

The Evolution of the Service of Leadership since Vatican II

Panel Presentation by Dolores Bourque, FMA

A special good-day to each and every one. I have been asked to speak to you about the how the service of “leadership” has evolved since Vatican II. In 1962, at the opening of the Vatican II Council, I was 16 years old – young and dreaming of the future. I was probably more preoccupied in leading my basketball team to victory than to follow what was going on in Rome, at the Vatican, a place so far away from my small village of Sluice Point in Nova Scotia. But still, who knows, my leadership in my team was, probably, a good preparation to my leadership in my congregation, because, when I think of it, in both cases, we have to learn winning strategies, to know how to make good passes, how to be one with the other members, learn good communication skills and do “smashes” that amaze!

There are probably, here today, persons who could better speak to you about leadership – people who have been and still are leaders in their congregation, in committees or in dioceses and would have much more to say... however, I dare to present my humble and simple reflection. To make thing lighter, I will use the feminine form, but my reflection is for all participants (general superiors, religious, bishops, chairpersons of committees).

Since Vatican II, leadership in religious congregations, as in the Church, in families, in organizations have experienced transformations. One of my co-sisters, once said: in the past, when we talked about the general superior, we called her ‘reverend mother’... then we called her ‘mother’, then ‘sister’, then by her ‘first name’... before long, she continued, we will call her the “good lady”. Imagine, even I had to experience a particular transformation. Certain sisters who used to call me ‘Dolly’ now call me ‘Dolores’... because it seems that Dolly is not appropriate for a general superior!

Being with Others

This little story is still relevant, and shows the change in mentality or in familiarity that happened over time. It also shows that the leaders came down from “ABOVE” to be “BELOW” with the others. To come to this, what did we go through? What did we experience? It seems, from what I heard, that in the past:

- someone would prepare our bed, would wax our shoes, wash our clothes...;
- sisters would bow as we passed by...;
- there was a table for “our mothers”...;
- we would be called mothers, reverend, or supreme moderator (name still found in the Canon Law).

How did we manage to move from “ABOVE” to “BELOW”? I believe that it is Jesus who showed us what being a leader means. He himself came from “ABOVE” to be “BELOW” **with** others... and to make his home with us. Jesus was the leader by excellence and he showed that true leadership is circular: he sits down **with** his disciples... he walks **with** them... he eats **with** them... he is **with** them... he challenges them, he talks to them of what a servant should be or should not be.

In our communal and personal experiences, we gradually understood that being a leader is to be a disciple, it is to be humble and not to look for places of honour or of power, it is to hear and to listen to Jesus who says to us: *You know that the rulers of nations act as tyrants, and the powerful oppress them. It shall not be so among you.* (Mt 20:26)

At the beginning of our congregations, so it seems, the general superior and superiors decided everything, or almost everything: few consultations, few communal or personal discernment. From what I heard, there was a time when the assignments for the following year came as a surprise. You were sent to a certain place for a certain mission... ready or not. Blind obedience, they say! How pleasant it was at that time. I did not experience that... Blessed be God!

I am, I daresay, of another time, that of consultations, of discernment, of listening! But these times also have their demands as well as their shortcomings. Today, it is the general superiors or the superiors who have to adjust themselves, who sometimes have to submit to the needs, the desires of the sisters. At times, the sisters do their discernment directly with the Holy Spirit, and when they come for dialogue, they will say: "the Spirit and I have decided..." However, I have to admit that the responsibility as general superior brings about happiness and gives a chance to live wonderful encounters and sharings with the sisters, the other leaders, other congregations, bishops, and other people we meet at various social events and occasions.

"Let us Be True Disciples"

Since Vatican II, the Synods, the general chapters, the rediscovery of our charism, of our spirituality and of our mission have opened our congregations to other dimensions; windows have been opened to welcome a breath of fresh air from the Spirit of God. We learned that our charism and spirituality were made to be shared and not to be kept for ourselves. I believe that we heard loud and clear the message, the challenge formulated by Jean Debruyne:

"We are waiting for you outside, people of God. We are waiting for you outside... Filles de Marie-de-l'Assomption... Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur... Sisters of Saint-Martha... Holy Cross fathers and brothers... Sisters of Charity... bishops of our diocese... all of us... Let's go out... God comes out with us."

Because we did go out, because we listened to the Spirit and to the people, because we shared with others our charism and our spirituality, we heard the cries of the women and children neglected and ill-treated. We heard the call of the Church to go out on mission in other countries. We chose to commit ourselves to social justice and to do our part to save our planet or, at least, to support organisations involved in these commitments. We dared to journey with the poor, to be the voice of those who cannot be heard. We decided, together, as a congregation, to give new life to our charism, to favour solidarity, communion and to dare personal and communal discernment.

Our leadership becoming more circular instead of pyramidal opened a dialogue, a possibility of discernment which moved us to greater freedom and a new commitment in new places and new realities. Circular leadership gave the sisters a chance to discover their own personal charism and to be able to share it with others. Circular leadership also gave the general superiors and superiors freedom to love their mission and to find happiness in being servants. As it is said at times: I love "my job." It is "fun" being a

general superior. I encourage all of you to apply for the position when it is open!!! It pays well and the benefits are extraordinary!!!

To end this reflection, I dare to say this, since Vatican II, leadership has jumped from “I” to “**WE**”.

I am served...	WE become servants
I decide...	WE discern in the Spirit
I am mother...	WE are sisters / brothers
I am sister...	WE become <i>companion of grace</i> (Mary Pat Garvin)
I manage growth...	WE experience together growing old, letting-go
I send on mission...	WE continue the mission of love till the end.

Today, in our congregations or diocese, our leadership invites us to double our trust in God’s loving plan for humanity, to live a radical conversion in our following of Christ – as we are strongly urged by Pope Francis – to answer to the call of coming out of our individualism, *not to be afraid to walk at God’s own pace* (Arthur Melanson, founder of the FMA) and to give to the power that is entrusted to us its true meaning, that of the power of love, of supporting and of encouraging. My sisters, my brothers, may we be true disciples... this is our leadership.