

The Franciscan View of Leadership

St. Francis is probably the world's best known, most recognized, and respected saint. Yet it is difficult to see a spirituality of leadership and work that evolves from the life of a saint all too often represented in popular statues and yard ornaments as a romanticized caricature of a serene man with a bird perched on his shoulder and wild animals tamely surrounding him. On the contrary, however, Francis was a multi-dimensional figure with deep, spiritual insights which have had a ripple effect throughout the centuries, impacting many areas of modern-day life—including leadership and work.

It has always been a core tenet of Franciscan spirituality that the “world is our cloister.” This means that we incorporate our Franciscan heritage into all aspects of our daily living. We break down the traditional boundaries that we as Christians tend to construct between our spiritual and secular lives. We, of course, need no reminding that this was the driving force behind St. Francis' way of living the Gospel. The message at San Damiano, “Francis, rebuild my church for it is falling into ruin” penetrated the very core of his being, and should do the same to us. The words spoken by Christ from the San Damiano Cross, when understood in the broader context as St. Francis grew to understand them, are a universal call to action to rebuild and to renew the Church as a sign pointing towards the realization of the kingdom of God on earth. And now, after eight centuries, this command to rebuild the Church continues to resound around the world with its need as great as ever. This spirit has been reaffirmed with the advent of Vatican II with the words we read in article 12 of *Lumen Gentium*, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: “The holy people of God share in Christ's prophetic office: it spreads abroad a living

witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love. . .” As a prophetic people, the people of God are expected to lead the way, to become prophets and leaders in the rebuilding process.

This challenges us to carry our Franciscan charism wherever we go, even to workplace. Just as importantly, the spirit of Franciscan servant-leadership should guide all Franciscans who find themselves in positions of leadership within their fraternities and councils. Servant-Leadership has a strong foundation to draw from, starting with the words and ministry of Jesus Christ: “And whoever wishes to be first among you must be your servant; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:27). St. Francis incorporates this Gospel Passage into the Earlier Rule where he directly refers to ministers and leaders as servants: Let all the brothers who have been designated ministers and servants. . .remember what the Lord says “I have not come to be served, but to serve; because the care of the brothers’ souls has been entrusted to them, if anything is lost on account of their fault or bad example, they will have to render an account before the Lord Jesus Christ on the day of judgment. St. Clare carries on the Franciscan tradition in her rule concerning abbesses in authority: “Let whoever is elected reflect upon the king of burden she has undertaken on herself and to Whom she must render an account of the flock committed to her. Let her also strive to preside over the others more by her virtues and holy behaviour than by her office, so that, moved by her example, the sisters may obey her more out of love than out of fear.”

From this rich tradition, there emerges a style of leadership which reflects the counter-cultural idea that places the one in authority and office in relationship and service to others—not in dominance over them. From this foundation, we can identify 10 characteristics of Franciscan Leadership: respect for the individual; empowerment; collaboration; communication; ethical

worldview; commitment to the growth of others; informed decision making; open to learning; compassionate, fair, and strong; and above all, servant. Let me briefly talk about these characteristics one at a time.

Respect for the individual—A Franciscan leader instinctively cultivates respect for all individuals and creation based on the belief and recognition that all people are children of God, created in his Divine Image. This reflects a universal communion among all human beings, as stated so beautifully in Pope Francis’ environmental encyclical “Laudato Si.” All of us are linked by unseen spiritual bonds. It is not a coincidence that in the Canticum of the Creatures, in which St. Francis praises God for his creatures, he goes on to say “Praise be to you my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love.” Everyone is connected in a fraternity which should exclude no one. This fundamental relationship affects our relationship we have to creation. If we choose to exclude and mistreat and disrespect others, it follows that this will show in our ability to take care of God’s creation. Respect for the individual reflects the Trinitarian nature present within humanity. God the Father is the ultimate source of everything, The Son, who reflects the Father, unites himself to creation by the Incarnation, and the Holy Spirit is present at the heart of creation, inspiring and guiding us along new paths. The world was created by these 3 persons of the Trinity, acting in unity while performing their particular role. The persons of the Trinity reflect interconnected relationships—and so it is with us. The human person grows and matures spiritually to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out of themselves to live in communion with God and others in solidarity and respect.

Empowerment—A Franciscan leader becomes empowered by striving to empower others—sees the importance of building up others. Empowerment acknowledges that people have

talents, abilities, ideas, skills which contribute to the building of the fraternity and the kingdom of God. Empowerment means power *with*, not power *over*. Coercion and manipulation use power over people in order to get them to do what the leader wants—regardless of alternatives which might be better. In effect, it is telling others that their ideas and abilities are not worthy of attention or acknowledgement—that they are meant to be ignored. But it is important to understand what the true meaning of power is. The word “power” comes from the Latin “*posse*” and the French verb “*pouvoir*” which means “to be able to.” So power can be the ability to coerce, manipulate, and ultimately kill—or it can be used to influence and draw others to utilize the skills which God has given them. A Franciscan servant-leader uses power “with others” to create opportunities, community and fraternity where members become invested personally, enliven their faith, and raises motivation and zeal for the kingdom of God. We see St. Francis utilize this concept of empowerment in advice to ministers on how to inspire and motivate the brothers:

Wherever the brothers may be who know and feel they cannot observe the Rule spiritually, they can and should have recourse to their ministers. Let the ministers, moreover, receive them charitably and kindly and have such familiarity with them that these same brothers may speak and deal with them as masters with their servants, for so it must be that the ministers are the servants of all the brothers.

