

Reflections on
Christian Leadership

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*In the
Name of
Jesus*

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Reflections on Christian Leadership

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CHAPTER 1

From Relevance to Prayer

The Temptation: To Be Relevant

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then.

Since nobody could read my books, the books could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable ecumenical experience proved even less valuable. When I offered some meat to one of the assistants during dinner, one of the handicapped men said to me, "Don't give him meat. He doesn't eat meat. He's a Presbyterian."

Not being able to use any of the skills that had proved so practical in the past was a real source of anxiety. I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, reputations could no longer be counted on.

This experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self — the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things — and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.

I am telling you all this because I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's Word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.

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Jesus' first temptation was to be relevant: to turn stones into bread. Oh, how often have I wished I could do that! Walking through the "young towns" on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, where children die from malnutrition and contaminated water, I would not have been able to reject the magical gift of making the dusty stone-covered streets into places where people could pick up any of the thousands of rocks and discover that they were croissants, coffee cakes, or fresh-baked buns, and where they could fill their cupped hands with stale water from the cisterns and joyfully realize that what they were drinking was delicious milk. Aren't we priests and ministers called to help people, to feed the hungry, and to save those who are starving? Are we not called to do something that makes people realize that we do make a difference in their lives? Aren't we called to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and alleviate the suffering of the poor? Jesus was faced with these same questions, but when he was asked to prove his power as the Son of God by the relevant behavior of changing stones into bread, he clung to his mission to proclaim the Word and said, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

One of the main sufferings experienced in the ministry is that of low self-esteem. Many priests and ministers today increasingly perceive themselves as having very little impact. They are very busy, but they do not see much change. It seems that their efforts are fruitless. They face an ongoing decrease in church attendance and discover that psychologists, psychotherapists, marriage counselors, and doctors are often more trusted than they. One of the most painful realizations for many Christian leaders is that fewer and fewer young people feel attracted to follow in their footsteps. It might seem that nowadays, becoming and being a priest or minister is no longer something worth dedicating your life to. Meanwhile, there is little praise and much criticism in the church today, and who can live for long in such a climate without slipping into some type of depression?

The secular world around us is saying in a loud voice, "We can take care of ourselves. We do not need God, the church, or a priest. We are in control. And if we are not, then we have to work harder to get in control. The problem is not lack of faith, but lack of competence. If you are sick, you need a competent doctor; if you are poor, you need competent politicians; if there are technical problems, you need competent

engineers; if there are wars, you need competent negotiators. God, the church, and the minister have been used for centuries to fill the gaps of incompetence, but today the gaps are being filled in other ways, and we no longer need spiritual answers to practical questions."

In this climate of secularization, Christian leaders feel less and less relevant and more and more marginal. Many begin to wonder why they should stay in the ministry. Often they leave, develop a new competency, and join their contemporaries in their attempts to make relevant contributions to a better world.

But there is a completely different story to tell. Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world.

Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Less Than Zero* offers a most graphic description of the moral and spiritual poverty behind the contemporary facade of wealth, success, popularity, and power. In a dramatically staccato way, he describes the life of sex, drugs, and violence among the teenage sons and daughters of the super-rich entertainers in Los Angeles. And the cry that arises from behind all of this decadence is clearly: "Is there anybody who loves me? Is there anybody who really cares? Is there anybody who wants to stay home for me? Is there anybody who wants to be with me when I am not in control, when I feel like crying? Is there anybody who can hold me and give me a sense of belonging?" Feeling irrelevant is a much more general experience than we might think when we look at our seemingly self-confident society. Medical technology and the tragic increase in abortions may radically diminish the number of mentally handicapped people in our society, but it is already becoming apparent that more and more people are suffering from profound moral and spiritual handicaps without having any idea of where to look for healing.

It is here that the need for a new Christian leadership becomes clear. The leaders of the future will be those who dare to claim their irrelevance in

the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows them to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success, and to bring the light of Jesus there.

The Question: "Do You Love Me?"

Before Jesus commissioned Peter to be a shepherd, he asked him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" He asked him again, "Do you love me?" And a third time he asked: "Do you love me?" (John 21:15–17). We have to hear that question as being central to all of our Christian ministry because it is the question that can allow us to be, at the same time, irrelevant and truly self-confident.

