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LEADERSHIP AS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

“TRUST THE EARTH YOUR FEET ARE ON.”

By Scott A. Chadwick

A few years ago while at a teaching conference in Oregon, I mentioned to other conference attendees my plan to walk up to the peak of Mount Scott at Crater Lake, Oregon. Even as a novice hiker, a trail hike of about five miles round trip, gaining 1,500 feet of elevation to the 8,929 foot summit looked challenging, but possible. A fellow I met two days earlier asked if he could come along. Having anticipated a half-day of solitude in nature, I was not excited about this change in plans, yet I reluctantly agreed, seeing in his eyes an intense desire to join me. During our drive, we stopped to experience the majesty of a thunderstorm breaking across the mountains of the park. After visiting the lake, we drove to the trailhead for Mount Scott and started hiking.

Nearing the peak, we came to a narrow ridge with angled slopes of loose rocks falling off both sides. Not being particularly fond of heights, I paused, feeling frozen in place out of a growing sense of fear and a loss of control. I wanted to continue. I knew how to continue, but I felt my will abandon me; I would rather stand still in that place forever than risk taking the step that could prove to be my downfall. I knew it was irrational, but my fear of misstepping and sliding down the mountainside was palpable to me.

My hiking partner came up next to me, and as he walked by gently said, “Trust the earth your feet are on.” Through those words I was freed from the artificial reality my brain was creating. Looking down, I saw the firm earth, the foundation upon which I stood. I felt connected to God in nature, the connection I sought in taking the afternoon to hike. It empowered me to head for the peak.

As an administrator in a Jesuit university, the “earth my feet are on” that I trust is the mission of my institution. It is the reason I choose to work at a Jesuit institution. It is the grounding for my daily interactions and every decision I make. It is also the underpinning for a unique leadership paradigm available to us as followers in the footsteps of St. Ignatius.

My orientation to leadership was formed, poorly, in Corporate America. Some of us know and many of us fear that its paradigm for leadership can corrupt moral values, yet we should not discount the many effective

leadership methods which originated there. We need to develop solid leadership skills that help us address the issues and opportunities that we face as administrators in Jesuit schools. If we take those methods and skills and utilize them within our own leadership paradigm, we can be true to the organizational identity put forth by our mission. Ours is a leadership grounded in love for others and God, grounded in Ignatian values, and enacted in ways similar to those used by a spiritual director guiding a person through the Spiritual Exercises.

I am not a spiritual director, but through my experience of spiritual direction I see a model for leading a Jesuit institution. The Exercises make a specific call for us to act out

of love, faith, and compassion. Just as a spiritual director does not do the work of responding to the love of God for the directee, neither do administrators do the work of the organization's members. Rather they guide, often with questions that lead back to the mission and ensure we are being true to ourselves and true to our identity. Is this where we want to go as a Jesuit institution? Is this who we, as a Jesuit institution, are called to be? Just as the spiritual director poses questions rather than issues orders or relies on his popularity or charm, so must a leader pose questions for reflection rather than just demand or, worse, rely on the cult of personality or position, to enact change. Adopting a practice of “looking to discern what might be possible” and leading from there is what is needed. Enacting discernment in this way requires leadership based on trust, openness, and personal responsibility to each other and the organization.

The leader must hold sacred the trust of her organization just as a spiritual director holds sacred the trust of the directee. The leader must form partnerships rather than dictate, empower rather than constrain, and challenge compassionately rather than confront harshly. The spiritual director and the administrative leader each assume the burden of identifying the environmental pressures, temptations, and issues that have the potential to inhibit our sincere response to our calling.

The spiritual director must help a directee nurture a sense of responsibility for her own spirituality and God.

Leadership acts out of love.

Testimonies

For leaders, there is likewise an opportunity to help shape a culture where choices are based on an unwavering sense of responsibility to the mission of the organization. Just as the spiritual director models unwavering faith in both the directee and God, so the leader models unwavering faith in the institution's faculty and staff and

My compassion becomes his gift

their ability to serve as men and women for and with others. Ultimately, the spiritual director helps others to define choices based on the love of God. Leading from a love of colleagues and a love of God allows all of us to define choices similarly. A desire to use one's leadership talents in responding to that love must be at the heart of administration at a Jesuit university. That is the path we must walk.

