

In the Name of Jesus

Reflections on Christian Leadership

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Prologue

When my friend Murray McDonnel visited me at the Daybreak community near Toronto, he asked me whether I would be willing to speak about Christian leadership in the twenty-first century, the occasion being the fifteenth anniversary of the Center for Human Development in Washington, D.C. Although I had only recently begun my work as a priest at Daybreak, one of L'Arche communities for mentally handicapped people, I did not want to disappoint Murray, who, as chairman of the board of the Center for Human Development, had given much of his time and energy to its growth. I also knew Father Vincent Dwyer, the Center's founder, and had great admiration for his dedicated work in helping priests and ministers in their search for emotional and spiritual wholeness. So I said yes.

But after having said yes to the invitation, I realized that it was far from easy to come up with a sane perspective on Christian leadership for the twenty-first century. The audience would mostly be priests who were themselves deeply involved in ministry to their fellow priests. What would I be able to say to people who are thinking day in and day out about the future of the priesthood and the ministry in the church? I also wondered how it would be possible to look ahead of me, into the new century, when I considered that

nobody in the 1950's could have foreseen the situation of most priests today. Still, the more I said to myself, "I can't do this," the more I discovered within me a desire to put into words my thoughts about ministry as they had evolved since my joining the Daybreak community. For many years I had taught courses about ministry. Now, having stepped away from the academic life and having been called to be a priest for mentally handicapped people and their assistants, I asked myself, "How do I now live from day to day after having spoken for twenty years to young men and women preparing themselves for ministry? How do I think about my ministry and how do these thoughts affect my everyday words and actions?"

I also came to see that I should not worry about tomorrow, next week, next year, or the next century. The more willing I was to look honestly at what I was thinking and saying and doing now, the more easily I would come into touch with the movement of God's Spirit in me, leading me to the future. God is a God of the present and reveals to those who are willing to listen carefully to the moment in which they live the steps they are to take toward the future. "Do not worry about tomorrow," Jesus says. "Tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

With these thoughts, I began to write down what I most deeply felt about my present life as a priest at Daybreak, trying carefully to discern which of my own experiences and insights could speak to priests and ministers who live in very different circumstances. The present work is the result.

Jesus did not send his disciples out alone to preach the word. He sent them two by two.

Before concluding these introductory remarks, however, I must tell you, the readers of this little book, that I did not go to Washington, D.C., by myself. As I was preparing my presentation, I became deeply aware of the fact that Jesus did not send his disciples out alone to preach the word. He sent them two by two. I began to wonder why nobody was planning to go with me. If my present life is truly a life among handicapped people, why no ask one of them to join me on the journey and to share the ministry with me?

After some consultation, the Daybreak community decided to send Bill van Buren with me. Since my arrival at Daybreak, Bill and I had become good friends. Of all the handicapped people in the house, he was the most able to express himself with words and gestures. From the beginning of our friendship, he had shown a real interest in my work as a priest and had offered to help me during services. One day he told me that he had not been baptized and expressed a strong desire to belong to the church. I suggest that he join a parish program for those who desired baptism. Faithfully he went to the local parish every Thursday evening. Even though the long and often complex presentations and discussions were far beyond his mental capacities, he had a real sense of belonging to the group. He felt accepted and loved. He received much and, with his generous heart, gave much in return. His Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion during the Easter Vigil became a high point in his life. While limited in his ability to express himself in many words, he felt deeply touched by Jesus and knew what it meant to be

reborn by water and the Holy Spirit.

Often I had told Bill that those who are baptized and confirmed have a new vocation, the vocation to proclaim to others the good news of Jesus. Bill had listened to me carefully, and when I invited him to go with me to Washington, D.C. to speak to priests and ministers, he accepted as an invitation to join me in my ministry. “We are doing this together,” he said at different times in the days before we left.

“Yes,” I kept saying, “we are doing this together. You and I are going to Washington to proclaim the Gospel!”

Bill did not for a moment doubt the truth of this. While I was quite nervous about what to say and how to say it, Bill showed great confidence in his task. And, while I was still thinking about Bill’s trip with me primarily as something that would be nice for him, Bill was, from the beginning, convinced that he was going to help me. I later came to realize that he knew better than I. As we stepped on board the plane to Toronto, Bill reminded me again, “We are doing this together, aren’t we?”

“Yes, Bill,” I said, “we sure are.”

After telling you what I said in Washington, I will tell you in more detail what happened there and explain to you why Bill’s presence most likely had a more lasting influence than my words.

