

Franciscan Leadership: Mutual Love Generating a Future
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I'd like to begin by asking you to think of one person living today that you would consider a leader and why. Now think of one living Franciscan that you would consider a leader and the reason behind it ... Is there a difference between the leadership style of the first leader you named and the Franciscan leader? How would describe this difference?

Who are some of the names you surfaced – leaders in general/Franciscan leaders? Did any of you think of yourself as a leader? Did anyone turn to the group and said, "Well, would you believe I picked myself both times!" Is this misplaced humility?

Who is a leader? What makes the names you chose fit into that category? How do these individuals lead? What differences did you note in leadership styles of the people you named?

If we walk into any book store or visit Amazon.com we are mesmerized by titles that speak of leadership models or the spirituality of leadership, or leadership formation or development for the corporate world. Hundreds of volumes yet none written by Francis and few, I would wager, authored by Franciscans. The number of books, seminars and workshops on this topic suggests that we no longer think of leadership as a "given." It does not automatically come with promotion/election to the top; rather, leadership is a trait to be cultivated. CEOs, CFOs, Presidents and VPs have coaches. They are evaluated in 180s and 360s by boards, peers and those they supervise. Congregational leadership teams often have a mentor or a spiritual guide. Leadership has become a multi-faceted science with a plethora of theories.

For the purpose of this talk, I would like to propose a working description of leadership, one that will resonate, I believe, with the individuals that you named (and possibly with yourself!). A leader is one who has a profound experience of and passion (love) for life coupled with a vision of the future. A leader is one who can successfully communicate this vision and who is able to inspire and motivate others to share in it and own it. A leader can assist others to achieve it, despite conflicts and obstacles that might have to be overcome.¹

Although this description might initially sound overwhelming it already applies to a large number of people. One group that comes immediately to mind is parents. Their vision, their hope guides the child into the future. They motivate their offspring to embrace it. Parents are there to help with obstacles and conflicts.

¹ This definition is derived from Chris Lownley's *Heroic Leadership*. Loyola Press, Chicago, 2003, pp. 13-14. Lowney in turn has adapted this from John. P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996, 26.

Teachers, ministers, coaches, managers, consultants, sales people, and a host of others also fit this description.

I believe that each of us in this room qualifies as a leader in some degree. This past semester, one of the shyest students in one of my classes wrote in her journal "I believe that there is a leader in each of us!" I was somewhat surprised, because due to her reticence, I did not realize that even though she was a good student, she perceived herself that way. There is a leader in each of us! This is exciting but it could also be problematic for if everyone is a leader who follows? (I think that all in leadership positions have asked that question from time to time!)

If everyone is a leader who follows? I believe that we need only look to our Franciscan tradition to answer that question. The Most High made it clear to Francis that he must live the life of the gospel. Francis was the ultimate leader because he was the ultimate follower... of Jesus. Because he followed so closely in the footprints of Jesus, he was able to lead in the very Spirit of Jesus. A strong leader is able to follow; those who actively follow have the potential of becoming strong leaders.

Francis' following of Jesus, like ours, was rooted in his baptismal commitment. Essentially Francis' entire life was a living out of this sacrament. In baptism he became a disciple of Jesus – a follower, learner, student, apprentice, imitator. It was a life long process that led him deeper into the very life of the Trinity. But at the same time he was missioned in baptism – sent forth. He grew into, took on, an apostolic, missionary and prophetic dimension that again led him deeper into the mystery of the Trinity.

Francis exhibited leadership skills from his youth. Celano, after listing the follies in which Francis engaged (and this is the part that students really identify with; a number of students write in their journals: Francis is just like me!) states that although Francis "proved himself a more excessive inciter of evil and a zealous imitator of foolishness... He was, nevertheless a rather kindly person, adaptable and quite affable, even though it made him look foolish. For this reason more than for anything else, many went over to him..."² Leonardo Boff echoes the attraction that Francis held for his contemporaries, (and for us today) noting his gentleness, enthusiasm and appreciation of beauty.³

Bonaventure, likewise, describes the youthful Francis as gentle, mannerly, patient and affable, characteristics that would continue to be developed throughout his life.⁴ Initially after his conversion Francis was conscious of and focused on his discipleship. Aware of his call, he was uncertain of its implications. As his vision emerged and was clarified the missionary and prophetic dimensions of his ministry evolved. Unwittingly, Francis became the inspiration that others chose to follow. He

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³ Boff, Leonardo, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 202 ff.

