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SPIRITUALITY OF THE SERVANT LEADER

Sister Sally Duffy, SC

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the words and lived actions of philosophers, theologians and others in the Catholic tradition can inform the Spirituality of a Servant Leader. Thoughtful considerations of the crucified today and personal examination of reader towards systems and structures of oppression should inform those in leadership. Members and alumni of a Vincentian university must recall and embody the leadership styles of Jesus Christ and St. Vincent De Paul in their own places of influence to make for a more just and righteous global society. A Vincentian education calls leaders to holistic care of those they lead coupled with radical principles that are counter cultural but rooted in solidarity and other Catholic Social Teachings.

SPIRITUALITY OF THE SERVANT LEADER

With humility, I start this reflection on servant leadership. Vincent de Paul stated, “Be wary about crediting anything to yourself. In claiming this, you in effect steal from God and do him injury. God alone is the author of every good thing.” Jesus taught us to be servants when he washed the feet of the apostles the night of the Last Supper. Servant leadership is our calling. Leadership is not about authority over others but about authoring Life. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus’ way is a preferential option for those in poverty and oppressed including persons and all of creation including our global home. This includes those shamed, unloved, abused, neglected, powerless, persecuted, marginalized and dependent on care from others. In the words of St. Vincent de Paul, “by serving the poor we serve Jesus Christ.”

“St. John’s is a Vincentian university, inspired by St. Vincent de Paul’s compassion and zeal for service. We strive to provide excellent education for all people, especially those lacking economic, physical, or social advantages. Community service programs combine with reflective learning to enlarge the classroom experience. Wherever possible, we devote our intellectual and physical resources to search out the causes of poverty and social injustice and to encourage solutions that are adaptable, effective, and concrete. In the Vincentian tradition, we seek to foster a world view and to further efforts toward global harmony and development by creating an atmosphere in

which all may imbibe and embody the spirit of compassionate concern for others so characteristic of Vincent.” (St. John’s University, 2015b, October)

In the words of St. Vincent de Paul, “you will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the kettle of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give soup and bread. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor, always smiling and good-humored. They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting master you will see.”

Graduation day marks a signpost in one’s life, a day of accomplishment, the recognition of a dream, a professional status, a career, an opportunity, and a gateway to opportunities. One’s graduation day is not celebrated alone, nor achieved alone. We all had people in our lives during those years who supported us emotionally, physically, spiritually, intellectually and perhaps financially. When we could not believe in ourselves, they were there to believe in us. Persons who communicated to us a sense of self-worth, being loveable, and who encouraged us to realize our own uniqueness and unrepeatability. Persons, who taught and modeled for us the meaning of belonging, sharing resources and power, and mature other-centered love.

The story of the Good Samaritan calls us daily to reflect on who my neighbor is, and how to respond

to my neighbor. We can on some days imagine our self as the one beaten, lifted up, healed, dignity restored, and made whole on many levels though the love of Christ experienced through friends, family or strangers.

We can also imagine our self as the Good Samaritan, called to transformation by sharing Trinitarian life, truth and the way of Jesus. The love of Christ truly urges us. Vincent de Paul cautioned, “Charity is certainly greater than any rule. Moreover, all rules must lead to charity.” Love of Christ urges us to be moved with compassion and mercy, to act on needs, engage others to participate in solidarity, to sacrifice our God-given time, talents and treasures as a sign of gratuitous love by and through God to lovingly serve those in need. We must examine how we are making the road safe for everyone, and how we are complicit in creating unsafe, unjust and vulnerable conditions and systems.

A servant is the person in right relationship with God. St. John’s University calls everyone to give evidence through presence, words and actions to right relationship with God, our neighbor and our global home. This is the lifelong journey of all of us to be servant leaders whether students, faculty, administration, staff, faculty, board, donors, volunteers and alumni. To borrow from

St. Francis of Assisi, “preach the Gospel and use words if necessary.” Our actions and behaviors are evidence of our fundamental direction or habit of the heart, and the grounding in Jesus’ way, truth and life. We need to thank all those responsible for enhancing the reputation and credibility of this University, and for promotion and integration of Gospel values for our lifetime and for life of the world.

