

ON CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

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But Jesus called [the twelve disciples] to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

(Matt 20:25-28)

By most standards, he was an unlikely leader, quiet and unassuming, soft-spoken and gentle, a baker by trade. And he experienced a life-altering encounter with Jesus Christ in the most unlikely of places – a communist prison camp, where he was held, without trial, for a crime he did not commit. Yet this unlikely leader with his unlikely faith became a beacon for the Protestant Christian community in Yugoslavia.

The list of people aided by Rev. Dragutin Volf, father and abiding model of ministry to one of us, is long indeed; as is the record of his other accomplishments as a pastor, educator, translator, and publisher during his tenure as a leader of the Pentecostal Church in Yugoslavia.¹ But what is perhaps most remarkable about him is the kind of leadership he exercised. For many he remained a model of a Christian leader, and he was that because of the source, sustenance, and goal of his leading. In this, Rev. Volf resembled all in that remarkable company of men and women – famous and obscure; from across boundaries of ethnicity,

nation, denomination, and time – who have walked the hard and joyful path of authentic Christian leadership. For them, God is the foundation, provision, and purpose of their lives and their work. Their pattern and referent is Jesus Christ, the great confounder of expectations who presents in His teachings and example a model of Christian leadership that both relates to and subverts conventional conceptions of leadership.²

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In this paper, we will discuss the defining characteristics of Christian leadership, drawing on Christian scriptures

and tradition. We will reflect on some of the difficulties perennially confronting those who exercise such leadership and examine more closely one of the fundamental challenges posed by some dominant cultural currents when tied to globalization processes. We will concentrate on the theological ontology and spiritual foundations of leadership rather than report on or analyze concrete modes of its exercise in the variety of situations in which it may be found, whether historical or contemporary. Part of the reason for this decision is that, in the West today, the understanding of Christian leadership and practice has increasingly come under the influence of various managerial models. While such models have improved various leadership skills (including administrative efficiency), the cost has too often been the loss of the very substance of specifically Christian leadership. While a discussion of structures or historical modes of leadership may be valuable, what is more urgently needed is a retrieval of that substance, a reclaiming of the theological and spiritual dimensions of Christian leadership. As we try to attend to this need, we hope to give expression to what many across the spectrum of Christian churches would recognize as features of authentic Christian leadership.

Forms of Leadership

Christian leadership takes many different forms.³ The most obvious, of course, is that of a clerical leader. Early on, this sort of leadership was organized into a tripartite division of bishop, presbyter/priest, and deacon. The central and church-constitutive role was accorded to the bishop,

who both incorporated in his own person the whole congregation and acts in the person of Christ toward the congregation.⁴ As the church grew, marched through history, and divided into Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant branches, each section and subsection developed a slightly different form of organizing clerical authority and power, though for the most part all such forms remained basically variations on the early tripartite division.⁵

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Christian leadership is not limited to ordained clergy. Even in churches in which ordained ministry is considered indispensable for the very being of the church – and not all churches take that position, but instead insist that ordained ministry is beneficial rather than essential – lay leaders often play an important role. Moreover, para-church organizations, missions, and lay Christian organizations provide opportunities for Christian leadership outside official church structures. Within homes, which some consider to be the most basic “church” within the church, parents play critical Christian leadership roles in the lives of their children.⁶

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A generic term frequently used for a Christian leader is a “minister,” from the Latin for “servant” or “waiter.”⁷ As can be

surmised from what was said above, Christian ministry takes many forms. Even the long lists of ministries found in the New Testament, for instance – including such forms of service as prophecy, teaching, preaching/exhortation, healing and giving – are not exhaustive.⁸ Indeed, the New Testament was written with the assumption that all Christians are called to some form of ministry, a concept that later became known in some Christian traditions as the “priesthood of all believers.”⁹ The role of ordained ministers (“special priesthood”) in regard to all other ministers, non-ordained ministers (“general priesthood”) is not so much to rule over – let alone to oppress – the people, but to empower them: “to equip the saints” for their own “work of ministry” (Eph 4:12).

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In what ways are these forms of leadership Christian? On one level, Christian leadership is leadership, like any other. As such, it is always deeply relational, consisting in an arrangement of power and authority between subject and direct object, leader and followers, pursuing particular goals.¹⁰ These elements – leader, followers, and goal – may be implied rather than stated, and they may be variously understood, but they must always be present for leadership to take place.¹¹

But what is Christian about Christian leadership? More than merely leadership by or of Christians is required. A definition that indicated only that much might be appropriate taxonomically, but it would say little about the character and content of Christian leadership itself.¹² Similarly, leadership that takes place within a context, whether cultural, geographic, or chronological, which can be characterized as “Christian” – however such a characterization may be determined – might reflect little of the character of Christianity as a living faith or of Christ as the living Lord.

Question:

When is any leadership specifically that of a given religion (Jewish, Hindu etc.), and when does it involve members of the faith community, without being characterized as specific to the religion (“Jewish leadership” etc.)?

Such formal definitions of Christian leadership will therefore not suffice. We need to fill them with material content drawn from the heart of the faith itself. What we need is a theological ontology of Christian leadership.

God at the Center

The matter is very simple: for leadership to be authentically Christian, it must grow out of the heart of the Christian faith. There are different ways of construing the heart of the Christian faith. One very common and completely accurate way is to

say that it is about the reconciliation of people with God through Christ and their transformation by the Holy Spirit for the good of the world. We will pursue a different possibility – not so much an alternative as a different way of expressing the same idea – based on the spare and beautiful doxology from the Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Romans. At the most important and in many ways concluding point of the letter, the Apostle wrote: “From him [God] and to him and through him are all things” (Rom 11:36). This brief doxological formula offers a succinct framework for the Christian account of reality, and thus serves well as a basis for constructing a theological ontology of Christian leadership.

