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## Servant Leadership in Catholic Institutions of Higher Education

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# SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Dr. Margaret Mary Fitzpatrick, S.C.

## ABSTRACT

*Catholic institutions of higher learning are charged with the formation of a significant number of privileged students, who received an advanced degree worldwide. All colleges and universities of Catholic identity, especially its presidents and leadership, would gain to reflect on servant leadership from a Vincentian perspective, What must be done? How must it be done? A Catholic college creates a faith-filled climate where the presence of the Spirit deepens the communion with the entire community, city, state, and beyond. A growing leadership philosophy is based on Greenleaf's Servant Leadership, where the behaviors and practices emphasize the well-being of those being served. Suggestions and practical examples are offered as an encouragement towards praxis from the reader.*

## WHAT MUST BE DONE? HOW MUST IT BE DONE?

There are 260 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States serving 870,000 students. Globally, there are approximately 1,500 institutions of Catholic higher learning. Many of these universities were founded by religious orders, dioceses, or are pontifical. They are led by presidents who must be astute, agile, learned, visionary, and administratively adept. The role of a president is complex. The president is the chief executive officer, policy maker, ensures the mission, fosters academic excellence, sets the climate of the culture, is fiscally responsible, develops policy, champions the university externally while raising funds, sets standards, recruits top level personnel, is a collaborator with administrators, faculty and students, and is the role model for the values of the institution.

As a Sister of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul I ask, "What must be done?" This Vincentian mandate shaped my vision and drove my presidency for twenty-five years as a Catholic college president. It is not enough to foster academic excellence and the holistic development of the students. It must be done within a context of shared leadership, enlightening minds through truth, and with a purposeful intention to lead from a stance of social justice and compassion.

Presidents of Catholic higher educational institutions must follow up on the fundamental Vincentian question with How must it be done? Louise Sullivan, D.C., found in the writings of St. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac the central values foundational to Catholic Vincentian higher education: holistic, integrated, creative, flexible, excellent, person oriented, collaborative, and focused (Sullivan, 1995). Louise gives us an insight into how we must be as leaders and how we must act.

I like the image of an interactive theatre performance supported by a musical ensemble that adds dramatic and melodious tones to the performance. While the president may play the role of the orchestra leader or play director, the president is only successful if all the performers play their role in harmony with the others all the while engaging the audience. At times, the president may be the drummer setting the tempo, or be a supporting actor adding the one line that changes the course of the action. The president needs to understand all the roles and may play most of the roles as is necessary. The students are invited into this college community, this performance, as active learners. They add new insights and their yearning to participate gives an energy that propels the learning process forward. Who knows what the ending may be?

The key role, however, is not a particular part that one plays but how one calls forth the gifts of all the actors and students who interactively learn together within a framework of respect, dignity and individual and social responsibility.

A Catholic college creates a faith-filled climate where the presence of the Spirit deepens the communion with the entire community, city, state, and beyond. A Catholic institution of higher learning must open its doors to first-generation students, embrace the diversity in society, invite those who are economically disadvantaged and aspire for a quality value-centered higher education, with the open invitation to come and to learn.

*How must it be done?*

The actual leadership model must fit the particular institution of higher learning and its culture. Whether it is a department and committee model led by an executive team, a distributive leadership model, or a centrally governed model, how the mission and work is done is core to actualizing the mission, goals and objectives of the institution. Integral to the model is the style of leadership - how the mission is achieved.

A growing leadership philosophy is based on servant leadership where the behaviors and practices emphasize the well-being of those being served. The term, servant leadership, was introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf who explains the idea. "The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 1973). For a college or university president, the philosophy of servant leadership translates into focusing on the well-being of the students and colleagues in the community. The president puts the needs of others first and promotes the development of each person within the mission and goals of the institution of higher learning.

What are the implications of servant leadership? The president promotes innovation and the empowerment of students, faculty, staff and administrators. The president achieves servant

leadership through a style that is empathetic, listening, and committed to the growth of others all the while developing each one's leadership qualities. Greenleaf centers servant leadership on ten principles: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. The focus needs to be on the holistic development of the students first. All stakeholders, especially the leaders, must hold themselves accountable for their actions and how they have affected the culture at the college or university.

When you evaluate your leadership style; when you incorporate the principles of servant leadership; take time for reflection then GO DEEPER. When you think you have applied Greenleaf's principles of servant leadership, go deeper. Do you treat everyone with respect? Are you just in all your dealings? Is the dignity of each person enhanced because of your style of leadership? When you fall short or become impatient with others' shortcomings, go deeper.

The complex nature of university governance, the multiple constituency groups, the societal pressures to do more with less, the fiscal challenges of balancing and supporting multiple areas of the institution, the rich diversity of personnel and needs will all require one to go deeper. Yet, the power of the Spirit is alive, embracing our own vulnerability while we participate in ongoing learning, conversion and discern actions.

As we engage with the college community, we are ultimately called to be present. Presence is first and foremost - being there. The quality of presence can permeate a community, give hope to the hopeless, strengthen the discouraged, and give space for the innovators. Presence invites closeness; presence engenders an attitude of companionship; and presence creates the opportunity for engagement, dialogue, and learning.

