

## ***'Leader and Servant' (Luke 22:26 in Const. 177)***

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### ***1. Leadership and authority today***

Why should we spend valuable time of your ARC [Annual Review Consultation] meeting on the role and duties of superiors? What is the use of adding one more issue to the list of problems you are already facing? Let me try to say why I find the matter important. When I visited the Society, I noticed how much the role of the superior has changed, and not only changed but also weakened, at all levels of the Society. If so, is that serious? Many of us will say it is not, and I acknowledge there are good reasons to beware of anything aimed at restoring the old order. We still remember negative experiences of the past. It is also noticeable that among some young religious and priests there is a tendency to favour ideas and practices concerning authority that many find detrimental to human development and indeed contrary to the spirit of Vatican II. Besides, one can say that true life should first of all come from the grassroots, not from the top. Jesus left us these astounding words: 'call nobody your Father on earth: for you have only one Father, He who is in heaven.'<sup>1</sup> Today these words strike a chord with many people. They believe the idea of religious power and authority fits in badly with the democratic and participatory society that has developed since the sixties.

However, this is not the whole story. It is true to say that, if the direct, virile, and dominating styles of authority have been rejected in our culture, many new types of leadership and authority are being introduced. While these may prove to be more limited, conditional and particularised, they are nonetheless no less powerful. I am not going to dwell on the fact that psychologists and sociologists insist on bringing back again the role of the father in the family.<sup>2</sup> After all a religious community is not a family. But we should also think about businesses, hospitals, schools, and universities. Everywhere people are developing new forms of leadership and authority. While it is evident that the direct, formal manner of authority no longer works, they know only too well that the role of the chief is nevertheless indispensable. He it is who creates the alchemy, and who, instead of simply adding to them, multiplies the talents and the skills necessary to realise the goals of the organisation. To accomplish this, he must build up confidence, foster unity, know how to communicate, give example, in a word: give proof of 'leadership'. This interest in the role of leadership does not surprise me. What does astonish me is how little interest is given to this role in the majority of efforts proposed for the renewal of religious life. True, there are courses available for the training of religious leaders. I also draw your attention to the documents of the Congregation for the Institutes of Religious life and the Societies for Apostolic Life that emphasize the importance of spiritual authority in religious life.<sup>3</sup> But how many religious superiors, especially on the local level, really take advantage of programs that are offered? A community doesn't come to be by spontaneous generation. What gives life and makes sense to a group should be identified, encouraged, articulated, questioned, tried, discussed, and finally, decided upon. If the contribution of each member of the community is indispensable in this process, the superior has a particular role to play and, at certain times, his role is decisive. To recognise this role is not only common sense but also a question of faith. So there are enough reasons to have a closer look at one of the key statements of our new constitutions on leadership and authority.

### ***2. Constitutions Number 177***

*"All Marists share responsibility for the life of the Society. Some, however, are called to serve their brothers and promote the common welfare by accepting functions of authority. They keep in mind the words and example of Jesus: The greatest among you must be like the youngest, and the leader must*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:9.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Alexandre Van der Does de Willebois, *La société sans père*, Paris 1985; David Popenoe, *Life without Father*, New York 1996; David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, New York 1996; Matthias Matussek, *Die Vaterlose Gesellschaft*, 1998; Christiane Olivier, *Les fils d'Oreste ou la question du père*, Paris 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Fraternal Life in Community*, 1994, no. 50, and *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 2008, no. 13.

