

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP

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IN ITS ISSUE of March 18, 1974, the american magazine, *Newsweek*, had a leading article on world affairs entitled: 'Another shortage: Leaders'. Hard on the shortage of oil comes another – a lack of leaders with fresh ideas and ability to meet the challenges of today. The Church is no exception. At every level we are experiencing the lack of those charismatic leaders who, at a given time and in a given situation, are able to pull the forces together in order to respond to the crisis of a fast-moving society, which is grasping at change and renewal and at the same time longing for stability rooted in tradition. It is all too common to hear either priests or sisters complaining about the lack of imagination of those in positions of authority, or major superiors looking for those non-existent people who will animate their local communities.

Some will contest this – and rightly so, on the score that we have too many leaders, but no leadership. Experiences in chapters of religious congregations,¹ or special courses for potential or actual leaders, reveal a tendency to reduce all the leaders to a level at which no leadership can be exercised. The phenomenon of reciprocal threat among leaders paralyses the group and leads to chaos and mistrust. Not enough leaders, or too many leaders? Whatever way we look at it, we do not seem to be able to find a solution.

It seems to me that the problem is tackled in the wrong way. What we have to deal with is not primarily a problem of leaders, but of leadership. Unfortunately, we have been using in the Church and in religious life a political model of leadership whose characteristic is to identify leader and leadership, while emphasizing the former. In workshops on leadership, I find two questions most relevant, particularly in the context of religious communities: 'How would you define the leader?', and, 'What are the functions of leadership?' Invariably, the groups answer the second question in terms of the functions of the leader, and not of leadership.

¹ Laudin, George: *Expérience d'un Chapitre*, in *Spiritus*, 1972.

Here I would like to explain the difference between leader and leadership, then to define the functions of leadership at the level of primary and secondary groups, and finally to give some guide-lines on what should characterize spiritual leadership.

Leader versus Leadership

Leadership belongs to the group. The leader is one who allows the leadership to be exercised by the group. It is therefore not a privilege of one person, but the responsibility of the group, to see that leadership is exercised in the group. Psychologists tend to make a distinction between two types of leadership: the political model and the management model.² In the political model, what is important is the person of the leader, recognized and accepted as such because of his charismatic power. I do not use the term 'power' in the sense of authority, but rather of a certain magnetism existing between the leader and the followers, as a result of which the followers are ready to trust the leader to fulfil their needs, conscious or unconscious. He becomes the incarnation of the hopes and longings of the people. Men like Roosevelt, Churchill, De Gaulle, were in a true sense political leaders, because at a given time they knew how to respond to the aspirations of their people. But their leadership was accepted only as long as they were able to embody all these aspirations. The relationship between the charismatic leader and his followers is possible only as long as they have faith – almost in a religious sense – in their leader, and are ready to submit their will to him. When this faith evaporates, either the leader is rejected (Churchill and De Gaulle are examples), or he maintains his position through dictatorship – which leads to injustice and oppression on a vast scale.

The political model is to be found in the beginnings of practically every religious Institute in the Church. The charism of the founder or foundress was essential for the gathering of the first group, because the cohesive bond between the founder and the first disciples gave the group a certain stability. But when the leader died, usually the charismatic leadership disappeared with him. It was replaced by structures leading towards institutional relationships instead of fraternal relationships; or else the group experienced destructive anarchy.³ The political model of leadership is possible only when you have true charismatic leaders, who are not very easy to find.

² Gibb, C. A.: *Leadership* (London, 1969).

³ Hostie, Raymond, S.J.: *Vie et Mort des Ordres Religieux* (Brussels, 1972).

The other model to which psychologists refer is the management model. The question here is not 'Who is the leader?', but 'How are the leadership functions distributed in this group?'; so that the emphasis is on leadership, no longer on the leader. It is understood that leadership belongs to the group and can be more or less distributed throughout the group. Where there are several functions of leadership necessary for the maintenance of a group, such as taking initiatives, conciliating, listening, challenging, healing etc., these can be distributed in various ways. Every member of the group will exercise one of these functions, or one person in the group can exercise them all, and so on. Research on group-behaviour suggests that the effectiveness of a group, in terms of quality of relationship, is increased when leadership is distributed in such a way that maximum advantage is taken of the potential of each group member.⁴ Hence the definition of Carl Rogers: 'The most effective leader is one who can create the conditions by which he will actually lose the leadership'.