Jon Sobrino, a theologian, issued a challenge to college students, graduates and universities. Sobrino challenges us to ask the question: “What can we do to take the crucified down from their crosses?”

(Sobrino, 1994). This is a question: the common good calls us to ask and as a university inspired by St. Vincent de Paul’s compassion and zeal for service. We may first need to ask the ways we need to free ourselves in terms of balance, and care for ourselves and our relationships. You can give and give until there is nothing left to love. We ground our lives in the Source of love, many of us call God but other faith traditions call by other names.

Who may be the crucified that are on crosses in our time, space and locations? Truth calls us to recognize that our global home is on a cross and many of our neighbors, our sisters and brothers. Our neighbor is the face of Christ so we are putting Jesus back on the cross. Who may be crucified in our times and locations? Who am I or we keeping invisible and silent? Some “isms” identify who needs to be taken down from their crosses such as

classism, racism, consumerism, sexism, heterosexism, genderism, etc.

Jon Sobrino’s question and Vincent de Paul’s witness and challenge to be “servant(s) of the poor, always smiling and good-humored” is not about abandoning our professions and careers; but rather, integrating this question and witness into our daily lives, professions and careers. This calls us to walk

the roads, places, neighborhoods, countries where persons are on crosses and beaten, and to see the poor as our masters. De Paul directed us “with renewed devotion then, we must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.” DePaul’s writing to the Missionaries on June 12th, 1658 state that, “if there are some among us that think they are in the Mission to evangelize the poor and not to relieve their sufferings, to attend to their spiritual needs and not their material wants; I reply that we must assist and assist in every way, by ourselves and by others,...To do that, is to evangelize in word and in deed, and it is the most perfect way.”

“Truth calls us to recognize that our global home is on a cross and many of our neighbors, our sisters and brothers.”

We can also limit our role in not pounding a nail to put someone on a cross by asking how I benefitted or colluded with some institutions, systems and structures. Am I willing to acknowledge that some persons were losing while I was benefitting and winning? Am I joining or connected with systems and structures that benefit some especially the economically sufficient, while others lose? Will I ask, who is losing, who is winning, and who is deciding who benefits and who loses? Is every person given shared membership in our society because of his or her God-given dignity? Am I the steward, the one who cherish God's resources or believe entitled to my resources? As De Paul stated, "we must worry more about enlarging the kingdom of God than adding to our own possessions."

Would I ask and challenge who benefits, who loses, who decides related to: health care access and affordability, and Gospel value based care? Living wage and benefits? Quality, affordable, accessible child development especially for the working poor? Do I live De Paul's belief that "love is inventive, even to infinity?" Do I follow his witness of how to be inventive? Will I work to be inventive and fix our broken immigration system and truly welcome the stranger as a brother or sister? Am I ensuring quality, safe and affordable housing? The issues go on and on...

Currently in New York City, there are plenty of opportunities to welcome the stranger. This is a fundamental imperative of Christianity. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were all forced to flee their homeland because it was life-threatening and dangerous.

Vincent De Paul left his village in Southern France because of poverty, ashamed of being poor; he denied knowing his own father when his father came to visit Vincent in the seminary, Vincent had him sent away. Vincent was eager to have wealth and reputation and was illegally ordained at nineteen years of age. Vincent, open to extraordinary conversions and through the influence of Berulle, eventually devoted his life to acts of charity. When the Bishop of Paris asked volunteers to care for the galley slaves, Vincent encountered his revulsion and fear but still volunteered. Vincent was evangelized

by the poor and realized that "charity is a heavy burden, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket." The Christ of Vincent was the one who loves until it hurts. Vincent was a lifelong learner who integrated his painful past through humility, charity, simplicity and remembering that God is ever present.

