

PREPARING LEADERS FOR MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

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1. LEADERSHIP AND THE NEW EVANGELISATION

Let me begin by pointing out that there has been a certain confusion in the title of this presentation. At one stage, it was given to me as “Preparing Leaders *for* Migrant Communities” and then it appeared as “Preparing Leaders *from* Migrant Communities”. The change of preposition may seem slight, but it leads to a quite different emphasis. In the first case, the emphasis is on leaders within the migrant communities; and in the second case, it is on leaders from the migrant communities who are offering their gifts to the wider Church. In what I offer here, I want to focus on both. Therefore, a better title of the presentation would be “Preparing Leaders for and from Migrant Communities”.

The preparation of leaders in the Church – priestly, religious and lay – has always been a vital task, but it is perhaps more vital than ever now as the Holy Spirit is calling the Church to enter new territory. The preparation of leaders for this journey into the unknown is at the heart of the new evangelisation. The Church is heading into new and exciting territory, and there is no precise road-map to tell us where to go. In such a situation, leadership – indeed Abrahamic leadership – is vital; and without it, the Church will struggle to move into the future which God has in mind.

There have been many surprises of the Holy Spirit since the second Vatican Council, and one of the Spirit’s surprises at this time is that unlikely people are being called to lead the Church in unlikely ways. In one sense, there is nothing new in this, given that the Bible is full of stories of unlikely people called by God to do unlikely things. Moses was called by God to set his people free, and

he replied that he was “not eloquent” but “slow of speech and of tongue” (Exod 4:10). To this God replies simply and abruptly: “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak” (v. 12). After Moses demurs again, God replies with a touch of pique: “Is there not Aaron, your brother? I know that he can speak well” (v.14). Then the prophet Isaiah, after his vision of the all-holy God in the Temple and before his commission, cries out: “Woe is me! I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips” (6:5). In other words, I’m too sinful to be called. But then one of the seraphim touches his lips with a burning coal taken from the altar, saying: “Your guilt is taken away and your sin is forgiven” (v. 7). Then immediately the prophet is commissioned. The prophet Jeremiah offers another objection: “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth” (1:6) – to which God replies: “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’, for to all to whom I send you you shall go. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you” (vv. 7-8). And then Mary, when she hears Gabriel’s promise that she will be mother of the Messiah, puts the question: “How can this be, since I have no husband?” (Luke 1:34) – to which the angel replies: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (v. 35). The pattern is clear: human beings are called by God, they object that they are not suitable or qualified, and God then overrides the objection to confirm the calling. Against such a background, it is hardly surprising now that the Holy Spirit is calling unlikely people to lead in unlikely ways.

Pope John Paul II was at a times a man of prophetic insight; and one of his insights was to see that young people are now being called to lead the Church into new territory. That insight was largely behind his decision to call World Youth Day. It is commonplace to speak of young people as the Church of the future, but what the Pope saw was that they are also the Church of *now*. Like Jeremiah, they may say that they are too young and not ready; or others may say this of them. But God seems to be overriding that objection and asking the young to lead the whole Church in ways we did not expect. Their leadership is

to “strengthen weak hands and make firm feeble knees”; they are to “say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, fear not!’” (Isa 35:3-4). At a time when an older generation can be tempted to lose heart, God sends to us all the energy and enthusiasm of the young as a source of Spirit-filled encouragement.

But it’s not just the young whom are among the unlikely leaders leading us in unlikely ways. So too in this country people from migrant communities are now being called not just to lead their own communities but to lead the Church as a whole. This is in part because the migrant communities have human and spiritual resources which the whole Church in Australia needs at this time and also because the migrant communities are becoming an ever greater percentage of those attending Mass regularly.

There is a danger that we can isolate groups like the young and the migrant communities, treating them as somehow different from rest of us, somehow alien, and therefore in need of quarantine. But the Church in Australia is at a point, I think, where groups such as these must move to centre-stage and assume responsibility for the Church as a whole. They are no longer marginal; they are at the heart of things. Their time lies not in some distant future; their time has come.

