

# THE ROLE OF A RELIGIOUS LEADER TODAY

Alfred Darmanin

*The following description of the role, functions and characteristics of a religious leader in our times, in no way claims to be either an exhaustive or an exclusive list. The items mentioned are not meant to be disjunctive elements since many overlappings occur, nor should the analytic or systematic presentation distort what is a synthetic, unifying reality.*

## *Giving Direction*

The leader of an organization is the person who gives it a sense of direction and orientation by coordinating the activities of the members in the achievement of the established goals of the group. Leadership begins by enabling the group to clarify and own its proper goals, and commit itself to their achievement. The religious leader's primary responsibility is to enable the community to fulfil its mission.

Sense of direction, or goal orientation, goes hand in hand with foresight. The leader leads the members forward towards a "vision", enabling them to see the larger picture beyond the daily contingencies, being constantly aware of the purpose of the community's life and work. While an administrator is concerned with the orderly functioning of an organization, the leader is attentive to the purpose of the activities.

Leadership functions can actually be distributed among members, but as organizational psychologist E.H. Schein (1980) notes, the leader's "critical functions" still remain

(1) to determine, articulate, or transmit the basic goals or tasks to be accomplished;

(2) to monitor progress toward task or goal accomplishment;

(3) to ensure that the group of subordinates is built and maintained for effective task performance; and

(4) to supply whatever is needed or missing for task accomplishment and group maintenance. (p.134)

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A major function of a religious leader is therefore to integrate and focus the multiplicity of gifts of community members in the service of mission, by facilitating their response to the community's goals and by pointing towards a vision or direction.

### *Integrating*

A conflict sometimes arises between the individuals' personal needs and the goals of the community. The role of the religious leader is not simply to reconcile these two by reaching a compromise but to effect an integration in such a way that these forces converge along a common vector. If the individual and the institution are forces represented along two orthogonal axes, the integrating role of the leader would consist in creating the resultant vector with positive co-ordinates. In other words, the religious leader would enable both the individual and the community to transcend their own respective needs and synergetically achieve a higher common goal.

How? By designing and promoting a system such that the individuals' growth is enhanced. By creating an environment in which members may satisfy their own particular objectives, while at the same time contributing responsibly to the attainment of the community's goals. By facilitating the activities of the members in a way that simultaneously promotes the overall aim of the institution. Such an integration is clearly not easy to achieve.

This issue of integration is ultimately a question of values, especially in a religious context. The need is felt for congruence between the internalized values of the individual member and the constantly evolving value-orientations of the community. This applies particularly in formation where the individual undergoes a form of inculturation in a way that the internalized values he or she accepts and integrates as part of one's own psychic structure are congruent with those of the community.

It is ultimately the degree to which values are effectively transmitted and integrated that personal growth, spiritual development and the fulfillment of the community goals occur. W. Meissner (1971) claims that this takes place through the "authority relation" which provides a matrix within which values are communicated and reinforced. As he puts it:

The authority relation does not generate values in the community, but by reason of its unique role in the structures and organization of the group, it serves uniquely to intergrate a coherent and recognizable value-system for the community. This is in virtue of its organizing function on one level, but also in virtue of less apparent mechanisms of identification and value transmissions. (p.74)

Later on in the book, the author suggests a way of applying this to the

integrating role of leadership:

A given measure of variation in values and behaviour contributes positively to the perdurance of shared communal values. For each community and each social system there is an optimal degree of inherent variability which maximally stabilizes the community structure and maximally satisfies built-in needs for creative responsibility and freedom in the community. Authority maintains the delicate balance between the stability of communal structure and the variability of individual enterprise. (p.199)

### *Serving and Uniting*

The roles described so far are more of a general nature. Coming down to specifics now, what is the specific modality in which the religious leader exercises direction and integration? First and foremost through service. A good leader works with and for people, not through them, in spite of them or against them. Leaders serve people, they do not use them. The religious leader exercises authority as a service and not as a power or privilege to be taken advantage of.

