

Discerning Hope amid the Challenges

In the traditional and plentiful literature on contemporary organizational leadership, it is common to see authors draw a distinction between leadership and management. Organizations need both but they require skills not often possessed by the same person. In other words, it is often difficult to lead *and* manage and one often makes mistakes if one attempts to do both. A manager makes decisions; a leader empowers. A manager thinks creatively; a leader inspires creativity. A manager listens; a leader ensures understanding... and so on.

Is it Possible to Be Leader *and* Pastor?

In my recent ministry as a congregational leader, I see the contrast not so much between leadership and management, but between leadership and pastoral accompaniment. Too often, my confrères seem to expect both, and just as often I see the difficulty of providing both.

Collaborating with four other members of our General Council certainly helps me to remember that there is a wealth of gifts that we bring into service for the members of our congregation. Still, there are times when it seems that there is an expectation for me to make decisions for the good of the congregation as a whole, while at same time being pastorally present to those whose lives are most impacted (oftentimes in their minds negatively) by those same decisions. Is it possible to be leader *and* pastor?

So many of the decisions to which I am called to give leadership involve confronting our reality and evaluating the structures of common life and the modes of apostolic ministry that will be sustainable over the next 10 to 20 years. It is difficult to imagine that there is a congregational leader in Canada who is not experienced in this challenge. Aging membership and the declining ability to sustain ministry commitments provide enormous challenges which some congregations have met with grace and dignity, while others still struggle to face reality.

One can discern seeds of hope as old conceptions of common life and ministry give way to newer, more inclusive modes of living out radical discipleship and serving those most in need. But how does a congregational leader go ahead to guide the way (the classical definition of a leader) while at the same time accompanying those whom he or she is called to lead? Are leadership and pastoral accompaniment mutually exclusive concepts? Do the difficult decisions that a congregational leader is required to make render him or her incapable of ministering to those who feel hurt and abandoned by those decisions?

Key Insights for Discerning Hope

While there are no easy answers to these questions, a recent set of questions posed by Pope Francis to religious, and captured in *Rejoice! A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women: A Message from the Teachings of Pope Francis*, issued in 2014 by the CICALSAL, has some insights for those of us looking for hope amid the challenges.

The language that Pope Francis employs to challenge us constitutes a lexicon of hope. As advanced in years as we may be, he asks us to search for the “joy of freshness.” He dares us to look into the “depths of our hearts” to find God waiting for us. He asks us if we are free men and women.

Is there any more profound or personal question that one religious can ask of another: “Are you living in freedom?” And if we are, are we still “restless for God?” In regards to our brothers and sisters in religious life, “do we still feel the restlessness of love” for them? Do we live in authentic

Christian communities or “comfortable communities”? Do we have vision? Are we daring? “Do our dreams fly high?” These are the questions that inspire us to discern hope amid the challenges.

Called to Be “Gospel Ritual Leaders”

In his most recent book *The Francis Factor and the People of God: New Life for the Church* (Orbis Books, 2015), Gerald A. Arbuckle, SM offers a typically insightful analysis of the ministry of leadership in today’s Franciscan Church. The questions that Pope Francis poses to us as religious serve as a backdrop for the integration of leadership and ministry. Taken together with Arbuckle’s analysis, they suggest ways that congregational leaders can strive to be authentic leaders, capable of making difficult decisions while accompanying those whom they are called to lead.

Arbuckle’s analysis of the elements of pastoral leadership is as challenging as the Pope’s questions. Using lessons learned from Scripture, particularly through the lives of Moses, Joshua, Jeremiah and Jesus, Arbuckle introduces the concept of “Gospel Ritual Leaders.”

Acknowledging Loss

The first task of a ritual leader is to acknowledge loss. As the prophets encouraged people to name their sorrows, so Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* describes some of the causes of contemporary grief among the People of God (nos. 32, 70).

As congregational leaders, we must find ways to allow our communities and individuals to ritualize the loss that comes from the demise of familiar structures of common life and ministry, not to mention the debilitating struggles of aging and illness. But we must do so not as men and women above the fray, but as fellow mourners willing to publicly acknowledge our loss and pain.

Learning to Be Listeners

And we must be listeners, taking our inspiration from the listening ministry of Jesus, both in prayer and in his encounters with the men and women of his day. For Arbuckle, our listening must be hospitable and healing, and here we have so much to learn from the dynamic of listening that is at the heart of the experiences of Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen with the L’Arche movement. Central to this ministry of listening is the power of silence.

Those familiar with the work of Arbuckle will be aware of the importance he attaches to the creative power of chaos which, in its authentic biblical sense, describes the reality of many contemporary religious communities in the North American and European Church. From this chaos will come either extinction or refounding, but congregational leaders will need to learn to respect dissenters and cultivate a sense of humor. Pope Francis seems to be gifted at both, and has much to teach us about the simultaneous ministry of leadership and accompaniment.

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