I would distinguish two main functions of leadership: the first to help the group to achieve its goals, the second to help individuals to satisfy their needs – individual as much as group needs. Both individual and group need to have strong affinities with each other, though at times they may come into conflict. Harmony and balance have to be worked out in order to allow at least the minimum fulfilment of these needs. The leader will be the one who, at a given time and situation, is seen as the one most helpful to the group in fulfilling these two functions. Therefore the generally accepted qualities of leader, intelligence, skilfulness, *savoir-faire* etc. . . . do not of themselves make the leader. A person is a leader in so far as his qualities are perceived by the group as the best means by which it can reach its goals and fulfil its needs. Leadership, then, is a function of the social situation; and leaders in one situation may not necessarily be so in another. The 'Peter's principle', according to which one who is competent in one situation is promoted to the point where he reaches the maximum of his incompetency, is not foreign to our experience of christian communities. The problem is not to find people who have the qualities of leader – many have them – but rather to place these people in situations where they will be able to function as leaders. It is the situation, rather than the qualities of leadership, which needs assessment.

⁴ Gibb, p 22.

Leadership: response to relationship

Leadership as an organizational function needs to take into account various elements, such as the goal of the group, the structures of inter-personal relationships within the group, the characteristics of the culture in which the group is functioning, the physical conditions of living and so on. All these variables determine what type of leadership is to be exercised and how it is to be distributed in the group. Peter Rudge distinguishes various types of leadership in function of the goal. If, for instance, the goal of the group is to maintain a tradition, the leader will be chosen from among the elders, and the leadership will be exercised through unconditional obedience to the leader.⁵

My preference is for a more simplified distinction, based not so much on the goals of the group as on the structures of relationships existing in the group. Relationships are essentially functions of needs, in the sense that it is through relationships that needs are fulfilled. Freud reduces basic human needs to two: the need of loving and being loved, the need of producing.⁶ Every group will have its own way of expressing and fulfilling these needs. A religious community is a group of men or women, personally committed to live out the reality of the gospel which they wish to understand, and give witness to a common sharing. The sharing (first need) and the witness (second need) cannot be separated. It would be dangerous to create a dichotomy between community and mission, since the sharing is first of all witness of the *koinonia*, the communion. It is by the quality of their sharing that a community will be a manifestation of the Kingdom – a kingdom which is present and yet to come, where we are saved and yet in need of healing, where we are risen and yet experiencing death. The quality of witness in community depends on the quality of relationships. It is here precisely that leadership has to be exercised.

Historically, there are two different stages and levels in the exercise of leadership. At the time of its foundation, an Institute was generally a *primary* group, in which the relationships were essentially of an affective (empathetic) type. Later, it developed into a *secondary* group, in which relationships were essentially functional, based on structures and mutual contracts. The large communities in many apostolic religious Institutes, as we knew them in the past, were

⁵ Rudge, Peter: *Ministry and Management* (London 1968).

⁶ *Ibid.*, chap 3.

essentially 'secondary' groups, in which relationships were conditioned by certain external structures such as silence, formal recreation and so on, which allowed only for a minimum of contacts, each contact being justified in terms of a function or goal. The present movement towards small-group living is the immediate result of a desire to escape from these functional relationships. Empathetic relationships cannot be created in the large group; and very often small group-living has been seen as the panacea to all problems; whereas, in fact, experience shows that life in a small group can be very difficult when one has known the individualistic life in a large community. Hence the need of re-educating people in living empathetic relationships.

Every human being needs to belong to a primary group, which touches the more affective level of his personality, where a person finds others who understand, appreciate and affirm him in his basic needs. This need of belonging to a basic community of a family type creates the movement towards small communities, in which, through relationships, every member of the group can experience a certain identity, a certain being-value-for-others. It is at this level that the leadership of the primary group should be exercised. As the small group, in order to survive, has to be part of a larger entity, the relationship between the primary group and the larger (secondary) group will require also a certain type of leadership which will allow these relationships to function well.

