

CARMELITE GENERAL CONGREGATION: LEADERSHIP

I gather that most of you are Provincials or members of leadership teams. So it is good to reflect on what leadership means today.

I must confess that I do not much like the term leadership. It replaced the 'term 'superior' which was not liked since implied the others were inferiors! When I was President of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors in England, we liked to call it the Conference of Minor Inferiors! But is 'leader' any better? Not many Dominicans would like to think of themselves as belonging to the 'led'! But this is the term which is widely used, and so I will stick with it, with typical Dominican humility!

Every religious order has its own understanding of leadership. The Benedictine Abbot is a paternal figure. I have the impression that Jesuit government is more centralised, almost military. Dominican government is more communitarian. I would guess that the Carmelites are more like us, being friars, but if what I propose just seems odd and alien forgive me!

So what does leadership mean? We all know that it means service. Jesus said: 'whoever wishes to become great among you, shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave'.(Mark 10.43). The famous American bishop Ken Untener greeted the congregation at his episcopal ordination saying, 'Hi. I'm Ken and I'm here to be your waiter¹.' But what sort of a waiter? Some serve in a way that is dominating. I am reminded of the Irish bishop who said during his ordination that he would serve the diocese with a rod of iron.

So, what sort of service? Some religious leaders become seduced by the business model. I have visited the HQ of religious congregations which seem like the offices of the CEO of a business. At few years ago I was sitting next to a universality Vice-Chancellor. He struggled to work out what I was as Master of the Order. Finally he said, 'I've got it. You are the CEO of a multinational corporation. How do you market your brand? How are the Dominicans competing with the Franciscans in the vocation market?' My heart sunk!

Another common model is that of problem solver. Politicians often present themselves as saviour who will "fix" things. When I became Provincial, my predecessor showed me the Provincial files. He said, '90% are about 10% of the brothers. That is your life for the next four years.' He was right but if we see our brothers and sisters as problems, then that is what they will be. The Word did not become flesh to solve the problems of humanity. There are innumerable problems which we must try to solve, of course, but if that defines our role, we shall not serve as disciples but as managers.

We are servants of grace. And we never know what that will ask of us in advance. Psalm 123; 'Like the eyes of a servant on the hand of her mistress, so our eyes are on the Lord our God till he show us his mercy.' The servant does not lay down beforehand what are the

¹ Ed. Elizabeth Picken CJ et al. *The practical prophet: The practical prophet* Mahwah 2007 p.xix

limits of his duty. He or she hangs around, with their eyes on the hands of the mistress, ready to do whatever is needed. A true servant of the Lord does not define his role beforehand and so limit his responses: "That's not my job". When I was a chaplain at Imperial College I went to see a venerable former chaplain and asked him what I was supposed to do. He replied, 'Loiter with intent.' Everyone else on the campus had their roles, from the Principal to the cleaners. The chaplain is there to do whatever is needed. That is service. A French Dominican came to stay in Oxford to learn Bengali, so that he could serve the poorest of the poor. When I asked him what he was going to do, he replied that it was they who would ask him. This is the obedience of the servant/leader.

A grand American Dominican came to stay in my community in Oxford. The brother who opened the door had just been sweeping the floor. And so this imperious friar said, 'Brother, go and get me a cup of tea.' So the brother went for the tea. Then the American said, 'Now brother, take me to my room. Here is my bag' Obediently he picked up the bag and led him away.. did so. Then the guest said, 'Now I wish to meet Father Prior. Take me to his room'. 'I am the Prior'.

The leadership is at the service of grace, God's fruitful, surprising grace. This begins in how we speak to and about each other. Not as employees of a business, not as problem solvers, but as fellow disciples.

The primary responsibility of leadership is to have care for the quality of the conversation of the brethren. When I looked at obedience, I suggested that it was founded in open, free, loving, grace-filled conversation. That is why on visitation, I tried to hang around in the kitchen and the common room. How do these brethren talk to each other? St Paul said to the Ephesians, 'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.' (Ephesians 4.29). Do they just talk about football? Do they talk of the deepest concerns of their heart?

In Rome, our General Council met every week to study the scriptures together, to pray and to have a good dinner by ourselves, for before anything else, we were fellow disciples, with our eyes on the hands of our Lord and the brethren. Twice a year the fourteen members of the General Council went away for four days. We shared in the morning what we had been living. Often war and violence in far away places. We shared our suffering and worries and hopes. We walked together in the afternoon. Mediated together in the evening, and then had a party! We could only converse as members of the council, if we also talked as fellow disciples and human beings.

All this takes a lot of time. I do not just mean that we must not rush decisions. We must share a little in the vast patience of God, who waits for millennia for us to turn to him. St Paul talks of 'the God of patience' (Romans 15.5). It is the patience of the father of the prodigal son who waits for years until the son comes home. I am by nature rather impatient. I find it hard to live with unresolved tensions and would dash off letters to people.

