

THE ART OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP;

A reflection on how Christian Faith Impacts Leadership

**Presentation Brothers Extended Leadership Team Meeting,
Logre**

(9/1/18)

+Alfred Agyenta

1. Introduction

-Acknowledgment of gratitude for the invitation

-Welcome the CLT to Ghana and to the diocese; Providential and significant as we **celebrate 50 years** of the presence of the Congregation.

-The challenge posed by the subject or theme chosen, proposed by Br Francis “spiritual leadership’.

-There are no *spiritual leaders* but rather *leaders who are spiritual i.e.* leaders whose leadership is informed and inspired by their religious *faith and belief*. In other words, leaders who try to **integrate faith into their leadership roles; who bring their faith to all aspects of their leadership.**

-In this regard, I am only a *beggar who will try to tell fellow beggars where to find bread*. I am in constant search of the bread myself (trying to lead others from or out of the resources of my poor faith).

What I want to share with you are some ideas and tips that have helped me and as a Christian leader.

2. Definition of key terms **Spirituality and Leadership**

I will not like to bore you with theoretical definitions of what *Spirituality and leadership* are;

Suffice it to share with you a very down to earth definition of **Spirituality** that has fascinated me all these years; *Spirituality is our theology in our walking shoes*; it is faith in action, cf Jam 2,14).

Leadership *is the call to walk with others towards a common goal.* Pope Francis has given us an image of such a vocation which does not put the emphasis on the rank/title of the one who leads but on his or her availability to those being accompanied.

The Holy Father explains that, sometimes the leader walks ahead of those he leads (to share his vision) sometimes he walks in their midst (to provide companionship for the common journey, by “taking on the smell of the sheep”) and other times he walks behind them (to provide encouragement and motivation).

A vibrant spiritual life has a lot to offer the leader in each of the three aspects of his or her leadership; in walking ahead, walking in the midst and walking behind.

3. Outline of My reflection

- i. Preliminary observations on our universal Vocation and its impact on our call to leadership.
- ii. The Art of Christian Spiritual leadership
- iii. Concluding Remarks

i. Our universal Vocation and how this impacts our leadership.

The author of this book made a very useful distinction and clarification between types of vocations which is useful as a starting point for our reflection.

According to the author there are three levels of vocations which are focussed on different aspects of our lives and differ in importance.

First, there is what he calls, the universal vocation in which every human being shares; *it is the vocation to be a human being*. This vocation answers the old catechism question, **why did God make me?** *To know him, love him and to serve him and to be happy with him now and in the next life.*

This is the fundamental calling of every human being. In the words of St JPII, “*whatever you shall be in life, whichever calling you choose, remember that the fundamental calling of a human being is to have humanity*”. Widmar, p. 21).

In this vocation, human beings, whoever we are, are called to be **co-creators** with God, to help *give life to others* and to make the world a better place for all. The highest form of expression of this vocation is love which is at the base of whatever we do as co-creators with God (cf God is Love!).

When we create, give life (love) we are doing that for which God made us. We are carrying out our mission and making a gift of our life to God”. (Widmar p. 22).

The second level of vocation is our *primary vocation*; this coincides with the traditional understanding of vocations; namely the vocation to the priesthood, the consecrated life, married life and single life. This comes about through discernment (guided by the Spirit) and a conscious choice on our part.

The third level is what he calls our secondary vocation, by which is meant what we do as priests, religious or married people; our specific jobs or professions; (e.g. teachers, doctors, tradesmen administrators, leaders, parish priests, formators, bishop CTL.). The vocation comes about through skills training or development of talent.

According to the author, all these levels of vocations are related but of different importance. Our universal vocation is the most important one since, in the words of St JP II, it is our fundamental calling to be human. *It informs and determines and is specified in the other two vocations.*

Unless we are conscious of our universal vocation (to be human) i.e. to love, know and serve God (to be co-creators in giving life to others) it becomes difficult to fulfil our primary and secondary vocations.

I believe this distinction of the levels of vocations can help us understand our secondary vocation, namely the specific task of leadership that we have been assigned in the context of our primary vocations (religious and priests). Unless we appreciate the universal call to holiness through knowledge, love and service of God, which fundamentally is a call to **give life** to others, our secondary vocation which offers us the concrete opportunity to do so can become a big challenge for us.

ii. The Art of Christian spiritual leadership

In principle, leaders are not born already endowed with spiritual gifts but rather grow in their spiritual life by means of which they give colour and life to their leadership style.

Leaders with a vibrant spiritual life seek to allow their faith and religious convictions inspire what they do and say as leaders.

The question is, if leaders are not born spiritual (viz natural leadership talent), how do they grow spiritually so that this can impact their secondary vocations (e.g. Leadership)?

More specifically how does one in a leadership position consciously grow/ nurture his or her spiritual life so that it influences what he or she does as a leader.

