

The Christian Vocation in Business Leadership

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Introduction

Leadership, whether in business, politics or any other field, has to do with the ability to influence people in order to achieve goals. The literature on leadership is voluminous; this is especially true of business leadership, which is considered a key aspect of management (Gardner, 1990; Kellerman, 1986; Rosenbach and Taylor, 1989; Yukl 1981, Rost 1991).

Most research on leadership has been limited to descriptive and predictive methodology, with the authors merely seeking some correlation that could boost business effectiveness (Yukl, 1981; Rost 1991). Some look for personality traits common to leaders (*trait theories*). Others focus on behavior to find the critical determinants of leadership style (*behavioral theories*). A third group takes both personal attributes and behavior into account, with particular attention to situational factors (*contingency models*).

Development of these theories according to the scientific method (hypothesis and empirical verification) has been quite fragmentary. Calas & Smircich (1988, 222-226), ironically, assert that many researchers seem to be seeking the Rosetta stone of leadership and break its codes. In the face of this fragmentation, Rost (1991), who has made a broad review of leadership literature, urges that future research focus on the essence of leadership.

Prescriptive leadership theories also exist: "transactional" and "transformational" leadership are two quite popular ones. "Servant leadership" is another prescriptive approach, less well-known than the first two but with a growing reputation.

In reflection on the essence of leadership and the roots of these prescriptive theories, one crucial point is the relationship between leadership and ethics. Many people acknowledge the importance of honesty and integrity in leadership, and the need for the leader to possess values has been the subject of several articles. Nevertheless, very little work has been done in the way of sustained and systematic treatment on ethics in leadership (Ciulla, 1995, 1998).

Still more rare is any discussion of the relationship between the Christian vocation and management or business leadership. Perhaps the main reason for this is the positivistic belief of some that religion is an individual affair which has nothing to do with management or business leadership.

In this paper, by contrast, following Catholic tradition, we shall seek to show that the Christian vocation entails important implications and requirements for business leadership. At the same time, we shall analyze whether the prescriptive approaches mentioned (transactional, transformational and servant leadership) are in accordance with the requirements of the Christian vocation, as well as determining what those requirements are.

The Christian Vocation

Both faith and reason, in their different ways, reveal that human life is a calling. First of all, ordinary experience reveals that the human being can develop in his humanity. Every person's human capabilities can either flourish or diminish. In this fact, one can discern a sort of calling to develop as a human being--a duty to strive to become a better person.

Christian faith corroborates the basic conviction that everyone is called to develop their humanity. God created man in His own "image and likeness...male and female he created them" (Gn. 1:26-27), so man's life and behavior ought to be consistent with this reality, because "acting follows being" (*operatur sequitur esse*). God explicitly calls people to strive for perfection, setting Himself up as a pattern (cf. Mt. 5:48). As Pope Paul VI explains: "In the design of God, every man is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation....Endowed with intelligence and freedom, he is responsible for his fulfillment as he is for his salvation" (*Populorum progressio*, no. 15).

Moreover, the divine Wisdom has chosen to call human beings not only to human fulfillment but to a life of close communion with God. He Himself introduces man into the intimacy of His divine life by giving him the gift of becoming a child of God ("divine filiation"). Thus, the Second Vatican Council, drawing on several Biblical texts, states that "the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself" (*Dei verbum*, no. 2).

God has chosen us in Christ to become saints: that is, partakers in the divine nature (cf. Eph. 2:18; 2 Pet. 1:4). As St. Paul explains, God the Father "has chosen us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will" (Eph. 1:4-5). These words are complemented by the following passage from his letter to the Romans: "for those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son, in order that He might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom He predestined He also called" (Rom. 8:30). This calling to

life in communion with God through Christ takes place in the Church (Ocáriz, 1996), because the Christian, in Christ, becomes a member of His body, which is the Church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13,27).

The response to this invitation entails striving for increased sanctity: "this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thes. 4:3; cf. Eph. 1:4). This is why Christians must live as is fitting among the saints (cf. Eph. 5:3).