Leadership at the level of primary group – a function of mediation

The french psychologist, Max Pagès, has advanced a theory which can help us to understand the reality of the primary group.⁷ He claims that the group exists before the individual: that the individuals are a product of the group, and not vice-versa. Two people, he says, are always in a state of non-indifference towards one another. The awareness of being 'I' comes from a basic feeling (conscious or unconscious) of anxiety of separation and solitude: the impossibility of reaching the other. This feeling of anxiety comes from an awareness of the presence/absence of the other, and the emergence of the 'I' depends on this constant dynamics of being-with and being separated. The best image is the one of the tight-rope walker who finds his equilibrium at the point of maximum tension between the two poles. On one hand the individual wants to be-with, in com-

⁷ Pagès, Max: *La vie affective des groupes* (Paris, 1968).

munion with, the other; but as he tries he is also longing for recognition as a separate entity – somebody different from the other, with his own qualities and temperament: in a word, his own existence. This wanting to be part of and yet not swallowed up, to be with and yet separated, will create the dynamics of the individual in the group; it will characterize the type of relationship and communication taking place in the group. The function of leadership at the level of the primary group is one of *mediation*, which is to establish or re-establish meaningful and satisfying relationships between the different members of the group, in order to foster the constant dynamics of the 'being with' and 'being separated'. Of the qualities which must exist in one or more members of the group in order to ensure the function of mediation, the first and most important is a great sensitivity to the needs of the individuals as well as to the needs of the group as a whole. And here again, it is difficult to find the right balance.

Sensitivity to individual needs means the ability to create relationships of friendship with every type of individual, and not relationships of friendship with some, and relationships of authority with others. It also means that no one member in the group will feel threatened by any other. The real mediator is therefore the one who is perceived as the least threatening by all the members of the group. Sensitivity to the group as a whole means an ability to read the experiences of the group in the here and now, to make explicit this experience at the conscious level of the group, to understand that withdrawal or aggressiveness are different expressions of a common experience. Conflicts and tensions are an essential part of the development of the individuals as much as of the group. But they can also lead to a breakdown in communication, and thus to a setback in the growth of the individual and/or the group.

Conflict arises when there is opposition between individual needs and group needs (that is, when expectations of individuals run counter to the expectations of the group as a whole). The conflict is first lived out at the unconscious level. The role of leadership is to help the group to become aware of this conflict: to verbalize it in a way that the group may act on it. No one from outside can bring about a solution to this conflict; it has to be recognized and worked out by the group.⁸

⁸ Victor Frankl adds a third need: the need for understanding in order to escape from the absurdity of life. It seems that this third need can be reduced to the first one, as so far as loving and being loved brings about an understanding of oneself and of the other.

Can this function of mediation, with its twofold aspect of sensitivity to individuals and to the group, be embodied in one person? I am not sure that the answer can be given in one way or the other. My own experience of working with groups indicates that generally these two functions are not in the same person. I have found people extremely sensitive to the sufferings of some members of the group, but unable to see how the group reacts to these individuals. People aware of the experience of the group as a whole can easily be blind to the crying needs of the individual, whose freedom is constantly crushed. Or again, we can find people very aware of what is happening, but completely unable to verbalize it and therefore unable to help the group to grow in awareness of the situation. Obviously there are exceptions, and at times the different aspects of this function of mediation can be found in one and the same person. But again it is of prime importance to make sure that these different aspects of the function of mediation be exercised in the group: whether by one or several members does not matter; though certainly, distributed leadership increases the effectiveness of the group.

Leadership at the level of the secondary group: functions of prophecy and organization

It has been said that the primary group, in order to survive, must relate to a larger group, to the totality of the world in which it exists: other people sharing the same values, society, culture, etc. The relationship between the primary group and the larger group (itself formed of many different primary groups) is what forms the secondary group. We can define the secondary group as the totality of several primary groups who want to (or must) relate with one another in order to survive in a context larger than their own. The relationships at this level are no longer affective or empathetic, but functional: that is, in terms of a goal. At this level a further type of leadership will be required, which is characterized by two functions: prophecy and organization.

The word 'prophet' can create negative reactions: we tend to fear the people who are always disturbing us; and it is also difficult to distinguish between true and false prophets. Marie France Perrin Jassy makes a distinction between prophets arising in their own culture and prophets arising in another culture.⁹ The distinction is

⁹ Reno, Madeleine, O.P., & Weber, Paul, S.J.: 'Creative conflicts in small communities', in *Sisters To-day* (Gaba Publications, Pastoral Institute of Eastern Africa, Kampala, Uganda, 1974).

useful in that it brings out the twofold aspect of the function of prophecy. In one's own culture, the function of prophecy at the level of the secondary group is not so much to have a vision of the future as of the totality of the here and now. The role of the Old Testament prophet was to read the 'signs of the times', to make sense of the events happening to the people of Israel. Today, this function of leadership consists in being able to see beyond the local situation, to give a vision of the totality, to articulate the experiences of the different primary groups in relation to the world picture. It is not so much a question of bringing new visions as being able to read the meaning of experiences and to communicate this.