*be like the servant (Luke 22:26). They will claim no privileges in virtue of their position. Their first service to the community is the example they give of their fidelity to the spirit of the Society.”*

Why did the Society need a new text on superiors? True, in line with Vatican II the new text emphasizes that a call to authority is a call to service and that seems a rather new way of looking at authority. But to a large extent this is what Fr. Colin also said, especially with regard to the superior general. He should be emptied of ambition (299), help his subjects (299), ‘sympathize with the weaknesses of his sons’ (301), show patience (302) and have the qualities of a councillor and a therapist (304). So I ask, why a new text? Well, with all the impressive elements they contain, the constitutions of Colin are still very much part of a world that was no longer the world of the capitulants of 1977 and 1985. It was a world divided into those who govern and those who are governed, those who care and those who are cared for, those who have a say, and those who are told, those who know everyone’s place and those who only need to know their own place, those who take the decisions and those who carry them out, those who stand in the pulpit and those who listen, those who open their purse strings and those who decide where the money is to go. Admittedly, this picture is painted with rough brushstrokes. However, we should not underestimate how much this view was underlying the organisation of universities, hospitals, enterprises, the military, and also the organization of the Church and its religious orders. In this sense, whatever truth there may be in the so called hermeneutics of continuity, Vatican II was a real turning point in this sense. The whole community of the baptized is the Church, and its members are not just the passive object of ministerial activity. Similarly when a religious charism is lived out it is the religious who do this, as active subjects not as passive recipients. Superiors are at the service of the life and the mission of the community. This shift toward a community based understanding of the role of the superior had to find its expression in our basic code of legislation.

### **3. *Luke 22:26 in the actual discussion on authority in the Church***

This same shift has also led to a crisis of authority, in a double sense of the word. When I travelled around the Society, I heard some Marists - though I have to say not many - complaining that the new constitutions have caused confusion and uncertainty by turning religious life upside down. Has the community based understanding of the role of the superior not become a comfortable cover allowing people just to do what they like? At the other end of the spectrum I heard Marists complain about wide spread unwillingness in the Church to enter into a new culture of shared responsibility. They referred to new forms of clericalism and authoritarian behaviour in old and new communities and movements and in circles of priests, bishops and cardinals within and outside the Roman curia. They point to traditional seminaries where candidates are taught undisguised contempt for ‘the trendy fashions of the sixties’, concerning dialogue, consultation and shared responsibility. And what makes it more complicated: both sides make reference to Vatican II and the Scriptures. In one camp Vatican II statements on hierarchy and authority are quoted, in the other camp statements about leadership as service. In this field of tension Luke 22:26 deserves special attention. The verse contains Jesus’ saying that in the community of his disciples the leader should be like a servant. The context is a dispute, after the Passover supper, between the disciples about which should be reckoned the greatest. The saying in Luke 22:26 is quoted twice by the Fathers of Vatican II: a bishop should be *as one who serves*.<sup>4</sup> Of the religious superior the Fathers of Vatican II say in the same vein, though without quoting Luke 22:26 that he has to exercise authority *in a spirit of service*.<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:26 figures in our constitutions to set the style of religious authority in the Society of Mary. The question I should like to look into is whether or not the saying of Jesus in Luke 22:26 can serve to help bridge the gap between the two camps I mentioned before.

### **4. ‘As one who serves’ – ‘hoos ho diakonoon’**

<sup>4</sup> Lumen Gentium, 27, and Christus Dominus, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Perfectae Caritatis, 15.

