



Leadership's Role and Challenges

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I was asked to talk today about “les défis pour le leadership religieux.” Even though “leadership” is an English word, I still dislike it. It seems to me that in the Church there is only one leader, Jesus Christ, and the rest of us are disciples. For religious I suppose that it is a way of leaving behind the old language of superiors, which seemed to imply inferiors. Every year the Conference of Major Religious Superiors in Ireland prepares an analysis of the Government’s budget, usually scathing. The government trembles. Finally the Prime Minister said that he could not take seriously any institution which claimed to be both Major and Superior. So they are now the Conference of Religious! But “leadership” is the word that is used everywhere and so, with a typical Dominican humility, I will use it!

I will take us through the parable of the prodigal son. This may seem a little odd because it is not obviously about leadership. My reason is that all too easily we tend to think of leadership in terms of management and administration. The business world dominates our imagination. At dinner a couple of years ago I was sitting next to the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. He struggled to work out what I had been up to for my nine years as Master of the Order. Finally he said, “I’ve got it. You were the CEO of a multinational. How are the Dominicans competing with the Franciscans in the vocation market?”

Being in the Service of God’s Grace

If we look to the gospels, then the model that Jesus offers us is of service. And that is fundamental. Bishop Ken Untener greeted the congregation at his installation saying, “Hi. I’m Ken and I’m here to be your waiter.”¹ But what sort of a waiter? The laity is often delighted to hear that we are called to be servants but surprised to see that it usually means that we boss them around. I am reminded of the Irish bishop who said during his installation that he would serve the diocese with a rod of iron.

My theory is that Christian leadership is the service of God’s grace. We serve the people by serving the happening of grace. A Dominican who influenced me profoundly was Cornelius Ernst. His father was a Dutch Christian and his mother a Buddhist from Sri Lanka. All of his life was dedicated to the encounter of the East and the West. He wrote a wonderful book on grace. For him grace was not something, a substance. It was this happening of God in our lives. He called it “the genetic moment.” What is wonderful about a flower is not the fact of its existence but the act of its flowering, its budding. He wrote: “Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the

¹ *The practical prophet*, ed. Elizabeth Picken, CJ, et al. Mahwah, 2007, p. xix.

light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love. It could be said that Christianity is ... the power to transform and renew all things: 'Behold I make all things new.'" (Rev. 21.5)²

Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32)

Any parable or incident in the gospel would have served to explore the happening of grace. I almost chose the woman caught in adultery since Jesus gives us a fine example on how to conduct meetings and deal with awkward people. But let us see where the parable of the prodigal son takes us.

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living."

When you hear those opening words, "a man had two sons," you may well suspect that the model of leadership proposed will be the father. Superiors are out but daddies are in. But if one is to be caught up within a parable then you must find yourself in all of the participants. We are the father and both of the sons and the servant but perhaps above all the fatted calf! The happening of grace in this story demands all of these characters.

Leadership means refusing to be cramped by any single definition of our role. We are there to do whatever is necessary for the happening of grace. If we insist on sticking to predetermined functions, then things can become paralyzed. "It's not my job to do that." When I was a chaplain at Imperial College I went to see a venerable Anglican called Ivor Smith Cameron and asked him what I was supposed to do. He replied, "Loiter with intent." Everyone else on the campus had their roles, from the Principal to the cleaners. The chaplain is there to do whatever is needed. That is service. A French Dominican came to stay in Oxford to learn Bengali, so that he could serve the poorest of the poor. When I asked him what he was going to do, he replied that it was they who would tell him.

A grand American Dominican came to stay in Blackfriars in Oxford. The brother who opened the door had just been sweeping the floor. And so this imperious friar said, "Brother, go and get me a cup of tea." So the brother went for the tea. Then the American said, "Now brother, take me to my room." Obediently he did so. Then the guest said, "Now I wish to meet Father Prior. Take me to his room." And he said "I am the Prior." The Prior was the theologian, Fergus Kerr!

"The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them."

The parable is about the loss and restoration of the unity of the family. And this is the fruit of grace and the primary task of leadership. St Paul writes to the Ephesians, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were all called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all through all and in all." (Eph 4:5). Grace overthrows division. So your primary task as Christian leaders is surely to nurture the unity within your communities and the unity between your communities and the Universal Church.

Reconciling Truth and Unity

² *The Theology of Grace*. Dublin, 1974, p. 74f.