⁴ *Major Legend of St. Francis*, Bonaventure, 531.

communicated his dream simply in the very manner of his life. Francis, who never would have claimed the title of leader nonetheless, had that sense of mission that would ultimately move him to write letters to all the rulers, to all the faithful all over the world and was the first to place a missionary chapter in a Rule! All as a little brother! Mutual love generating a future!

Francis exemplifies our description of leadership. He had a passion and love for life, for all life! He revered the dignity of each person made in the image of God; he experienced an intimate relationship with all creation as sister and brother. He possessed a new vision for the future. He did not want to be told of Augustine or Benedict because the Lord had called him to be a new kind of fool. Francis was to rebuild the Church, the meaning of which unfolded throughout his life. He communicated this vision by faithfully living the gospel message in simplicity, joy and love in his very person, inspiring and empowering others. He was a servant and prophetic leader, the one with the open heart. Francis, in spite of himself, continued to motivate and inspire others to join him and live his vision as their own. He had great solicitude for those who journeyed with him along the evangelical way and encouraged ministers to have this same concern. It was above all important that the Spirit work within them.

Interestingly, Clare in her Testament iterates an approach to leadership in synch with Francis and with our working description. She begs sisters who have an office (those entrusted with leadership) to be living examples of virtue and holiness of life. She urges them to inspire others (to share with them that vision, that sense of a future) *not* because of position, but out of love. Leaders (Clare uses the image of a mother providing for daughters) are to be farsighted and discerning toward those entrusted to them. They are to be open – “so kind and affable” that others will share their struggles with them; thus leaders help them with difficulties on their way.⁵ Mutual love generating a future!

Yet something sets Franciscan leadership apart from other groups or individuals who exemplify this description. This was true of Francis and Clare in their time and remains true today. I’d like to highlight five hallmarks of Franciscan leadership, that I believe are critical, each of which corresponds to one of the segments of the description presented here and overlaps the others. I believe that Franciscan leadership is gospel centered, rooted in who one is, springs from littleness, is familial, and requires continuous conversion.

GOSPEL CENTERED

Franciscan leadership is centered in the gospel. It is rooted in the power and authority of Jesus, a power and authority based on mutual love and obedience with his Father-God. Jesus proclaimed a time of repentance and announced the good news of salvation. He ate with sinners and proclaimed justice and peace to those

⁵ St. Clare of Assisi, Testament,” 64.

were deemed unimportant by those in leadership at the time. Jesus prophetically witnessed to a whole new way of being in relationship with God, where the only law was love. Such was the leadership that Francis modeled. His profound experience of and passion for life emanated from the gospel. Like Jesus, his love was inclusive of all people and all creation, for it was a reflection of God's very love for us.

ROOTED IN BEING

Franciscan leadership is primarily about *who one is* – not what one *does*. What we are before God – that we are. The gospel of John, to which Francis' writings have numerous references, makes this clear.⁶ Jesus describes himself, his oneness with God, in the *I AM* statements. He proclaims that he is the bread of life, living bread from heaven, light for the world, a gate for the sheep, the Good Shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way the truth and the life, the vine. Ordinary things like bread, light, a gate, a shepherd, a vine. He does not use words or images that are traditionally equated with power and authority but concepts that are part of the ebb and flow of everyday life. Jesus lived to glorify his Father-God. Francis, following in the footsteps of Jesus, lived in praise to the Most High God! Unlike some of us, Francis was not obsessed with all that had to be done to keep his vision alive –attending countless meetings, forming strategic plans and setting means of assessment – he simply went about doing what was his to do. His doing flowed from who he was; it did not define him. Franciscan leadership in the end is about who we are in relationship with God.

SPRINGS FROM LITTLENESS

Franciscan leadership springs from littleness, from humility. It is incarnational. Francis led from the margins of society. I was listening to Joe Chinnici's and Margaret Carney's response to Zachary Hayes' presentation on Christology that took place at the 30th anniversary of the Franciscan Federation in Anaheim in 1995. At one point Margaret was referring to the success of the Franciscan NGO at the UN. Joe proceeded to say while that is important it is not *most important* in the Franciscan tradition of *minoritas*. He noted that Francis was called (and so are we!) to offer an alternative model of leadership, one that leads from the margins of society. Joe pointed out that leadership in this perspective demands reverencing the "little human being" in ourselves and in one another and reaching out in love to assist that little human person.⁷ While the Franciscan presence at the UN and, we could add, the recent growth of the Association of Franciscan colleges and universities and Franciscan Action Network (FAN), and the Federation itself are all good things, we cannot overlook a very basic building block of Franciscan

⁶ Guinan, Michael D., *The Franciscan Vision and the Gospel of John*, Volume Four, Franciscan Heritage Series, 2, 22. Guinan notes that while it was obvious that Francis was influenced by the synoptic gospels, more recent research indicates the strong influence of the Johannine writings.