Epilogue

Writing these reflections was one thing, presenting them in Washington, D.C., quite another. When Bill and I arrived at the Washington airport we were taken to the Claredon Hotel in Crystal City, a collection of modern, seemingly all-glass high-rise buildings on the same side of the Potomac River as the airport. Both Bill and I were quite impressed by the glittering atmosphere of the hotel. We were both given spacious rooms with double beds, bathrooms with many towels, and cable TV. On the table in Bill's room there was a basket with fruit and a bottle of wine. Bill loved it. Being a veteran TV-watcher, he settled comfortably on his queen-size bed and checked out all the channels with his remote-control box.

But the time for us to bring our good news together came quickly. After a delicious buffet dinner in one of the ballrooms decorated with golden statues and little fountains, Vincent Dwyer introduced me to the audience. At that moment I still did not know what "doing it together" with Bill would mean. I opened by saying that I had not come alone, but was very happy that Bill had come with me. Then I took my handwritten text and began my address. At that moment, I saw that Bill had left his seat, walked up to the podium, and planted himself right behind me. It was clear that he had a much more concrete idea about the meaning of "doing it to-

gether” than I. Each time I finished reading a page, he took it away and put it upside down on a small table close by. I felt very much at ease with this and started to feel Bill’s presence as a support.

And we did it together,
didn’t we?

But Bill had more in mind. When I began to speak about the temptation to turn stones into bread as a temptation to be relevant, he interrupted me and said loudly for everyone to hear, “I have heard that before!” He had indeed, and he just wanted the priests and ministers who were listening to know that he knew me quite well and was familiar with my ideas. For me, however, it felt like a gentle loving reminder that my thoughts were not as new as I wanted my audience to believe. Bill’s intervention created a new atmosphere in the Ballroom: lighter, easier, and more playful. Somehow Bill had taken away the seriousness of the occasion and had brought to it some homespun normality. As I continued my presentation, I felt more and more that we were indeed doing it together. And it felt good.

When I came to the second part and was reading the words, “The question most asked by the handicapped people with whom I live was, ‘Are you home tonight?’ ” Bill interrupted me again and said, “That’s right, that is what John Smeltzer always asks.” Again there was something disarming about his remark. Bill knew John Smeltzar very well after living with him in the same house for quite some years. He simply wanted people to know about his friend. It was as if he drew the audience toward us, inviting them into the intimacy of our common life.

After I had finished reading my text and people had shown their appreciation, Bill said to me, “Henri, can I say something now?” My first reaction was, “Oh, how am I going to handle this? He might start rambling and create an embarrassing situation,” but then I caught myself in my presumption that he had nothing of important to say and said to the audience, “Will you please sit down? Bill would like to say a few words to you.”

Bill took the microphone and said, with all the difficulties he has in speaking, “Last time, when Henri went to Boston, he took John Smeltzar with him. This time he wanted me to come with him to Washington, and I am very glad to be here with you. Thank you very much.” That was it, and everyone stood up and gave him warm applause.

As we walked away from the podium, Bill said to me, “Henri, how did you like my speech?”

“Very much,” I answered. “Everyone was really happy with what you said.” Bill was delighted. As people gathered for drinks, he felt freer than ever. He went from person to person, introduced himself, asked how they liked the evening, and told them all sorts of stories about his life in Daybreak. I did not see him for more than an hour. He was too busy getting to know everybody.

The next morning at breakfast before we left, Bill walked from table to table with his cup of coffee in his hands and said goodbye to all those he knew from the evening before. It was clear that he had made many friends and felt very much at home in these, for him, so unusual surroundings.

As we flew back to Toronto, Bill looked up from the word-puzzle book that he takes with him wherever he goes and said, “Henri, did you like our trip?”

“Oh, yes,” I answered, “it was a wonderful trip, and I am so glad you came with me.”

Bill looked at me attentively and then said, “And we did it together, didn’t we?”

Then I realized the full truth of Jesus’ words, “Where two or three meet in my name, I am among them” (Matthew 18:20). In the past, I had always been given lectures, sermons, addresses, and speeches by myself. Often I had wondered how much of what I had said would be remembered. Now it dawned on me that most likely much of what I said would not be long remembered, but that Bill and I doing it together would not easily be forgotten. I hoped and prayed that Jesus, who had sent us out together and had been with us all during the journey, would have become really present to those who had gathered in the Claredon Hotel in Crystal City.

As we landed, I said to Bill, “Bill, thanks so much for coming with me. It was a wonderful trip, and what we did, we did together in Jesus’ name,” And I really meant it.

Introduction

The request to reflect on Christian leadership in the new century has created quite a bit of anxiety in me. What can I say about the twenty-first century if I feel at a loss when people ask me about next month? After a lot of inner turmoil, I decided to stay as close to my own heart as possible. I asked myself, “What decisions have you been making lately and how are they a reflection of the way you sense the future?” Somehow I have to trust that God is at work in me and that the way I am being moved to new inner and outer places is part of a larger movement of which I am only a very small part.