From God. Christian leaders are “from God.” They are not self-appointed or appointed merely by other human beings but are constituted by God’s call. Expressed in ontological terms, God calls them from non-being into being. Such a call comes always to individuals, but in most Christian traditions it is “communicated,” “ratified,” or “recognized” by the church, usually through some form of ordination.

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If ordination is not simply to be a conference of social power upon the leader, it has to be matched by the leader’s inner call by God. This inner call is always some form of encounter with God. Each must ascend the mount of God – an ascent which is most often metaphorical, though no less genuine

than the spiritually-charged physical ascents of great biblical leaders like Moses or the three disciples accompanying the soon-to-be-transfigured Christ. It may happen through prayer and meditation, scriptural study, fellowship with other believers, dreams and visions; the possibilities provided by the infinitely resourceful God are countless. Sometimes the call of God comes in grand style; sometimes it is a “still, small voice,” discerned within the community of believers in terms of the talents, skills and deep inclinations of each individual.

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Just as they derive being from God, Christian leaders derive their authority from God. Consider the Great Commission, a text which many people from other religions consider problematic but which has been and continues to be a foundational text for Christian leadership. In it Christ, about to be ascended, charges his disciples to continue his mission. According to Matthew’s Gospel, Christ’s command, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mat 28:19-20), is preceded by Christ’s claim: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mat 28:18). Christ’s own authority is given to the disciples—to Christian leaders—to bear the gospel message into the world. As God’s call creates leadership, God’s authority entrusted to Christ empowers it.

Question:

Is the notion that removal of ego is a condition for spiritually effective leadership to be found in all religions?

As well, Christian leaders derive their capacities from God; these are all gifts from God. Indeed, in the New Testament, specific ministries that various Christians exercise are called charisms or “gifts.” Leadership is not based on merit, as Paul suggested when he asked rhetorically, “who has given a gift to [God], to receive a gift in return?” (Rom 11:35). Rather, each person is given a gift from God for ministry, “according to the grace” – unmerited favor – “given to us” (Romans 12:6). In a significant way, at the heart of Christian leadership lies the thought that, as a leader, each person is gifted for the gifting of others: “for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12b), “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7b).¹³

Through God. As we have explicated above, God is the ground and source of Christian leadership. However, such leadership – its being, authority, and capacities – does not merely originate in God only to be wielded by people in the name of God, or for the sake of “God’s interests.” Neither are God’s call, conferral of authority, and gifts one-time events. When it comes to authentic Christian leadership, God does not just give it an “initial push,” so to speak: God keeps it in motion as well. God is a dynamic source, continuously and organically breathing life into leaders in their activity of leading.

One way to think about this more abiding presence of God in the leader is by speaking of the transparency of leaders to God – a different usage of the term than in many discussions on leadership, where it primarily refers to the degree to which those who are led, as well as third parties, are permitted to “observe” decision-making processes. Pope Benedict XVI has used the term in its theological sense in various writings. Paradigmatic for him is the statement of Jesus in John’s Gospel: “My teaching is not my own, but of the one who sent me” (John 7:14).

According to this model, the more leaders take themselves out of the way and the more transparent they become for God, the better leaders they become

According to this model, Jesus has nothing of His own to give; everything He gives, indeed, His whole person, is from God. The more leaders take themselves out of the way and the more transparent they become for God, the better leaders they become. The model here is the relationship between God and the divine Word incarnate in Jesus Christ.

But even though Jesus Christ is their model, Christian leaders are not Jesus Christ, and the relationship between God and the divine Word, even the Word incarnate, is different from the relationship between God and human beings. To preserve the integrity of the creature in relation to God, it may be

better to speak of translucency of leaders to God¹⁴ rather than transparency.¹⁵ Transparent things are themselves invisible. Their own individuality is overlooked, since their entire purpose lies in their ability to reveal the thing to which they are transparent. Applied to leaders, any marks of individual identity or autonomy hamper their ability to reveal the primary Other, like smudges on a pane of glass. In extreme cases, this would turn the leader into a virtually inanimate instrument in the hands of God, denigrating the created integrity of the leader's being and will. But God creates human beings not as generic tools but as individuals; not so that all traces of who they are would be erased into invisibility, but to be in a state of revealing the transcendent God in their created finitude. This is what the idea of translucency seeks to express.

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When one looks at objects through translucent things, that through which one looks never disappears but is always seen with the object that is being revealed. Translucent Christian leadership is thus both deeply human and deeply divine: the creature's own created value, integrity, and autonomy are affirmed and acknowledged as "visible," even as she "images God" by becoming a "place" where God becomes manifest. Translucency is a metaphor for the human "working out" of God's call "in fear and trembling," while at the same time acknowledging that it is "God who is at work

in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12b-13).

In Christian traditions, people become translucent to God in that they are conformed to Christ, the ultimate image of God. This conformation to Christ is, in part, an imitation of Christ, an active pursuit of holiness, a conscious choice to follow the example of Christ who is the self-manifestation of God. But conformation to Christ is also a gift, the presence of Christ in the "soul," so that a person indwelt by Christ can say, as the Apostle Paul did, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).¹⁶ This applies to all Christians, all of whom are ministers, and not only to those specifically ordained as clergy. As a consequence, Christian leaders are neither primarily experts on the content of Christianity nor wise decision-makers, whose identity as leaders can be separated from their identification with Christ. Nor are they shamans, those arresting figures in the community who, in their own power, are regarded as bridges between the mundane and supernatural, the human and the divine.¹⁷ Rather, Christian leaders are icons of Christ, translucent to His presence. Expressed with a different metaphor, in whatever they do they draw on that very well, so that, from them "streams of living waters flow" (John 7:38b).

Question:

Does the iconic understanding of leadership go beyond the idea that all leadership follows the model of the founder of the religion (Moses, Muhammad, Buddha etc.)? Can similar expressions be found in other religions?

Consider one important consequence of placing the transcendent God as revealed in Jesus Christ at the heart of leadership. Negatively, to be engaged in Christian leadership, one need not adhere to particular culturally-sanctioned conceptions of Christianity, or any “trappings” of Christianity at all. Positively, one can be informed and inspired by wisdom from non-religious spheres of life or other religious and cultural traditions. What matters fundamentally, however, is that leadership draws from the divine well of the Triune God as revealed in Christ.

