

# Leadership as Covenant, Charism, and Communion

by Deborah Savage

One of the most difficult questions of our time concerns the true nature of authority - where it comes from, who has it, and how and to what ends it can be legitimately exercised. While the question is not a new one, the term itself has been a source of confusion and controversy since the turn of the century. A “constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority...is a naked fact”<sup>1</sup> that has affected the entire spectrum of human endeavor, from the political arena to the business community, from child rearing and education, and more recently, to the Church herself. The movement over the last 20 years toward more collaborative workplaces, participative management, and self-directed teams has been an attempt to respond to this issue, and to correct the perception that past managerial practices have precluded the involvement of key members of the work community in decision-making and the management of the workplace. In some cases these efforts have been successful to varying degrees; in others, they have been a source of disappointment or cynicism. In many organizations, they have further confused the notion of authority, turning it into a kind of misplaced paternalism and a false sense of empowerment at lower levels, sometimes giving equal weight to uninformed opinion and turning legitimate efforts to benefit from diverse points of view through consensus building into a form of majority rule. The intent of this paper is to suggest that while moving toward these more participative structures was necessary and correct, it is our failure to understand the source and nature of genuine authority and leadership that has prevented their widespread use and success. Organizations have had difficulty in creating effective collaborative workplaces because the success of such attempts presupposes and relies on a correct understanding of the true nature of leadership, where it originates, and what sustains it. Within the Catholic tradition, we have worked to identify the proper mechanisms for insuring the dignity of the worker is preserved and his/her potential respected.<sup>2</sup> But in pursuing systems that do so we must also ask what the implications of the Catholic tradition are for our understanding of leadership itself. What type of leadership is necessary for the principles of participation and subsidiarity to become manifest in any organization? What kind of leader is needed to govern such an organization?

This paper will explore and begin the development of three themes in connection with these questions: the nature and origin of leadership first as a covenant with a community of persons, in which authority issues from the relationship to the community; leadership as charism, as first and foremost a free gift from God to be exercised in service to the community; and leadership as communion, an on-going collaboration with God and the community which is both brought to fruition and sustained through the celebration of the Eucharist.

## Leadership as Covenant

There are many theories and models that we could consider in attempting to understand the true nature of authority and leadership. But we are free to limit our exploration to those that have the possibility of being consistent with the truths that have been revealed to us by God. We don't have to invent models of authority; we can take our point of departure from divine revelation and from salvation history.

God has revealed himself to us as three persons that exist from all time in relationship to one another. By definition, God's very being is relational.<sup>3</sup> And since we are made in God's image, then we exist to be in relationship to others. This ontological reality does not change when someone takes on a leadership position. In fact, some scholars show that authority and leadership itself is relational and issues from a collective agreement of who is qualified to lead. Organizational leaders have the "illusion of final authority," the dream of complete control, when the truth is that they are only as effective as the relationships are that drive the organization.<sup>4</sup> In fact, all leaders are subject to the "law of acceptance of authority" in which a leader has no authority except that which is invested in him by those he leads.<sup>5</sup> The harsh reality is that people only appear to follow leaders who do not exhibit competence and vision. People only follow those they trust and respect, particularly if we equate "follow" with its true significance: a full commitment of the entire human person to the direction envisioned and taken by the leader. True authority is given to the leader from those he/she is leading and outcomes occur through the interrelationships that exist throughout the organization. A leader is a leader and has authority only in relation to others.

This relationship cannot be reduced to a contractual agreement. It must be a reciprocal exchange, that is, a covenant in which those involved participate in "a two-way process of giving and receiving that governs extended exchanges between parties, from which permanent agreements arise that shape the future."<sup>6</sup> It is through this form of relationship that we begin to have a shared stake in its outcomes and its future. "Contracts end in files, covenants become part of one's history and shape in unexpected ways self-perception and perhaps even destiny."<sup>7</sup> If leadership and authority, by their very nature are relational, if organizational outcomes are achieved through relationships, not through contracts alone, then the proper form of that relationship must be considered, and it is one of covenant.

Throughout salvation history, we have seen repeatedly that God seeks to establish a covenant with His people, a relationship of mutual ownership and trust in a promise of future action. In the Old Testament, it was God who saw that humanity could not keep the covenant and it was God who took action to sustain it. He doesn't just establish some rules and forget about us; He tries again and again to keep the covenant alive by taking the initiative to bring us into relationship with Him, ultimately establishing a new covenant through the passion and death of His own Son.

