

True Christian Leadership: A Challenge to all Church Leaders

Introduction

Leadership has always been very important in the Church. Beginning from the New Testament, leaders emerged in various communities, who organized and supervised different ministries in their communities. Ordinarily, the exercise of leadership by Church leaders depends on their understanding of leadership. The Church's understanding of leadership at any given period will determine the way it exercises leadership. And the concept of leadership in the various societies in the Church will determine how their leaders exercise leadership.

In this paper, I wish to present the shepherd and servant models of Christian leadership. I will argue that these two models of leadership must be the way Church leaders lead their people. Anything short of these two models of leadership is contrary to the gospel. I will then focus on the different styles of leadership. I will conclude by emphasizing that the shepherd and servant models of Christian leadership are absolutely necessary for all Church leaders.

A. The Church Leader as a Shepherd

The word >pastoral= is derived from the Latin word *pastor* which means Ashepherd." Therefore, the Church leader can be correctly referred to as a shepherd.

i) The Image of Shepherd in OT

The image of a shepherd runs through the Old Testament. The Old Testament understood God as Shepherd. Thus kings and leaders must be shepherds in the same way as God shepherds his people (see Gen 48:15; Deut 26:5-8; Psalm 23). The duty of the shepherd is to care for his flock, to provide enough food and water for them and to lead them to greener pasture. The shepherd guards and protects his sheep from wild animals (1 Sam 17:34-5; Amos 3:12). The image of a shepherd is used to describe kings and lay leaders in OT. Because of constant bad leadership from the Kings of Israel and lay leaders, God promised the people of Israel to send them good shepherds: AI shall give you shepherds after my own heart, who will pasture you wisely and discreetly@ (Jer 3:15). The prophet Ezekiel goes further to state that God will eventually shepherd His people by Himself. Ezekiel rebukes bad leaders as evil shepherds who had no interest of the sheep at heart. This rebuke of the evil shepherds is followed by a promise that God will shepherd His people by Himself because of the failure of the leaders to truly shepherd the people entrusted to their care: "For the Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it. As a shepherd looks after his flock when he is with his scattered sheep, so shall I look after my sheep" (Ezek 34: 11-12). The OT prophets called God the shepherd of Israel (Isaiah 40:11; Jer 23:1-6; Psalm 23).

ii) The Image of Shepherd in NT

The concept of shepherd in the OT reached its climax in the person of Jesus, the *good shepherd*. Jesus is the *good shepherd par excellence* because he laid down his life for his sheep on the cross (Jn 10:11, 15, 18). The sacrifice of Jesus clearly and radically distinguished him as the *good shepherd* from those who were not good shepherds, and from those who are only “the hired man” (John 10:12). The New Testament saw Jesus as the guardian and shepherd of souls and all leaders must follow in his footsteps: “You had gone astray like sheep but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). The early Church used the symbol of a shepherd to describe the work of its leaders, who were expected to pattern their life and work after that of their chief shepherd: Jesus Christ. Similarly, all Church leaders must pattern their leadership after that of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd.

iii) The Concept of Shepherd in Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council underscores leadership in the Church using the image of a shepherd and his flock. Vatican II teaches that Christ established a variety of offices in the Church “in order to shepherd the people of God and to increase its numbers without cease” (**Lumen Gentium, #18**). Vatican II uses the image of a shepherd tending his flock to describe the office and ministry of bishops who are called to shepherd the Lord=s flock after Christ=s model of service “who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28); and who laid down his life for his sheep (Jn 10:11). The imagery of sheep and shepherd is quite strong in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council with regard to the office of the bishop and those entrusted to his care. Bishops are called to shepherd the portion of the Lord=s flock entrusted to them (*Lumen Gentium* 28). Priests are helpers of the bishop in caring for the flock of Christ.

iv) Shepherds to One Another

The image of a shepherd and his flock describes leadership in the Church. We are called to be shepherds to one another after Christ the *good shepherd*. All Christians are called to embrace *pastoral charity*, which is, the total giving of self to Christ and His Church and the service of others. *Pastoral charity* means that we give ourselves completely in service of others. In the parish community, all should be available to serve others because all of us have experienced the love of Christ, the *good shepherd*.

The shepherd image of leadership and Christ=s model of service, is extended to all offices and leadership positions in the Church, whether as Chairman of Church Council, President of Legion of Mary, President of St. Vincent De Paul, Choir Mistress, CWO President, Youth President, etc., in virtue of our common baptism and our participation in the priesthood of Christ. Consequently, Christian leadership skills must be sought and acquired since it does not automatically come with marriage, beautiful looks, wealth, appointment or election into an office in the Church. To become a good Christian leader requires a complete disposition to service and the acquisition of leadership skills. It takes tremendous effort to be a good leader hence one has to be thoroughly open and motivated to learn leadership skills. Good and fruitful pastoral leadership requires a lot of hard work, dedication, patience, sacrifice, fidelity, honesty, humility, and endurance. The more one desires to be a good and spiritual leader and continuously subjects himself or herself through the means of achieving good leadership, the more such a person will enjoy being a good and humble leader.