The notion that leadership is both from God and through God underscores, that we ought to think of God as the ultimate leader, at work in and translucently through human beings. Despite the short-lived highs and abysmal lows of Christian history as mediated through human realities, it is the Christian conviction that God is and remains the original, ultimate, and essential leader of the Christian community across time and space.

To God. God leads to God. When leaders in their lives and their leading are translucent to God, those lives and actions are themselves witnesses to God. The goal of leading people to God is inscribed in the very being of Christian leaders.

Question:

Does the idea of leading “to God” find more common ground with other religions, than the notions of “from God” and “through God”?

The goal defines all the activities of the leaders. In one sermon, St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest Christian leaders, recalled the story of the apostles leading the foal to Jesus (Mat 21:1-11), so that the foal could bear Christ into Jerusalem. Just so, Augustine exclaimed, do Christian leaders lead people to Christ; so that they may, in turn, bear Christ into the world.¹⁸ Whatever shape it takes – be it preaching, teaching, prophecy, serving, giving, or administration – Christian leadership always leads to Christ so that people can bring Christ to the world. Alternatively, we can see the minister in the figure of John the Baptist, pointing to Jesus Christ: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (John 1:29).¹⁹ Of course, more than a mere nod or vague indication of Christ is required. As Pope John Paul II explained early on in his pontificate, “the definitive aim [...] is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”²⁰

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Finally, the goal of leadership is expressed also in the style of leadership. Out of concern that the very style of exercising leadership does not lead people to the leader rather than to God, the Apostle Paul on occasion chose to speak to certain listeners “not with plausible words of wisdom, but

with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:4). At other times, however, Paul applied the best of his human eloquence to persuade his readers with powerful rhetorical tools.²¹ Whether their leading is taking place in “weakness” or in “strength,” leaders can be free to rejoice in their created finitude while acknowledging and embracing the reality that their “competence” is “from God” (2 Cor 3:5), that the “extraordinary power” which they wield “belongs to God and does not come” from them (2 Cor 4:7), and that the best of them are no more than “clay jars” (ibid.) in the service of God.²² This “extraordinary power,” as the Apostle Paul puts it, at work in the lives and leading of Christian leaders enables them to become signposts pointing to God.

Character of Leadership

As we have argued above, Christian leadership exists from, through and to the Triune God. As the self-revelation of God and mediator between God and humanity, Christ is the critical focal point of Christian leadership. As leaders are conformed to Christ and lead their followers to similar conformation, Christ becomes both the pattern and referent for their leadership.

But what sort of pattern of life and leadership did Christ establish? What is the character of the One to whom Christian leadership must always refer? Christ’s manner of leading was counter-cultural in the

Graeco-Roman-dominated culture in which he lived. Cultural dominance and military strength expressed in stable hierarchical relations were the abiding norms of the day. In contrast, Christ modeled what is known by the now nearly worn-out but still accurate phrase “servant leadership,”²³ and led others into servanthood.

He spoke of the leader as servant on a number of occasions (e.g., Matt 20:25-28, Mark 9:33-37, Luke 22:24-32, John 21:15-19), and even provided a potent demonstration of servanthood when he washed his disciples’ feet (John 13:3-17).

Question:

Is service a universal feature of religious leadership?

Not any servanthood will do, of course. After all, one can be thrust into the position of servant or slave by adverse circumstances and human cruelty. The servanthood into which Christ calls leaders is not one of humiliation, but a willing transformation into a posture of joyful humility in the presence of God for the good of others. Instead of “lording over” their followers, whether by brute force or subtle forms of religious manipulation, authentic Christian leaders heed the words of Jesus: “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:26-28).

Question:

How essential is humility to the image of the ideal religious leader?

In most Christian traditions, leaders are not mere servants; they also have formal authority; perhaps a bit like Christ, who served others precisely as the Son of Man, a title generally recognized to contain a reference to an authority figure.²⁴ Christian leaders are still owed obedience and respect by those under their influence. And precisely as servants, they are not to be held at the whimsical beck and call of their followers. Given that their leadership is from God and through God, they are responsible ultimately to God, and not to people they serve.

The servanthood into which Christ calls leaders is a willing transformation into a posture of joyful humility in the presence of God for the good of others

In concrete situations, there is a tension between responsibility to God and service to concrete communities, and it takes wisdom to know how to be a servant to a community in obedience to God. A general rule is formulated in the Epistle to the Ephesians in a preface to a delineation of various social hierarchies: “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). Such mutual submission is appropriate

because leaders and followers are also sisters and brothers in the family of God.

Even more pointedly, both are sinners standing at the foot of the same cross, saved by the same grace of the same God. All owe one another love, and, as mentioned earlier, all are subject to the same Lord—Jesus the Christ.

This, in addition to the servant character of Christian leadership, also undermines the theological legitimacy of authoritarian forms of leadership in the Christian tradition. Almost universally, leaders are seen fundamentally as part of the community. True, in the act of leading, they stand on the side of God and over against the community. But even more fundamentally, as human beings and Christians they stand with the community and over against God. As liturgical theologian and Lutheran pastor Gordon Lathrop puts it, “so then, beg God, let me know that when I rise to take on the presider’s task, I do it from my place in the assembly.”²⁵

Question:

What role do those who are led play in the success of religious leadership (e.g., assent to be led, intercessory prayer for leaders, access to lay leadership responsibilities, accountability of their leaders to them)? How might their willing participation be obtained?

There are differences among Christian churches about the relationship between “standing over against” community

and “being part of the” community and about the implications of the fact that leaders are part of the community. These differences are related to a range of models of social mediation of formal authority and concrete modes of church governance. On the one end of the spectrum are democratic forms of ecclesiastical governance, exemplified paradigmatically by churches with congregationalist polities. The ultimate authority, which always rests with God, is mediated through a given local church and the leadership of the church is recognized and ratified by the concrete assembly. On the other end of the spectrum are monarchic forms of governance. The ultimate authority, again residing in God, is vested primarily in a local bishop, who has to be appointed by the assembly of bishops.