The role of the religious leader as servant should not be confused with a false notion of service. It does not mean servility by which the leader becomes the slave of the community, performing menial tasks in the house, providing good meals, accepting duties no one else wants to do, etc., instead of attending to the more demanding role of leadership. Nor does service consist in a timid "laissez-faire" attitude where the leader tries to please everyone, never confronting anyone, never deciding anything. Shirking one's responsibility as leader constitutes a great dis-service.

The leader is at the service of the union of the members. Unifying the community is an important role of the religious leader today. Fostering union by promoting mutual understanding and acceptance among members, integrating the community with the larger body of the institution, defending the community against outside oppressors, protecting the minority, etc. is truly an authentic service. It is a delicate and difficult task for the leader to preserve such unity while maintaining plurality since these appear often in opposition.

### *Discerning*

Through discernment the leader can give direction, serve, unify, and resolve the dialectic between individual needs and community goals. To discern is to be able to read the signs of the times in the light of faith. It means being attentive to the Spirit operating through individuals' needs and gifts, through contemporary changes and current events, through the lived experiences of gospel values.

The role of the religious leader is to facilitate the discernment process, that is, to enable the individual and the community to seek God's will in their life and mission. Authentic discernment combines respect for the spirit of the founder/foundress' charism with adaptability to different persons, places, times and circumstances. In discerning, the religious leader prays, reflects, and dialogues with the community so that the decisions and actions taken express real communal discernment.

### *Energizing*

Under this rubric is included the role of inspiring, motivating, encouraging, etc. A leader inspires the members through trust and confidence in their abilities, through a realistic vision, through hope and optimism in the midst of fear, discouragement and criticism, and through good example or modelling. Members are motivated when their expectations are fulfilled, when they see meaning and purpose in achieving objectives, when they are challenged and given feedback about their performance. The leader thus exercises the role of energizer by providing the atmosphere just described. In this manner, the members feel supported by the leader in their endeavours, and their contact with the person fills them with energy and enthusiasm.

Besides energizing, the leader's role can also be seen as that of "synergizing". By putting together the available energies, talents and resources, a synergetic effect is produced that exceeds the sum of the individual elements. By grouping a number of persons to live and work together, the benefit for the individuals and the effectiveness of the task go beyond the anticipated results. By integrating the individual needs with the organizational goals, new energy is produced and new ideas are generated that satisfy the persons' needs and accomplish the common objectives maximally.

The leader's role of energizing is not restricted to the preservation and maintenance of the members and the institution. It involves becoming an agent of change. Leaders act on the environment, not vice-versa. Rather than allowing circumstances to determine their action, they make decisions and take action in order to change the circumstances. More than the minimal adaptive change, what is required for good leadership is innovative change. In the words of H. Igor Ansoff, "in the modern world adaptive change is a requirement for survival, and innovative change a condition for success".

At a high level of development, then, the role of the religious leader becomes that of a *creative innovator*. Besides effecting necessary changes, besides ingeniously putting together the elements that are already there ("spatial creativity"), he or she brings in what is absent, creates new ideas, visions, dreams, anticipates future goals ("temporal creativity"). This requires skills in imagination and creativity, but if the leader is not so creative, at least support should be given to those members who are. Encouraging the "creative minority" in a

community is a sign of good leadership.

### *Caring for Persons*

The leader's role is being seen more and more in terms of leading people, dealing with human beings. These complex and ever-changing creatures consume most of the leader's time and energy. And the task becomes more complicated because, unlike parents, the leader must work with used, not new, human beings - persons whom other people have gotten to first! Skills in human relations, consequently, are a must for leaders.

All this applies to religious leaders. They are to show care and concern for their members as persons. The members expect their leaders to treat them as persons with needs and feelings rather than as jobs they have to perform. They want to experience worth for who they are more than for what they do. Such a relationship can only develop if there is mutual trust between leader and members. Otherwise, mutual suspicion would stifle and kind of inter-personal relation and apostolic initiative.

The religious leader's interpersonal skills in caring for persons is part of a whole communication process. The leader has to promote an effective system of communication both within and outside the organization, while realizing that channels of communication spread out in various directions-upwards, downwards, sideways and outwards.

The task of the religious leader is to open up these channels among the members in order to facilitate an exchange of communication, removing any blocks or distortions in communicating. Interpersonal communication in religious organizations breeds openness, sincerity, trust, mutual understanding, intimacy and love. By facilitating this type of communication, the religious leader helps create those conditions required for communal discernment, team-work, mutual sharing, and harmonious living.