True leadership must be seen as such a covenant, a relationship between the leader and the community in which the leader understands her responsibility for its future and continually asks herself: "What more can I do to keep this covenant alive?" In contrast, the leadership of most organizations today is more intent on personally benefiting from the work of the community, and often sees no need to consider or respect such a

relationship with it. When something goes wrong, the relationship with the community is often the first to suffer, either through layoffs or - less dramatically but more frequently - through seeking someone to blame or punish. True leadership consists in taking the initiative to create and maintain the relationships that sustain the community of work and insure its future, relationships that are shaped by the charism of leadership.

### **Leadership as Charism**

Leadership and authority have become confused with a wish for power and control, or a striving to be at the center of things, a desire to determine the course of events.<sup>8</sup> They have become associated with those who wish to manipulate conditions and outcomes solely for personal gain. There are many examples of this type of leader in all walks of life, from families, to the political arena, to the business world. As a result, would-be leaders and those in positions of authority are often automatically suspect as self-centered seekers of status and unearned rewards. The tragedy of this situation is that, among the crowd vying for leadership positions, are those who possess the true gift of leadership, the charism of leadership, a freely given gift from God, which does not rely on office or position and should not be confused with them. The truth of the matter is that all authority comes from God; “everything is God’s gift and decision, and everything must serve the unity and the peace and the edification, the exhortation of the whole community.”<sup>9</sup> It is God’s will that all men and women are called to the unity of this community, whether that take particular shape within a business organization or other institution; all in “different ways to it belong, or are related: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God’s grace to salvation.”<sup>10</sup> The charisms that are received through the life of the universal Church are not divorced from life in the world, but rather find their greatest use in consecrating “the world itself to God.”<sup>11</sup> It is in this realm that the Church exists primarily in the living faith of her members and through the often wordless communication of that faith, “a belief translated quite simply into life, with no attempt at persuasion.”<sup>12</sup> Leadership is a matter, not of specific offices or acts, but of being, of a being infused with gifts that come from God, through the action of the Holy Spirit.

All persons are offered the necessary graces for “his or her personal healing and sanctification”; these “must be distinguished [from] capacities for the service of the community.”<sup>13</sup> The charisms introduced by St. Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians as graces we are given “according to the measure of Christ’s gift,”<sup>14</sup> are united with various ministries and offices in his first Letter to the Corinthians. True leadership possesses in some form all of the gifts cited by St. Paul in I Corinthians 12, 4-10:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge..., to another faith..., to another gifts of healing, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to

another discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.<sup>15</sup>

A genuine leader is ultimately someone who is open to all the gifts of the Spirit, because true leadership requires the exercise of all of them “for the common good.” First, she will need “faith for the mysteries of divine revelation”<sup>16</sup> in order to keep the organization related to the deeper meaning and purpose of life, in order not to lose sight of the true end of all our efforts. The leader cannot forget that final fulfillment of all our efforts is in the kingdom yet to come. It is her job to “safeguard the purity of [the] engagement that the organization has with the world, to insure a right relationship with it: one of both transcendence and immanence.”<sup>17</sup> Organizations are nothing more than a group of individuals whose task must always be to live with the Christian challenge to be in the world but not of it. Even current management literature advocates the position that a successful organization is one which continually keeps its larger purpose in mind, in the midst of achieving daily objectives. The most disturbing and destructive blindness of our time is that which keeps us from seeing that the purpose of organizational life must conform to and be ordered to the kingdom of God and the salvation of all. “Work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work.’”<sup>18</sup> Organizations exist for the benefit of man, not the other way around. And man’s ultimate end is to see God.

Secondly, and related to the first charism, the genuine leader must speak the truth and so, the leader must possess the gift of prophecy for the “edification, exhortation, and consolation of the community”<sup>19</sup> she leads. She will need it in order to bear witness to the truth of the current situation and to envision the future of the organization, to inspire in times of opportunity, and comfort in times of difficulty. A fundamental force in organizational life is released and leveraged when there is clarity concerning the desired state, i.e. the future, and the current or actual state, i.e. the present. A leader’s job is to continually create this “structural tension” which “generates a tendency to move from the actual state to the desired state.”<sup>20</sup> She must bear witness to the truth and cleave to the vision of what her organization might become.