These bishops, through apostolic succession and communion with all living bishops – the head of whom, in the case of Catholicism, is the Pope – are connected to the whole church. In both of these “limiting” models, the leader is both part of the community of believers and a figure who stands over against that community and speaks to it in God’s name.

Question:

Consider how authority plays into the role of the leader. Are there types of leadership that rely more heavily on authority than others? Why and when does a religion emphasize authority?

Challenges to Christian Leadership

In the difficult work of maintaining the authentic character of Christian leadership, leaders face many challenges. Some of them are perennial, given the very character of Christian leadership as being rooted in God and directed toward the good of the world.

Building on the distinction between two key moments of prophetic religions, the character of Christian leadership can be imagined with the help of the metaphors of “ascent” (to the mountain of God) and “return” (to the world with God’s transformative message). The Apostle Paul, in an epistle to the church in Corinth that focuses very much on leadership, identifies these two moments as “standing in [God’s] presence” and being “sent from God” (2 Cor 2:17). Though the metaphors of ascent and return suggest otherwise, the two are not exclusive, as the Apostle Paul’s formulation makes plain. In concrete experience, the two moments often happen in alternating spaces and times (prayer or study at one time; proclamation, pastoral care, or administration at another). Yet they are inextricably intertwined: the God of the “ascent” is fully present and active in the “return,” and the Other-oriented action of the “return” is a natural overflow of the purpose and fulfillment of the “ascent.” These two moments are also the ways in which Christian leaders fulfill the greatest commandment: to love God with their whole being and their neighbors as themselves (Luke 10:27).²⁶

“Malfunctions” of Christian leadership often take place at the point of either ascent or return. This is not the place

to offer a full account of these malfunctions.²⁷ Nevertheless, given that we are highlighting the theological ontology and spirituality of leadership, it may be appropriate to comment on some malfunctions of “ascent.” Such malfunctions may occur when people assume positions of Christian leadership for the “wrong reasons” – power, prestige, personal gain – rather than as a result of the call of God.

Question:

Are the causes of malfunction of leadership the same across traditions? If so, is this a reflection of our common human nature?

More commonly, however, leaders have responded to a genuine call of God, but may have lost sight of their calling and their fundamental character as beings translucent to God. When this happens, leaders are deprived of the animating power of God to continually ground and sustain leadership in the life of God. And yet, since they are religious leaders, they often have to act as if they have made the ascent, as if they are bringing the message somehow from God, as if they are in touch with transcendence. Instead of real ascent, there is a “pretense of ascent”²⁸ – mostly not intentional, but negligent; a result of the pressures of responsibilities, the accumulated force of disappointments, and many other reasons leading to the gradual erosion of faith.

In some cases, the vacuum resulting from the pretense of ascent is filled by

“idolatric substitutions.”²⁹ Instead of coming from the mountain of God with divine tablets of law as Moses did, leaders create a golden calf – not always as openly as the high priest Aaron did, but often more subtly, substituting the content of God’s revelation with what in the New Testament is called “worldly wisdom.” The word “worldly” does not designate the sphere from which wisdom comes – implying that it comes from secular sources rather than from sacred books. Instead, it describes the content of wisdom – that it is incompatible with the truth, goodness, and beauty stemming from God. Alien wisdom gets wrapped up in religious packaging and sold as a genuine good. A more subtle form of idolatric substitutions occurs when leaders focus on the “good purposes” of God, rather than on God. As we mentioned earlier, however, any goal besides God cannot serve as the ultimate purpose of Christian leadership. If “good purposes” take the place of God, they too become idols.

Lines distinguishing a real from a pretended ascent, or the true God from an idol, are not always easy to draw. It takes a great deal of wisdom and spiritual discipline to do it well. Let us give just one example of the difficulty, an example that concerns the leader’s task as a teacher. That task has two aspects – to preserve the faith handed down through generations, guarding its content from distortions, and to mediate faith in new situations, transforming it in light of the demands of new challenges. These two aspects of teaching are often in tension with one another. Life is never static, and when faced with a new language, a new culture, a new constellation of contemporary issues, the

message needs to be expressed in a new way to effectively be the same old message. And yet, new expressions of faith have the potential to become betrayals of faith.

This tension between guarding and mediating is just one instance of the more fundamental tension between the leadership goals of seeking to preserve the identity of the community and fostering the community's relevance in the world.³⁰

The character of Christian leadership can be imagined with the help of the metaphors of “ascent” (to the mountain of God) and “return” (to the world with God’s transformative message)

Experiential Satisfaction: A New Take on an Old Tendency

We have noted above some perennial challenges for those in Christian leadership. But there are other, more contemporary challenges as well – new versions of the perennial concerns, more often than not. We will highlight one such challenge which is tied both to deep currents in Western intellectual traditions and to processes of globalization. It concerns a reductive account of what it means to live well as human beings.

There is a deeply culpable pretense of ascent as well. Sometimes leaders portray themselves as “women” or “men of God” speaking in the name of God so as to serve their own selfish interests. Appealing to God gives them authority and respectability in the

eyes of others as well as in their own eyes, and that authority and respectability serve as a cloak to hide base intentions and practices, such as embezzlement of funds or sexual abuse.

In many Western countries, as well as around the globe, human flourishing is increasingly understood as “experiential satisfaction,” and the business of life is organized primarily around the “pursuit of desire.” On the surface, it may seem that we are talking about simple selfishness, hedonism, or greed – this shrinking of interest to mere concern for the self and what serves the self’s experience of satisfaction. Although the pursuit of experiential satisfaction has been a factor in human life throughout its history – the saying “let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” found in the Bible,³¹ is just one crass expression of it – the situation is different now. Experiential satisfaction is not just one element which has its proper place in the larger conception of a life well lived. It has become the primary content of a life well lived, or of human flourishing.

