

Servant Leaders

by Hugh F. O'Donnell, C.M.

The last half of the 20th century witnessed a great evolution in the understanding of institutions, organizations and leadership. Leadership development is currently a topic in educational institutions everywhere. It is a theme that has come of age in the Congregation of the Mission.

Confreres are inclined to repeat to one another, and sometimes to strangers, Saint Vincent's words that we are gleaners after the great communities, the Jesuits in particular. This is a useful lesson in humility and it is salutary to admit that others have done more than we may every dream of doing. All of that is in God's hands anyway. But, thinking of ourselves as gleaners from the point of view of leadership, of taking responsibility for our own calling, of recognizing God's call to us for service and evangelization leads us down the path of false humility and sidelines us in our own minds. It is an evasion of responsibility. The Little Company is called to take full responsibility for our vocation, life and mission and to act decisively as Saint Vincent did.

Thomas Merton used to like to quote what the Dalai Lama said when so many Tibetans including himself fled Tibet in 1959. He said, "Now everyone must learn to stand on his or her own two feet." This is true for us today. We must take responsibility for our own lives as well as for our communities and for our mission in the 21st century.

We are now grasping the full impact of what the Congregation of the Mission did in accepting responsibility for writing the Constitutions and Statutes in 1980. We re-invented ourselves. We accepted full responsibility for faithfully living the charism of Vincent in new times and under new circumstances. It was done in complete fidelity to Saint Vincent, the Common Rules and our own history. Nevertheless, there are two significant differences between the Common Rules which governed our lives from 1658 to 1980 and the Constitutions and Statutes of 1980 (1984 when they were promulgated). The author of the Common Rules was Saint Vincent and we wrote the Constitutions and Statutes. Secondly, the Common Rules were a reflection of the way the Congregation of the Mission was actually living, and the Constitutions and Statutes, on the other

hand, embody our best understanding of what fidelity to our charism calls us to in the present and future. We have accepted the responsibility to lead in response to the new demands and opportunities of our times. This is both a sobering and exhilarating grace.

The Constitutions and Statues bring us face to face with the fact that fidelity is oriented not only to the past but also to the future. Our fidelity to the past is to Saint Vincent, his charism, his way and his inheritance, which in the past forty years has involved going back to the sources, an effort concerning which the community can rightly be proud. But there is also creative fidelity, that is, fidelity to the charism in new times and under new circumstances. Creative fidelity calls for leadership.

The second paragraph of the Constitutions is remarkable not only for its content but also for its place in the Constitutions, right after the opening paragraph on mission. In tandem with the first paragraph it establishes the hermeneutic for reading and understanding the meaning and challenge of the whole of the Constitutions and Statues. The second paragraph reads:

With this purpose in view, the Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal.

While the first paragraph identifies us as disciples of Jesus with the mission of following Christ evangelizing the poor, the second paragraph gives the historical and temporal setting which creates the dynamic relevance of our vocation today. It is lived in relation to *the signs of the times* and the urgent calls of the church and calls us to respond creatively according to the circumstances of time and place. We “should take care to open up new ways and use new means.” Evaluation and planning of our works and ministries has become a fundamental dynamic of fidelity to our vocation. The Constitutions anticipate that this dynamic will involve us in a process of “continual renewal,” of ongoing conversion. We are called to have the same creative dynamic in our communities in the 21st century that Vincent and the confreres had in the face of the challenges of the 17th century.

Behind this second paragraph we can sense the determination to come up to “the level of our times” and it includes a determination to know when past commitments have been fulfilled, to know when our mission in a particular place is finished, to be open to the present

and to the future, to be free enough to hear the cries of the poor today. It is a vision of ongoing transformation, responsiveness, discernment and attention to events. Still, the past is sacred. It is past fidelity which has brought us to the present. One of the most touching moments in the Gospel is when Jesus is talking about new wine in new wine skins and he says with great feeling for those who enjoyed the old wine: "And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better'" (Luke 5:39). Perhaps in all of us there is a corner of our souls where we feel the old is better. Leaders have to take this into account.

