

# Servant Leadership in the Manner of Vincent de Paul Workshops: A Personal Reflection

by John Jack Lane, Ph.D.

I have been invited to share a few personal reflections on the planning and presentation of a series of leadership development workshops titled *Servant Leadership in the Manner of St. Vincent de Paul*. At this time, the workshops are presented at the Vincentian Mother House in Paris under the auspices of Centre International de Formation (C.I.F.) The workshops represent one of a number of recent Vincentian initiatives in support of renewing Vincentian leadership in a variety of organizational and multi-cultural contexts. I thank Fr. Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., for inviting me to collaborate with him and his workshop team.

I formed my first impressions of Vincentians over fifty years ago. The men I met then were parish priests, brothers, seminary and college professors, school teachers and principals, and a few returning missionaries. I recall thinking that they had a marvelous capacity for getting things done without a lot of fanfare. I also noted that, by and large, they were affable and unpretentious people. As a boy in Chicago, I admired the work of the Daughters of Charity and the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Thus, without benefit of having read a mission statement, strategic plan, or public relations brochure, I associated Vincentians with serving the poor, the sick, and the uneducated. I still do.

Of course, fifty years ago, the world was a different place. Advances in science, medicine, technology, politics, economics, communication, among other factors, have combined to form new global, interdependent societies. Not everyone has benefitted from these advances. According to recent demographic studies, the number of poor, sick, uneducated, and politically oppressed persons has not diminished during the past decade. To the contrary, we know that when the population in Latin America and the Caribbean tripled between 1950 and 1995, sadly, so did the number of the destitute and

working poor. The 2008-2009 Chronic Poverty Report and the 2008 Global Employment Trend (GET) Report paint dire pictures of the poor, particularly those already living in extreme poverty. Please consider that most of these data were gathered before the current world-wide economic recession. After 384 years, the need for Vincentian leadership and service has not diminished. But fifty years ago the Congregation was nearly twice as large as it is now.

### **Leadership Reflections**

St. Vincent was wary of persons who were too eager to be in charge or who regarded themselves somehow superior to their confreres. I am convinced that today he would have a different set of concerns. Permit me to explain. Over the years, I have met and sometimes collaborated with Vincentians in Europe, Asia, South America, North America, and Africa. Many of these men were pastors, house superiors, visitors, social change agents, and academic leaders. I also encountered a number of individuals who, in my opinion, had great leadership potential; but most of them had few, if any, leadership aspirations and made it a point to say so. With some exceptions, I would have to describe most of the active and potential Vincentian leaders I have known as *reluctant*. For them, leadership was not the reason they had joined the Congregation. To paraphrase more than a few, they preferred “being in the field where the action is to sitting in an office shuffling papers.” Most readers will recognize that last statement as the classic confusion that equates bureaucratic management with leadership. Surprisingly, as a consultant and leadership development coach for many years, I encountered that same phenomenon in the competitive environment of the business world.

### **Potential problems with reluctant leaders**

While not axiomatic, it has often been my experience that reluctant leaders, especially those working in non-profit organizations without professional education, are prone to think and act as if they are doing the organization a favor by taking on leadership responsibilities. Such a mindset can reduce the leader’s level of commitment both to the work at hand and to the spiritual and leadership development owed to their collaborators. Further, reluctant leaders in a culture of reluctant leaders may feel less impelled to be accountable for their decisions and behaviors. One can easily imagine a reluctant leader thinking or saying, “If you do not like what I am doing or the way I am doing it, then you do it.”

Also, I find that reluctant leaders pay insufficient attention to the question of succession. That is, they tend not to prepare others to replace them by arranging mentoring, coaching, internships, graduate studies, and other professional opportunities suitable for promising leadership candidates. Finally, reluctant leaders do not delegate well.

