

Leadership in the Marianist Tradition

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Theories about leadership vary from culture to culture. In the West, an entire literature on the subject now exists which emphasizes quite different theories of leadership: the "trait theory," the "great man" theory, the "situationist" critique (it is not so much a great person as it is a certain type of person in a special situation), leadership styles, bureaucratic and charismatic forms of leadership and even leaderless leadership! In Eastern cultures, what constitutes leadership usually differs considerably from those theories elaborated in democratic liberal societies where capitalism has been the dominant economic theory. In view of these wide-ranging and even contradictory theories of leadership, we will not get very far if we ask the question, "What is leadership?" What we really need to understand is neither the idea of leadership in general nor the current literature (mostly Western) on leadership (as helpful as some of that may be), but rather to understand what leadership ought to be in the context of Marianist education.

To describe what that particular type of leadership looks like, I will first locate Marianist education in the larger context of the Catholic tradition, then consider some specific Marianist characteristics of leadership, and finally ask again whether there is a theory of leadership in Marianist education. At the current time in the Society of Mary, we are only beginning to write about a distinctive style of educational leadership. Catholics and Marianists who look for that distinctive style will want to examine the lives and examples of people who have led their communities over the centuries in order to gain insight into the kinds of leaders we want and need for our institutions today. Even though there is currently no widely-recognized Marianist theory of leadership, there are certain widely-accepted characteristics of Marianist education as well as certain widely-accepted characteristics of Marianist life and spirituality—both of which suggest types or styles of leadership that would be most appropriate for Marianist educational communities. By the end of this essay, I will have pointed out three of those styles.

Insights Drawn from the Catholic Tradition

I shall begin with reflections based on the Catholic tradition simply because Catholicism precedes and undergirds whatever is Marianist. The Marianist way of life is a particular way of living Catholicism. Therefore, "returning to the sources" means looking not only at the thought of the founders of Marianist congregations, but also at the example and teachings of Jesus himself, and at the insights generated by his disciples down through the centuries. Leaders in the Catholic community can never afford to be unaware of Jesus as the primary leader, which means that all Christians remain at heart followers. In a real sense then, "leadership" is not a biblical concept. The New Testament stresses servanthood, laying down one's life, and "speaking truth to power." It expects of disciples behaviors which are quite foreign to most people who inhabit the contemporary industrial-managerial world.

What are some of the insights from the Catholic tradition, now nearly two thousand years old, that will help us understand how leadership in Marianist schools should be exercised? I will consider only three such insights here: first, the centrality of community; second, the simple fact that there are many forms of leadership; and third, the fragility of the human person.

At the heart of Catholicism is an *emphasis on community*, on the importance of love, of laying down one's life for another, of using one's gifts for the good of the community, and on the presence and power of God manifested in prayer when "two or three" are gathered together. Followers of Jesus do not imagine that they create themselves; rather, they are profoundly aware that they are a part of the larger

community of believers, indeed of humanity itself. The Christian community traces its history back at least two millennia. Communities retain a strong sense of identity by knowing their history, by telling stories about it and by celebrating that history through rituals. Being part of the Christian community requires its members to recognize that they are shaped by the stories they repeat and the rituals they celebrate. Those called to lead educational institutions should immerse themselves in the history of those institutions; if they are founders of such institutions, they should remember that they stand on the shoulders of those many educational leaders who have gone before them, bearing a wisdom rooted in Catholicism's emphasis on community.

Besides the critical importance to identity of being part of a larger community, these various communities raise up quite naturally from their midst various kinds of leaders. From within them members are "called" to leadership. They discover their particular gifts through the mentoring and the encouragement they receive from their community. Some are called, the New Testament reminds us, to be teachers, others administrators, and still others counselors. Persons who are influential in the community often are the ones who invite us to consider entering these roles. These people are mentors; we seek their counsel and accept their encouragement. These mentors themselves came to have influence because someone had recognized their ability and invited them to a new position of responsibility. In this sense, leadership develops in the context of a community that raises up individuals and calls them to assume particular roles for the good of the rest of the community.