Sanctity, in essence, is the perfection of charity (Illanes, 1984). As Pope John Paul II explains in the Encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (no. 19), the perfection to which we are called consists of *sequela Christi*, following Christ. He adds: "Jesus asks us to follow him and to imitate him along the path of love, a love which gives itself completely to the brethren out of love for God" (no. 20). The imitation of Christ, then, is something interior, not merely exterior. "Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross (cf. Phil. 2:5-8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (cf. Eph. 3:17), and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the effect of the grace, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us" (no. 21).

All Christians are called to increase in sanctity. As the Constitution *Lumen gentium* (no. 40, 2) puts it, "all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity." Moreover, all people--not only Christians--are called to life in communion with God in Christ. In fact, Christ died for all men (Rom. 8:32), and "God...wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm. 2:4). One may therefore affirm that "the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine" (*Gaudium et spes*, 22). The callings to human fulfillment, to divine filiation in Christ and to sanctity are different aspects of the same unique Christian vocation.

Although the Christian vocation is universal, it is at the same time, personal. Each person is unique and unrepeatable, and this universal vocation, in any of its aspects, is concretized for each individual in different ways.

The vocation that leads one to live as a Christian is not something that comes into play in only some areas of life: rather, it touches upon personal existence in every one of its dimensions, for it is a call to the person at his root. Nor is it something accidental, since God is absolute and His relations with man encompass one's whole life, demanding consistency in all his acts: what is commonly called *unity of life*. Finally, the vocation is not something transitory, since it is a gift of God, Whose gifts are permanent (cf. Rom. 11:29). Bl. Josemaría Escrivá points this out in precisely these words: "Christian faith and calling affect our whole existence, not just a part of it. Our relations with God necessarily demand giving ourselves, giving ourselves completely. The man of faith sees life, in all its dimensions, from a new perspective: that which is given us by God" (1974, no. 46). In short, the Christian vocation is *all-encompassing* of human life; it *unifies* one's entire existence; and it is *permanent* (Ocáriz, 1994, 1996).

Work as a calling

Work, at least if understood in a broad sense, is a calling. It is another aspect of the human vocation. This is a teaching of the Bible. The second chapter of Genesis explains that God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Gn. 2:15). On a more philosophical plane, the first chapter expresses the idea that man is placed in the visible universe, as the image and likeness of God, in order to subdue the earth (cf. Gn. 1:26): another way of indicating God's will to call human beings to work. "From the beginning, therefore, he is called to work" (*Laborem exercens* [LE], preamble).

This calling to work, the process by which man subdues the earth, is *universal*: "it embraces all human beings, every generation, every phase of economic and cultural development, and at the same time it is a process that takes place within each human being, in each conscious human subject" (LE, no. 4,4).

Work is a means of increasing in human fulfillment, since the one who works not only produces things but is, as subject, affected by the actions he performs in his work. "Work is a good thing for man--a good thing for his humanity--because through work man *not only transforms nature*, adapting it to his own needs, but he also *achieves fulfillment* as a human being and, in a sense, becomes 'more human being'" (LE, no. 9,3). Thus, the calling to be a person involves working in such a way that one's humanity is more fully realized (cf. LE, no. 6,2). With the action of the Holy Spirit, work must also contribute to the conformity with Christ of the one who works. In this sense, work is also a means of sanctification (Illanes 1982, Meyer 1998).

For many, the calling to work assumes the form of a *profession* or specific type of work, specialized, stable and, in a certain sense, common to many people. The work of the business manager is one such profession, and in a certain sense includes a calling (Novak, 1996).

If the Christian vocation, including divine filiation and the pursuit of perfect charity--always with the aid of the Holy Spirit--embraces all of life's dimensions, then it must also inform the profession of business management and leadership.

A well-known passage from St. Paul helps us to understand the relationship between one's profession and the Christian vocation: "Let every man remain in the calling in which he was called (1 Cor. 7:20). By requiring of the ordinary faithful that they remain in their present state, the Apostle confirms that ordinary and professional life are the place from which the response to the Christian vocation ought to arise and where its goal--sanctity--is to be attained. In this sense it has been said, addressing those who exercise a profession in the midst of the world: "Your human vocation is a part--and an important part--of your divine vocation" (Bl. Josemaría Escrivá 1974, no. 46).