What is the source of new energy in our Constitutions and Statutes? I believe it is the recovery of a sense of mission. It seems to me that after the time of Saint Vincent mission came to be identified with the works of seminaries and popular missions, which was clearly the case in the 130 years up to the French Revolution. In the 19th and 20th centuries missions *ad gentes* also became prominent along with the overseas expansion of the Congregation. The Constitutions of 1954 scarcely say anything about mission but rather speak of works. In the Assemblies of 1968-1969, 1974 and 1980 it was very difficult for some to recognize the difference between mission and works, but the distinction is fundamental and vital to the Congregation. It has become commonplace now in the Congregation to speak of our mission "to follow Christ evangelizer of the poor."¹

This view of the Constitutions and Statutes leads naturally to the role of leadership in the Congregation. This is the horizon, the new world, that calls for leadership at every level in the Congregation. In 1986, as I was finishing my time as Visitor in the Midwest province, I attended a national meeting of provincials from many congregations. A Jesuit provincial addressed us on the topic, "From Maintenance to Mission." He was concerned that too many of us were spending all our time taking care of business as usual and we had no time to dedicate to the mission of our congregations. Leaders and mission go together. Saint Vincent once gave advice to the Daughters of Charity on how to think clearly about new problems facing them. He said first think about the purpose and then all the other elements will fall into place. Our purpose is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor....

¹ It is in light of our mission that we are called to withdraw from works we judge do not any longer fulfill it (taking time to do it right, for example, in dialogue with the people) see Statute 1. All our works are to be evaluated in the light of our mission. The Constitutions are particularly clear about the directive role of mission in our parishes and educational institutions (see Statutes 10 and 11).

The Art of Leadership

There is a science of leadership, but in practice it is an art. As such, it can be learned. Everyone can learn to lead in his or her specific area of responsibility and as part of a common effort.

The words *leader* and *leadership* are not found in our Constitutions and Statues, but the reality is implied and has been part of our history from the time of Saint Vincent. In the past it depended on the gifts and charisma of individuals rather than insights garnered from research and study. There were exceptional leaders long before “leadership” became the object of systematic study and reflection, just as there were missionaries inculturating the Gospel long before the word “inculturation” was invented after the Second Vatican Council. Experience and performance provided the data for the eventual development of the science of leadership.

Bernard Lonergan, who studied years to understand the genius of Thomas Aquinas said that his purpose was to help people do by method what Aquinas did by genius.² Saint Vincent was a genius in his own way, not the kind of genius Aquinas was, but a genius of Charity. He had a genius for attracting people, winning their confidence, evoking their assistance and working together with them. He had a genius for organization and attention to detail. He was busy all the time, but never got ahead of God, not treading on the heels of providence. At the heart of his genius was love. Someone called him the Mystic of Charity³ in a century when there were many other mystics in the more usual sense of the word. Following Lonergan’s lead we want to do by method what Vincent did by genius.

“Method” has a special meaning for Bernard Lonergan.⁴ He does not mean tactics or strategies or techniques. For him the method is in the person himself or herself. It is in the way of seeing, of understanding, or asking the right questions, of listening (to God and neighbor), of grasping the reality and truth of a situation, of deciding responsibly on the basis of values, of knowing the differences between the conditional and the unconditional, the negotiable and the non-negotiable. It is not what we usually mean by “method,” but it is what we mean by *authenticity*. We want to lead like Vincent did.

² BERNARD J. LONGEGAN, S.J., *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas (Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan)* (v. 2), by Bernard Lonergan, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (Paperback - May 17, 1997).

³ GIUSEPPE TOSCANI, C.M., *La Mystique des Pauvres: Le charisme de la Charité* (Editions Saint-Paul, 1998). Translated and privately printed by Myles Rearden, C.M., as *The Spirituality of the Poor* (Dublin, 2007).