⁷ Carney, Margaret, OSF and Joseph Chinnici, OFM, "Implications for Governance from Franciscan Christology," response to Zachary Hayes' presentation on Christology, Franciscan Federation, Anaheim, 1995.

leadership: Franciscans lead from a position of littleness. The Incarnation was central to Francis' theology; it formed and shaped his leadership style. He led from the stance of humility, like the Word of God who bent low to assume our humanity. Franciscan leadership is not something to be sought but rather is to be humbly lived wherever we happen to find ourselves. Francis found God and led others to God in the context of simply being a little human creature.

FAMILIAL

Franciscan leadership is familial. In the Later Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance Francis makes clear that we must never desire to be over others; instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake. By this we are known as mothers and spouses and brothers and sisters of Jesus. We are spouses, through union with Jesus through the Spirit; brothers and sisters when we do the will of God, mothers when we carry Christ in our hearts and give birth through "holy activity, which must shine before others by example."⁸ In chapter 6 of the Rule of 1221 Francis admonishes that no one is to be called "Prior." Clare, too, "preferred a participative, egalitarian and empowering framework" for her sisters at San Damiano.⁹ All are little brothers (and sisters) who should be ready to wash each other's feet. For Franciscans leadership is always relational. We are to lead as sister and brother. Through this prophetic stance we invite others to share in this relationship, to be sister and brother to us and with us. Mutual love generating a future.

REQUIRES CONTINUOUS CONVERSION

Franciscan leadership is marked by ongoing conversion; those movements from bitterness to sweetness that broadened our vision and deepen our faith. Francis led with openness. Called to rebuild the Church Francis continued to expand his concept of what this meant: from small church buildings, to the Church of Assisi, to the Church of Rome, to the universal church, to the church that exists as People of God without boundaries. As Mike Higgins noted at the 2004 Denver forum when Francis began repairing dilapidated churches he did not misinterpret God's message; rather, he did what he could at that time. He collected stones and went to work. Only in time, only through conversion was he led to its deeper meaning.¹⁰

Only our conversion can bring about change. My ability to assist others in living their vision requires a similar openness to be assisted by them in attaining mine. And here Francis has provided the wisdom and discernment contained in his Admonitions, those teachings that assist us in applying practically the gospel and other Scripture to our daily lives.

⁸ Later Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sister of Penance, 49.

⁹ Julien, Danielle, FMIC, "Clare's Model of Leadership," *The Cord*. 51:4, July-August, 2000, 184.

¹⁰ Higgins, Michael, *The Cord*, Vol 54, no. 5 September-October 2004, 263-268.

Justice and the peace that it brings begin with the leader that is each of us. It is a life long process. We need one another. The classic "Wolf of Gubbio" legend brings home these concepts of justice, peace, conversion and interdependence! Mutual love generating a future.

The Second Vatican Council called religious women and men to return to the spirit of their founders. It allowed congregations to move out of the one-size-fits-all model imposed by the codification of canon law, and to claim their unique charism. Franciscans exercised leadership in following the council's mandates. We need only look over the past 45 years. Initially we "renewed" alone, not merely 1st 2nd and 3rd orders alone, but each TOR group individually. However, in the spirit of ongoing conversion, we soon realized that our charism was akin to other TOR groups. The Federation was formed and some congregations merged. The Franciscan "family" held reunions and rediscovered their intimate and egalitarian relationship as sister and brother. This was palpably evident in the recent International Franciscan Conference of TORs held this past May in Rome. The gathering, which some of you here attended, comprised over 100 member congregations and six language groups. The call, the challenge of the General Assembly for the Third Order Regular to become a more "disturbing presence in our world" – as Jesus was, as Francis and Clare were – has the potential to lead us to deeper prophetic unity. It echoes the hallmarks of Franciscan leadership that we have touched on.