This requires a **number of things** among which I wish to share with you the following which have been very helpful to me as a bishop for the last six years.

1. A leadership Inspired by Faith

Faith is the awareness of the fact that you are not your own source and origin and that there is a Power beyond you who has called you into being to serve others. (cf, our universal vocation already gives us this sense and awareness).

Faith is not only belief in someone or something but also total trust in that power or being to do what he promises. It is crucial for both our primary (traditional vocations) and secondary vocations (specific area of ministry, e.g. leadership).

*Personal experience; my choice as a bishop; by **Divine Providence and Apostolic favour**. (He chose us we did not choose us). I believe it is the case with most of you. No one takes this honour upon himself (cf Heb 5,4). You probably wished it were some other people.*

If the choice is by divine providence and human favour, it cannot be exercised as if we owe it to ourselves, and therefore dependent on our personal skills and ability, no matter how gifted we are. We owe it to the one who called us.

2. *A leadership Sustained by a vibrant spiritual life.*

Faith is alive when it is concretely expressed in the form of our encounter with the Power that has called us into being and entrusted us with the care of others.

A **vibrant spiritual life**, which is our theology in our walking shoes, has a lot to offer to the art of Christian leadership.

First, **creating a space** for God in our lives. It is a crucial life-line for every leader who desires to exercise his/her ministry in accordance with the will of God.

Creating this space can be a daunting task for a very busy person/leader. Cf Cardinal Daneels, when asked what he would be doing during his retirement, his response was, *looking forward to having more time to pray.*

But this is very important if we are to succeed; Pope St John XXIII used to say “because *I have so much work to do I need to spend more time in prayer*”. The pope was aware that the myriad responsibilities that call for his attention require that he be in the best form to attend to them and that is only possible by giving time to prayer. This can be very trying and difficult in a society that believes in not wasting time by being idle. And prayer is a form of *wasting time* with God!

Secondly, it is not enough to create the space, we need to ensure that it is **properly filled** (Nature abhors vacuum). The purpose for which the space (sacred space/time) is created is to foster an **enduring encounter/relationship** with God, the one by whose providence we are what we are.

It is important to note that creating space for God in our lives is very crucial for realizing our primary and secondary vocations no matter who we are (cf priesthood/religious life; leaders of Congregation/local Church).

There are so **many ways** of fostering this encounter with God, which in the final analysis has a ripple effect on what we do as leaders. I want to discuss a few with you;

A-- **prayer**, in whatever form and method, is the highest form of this encounter with God. Prayer is very crucial for living fully both the primary and secondary vocations. With regard to how this (prayerful encounter with God) enhances and gives quality to our leadership roles here are a few **personal experiences**

Difficulty of finding the time for prayer.

Personally, I have struggled to follow the wisdom of the Pope John XXIII. If one does not make a conscious effort to find the space and time and the regularity to spend quality time in prayer, the world and its busy nature will not give these to you easily. What is even more troubling is to be at prayer but not fully present to the Lord. An encounter takes place only when one is fully **here, now and present**.

Often time I have had the urge to give in to the strong temptation to **skip/postpone** my prayer time to attend to some urgent tasks. A number of times I did that telling the Lord, at least you have seen my effort. But I was cutting corners without knowing.

The value of spending time in Prayer

In the course of time, I discovered what Prayer/finding time to pray, can bring to *my ministry of leadership*. This is what I learnt;

i. - Prayer is a **school of humility**, a constant reminder of our universal vocation to **be co-creators/co-workers** with God (cf St Paul). We are working with him rather than just for him. If we recognize that it is his work that we are doing we can proceed with

serenity and humility because we know that the success of what we are doing depends on him.

In prayer we recognise our **limitations and dependence** on the one who has called us and this makes the leader humble and open to the direction of the Spirit. “Come let us kneel, let us bow and bend low”. (Ps 95)

ii. -In prayer we **learn about the will of God** for us, his plans (not ours). Listening attentively to his voice (via scriptures and prayerful mediation) helps us (inspires us) to make wise choices /difficult decisions. (cf. *Fundamentally, prayer is not about trying to change God’s mind but rather trying to conform our own will to his cf Jesus prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26,39).*)

Sometimes the expectations and the pressures to act, to take decisions can be so strong. In moments like these I go to the chapel to pray and to lay my problem before God, weigh the options available in his presence;

Sometimes I emerge with a lighter heart not because the option that seems viable to me is easy but with a sense of feeling that I am moving in the right direction (Cf *discernment of spirits by St Ignatius of Loyola*). cf the more dramatic approach of placing the document by the altar overnight).

Often times I have emerged from prayer to go straight and make a call to a priest or take a decision and felt very much at peace even if it was a hard one. You feel strongly that the Lord is with you.

iii,- Prayer is a training ground for becoming a **better listener** to others. When we spend time, sometimes in silence, listening to God, who does not speak/communicate with us in the dramatic ways used in former times, we learn to discern his will with patience. (*Divine communication is never always hundred percent complete at any given point in time*).