Empowerment, therefore, respects and listens to the individual—takes them at the level they are and raises awareness and understanding and motivates people to work toward a positive goal. It may be difficult to empower rather than manipulate or control—it draws from the inner strength of the minister and leader with God’s help. In the end, it serves to engage and develop creativity and a vibrancy which already exists within the community. Empowerment enables people to use

their skills and experience to work toward a common good, to a more effective and vibrant community where there is creativity, the courage to do things in different ways, and trust in each other.

Franciscan leadership also seeks healing and reconciliation. Servant-Leaders may not think of themselves as healers, but this is an important characteristic if a leader wants to follow in the footsteps of St. Francis. Healing involves the little, unknown acts of kindness—like a kind and uplifting word, helping to mend a broken relationship, offering forgiveness, lending a helping hand or a listening ear. All these are acts of healing—helping to make a community or fraternity whole again. Healing was one of the primary acts Jesus did during his earthly ministry—it was a central proof of the validity of his ministry and his divinity. In Mt. 11:4-5, he told the disciples of John the Baptist “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” St. Francis emulated Jesus in his acts of healing. There are several stories of healing in his biographies. St. Bonaventure in his Major Legend of St. Francis, includes a healing story where he healed a woman in the town of Gubbio who had crippled and withered hands. In the town of Bevagna, he restored the sight of a blind girl by marking her eyes with his saliva 3 times in the name of the Trinity. He healed not only damaged bodies, but damaged relationships as well. In his prayer Inspired by the Our Father, St. Francis urges the friars to offer peace even to enemies: “As We forgive those who trespass against us: and what we do not completely forgive, make us Lord, forgive completely that we may truly of our enemies because of You, and we may fervently intercede for them before You, returning on one evil for evil, and we may strive to help everyone in You.”

Francis sought to heal broken communities. He brought peace to warring factions in Bologna, Arezzo, and Siena. In his book on St. Francis, Leonardo Boff recounts how Francis brought healing and peace to the strife between the Bishop and the Mayor: The Bishop had excommunicated the Mayor, and the Mayor had prohibited the citizens from buying and selling to the Bishop. Francis sent the friars to bring the two men together. When they had done so, they started to sing a verse from the Canticle of Creatures which Francis wrote referring to the dispute. When they had heard this, the Bishop and Mayor embraced each other and were reconciled.

Franciscan leadership involves listening, walking in other people's shoes, growing in awareness so that they can help bring healing to broken bodies, souls, relationships and communities. Not only because all Christians should be doing this, but also if a community or fraternity is to be effective and thrive in helping to build the Kingdom of God. Bringing healing is not just for the sake for the one who is healed, but those who are healed can more likely to become servant leader and healers themselves and help others.

A Franciscan Leader has the Vision of the Gospel as the central mission statement. It has been said that “for something to great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement, there is a dreamer of great dreams; much more than a dreamer is required to bring it to reality, but the dream must be there first.” Francis was certainly a great dreamer—his mission of living the Gospel and rebuilding the Church was simple, but compelling. The Franciscan Rule of Life went through several expansions and revisions, but the core mission statement always remained “To observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Franciscan charism stuck to this core idea, even when the authorities tried to persuade Francis to

adopt one of the existing rules. At the heart of living the Gospel, is the building of the Kingdom of God. We hear this in the Words of Jesus “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6:26-34).

What we believe and set our hearts on—that is what drives a fraternities’ action and path.

What does the Kingdom of God and the Gospel Vision look like? Francis summarized the Gospel vision in his Admonitions to the Secular Franciscans of his time: But how happy and blessed are those who love God and do as the Lord Himself says in the Gospel: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” So the Gospel Vision for St. Francis involved being faithful to the Lord’s commands and to do this out of love for God and others. Franciscans conceptualize life on earth where people’s physical and spiritual needs are met and have the opportunity to become freer, healthier, wiser, and more likely to become servants of God themselves. The Franciscan charism today needs leaders who remember the Gospel Vision and remember what’s important and why we live the Franciscan way of life.