The Christian vocation, then, requires the sanctification of work and of all other human activities. Those who exercise a profession, consistent with the talents received and the

circumstances of their surroundings, are called to sanctify themselves in their professional work, living the love of Christ--charity--with the action of the Holy Spirit.

Charity, together with the theological virtues of faith and hope, both informs and enlivens the moral virtues. These virtues aid in the performance of professional work before God and in the service of others, in the imitation of Christ. The work itself is a way of increasing in human virtues, essential for rendering effective service to others. A professional job, in turn, must nourish the prayer of the one who performs it, and the effort required to carry out one's job will be an occasion of union with Christ on the cross.

Analysis of normative theories of business leadership

If the Christian vocation is manifested in one's work--one's profession--and has this mark of totality, then the Christian vocation must also be made present in business leadership.

On the other hand, the Christian vocation, at once universal and singular, is such that leadership, as one's profession and work, can be played out in different ways and with different styles, but must always include what is essential to the Christian vocation. Talking specifically about the lay faithful John Paul II has written that they "must accomplish their work with professional competence, with human honesty, and with a Christian spirit, and especially as a way of their own sanctification" (*Christifideles laici*, no. 43).

These basic requirements provide a criterion for analyzing the normative theories of leadership: a means of determining the extent to which these theories are consistent with the Christian vocation.

With this point of departure, we can introduce and analyze the normative theories mentioned in the introduction--transactional, transformational and servant leadership (though with the brevity imposed by our space constraints)--and consider them in the context of the requirements of the Christian vocation. To judge by its name and by what we have said so far, only servant leadership appears to conform to the Christian vocation; but let us not jump to conclusions.

Transactional Leadership

For J. MacGregor Burns (1979), transactional leadership is characterized by certain exchange-based relations between the leader and his followers. With this kind of leadership, one follows a leader because he offers something deemed valuable by the people with whom he interacts. In exchange, his followers offer the leader something advantageous to him. In the political arena, certain public investments that are of interest

to the citizens may be exchanged for votes; in business, it may mean superior results in exchange for a higher salary or some form of symbolic recognition. The leader makes promises or pacts, clarifies prospects, imposes rules and urges action favorable to a given objective--and, especially, awards prizes or threatens sanctions in return.

The leader keeps a close eye on all this, although he intervenes only if errors or deviations from the established norm arise. In this case, he takes corrective action to return to the norm. The relationship that binds the leader and his followers rests on power. It is power that allows one to make offers or demands and to engage in exchanges.

With transactional leadership, what motivates the leader's action are his own interests, expressed in his objectives and the means to them. The leader's only concern for his subordinates is in figuring out how to motivate them to pursue his own interests. The victory of a certain political party (or a political revolution) or the achievement of certain economic results (sales, market share, benefits, etc.) of interest to the leader is the only goal of this type of leadership.

A political leader who remains in power by buying the silence of those who know of his corrupt action exercises a version of transactional leadership that is obviously reprehensible. The same is true of a business leader who deceives shareholders with manipulated balances, supported by collaborators whom he bribes with exorbitant sums to provide cover for him. Nonetheless, not all forms of transactional leadership are ethically blameworthy. Many economic incentives may be fully justifiable.

To determine such justification, one applies ethical norms. Thus, the object of a pact must be licit, and, if so, the agreement must be fulfilled; one must act in good faith and follow other such norms that govern matters of exchange.

The duty to abide by promises and legitimate pacts or contracts is a widely acknowledged ethical norm, and constitutes one moral requirement of the Christian vocation. Summing up a teaching of long standing, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 2410) affirms: "Promises must be kept and contracts strictly observed to the extent that the commitments made in them are morally just....All contracts must be agreed to and executed in good faith."

However, the question arises of whether all that the Christian vocation demands is the observance of norms such as these. The answer, in light of our earlier remarks, is *no*. Transactional leadership does not seek the good of others, as the Christian vocation requires, but only the leader's own private interest. At best, it respects a few minimal ethical norms, but such a leader does not live as is fitting to a child of God.

One might ask, moreover, whether transactional leadership is the only kind of leadership that business itself needs. For many, this question, too, must be answered in the negative.

Transformational Leadership

In order to overcome some of the shortcomings of transactional leadership for the smooth functioning of the business firm, J. MacGregor Burns (1979) proposed *transforming leadership*, which would, some years later, be modified by Bernard M. Bass (1985) and called *transformational leadership*.