⁴ BERNARD J. LONERGAN, S.J., *Method in Theology* (Seabury Press, 1972).

We may not have his genius, but each and every one of us can walk authentically in his way.

We are interested particularly in value-centered leadership, and, of course, the values we are interested in are Gospel and Vincentian values expressed in an unconditional regard for the value and dignity of the human person. "*Vincent on Leadership – the Hay Project* at De Paul University in Chicago emphasizes value-centered leadership as it awakens and advances the vision, values and practices of Saint Vincent de Paul in people and organizations worldwide."⁵

Their help in planning and presenting both workshops expanded our horizons and fostered the development of the skills required for leadership. One of the great assets of the Congregation is the presence of post-secondary centers of learning where people strive daily to integrate Catholic and Vincentian values with excellent scholarship and first rate teaching. CIF's collaboration with De Paul points to many other avenues of collaboration.

The two poles of the art of leadership are 1) foundations and 2) the best practices of effective leadership. Our goal has been from the beginning to integrate the two aspects, the why and the how.

Foundations

Our foundations are Jesus, Vincent and the Constitutions and Statutes.

Jesus as Servant. Following Christ evangelizing the poor is the beginning of servant leadership and the source to which we always return. Following Christ means discipleship. It means a personal relationship to Jesus and to him present in the church and the poor. It is in response to an invitation or a call. Vincent learned this lesson from de Berulle. He learned that his priesthood was more than a career and an opportunity, that, in fact, it meant a total and unconditional relationship to Jesus and his mission. Jesus not only proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom but he did it by going from village to village. Father Andre Dodin, when asked once how Saint Vincent could have said that the Lord waited 1600 years to found a community that did what he did, replied that it was true from the point of view of going from village to village. He said that no other community had every been founded to go from village to village following the example of Jesus. This speaks to the missionary mobility which characterizes our community, especially the interior

⁵ See <http://leadership.depaul.edu/>

mobility of unconditional readiness to go where we are called and sent, as Saint Vincent says, for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor.

The identity of Jesus as Servant and the link to servant leadership finds its deepest Vincentian meaning in relationship and free, unconditional commitment. We are servant leaders as disciples of Jesus unconditionally committed to following him to the poor. It is also important to say that for Saint Vincent the poor are understood in the first place theologically and not economically or socially, certainly not as objects of charity. They are seen as God sees them. For Vincent they are who they are in the sight of God and they are loved as God loves them. This is the invisible and interior foundation of Vincentian servant leadership. This is the dimension which Father Tom Lane presented in 2006 and Fathers José Carlos Fonsatti and Jean-Pierre Renouard stressed in 2008.

Vincent as Servant Leader. The invisible and interior side of Vincent's following of Christ was manifest in a life of remarkable leadership. Here are some of the highlights.

Saint Vincent's primary model was organic rather than architectural — he was the farmer rather than the architect with blueprints. He was tuned into nature, history, Providence, events and people. He did not seek to impose a preconceived model, but acted with detachment and unrestricted readiness, with a great freedom of spirit. He insisted nothing is ruined by taking one's time and that, on the contrary, he saw many things ruined by haste.

He was a collaborative leader. His greatest collaborator, of course, was Saint Louise de Marillac, but the wonderful story of their collaboration has not yet been fully told. Monsieur Portail was at his side from the beginning of the Congregation. He welcomed the collaboration of people from all walks of life, men and women, rich and poor, urban and rural. He had confidence in others and valued their contributions, expecting sometimes more than they knew they were capable of giving. His style of collaboration was creative. He was a catalyst. He helped the women of Chatillon organize themselves in a way that was enduring and repeatable. The same is true for the Ladies of Charity. It was both creative and daring to support them in visiting the sick in the Hotel Dieu. He built bridges between those with money and those in need. For him everyone had a role in doing the Lord's work.