### *Delegating Authority*

This role consists in entrusting certain leadership functions to other subordinates. It obviously involves the risk that subordinates will make mistakes, do things differently or even worse than the leader would, for it implies delegating the right to be different and wrong. But its long-term effects in increasing initiative, trust and responsible action are highly-prized payoffs.

For delegation to be effective, the person who is assigned duties to perform must be told clearly what these entail in terms of their role in accomplishing objectives. Such a person should be given authority within that domain, otherwise a feeling of powerlessness would create frustration. Delegation also confers obligations on the person who accepts the job and to whom duties are

delegated. By the process of delegation, responsibility is shared, authority is transferred, and accountability is established.

Delegation of authority not only encourages co-responsibility, promotes team-spirit and creates trust among members of the organization, it also proves beneficial for leader. By liberating themselves of the less crucial issues, leaders can utilize their precious time and spend their limited energy on other more important matters like long-term planning, motivating personnel, anticipating crises, creating new ideas, etc. Unfortunately, many religious leaders ignore what is known in management as "Gresham's Law", namely, they tend to dedicate their whole time and energy on routine and programmed tasks. They work on specific problems with specific deadlines, usually under pressure, and by responding continuously to these unending pressing problems they are apt to neglect the more important, though unprogrammed, tasks.

Religious leaders also have to realize that they are neither indispensable nor eternal. There are times when subordinates have to manage without their leaders. It may in fact be a good advice for leaders at times to let others "enjoy their absence!" A good leader, aware of the importance of continuity in the religious organization, tries to train and prepare suitable successors. This would also prevent him or her from becoming addictive to power.

### *Planning and Evaluating*

The religious leader has the responsibility to ensure that serious planning does take place for the community. Planning aims at both effectiveness and efficiency. The former consists in choosing the right goals from a set of alternatives and reaching them. The latter assumes the goals as given and proper, and proceeds to find the best means of achieving them. In other words, efficiency is doing things right, whereas effectiveness is doing the right things. Effectiveness is results-oriented while efficiency is means-oriented.

Evaluation guarantees that the community is operating effectively and efficiently. The content of such evaluation includes a study of one's apostolic goals or mission, an examination of the means employed to achieve such goals, a clarification and reformulation if necessary of one's values and priorities, an assessment of personnel and resources, and suggested remedies for the future. The process of evaluation is a continuous one, it takes place in the context of renewal and adaptation, it forms part of ongoing formation and continuous updating, and it involves the whole community.

The excuse often brought forward by religious leaders for not investing in planning and evaluation is that they are too busy to find time for that. Quite a few of these religious leaders may be too busy doing the wrong thing! Basically, they fail to distinguish what is urgent from what is important. Certain trivial things that require immediate attention because of their apparent urgency

(phone calls, visitors, paper-work) cause them to neglect the less urgent but more important tasks, like long-term planning and evaluation. Governed by the tyranny of the urgent, they spend all their time fighting small fires while the big ones rage uncontrolled!

### *Making Decisions*

A religious leader serves the community also by making appropriate decisions, difficult and at times agonizing though this task might be. Today, with the emphasis on collegiality and subsidiarity, the decision-making process is no longer the exclusive task of the leader. Yet decisions must be made and the leader has an important role in the process and implementation of decisions. One must realize that not deciding, or postponing to decide, is in itself a decision. Not a few religious organizations become stagnant, impotent and dissatisfied because no proper decision-making mechanism exists in their extremely "laissez-faire" leadership style.

Appropriate decisions are made in view of specific objectives, values, priorities, programmes, personnel and resources. Decisions are relative to the persons, places, times and circumstances. The situational approach to decisions would indicate which process to adopt—consensus procedure, majority rule, delegation, committees, immediate decision by leader, etc.

It is important that decisions are communicated in good time and that an explanation be given regarding the reasons why and manner how they were made. This increases the degree of acceptance, though not necessarily of agreement, by the members. Finally, decisions are not meant to please everyone, and every "no" to something is a "yes" to something else.