As recipients of a St. John's education and formation, we integrate Gospel values into our careers, professions, lifestyle choices and advocacy efforts by challenging, influencing and changing systems and structures. We choose not to isolate ourselves or drive past those experiencing injustice, restrictions and oppression in our society. Will we, like De Paul, volunteer and encounter revulsion and fear, and let ourselves be evangelized by the poor? It all begins by initiating and being in "atmosphere in which all may imbibe and embody the spirit of compassionate concern for others so characteristic of Vincent." We must go out to the poor, the oppressed and see, listen and act. Because a person is living in poverty, each person still has assets, gifts for the common good.

Vincent can teach us to balance the tensions of change and continuity, to accept rather than deny reality, to be hope-filled about the future, and to be committed to change because "love is inventive into infinity." The effects of our choices can be to promote life for all. You obviously have the strength of character and fortitude to make a difference in the world; otherwise, you would not be part of a Vincentian, Catholic University. You can take the crucified down from their crosses.

In the deepest part of each of us is the desire to do what is right, to be in right relationship with God, to be compassionate, just and loving and to ensure the basic human rights and dignity of all individuals made in the image and likeness of God. We can give thanks to God by applying our skills, knowledge and competencies through the framework of Catholic social teaching to our economic and social systems that ensure abundance rather than scarcity for all people. This is our calling; this is fulfilling the Gospel imperative to "love one another as I have loved you."

St. John's mission as a Catholic university embraces the Judeo-Christian ideals of respect for the rights and dignity of every person and each individual's responsibility for the world in which we live. We commit ourselves to create a climate patterned on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as embodied in the traditions and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Our community, which comprises members of many faiths, strives for an openness that is "wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8) (St. John's University, 2015a, October). Thus, the University is a place where the Church reflects upon itself and the world as it engages in dialogue with other religious traditions." Right relationship impels that we recognize the God-given dignity of every person and create the conditions for human flourishing or maximizing one's potential. With any right comes duties and responsibilities related to our choices and discernment of our choices. We must accept consequences when we choose to violate the rights of others.

Catholic leadership requires remaining in God's love, to love (abide, dwell) and loving another as I have loved you. Love means laying down your life for another. Our faith is haunted by the mystery of love. Love is not won, not earned or meritocracy. Love is given. This is so contrary to what many cultures teach us. It is our choice to remain in God's love and to love as Jesus loved. Love is laying down my life and washing the feet of another. This all leads to improbable situations like that of the Prodigal son, laborers in the field, and to forgiveness seventy times seven, loving your enemies, welcoming the stranger, praying for those who persecute you. This truly means being a servant and a leader.

This love is not the narcissistic and self-indulgent state of mind that often passes for love in our contemporary life. Nor is it the great tidal wave of emotion associated with "falling in love." Paul reminds us love is patience and kindness, and let's go of jealousy, conceit, and resentment. Love delights in the truth. Love trusts. Love hopes. Love endures. These are all attributes of God's love for us. Love's

greatest expression is to lay down one's life, and this is what the Passion means. This is the call of a servant leader. Yes, love is a decision even when we do not feel love or loving or lovable. We are called to keep alive the memory of Jesus and do this (be a servant) in memory of Jesus. In *Brothers Karamazov*, the old Father Zossima points out to Madame Hohlokov that her supposed crisis of faith is really a crisis of love: "For love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly performed and in the sight of all... But active love is labor and fortitude, and for some people too, perhaps a complete science" (Dostoevskij, et al., 2002).

When we are all truly honest with ourselves, we have looked for love in all the wrong places and all the wrong faces.

As Servant Leaders, how do we treat others? Do we maximize their potential through professional development but also focus on wholeness and their integral development through interior reflection and development? Do we offer benefits, just wage and the opportunity for advancement? If late for work, do we try to find out what is happening or write-up the employee? Does the Metro schedule meet the time they can arrive? Do we offer to pay half hour extra at the beginning of the shift and end of shift to an employee to pick up and drop off another employee at their home? Are we surfacing ideas and communication from individuals and departments rather than top-down? Have we utilized tools like the Greater Cincinnati Foundations Employer Toolkit (Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati FDN, 2018). Do we attend to the souls of our staff to bring about the Reign of God?