As Franciscans, we are ever in process of discovering who we are and how we influence and lead in our world today through littleness and humility. It is important that we stay with it for our tradition sheds light on relevant issues for society today: justice and peace, brother and sisterhood, the economic crisis, the environment, the ultimate relationship of all humankind. The revival of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition, occurring even as we meet on the academic and practical levels is an attempt to do just this. The Heritage Series recently added the work of Dr. Maria Calisi on the Trinity. Many of you here have already participated in the "God's Extravagant Love" program. It has gone global; to date nearly 2500 people have experienced this new moment of reclaiming our theological inheritance.

As Franciscan leaders we need to possess a prophetic passion for who we are and what we are about. We share our vision in simple ways, and are ever open to others who want to be part of it, especially the voiceless in society, being sister and brother to all in love. (It is always striking to hear a co-worker at one of our ministries, who is not a religious, speak of "our congregation" or our "charism" or our "founder." People are quick to identify with the Franciscan tradition.) Mutual love generating a future!

In many ways we have evolved beyond the Church's current understanding of religious life. Certainly this is true in the evangelical form of life that we profess to live; but it is also true in regard to the canonical structures of consecrated life. We

have entered into new relationships with our sisters and brothers who are not vowed members of community; we have worked diligently to become more inclusive in our life and mission.

I have done some research for an article that I hope to write on the topic of “beyond religious life,” the evolution of religious life today. My basic premise is that as religious life has developed since the revised code of canon law (1983) many of the structures and laws therein, do not speak to who we are and what we are about. I believe that we have evolved beyond some of these structures as religious life has done throughout the ages. Margaret Carney, again in response to Zachary’s presentation on Christology stated that one of the key learnings of the 1994 Synod on consecrated life was that the church lacks a “a concise, comprehensive, credible theology of religious life as it has evolved in the post-conciliar [period].”¹¹ I was sharing my thoughts with a colleague who questioned whether the change was a sign of growth or a matter of convenience. As Franciscan women religious in the midst of an apostolic visitation we have the opportunity to respond to that question. We are well poised for the conversation. Hopefully our input will enrich the Vatican’s understanding of our distinctive charism, and give both the church and us, the opportunity to be open to and changed, enriched and converted by this experience.

The theme for this conference, “Mutual Love Generating a Future” echoes the description and characteristics of Franciscan leadership. The new Federation model being initiated during this gathering evolved from the desire that the leadership and membership of the Federation reflect more a Franciscan tradition of inclusiveness. It espouses a broad understanding of leadership similar to what has been described here: There is a leader in each of us!

The new model eliminates the distinction between elected congregational leadership and members who are currently serving in other leadership roles. Its framework also includes those who have embraced the TOR charism, such as associates, co-workers and related organizations. The new model offers a genuine experience of evangelical leadership. The Federation will be led by those among us most capable, committed and ready to serve our distinctive charism.

In a letter dated October 2008 the members of the Implementation Task Force stated: “People, hungry for the spirit of Francis and Clare, are searching for ways to immerse themselves in and express the Franciscan values of evangelical conversion of life, prayer, poverty and humility. Our reconfiguration as an organization is to enable us to engage with each other and our associates and co-workers in new ways to live those values in our world today.” It recognizes that all of us by virtue of our baptism, by virtue of our Franciscan call, by virtue of our leadership, are about following Jesus in the way of the evangelical life.

¹¹ “Implications for Governance from Franciscan Christology,” response by Margaret Carney.

I believe that this new model incarnates what I have conveyed about leadership in general and Franciscan leadership in particular. There is a leader in each of us who follows Francis, who follows the gospel way. It is a servant leader, which Mike will talk more about, but it is also a prophetic leader, pointing to the reality of the times while believing in and witnessing to a vision for the future. Prophetic leaders communicate their vision, not simply in words, but by who they are and the actions that flow from that. They lead as one-with from the margins of society. They call others to conversion even as they are converted themselves.

The 2001 Commission for the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition working paper prepared by Bill Short and Ilia Delio echoed the challenge to offer our Franciscan tradition as an alternate theological model for the world today, one that will neither replace nor displace other models but one that can be in dialogue with them. A variety of models enables all to be stretched and enriched. It is up to each of us to take leadership in doing just that: To articulate in our lives and our ministry the little human being that is each of us and the hope and love that motivates our leadership. In the words of CFIT paper: If not us, who? If not now, when?¹²

¹² Short, Bill, OFM and Ilia Delio, OSF, CFIT Working Paper, 2001, Franciscan Institute.