2. CHRIST AS LEADER

Christian leadership will always have features in common with leadership of any kind, but it will also be different in its own way, chiefly because it depends absolutely upon the leadership of Christ himself. As we read the Gospels, we find in Jesus a very distinctive and in some ways paradoxical style of leadership. The first thing we can say about him is that he is intimate without ever being matey. He has an extraordinary ability to pierce beneath the surface to the heart of the human being, but never once do we see him being matey. He doesn’t slap backs, cracks jokes or even smile. It’s not that he’s grim; it’s

simply that he has about him in each of the Gospels an awesome intimacy, which is a most unusual combination.

The second thing we can say about Jesus in the Gospels is that he is authoritative without ever being authoritarian. He never cites another authority to back up his own; indeed the one authority to which he has seemingly unlimited access is the God whom he calls Father. Yet such an exceptional authority never once degenerates into crude authoritarianism, with the violent exercise of power which it always implies. So the first thing we may say about Christian leadership forged in the image of Christ is that it too will show itself intimate without ever being matey and authoritative without ever being authoritarian.

It is also important to keep in mind that Christ works in weakness rather than strength; and this means that Christian leadership will always have to deal with weakness in a special way. Saint Paul gets to the heart of it when he writes in 2 Corinthians: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). This was not something which Paul came to see easily and quickly; indeed he came to the insight slowly and painfully after long experience of suffering in the apostolic ministry. What he came to see was that the things which should have stopped him in his tracks and even destroyed his mission – persecution, imprisonment and the like – were the very things that gave his mission greater impetus. In that sense, his weakness became his strength; or rather, his weakness became the opportunity for Christ’s strength to work in him and through him.

In other words, he came to see himself living the mystery of the Lord’s Cross – the Cross which should have destroyed Jesus (as his executioners certainly intended) but which in fact simply provoked the thunder of the Resurrection and established him as Saviour for ever. The Christian leader too will be one in whose life weakness has become or is becoming strength. He or she will not be Superman or Superwoman, but one who is living the mystery of

the Lord's Cross. Here we see a kind of servant leadership which emerges in a kind of powerlessness.

3. PROFILE OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Beyond these more general observations, I would like now to offer in more detail a profile of the Christian leader today, since we cannot know how to prepare leaders if we are not sure what leadership looks like. For the sake of brevity, I offer here a number of marks of the Christian leader.

➤ A sense of vocation

By this I mean the very concrete sense of divine calling such as we find in the Bible. The biblical call stories have a similar pattern: 1) God comes from nowhere as the one who calls, 2) the call comes as a shock or surprise, 3) it draws a protest or hesitation of some kind, and 4) God promises to equip the one he calls, i.e. to supply for the weakness of the one called. The call means that the leader is drawn deep into the mystery of God's purposes, of which he or she is to be a servant.

➤ A spirit of prayer

This means primarily the experience of listening to the one who has called, since only God knows the way into the future. Like Abraham, the Christian leader is called but is given no road-map. The leader must watch and listen to God if he or she is to know the way. The leader who does not listen has no choice but to follow a path of his or her own devising, and this is a recipe for disaster. Once the leader has listened, then can come the prayer of praise for God's faithfulness

and intercession for the leader's own needs and the needs of the people whom he or she leads.

➤ **Formation**

It is tempting to think that formation is something done early in the journey and the left behind for ever. Yet the Christian leader is one who never ceases to learn and who is always called to take the path of formation. This formation is not just a matter of growing in self-awareness, as it must be, but also a matter of growing in knowledge of the ways of God, which can be strange, and in knowledge of the vast riches of the Catholic faith. As growth in this triple sense, it is a journey into the wisdom which comes from God alone.

➤ **A love of native culture but an ability to see beyond it**

This is especially true of leaders in and from migrant communities. They must of course love their native culture and the forms of Catholic faith which their culture has offered them. But as leaders within the Catholic Church, they must also open to the universality of the Church. No culture is absolute, since the Cross of Jesus stands in judgement upon all human cultures. All cultures have their strengths and weaknesses; all cultures need to be purified by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

➤ **Love of the Church**

It is not always easy to love the Church, but this is essential for the leader. It is like the love a parent has for a child: the parent sees all the flaws and failures, better than anyone else perhaps, but still has an unconditional love for the child. To love the Church is not to be blind to her flaws and failures, but is to see the

magnificence at the heart of the mess. The Church has always been a mess, seen from one angle; but there is also the magnificent presence of the Risen Christ at the heart of the Church. Without this, the Church is just a corpse; but with the presence of the Risen Christ, the Church becomes his Mystical Body, to be loved as Christ himself loves the Church.