He was a father and mentor to the priests and sisters. His letters show him to be amazingly well-informed about what was happening in each locale. He had a sense for what people needed, whether it

was encouragement or admonition. He was in regular communication with the superiors of the local houses.

He was a visionary leader. Love is the goal, love is the way. Jesus gave himself totally for us, our vocation is likewise "*se donner*" to give ourselves to the Lord and to the neighbor. Whether he was or was not a captive in North Africa, it has always seemed to me that the paradigm of alchemist suited him very well. He met ordinary situations in such a way that they were transformed into something enduring and of greater value. For example, he was not the first to preach missions or to urge general confessions, but the dynamic of the missions as they evolved under his leadership went to the heart of the matter, and would speak to today's world, if we were alchemists ourselves. He offered people a new beginning [through general confession], promoted reconciliation (confreres reconciled families) and established a way to help the neighbor (the Confraternities of Charity).

Some of his rules of action were: detach from the outcome (it is in God's hands), be well-informed, consult as necessary, trust collaborators, do not rush Providence, act decisively when the time comes, and be firm regarding the goal and flexible and gentle regarding the means.

Vincent's life is a study in leadership, but the *intention* of becoming a great leader belongs more to our time than to his. He had evangelical freedom and was tuned into Providence and history. His leadership emerged from there.

Constitutions and Statutes. Though the Constitutions and Statutes do not use the language of "leader" and "leadership," the first general principle states that those exercising authority in the Congregation "should have before their eyes the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be ministered to but to minister" and "they shall consider themselves **servants** of the community for furthering its own purpose (end) according to the spirit of St. Vincent in a true communion of apostolate and life."⁶

This service of authority, nevertheless, is done within a constitutional framework, which identifies and guarantees the rights and obligations of all. Authority remains important in the Congregation of the Mission. Those who exercise authority in the Congregation have the right to decide and command what is to be done, after consultation and dialogue.⁷ Each confrere has authority

⁶ C. 97,1.

⁷ C. 97,2.

appropriate to his role and mission in the Congregation.⁸ Subsidiarity is a sacred principle in the Constitutions: “Those matters which can be managed by individual members or lower levels of government should not be referred to higher levels of government.”⁹

The Constitutions and Statues are equally strong on the rights and responsibilities of all the members of the Congregation. Each one has the right and responsibility “of working together for the good of the apostolic community and of participating in its government” through active and responsible cooperation.¹⁰ This is the first general principle under the organization of our government. Rights and responsibilities reside in the body as a whole and in all of its members. There is a remarkable and unprecedented attention to the individual worth, initiatives, individuality and charisms of each confrere in paragraph 22 of the Constitutions. Like everything else, everything is to be seen in the light of the mission and end of the Congregation.¹¹

The voice of each confrere is important and honored in the Constitutions. Dialogue is a cornerstone of community life¹² and is the source of the local community plan.¹³ It is presumed to precede the decisions of the leaders.¹⁴ It is fundamental to community discernment and the responsible exercise of obedience. Paragraph 37,1 says: “To participate in this mystery of the obedient Christ requires us all to seek, as a community, the will of the Father. We do this through mutual sharing of experience, open and responsible dialogue in which differences of age and outlook interact, so that common directions may surface and develop, and lead to making decisions.” Finally, the road to renewal is through dialogue. “In community prayer we find an excellent way of animating and renewing our lives, especially... when in fraternal dialogue we share with one another the fruit of our spiritual and apostolic experience.”¹⁵

The Visitor and the local superior are urged to be solicitous for the participation of each confrere in the life and mission of the Congregation and the personal development of each confrere. This sense of solicitude and care for the well being of each confrere

⁸ C. 98.

⁹ C. 98.

¹⁰ C. 96.

¹¹ C. 22.

¹² C. 24,2.

¹³ C. 27.

¹⁴ C. 97,2.