A good deal of the contemporary literature on leadership emphasizes the importance of the charismatic personality for leadership. It is true that one powerful form of leadership is the charismatic person with a compelling personality who speaks and lives in ways that motivate others to follow. Yet it is important to remember that there are *many different forms* of leadership. Persons with a "catholic sensibility" have a certain breadth of interests and appreciate a wide variety of leaders. The great Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar describes four types of discipleship, singling out the New Testament figures of Mary, Peter, Paul, and John. While each could be described as a compelling personality, not all could be described as charismatic in the popular sense of that term. Indeed, there are many forms of leadership. Therefore, educational leaders need to think not in terms of their own virtuoso abilities, but rather in terms of bringing together people with different abilities in order to form a balanced team. The dynamic Paul needs to be balanced by a reflective Mary, and the one who speaks for the others, like Peter, needs the depth of the mystic John.

The third Catholic insight into leadership emphasizes that *people are fragile*. Everyone needs encouragement and support, for everyone is broken and sinful. The Christian vision of life assumes that people sin and fail. The doctrine of original sin—that we are all broken and in need of healing and forgiveness—invites leaders to be more compassionate than if they presumed that everyone, if only they tried hard enough, could be perfect. Leaders also learn greater patience than if they believed that the road to the goal was short and that everyone who reports to them could get the job done quickly. They come to realize that part of leading is the capacity for forgiveness and the ability to nourish.

Administrators should not neglect their own need for nourishment and support. Frank Rhodes, the very successful president emeritus of Cornell University, pinpoints several reasons why leaders of educational institutions fail in doing their task well. The first is exhaustion: "Lack of sleep, no time for exercise, shortened vacations, and repeated involvement in crises are the warning sign of the road to personal exhaustion." Leaders need to sustain themselves with time not only to read, but to keep clear their priorities, keep close to their families and loved ones, and to draw upon the insights of the Catholic tradition. Ordinary people often expect leaders to be extraordinary; they forget that everyone, including leaders, are only human and also in need of nourishment and healing. Too many educational leaders try to do it all, do not build teams, and forget that they need to take time to nourish themselves. Personal

exhaustion kills imagination and destroys passion; educational leaders need to learn to take time to renew and refresh themselves, as well as those who work with them.

Insights Drawn from the Marianist Tradition

If the great Catholic tradition reminds leaders that they need to be part of the larger community, recognize many forms of leadership, and understand the fragility of people, including themselves, what insights might be drawn from the Marianist tradition of education? Here, I single out again three insights: first, an emphasis on collaboration; second, a careful linking of the heart and the head; and third, an emphasis on institutional change.

To “*collaborate*” means to work together. Leaders of Marianist institutions are neither dictators nor doormats, neither people who trample on others or who allow others to trample on them; they are rather people who work *with* those they lead. Jesus says that no servant is greater than his master; leaders of Marianist institutions do not ask more of those with whom they work than they ask of themselves. For the members of the Society of Mary, the unusual form of religious community in which brothers and priests live together and share responsibilities equally proves to be one of the most important sources of a sense of collaboration. Marianists are known for their strong community life, and that very life becomes an essential part of the mission. Article 67 of the *Rule of Life* states that “the community itself is a primary instrument to fulfill our mission.” People who truly live together work together. Marianist forms of leadership, it can be concluded, are marked by a strong spirit of collaboration. In Marianist institutions, a close working relationship exists between administration and faculty, the school and the parents of the students. Ultimately, leaders of Marianist institutions constantly build the Marianist family.