“Malfunctions” of Christian leadership often take place at the point of either ascent or return

This shift of emphasis has occurred for at least two fundamental reasons. First, intellectual currents that started with modernity and are continuing into what some call “post-modernity” are offering freedom demurred from any normative notion of humanity and human life as the ideal. In this

scenario, all persons can re-invent themselves freely, provided no harm is done to others. Second, globalization processes, driven as they are to a great extent by market forces, have spread consumerism and reinforced the tendency to orient our lives toward the satisfaction of our desires. The result of this shift in ways of living as well as ways of thinking about living has made us prisoners of what Rusty Reno has recently called the “Empire of Desire.”³²

This account of human flourishing constitutes a fundamental challenge to all religions and all religious leaders, and undermines the entire religious vision of life, indeed, the humane way of life itself. All religions are about connecting the self both with an “ultimate reality” larger than the self – in Christianity, this “ultimate reality” is the Triune God – and with other people. This dual move was encapsulated in Christ Jesus’ summary of the teachings of the Jewish law and prophets: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). According to the Christian tradition, this love of God and, in God, love of neighbor is more than a prudent rule to follow, more even than a commandment to be obeyed. It is the very purpose and meaning of human life, God’s design for the fulfillment of human being.

Moreover, almost all religions provide ways to organize, direct, and transform human desire so that people can be turned away from empty and meaningless self-oriented pleasure and, by transcending themselves, come to live deeply meaningful

lives. For the Christian tradition specifically, the Empire of Desire is a problem because it threatens to do the very reverse – to draw people away from the fulfillment of loving God and neighbor and direct them toward the ultimately empty Empire, distorting almost beyond recognition the Christian conception of what it is to be a restored human being in Christ.

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It probably goes without saying that sensuality, physicality, experiential satisfaction, and the fulfillment of human desires are not evils in themselves. In fact, they can be gifts from God, ways of being human and enjoying being human. However, within a Christian conception of human being, these things are neither the substance nor the purpose of life; and the single-minded pursuit of experiential satisfaction undermines that very satisfaction and often leaves a trail of ruined lives. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians puts things starkly:

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:3-5).

The irony of the situation is striking: as they promise to provide for us “the good life,” these forces take us back to a culture of spiritual death. As our interests shrink to mere concern for the self, we lose touch with what truly fulfills the self. As our technology allows us to reach the world, we lose interest in seeking the good of the global community at large, until our circles of concern contract to accommodate only our selves. Of course, we continue to “care” for others – from immediate family, our cultural group, our nation, all the way to the environment. But such care for others is completely subordinated to our own desires: we care for all these things as ways to care for ourselves and promote the satisfaction of our desires.

One of the most telling indicators of the shift in our culture toward self and the satisfaction of its desires is the attitude toward forgiveness. To forgive is to give a gift to another. And this is what becomes difficult if we understand the good life as experiential satisfaction. Often, we refuse to forgive and instead insist on punishment, since our aim is to satisfy our desire for vengeance. Even when we do choose to forgive, we place forgiveness completely in service of our own wellbeing. We forgive primarily because it makes us feel better than being consumed by bitterness and hatred, because it helps us move on rather than remain imprisoned by the past. Forgiveness then becomes a gift we give to ourselves, rather than a gift we give to another.

It is no surprise that we twist religions to serve our desires. Our faith no longer takes us out of ourselves, connecting us in love to God and to neighbor. Rather,

we attempt to make “God” do the work we find useful in our Empire of Desire: we “instrumentalize” “God” and “religion,” reducing our concepts of them to mere tools designed either to improve our performance at work or at play, which is ultimately directed toward our experience of satisfaction – like divine “performance-enhancing” drugs – or to rescue us from our failures in our rat race of choice – like a divine “band-aid.”³³

Christian Leadership and the Spiritual Crisis

Within Christian communities, those in positions of influence must consider how Christian leadership can address these concerns. There are two aspects to meeting this challenge. The first response has to do with the spirituality of leaders, their own rootedness in the faith which serves as an alternative to the Empire of Desire. They themselves must in their own person resist the temptation to live as if experiential satisfaction is the meaning of life. To do so, Christian leaders must focus on maintaining their own connection with and translucence to God. They must be conformed to the living Christ – not merely the historical memory of a “great teacher” and “innocent martyr” – if they are to exercise sustainable Christian leadership that can point people away from the pursuit of desire toward authentic human living for God and for neighbor.

The second response to the challenge that the Empire of Desire represents concerns the function of leaders as thinkers and teachers. Leaders must be trained to be

able to (1) understand deeply the world, its problems and possibilities that open themselves up; (2) understand the Christian tradition, above all the biblical traditions and the great visions of life before God expressed by the “cloud of witnesses” of the Christian faith; and (3) articulate and demonstrate in what ways this ancient faith can prove to be life giving in contemporary situations.

If the ministry of reconciliation lies at the heart of the Christian faith, then helping people receive forgiveness from God and practice forgiveness toward those who have injured them should be one of the primary goals of Christian leaders

Through all this, leaders must seek actively to lead people to counter conceptions of human flourishing which reduce it to experiential satisfaction, and seek instead to retrieve a more salutary perspective on living well. How can Christian leaders retrieve such a salutary perspective? The resources for this are built into the fabric of what it is to be Christian: a refocusing of ideas of human telos back onto God. After all, the Christian understanding of “living well” is that same dual motion of loving God and neighbor, as embodied in Christ. Only in such a love can human being find its true fulfillment: a genuine, God-mediated love even for the despised Other, it reconciles human beings to God, to one another and to themselves, engaging each in the work of serving the global common good.

