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# LEADERSHIP IN THE PASSIONIST COMMUNITY

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Many of our religious are expressing unhappiness with the quality of community life. This is a serious matter since community is one of the pillars of Passionist life. Our Constitutions underline the importance of community life by dedicating an entire chapter to it (nos. 25-36). From the very beginning, St. Paul of the Cross saw the Passionists as companions on mission. Our life together as companions has a great influence on every other aspect of our life and mission. If community life suffers so too will our prayer life and our apostolate. Attention devoted to improving community life will also improve our personal wellbeing and our apostolic fruitfulness.

One of the most important contributors to a happy and healthy community life is good leadership. The role of the local superior is beautifully described in our Constitutions (no. 23). The community leader can contribute either to the wellbeing of the members or to their frustration and unhappiness. This will depend on his effectiveness in creating an environment of real fraternal sharing and the common pursuit of worthy community goals.

In the following reflections I want to offer some ideas about different kinds of leadership and how these can contribute to improving the quality of our community life. I am drawing on both Eastern and Western insights into the many faces of leadership. This is not an exclusively theological reflection but draws on social psychology and other human sciences.

I hope the following few ideas on leadership will be useful for your personal reflection and for group discussion. They could also be useful for a wider discussion among the superiors of a province when the provincial superior together with his council and the local superiors meet for their regular review of life in the province.

## **Wisdom from the East**

Eastern philosophers gave a lot of attention to the leader as the one who embodied the best qualities of the society and helped the citizens to realise

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their full human potential. However, no one quality alone is sufficient to be a good leader. It is always a combination of qualities held in balance.

A good example of this way of seeing things is the Confucian thinker Sun Zi (544-496 BC) who wrote,

*“Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and discipline ... Reliance on intelligence alone results in rebelliousness. Exercise of humaneness alone results in weakness. Fixation on trust results in folly. Dependence on the strength of courage results in violence. Excessive discipline and sternness in command result in cruelty. When one has all five virtues together, each appropriate to its function, then one can be a leader.”*

For the Daoist philosopher Lao Zi (6<sup>th</sup> century BC), the ideal leader is the one whose leadership and influence is hardly noticed by the members. He gives the members a sense of their dignity and authority. This kind of leadership is the opposite of authoritarian or autocratic leadership where the leader imposes his will and dominates the members.

In the famous Dao De Jing, Lao Zi writes,

*The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware.*

*Next comes one whom they love and praise.*

*Next comes one whom they fear.*

*Next comes one whom they despise and defy.*

*When you are lacking in faith,*

*Others will be unfaithful to you.*

*The Sage is self-effacing and scanty of words.*

*When his task is accomplished and things have been completed, All the people say,*

*‘We ourselves have achieved it!’*

The most admired leaders in the East were the wise and ethical leaders who contributed to the inner life of their followers and disciples, and not the great warriors and conquerors. The wise leaders made their followers better human beings and better citizens. They understood that the good of society and the wellbeing of the individual go hand in hand. The good leader is the servant of both the individual and the society.

### Contemporary Western Thinking

There are many models of leadership in the West. We can think of autocratic leaders like Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler as well as charismatic

leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. The west has swung from one kind of leader to another with dramatic consequences for the people. Even today there are different kinds of leaders competing for power and producing lamentable results.

The Christian community has also experimented with different kinds of leadership. Until recently the preferred kind of leader was the authoritarian leader who had all authority and the power to impose it. This model of leader fitted well with a hierarchical view of the world that saw all authority and power coming from God and mediated through the levels of the sacred hierarchy down to the mere servant recipients. This view has been moderated in recent times especially because of new biblical scholarship and a greater awareness of the kind of leadership we see in Jesus and in the early Christian communities.

I will look at three kinds of leadership that are discussed in the scholarly literature that can contribute to the creation of a richer and more rewarding experience of religious community life.

### **Servant Leadership**

In religious communities we try to keep the example and teaching of Jesus in view. The kind of leadership we see exemplified in Jesus can be called Servant Leadership. Jesus said he did not come to be served but to serve, and warned his disciples not to imitate those leaders who make their power felt by dominating others. Today, even in the secular world, there is a growing appreciation of this kind of leadership and the benefits it brings to groups.

Servant leadership is a style of leadership in which the main goal of the leader is to serve the community. This is different from traditional leadership where the leader's main focus is the economic or military thriving of their group. A servant leader shares power, puts the needs of the members first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. Servant leadership inverts the norm, which puts the outcomes or results as a main priority. The good of the members are the first priority of the servant leader. Instead of the people working to serve the leader, the leader exists to serve the people.

A servant leader is focused on the question, "*Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?*" The servant leader also benefits from this way of leading. All the members experience personal growth and the goals of the

community are achieved due to the members' growing commitment and engagement.

### **Authentic Leadership**

Another style of leadership that is more and more appreciated in society today is called authentic leadership. This too can be adapted to the needs of a religious community.

Authentic leadership is an approach to leadership that emphasizes the leader's inherent human qualities. The leader has the qualities necessary to lead and to win the support and cooperation of the members. The community responds to the leader because they recognise the leader's legitimacy, not because he was appointed by the Major Superior but because of his honest and open relationships with the members, by which he values their contribution and participation. These relationships are not merely utilitarian but are built on an ethical foundation.

Authentic leaders are positive people with truthful self-concepts who promote openness. By building trust and generating enthusiastic support from the members, authentic leaders are able to improve individual and team performance.