Sometimes the secretary general would keep them back and say the next day, 'Are you sure Timothy, you wish to send this?'

This patience is rooted in the calm of those who believe that Christ is risen and so the great victory is won. The father of the prodigal son does not lie on the ground and beg the younger son to stay or threaten him. Life carries on. Religious people are extraordinarily inclined to drama, from the squabbling of Peter and Paul until today. I had dealings with the Vatican for nine years, and sometimes it was like an opera by Puccini! But if we are servants of God's grace, then the great drama has already happened. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to Bishop Bell just before his murder by the Nazis, the victory is certain.

When I was a young Dominican student at Oxford, the Priory was attacked by an extremist political group. They set off one night a small explosive that made a lot of noise and blew in all the windows. It woke up the whole community except the Prior, the Scottish theologian Fergus Kerr. The police and the fire brigade came around. Finally, the youngest friar went to wake the Prior. 'Fergus, Fergus, the priory has been attacked, wake up.' 'Is anyone dead?' 'No'. 'Is anybody wounded?' 'No'. 'Well, let me go to sleep and we will think about it in the morning'. That was my first lesson in leadership!

OK, so the bursar has run away with the money and one of the brethren has had a sex change, the church has burnt down, but relax: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Now we come to the heart of what I want to say. Leadership is the service of God's grace, and grace is the breaking in of the Kingdom now! Of course, we live in the present and attend to its needs, but our focus in leadership is openness to the future, the Kingdom.

This means that it belongs to our leadership that we free people from the old quarrels, the old resentments so that the new may happen. God says in Isaiah, 'Behold I make all things new.' How are we at the service of God's ever new grace?

Leadership means that we take the first step towards an alienated brother even if we think that he is more to blame than I am. We step forward as the father of the prodigal son went galumphing across the fields to embrace his son, not waiting for an apology. Just as God took the first step towards us, and loved us before we loved Him, so in his grace, we step out to alienated, the marginalised brethren, not waiting for them to grovel. We do not hold back saying 'It's his job to come to me.'

If we do this, we shall be vulnerable to rebuff. We shed the strong image of the powerful leader, let fall the armour, and dare to appear weak. We risk being rejected and even despised for this. Leadership means that we accept that we shall get unjustly blamed for a lot. If there are tensions in the community, we shall have to carry them inside ourselves,, and be the lightning rod, the scapegoat, even when we know it is not our fault. This is being conformed to Christ who, it says in 1 Peter, bore our sins (2.24). If we dare to do this, we can help the community to open itself to the future and begin again.

This openness to the future also shapes our planning. The first question is never 'What must we stop doing that we have done?' It is always: "What do we want to do in the future? What are we *called* to do? However limited our resources, even if we only have a handful of active friars in a Province, how may they be set free for our mission? To begin or strengthen a new project may mean closing several others. To open a new community may demand the closure of three others. But we shall still be reaching out to a future we have chosen and not the prisoner of the past. We refuse to be trapped in a mentality of retreat.

I was inspired by our brethren in French-speaking Belgium. Their numbers were shrinking rapidly. There were almost no vocations. They were left with only one dynamic centre of mission, a parish on the outskirts of Brussels. But to my astonishment and admiration, they decided to close it and open new small ventures in Liege and Louvain La Neuve!

Being open to the future means having confidence in the young! They are our future! When St Dominic sent out his youngest friars to preach, barely after they had joined the Order, the Cistercians warned him that he would lose them. Dominic replied, 'I know for certain that my young men will go out and come back, will be sent out and will return; but your young men will be kept locked up and will still go out.'²

Grace is the breaking into our lives of God grace, ever fresh and ever young. Every year we remember that God came to us as a child, new-born. And so confidence in the young is an intrinsic part of Christian Leadership. As the priesthood gets older, 'youth' is being constantly redefined. I met a religious sister the other day who told me that even at the age of sixty she was still considered young! I have yet to discover anywhere that still considers me young!

The prodigal son is anticipating the future. According to Henri Nowen, He is saying to the father, 'I cannot wait for you to die.' I want the future now. This is not a good way of doing it, but it does belong to leadership to let the future happen, even if that means stepping into the unknown. Sometimes this means letting what exists now die, so that something else may happen. Often religious orders are burdened by the past, and we hang on because no one wishes forever to be known as the person who closed this beloved institution.