The most pointed example of love of the other in the Christian tradition is forgiveness because it is not just love of neighbor, but is love of the neighbor who has become an enemy. In many ways, forgiveness can be seen as the heart of the Gospel. Christians are those who have received the gift of forgiveness – and through forgiveness a gift of new life – from God through Jesus Christ. Christians are those who, irrespective of the character of the injury done against them, seek to forgive as God has forgiven them in Christ. If, as we have suggested earlier, the ministry of reconciliation lies at the heart of the Christian faith, then helping people receive forgiveness from God and practice forgiveness toward those who have injured them should be one of the primary goals of Christian leaders.

Perennial and contemporary challenges for Christian leaders, which we have highlighted, have consequences for the training of future leaders. There are many important components of good Christian leadership training which lie beyond the scope of this paper. Some of the central ones touching the challenges we have explored, however, are the following:

1. Future leaders need to have a sense of the Christian faith as a whole; in seminaries and divinity schools, however, they are often served perspectives from widely divergent fields of specialization which are hard to integrate into a whole;
2. At the heart of Christian leadership education must be the fostering of knowledge and the love of God and neighbor; often, however, future leaders are merely given information about faith

and taught leadership skills, rather than being encouraged and led to acquire the depth and wisdom of the life of faith and spirituality;

3. Central to theological education must be a vision of human flourishing, of living well in today's world; students in seminaries and divinity schools, however, often leave their studies without being able to articulate what it means to flourish in a multiplicity of concrete situations or how faith relates to human flourishing.

Conclusion

Within Christian communities, leaders are needed as the “hands and feet” of God at work in the world today. The kind of leadership to which such leaders are called is both similar to and different from other models of leadership. Because it is Christian leadership; it requires real leading by someone, of someone and to someone or something. Because it is Christian leadership; it must be identified on every level with Christ Jesus as the self-revelation of the Triune God, “from whom and through whom and to whom,” according to Christian Scriptures, “are all things” (Rom 11:36). Such Christ-infused leadership takes the particular form of “servant-leadership,” regardless of the specifics of how is it incarnated in individual relationships and contexts.

The mettle of those engaged in Christian leadership is tested by numerous forces, from within and without. We have proposed that all challenges may be

addressed by the simple though humanly impossible act – made possible by God's grace – of reorienting the being of leaders and, through them, of followers to the love of God.

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In that love of God, people are enabled to discover the love of neighbor that seeks the common good not as an intermediate goal to the achievement of experiential satisfaction for the self, but as an overflowing of the life of God. Even experiential satisfaction may be transformed in this economy of divine love, so that it may be enjoyed in its proper perspective as a gift of God, given as part of the common good. As Christian leaders in their living and leading grow more and more translucent to God in Christ Jesus – the God who is love – and work boldly to reorient followers to the source and telos of their human being – the God who is love – they will be reconciled to their own purpose. Though the “great” among us will be the “servant,” and the “first” among us will be the “slave” (Matt 20:26-27), this pattern which Christ Himself has established will be to the fulfillment of God's kingdom for the common good of all humanity.

O God, our Sovereign, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Revelation 17:14, 19:16), we give thanks to you for shaping those whom you have called to serve you as leaders according to the pattern of servanthood which you revealed in Christ Jesus. We ask that you would continually turn their hearts to your presence and the love of you, that their being would be transformed into the beauty of ever deeper translucence to you. We pray that you would so enable them to love their neighbor as themselves that their leading would be a natural outpouring of love, a humble living out of their joy in acts of service to friend and ostensible enemy alike. We present before you those who are led, that through your Holy Spirit, the living Christ at work in and through leaders would inspire them to draw near to you, and, in turn, to draw others to you. We read in the Scriptures that “from [you] and through [you] and to [you] are all things” (Rom 11:36), and we trust that your will for the fulfillment of human being is a good and gracious will. As we draw nearer and more translucent to you, and live and act in the world according to the prompting of your Holy Spirit, we believe that we will share in the realization of your kingdom of love, joy and peace for all humankind, which you purchased by the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen.

Notes

- ¹ For a bare-boned record in English, see Raymond T. Brock, “Pentecostal Expansion in Yugoslavia,” *The Pentecostal Evangel* (4 Feb 1962), 10; Mark Oppenheimer, “Embracing Theology: Miroslav Volf spans conflicting worlds,” *Christian Century* (11 Jan 2003), 18; Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 122-3; Stanko Jambreč, “The Pentecostal Movement in Croatia 1907-2007” (professional paper), trans. Davorin Peterlin (2007), 214. < hrcak.srce.hr/file/38516 > accessed 15 July 2009; Paul Williscroft, “A Bible School for Yugoslavia,” *The Pentecostal Evangel* (20 July 1969), 17.
- ² For an insightful discussion of the broader concept of Christ’s subversion and transformation of ordinary realities, see Gordon Lathrop on “broken” myth, ritual and symbol, e.g., Lathrop, *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) pp. 27-31, 80-81, 199-201; Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) pp. 5-11, 20, 38, 54, 69, 95, 109).
- ³ Sometimes, the term “Christian leader” is used very broadly to designate any form of leadership inspired by a Christian vision or undertaken by a Christian person. In that sense, one can have Christian leaders in politics, business, the academy, etc. In this paper, we are using it in a more restricted sense, to designate leadership which is – as we will discuss later in the paper – identified on every level with Christ Jesus, the self-revelation of the Triune God.
- ⁴ The Letters of Ignatius of Antioch (1st -2nd cent A.D.) are among the earliest Christian documents to refer to this three-part structure of ecclesiastical leadership (cf., Letter to the Magnesians 6:1; Letter to the Trallians 3:1; Letter to the Philadelphians, opening salutation; and Letter to the Smyrnaens 8:1). Although each office is mentioned in Christian canonical scripture (“bishop” in 1 Tim 3:1-7, “elder” or “presbyter” in Acts 20:17, “deacon” in 1 Tim 3:8-13, *inter alia*), nowhere in the New Testament are these offices described with the level of hierarchical formality later developed in some branches of Christianity.
- ⁵ See the ecumenical convergence document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* of the WCC, which operates with the tripartite form of ministry and in which many churches have been able to recognize their own form of ministry.
- ⁶ Cf. Roland Martinson, “The Role of Family in the Faith and Value Formation of Children,” *Word & World*, Vol. 17:4 (Fall, 1997) pp. 396-404; and Walter Brueggemann, “The Covenanted Family: A Zone for Humanness,” *Journal of Current Social Issues*, Vol. 14 (October, 1977) 18-23, *inter alia*. Cf., also, 1 Tim 3:4-5, in which the ability to lead one’s children effectively is set forth as a prerequisite to being able to “take care of God’s church.”
- ⁷ Similarly, the Greek term used in the New Testament and early church is *diakonia*, from *diakonos*, meaning “waiter” in ancient usage. John Knox, “The Ministry in the Primitive Church,” in *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, ed. H., Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956) p. 1.
- ⁸ Cf. Rom 12:5-8, 1 Cor 12:28, and Eph 4:11.
- ⁹ The term “priesthood of all believers” derives from a verse in I Peter: “But you are a chosen