But how do we reconcile that with truthfulness? Truth and unity can be in tension. If I may share my experience with you for a moment: As Master of the Order of Preachers my main task was to care for the unity of the Order because you cannot be preachers of the gospel and splinter. So, we have to negotiate the tensions between left and right, young and old, first world and third world. Unlike most Orders we have always hung on to our unity, unlike some whom I am too polite to mention! But the motto of the Order is "Veritas," truth. The role of the Master is to serve the Order's bold preaching of the truth. But how can we both be boldly truthful and not split the brethren? How can we be one without being fuzzy? This is a dilemma in most of our communities today. If you preach boldly then your mailbox will be filled with angry letters. If you keep quiet and do not preach, then you have also failed.

The parable gives us some clues. First of all there are no hints that the father treats this as a dramatic event. He does not lie on the ground and beg the younger son to stay or threaten him. Life carries on. Religious people are extraordinarily inclined to drama, from the squabbling of Peter and Paul until today. I know. I lived in Italy for nine years, and sometimes it was like an opera by Puccini! But if we are servants of God's grace, then the great drama has already happened. "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." One of the ways in which we hold together truth and unity is by living by the fundamental drama of grace rather than throwing oil on the little fires that get everyone so excited. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to Bishop Bell just before his murder by the Nazis, the victory is certain.

Let me share with you another story of when Fergus Kerr was Prior. When I was a young Dominican student at Blackfriars, Oxford, the Priory was attacked by a right wing group who resented our involvement in left wing causes. They set off on different nights two small explosives that made a lot of noise and blew in the windows. It woke up the whole community except the Prior. I was fascinated to discover what the brethren wore in bed! Pajamas, boxer shorts, nothing! The police and the fire brigade came around. Finally I went to wake the Prior. "Fergus, the priory has been attacked, wake up." "Is anyone dead?" "No." "Is anybody wounded?" "No." "Well, let me sleep and we will think about it in the morning." That was my first lesson in leadership! The father appears to just let the drama happen. This is not passivity but confidence, perhaps in the ultimate homecoming. His eyes will be open to spot the son from afar. He must have been watching.

Resisting the "Culture Control"

Our society has been called "the culture of control," and yet apparently we have less and less of a hold on what is happening. We live in what Anthony Giddens has called "the runaway world," "a manufactured jungle." In our runaway world we want safety, clear guide lines, with no ambiguity, to hold at bay the waters that are about to overwhelm us. There must be no risks, and whatever happens, I must not be to blame. It is behind the ridiculous obsession with health and safety. I heard of a washing machine that had a label stuck on it, "Do not insert babies or pets."

Christian leadership should resist the culture of control, to which the Catholic Church is rather addicted, alas. The waters of chaos did indeed overwhelm us on Good Friday, and then on Easter Sunday the women heard the angel say, "Do not be afraid." But according to Mark, like many religious leaders since, they said nothing because they were afraid. The father lets things happen, even though he does not know what this will lead to. This is leadership, not having to know in advance where things are going. It is being unafraid, however much chaos threatens. "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

“The Art of Dying so that the Future May Break In”

The prodigal son is anticipating the future. According to Henri Nouwen, he is saying to the father, “I cannot wait for you to die.” I want the future now. This is not a good way of doing it, and he will have to repair the damage later, but it does belong to leadership to let the future happen, even if that means stepping into the unknown. That also means letting what exists now die, so that something else may happen. God’s grace is the future breaking in, and that means the present must die. Often dioceses and religious orders are burdened by the past, and we hang on because general superiors or provincials do not wish forever to be known as the person who closed this beloved institution.

I remember a sermon at a solemn profession by one Provincial, who was a fierce and lovable convert from Scottish Presbyterianism. He said, “I am coming to the end of my religious life and you are now beginning yours. As I look back over my religious life, and it has been a long one, I think of all that I have labored to build and to support. Often I have labored hard to construct something, to leave some monument behind me, when, inevitably, some idiot has come along after me and torn down all that I have built and called it progress. So, I want to give you this piece of counsel, whatever schemes you may hatch, whatever plans you may formulate be sure of one thing, God will frustrate them!”³

Not having ever been a Scottish Presbyterian, I would not put it like that, but surely leadership is in part the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying so that the future may break in. It is creating the space for the young to do what we cannot imagine or anticipate, loosing the grip of the present, stirring in a bit of unpredictability. If we cannot face the death of our institutions, then how will we face our own death? We will only be people who preach the resurrection if we are seen to face death with courage. The other day I mentioned my visit to the monastery that was being closed and the words of the previous Provincial: “He let his son die.”