B. The Servant Model of Christian Leadership (Mk 10:35-45)

At the heart of Christian leadership is service. Our Lord strongly teaches that service constitutes greatness and leadership. In the above text, Jesus makes it clear that leadership, authority and greatness come from the desire to serve. James and John, the sons of Zebedee want to be great; they want the best positions; they want to be first; they want to be recognized. But their concept of greatness is the same as the world=s. Our Lord makes it clear that it must not be so with his disciples. The Greek word *diakoneo* which means Ato serve@ appears 36 times in the New Testament; the word *diakonia* which means Aservice, ministry, office,@ appears 33 times in the New Testament; the word *diakonos* which means Aservant@ appears 29 times in the New Testament (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 2, pp. 82-84). By and large, the concept of service and servant appears 98 times in the New Testament. This clearly underscores the centrality of service as the basis for pastoral leadership and for being a discipleship of Christ.

i) A Call to Servant Leadership

James and John (and the other ten disciples), certainly desired to be masters and not servants. But our Lord purified their concept of leadership and greatness by giving them a new definition of greatness. They must embrace the servant model of authority and greatness. They needed a new orientation, a radical shift in order to truly become Christ=s disciples. Similarly, all Church leaders also need a radical shift so that they can lead others as servants and those being led will then testify that they are true servants. Remember that the pope is referred to as “servant of the servants of God.” As C.P. Varkey has noted: AThe concept of authority as Christ teaches and which alone builds the kingdom, is a real paradigm shift. It demands total annihilation of self; it will bring joy which words cannot describe” (Varkey, C.P., Authority: Its Use and Abuse, p. 57).

The ministry of Jesus is interpreted in the context of servant-hood and summed up in total and unparalleled service. Jesus= entire work and death are described in service (Mk 10:45; Lk 22:20f; Mt 20:28). Mk 10:43 emphasizes the greatness of servanthood which culminates in the life of Jesus. Jesus is the model of humble service in contrast to the hunger for power and domination in the world and unfortunately in the Church as we oftentimes see. **For the followers of Jesus, the overriding desire to serve must be the basis for leadership in the community.** The servant leadership style in the community must imitate Jesus who came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). In Mk 10:44, Mark uses the word for a slave *doulos* which is a much humbler word than *diakonos*. In other words, those who desire to be first must strive to be the slave of all. They must empty themselves in the form of a slave and be absolutely available to serve the needs of others.

ii) A Quest for Servant Leadership

The exercise of servant leadership must be influenced by a solid concept of leadership with a focus on the life, work and death of Jesus which manifests service *par excellence*. Church leaders must adopt Jesus= pattern of leadership. The Church undoubtedly needs leaders, however, they must be leaders after the leadership pattern of Jesus, not leaders who are self-serving but self-emptying and self-giving. To strive for leadership position in the Church is not

intrinsically bad. In fact, to want to be a presiding elder [leader] is to desire a noble task (1Tim 3:1). But such desire must be motivated by the need to serve and not to be served or to seek comfort.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, “wanted the glory, but not the cup of shame; the crown, but not the cross; the role of master, but not servant” (**Sanders, Oswald., Spiritual Leadership, p. 22**). In response to their request, our Lord subjected James and John through a thorough training programme in servant leadership and discipleship. Our Lord did not rebuke them for desiring greatness but he reordered their priorities; they did not have to give up their desire to be first, to be recognized, and to be significant; instead, they must seek the greatness of gospel discipleship. They must realize that “greatness comes through servanthood, and leadership through becoming a slave of all” (**Sanders, Oswald., Spiritual Leadership, p. 23**).

For Christ’s disciples, greatness comes not through prestige and acquiring places of honour and recognition but through a life of total service which involves suffering and sacrifice. James and John (and indeed the other ten disciples) remind us of the innate desire and the basic instinct in each of us to be first, to be served, to be recognized, to be a master. There is in each of us what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., calls: “The Drum Major Instinct” (**Washington, James., I Have A Dream, p. 181**). A drum major is a leader of a marching band in a parade. The drum major is the anchor person, the centre-piece of a marching band in their magnificent parade and ostentatious display. The natural ambition of a marching band member is to be a drum major.

Servant leadership demands that the parish pastoral council, the Church Council, catechists, lay ministers, leaders of pious associations, parents and guardians must seek the greatness of gospel discipleship. They must continually ask themselves if they manifest the pattern of Christ’s leadership and greatness in discharging their responsibilities. In his homily on Mk 10:35-45, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., reflects on our Lord’s response to James and John:

- “Oh, I see, you want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be important. You want to be significant. Well you ought to be. If you’re to be my disciple, you must be.... And he said, “Yes, don’t give up this instinct. It’s a good instinct if you use it right. It’s a good instinct if you don’t pervert it. Don’t give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do” (**Washington, I Have A Dream, p. 189**).