Look at Jesus. The world did not pay any attention to him. He was crucified and put away. His message of love was rejected by a world in search of power, efficiency, and control. But there he was, appearing with wounds in his glorified body to a few friends who had eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand. This rejected, unknown, wounded Jesus simply asked, "Do you love me, do you really love me?" He whose only concern had been to announce the unconditional love of God had only one question to ask, "Do you love me?"

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope.

The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, "a heart of flesh," in Jesus. Knowing God's

heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begins to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God. This sounds very simple and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits.

This unconditional and unlimited love is what the evangelist John calls God's first love. "Let us love," he says, "because God loved us first" (1 John 4:19). The love that often leaves us doubtful, frustrated, angry, and resentful is the second love, that is to say, the affirmation, affection, sympathy, encouragement, and we receive from our parents, teachers, spouses, and friends. We all know how limited, broken, and very fragile that love is. Behind the many expressions of this second love there is always the chance of rejection, withdrawal, punishment, blackmail, violence, and even hatred. Many contemporary movies and plays portray the ambiguities and ambivalences of human relationships, and there are no friendships, marriages, or communities in which the strains and stresses of the second love are not keenly felt. Often it seems that beneath the pleasantries of daily life there are many gaping wounds that carry such names as abandonment, betrayal, rejection, rupture, and loss. These are all the shadow side of the second love and reveal the darkness that never completely leaves the human heart.

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The radical good news is that the second love is only a broken reflection of the first love and that the first love is offered to us by a God in whom there are no shadows. Jesus' heart is the incarnation of the shadow-free first love of God. From his heart flow streams of living water. He cries out in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes in me come and drink" (John 7:37–38). "Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29).

From that heart come the words, "Do you love me?" Knowing the heart of Jesus and loving him are the same thing. The knowledge of Jesus' heart is a knowledge of the heart. And when we live in the world with that knowledge, we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope wherever we go. The desire to be relevant and successful will gradually disappear, and our only desire will be to say with our whole being to our brothers and sisters of the human race, "You are loved. There is no reason to be afraid. In love God created your inmost self and knit you together in your mother's womb" (see Psalm 139:13).

The Discipline: Contemplative Prayer

To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God's first love, we have to be mystics. A mystic is a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God's first love.

If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" This is the discipline of contemplative prayer. Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own heart and God's heart. Contemplative prayer keeps us home, rooted and safe, even when we are on the road, moving from place to place, and often surrounded by sounds of violence and war. Contemplative prayer deepens in us the knowledge that we are already free, that we have already found a place to dwell, that we already belong to God, even though everything and everyone around us keep suggesting the opposite.

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to

God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word, and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?

The original meaning of the word "theology" was "union with God in prayer." Today theology has become one academic discipline alongside many others, and often theologians are finding it hard to pray. But for the future of Christian leadership it is of vital importance to reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every word of advice given, and every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately. I have the impression that many of the debates within the church around issues such as the papacy, the ordination of women, the marriage of priests, homosexuality, birth control, abortion, and euthanasia take place on a primarily moral level. On that level, different parties battle about right or wrong. But that battle is often removed from the experience of God's first love, which lies at the base of all human relationships.

Words like "right-wing," "reactionary," "conservative," "liberal," and "left-wing" are used to describe people's opinions, and many discussions then seem more like political battles for power than spiritual searches for the truth.

Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them. Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject. But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative.

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For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required.

CHAPTER 2

From Popularity to Ministry

The Temptation: To Be Spectacular

Let me tell you about another experience that came out of my move from Harvard to L'Arche. It was the experience of shared ministry. I was educated in a seminary that made me believe ministry was essentially an individual affair. I had to be well trained and well formed, and after six years of training and formation, I was considered well equipped to preach, administer the sacraments, counsel, and run a parish. I was made to feel like a man sent on a long, long hike with a huge backpack containing all the things necessary to help the people I would meet on the road. Questions had answers, problems had solutions, and pains had their medicines. Just be sure that you know with which one of the three you are dealing. Over the years, I realized that things are not as simple as that, but my basic individualistic approach to ministry did not change. When I became a teacher I was even more encouraged to do my own thing. I could choose my own subject, my own method, and sometimes even my own students. Nobody would even question my way of doing things. And when I left the classroom I was completely free to do whatever I saw fit. After all, we all have a right to live our private lives privately!

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