Besides stressing collaboration, Marianist leadership is aware of both the head and the heart, the cognitive and the affective. In the context of a strong community, of a family spirit, leaders of Marianist educational institutions emphasize that moral and intellectual forms of learning are intimately related. Knowledge, the intellectual dimension of learning, does not automatically lead to virtuous behavior; the brightest persons are not always the best persons. Josef Pieper, the Catholic philosopher, once wrote that many people today have “lost the awareness of the close bond that links the knowing of truth to the condition of purity.” In other words, in order to really know, we need to become persons of a certain sort. That is to say, how we live—our affective and moral life—will directly affect what we can truly know and understand.

In Mary, Marianists find an intimate relationship between heart and head. She not only pondered many things in her heart, she also was clear-headed enough to ask the Angel Gabriel clarifying questions about how it could be that she would become mother of the Lord. She not only knew enough to tell others to do “whatever He tells” them, but also was loving enough to remain standing at the foot of the cross, witnessing his passion and death, and cradling her son in her arms once he was taken down from the cross. Mary not only is a model of faith and prayerfulness, she also got up and went in haste, though pregnant, through the dangerous hill country to be with her elderly cousin Elizabeth. Marianists find in Mary a person whose head and heart are linked for the sake of the kingdom. In Marianist institutions, both the curriculum and the entire learning environment reflect a holistic Marian approach. The curriculum includes art, music and drama, as well as opportunities for spiritual formation, retreats and service. In general, educational leaders provide more ways of learning than through the use of reason alone.

Besides focusing on collaboration and the intimate relationship between the heart and the head, Marianist educational leaders dedicate themselves to transforming institutions. Today we speak often of justice. Chaminade understood this imperative as the rebuilding and transforming of institutions. Such an approach was natural for him because, shortly after returning from exile in Spain, he founded sodalities in Bordeaux. It was crucial that he form these communities of faith, groups who could draw strength from

each other precisely in order to go forth, as apostles of Mary, to change the fabric and texture of the institutions which the violent French revolution had torn up and destroyed. As a Catholic and a brilliant pastoral strategist, Blessed Chaminade instinctively knew that it was through institutions that institutions would be changed. For the same reasons, some years later, he took over schools that specialized in training teachers. In such schools he believed that he could shape a generation of teachers who would be willing to work together in joining head and heart, and to impart learning for the sake of rebuilding the Church in France and beyond. In Western societies, people tend to privatize their religion, to make it such a personal thing that it has no public impact. While the gospel should never be reduced to politics, it should have a political impact. To understand the transformation of institutions as a characteristic of Marianist education requires us to think about how religion should move people to public action where they live.

Since the Second Vatican Council, theologians, especially liberation theologians, use the word “justice” to describe the effort to change institutions, an effort aimed to uphold the dignity of everyone, especially the marginalized and the poor. They interpret Mary’s *Magnificat* as a call to restructure society, to bring down the proud and raise up the lowly, and to fill the hungry with good things. Efforts of one person to help another person are edifying; however, it is mainly through the impact of just communities and institutions that the work of justice has the best chance to be effective. In Marianist schools, educational leaders will provide opportunities for faculty and students to learn about the social teachings of the Church and explore ways in which they might apply both within the school itself (fair wages and practices that recognize the dignity of every person) and beyond it (reaching out to the poor and working for justice).

In summary then, leaders formed in the Marianist tradition effectively collaborate, are acutely aware of the need to link closely the education of the head and the heart, and finally, educate leaders who will be positive forces for the transformation of institutions and, in and through that effort, eventually of societies as well.

Conclusion

We began this essay by asking whether it can be said that there is a Marianist approach to leading educational institutions. I singled out three characteristics of education in the Catholic tradition—being part of a larger community, recognizing many forms of leadership and the fragility of persons—and then proceeded to single out from the Marianist tradition three more characteristics for educational leaders—an ability to collaborate, a linking of the heart and the head, and a dedication to the transformation of institutions. Although I do not think there currently exists a single widely-held theory of Marianist leadership, I do believe that key elements that should be included in such a theory have been described in this paper. Worked into vibrant combinations, these elements together should provide a very fertile ground for the nourishment and growth of styles of leadership capable of forming gospel communities powerful enough to transform the world.