➤ **A spirit of service**

The leader who is driven by the will to power cannot serve as Christ serves. A capacity to serve and a spirit of humility are essential. Humility means to see the truth of oneself, which in the end means to see oneself as Christ sees us. The humble leader will be prepared to sacrifice himself or herself, even to live martyrdom of a kind. This means that the Cross will loom over all: to serve as Christ serves is to share his Cross. To share his Cross means to choose the kind of powerlessness – the powerlessness of love – in which the power of God can work.

➤ **A spirit of collaboration**

This is harder than it sounds, and it cannot take hold of someone who is driven by the will to power. It will mean first of all saying no to a spirit of competition, which in a highly competitive culture can be a challenge. There are people who think that they can “win” only if others “lose”, that they can affirm themselves only by putting others down. But this is not the way of the Christian leader, who will understand that we either all “win” or we all “lose”. Another important aspect of the spirit of collaboration is the ability to choose the right people for the right job in the team which the leader leads. This may mean seeing in other people qualities and possibilities which they themselves cannot see and calling them to serve in a way that brings out the best in them for the sake of others.

➤ **A sense of a future**

There are some people in this country who seem to think that the Church is going out of business, that we have no future. This can lead to a despondency which has a devastating effect upon morale. The leader is not one who refuses to face reality, preferring simply to whistle in the dark and indulge in wishful thinking. The leader is one who, like Abraham, can hope against hope. This is not glib optimism, but a hope born of faith. Like Abraham again, the leader is one who knows deep down that “God will provide”. This is not unrelated to a sense of humour, which is not an empty escapist guffaw but the wise laughter of the Risen Christ who knows how bad things are and how good they can be.

➤ **An ability to motivate and inspire**

This is not unrelated to the ability to stir in people a sense of the future. But it is not just any future; it is a future which excites people and makes them ready to dedicate their gifts and energies joyfully to the journey into that future. It is an ability to see the bigger picture and to communicate that picture to people whenever their own view of things begins to shrink, as it inevitably does. It involves a determination to put a bomb under the monotony and claustrophobia, which are always the work of the spirit of evil.

➤ **A sense of what you can and can't do**

This means a sense of realism. There are some things a leader can do and some things which he or she cannot do. When they ordain a bishop, for instance, they give him a crozier but not a magic wand. A failure to accept that there are some situations where nothing can be done, at least at this time and by me, can create

all kinds of unproductive pressures in the life of a leader. Far from being fatalism of any kind, the ability to know what can and cannot be done is more a sense of proportion and of personal limitation. It is also a way of saying that, where I can do nothing, the power of God can work best.

➤ **An ability to deal with conflict**

The question is never, Will there be conflict?, because the fact is that there will always be conflict. The only question then is, How to deal with conflict when it arises? There is a destructive way of dealing with conflict which leads only to more conflict. But there is also a creative way of dealing with it, which heals the wound and makes relationships stronger than before. The Christian leader must know the difference and how to be creative in dealing with conflict. He or she must also be one who never settles for conflict, as if nothing else were possible, but be prepared instead to do all that is necessary to move towards the far horizon of unity, which beckons beyond every conflict.

In the end, the only authority which a Christian leader will have is the authority of holiness. “Holiness” is a word that gets a bad press, and we need perhaps to keep in mind what the Bible has to say about holiness. The Book of Leviticus elaborates a magnificent theology of holiness which can be summed up in two words. The first word is “separate”: if the Christian leader is not separate, different, other, then he or she will not lead in the way of holiness. But separation for its own sake is not enough. The second word is “service”: the Bible defines holiness as “separation for the sake of service”. The separation which Christian leadership requires is not separation for its own sake but separation for the service of those from whom the leader is called forth or set apart. In the end, it is the crucified Christ who defines absolutely what this separation for the sake of service means: on the Cross, he is utterly “separate”,

but he is also utterly “servant”. This is why we can apply to him the words that echo through the pages of Leviticus: “Be holy as I the Lord your God am holy”. That is the essence of Christian leadership in any time or place or culture.