What do the words *diakonia*, *diakonein* and *diakonos* originally mean? In a well-known article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* the German scripture scholar H.W. Beyer said *diakonia* originally meant nothing more than humble service at table. The *diakonos*, he said, is just the waiter, as we see him at work here in ‘Lo Scarpone’, around the corner, and therefore, Beyer said, the ‘institutional Church’ got it all wrong. By setting up clerical elites endowed with power and authority it forgot Jesus’ example. Beyer’s article has long been the standard work of reference for theologians. So Hans Küng and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza refer to him when they state that everything connected to ‘law’ and ‘power’ is foreign to the Gospel preached by Jesus. And so they use this semantic question concerning the meaning of *diakonia* to deepen the gulf between a progressive and conservative wing in the Church. But, is it true that *diakonos* originally just meant the humble servant, the waiter? This understanding of the word has already twenty years ago convincingly been challenged by the Australian Scripture scholar John N. Collins: *Diakonia. Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*.<sup>6</sup> Collins studies the sources at length and concludes that *diakonia*, *diakonos* and *diakonein* belong to a family of Greek words ‘designating actions of an in-between capacity, especially people (or spirits) who implement the intentions or desires of others’. *Diakonoi* can be humble waiters, who run between the kitchen and the guests, but the semantic field of the word is much wider. Ambassadors, heralds, couriers, political agents, generals could all be called *diakonoi*, even go-betweens in love affairs: in short, anyone who was charged to speak in another’s name or do things on their behalf. Collins points out that *diakonia* supposes not just the relationship between two persons, but a tripartite relationship between the one who is sent, the one by whom he is sent, and the one to whom he is sent. Thus Hermes was called the *diakonos* as he carried out the divine commissions. In this light all sorts of New Testament texts begin to make sense. For instance, for Paul to be a *diakonos* of God is not just for him to be God’s humble servant, God’s lowly waiter, but rather sees Paul himself as ‘the authoritative mouthpiece’ of God, the one who speaks for God and who carries the Gospel of Christ to the gentiles. This means that in the New Testament there is basically no antithesis between service and authority, because both, the *diakonos* and the one whom he addresses, are grounded on a reality which transcends their mutual relationship. The superior is a servant, because he doesn’t own his authority. It has been given to him for the sake of others. And his subjects won’t be diminished by being subjects, because their dignity is not based upon them being well treated by the superior, but upon baptism and profession.

## 5. By way of conclusion: a review of models of being a superior

5.1 ‘*Servant*’. By way of conclusion I should like, in the light of what has been said, to review a few models used to identify the role of the superior. First of all the fact that Jesus’ saying of Luke 22:26 arose during a meal, as the servants were running back and forth between the table and the kitchen, has to be underlined. The context of 22:26 does not leave the slightest doubt about the importance of humble brotherly service as the touchstone of evangelical leadership. Ordinary day by day service to his brothers is part and parcel of the superior’s ministry, and even its crucial touchstone, as it is the ultimate touchstone of the life of each Christian. I know major superiors who are in an exemplary way *diakonoi*, waiters of their confreres, not only when they appear at a jubilee with of a bottle of Johnny Walker or Chateau Neuf du Pape. They visit their confreres in days of joy and in days of distress. They bear their weaknesses. They accompany them in their spiritual quests. They understand that the human person is never just an element of the organization, but its principle and its culminating point. So this type of service, mostly quite unproductive from a mere organizational viewpoint, is and will always be one of the core tasks of the provincial.

5.2 ‘*Nurturer*’. Still, we need to see beyond this type of service. It’s not only among women religious that the image persists of the superior being first of all a ‘Mother’, in the sense of nurturer, helper and caregiver. At times also male religious want a ‘mother figure’ spending his

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<sup>6</sup> Oxford University Press, 1991; review by Timothy Radcliffe, in: *The Tablet* 1992, 865.

time nurturing and being available to individual members.<sup>7</sup> Here dangers are lurking. A superior who wants to be everybody's servant is hovering on the verge of 'paternalism'. If we just use the word *diakonos* in its popular and – restricted - sense of waiter or caretaker, we fall short to express what a religious superior has to be. Most superiors are aware of this. Well-known research shows that outstanding religious leaders rather than spending all their time giving attention to the personal adjustment of individual members emphasize setting goals and achieving them by careful planning and by building group commitment.<sup>8</sup>

5.3 *Employment manager*. A superior has to organize the mission of the community. In that sense he is a *diakonos*, intermediary between the individual religious and the works of the Society. However, for some religious what comes first is just their personal career and they tend to see the mission of the Society mainly in function of their self-realization. For them the superior is instrumental in getting access to the job market, without the interests of the community carrying much weight. The superior as employment manager fits in well with the secular meaning of *diakonos*, but he is far from being the *diakonos* of the New Testament, whose role is grounded on divine mission. In the McDonough-Bianchi survey on American Jesuits a Jesuit is quoted complaining that in the relationship between religious and provincials, market signals and therapeutic turns act sometimes more forcefully than central direction. In this relationship the superior tends to become a careers counsellor, focussed on the interests of the individual religious rather than on the mission entrusted to the community. "What happens is that the provincial's role ultimately devolves into a personnel management office. It becomes rhetorical to call any Jesuits to be missionaries somewhere in terms of our major apostolates. What does that mean? We're in massive denial: we still believe that this is some reality. If I'm your provincial and I say to you: 'Peter, you want to change your job, well go out there and see what's out there and get back to me,' and you go, like anybody else out there, and you look for a job and then you come back and say: 'I've looked around and – our standard catchword – 'I've prayed about this, and I would like to go to X and they are willing to accept me and even though I've had other offers this is the one that I want.' I say to you: 'Peter, this is great! It fits your talents. I will mission you there.'"<sup>9</sup> The provincial is no doubt a kind and helpful man, but he is not a *diakonos* in the biblical sense of the word.