But it is not enough to only have a vision. A leader will need “wisdom for practical truths”<sup>21</sup> so that the gap between the current reality and the vision of the future state can be bridged. He will need to be able to act in practical ways to insure that the organization survives to fulfill its mission and serve its constituents. He will also need “knowledge for speculative truths”<sup>22</sup> so as to continue to keep pace with developments in the bodies of knowledge relevant to his purpose. Organizations rely on knowledge to inform and guide their decisions and actions: “there is no substitute for knowledge.”<sup>23</sup>

The leader must be able to speak and interpret many tongues in order to understand the language of various types of people, functional specialties, and diverse views. She will need the “power of healing”<sup>24</sup> when mistakes are made and damage is done to persons or groups.

Above all, a leader will need to have the gift of discernment of spirits in order to “distinguish false prophets from true prophets”<sup>25</sup> so as to maintain “constancy of

purpose”<sup>26</sup> for his organization, not allowing it to be sidetracked by fads and false directions. He will have to be able to spot and develop the talents and gifts of others, for while there is one spirit, there are many gifts. In order to insure clarity and maintenance of the organization’s purpose, the leader needs to have the capacity for spotting talent and for discerning the best use of that talent in fulfilling it. The gifts can be and are possessed by persons throughout the organization; they are found at every level, sometimes hidden, sometimes unacknowledged, sometimes suppressed. The job of any leader is to identify and nourish these gifts in others, because leadership is not an isolated activity. It is one of relationship and of community.

And finally, a leader must continually seek to work the miracle of creating an environment where it is possible for those involved to lead a life of holiness, where people thrive, customers are served, and families and communities flourish while legitimate organizational outcomes are achieved.

### **Leadership as Communion**

While it can be said that the true nature of leadership is to be in possession of all the charisms, it must also be acknowledge that few individual leaders will possess them to the degree needed for working such a miracle. Fortunately, this is unnecessary since “the body does not consist of one member but of many” and each of the members is offered the gifts of the spirit. Thus, the recent efforts at collaborative leadership are not only right and just; they correspond to God’s very design of the human community. While it is true that “an enterprise truly in accord with human dignity” should not consider workers “merely as servants, whose sole function is to execute orders silently,”<sup>27</sup> it is not enough to give workers a voice. We must have a different vision of leadership itself. We must begin to think of it as a form of communion, in which it is shared, as life is shared with the members of a body. Because the job of leadership is one of cooperation with God’s continual act of creation, a job which cannot be the responsibility or exclusive right of any one person.

Our traditional view is that leadership involves special people setting the direction, making key decisions, motivating “the workforce.” But this notion is deeply rooted in an individualistic and nonsystemic worldview, one in which leaders are heroes, taking action while others wait for instructions. A new vision of leadership is emerging, in which leaders become the designers and architects of the systems and structures that people work in and through which they develop and succeed. In this way, the leader collaborates with God, who “manifest himself for the first time to the world and to the eyes of man as Creator, that is as one who constructs the world with wisdom and goodness. God himself appears as a worker, in the form of the architect...[a task God gives] to man joyfully and without reservations, and entrusts him with the task of prolonging God’s work in accord with progress that is never finished.”<sup>28</sup> Leaders “are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision...that is, they are responsible for learning.”<sup>29</sup> Management theorists are beginning to see that the leader’s job is to create “conditions that will make it possible for work not only to develop the capacities of the person, but also at the same

time achieve an effective and reasonable production of goods and services...,<sup>30</sup> in other words, to promote the common good. But the creation of these conditions is an act of community, of persons acting together with a common purpose and means, participating in a “shared life derived from a single vital principle,”<sup>31</sup> and one in which its members can find the possibility of living as full human persons through the pursuit of a life of holiness while at work. In such a community, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”<sup>32</sup>