With regard to reluctant Vincentian leaders, I was at first uncertain. Was it diffidence or humility that explained their jaundiced perspectives on leadership? For a time, I found something charming, even laudable, about their outlook. Perhaps I mistook reluctance for manifestations of two of the five Vincentian charisms: humility and gentleness. However, the longer I thought about this matter, the more I realized, how potentially harmful such a viewpoint can be — humility and gentleness notwithstanding. Certainly, leadership entails paperwork, meetings, budgeting, philanthropy, and dealing with egos including one's own. We know that in the early years of the Congregation after 1625, St. Vincent spent an enormous amount of time and psychic energy dealing with the mundane but necessary work of managing an institution. What sustained him was an ever-sharpening vision: Evangelizing the Poor. He understood that, as we now say, perhaps a bit crassly, "More money means more mission." Vincentian leadership is so much more than good management. It is about foresight, vision, and attentive service to the poor and disenfranchised. It is about listening, conceptualizing and developing frameworks for the future that challenge the status quo. It is about preparing practical servant leaders to assist the poor and others living at the margins. It is to lead through generous, loving, and organized service to others after the manner of Sts. Vincent and Louise.

### **The Workshop Model**

Early in the workshops, participants reflect on their experiences with effective and ineffective leaders. Lightheartedly, we insist that as they share, they change the names or omit them altogether to protect the "guilty." The group was interested to note what characteristics effective leaders shared in common with one another. More importantly, we take the time to discover and examine what working definitions or, as they are sometimes called, our theories-in-practice that, for good or ill, we all hold about the nature of leadership. It is during these exercises that many participants acknowledge that they have never formulated clear ideas about leadership, let alone, Vincentian leadership. Throughout the workshop, there are opportunities for participants to identify which values, talents, and

skills sets they would bring to a variety of leadership roles. To that end, we make available a number of well-designed and validated leadership, communication, and conflict management assessment instruments. Individual and group coaching and mentoring sessions are also available. And, yes, we also consider that important kind of leadership available to everyone, the one without formal titles.

One of the major goals of the workshops is to encourage participants to consider how time spent in leadership may be understood as true mission — a service role to be embraced, not avoided. We attempt to present leadership as a genuine mission of service no less important than an assignment to work in the slums of Kenya or the favelas of Brazil. To be fair, I must acknowledge that over the years, I have met a number of outstanding Vincentian leaders who reluctantly but obediently accepted their leadership assignments. Some not only met but exceeded standard leadership performance criteria. They grew magnificently into their jobs. Yet, despite their success, some spoke of their appointments in terms of a jail sentence, counting every day until their term of office expired.

### **Servant Leadership in the Manner of St. Vincent de Paul**

The Servant Leadership workshop programs turn on three key principles:

1. That all baptized Christians are called to serve one another and that Jesus Christ is our Servant Leader exemplar
2. That priests, religious, and laity working in organizations under the auspices of the Church are called to a unique form of servant leadership
3. That St. Vincent de Paul provides a model of servant leadership relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations.

### **Adult Learning Principles**

The design of the workshops accords with adult learning principles. That is, presenters and facilitators know that adult learners are goal-oriented and learn best when they can relate new information and planned activities to their own life experiences. Adult learners especially appreciate a good measure of autonomy and self-direction in the learning environment. Another salient characteristic of the programs — and most impressive for me — is the positive effect that group chemistry has on the total learning

experience. For many, it was a foretaste of what community living could be.

Currently the workshops vary in length — seven to ten days or longer. Ordinarily the day begins with Eucharistic liturgies prepared by a group of volunteers. After breakfast, we discuss and reflect on a number of foundational topics, for example: “Jesus Leader and Servant,” “The Leadership Way of Vincent,” “Experience with the Poor (the Daughters of Charity).”

On the leadership development side, topics include, but are not limited to: “Exploring Your Leadership Hopes and Dreams for Yourself, Your Mission, and the Church,” “Finding Your Leadership Voice: Leading Through Values,” and “Envisioning the Future: a Conversation with Vincent,” “Identifying Partners and Collaborators: coaching, mentoring, delegating,” and “The Leadership Role of Women in Vincentian Institutions.”