5.4 *Scapegoat*'. A provincial will at times feel like the 'scapegoat', loaded with the deficiencies, tensions and confusions of the community. People consciously or unconsciously make the person of the superior responsible for what is going wrong in the community. The superior can also scapegoat himself by personalizing complaints addressed to him, but not directed against him. If somebody, rightly or wrongly, complains about how things are going in the community, a provincial easily tends to load criticisms on his own shoulders. Whereas he cannot always avoid being scapegoated by others he can avoid scapegoating himself and so becoming himself source of conflicts and bitterness. In these situations it can be of help for a superior to realize that being a *diakonos* in dealing with his confreres he doesn't just stand for himself, but represents the community and the mission.

5.5 *Minister of the Word and prophet*. Ultimately the superior represents the one by whom he is sent. So he has to see his task in the light of Christ who calls the community and each of its members. Only in this way he can prevent the community from becoming just focussed on its own survival. We know Jesus' word to his disciples: 'He, who hears you, hears me', which is quoted

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Beatrice M. Eichten, *Electing Leaders in Women's Congregations*, in: *Review for Religious* 59 [2000], 249-262).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. David J. Nygren CM and Miriam D. Ukeritis CSJ, *Religious-Leadership Competencies*, in *Review for Religious* 54 [1993] nr. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Peter McDonough and Eugene C. Bianchi, *Passionate Uncertainty, Inside the American Jesuits*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2002, 246.

twice in the constitutions of Fr. Colin speaking about superiors.<sup>10</sup> In the line of a long tradition, Fr. Colin applies the saying of Jesus not only to ordained ministries, but also to the ministry of the religious superior.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, if the charisma of our congregation consists in a specific reading of the Gospel, a Marist superior has to be a guide for his confreres in reading the Word of God. He has to be a minister of the Word, a *diakonos* in the Pauline sense. Indeed, the superior has the task of keeping the Word of God alive in his community, of interpreting the reality of daily life in the light of the Word of God and of discovering the potential and the challenges of a Marist reading of the Gospel. In that sense there is always something prophetic in the role of a superior.

5.6. *Spiritual leader.* A religious superior is a minister of the Word, but he fulfils this specific task by leading the individual and collective talents and energies toward the specific goals of the community rather than by preaching and teaching. He is the *diakonos* of Christ and of his brothers by leading the community. His spiritual leadership consists, as I said before, essentially in pursuing spiritual goals with administrative tools.<sup>12</sup> The goals are traditionally ‘our own salvation and the salvation of our neighbour’, in modern words: personal spiritual growth and service to our brothers and sisters. The tools are: personal persuasion and dissuasion, supported by their personal example, as underlined in this number 177 of our constitutions, planning and evaluation of formation and ministries, making appointments and decisions, supervising financial administration, carrying out visitations, organizing initial and permanent formation, etc. A spiritual leader needs to challenge individual religious to carry out corporate policies and to balance the purpose of the congregation with the good of the individual. In doing all this a superior will find in the words and even more in the example of Jesus, leader and servant, his primary source of inspiration.

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<sup>10</sup> Luke: 10,16. Cf. Constitutions 1873, 432;433.

<sup>11</sup> Constitutions 1873, 433.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Hulshof, *With a more lively Confidence*, Rome 2005, 38.