Long moments of silent prayer and meditation (e.g. before the blessed sacrament etc) disposes us to listen to others patiently.

In every form of leadership this is a demanding task, to **listen patiently, empathically** sometimes to enable us perceive what is not being said but which is still part and parcel of the message being communicated by the person in front of you.

People do not often tell the full story at ago and you need time and patience to probe further. At the same time you need patience to make the person feel that you have time for him or her and care about his welfare.

iv,-Payer helps us to see others, especially those we serve **with the eyes of God**. You are led to contemplate how He (God) would have you solve or resolve difficulties and to check **your own often imperfect impulses to react out of anger or frustration**. You are compelled to consider what is just and what is merciful in the situation (more about this later).

Pope St JP II used to say that nothing is accidental, everything has a purpose. *Cf social media wisdom, Some people/events come into your life as a blessing, others as a lesson/warning; both are gifts to be taken with gratitude.*

Contemplating everything that happens and every person that crosses your path as having a purpose greatly **reduces tension** and disposes us to deal with events and people with serenity.

v.-Prayer teaches us the **virtue of patience**. God helps us to slow down especially when we are in a very difficult situation and immediate illumination/inspiration is not forthcoming. I am learning gradually that this silence of God could be a form of guidance, directing me to hasten slowly and teaching me the importance of the **virtue of patience**.

This is not often easy when you find yourself caught between the wedge of the hawks and the doves in your team of advisors. Some calling for immediate drastic action while others advise a more cautious and soft approach.

B- - Other forms of encounter with God (sustaining the spiritual life)

Besides prayer, other forms of fostering this encounter with God include the;

- regular **retreats/recollections, (periodic stock taking/review of our stewardship in the context of prayer)**

- familiarity with the **Word of God (the scriptures provide us with a rich resource which challenges, motivates and guides us.**

- the celebration of the **sacraments**, especially the Eucharist (daily **source of spiritual strength**) and the Sacrament of reconciliation (**source of healing for our own brokenness**).

- personal devotions (e.g. holy rosary etc).

These are all prayerful moments of encounter with God which do not leave our leadership role unaffected.

3. Leadership informed by right knowledge

As leaders we are constantly asked to make judgments and take decisions which affect other people's lives and destinies, and this can be for good or for bad. This grave responsibility requires from us a certain rootedness in the **knowledge of what is right and what is wrong; what is ethical and unethical, what is moral and immoral.**

Every form of Christian leadership, to be genuine must be informed and enlightened by the following sources;

-natural law (nature is the first guide for rightful human conduct and this applies to the art of leadership too). **The need to respect the natural law. A fundamental source of human rights.**

-the Sacred Scriptures (sources of Christian ethics/moral theology). Fundamentally, it is the leader constantly asking himself or herself, *what Christ would do in my situation. What is his mind in this matter?* The Gospel teaching is the supreme rule in these cases. (In pastoral practice, the principle of *salus animarum* (salvation of souls) is the supreme guide in every situation that requires careful discernment.

- The **Social Teachings** of the Church.

Besides the Gospel, the Social Teachings of the Church (inspired by the Word of God) is another invaluable source for the practice of Christian leadership.

Three fundamental principles that run through the Social Teachings of the Church and which inform every form of Christian leadership are;

- a. The Respect for the dignity of every human being. Both the sinner and the saint are created in the image and likeness of God and deserve the right to be respected and protected.

Personal experience; sometimes at the cost of protecting the dignity of a person, the leader may be required to give up the right of defending himself in public/ or justifying his action.

- b. The protection of the common good; The common welfare of the people that we serve takes precedence over individual interests. This often requires the leader to sacrifice his personal interests or more often that of a single individual of the group for the sake of the common good.

Personal experience; the dissolution of a community of priests because it became impossible to reconcile them and to let them work as a team. The good of the Christian community (salus animarum principle was applied)

c. The promotion of Justice; *Distributive* justice (cf biblical justice) as opposed to *retributive* justice (cf legal justice) is the guiding principle for Christian leadership. Sometimes distributive justice/biblical justice can be seen to be unjust and unfair in the eyes of many, but it is the way of God himself. (Cf Matt 18,12-14, parable of lost sheep; Matt 20,1-16 the workers in the vineyard; Ps 101,10, “he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our faults”).

*Personal experience; the need to impose a certain sanction on some individuals which is not forthcoming etc. In the eyes of onlookers’ justice is not applied here. Even sanctions especially in the context of the Church are **salutary not punitive or vindictive***

In Church practice (especially for church leadership) it is said that one can never go wrong if we are willing to draw knowledge from these four fundamental sources; **Scripture (Bible)** (right conduct) **Catechism of the Catholic Church** (right knowledge/orthodoxy), **the Social Teaching of the Church** (governs right relationships; with God, nature and the neighbour) **and the Code of Canon law** (discipline/regulating conduct).