Our leadership is a ministry, a calling that is different from a career or a work. Rooted in God, of God and for God and others and for all of creation, there is a deeper meaning and purpose that is Interiorly motivating and compelling that is grounded in a calling. Ron Rohlheiser in his book, writes "My vocation is at each moment to make the person in front of me the most important person in my life" (Rohlheiser, 2004).

Interruptions, most days, are our ministry so we mold our interruptions. Are we restless, unfocused, and too distracted to notice and to make the person in front of me the most important person in my life? Can we let go of the desire to have, to control, to guard events and decisions as if they were mine alone? Self-sufficiency was certainly one of the temptations that Satan tried to inflict on Jesus. Gospel values call us to treat everything and everyone with reverence, to live out of gratitude and freedom which comes from trusting the generosity of the Creator as respectful guests in God's world.

Paschal taught, "The heart has reasons which reason does not know of." Our vocation is a compelling invitation, not a goal to achieve but a gift to be received. Buchner called our vocation "The place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Do you believe you are beloved? Do we take time and space in prayer to allow our relationship with God to nurture and grow so our awareness and conviction of our *belovedness* deepens? How have you experienced your gladness meeting the world's great need?

We are all called to wholeness and to solidarity in wholeness and radical compassion: "whole-hearted commitment to always being on the way" rather than having it all together. A whole person values consciousness and is committed to being aware and reflective about how their thoughts, feelings, and actions affect the life of love to which Christians are called. Recognizing that our tendency through our culture is toward selfishness, control, ambition, competition, and a desire to be first and the greatest, can stand in the way of loving like Jesus. In the process of striving to love as Jesus loved, God will make us whole. Becoming whole does not mean being perfect. It does not necessarily mean happiness but growth, inner peace and the joy of the Gospel. Reflection, prayer and interdependence on spiritual direction can minimize projection. We can all recall leaders "lorded over" and caused harm through their demeaning words and actions. We witness leaders who fabricate, lie, and are self-serving, emotionally abusive (sometimes even physically abusive). The tyranny of the "should" for ourselves

can result in a leader being harshly self-critical, overly evaluative and judgmental (at times not grounded in reality). Servant leaders are aware of their need for healing, deal with their feelings and hurts in healthy ways, and rely on the help of others for insights and wisdom. At a minimum, we are all called to do no harm.

Walk into a classroom, a meeting, an office, a church and we can resonate with the management consultant and writer Peter Drucker that "culture eats strategy for breakfast." Strategy is important but the servant leadership culture of any organization, department, and classroom is essential.

Thomas Merton often writes about the false self and the true self. As a servant leader am I becoming more sensitive to the needs of others, more vulnerable in my own failings of what I did and failed to do, more aware of receiving mercy and sharing mercy, more authentic, more hospitable to myself and to others and to creation? Alternatively, am I becoming more aloof, more distracted, more distant, more unaware, more withholding and less spontaneous?

Am I growing in a deeper appreciation of the sacredness of ordinary life and to see in my routine of work and/or family life countless opportunities for spiritual transformation through self-transcendence. Two of my most meaningful insights are from Saint Mother Teresa: "Do ordinary things with extraordinary love," and "Love begins at home, it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the action that we do." Servant leaders pitch in, clean-up spilled water on a hallway floor and reach out if there is a tragedy or loss immediately and months later. Servant leaders are friendly, available and hospitable, and greet you in the hallway and classroom. They are visible at campus events (play, basketball game, etc.). When we meet, someone that we sense is a holy person, a servant leader; there is an experience of their genuineness. It is evident how ordinary and how unassuming this person is and how they are in no way invested in their self-importance.

When we focus on servant leadership through a Trinitarian lens, the doctrine of the Trinity, we affirm that God is absolutely personal, that God begets a Son, and breathes forth the Spirit to be united with all creatures and human beings for the sake of communion. Our origin is with a personal God, and our destiny is to be in communion with other persons, other creatures with all the goods of the earth, with God. We are persons in a community; therefore, self-sufficiency and being independent is contrary to our theological anthropology and our human development. Competition is contrary to being in communion. “I” can mature only in the presence of authentic interpersonal relationships.