A constant danger for any primary group is to enclose itself in its little world, developing a keen self-complacency and a very narcissistic attitude. These groups need help to integrate themselves in the culture in which they live, to become part of a larger group; and this is possible only as far as the experience of the primary group can be related to the experience of a larger group. At this level, obviously, the quality of empathetic relationship, the ability to relate to individuals, is far less important than at the level of the primary group. But what is important is the ability to work with groups and to have a vision of the whole. In many religious Institutes, it is not rare to find major superiors (Generals or Provincials) acting in a Province as though it were a primary group, trying to enter into a personal relationship with 150 or 300 people. The result is that they are so spread out that their whole effectiveness is wasted. This is a very difficult problem, for very often members of a religious community expect their major superiors to be for them the 'mother' or the 'father' they are longing for, and to whom they all want to have recourse, in order to escape from the reality of their primary group. Education for leadership requires not only the education of the leaders but the education of the whole group.

The other functional aspect of prophecy is equally important in today's world. The accelerating socio-economic changes make it very difficult for some closed primary groups to understand what is happening. A concrete example is the difficulties encountered by many local communities in the face of the new insights of Vatican II. It is very much the role of leadership at the level of the secondary group to bring these new visions to the local level; it is often a question of sheer survival. Many communities in their fears have closed themselves to every new insight and change, and have thus become little ghettos. Presenting a new vision is not easy. The need

for security tends to bring out all the defences against it.

There are three principles to be applied when new visions are presented. First the language of the presentation must be understood by those who receive it. The new vision is not a break from the past, but an evolution from it, 'a bridge between the past and the future'.¹⁰ It should also be within the realm of the possible, according to the means available to the local group. I do not refer only or mainly to material means, but to the psychological means. It seems to me quite impossible to introduce shared prayer amongst a group of people who have no sense of what communication means. The third point is that this new vision should be adopted by the group rather than by individuals. It is the group as a whole which has to accept this new vision. It requires, obviously, a much longer process of education, but it is the only way to preserve the unity of the group and to avoid the process of marginalization which we see happening in many communities. Where the new vision is received by the group; the individuals in the group can give it their support. It frequently happens that individuals are taken out of their community, sent to 'courses' where they are introduced to new visions, and find themselves completely lost when they return. The group tends to react negatively to visions they do not understand; and therefore they reject the person with vision.

The second function of leadership at the level of the secondary group is the function of organization or management. It is more familiar to those in positions of authority; but there are aspects of it which are often ignored. In 1966 three young dutch bishops died suddenly. A newspaper article suggested that these untimely deaths were caused by the burden of their office.¹¹ The problem of management is first of all a problem of organization and delegation, which is one of the major weaknesses of Church management.

Over-centralization, which very often denotes a lack of trust in others, has characterized the ecclesiastical and religious world, creating an impossible burden on those in authority. Even at a time when the emphasis is on decentralization, the procedures of communication and control make the work of those in authority very difficult. To administer, to organize, is first a matter of knowing how to delegate and how to trust other people in the making of their own decisions. 'Decisions which belong to the primary group

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 22.

¹¹ Buntix, Hubert: *L'Eglise et le management* (Puteaux, 1971), p 27.

have to be made at the level of the primary group': this is simply to enunciate the principle of subsidiarity which has become part of the Constitutions of many religious Institutes – in theory, but seldom in practice. It would be a great advantage for the Church to look at the organization of, say, the aero-spatial agency NASA which combines perfectly the principle of subsidiarity whilst safeguarding the unity of the agency.

The second important factor in management has to do with making decisions and accepting the consequences, and with communicating in a proper manner the reasons for these decisions. This latter can be very painful at times, but it is the burden of responsibility of those in a position of authority.

These three functions (mediation, prophecy, organization) are obviously not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are all very necessary for the normal well-being and development of any group. At the same time, some people are much more proficient than others in one or other of these functions. It is important to know at which level the mediator, the prophet or the organizer can be placed for the better service of the group. These functions, which are not always innate qualities, can be developed in some individuals; but their growth and development will depend on natural potential. Again, it is not so much the qualities of the leader, as what type of leader the situation requires. The leader cannot operate alone. He belongs to a team, to a group; and, in the last analysis, the responsibility is always the responsibility of the group to ensure that these functions are exercised.