But we must move on, at least a little further in the story.

“And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and went to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced and kissed him.”

Here both the prodigal son and the father show leadership in its most basic sense. Christ is our leader because he has gone before us into the presence of God. According to the letter to the Hebrews, he has opened for us “a new and living way” (10.20). Christian leadership is not fundamentally about having ambitious plans for the parish, taking bold and lonely decisions like a business leader. It is not fundamentally about working out wonderful strategies like a general. All of these may be good, but Christian leadership is fundamentally about stepping out in front, going ahead, as the prodigal son steps out to go and seek his father, and his father steps out to go and greet his son.

3 Sermon by Allan White OP, *The Acts of the Provincial chapter of the English province of the Order of Preachers*, Oxford 2000. p. 66.

³ Sermon by Allan White OP, *The Acts of the Provincial chapter of the English province of the Order of Preachers*. Oxford, 2000, p. 66.

The leadership of both son and father means that both cast off their dignity. The son comes to the father not claiming the dignity of a son, happy to be one of the hired servants, and the father casts off all his patriarchal dignity, and galumphs across the field as if he too were a kid, making a fool of himself. Most radically we see leadership in the son's asking for forgiveness, and in the father's refusal even to wait for an apology.

“Stepping out into Vulnerability”

The Christian leader principal role is stepping out into vulnerability. We must be the first ones to shed the macho image, to let fall the amour, to offer apologies knowing that we may be rebuffed. We must be those who first say sorry, even if we happen to think that the other person has wronged us more than we have wronged him. We must step out front, climb out of the trenches, expose ourselves to ridicule. We do not wait for signs of reciprocity before we move.

John Paul II did this strongly in his relationship with Islam, reaching out for friendship, asking for forgiveness, exposing himself to rejection. That is not the loneliness of the Great Leader, but the vulnerability of the cross. This means that we must be the first to discard our dignity. I used to tell the Provincials, “If you care for your dignity, the brethren will not feel that they need to. But if you do not, then they will.”

The journey that the son makes is not primarily geographical. When he is stuffing himself with the pig food, then it says that “he came to himself.” He came home to his fundamental identity, which is that of the son of his father. Going home to his father was simply living out the return that he had already made when he remembered he was his father's son. He came home for the first time. He no longer sees his father as his rival, who stands between him and his money. For the first time he sees his father as the one who ensures that his servants have “bread and enough to spare.” And his father spots him from afar because he has always been looking for the one who has always been his son, whatever happened.

“Keeping Alive God's Perception of People”

I am fumbling for words here, but I want to suggest that leadership includes seeing who people are in Christ. There is a tremendous pressure to see other people as rivals and threats, useful allies or supporters. There is the temptation to fit people into easy categories and see them as nasty progressives or stuffy conservatives. Provincials may be tempted to see their brothers and sisters as pieces to be moved around the chessboard of the province or as problems to be solved.

George Patrick Dwyer, Archbishop of Birmingham, England, was sitting beside a priest when the gifts were being brought up at the offertory by a young woman who was dancing. And the Archbishop turned to the priest and said, “If she asks for your head on a platter, then I will give it to her.”

When the father saw his son from afar, he might have been tempted to see a problem. Oh Lord. What are we going to do with this one? How will his brother react? What will he be able to do? Should I give him any more money? Instead he saw a son. The son had come home to who he was. The father had never forgotten. Leadership means keeping alive God's perception of people.

Maybe the son had to reject who he was before he could embrace his identity again, fully and freely for the first time. His elder brother had never done that. Maybe we have to let people, our own brothers and sisters, the clergy, theologians, apparently drift far away, adopt aggressive postures, propose

slightly crazy theologies, dabble on the edges, while we keep patience for when they may move on and come home, freely. If we cherish people's liberty, then they may freely reject the Church, but they may freely come home again, wiser and better for it.

Certainly, the temptation in the Catholic Church is to panic if things are not under complete control! We fear risk and lack confidence. When St Dominic sent out his youngest friars to preach, barely after they had joined the Order, the Cistercians warned him that he would loose them. Dominic replied, "I know for certain that my young men will go out and come back, will be sent out and will return; but your young men will be kept locked up and will still go out."⁴ Confidence is the heart of leadership.