Burns is supported by several well-known psychological theories: Maslow's theory of needs, Rokeach's theory of value development and the works on moral development of Kohlberg, Piaget, Erickson and Adler. On this basis, Burns contends that the leader must act on a higher level of needs and values than his followers. The role of leader consists of awakening the consciences of others--those who will be his followers--helping them to discover needs and values within themselves. Thus, the leader helps his followers to actualize their own intellectual and affective potential.

With transformational leadership, the leader expresses his values--which must be firmly held--transmits conviction, explains motives for action, expresses confidence, takes a stand on tough questions, underlining their ethical implications, manifests his commitment and, in general, places great emphasis on communicating everything that will foster moral transformation in his followers.

The relationship that unites leader and followers is sustained by the reciprocity of interests, not merely by the leader's power and capacity to mete out rewards and punishments. The objectives proposed are expressions of the values he emphasizes and are in line with the desires and expectations of leader and followers alike.

Without a doubt, transformational leadership adds something laudable from the Christian perspective. This leader does not limit himself to transactions (although these are admitted for certain purposes) but goes beyond them, seeking to elevate his followers' points of view. In this regard, it is enough to recall the Sermon on the Mount and the new commandment of love. Christ's conduct was altogether consistent, and His entire life manifested a sense of commitment; His words were infused with such conviction and inspired such confidence that some left everything to follow Him.

If Christ acted in this way, then the Christian vocation, which entails the imitation of Christ, must also include transformational leadership. Christ's teachings, however, seek not only to awaken values "dormant" in the subconscious, but introduce a novel morality. Christian morality, besides affirming already-recognized values, introduces other, absolutely new ones, such as humility, repentance, mercy or the new commandment of love extended even to one's enemies.

In reality, transformational leadership suffers from the limitations one would expect from its exclusively psychological focus. It is based on psychological theories, and its conclusions, logically enough, fail to rise above this level. In the Burn and Bass approaches, the leader's fundamental, orientational function consists of rendering conscious and explicit that which already exists at the subconscious level. The problem is that pseudo-values are also present at this level, and in awakening whatever exists in the follower's subconscious mind one may end up with a very different sort of

transformation. Everyone is familiar with leaders who have motivated and transformed their followers by awakening in them feelings of hatred, envy or greed, while others have abused their charismatic abilities to transform others for the sake of self-interest. Transformational leadership, therefore, runs the risk of being alienating and, on occasion, even manipulative. Everything depends on the leader's own moral quality.

Burns (1978) solves this problem saying that, by definition, the transforming leader was morally uplifting. Bass (1985), was willing to call Hitler a transformational leader, but later (1998) he has distinguished between transformational (with ethical values) from pseudotransformational leadership (like Hitler). In a similar way, Howell and Avolio (1993) described the values and traits that distinguish ethical from unethical leaders.

Transformational leadership theory stresses attitudes and communication. Thus, all the material just discussed may be reduced to a set of techniques for awakening certain values and measuring their validity against the interests of both leader and followers, but with no guarantee that these interests will lead to the personal fulfillment--the human flourishing--of either party. In other words, transformational leadership seeks to move followers towards superior values, but fails to relate those values to integral human development.

Servant leadership

Finally, various versions of the idea of *servant leadership* have been introduced. According to Greenleaf (1977), the servant leader leads because he wishes to serve others. Greenleaf illustrates servant leadership with the story of a voyage by Hermann Hesse (1991). One character is a servant named Leo, who carried bags and performed domestic chores for the travellers, keeping the group united with his presence and his songs. But one fine day, Leo mysteriously disappears, and the group loses its way. The main character later discovers that Leo was the group's real leader. It seems clear that servant leadership is a cause of unity among a leader and his followers and thus, also, of effectiveness.

The leader's service is oriented to the personal growth of his followers. By being served well, the followers grow more wise, free and independent and will probably themselves become servants of others. Such a leader is followed because of the trust he inspires in people.

A systematic explanation of this kind of leadership is offered by Pérez López (1991, 1993, 1997, 1998) on the basis of his theory of motivation and power in organizations, which he had been developing since the 1960s (1976a, 1976b), although this author, now deceased, never used the expression "servant leadership".