### *Taking Risks*

A good leader is ready to take prudent risks, is not afraid of making mistakes, accepts limitations, and does not claim to have the right answers for all the problems. This implies that leaders encourage experimentation and do not allow the best to become the enemy of the good.

The necessity of risk-taking for the religious leader is well expressed by former Jesuit General Superior P. Arrupe (1979):

The man in search of progress wants to experiment and to take some prudent risks. He is not afraid of the judgments made of his actions nor of the criticisms they might incur. He has enough humility to recognize his mistakes, as well as the strength to resist discouragement and to begin all over again. One reason adults learn less than the young is

because they take fewer risks and with greater difficulty admit their mistakes. If we want to learn, we have to take risks and make mistakes. (p.90)

There are situations where taking risks for a leader becomes a question of survival for the organization. The role of a leader may then be compared to that of a driver whose task is normally to push the accelerator, occasionally the brakes, rarely puts the car in reverse, and sometimes has to shift gears - each time depending on the circumstances. There are situations where only by taking a risk can the driver and the car be saved from ruin.

### *Favouring a Healthy Pluralism*

It used to appear as easier, more efficient and more secure to establish uniformity in an organization. As opposed to such a monolithic type of organization where centralization prevailed, a pluralistic one where subsidiarity and collegiality are at work, has emerged. In such a pluralistic community, various points of view are accepted, power is distributed, initiatives arise from different sources, and decisions are assigned to various units of the organization.

A healthy form of pluralism is not only compatible with the goals of a religious organization but it also brings out the richness and variety of human talents that make up a religious organization. A good leader favours such a healthy pluralism in his or her community, and knows that far from dividing, it enriches the community. Such pluralism becomes a source of dynamism in creating greater initiative and innovative action emanating from the grass roots.

In favouring pluralism and promoting unity at the same time, some leaders experience great difficulty. They think you either have to adopt a "laissez-faire" attitude to safeguard pluralism or else implement rigid structures to protect uniformity. Yet, a certain amount and type of structure may help attain both.

For some, the word "structure" evokes the idea of an oppressive system of rules rather than a way of providing a common reference within which a group can operate freely and effectively. Structures are means to facilitate not block development. Even the most flexible groups must have minimal structures and norms if the members are to act together.

### *Welcoming Criticism and Feedback*

The leader-member relationship is a two-way communication. Just as the leader is responsible for providing feedback to the members on their performance, so must he or she be ready to receive it from them. Rather than fearing criticism, a good leader allows it and even facilitates and welcomes it. Unless the members feel that their leader is open to criticism and accepts feedback, the channels of communication between them would remain blocked. As a



result, criticism, instead of being stifled, would be expressed to everyone but the leader.

Instead of taking criticism as a personal attack, an open-minded leader receives it as a sign of interest and concern by the members. It becomes a form of consultation and advice for reflection and future decisions. Again, this does not mean that the leader's aim is to please everyone, seeking popularity and unanimous approval, but that in making decisions he or she tries to be objective, just and honest.

### *Conclusion*

As we conclude this list of the role and functions of a religious leader, the description given above may sound idealistic. As a matter of fact it is. It presents more an ideal or vision of what a leader should be or can become, than the way religious leaders actually are today. It may serve more as an orientation for the future than as a picture of the present. Nevertheless, it offers a challenge and an opportunity for serious reflection not just on leadership but on good, effective leadership today.

It is also true that there are a few leaders who do come relatively close to what we have described. One person certainly does - Jesus Christ. He did exercise the role of a religious leader in his time. From the gospels we know that Christ performed the functions of leadership. He had clear goals to accomplish and enabled his followers to achieve them together with him. He recruited personnel and gave them solid training in view of the objectives to be attained. He motivated and inspired his followers giving them a sense of direction. He served and united his disciples making of them an apostolic community of love. He planned, made decisions, gave commands, and delegated. He coordinated the activities of his members and facilitated communication among them. He certainly took risks in being a creative innovator and agent of change. He respected differences in his followers, welcomed their initiatives, encouraged coresponsibility and even prepared them as successors. His leadership style was flexible and adaptive according to the persons and the situation. Indeed, Christ proved to be an effective organization leader.

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