A Franciscan leader should also strive to be mindful of the present, but also have the foresight to look toward the future. In 1220, at a Chapter of Mats such as this one, St. Francis resigned his position as leader of the Franciscans, much to the surprise to the rest of the friars. His health was declining, and the Order was expanding rapidly and many changes were being brought in to the Franciscan way of life. Francis knew that he was not the right person to oversee this time of change. He knew that his effectiveness would not be as a leader, but as a guide, an example, a servant. He spent the rest of his days praying and observing the Order and exhorting

the Friars to remain true their charism. Francis knew that he could not control the future but drew from his past experiences and foresaw some of the challenges ahead and did what he could to keep their focuses directed towards the Gospel. The Order might not have survived without the foresight of Francis. Foresight is the ability to be in the present and understand how it is influenced by the past and that decisions made now has real consequences in the future. This is central to all types of leadership. Only by considering the consequences of a decision can we ensure that the present decision will be the correct one. We've all seen the consequences of a lack of foresight—economic ruin of societies, the wars that have been fought without counting the cost of lives and property. Jesus spoke of the importance of foresight in the Christian life and hinted at the consequences that come with a lack of foresight. [read Mt 7:21-27] Franciscan leaders grow in foresight as they develop other key characteristics—empathy, listening, awareness, conceptualization. These all assist us when we look down the road and see the results of our actions and decisions.

We are all familiar of with St. Francis' love and affinity for God's creation. Stories such as Francis preaching to the birds, the wolf of Gubbio, carrying earthworms off the path to safety tell us of the truth of Francis as a leader: we are all interconnected with the earth, sky, water, plants and animals. He knew that we do not control our brothers and sisters in nature—but that “the earth is the Lord's; and all things in it” (Ps 24:1). Any attempt to dominate, abuse, and denigrate any part of creation is an attempt to destroy what belongs to the Lord. It was very fitting when Pope John Paul II declared St. Francis the patron saint of ecology. The word ecology comes from 2 Greek words: “oikos” meaning “household” and “logos” meaning “word.” The ecology speaks the truth about the household which is our planet—at the heart is caring for our

house. In his actions and words, Francis modeled good leadership by being a good steward of creation. In the book “Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest,” Peter Block describes stewardship which parallels the Bible and St. Francis: “Stewardship is to hold in trust the well-being of some larger entity—our organization, our community, the earth itself. To hold something of value in trust is to hold service ahead of control. . . .Service is the central idea of stewardship.”

The Franciscan idea of poverty has its roots in the idea of stewardship. I know that my vow to live without property is different from your promises as SFO’s, but there are some principles that are common to both our orders. Francis took the vow of poverty literally because he knew that ownership had the potential to separate people from one another—poverty and stewardship made the friars “members of the same family”—all people creation. For stewards like Francis, all goods of the earth are “on loan” from God. To withhold goods and not serve those in need would be like stealing. Stewardship realizes the interdependency of all humanity with God’s creation. It is a relinquishment of status and domination which Francis and Clare understood as being embodied in Christ’s Incarnation. Franciscan leaders should understand that everything is “gift,” not property and hold God’s creation in trust for the common good of all.

A Franciscan leader is also to be a resource of growth for others. St. Francis gave of his entire self to anyone in need. He was a careful and empathetic listener and a constant resource of growth for the brothers. He shared his wisdom, insights, and guidance so they could be effective ministers in return. He gave them a rule of life to live by when he was gone. [read Rule Chp 6, pg 68]. He led not by power, but by one who serves and shares the resources needed for their personal growth. Like St. Francis, this should be done quietly, simply, inconspicuously—not for

recognition or glory, but for the good of others. The power of Franciscan leadership is felt in the small, quiet deeds. A good example is when Francis constructed the first Christmas crèche scene at Greccio. He displayed a quiet leadership so that others may be formed by the Nativity story and the Gospel message of salvation. His example provided a resource throughout the centuries that empowered people to remember the birth of Jesus as a concrete event with a meaningful message. Francis offered resources to the brothers so that they can become servant-leaders themselves. This carries on the message of Jesus—he commissioned his disciples to preach and heal. The disciples in turn led others to Christ by their resources and support.

The Final characteristic of a Franciscan leader is that they are community builders. They seek to provide circles of support, inspiration, love and service. They acknowledge everyone's gifts and abilities. Franciscan leaders see themselves as part of and responsible to the community. Francis inspired fraternal love among the brothers even when he was not present. [read TS pg 217-218] Joyful looks, sweet embrace, conversation, affection—these define Franciscan leaders who build community. Francis' commitment of community building is reflected in the rule for the Friars [read TS pg. 103]. As with any community and fraternity, friars bickered, argued and gossiped, but Francis relied on God's grace to gather all of them together for one purpose and made sure every brother's needs were met. Franciscan leadership is meant for the long-term. His teachings on community are rooted in the Gospel. In his final hours, he had the Gospel of John read to him. He would have heard the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and telling them to do the same (Jn 13:34-35). Not only is community building commanded by the Gospel, but ensures that the community's mission carries on after the minister has gone.

No matter what our station in life, we practice leadership in one way or another. We all influence other people in some way. If we are to build God's Kingdom, then we are to embrace servant-leadership that has empathy and awareness, listens, has vision and foresight, builds community and resources and practices stewardship of God's creation. Francis was just such a leader who followed in the footsteps of Christ. It is not a coincidence that Pope Francis has commanded the respect of Christians and Non-Christians alike around the world. He is modeling the leadership of Jesus and St. Francis which the world seeks to embrace.