### **Transformational Leadership**

This is an approach to leadership where a leader works with others to identify needed change. Through inspiration or creative thinking he is able to create a vision to guide the change, and can execute the change in collaboration with the committed members of the group.

This kind of leadership serves to enhance the motivation, morale and participation of the members through a variety of mechanisms. He is able to connect the follower's sense of identity and of self to an attractive vision/project and also to the collective identity of the organization. He is also a role model for followers and inspires them and is able to raise their interest in the project. He challenges followers to take greater ownership for their work. He understands the strengths and weaknesses of followers. All of these allow the leader to align followers with tasks that enhance their performance.

## **Synthesis and Conclusion**

I may have included too many ideas that are difficult to connect together into a coherent profile of a good community leader. My intention is not to write a well-argued thesis but merely to offer a few suggestions in the hope that they will provoke some creative thinking about the importance and the potential of good leaders.

## **The Challenges to Leadership Today**

In the past, the voice of the superior was likened to the voice of God. The superior commanded and the “inferiors” obeyed. The authority of the superior was based on the authority of the Holy Rule, and beyond that on God. That old “top down” style of leadership was common and effective in more stable times and institutions. It is less acceptable today and is seen as less effective when change is a normal part of life. A new approach to leadership begins with respect for persons, their intrinsic dignity and human rights. A greater appreciation of democracy and equality in society means that no one is born to lead or has a divine right to lead. Leadership is learned and often through many mistakes.

We have a greater appreciation today of the need for collaboration and its many benefits. The active participation of members leads to greater acceptance and reception of decisions. The leader is one of the community and a greater accountability of leaders means they are more likely to be criticized even opposed. Modesty is an essential trait for a leader today.

Today change is more frequent and often more radical. Therefore creativity and flexibility are essential. The leader is one who has the vision and the skill to engage the whole community in the difficult process of change in response to the new challenges and needs.

## **Leadership in Today’s Religious Community**

There is no fixed model of leadership for today’s religious community. It is a skill learned through experience. The most important model is Jesus the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the flock. We know from experience that certain things hinder and other things help in exercising effective leadership today. The following synthesis is a combination of three styles of leadership that are particularly useful for religious communities,

1. Servant Leadership inspired by the teachings of Jesus.

2. Authentic Leadership based on the integrity and self-awareness of the leader.
3. Transformational Leadership that boosts the morale of the members.

### **Leadership works at three levels**

Effective leadership works on three separate but related levels. The first is the group or public level when the leader interacts with the entire group. This happens during community meetings, communal events and other times when information or instructions are given to the group. The private level is the relationship the leader has with each member of the community. This is the face-to-face interpersonal level where knowledge, respect and care are communicated to each person. This is often a neglected level of leadership that is really of primary importance and significance. The third level is the relationship of the leader to himself. This means the necessary care for his physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. The inner health and wellbeing of the leader is indispensable to the health and wellbeing of the community.

#### A. The Public Level

This is where the leader is relating with the group. The main contribution of the leader to the group will be:

1. Setting goals.
2. Organizing and planning.
3. Ideation, problem solving.
4. Maintaining the group.
5. Sharing responsibility, delegating, using the leadership of others.
6. Keeping the group focused.
7. The leader is a fellow participant.

#### B. The Private Level

This is where the leader is relating with individual community members. The relationship of the leader to each member of the community is vitally important. He knows and respects each one and understands something of their inner world. The good leader will want to:

1. Recognize the talents of each.
2. Appreciate the work done.

3. Help to value the work.
4. Care for the well being of each person.
5. Is not afraid to be weak, vulnerable.

### C. The Personal Level

This concerns the leader's relationship with himself. The leader also has his personal needs. His role as leader will reflect the way in which he cares for himself and attends to his own personal growth.

1. Technical know-how and skills, especially about the dynamics of groups and persons.
2. Attitudes.
3. Psychological self-mastery.
4. Is free to seek help.

This outline of the three levels of leadership is an attempt to apply the three styles of Servant Leadership, Authentic Leadership and Transformational Leadership to a religious setting. It offers a general outline of an effective leader in a religious community today.

The outcome of good leadership is a healthy and relatively happy community. Some of the characteristics of a healthy community are the following:

#### **Ten characteristics of healthy community:**

- Purpose: the members proudly share a sense of why they are together and are invested in accomplishing the mission and goals of the community.
- Priorities: Members know what needs to be done next, by whom, and by when in order to achieve community goals.
- Roles: Members know their roles in getting tasks done and when to allow a more skilful member to do a certain task.
- Decisions: Authority and decision-making lines are clearly understood.
- Conflict: Conflict is dealt with openly and is considered important to decision-making and personal growth.
- Personal traits: members feel their unique personalities are appreciated and well utilized.
- Norms: Group norms for working together are set and seen as standards for every one in the groups.

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- Effectiveness: the members find community meetings encouraging, efficient and productive and look forward to this time together.
- Success: Members know clearly when the community has achieved an important goal and share in this equally and proudly.
- Training: Opportunities for feedback and updating skills are provided and taken advantage of by all the members.

These few ideas on leadership were gathered from many different sources. I hope they give a glimpse of the many sides of leadership and the important contribution wise and thoughtful leadership can make to creating a truly fraternal and creative community life. This is not to neglect the theological dimension of leadership in a religious community which precedes and is superimposed on all of this. It is God who calls us together in community for the sake of the Gospel and it is the Spirit who breathes the love, unity and peace of God into our life together.