I remember a sermon at a solemn profession by one Provincial, who was a fierce and lovable convert from Scottish Presbyterianism. He said, jokingly I assume, 'I am coming to the end of my religious life and you are now beginning yours. As I look back over my religious life, and it has been a long one, I think of all that I have laboured to build and to support. Often I have laboured hard to construct something, to leave some monument behind me, when, inevitably, some idiot has come along after me and torn down all that I have built and called it progress. So, I want to give you this piece of counsel, whatever schemes you may hatch, whatever plans you may formulate be sure of one thing, God will frustrate them!'³

² ed. Simon Tugwell OP *Early Dominicans: selected writings* Ramsey N.J., 1982 p.91

³ Sermon by Allan White OP *The Acts of the Provincial chapter of the English province of the Order of Preachers* Oxford 2000. p. 66

Not having ever been a Scottish Presbyterian, I would not put it like that, but surely leadership is in part the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying so that the future may break in. It is creating the space for the young to do what we cannot imagine or anticipate, loosening the grip of the present, stirring in a bit of unpredictability.

A Jesuit Provincial went to visit a community which was for the old and sick brethren. He remarked that it was full, and so one old Jesuit cried out, 'Father Provincial, we are *trying* to die as quickly as possible!' Of course we must care for the present, and especially the older brethren who have given their lives. I become ever more aware of the importance of this! We honour who they are and what they have done. But their greatest joy will be to see their young brethren set free for mission in ways that they could never have imagined.

This is the poverty of leadership. We have to let go what exists, what we have created, so that the new may happen. We empower those who are to come who may want to do something quite different. Our society thinks of leadership as the exercise of control. But grace-filled leadership can be a sort of loss of control, letting the Holy Spirit take us where we do not expect to go. We open ourselves to the God of surprises.

Our leadership should be rooted in prayer. And according to Pope Francis, prayer means learning to trust in God and relinquish control of our lives. He said: 'I have the sense of being in someone else's hands, as though God were taking me by the hand.'⁴ Again: 'Prayer is an act of freedom but sometimes it emerges as an attempt at control, which is the same as wanting to control God.'⁵ Of course, as Francis discovered, sometimes prayerful leadership does require strong action where there is resistance in the Vatican!

Jesus said at the Last Supper, 'This is my body, given for you.' At the Last Supper and on Good Friday, Jesus let go of control of his life. He handed himself to the disciples in the Last Supper and he handed himself over to the enemies the next day. He gave up control so that Easter could happen.

What does this mean for finance? I must admit that I have never been a bursar. So let me just ask a question: Do we dare launch projects which seem beyond our resources? Or are we restrained by fear? I once spend some time in a hospital run by Mother Teresa of Calcutta's sisters in Addis Abba, in Ethiopia. They told me that they dreaded her visits because she would tell them to open new projects for which they had no money. She would say, 'Don't worry, the money will come!' How does one draw a line between grace-filled trust and irresponsibility? I do not know! Which is why I would never have been a good bursar!

When the prodigal son comes home, the father throws a party. There is eating and drinking and dancing. Do you eat and drink and even dance in your communities? In Africa, yes! Our leadership means that we care for the joy of our brethren. Without that joy how can we ever preach the gospel?

⁴ Valley 144

⁵ Valley 145

Jesus' scandalized the scribes and the Pharisees by his partying. He was misunderstood. That is the risk that we have to take as well, of not being understood. We must not always be looking over our shoulder at other people: church authorities, the government, the press, difficult people in the Order. We must not be ruled by other people's fear and caution. The father of the prodigal son refused to worry too much about what other people thought about his welcome of his prodigal son. There was no spin-doctor at his side calculating how it would be reported in the press. We must not worry about being misunderstood. Jesus took the risk of being misunderstood and he died for it. That is why he was free. Grace gives us a share in Jesus' spontaneity. Grace is God's spontaneity.

At the heart of religious life, is our communal recreation, the joy of being together. Often it can seem an ascetical exercise which the brethren dread! But if we have no joy together, we shall be unable to preach the good news.

When Cardinal Murphy O'Connor visited Rome to receive his red hat, he said to me, 'Now, Timothy, you know how lonely it is at the top.' I had to reply that I had never felt less lonely in my life.' In the Council, we laughed together. When Jordan of Saxony, the second Master of the Order, was at compline, the novices got the giggles, a common experience. An old friar told them to stop laughing. But Jordan said, 'My dears, laugh away (*ridete fortiter*) and don't stop laughing just because of him. I authorize you to laugh. You have escaped from the devil's prison.....So laugh, my dears, laugh.' As leaders you are promoters of fraternal laughter.

Let us conclude: Leadership is at the service of the brethren. We need administrators and managers of course. That is a true service. But more radically, we serve the happening of God's grace, the breaking in of the Kingdom. We show that by being calm whatever the dramas. Christ is risen. The victory is won and so there is no need for panic.

Trust in God includes trust in the young, for as Augustine says, our God is forever young. We dare to let go tight control so that God's surprising grace can work in our lives. If we do anything daring, there is a danger that we shall be misunderstood, but Jesus took that risk.

Now I am deeply aware that this vision of grace filled leadership is remote from how I *actually* lived as Provincial and Master of the Dominicans. I am glad I did not hear such a lecture when I was in those roles! But let us imagine what might happen how we might open the door just a tiny bit wider to the unpredictable grace of God.

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