race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9) (see Exodus 19:6, ed.). Martin Luther is among the most famous proponents of this concept (cf. *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, inter alia*). However, the idea of the "priesthood of all believers" is embraced, in varying degrees and with different theological emphases, by many Christian traditions, including the Roman Catholic Church, especially in recent decades. Vatican II's "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity," for example, affirms that "the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world." Pope Paul VI, "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) I.2.

<http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html> .

- ¹⁰ According to Walt Wright, "leadership is a relationship of influence [... in which] one person influences the vision, values, attitudes, or behaviors of another and the other person chooses to act." Walt Wright, "Introduction: Mentor to Mentor," in *The Three Tasks of Leadership: Worldly Wisdom for Pastoral Leaders*, ed. Eric. O. Jacobsen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) pp. 4-5.
- ¹¹ John Donne's famous claim that "no man is an island" is certainly applicable whenever leadership is involved. In English, at least, the verb "lead" can function grammatically without both a direct and indirect object, though it still needs a subject; however, it cannot function conceptually without all three (subject and direct and indirect object). Thus, the statement "She leads effectively" is fully meaningful only if we have a concept of whom she leads and to whom or to what end she leads, whoever "she" may be.
- ¹² After all, two people in the positions of leader and follower may happen both to be Christians, but their religious affiliation may not have any significant bearing on their interaction (e.g., an employer and employee in a secular business context).
- ¹³ It is a Trinitarian gift, variously reported as coming from God [the first person of the Trinity] (1 Cor 12:28), Christ (Eph 4:7, 11), and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:11). Clarifying the mutuality of this Trinitarian act of giving, the Apostle Paul explains: "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Cor 12:4-6). For a further discussion of gifts and Christian theology, see Volf, *Free of Charge*. For a more detailed theological model of ministerial charismata than the scope of this paper permits, see Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) pp. 227ff.
- ¹⁴ For discussions of translucence in connection with theology and the arts, see the essays contained in Carol Gilbertson and Gregg Mulenburg, eds., *Translucence: Religion, the Arts and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).
- ¹⁵ Incarnation suggests that transparency is not desirable: God's design for Christ to be incarnated into human flesh, to be transfigured in human flesh, and to be resurrected in a human body, epitomizes a certain translucence of the human Jesus to the divine Christ.

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- ¹⁶ On the relationship between imitation of Christ and the presence of Christ see Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (1535) (*LW*, Vol. 26, pp. 165-172) and/or *Freedom of a Christian* (*LW*, Vol. 31, pp. 349ff).
- ¹⁷ As Lathrop confesses: “I used to think that, in a certain sense, I could indeed be a shaman [...] I know that people often wanted me to make such connections for them. [...] I was wrong. [...] I am a Christian, for whom the only reliable connection is the one made by Jesus Christ.” Lathrop, *The Pastor*, p. 19.
- ¹⁸ Augustine, “Sermon 359B: Sermon of Saint Augustine on Obedience,” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century III.11 – Sermons (Newly Discovered)*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1997) p. 339.
- ¹⁹ Consider artistic depictions of John the Baptist physically pointing toward Christ in countless paintings [e.g., by Titian (c. 1540); Raphael (c. 1518); and Lucas Cranach the Younger (c. 1555)], icons, altar pieces, mosaics, sculptures, etc.
- ²⁰ Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Exhortation (*Catechesi Tradendae*) On Catechesis in Our Time” I.5.11 (16 October 1979). <
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae_en.html>. Pope John Paul II was writing specifically on catechesis (the teaching of Christian doctrine), but, as we will have already implied, Christian leadership is both the overarching narrative and the essential theme in all forms of Christian ministry/service.
- ²¹ Cf. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* and other writings which reveal his rhetorical skill and potential for literary elegance.
- ²² It is important to note that God does not need to compete with human beings for power, agency or space; since God does not function on the same plane of existence, but rather chooses to coexist and partner with people in a non-competitive relationship of being. For further discussions of non-competitive human and divine agency, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.83.1, 1a2ae.10.4; Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, ed. J. Patout Burns (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971); George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 185-224; David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) p. 152; and Reinhard Hütter, “The Christian Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, eds. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) pp. 293-296; *inter alia*.
- ²³ The term “servant leadership” was coined by Robert Greenleaf. C.f., Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).
- ²⁴ See Daniel 7:13-14.

²⁵ Lathrop, *The Pastor*, p. 20.

²⁶ Cf. also, Matt 22:34-40.

²⁷ For a more extensive discussion of the “malfunctions” of faith, see Volf, *Functions and Malfunctions of Faith* (forthcoming).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ On this topic see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) pp. 7-31.

³¹ Cf. Isa 22:13, 1 Cor 15:32; also, Luke 12:19.

³² See Russell Reno, “The Antinomian Threat to Human Flourishing,” unpublished paper.

³³ For further discussion, see Volf, *Functions and Malfunctions*.

Appendix: Readings on Christian Leadership

New Testament: 1 Peter 2:4-7, 9-10, 5:1-6

Come to [Jesus Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner” [...]