After twenty years in the academic world as a teacher of pastoral psychology, pastoral theology, and Christian spirituality, I began to experience a deep inner threat. As I entered into my fifties and was able to realize the unlikelihood of doubling my years, I came face to face with the simple question, “Did becoming older bring me closer to Jesus?” After twenty five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very preoccupied with burning issues. Everyone was saying that I was doing really well, but something inside me was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger. I began to ask myself whether my lack of contemplative

prayer, my loneliness, and my constantly changing involvement in what seemed most urgent were signs that the Spirit was gradually being suppressed. It was very hard for me to see clearly, and though I never spoke about hell or only jokingly so, I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and that the term “burnout” was a convenient psychological translation for a spiritual death.

In the midst of this I kept praying, “Lord, show me where you want me to go and I will follow you. But please be clear and unambiguous about it!” Well, God was. In the person of Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche communities for mentally handicapped people, God said, “Go and live among the poor in spirit, and they will heal you.” The call was so clear and distinct that I had no choice but to follow.

So I moved from Harvard to L’Arche, from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society. It was a very hard and painful move, and I am still in the process of making it. After twenty years of being free to go where I wanted and to discuss what I chose, the small, hidden life with people whose broken minds and bodies demand a strict daily routine in which words are the least requirement does not immediately appear as the solution for spiritual burnout. And yet, my new life at L’Arche is offering me new words to use in speaking about Christian leadership in the future because I have found there all the challenges that we are facing as ministers of God’s Word.

So I will offer you some images from my life with people with a mental handicap. I hope that they will give you some inkling of the direction to take when wondering about Chris-

tian leadership in the future. In sharing my reflections with you, I will be guided by two stories from the Gospels: the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11) and the story of Peter's call to be a shepherd (John 21:15-19).

Chapter 1

From Relevance to Prayer

One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from
the mouth of God.

1.1 The temptation: To be relevant

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, the books could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable ecumenical experience proved even less valuable. When I offered some meat to one of the assistants during dinner, one of the handicapped men said to me, “Don’t give him meat. He doesn’t eat meat, He’s a Presbyterian.”

Not being able to use any of the skills that had proved so practical in the past was a real source of anxiety. I was sud-

denly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, reputations could no longer be counted on.

This experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self – the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things – and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.

I am telling you all these because I am deeply convinced that **the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self.** That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's Word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.

Jesus' first temptation was to be relevant: to turn stones into bread. Oh, how often have I wished I could do that! Walking through the "young towns" on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, where children die from malnutrition and contaminated water, I would not have been able to reject the magical gift of making the dusty stone-covered streets into places where people could pick up any of the thousands of rocks

and discover that they were croissants, coffee cakes, or fresh-baked buns, and where they could fill their cupped hands with stale water from the cisterns and joyfully realized that what they were drinking was delicious milk. Aren't we priests and ministers called to help people, to feed the hungry, and to save those who are starving? Are we not called to do something that makes people realize that we do make a difference in their lives? Aren't we called to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and alleviate the suffering of the poor? Jesus was faced with these same questions, but when he was asked to prove his power as the Son of God by the relevant behavior of changing stones into bread, he clung to his mission to proclaim the Word and said, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

One of the main suffering experienced in the ministry is that of low self-esteem. Many priests and ministers today increasingly perceive themselves as having very little impact. They are very busy, but they do not see much change. It seems that their efforts are fruitless. They face an ongoing decrease in church attendance and discover that psychologists, psychotherapists, marriage counselors, and doctors are often more trusted than they. One of the most painful realization for many Christian leaders is that fewer and fewer young people feel attracted to follow in their footsteps. It might seem that nowadays, becoming and being a priest is no longer something worth dedicating your life to. Meanwhile, there is little praise and much criticism in the church today, and who can live for long in such a climate without slipping into some type of depression?

The secular world around us is saying in a loud voice,

“We can take care of ourselves. We do not need God, the church, or a priest. We are in control. And if we are not, then we have to work harder to get in control. The problem is not lack of faith, but lack of competence. If you are sick, you need a competent doctor; if you are poor, you need competent politicians; if there are technical problems, you need competent engineers; if there are wars, you need competent negotiators. God, the church, and the minister have been used for centuries to fill the gaps of incompetence, but today the gaps are being filled in other ways, and we no longer need spiritual answers to practical questions.”

In this climate of secularization, Christian leaders feel less and less relevant and more and more marginal. Many begin to wonder why they should stay in the ministry. Often they leave, develop a new competency, and join their contemporaries in their attempts to make relevant contributions to a better world.

But there is a completely different story to tell. Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world.

Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *Less Than Zero* offers a most graphic description of the moral and spiritual poverty behind the contemporary facade of wealth, success, popularity, and power. In a dramatically staccato way, he describes the life of sex, drugs, and violence among the teenage sons and daughters of super-rich entertainers in Los Angeles. And the

cry that arises from behind all of this decadence is clearly: “Is there anybody who loves me? Is there anybody who really cares? Is there anybody who wants to stay home for me? Is there anybody who wants to be with me when I am not in control, when I feel like crying? Is there anybody who can hold me and give me a sense of belonging?” Feeling irrelevant is a much more general experience than we might think when we look at our seemingly self-confident society. Medical technology and the tragic increase in abortions may radically diminish the number of mentally handicapped people in our society, but it is already becoming apparent that more and more people are suffering from profound moral and spiritual handicaps without having any idea of where to look for healing.

It is here that the need for a new Christian leadership becomes clear. The leaders of the future will be those who dare to claim their irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows them to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success, and to bring the light of Jesus there.

1.2 The question: “Do you love me?”

Before Jesus commissioned Peter to be a shepherd, he asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?” He asked him again, “Do you love me?” And a third time he asked: “Do you love me?” (John 21:15–17). We have to hear that question as being central to all of our Christian ministry because it is the question that can allow us to be, the same time, irrelevant and truly self-confident.

Look at Jesus. The world did not pay any attention to him. He was crucified and put away. His message of love was rejected by a world in search of power, efficiency, and control. But there he was, appearing with wounds in his glorified body to a few friends who had eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand. This rejected, unknown, wounded Jesus simply asked, “Do you love me, do you really love me?” He whose only concern had been to announce the unconditional love of God had only one question to ask, “Do you love me?”

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: **Do you know the incarnate God?** In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope.

The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, “a heart of flesh”, in Jesus, Knowing God’s heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begin to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God. This sounds very simple

and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits.

This unconditional and unlimited love is what the evangelist John calls God's first love. "Let us love," he said, "because God loved us first" (1 John 4:19). The love that often leaves us doubtful, frustrated, angry, and resentful is the second love, that is to say, the affirmation, affection, sympathy, encouragement, and support we receive from our parents, teachers, spouses, and friends. We all know how limited, broken, and very fragile that love is. Behind the many expressions of this second love there is always the chance of rejection, withdrawal, punishment, blackmail, violence, and even hatred. Many contemporary movies and plays portray the ambiguities and ambivalences of human relationships, and there are no friendships, marriages, or communities in which the strains and stresses of the second love are not keenly felt. Often it seems that beneath the pleasantries of daily life there are many gaping wounds that carry such names as abandonment, betrayal, rejection, rupture, and loss. These are all the shadow side of the second love and reveal the darkness that never completely leaves the human heart.

The radical good news is that the second love is only a broken reflection of the first love and that the first love is offered to us by a God in whom there is no shadows. Jesus' heart is the incarnation of the shadow-free first love of God. From his heart flow streams of living water. He cries out in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes in me come and drink." (John 7:37–38). "Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from

me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28–29).

From that heart comes the words, “Do you love me?” Knowing the heart of Jesus and loving him are the same thing. The knowledge of Jesus’ heart is a knowledge of the heart. And when we live in the world with that knowledge, we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope wherever we go. The desire to be relevant and successful will gradually disappear, and our only desire will be to say with our whole being to our brothers and sisters of the human race, “You are loved. There is no reason to be afraid. In love God created your inmost self and knit you together in your mother’s womb” (see Psalm 139:13).

1.3 The discipline: Contemplative prayer

To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God’s first love, we have to be mystics. A mystic is a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God’s first love.

If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” This is the discipline of contemplative prayer. Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own heart and God’s heart. Contemplative prayer keeps us home, rooted and safe, even when we are on the road, moving from place to place, and often surrounded by sounds of violence and

war. Contemplative prayer deepens in us the knowledge that we are already free, that we have already found a place to dwell, that we already belong to God, even though everything and everyone around us keep suggesting the opposite.

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word, and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?

The original meaning of the word "theology" was "union with God in prayer". Today theology has become one academic discipline alongside many others, and often theologians are finding it hard to pray. But for the future of Christian leadership it is of vital importance to reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every work of advice given, and every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately. I have the impression that many of the debates within the church around issues such as the papacy, the ordination of women, the marriage of priests, homosexuality, birth control, abortion, and euthanasia take place in a primarily moral level. On that level, different parties battle about right or wrong. But that battle is often removed from the experience of God's first love, which lies at the base of all human relationship.

Words like "right-wing", "reactionary", "conservative", "liberal", and "left-wing" are used to describe peoples' opin-

ions, and many discussions then seem more like political battles for powers than spiritual searches for the truth.

Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. Through the disciplines of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them. Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject. But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative.

For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required.