A good and effective servant leadership is a monumental but an attainable task. It is a call to a gospel witness. Anything short of servant leadership will be a counter witness to the gospel. We must do all that we can to be good and quality leaders in the Church in whatever capacity we serve. The Church has been blessed with great leaders, but the Church has equally suffered greatly because of bad leadership. Those with visible leadership positions in the Church especially leaders of the various pious societies must imbibe the call to gospel leadership and embrace the new norm of greatness. However, the call to servant leadership is the vocation of all Christians since all Christians exercise leadership in varied ways both in the Church and in the world. Servant leadership is not the exclusive domain of priests and religious but of all Christians: in their families, careers, business, and in various ministries and societies in the Church. All Christians are called to ministry and leadership in the Church in virtue of their

baptism and confirmation (**Lumen Gentium 33**). As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has beautifully pointed out in his homily:

Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important & wonderful. If you want to be recognized & wonderful. If you want to be great & wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you must be your servant. That's your new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing that I like about it ... by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve.... You only need a heart full of love. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant (**I Have A Dream, pp. 189-190**).

C. Styles of Christian Leadership

Norman Cooper identifies three styles of pastoral leadership (**Cooper, Norman., Collaborative Ministry, p. 61**). First is the *classic style* of pastoral leadership which is hierarchically oriented and dependent on the delegation of authority whereby the priest, deacon, sister, brother, catechist, Church leader, and even a parent is seen as having all the answers in leadership. There is not much room for consultation and dialogue. Leadership is dictated from top to bottom. Second is the *semi-mutual style* of pastoral leadership which embraces planning and team work and people are able to facilitate communion, co-responsibility, cooperation, and yet confident and competent in one's area of leadership. Third is the *mutual style* of pastoral leadership which perceives collaboration as indispensable whereby authority, accountability, labor, is shared and there is interdependency. According to Cooper, training for mutual style of pastoral leadership requires: A1) a sophisticated understanding of personal development, 2) a firm grasp of interpersonal dynamics such as trust, cooperation, and justice, 3) the ability to discern the different roles of colleagues (**Collaborative Ministry, pp. 61-62**). This style of leadership enables the >subordinate= in any relationship to feel a sense of importance and self-worth, and this for the Christian cannot be over emphasized because even the >subordinate= too is created in God's image and likeness. In other words, the >subordinate= participates and not just dictated to.

It is pertinent to ask: what is my preferred pastoral leadership style? Inevitably, we must strive towards mutual leadership style and must be ready to learn the relevant leadership skills of reflective listening, talking, dialogue, delegation, negotiation, empathy, conflict resolution, interpersonal relationship, and other invaluable skills, that will enable us to attain mutual leadership style in the Church, in our families, places of work, and in varied Church and social groups.

Conclusion

This paper has emphasized the concept of Christian leadership using the shepherd and servant models as the foundation for leadership in the Church. Thus all Church leaders must exercise leadership after the leadership pattern of Christ who came "not to be served but to serve,

and to give his life as a ransom for many@ (Mk 10:45), and who “laid down his life for his sheep” (Jn 10:11). Church leaders, therefore, must be prepared to undergo our Lord=s leadership training programme like James and John in order to experience conversion and a change of heart. **This includes conversion from being the master to being the servant, from being first to being last, from being proud to being humble, from self-serving to self-emptying and self-giving, from always giving instructions to listening to subordinates= views and welcoming their suggestions, from always giving feedback to receiving feedback, and from being resistant to correction to being open to correction and constructive criticism.**

The call to a fruitful and effective Christian leadership is a huge challenge to all Church leaders in the Nigerian Church. All catechists, lay ministers, parents, choristers, and all categories of Church leaders must courageously rise to this challenge by embracing the shepherd and servant models of Christian leadership. Hence it is absolutely necessary for us to avail ourselves of all the opportunities, training, seminar, workshop, retreat, and on-going formation that will enable us to integrate the shepherd and servant models of Christian leadership in our ministries, in order for us to become good, effective, fruitful, and better Church leaders and disciples of Christ.

Thank you for listening and God bless you.

By

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Programme

9.30 am: Arrival and registration.

10.00 am: Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament: Private Prayer and Confession.

11.00 am: Talk: **True Christian Leadership: A Challenge to all Church Leaders.** This talk will be followed by questions and comments

12.30 pm: Group Discussion

1.00 pm: Lunch

1.30 pm: Report of Group Discussion

2.30 pm: Private Prayer

3.00 pm: Holy Mass.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How would you describe your personal experience as a leader in your parish?
2. To what extent have you practiced the shepherd and servant models of leadership on the occasions that you have been privileged to be a leader in your parish?
3. What do you and other leaders in your parish need to do in order to be shepherd and servant leaders?
4. Describe the style of leadership in your parish and its effects in your parish?
5. In what areas do all leaders in your parish need to change in order to become more and more of shepherd and servant leaders?
6. Describe the ways you have experienced the shepherd and servant models of leadership in your parish?