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. [...]

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for

“God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.”

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430): Excerpts from Sermon 340: On the Anniversary of His Ordination¹ (Date Uncertain)

From the moment this burden, about which such a difficult account has to be rendered, was placed on my shoulders, anxiety about the honor shown me has always indeed been haunting me. [...] This burden of mine, you see, about which I am now speaking, what else is it, after all, but you? Pray for strength for me, just as I pray that you may not be too heavy.

I mean, the Lord Jesus wouldn't have called his burden light, See Mt 11:30. The later edition leaves out the word "light." if he wasn't going to carry it together with its porter. But you too must all support me, so that according to the apostle's instructions we may carry one another's burdens, and in this way fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). If he doesn't carry it with us, we collapse; if he doesn't carry us, we keel over and die. A not very striking contrast is being made: nobiscum si non portat, succumbimus; si nos non portat, occumbimus. Where I'm terrified by what I am for you, I am given comfort by what I am with you. For you I am a bishop, with you, after all, I am a Christian. The first is the name of an office undertaken, the second a name of grace; that one means danger, this one salvation. A text quoted in Vatican II's document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 32; in the chapter on the laity, curiously enough, not in that on the hierarchy and the bishops, where one would have thought it belongs. Finally, as if in the open sea, I am being tossed about by the stormy activity involved in that one; but as I recall by whose blood I have been redeemed, I enter a safe harbor in the tranquil recollection of this one; and thus while toiling away at my own proper office, I take my rest in the marvelous benefit conferred on all of us in common.

So I hope the fact that I have been bought together with you gives me more pleasure than my having been placed at your head; then, as the Lord has commanded, I will be more effectively your servant, and be preserved from ingratitude for the price by which I was bought to be, not too unworthily, your fellow servant. [...]

On Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833)²

Once Father Seraphim had opened his door visitors were never lacking, and it was not only young monks and novices who sought his counsel but superiors from neighboring monasteries as well. The Father urged these latter to be kind and love their brethren, to have "the love of a mother for her children," to bear patiently with their weaknesses and even with their diverse failings. He told them that this was what it cost to gain true inner peace. "Learn to be peaceful," he would say, "and thousands of souls around you will find salvation."

Quaker Abolitionist Thomas Garrett on Harriet Tubman (c.1822-1913)³

In truth I never met with any person, of any color, who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul. She has frequently told me that she talked with God, and he talked with her every day of her life, and she has declared to me that she felt no more fear of being arrested by her former master, or any other person, when in his immediate neighborhood, than she did in the State of New York, or Canada, for she said she [only] ventured [...] where God sent her, and her faith in a Supreme Power truly was great.

On Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)⁴

During the Montgomery [bus boycott] movement [...] after being awakened in the night by a threatening phone call, Martin brewed a pot of coffee and sat down at his kitchen table. He was alone, worried, and fearful for himself and his family. “Oh, Lord,” he prayed, “I’m down here trying to do what is right. But ... I’m afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter.” Then he leaned on the table with his head in his hands and, as Martin himself related it, he heard an inner voice: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even unto the end of the world.” Afterward, Martin said to himself: “I can stand up without fear. I can face anything.”

Coralie Godoy on Monseñor Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador (1917-1980)⁵

Since I was in charge of bringing some kind of order to the files, as well as to the incoming and outgoing correspondence, some of the other workers in the offices

approached me [...]:

“Suggest to him that he should have a more fixed schedule for meetings and visits. If he doesn’t, this place is going to be a zoo.” [...]

I put together a few suggestions and went to see him [...]

“Some people say that often you don’t follow through on meetings that have already been set—whether they’re with the bishops, or priests or organizations—and that this is happening because you don’t have a good schedule of appointments with specific days and hours ...” I was embarrassed to be explaining this to him.

“Go on. Go on.”

“They also say that other unforeseen visits come up, and that they break up the sense of order, and that having order is very important. So, of course, if your day was scheduled better, you could attend to everyone better ...”

He looked pensive. And started to slide the cross that he wore around his neck up and down on its chain ... That was a habit of his when he’d be looking straight at you.

“Well, I don’t think that kind of scheduling is going to be possible.”

“No?”

“No, because I have my priorities. And with or without scheduling, I’m always going to receive any campesino (farmworker, peasant) that shows up here at any time of day, whether I’m in a meeting or not ...”

“So ...”

“So, the answer is no ... Look, my fellow bishops all have cars. The parish priests can take buses, and they can afford to wait. But what about the campesinos? They come walking for miles, face all kinds of dangers, and sometimes they haven’t even eaten [...] You know, the campesinos never ask me for anything. They just talk to me about the things that are going on in their lives, and that alone seems to help them. Can I schedule in the times when they’re allowed to do that? I think we should just forget about this.”

I went outside and threw my plans in the first wastebasket I could find.

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996): Excerpts from *In the Name of Jesus*⁶

The Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God’s love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God’s word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life. [...]

Feeling irrelevant is a much more general experience than we might think when we look at our seemingly self-confident society [...] The leader of the future will be the one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there. [...]

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you should some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? [...] Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and

women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal [...25] The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly know the heart of God as it has become flesh, “a heart of flesh,” in Jesus. [...]

If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” It is the discipline of contemplative prayer. [...]

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste full God’s infinite goodness?

- 1 Augustine, “Sermon 340: On the Anniversary of His Ordination” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century III.9 – Sermons on the Saints*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1994) pp. 292-293.
- 2 Valentine Zander, *St Seraphim of Sarov* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975) p. x.
- 3 Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W.J. Moses, 1869) p. 39.
- 4 Donald T. Phillips, Martin Luther King, Jr. *On Leadership: Inspiration and Wisdom for Challenging Times* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 301.
- 5 María López Vigil, *Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic*, trans. Kathy Ogle (Washington, D.C.: EPICA, 2000), 148-149.
- 6 Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989) pp. 17, 22, 24-25, 28, 29.