When I reached the top of Mount Scott on that warm summer day, I was woefully unprepared for sub-freezing temperatures awaiting me. While standing there, shiver-

ing from my sweat evaporating in the wind, my hiking companion reached into his backpack and pulled out dry clothes for me. He had not only recognized me as a novice, but knew from working in the Himalayas with Sherpas (as I found out later) that I would need help. In part, I think, it is why he asked my permission to hike with me. What I thought was a practice of compassion on my part by letting him accompany me turned out to be his gift to me of compassion and care. He was one who had gone before, and I benefited from walking the path that day with him, from his leadership in words and choices. I treated the hike as a walk up a trail, rather than as a hike up a mountain. My paradigm did not fit my task.

We have freedom to choose our paradigms, just as we choose our hiking companions and guides. For us, St. Ignatius, the Jesuits who have followed his lead, and the many professionals over the centuries who have sustained the essence of Ignatian spirituality in our institu-



Finance-CIS Professor Kala Seal teaching in his classroom, Loyola Marymount University.

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tions have blazed a trail. They can serve as our hiking companions and guides if we choose to follow their paradigm. Hiking that trail requires us to turn away from the material and personal rewards that are foundational to traditional leadership paradigms. It invites us to trust and walk a path of Ignatian values as we build other-centered organizational structures and systems based on love and compassion.

Traditional leadership paradigms can encourage strategically positioning one's unit within the organization to serve its own interests, defending its turf. Leading in love means designing and enacting systems to transcend self-interest, seeking only that which is best for the mission and the development of students. Leading in love requires that we refuse to perpetuate any injustices of previous systems, instead, naming them and facing them compassionately to help heal the wounds they have caused on our campuses. It requires that institutional reflection and discernment be built into the institution's annual processes. A leadership paradigm grounded in love also calls us to openness to those of other faith traditions who desire to support the institution's mission

because they believe in that mission. Leading in love means the weight of decision-making and decisions made must be carried willingly for the benefit of others rather than felt as a burden of position. It also means that compassion toward all others must be the basis for interactions, even as some others work against the leader, the mission, or each other.

As leaders, we are often face the choice to either trust the earth our feet are on or let fear drive our behavior. Acting out of fear increases the likelihood that we will resort to ineffective paradigms of leadership, ignoring the possibility of God working through ourselves and others as they work for mission. If we truly trust the earth our feet are on, we engage ourselves and others in a process of questioning and discernment. Then and only then can we follow in Ignatius' own footsteps further up the trail. Then and only then, no matter what, we will base our actions on love, as we stay open to find God in all things. ■

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DESCRIBE, DON'T PRESCRIBE

What would Cardinal Newman say?

By Wilburn T. Stancil

Out and about speaking in churches as I frequently do, a common question I often receive is this: What is it like for a Protestant to teach theology and religious studies at a Catholic university? While the question reveals a lack of knowledge of both the diversity of our Jesuit universities and the commitment of the Catholic Church to ecumenism, I do understand the bewilderment inherent in the question. My response generally centers on the convergence of my own values and principles with those articulated in the mission of Rockhurst University. And even though that mission is grounded in a theology and tradition that is clearly Catholic and Jesuit, many of the values and principles are humanistic in nature and shared by people of good will.

The religious aspect of a university's mission statement is usually related to the founding vision of the uni-

versity or to the tradition of the founding denomination and/or religious order. Sometimes that relationship is held too loosely, resulting in loss of stability; sometimes it is held too tightly, resulting in loss of flexibility. In recent years, writers such as George Marsden and James Burtchaell have documented the drifting away (mostly out of neglect) from the religious mission of many prominent universities in America, both Protestant and Catholic.

However, occasionally the opposite problem occurs when the relationship between the religious tradition and the mission is held too tightly. If the mission becomes a rigid standard, akin to a creed, and is used to measure orthodoxy and loyalty, academic freedom is threatened, flexibility disappears, and the tradition in which the university is situated becomes stagnant.

I propose that we think of the mission of a university as analogous to the role of tradition in early