4. A Leadership lived in the form of practical Christian witness

Images

- leading by Example;

“I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” Jn 13,15.

“Preach the word always, if necessary use words”. St Francis of Assisi.

“Modern man listens to witnesses more readily than teachers and if he listens to teachers it is because they are also witnesses”. EN, Pope Paul VI.

In all his actions, great and small, the leader must live as a witness to the truth". Being consequent is a mark of true Christian leader.

-A Servant style leadership

"The son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give up his life as a ransom for many" Mk 10,45.

Personal experience; I live in a society that literally adores its leaders, more so if they are men and women of God (cf Europe where this has been eroded by the scandals of the clergy).

The Catholic Church, in particular, is in grave danger of blunting her witness as a model of servant-style leadership by yielding to the attraction of power and rank. Titles and ranks come with honours and honours attract respect and privileges which make a servant-style leadership sometimes very difficult to practice. (*personal experience of coming to terms with the titles of the bishop*).

The Christian leader experiences a certain tension in himself deriving from the desire to imitate the servant-style leadership of the divine master himself (Mk 10,45) and the need to respond responsibly to the adulation and reverence that he enjoys from the people. There is the constant need to call to mind the words of Peter to Cornelius when he visited him "stand up; I am only a mortal" cf Act 10,26.

-bearing the cross patiently (Isa 53, Jn 10,1-18)

The call to a servant-style leadership is closely linked to another form of Christian witness, namely, the image of the suffering servant/the Good Shepherd.

In the course of my journey as a priest I came across the expression "the **penalty of leadership**", the full meaning of which I never understood until I became a bishop.

With time in my ministry as bishop, it began to dawn on me that the penalty of leadership refers to the **disadvantages** that one suffers as a result of accepting a certain form of responsibility or leadership; in other words, it is the personal price that one pays in the exercise of that responsibility/leadership.

It comes in the form of the constant struggle to meet the public expectation or the standards set for the leader and in the course of which the leader sometimes suffers severe criticism, vilification and persecution; these may be **merited (result of our human weaknesses and limitations) or unmerited (just for being in that office at this time).**

They are penalties which you either agree to pay or quit. But, fortunately, there is a third way inspired by the vision that, in the final analysis, it is most often not you in person who are the object of the severe criticism and attack but what you **represent and stand, especially in** holding onto what is right and just.

*Personal experience; if I were not in this office I am sure I would not have been in some cases an object of **attack or criticism or treated with disdain.***

Once again, we refer to the virtue of humility that is cultivated in the course of our encounter with God. When we were appointed bishops, we were told that if you do not already have the virtue of humility you will be forced to acquire it, not because it is a necessary Christian virtue but because it is a requisite for survival in your pastoral ministry.

Pride and arrogance (capital sin) will always stand in the way of many good things that a Christian leader can provide for the good of those he is called are called to serve. Most often the leader may be required set aside his personal ego, dignity for the sake of creating the enabling environment for things to go on/work to be done.

Sometimes we have to bear the burden of the foolishness of the cross for the sake of the kingdom.

*Personal experience. Three requests that are never lacking in my daily prayer are for **wisdom** (to know what is right and just) for a **big heart** (to be compassionate) and asking the Lord not to take away the burden of the cross but to **strengthen my shoulders**.*

CONCLUSION

Christian leadership by nature is faith-driven (we have come full cycle).

There is need for a balanced approach to the vocation of leadership.

-I have already mentioned the need to be aware that we are collaborators, co-workers with God.

There is the need for a balanced approach to our practical exercise of Christian leadership by avoiding two extremes;

On the one hand, a *laissez-faire* approach to what we do and on the other, taking ourselves too seriously, by being too preoccupied about succeeding in our mandate at all costs; trying to prove ourselves to others or justify our leadership.

Whilst the first can lead to chaos, the second can be a source of temptation to **replace God** by trying at all cost to save the world, our congregation or the diocese all by ourselves.

The ability to walk away from the office, away from work and stress and deadlines, the ability to enjoy what life had to offer in the form of time with God, to rest, to eat and exercise/recreate is a true mark of the vocation of the Christian leader.

We are called as leaders not so much to succeed as to be faithful to the one who called us.

I would like to conclude with the words of St Paul in Phil 3,12 “*Not that I have secured it already, nor yet reached my goal but I am still pursuing it in the attempt to take hold of the prize for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*”.

God bless you, I pray you find joy and fulfilment in your ministry of leadership.

Recommended Reading;

Andreas Widmar, *The Pope and the CEO; John Paul II's Leadership lessons to a young Swiss Guard* (2006)