*An important aside about leadership definitions.* Leadership development is big business. It is no exaggeration to say that today a leadership industry exists in most developed countries. The industry, often based at universities, meets the business needs of the homeland first and then exports its goods and services to developing nations. Dr. Suzanne Dumbleton, a colleague and leader with considerable experience in the publication world remarked a few years ago that in 1999 alone, 2,000 books on leadership “hit the bookshelves.” One can only imagine how many different definitions of leadership guided the authors’ writing. By the way, it is not only the secular press that produces leadership books. In 2003 Chris Lowney published *Heroic Leadership* with the express purpose of demonstrating how Ignatius and the early Jesuits created a leadership philosophy applicable to the present. Similarly in 2004, C.S. Galbraith and O. Galbraith combed through the fifty-page Rule of St. Benedict to discover “*Classic Management Secrets You Can Use Today*” in *The Benedictine Rule of Leadership*. My friend and colleague, Fr. J. Patrick Murphy, C.M. Ph.D., is thinking of writing a book about leadership lessons from St. Vincent de Paul.

Leadership development experts (authors, professors, consultants, coaches, and mentors) travel the world disseminating their particular brand of leadership development. At the 2006 workshops, confrere participants from Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines attested to the relative merits of various leadership programs they had attended in recent years. They found that the most successful leadership-for-change programs were those that respected the existing local culture and values and were conversant with local gender and race issues even when the programs advocated cultural changes. Needless to say, the CIF workshop organizers and presenters listened carefully

to the confreres' remarks, eager to ensure that we were as inclusive and respectful as possible in all our interactions. Clear definitions and working assumptions are always important in any learning situation; especially I am most grateful for all that I learned from all the confreres

Vincent understood that the best leaders are servants. He wrote "Therefore embrace that holy maxim (*I have not come to be served, but to serve*) and act toward those with whom you are about to live as one among them to serve them well."

In 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf popularized the notion of *The Servant as Leader*. He wrote: "The Servant-Leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

Nearly thirty years later, Larry Spears (1997), CEO of The Greenleaf Center, analyzed Greenleaf's writings and speeches and identified ten major characteristics of servant leaders. I will try to summarize them briefly. Greenleaf observed that it was not their ability to communicate or make decisions that distinguished a servant leader. Rather, it was their ability to **Listen** first to their own inner voice and then to the voices of those being served. Second, **Empathy** or the leader's ability to convey to others that they are respected, valued, and appreciated for their contributions to the organization. **Healing** refers to the mutual need that leaders and followers have to renew their spirits, to become whole. **Awareness** helps leaders understand their own motivations and the ethical dimensions of decision making. **Persuasion** is the ability to convince others and to build consensus rather than using force, fear, or position power to come to a decision.

**Conceptualization** is the ability to envision the future of an organization. Servant leaders acknowledge that management skills are necessary to run an organization well but insufficient to create something new, innovative, and responsive to emerging social needs.

Akin to conceptualization is **Foresight**. Foresight is the ability to examine past decisions and organizational processes and structures in light of current realities. Leaders with foresight trust their intuitions about possible futures and explore what new mindsets and actions will lead to effective change and innovation.

**Stewardship** is the organizational quality that reminds members that they are holding the organization in trust for future generations of persons committed to serving others. A sense of stewardship keeps

egos and pride of ownership in check and encourages members to focus on mission.

**Commitment to the Growth of People.** Servant leaders respect people for their contributions to the organization but also for their intrinsic value as persons. The leader's respect is manifest by his or her concern for the spiritual and professional growth of every member of the organization. Effective servant leaders assume the roles of coach and mentor.

**Building community.** Servant leaders seek to create welcoming and supportive environments for members of the organization.

We weave these concepts, traits, and values into our group discussions over the course of several days. I find that Vincentians and Vincentian collaborators easily identify with the ten characteristics. They understand that real challenge comes in learning how to model these behaviors ourselves and, as Vincentian leaders, to teach others the Vincentian Way.

Servant Leadership is by no means foreign to the Vincentian family. The five distinguishing characteristics of the Congregation (simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal) coincide with the qualities listed above. Also, those familiar with the writings of Fr. Robert P. Maloney, C.M., especially *He Hears the Cry of the Poor: On the spirituality of Vincent de Paul* will recognize how compatible the servant leader characteristics listed above are with the Vincentian Way and Vincentian Spirituality. For example, Chapter One is titled "Listening as the Foundation for Spirituality." In this chapter, the author explores topics like: "Listening as an Individual," "Respect for the word of human persons," "Attentiveness," "Listening in Community," "Meetings as Opportunities for Grace," and "Planning for the Future (Providence)." These concepts are Servant Leadership writ large.

