated through the humans who elected or selected the new leader, nevertheless the call comes from God. And this should not be just a matter of blind faith. The chosen leader should also experience this in some degree. Furthermore, the group or community should have some sense that this new leader has been chosen by God and given to them as a gift from God. Of course some members may find themselves surprised at, or even somewhat resistant to, this gift; but they should work to open up within themselves a space of welcome for the new leader.

A second idea suggested by the passages from the Old Testament is that we should be prepared to look for our leaders not just among the best-known and most obvious candidates. It may be that God expects us to play a role similar to the one played by the prophet Samuel—not simply to go by purely human calculation but to look more widely and listen for, and expect, the inspiration of God in the choice of leaders. And we should be willing to allow our leaders to grow into the role that has been given to them, as Moses and Saul and David did.

Perhaps the most striking text on leadership in the Old Testament comes when Solomon becomes king and God asks what gift he wants:

Solomon replied, “Yahweh my God, you have made your servant king in succession to David my father. But I am a very young man, unskilled in leadership. . . . So give your servant a

heart to understand how to govern your people, how to discern between good and evil, for how could one otherwise govern such a great people as yours?" It pleased Yahweh that Solomon should have asked for this. "Since you have asked for this," God said, "and not asked for long life for yourself or riches or the lives of your enemies but have asked for a discerning judgment for yourself, here and now I do what you ask. I give you a heart wise and shrewd as no one has had before and no one will have after you" (1 Kgs 3:6-12).

The significant point here is that the kernel of leadership is not simply the power to influence people or the ability to provide effective and efficient governance. Rather the gift of wise leadership has to do above all with moral issues. It is the ability "to discern between good and evil." This is where the biblical position contrasts sharply with that of Machiavelli—and with the attitude of many who hold leadership positions in today's world.

### *New Testament*

Probably the most commonly quoted passage of Scripture that refers to authority is from the letter to the Romans:

Everyone is to obey the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God and so whatever authorities exist have been appointed by God. So anyone who disobeys an authority is rebelling against God's ordinance; and rebels must expect to receive the condemnation they deserve. . . . You must be obedient . . . not only because of . . . retribution, but also for conscience's sake. (Rom 13:1-2, 5)

This text provides a basis for the legitimacy of civil governments. But it has often been misused to inculcate unquestioning obedience, and even to suggest that people should put up with abuses of power by oppressive authorities. Properly understood, of course, it simply means that the civil authorities should be obeyed unless their demands go against one's conscience. The

text may be linked to the passage from the First Epistle to Timothy indicating that the task of civil authorities is to ensure that the citizens can live in peace and mutual respect: "I urge then, first of all that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving should be offered for everyone, for kings and others in authority, so that we may be able to live peaceful and quiet lives with all devotion and propriety" (1 Tim 2:1-2).

Far more significant texts about authority and leadership are found in the gospels. We can begin with this striking passage from St. Matthew's Gospel:

Jesus called his followers together and said: "You know that the kings of the heathen lord it over their people and dominate them. That is not the way you are to exercise authority. Any of you who wants to be great must be the servant of the others; and the one who wants to be first among you must become your slave." (Matt 20:25-27)

This passage needs no explanation or commentary. It is a straightforward invitation from Jesus to any of his followers who takes up a leadership or authority role to take it on, not for personal power or honor, but purely as an act of service.

The same theme comes up again three chapters later in the same gospel: ". . . you are not to be called rabbi . . . call no one on earth your father. . . . The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled" (Matt 23:8-12).

In an interesting article Wilfrid Harrington points out that Jesus "stood authority on its head: *exousia* (authority) is shown to be *diakonia* (service)." The reason Jesus insisted that nobody on earth should be given the titles "rabbi" or "father" was that he saw genuine religion as "characterized by simplicity, affection, brother/sisterhood"; so "there ought not be an insistence on privilege and an exercise of power that distort this relationship." Harrington notes that Matthew's treatment of this topic is very strong because, by the time the gospel was being written, "Christian leaders were sporting title and flexing ecclesiastical muscle" (Harrington 2005, 51-2).



In regard to the use of power, Jesus himself showed the way. The gospel passages that describe his temptations (Matt 4:1-10 and Luke 4:3-13) indicate that the primary temptation was in regard to how he would use his power. He was being tempted to present himself as a wonder-worker (changing stones into bread), as somebody who could defy the law of gravity (jumping from the Temple). So he would be using his power to impress and overawe people to such an extent that they would effectively be powerless to oppose him. Seeing this as a temptation to use his human power abusively, he rejected it. He insisted that it is only to God that we should submit ourselves unconditionally. The authentic road for Jesus—and for us who follow him—is to leave people free to accept or reject him.

A key passage about leadership is from St. John's account of the Last Supper:

Jesus . . . got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. . . . After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them." (John 13:3-5, 12-16)

This passage, like those from St. Matthew's Gospel, stresses the role of service. But, as Raymond Brown points out (1970, 564), there is a further and deeper meaning. Even slaves were not required to wash the feet of their owner, but occasionally disciples would wash the feet of their master as a sign of their devotion. So the washing by Jesus of the feet of his disciples was a special act of love. What Jesus is asking, then, is that those who

are in a role of leadership or authority should not merely provide service to others but should do so in a spirit of exceptional devotion and love.

A fourth key passage in the gospels about leadership comes in St. John's Gospel account of the postresurrection meeting of Peter with Jesus:

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Look after my sheep." Then he said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt that he asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" and said, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. In all truth I tell you, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go." In these words he indicated the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God. After this he said, "Follow me." (John 21:15-19)

The most important point here is that love is the primary quality Jesus looks for in a leader (cf. Brown 1970, 1111). Peter has made mistakes. He has been impetuous and hot-headed. He has denied his Master. But all this can be overlooked because he has love.

Of course what Jesus asks of Peter is love for Jesus himself and not explicitly for the flock. But, as Brown (1115) points out, the total devotion of Peter to Jesus means that Jesus can safely entrust his flock to Peter. There are interesting implications when this is applied to those who hold any leadership role in the church today. First of all, leadership should only be entrusted to a person who is loving to a high degree. Second, the Christian leader's love is first of all for Jesus; but then it is put into practice by committed love for the "flock" or community.

Another important implication of this passage is that the flock or community belongs to Jesus, and not to the leader (v. 16: "look

after my sheep”). Leaders are not entitled to imagine that they “own” the community. By constantly thinking of the community as “the followers of Jesus” rather than as “my people” the leader can avoid many of the typical faults of leaders, such as being too controlling, or feeling unduly responsible either for the welfare of the group or for the mistakes or inadequacies of individuals in the group or of the group as a whole.

An important lesson can be drawn from the later part of this passage. It is that leaders who follow in the way of Jesus can expect to suffer. They will find they are no longer free to go in the way they would have wished. They are often compelled to do things and put up with treatment they would not have willingly chosen. The biblical writer sees this passage as a reference to the kind of death Peter had to undergo. But, as we apply it today, it can refer to a more drawn-out kind of martyrdom—that of the leader who is pressured from above by higher authorities and from below by the insistent demands of the community; or it could be applied to the martyrdom of the leader who is scapegoated by some or all of the members of the community.