When leadership is seen as an act of creation that permits conditions that foster human development and that leave members of the work community free to pursue a life of holiness while at work, there is no artificial barrier standing in the way of a full celebration of the Eucharist. When we celebrate the Eucharist, the celebration includes both the action of the priest and the offering of the people. In the central sacrifice of the Mass, the forms of bread and wine, which are transformed into Christ’s body and blood, represent the fruits of the labor of the faithful. “In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering and so acquire a new value.”<sup>33</sup> The fruits of our labor are offered to God in a direct participation in the sacrifice of the Eucharist. In the early Church, these fruits were the best the people had to offer, and so it must be now. We may not have homemade bread and wine to contribute, but our fruits must be the best we can offer as well. So the job of leadership takes on additional importance, since without conditions that permit one to live a life of holiness, our capacity to offer our best is compromised. The leader’s role in the Eucharistic celebration is critical, because he must create conditions in which the sacredness of one’s daily work is made manifest, permitting a labor that is worthy material for the sacrifice. The fruits of our labor are what we offer to God and their worthiness will be affected by the purpose that they serve and the conditions in which they were created. Thus, the leader must see beyond the immediate reality and realize that he is participating in a communion of sacrifice, ordered to our salvation and eternal life in God.

One must also ask, if one is in a leadership position, what is the fruit of such a work? If it is not actual product or service, what is it? What does a leader actually produce? The answer must be found in the act of creating an environment that permits others to flourish and reach their true and ultimate end.

## **Summary**

In this paper, I have attempted to outline a view of leadership that takes its point of departure from Scripture and Tradition. Further exploration and use of the ideas will require that as a society, we begin to view leadership as an act of service and the leader first as servant.<sup>34</sup> The paradox is that only persons who are natural servants - who by their God-given nature feel the wish to serve - are qualified to lead. Perhaps only when servants are leaders will we be able to further our understanding of the nature of true leadership.

## Notes

1. Arendt, Hannah, "What Was Authority," *Authority: Nomos I*, ed. C.J. Friedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 81-112.
2. See *Rerum Novarum, Quadragesimo Anno, Mater et Magistra, Laborem Exercens*, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. D. O'Brien and T. Shannon (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992).
3. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (New York, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p. 88.
4. Mary Parker Follet, "The Basis of Authority," *Freedom and Coordination: Lectures in Business Organisation by Mary Parker Follet*, ed. L. Urwick (London: Management Publications Trust, Ltd., 1949), p. 34-46.
5. Chester Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938). I am very grateful to my colleague, John Drozdal, Ph.D., ABD, who pointed out this research to me.
6. William F. May, "Moral Leadership in a Corporate Setting," Unpublished Manuscript.
7. William F. May, "Moral Leadership in a Corporate Setting," Unpublished Manuscript.
8. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York, New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990), p. 341.
9. Johann Auer and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology: The Church, The Universal Sacrament of Salvation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press), p. 190.
10. "Lumen Gentium," *The Documents of Vatican II, Volume I* (New York, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), p. 13.
11. "Lumen Gentium," p. 34.
12. Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1965), p. 303.
13. Auer, *The Church*, p. 190.
14. Ephesians, 4:7-11.

15. 1 Corinthians 12:28, NRSV (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
16. Auer, *The Church*, p. 189.
17. Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, p. 240.
18. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, *Catholic Social Thought*, p. 359.
19. Auer, *The Church*, p. 190.
20. Robert Fritz, *Corporate Tides: The Inescapable Laws of Organizational Structure* (San Francisco, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996), p. 23.
21. Auer, *The Church*, p. 189.
22. Auer, *The Church*, p. 189.
23. W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1986), p. 25.
24. Auer, *The Church*, p. 189.
25. Auer, *The Church*, p. 190.
26. Stephen Schmidt, et al, *Knowledge Based Management: Unleashing the Power of Quality Improvement* (Colorado Springs, CO: Air Academy Press, 1996), p. 24. "Create Constancy of Purpose" is one of W. Edwards Deming's Fourteen Points for management.
27. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, *Catholic Social Thought*, p. 99.
28. John Paul II, *The Meaning of Work Depends on the Meaning of Leisure and the Celebration of the Eucharist*, *Dignity of Work: John Paul II Speaks to Managers and Workers*, ed. R.G. Kennedy, et al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of American, 1994), p. 217.
29. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, p. 340.
30. John Paul II, "Direct Your Energies to the Wealth of Love, Not the Love of Wealth," *Dignity of Work: John Paul II Speaks to Managers and Workers*, ed. R.G. Kennedy, et al (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), p. 34-35.
31. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "The Eucharist and Community in First Corinthians," *Living Bread, Saving Cup: Readings on the Eucharist* ed. Kevin Seasoltz (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), p. 4.
32. 1 Corinthians 12:26, NRSV.

33. Catechism of the Catholic Church (Mission Hills, CA: Benziger Publishing Co., 1994), p. 1368.

34. Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 12.