¹⁵ C. 46.

reflects a level of mutuality and interest characteristic of the Good Shepherd. I know mine and mine know me.¹⁶

The promotion of the unity of the Congregation stands out as a primary goal of leadership at all levels.¹⁷ It is a unity based on a common mission, shared values, respect, love and dialogue. Coordination and promotion of ministries, animation, and the promotion of continual renewal of the Congregation also define the role of leadership in the Congregation.

Guiding all these decisions is the consciousness that we are carrying on "the mission of the Founder adapted to diverse circumstances."¹⁸ In these brief words we return to the contemporary challenge of creative fidelity to Vincent under new circumstances.

These foundations become the operative foundations of our lives when they are freely affirmed and appropriated by us. A new world opens when our freedom is unconditionally engaged in following Christ in the footsteps of Vincent according to the constitutive elements of our way of life laid out in the Constitutions and Statutes.

The Practice of Leadership

Building on these foundations De Paul University's experience in promoting Vincentian leadership and their use of the best practices of contemporary leadership produced many new insights, encouraged the development of specific skills and enabled the participants to leave with increased confidence in their roles as leaders. As usual, the participants had a lot to learn from one another. The process relied a great deal on the experience of participants themselves.

De Paul's team put us in touch with some of the principal authors in the field of leadership. In addition to the writings and insights of Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership*, which laid the foundation for our collaboration and transformed our way of looking at leadership, we found deep resonance with *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. They have distilled a lifetime of experience, study and practice in the field of leadership into five practices and ten commitments of exemplary leadership, easily understood and identified with within a Vincentian worldview. This became our basic framework for the Workshop with Visitors in 2008. Within this framework Father Pat Murphy, C.M., and Sister Patricia Bombard, B.V.M., enriched our understanding of

¹⁶ See C. 123,2 and 129,2.

¹⁷ See C. 102; 115; 123,2 and 129,2.

¹⁸ See C. 101.

leadership through the insights of other authors and their own personal experience. What follows is a distillation of some of the most memorable insights.

Authenticity. The most fundamental attribute people look for in a leader is authenticity. When a group of people were asked to name the qualities they considered most important in a leader, the top four qualities listed were: honest, forward-looking, competent and inspiring. It turned out that these same four qualities were the highest also for teachers. Credibility is the foundation of leadership. If people do not believe in the messenger, they will not believe the message. People want to be able to rely on what we say and what we say we will do. The true leader has earned the trust and confidence of the people.

Finding one's voice. Each leader has to find his or her own voice. A leader cannot lead with someone else's values. Kouzes and Posner's first commitment is: "Find your voice by clarifying your personal values." This is especially important in our community where no one seeks to be superior or provincial. The one chosen or appointed has to embrace freely the responsibility and challenges and know what he believes. Each person brings his or her own gifts and values to leadership. Clarifying them is necessary to setting the example and modeling the way (Kouzes and Posner).

Listening. Greenleaf makes it clear that the servant leader listens first. Listening is the key. It is an art concerning which there is a lot to learn. Listening sympathetically and intelligently often is transforming by itself. People want to be listened to and understood. A leader not only listens to the people in the organization or community, but he or she needs to find someone whose advice, guidance and feedback they will listen to. Listening also easily leads to compassion, entering into another's heart and feelings (J.P. Murphy).

Enlisting collaborators and co-workers. Leadership is a relationship. It is a relationship to the other people in the organization. In the workshop it was important to identify the people the leader works with. Leadership, taken wrongly, can be very lonely. Leadership, taken rightly, can involve the leader in a team effort with people who have a great deal to give and want to give it. In the community and elsewhere, people are our greatest asset. Leading *with* people can be a great experience. Enable others to act by fostering collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust; also, strengthen others by sharing power and discretion (K and P Practice 4 and Commitments 7 and 8).