Not who am I, but who am I to my neighbor? The heart of the Christian life is to be united with the God of Jesus Christ by means of communion with one another. Jesus Christ, the visible icon of the invisible God, discloses what it means to be fully personal, divine as well as human. We are persons from and for God, living as persons from and for others. Servant leaders will make regular rounds on different shifts and to various locations. Servant leaders regularly communicate and have regular opportunities for feedback and questions. They articulate the mission and the vision and integrate it into every aspect. Servant leaders are visible in a crisis and during the regular day. You might find a servant leader helping students clean the snow off their car on a snowy evening.

I often wonder if the recent controversies around the Eucharist is our trouble believing that Christ could inhabit us. God could be our food and drink rather than power, money, recognition, achievement, status. Are we struggling to believe anything that wonderful about our peers or ourselves? Do we truly believe in our own goodness, you are loveable and beloved, and that you are precious, honored and loved unconditionally by God. Apart from God’s love, we are nothing.

Being in communion with others, community life challenges are narcissism and our selfishness, just

as children challenge parents because there is a cost in time, money, and priorities. For love costs and love is more than words or feelings. Love is a risk of the ego, an emptying of the self, a desire to serve rather than to be served. This risk is the crux of the Christian belief, that God would love us and then graced by such abundance, we would generously love others. Only through complete love by Jesus, freely given to the point of death, could the grasping enslaving power of the human ego needs be broken and life set free. Ultimately the choice set before us is the imitation of Christ. Christ is humble; he does not demand his rights. Saint Paul is emphatic and direct about warning members of the community not to demand their rights or to dominate others, not to expect entitlements, and not to expect that others show them the deference they believe they deserve or have earned. Such attitudes can undermine the loving quality of the community so Paul offers the example of Jesus for their imitation and the way to act.

Servant leaders build consensus and motivate toward group goals. They are achievement oriented but also plan-ahead and work collaboratively to find new and better ways to achieve goals. Servant leaders provide opportunities for growth and empathy with personal problems and barriers yet remain focused on achieving the mission and goals. Servant leaders are spiritually sensitive, acutely aware of God in their midst, they are able to see and articulate the spiritual significance of events. Servant leaders are more open, conscientious and acting for impact and have a sense of humor. Servant leaders also appreciate that God has a sense of humor. God always makes sense but sometimes events and losses in our life only make sense looking backwards. They are change agents, courageous, gospel value driven, visionary, able to deal with complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty (as in the recent COVID-19 pandemic). They create a culture of life-long learners, and believing in people, they dare to risk a caring response. Servant leaders transition, but service does not retire.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sister Sally Duffy, SC is a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati, Ohio since 1977 and was President/CEO of the SC Ministry Foundation from 2004 to 2017. Sally has served in various administrative capacities including hospital President/CEO and VP Student Affairs/Dean of Students. Sally's current board service includes TriHealth System, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (founding board member), Ohio Justice and Policy Center, and Price Hill Will (founding board member). Sally current service on advisory boards includes City of Cincinnati's Housing Advisory Board, LISC and Pastoral Migratoria of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Her current service on committees includes Archdiocese of Cincinnati Immigration Task Force, Catholic Charities of SW Ohio Development Committee, Price Hill Safety Community Action Team, and recently completed service on the City of Cincinnati's Gender Equity Committee and the Port Authority Board. Sally was Chair of the Child Poverty Collaborative with the successful goal of reducing 10,000 children in poverty and 5000 adults in Cincinnati, Ohio until March of 2021. The Mayor and Cincinnati City Council honored Sally in March of 2022 for her leadership in reducing poverty. Sally's degrees include M. Ed., M. PA and M. Div. and two honorary doctorate degrees. Sally served as Co-Executive Producer of the Gabriel Award documentary "We Shall Not Be Moved: Catholic Sisters of New Orleans."