Christian community and spiritual leadership

Up to now I have been talking of leadership in general terms, using the different models offered by our culture. Most of the examples I have taken come from my work with various religious congregations. But one question remains: what characterizes leadership in the Church – what we call in our day 'spiritual leadership'? It is obvious that a religious group – whether the local christian community or a religious community – has a specific goal. It is in function of this goal that the different functions of leadership mentioned earlier should be exercised. It is surprising that we have suddenly begun to talk of spiritual leadership, as if any other type could have existed in a christian community. Perhaps we have considered christian communities as organizations whose main goal is efficiency. The word 'efficiency' does not belong to the gospel – it belongs to

our technological society. What is important for a christian community is 'quality of life'. This ecological term in christian parlance refers to our response to the gospel – to God's love and to the communion realized in Jesus Christ.

Spiritual leadership is not the responsibility of one or two. It presupposes that the community as a whole is more concerned about the presence of the Spirit in its midst than about structure, organization or efficiency. If we look at the gospel, at Christ's actions with his apostles, we notice three important aspects of spiritual leadership, which are characteristic of an evangelical community, as well as providing the basic rules of good leadership.¹²

Awakening people to their vocation

Men and women consecrated to the gospel are called to put themselves completely at the service of the Kingdom, using all their potential to respond to the Spirit. The text of First Corinthians is very clear. After drawing out the analogy of the body, Paul tells the local community: 'All of you, then, are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it'.¹³ The part represented by each one is essential to the integrity of the body; to awaken people to their vocation is to help them to become aware of their gifts and how they can be put to the service of the Kingdom. The apostles became aware of their potential in being called by Christ.¹⁴ Christ made the samaritan woman aware of who she was: aware of her poverty but also of her potential, making her ready to respond to him. To call one another to life – and I believe that is what the christian life is all about –¹⁵ requires this great sensitivity to the individual. It means that we constantly help one another to discover the real meaning of our life, the different calls of the Spirit, so that each member of the community may become the unique creature God intended them.

The ministry of healing and compassion

Healing and reconciliation are the most obvious signs of the presence of the Kingdom.¹⁶ The Spirit is the Reconciler, the Healer, the One who brings unity. In our communities, there are so many people who feel unaccepted, out of place, mentally ill, that the ministry of healing becomes one of the very important functions of

¹² Good management requires: 1. to make the best use of people, 2. to preserve the unity of the group: 3. to promote creativity. It corresponds to the three aspects of 'spiritual leadership'.

¹³ 1 Cor 12, 27.

¹⁴ Jn 1, 42.

¹⁵ Jn 10, 10.

¹⁶ Mt 11, 4-6.

spiritual leadership: the quality of our communion depends upon it. It consists in making the compassion, the forgiveness of the Father something visible and credible. Authority must no longer be expressed in authoritarian terms, but in terms of friendship: 'I call you my friends'.¹⁷ This is the great revelation of Christ to his apostles and disciples.

Ability to challenge

The function of challenging one another becomes more and more important in a world where it is increasingly difficult to preserve the quality of life essential to the gospel. Every time the apostles became complacent about themselves, Christ made them aware of his and their mission, and obliged them to take a stand. After the multiplication of the loaves, when prospects seemed very rosy, Christ made it clear that his language was not theirs, to such an extent that many left him. To the twelve he said: 'And you, would you like to leave too?'¹⁸ The quality of the evangelical life is spelt out very clearly in the gospel, and we need to challenge one another constantly on our response to its exigencies. The role of challenging is not so much to give answers as to raise questions. Christ did not say to Peter, 'stay with me', but 'are you going to leave?'; and to the sons of Zebedee, 'are you able to drink the cup that I am going to drink?'¹⁹ The answer that one gives to the exigencies of the gospel is a faith-answer, a leap in the dark into insecurity. Such leadership will disturb us, but it will preserve and enhance the quality of our response to the gospel. As a christian and religious community, we must allow ourselves to be confronted by the gospel, so that our daily response may be more and more a gospel response.

Leadership – a christian leadership based on the gospel and the techniques and tools offered by modern sciences – is the answer to the crisis that many in the Church are experiencing. It is not an instantaneous solution: it requires a constant education and willingness to submit ourselves to the gospel. But this leadership will help us to find understanding and peace in the midst of conflict, to become more aware of ourselves for a better service of the world. It will help us to experience the fulness of freedom for which we are all striving, since 'the Spirit that God has given you does not make you a slave and cause you to be afraid'.²⁰

¹⁷ Jn 15, 15.

¹⁸ Jn 6, 68.

¹⁹ Mt 20, 22.

²⁰ Rom 8, 15.