While servant leadership is a disposition of character and behaviors, it is authentically revealed in action. The attaining of a college degree is a privilege afforded to a small number of people

globally. A true Catholic university understands that loving God is intrinsically interwoven with loving the neighbor. The servant leader must go deeper and in this place of reflection meets the face of God. God is revealed in the faces of those on campus and those whose lives encounter the hardships of poverty, the cruelty of violence and war, and the deprivation of families lost through climate degradation, systemic racial injustice or the poverty of resources.

## HOW MUST IT BE DONE? SIGNS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Every president will have a style that suits them and is effective within the college/university community. The following are ways that may be effective and model servant leadership.

- The president's office door is open except when conducting meetings, on the phone, or for the need for uninterrupted time. The symbol of an open door is welcoming. I want your opinion; how can I work with you on an issue?
- The president is seen on campus, and meets you where you are.
- Showing up. If there is an academic program, attend it. If there is an athletic event, show up and cheer.
- Ask the executive team, what events do you want me to attend? What can I do to support this event?
- Bring Campus Ministry and the Office of Human Resources together to promote the mission of the institution.
- Teach a class or guest lecture in a class.
- Go on service learning trips.
- Embrace diversity in all its forms.
- Model Catholic in its particular and universal meaning.
- Begin the day. Review meetings and their implications. How can you be a servant leader? Go deeper.
- Review your day or week. What must be done? How must it be done? Was I a servant leader?
- Build consensus being faithful to the mission.

- What must be done? Go deeper.
- Disposition of a servant leader: reflective, courageous, student and teacher, listener, empathetic, compassionate, and bold in righteousness.

Dan Rockwell (2018, September 6) states what to look for when hiring a servant leader:

1. Servant-leaders turn conversations towards others.
2. Servant leaders use people's strengths, aspirations, and capabilities as guides for evaluation.
3. Servant-leaders concern themselves with how others feel about themselves, not what others think about them.
4. Stand behind others.
5. Take responsible risks.
6. Servant-leaders revel in the success of others.

Ed Stetzer (2020, March 24) offers seven signs to look for in a servant-leader: devotion, humility, gratitude, composure, encouragement, stewardship, and empathy. Stetzer uses the model of Jesus who came to serve not to be served (Matt 23:11, Mark 10:45). Similarly, Ken Blanchard in an interview with Kevin Kruse (2018, April 9) thinks that we focus first on tasks and then on people but this is in reverse order. Blanchard urges leading from the ground up and serving your team. If you do, you end up with a group of high-performing individuals. Leadership is about vision, direction, and goals. Once this is set, then you work with and for your colleagues who will serve the students. Blanchard understands that there are goals to be achieved and tasks to be done. Blanchard brings to this external goal achievement a reflective spirit and the attitude to serve. Then there is the Fitzpatrick mantra, Go Deeper.

### *What must be done?*

Social responsibility is one of the missions of higher education. As each member of the college community lives the mission to be servant leaders, the other becomes central and the needs of the world become the responsibility of each person. Inspired

by the charisms such as the Sisters of Charity, servant leaders strive to develop a sensitivity toward those whom the world oppresses, to right in great ways or small the injustices seen around us, to heal the wounds of the embittered, to speak peace to the troubled, to urge the mighty to right wrongs, and to bring the compassion of the Spirit to all whose lives are encountered. Then, go deeper: *What must be done? How must it be done?*

Elizabeth Ann Seton was instrumental in the birth of the Catholic school system in the United States. With academics at its foundation, these new schools developed character, based on Catholic values within the context of faith formation. Elizabeth Seton's deep desire was to teach children who were poor in order to give them a path out of poverty. Her respect for others and her inclusive nature was a testimony to her servant leadership. She was a pioneer, dared to go where others would not, and courageously lived "the sweet dream of imagination" (McNeil, 2006).

There are many roles for a Catholic institution of higher learning. This article suggests a style of servant-leadership all the while knowing that this style must foster the institution's mission, goals and objectives. At a Catholic University, it must also be the home for the Catholic intellectual tradition. Monika Hellwig was a leader in the Catholic intellectual tradition in Catholic universities. She states:

We are the heirs and trustees of a great intellectual and cultural tradition founded on Catholic faith and enhanced by grace and by many centuries of testing for fidelity and authenticity. It is a trust not only for the benefit of the Church but also for the benefit of the world. The Catholic universities play a key role in bearing this trust with its treasury of classic deposits and its long-developed approach to life and learning. The conditions for fidelity to our trust have changed a good deal. (Hellwig, 2000)

I believe that Hellwig would recognize the role of a servant-leader in supporting these essential cornerstones of Catholic institutions of higher learning in deepening in new ways the Catholic intellectual tradition through a style of leadership that embodies the greatest commandment to love God and to love the neighbor.

We are the cast of the interactive theatre performance. We practice and go deeper. We listen and reflect knowing that these are "essential to the growth of the servant-leader" (Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, n.d.). We are Vincent de Paul, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Robert Greenleaf, the servant leaders in the classrooms, in the offices, on the playing fields, in the minds and hearts of those we serve. We are one of six billion people, we are the bird in the ecosystem, we are the one dying without living, we are the face of God. Go deeper - action follows being.

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