Difficult people and difficult situations. Both workshops devoted time to facing difficult situations and difficult people. Sister Patricia Bombard offered new frameworks for understanding difficult situations and difficult people. She suggested that it may be that the people in question are not *difficult* so much as they are *different*. She cast the question in terms of inclusion and exclusion. Through inclusion we extend our boundaries to take into consideration another's needs, interests, experiences and perspective. "One of the central missions of the Christian community is to welcome those who are excluded." Law, 26. Saint Vincent extended the boundaries of the church in his day to include the poorest of the poor. When it comes to difficult situations she said that we are often called to make decisions that are not clean cut and black and white, in situations which include opposing values, like liberal and conservative, for example. In this case it is a matter of managing polarities rather than eliminating one of them. It is an ongoing process

Motivating. People are motivated by being listened to, by being valued, by being part of something worthwhile, by being understood, by having clear objectives and expectations, by being trusted, by having worthwhile responsibilities, by having their contribution and successes recognized. K and P's fifth practice is: Encourage the Heart: Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence, and Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

Challenging the Process. A shared vision in new circumstances will create a gap between present performance and future aspirations. It will mean challenging the process, our present way of doing things. Someone has said somewhere that the only change agents we can listen to are those who truly love us and love our organization and love what we are about. I have noticed recently at CIF that confreres have begun to express spontaneously their love for the Congregation. Saint Vincent loved the Congregation. Sharing his love for the Congregation and our mission, we will search for opportunities and seek innovative ways to change, grow and improve. It will involve taking risks "by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes."¹⁹

Inspiring a shared vision. Leadership above all is about the future. It is about pointing in the right direction and leading the way. It is about "imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities"

¹⁹ This paragraph is the third practice of Kouzes and Posner and expresses commitments five and six.

and “enlisting others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations” (K and P, commitments 3 and 4). The workshop began by asking participants for hopes and dreams, so that we might imagine our common future.

The Future

Looking to the future two questions come to mind: what aspects of Vincentian leadership are needed today? and, what are the possibilities of Servant Leadership training for the future?

During the session, participants were asked what aspects of Vincentian leadership are most needed today? They answered in terms of vision, process and the qualities of the leaders:

Vision: sensitivity to social problems; creativity in developing transforming responses to the realities of the poor; a community committed to speaking out about injustices.

Process: listening and discernment; being collaborative and systematic; act rather than talk (“Just do it!”); witnessing and working together as a team.

Qualities of a leader: be authentic and credible especially in action; be willing to face problems, confront them and respond to the challenges; be open to present times and be willing to take risks; be hopeful, inspiring and motivating; be strong and prophetic – brave, prophetic and bold (not silent).

Both groups affirmed the value of continuing to offer workshops on Servant Leadership. The Superior General and his Council have encouraged the ongoing development and offer of workshops on Servant Leadership in Paris, in regions, in provinces and also for specific groups, for example, young confreres, formators, missionaries ad gentes. The two workshops in collaboration with De Paul University have laid the foundation for further collaboration and partnership. Most importantly, evaluations and feedback confirm that this topic is very important to the confreres.

The team at CIF (Fathers Juan Julian Diaz Catalan, José Carlos Fonsatti and Hugh O’Donnell) is happy to express our gratitude to the Superior General (who participated in the workshops) and his Council, who opened the way for these workshops and continue to encourage their development, to the Visitors who sent confreres to the first session and participated in the second, to all the participants who as always provided the interpersonal chemistry that makes the experience come alive, to the team members from De Paul

University, namely, Father Dennis Holtschneider, Father Patrick Murphy, Doctor Jack Lane, Sister Patricia Bombard and Ms. Mary McGuinness (in planning the first workshop), and to the presenters Father Tom Lane, Father Elmer Bauer, Father Jean-Pierre Renouard, Father Claude Lautissier, and for his exception work in facilitating the Workshop for Visitors, Father Dan Borlik. We are grateful to the members of the Maison-mere who welcomed everyone warmly.