"But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to make merry."

They began to make merry. This is of course the fundamental point of the parable. Jesus had been provoked into telling the parable by the Pharisees and scribes murmuring, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The climax of the story is the father's invitation to the elder son to celebrate with them: "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

Christian leaders should lead the way to the party. Who will be first for the aperitifs before lunch? We are to be those who rejoice in human beings, whatever in whatever mess they might be. Christian leaders are the Masters of Revels. The beginning of the preaching of the gospel is Jesus' festivity. We have nothing to say on any moral issue until people have been assured without ambiguity of God's delight in their being, which is an entry into the life of the Trinity, the Father's delight in the Son which is the Holy Spirit: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

"Leading the Way to Joyfulness"

The burden of leadership may make us reluctant to celebrate. We may lose that spontaneous joy of the father, galumphing off to hug his naughty son. The joy of the gospel may be choked by the thorns of the cares of the world (Mark 4.18). I am a tremendous fan of the novels of Patrick O'Brian. Stephen Maturin, the physician and spy, says: "It is odd – will I say heart-breaking? – how cheerfulness goes: gaiety of mind, natural free-springing joy. Authority is its greatest enemy – the assumption of authority. I know few men over fifty that seem to me entirely human: virtually none who has long exercised authority. The senior post-captains here; Admiral Warne. Shriveled men (shriveled in essence: not, alas, in belly)." ⁵

How can we keep alive that joyful, youthful spontaneity and not become shriveled? I say nothing of bellies! Maybe it is in part by refusing to have our lives dictated by other people. The media and their categories of good and bad; the pressure groups within our churches who would enlist us in their causes; other people's fear and caution, their dread of chaos and an unknown future. The father refused to worry too much about what other people thought. There was no spin-doctor at his side

⁴ *Early Dominicans: selected writings*, ed. Simon Tugwell, OP. Ramsey N.J., 1982, p.91.

⁵ *Master and Commander*. London, 2002, p.173.

calculating how it would be reported in the press. We must not worry about being misunderstood. Grace gives us a share in Jesus' spontaneity. Grace is God's spontaneity.

We have just a moment for the eldest son:

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It is fitting to make merry and be glad for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

I wonder whether in every Christian leader there might not lurk a bit of the elder brother. If you have been appointed to leadership, then it probably means that you have not in any very obvious way gone wild spent all your money on prostitutes. You have probably been chosen as, in that awful phrase, "a safe pair of hands," which already implies a rather ghastly image of leadership. One imagines the Duke of Edinburgh trotting around Windsor Great Park in his carriage, twitching the reins. St Augustine with his illegitimate child probably would not be chosen to be a bishop these days, alas.

And so might there not lurk a tiny touch of jealousy of the prodigal son who has given in to his wildest fantasies and still come home and got the best robe. Might we not have a little of that resentment of the workers who have worked all day in the vineyard and then seen the latecomers get just the same wages? One of my brethren in South Africa fell in love, begot a child and left to marry the mother. After a while, he and his wife realized that really his vocation was to be a Dominican. He stayed and raised the child and then, with the full consent of his wife, came back home to us. I remember the celebrations when he was again admitted back to full fraternity. We did celebrate and I did not spot any elder brethren sulking, but the thought may have crossed their minds that he had all the luck!

The elder son is still a potential prodigal son who does not believe, like his brother at the beginning, that all that belongs to his father is his. Like his prodigal brother, he believes that he has to lay his hands upon it to have it. Maybe he just never dared to do so. He is angry because he dreamed of running away and did not have the courage. Charles Peguy maintained that a grave sinner understood forgiveness better than a pious person. Maybe our Churches suffer from not having enough grave sinners in leadership who can really understand that all that the father has is ours. Peter and Paul were inspired choices, the one had denied the Lord and the other had persecuted his followers. Maybe you should have the courage to elect really grave sinners to be your general superiors and provincials. This is the Dominican tradition, isn't it Yvon?

"Called to Be Unafraid"

So, to conclude, leadership is indeed service. But we serve our congregations best by serving the happening of grace. And this requires of us tremendous flexibility, the refusal to be stuck in predetermined roles. We should keep alive the memory of the only drama that really matters, that of Christ's death and resurrection. Everything else is relatively unimportant. Leadership is in daring to take the first step, to stride out into vulnerability when everyone else is watching their backs. We must lead the way to the party, keeping alive the spark of spontaneity. We must be unafraid.