Among the motives for the sake of which one performs an action are those which Pérez López terms "transcendent." This refers to service or aid provided to others (customers, colleagues, etc.).

According to this author, "A manager's leadership is what causes him to move beyond concern that certain things useful to the organization's effectiveness be accomplished, or that these things be to some extent attractive to the persons who must do them. Leadership, above all, means seeking that people act for the sake of transcendent motivation" (1997, p. 45). People have real needs--on the basis of which they are potentially motivatable--on a material, cognitive and affective level, and "leadership implies the capacity to perceive people's real needs....It has to do, therefore, with the real value of actions and not only of their value from the viewpoint of effectiveness" (1997, p. 45).

Like transformational leadership, this type tends to elevate people. Servant leadership, though, not only seeks to awaken values present in the subconscious, but also seeks that others act for the sake of transcendent motives.

Through transactional leadership one can motivate the performance of external actions and bring about the corresponding (external) effects; with transformational leadership, one may awaken values, but there is something else crucially important in human action, something that goes beyond the perception of values: namely, intentions. To awaken values in one's followers does not necessarily mean awakening an intention to serve others. No one, no matter how powerful or charismatic, can impose intentions.

The intention to act in a way that truly serves others does not necessarily arise as a consequence of servant leadership, but the latter can foster it. Pérez López cites three modes of a leader's action that favor the development of transcendent motivations (1997, pp. 47-49): 1) to refrain from being an obstacle to one's subordinates acting out of transcendent motivation when they so desire; 2) to teach them to evaluate the effects of their actions on others; and 3) to be an exemplary manager.

When motivations for service are present, an organization can achieve greater unity and cooperation than it can with motivations derived from mere recompense or satisfaction with the task accomplished, since the intention to serve is added.

Servant leadership is not charismatic, but acquired. This, at least, is what Pérez López contends. In his words, "Leaders are not born: they are made by means of personal effort, through a long process of acquiring the hard-won capacity to be moved by others, transcending one's own egotism" (1997, p. 45).

The servant leadership that seeks to serve others according to their real needs approximates more closely than the other theories the requirements of the Christian vocation which, as noted, centers on love: not just any love, but the love of Christ, of which one fundamental expression is service. "The Son of man has not come to be served but to serve" (Mt. 20:28).

The virtues lead one to act in a way that habitually seeks the good of others. For this reason, virtues are the key to servant leadership. The other leadership theories, by contrast, are insufficiently attentive to moral virtues, which confer moral quality upon a

leader. Thus the risk, already indicated, of alienation or manipulation.

Conclusion

The Christian vocation gives rise to a leadership of real service to others, in imitation of Christ: a service that seeks to satisfy needs in a way that contributes to human development and fosters everything that helps others to respond to their own Christian vocation. That service is expressed in love. This, however, does not imply that the Christian vocation is compatible with only one theory of business leadership.

The affinity of servant leadership with the demands of the Christian vocation, in my judgment, does not exclude other modes of leadership which may also be effective, but it does "adjust" them. In other words, servant leadership is the most desirable mode, and all other forms of leadership must be subordinate to it, but not excluded. Servant leadership is compatible with an appropriate transformational or transactional leadership.

Subordination to servant leadership means that transformational leadership cannot be alienating or manipulative, but must elevate one's followers, awakening and proposing real values which lead to the human flourishing of persons. It means, too, that transactional leadership, when necessary, (there are always circumstances that will require it, as Bass recognizes) must be carried out according to ethical guidelines derived from the good of man, which regulate pacts and contracts.

A complete ethics will include goods, norms and virtues (Polo, 1996), and Christian morality fulfills this requirement (Melé, 1996). Christian morality includes *virtues*, without which habitual service, provided promptly and with pleasure, is not possible, but also *goods* (objective moral values) that can be introduced and awakened, as well as *norms* that govern transactions. Christian morality and, in the final analysis, the Christian vocation, extends also to other theories.

In sum, my proposal is to move towards a theory that would integrate the contributions of transactional, transformational and servant leadership. This theory would give primacy to real service rendered to others and would subordinate other modes of leadership to that service.

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