According to Greenleaf and his successors, Servant Leadership reverses the old top-down mechanical model of leadership that has prevailed in one form or other for centuries. Hence, this type of leadership places special emphasis on listening, respect, attention, and community. These qualities are means to an end — foresight.

For Greenleaf (1970), the central ethic of leadership is foresight. He noted, "Prescience or foresight is a better than average guess about *what* is going to happen *when* in the future." He said the mark of a leader is to see the unforeseeable. "Leaders need to have a sense for the unknowable and to foresee the unforeseeable." He cites a decision theory expert who advises "If on a practical decision in the world of affairs, you are waiting for *all* of the information for a good decision, it never comes."

What decisions are we talking about? With each passing day the workshop participants shared more and more about their questions and concerns about the future of the Congregation. Some of the issues they presented became case studies whereby we could apply some of the principles and practices we were learning together. Among the major questions raised were:

How shall we deploy our diminishing human and financial resources? What are our mission priorities? How do we deal with declining numbers of vocations in one part of the world and rising in another? What qualities are we looking for in a new generation of Vincentian leaders? What changes should we incorporate into seminary education and preparation of priests and brothers? How shall we care for our elderly and infirm? How shall we improve community living and increase opportunities to celebrate Eucharist and pray together when there are only two or three of us in some mission locations? What charities should we terminate? Complex as these issues are, most agreed that they are manageable requiring near-term solutions that will affect the future of the Congregation. Most participants were aware that many of these kinds of questions are being addressed by the former and current Vincentian leadership in Rome and elsewhere. The conversations were optimistic and hope-filled.

Understandably, formal and informal discussions concerning the long-term future of the Congregation are another matter. Envisioning desirable future states for any entity requires a different kind of thinking. Trite though it sounds, we are setting sail on uncharted waters where foresight, as defined above, risk-taking, intuition, and prophecy are paramount. Decisions we make within the next five years or so will determine the nature and the very existence of the Congregation. Indeed, as I conclude these reflections, what again comes to mind is the prophetic role the entire Vincentian family could play around the world. The sons and daughters of Vincent and Louise and their collaborators are called to read the signs of the times, interpret them, and lead and teach accordingly. More, they are called explicitly to model the way of servant leaders. They are to listen to their hearts, to the Holy Spirit, to their confreres, sisters, and collaborators and, most especially, to their masters, the poor.

Having collaborated for many years as a foot soldier in the Army of St. Vincent de Paul with Vincentian men and women of all stripes, I know that they have the desire, intellect, talent, and skills to become an even greater force for charity. As servant leaders, with or without a formal title and position, they will work toward the creation of a better world, a world now increasingly defined by

religious secularity. They will attract and prepare lay men and women to continue and to extend the Vincentian mission. I can say with confidence that the Vincentians and the extended Vincentian family are poised to walk among the prophets of our time if they choose to. The Vincentian Flame of Charity will continue to burn brightly, but not without great effort and soul-wrenching change, change that challenges one's Vincentian identity. Experienced leaders know that whether the desirable change concerns structure, cost cutting, process, or culture, it is not the outcome of change that concerns them so much as the daunting problems and double-duty tasks associated with **transition**.

*Reality check:* A workshop is, after all, only a workshop. It would be the worst kind of hubris to think otherwise. But the servant leadership workshops and similar program offerings have the potential to develop site-level, intentional leaders capable of helping to shape the future of the Congregation and other Vincentian institutions. In addition, such leaders could be incredibly helpful by assisting with the difficult transition process.

St. Vincent said, "Grace has its moments." That describes my experience with the planning and presentation of the Servant Leadership In the Manner of Vincent de Paul Workshops. I am most grateful.

I am grateful to the workshop participants who came from every corner of the world and who, by word and example, taught me so much about walking the Vincentian Way. We prayed together and we learned and laughed together. I am grateful to my De Paul University colleagues whose scholarship has deepened my understanding of Vincent: Rev. John E. Rybolt, C.M., and Rev. Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Finally, there are no words to describe my deep gratitude and enduring respect for Rev. Hugh F. O'Donnell, C.M., and Rev. Juan Julian Catalan, C.M., who I believe led the workshops as Vincent would.

## References

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### General References

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*Readers will recall that Vincent referred  
to the poor as our masters*