Ministry Leadership and The Vocational Attitude

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Those who enter the helping professions, especially health care, often trace the choice to a compelling personal desire to serve others. Deeply embedded in their sense of personal identity, this fundamental choice can be characterized as a calling or vocation. Although the notion of a specific call or vocation finds currency in contemporary culture, it is woven into the fabric of the Jewish-Christian tradition. Any well-informed description of the Christian tradition or any major element within it — the Catholic health care ministry, for example — will take vocation into account.

A sense of vocation should be central to the life of those invited to lead our ministries. A vocational sense is the “true north” of a leader’s compass and serves as a directional beacon in today’s organizational maelstrom. Thus, a ministry leader ought to reflect deeply on the concept of vocation and develop a degree of skill in articulating and modeling it. In short, effective ministry leadership requires an openness to cultivating, adopting and communicating a vocational attitude. In short, effective ministry leadership requires an openness to cultivating, adopting and communicating a vocational attitude. In short, effective ministry leadership requires an openness to cultivating, adopting and communicating a vocational attitude. In short, effective ministry leadership requires an openness to cultivating, adopting and communicating a vocational attitude. In short, effective ministry leadership requires an openness to cultivating, adopting and communicating a vocational attitude.

VOCATION IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

The word vocation can be traced to the Latin “vocare,” which carries various connotations including to call, to invite or to name. In the Jewish-Christian theological tradition, the notion of vocation or call plays a central role. In fact, the entire tradition can be understood in terms of call or invitation. The relationship between God and humanity unfolds through the divinely choreographed movement of call and response.

In the opening chapters of the Bible, God calls humankind into existence. He then invites the man and the woman to name the animals in the Garden of Eden. In ancient times, names had power. If you knew the real name of an entity, you had power over it. To name something was to give it its place in the world.

The creation story highlights the Catholic tradition’s understanding of human life and destiny: We are called into existence by a loving creator, who invites us to share in the creative process. We are empowered and endowed with stewardship responsibility for the world and ourselves.

A more explicit understanding emerges later in the Bible with covenant as the theme. God calls the people of Israel into a special relationship, in the covenant at Sinai, “You shall be my people and I will be your God.” This covenant grounds another core conviction within the tradition: We are implicated in a deep, sustained relationship with the Creator. God is very much involved with humankind.

In the Christian tradition, God’s involvement becomes most intense in the person of Jesus, who is called the New Covenant. In Jesus, God’s original call becomes incarnate. St. Paul refers to Jesus as the Kalon or “the one who calls.” And those who accepted the call of Christ were referred to as kallourmenoi or “those who are called.” They, in turn, formed the ekklesia, or “the assembly of those who have been called,” that is, the church.

Just as it began, the Bible ends on the note of call. In the final chapters, we are invited or called...
According to the Catholic tradition, love and service are core features of human identity.

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sense of vocation, the leader provides a crisp picture of who she is and what she stands for. In other words, her definite sense of herself becomes the focal point for her professional standing and organizational relationships. The leader of a Catholic health care ministry should be able to link her professional priorities with the tradition's emphasis on calling. She has, in fact, been entrusted with responsibility for a ministry rooted in a call to love and serve in the face of human suffering.

Further, the leader’s vocational attitude supports the emergence of a collaborative esprit de corps that reinforces a shared sense of purpose and calls forth the giftedness of each associate. In displaying a vocational attitude, then, the leader witnesses to the deeper purpose of the organization and, by example, invites everyone to draw upon their own vocational identity and gifts to further their common mission. Organizational cohesion and effectiveness flow from a common vocational attitude that elevates and affirms the giftedness and dignity of every associate. Delbecq and co-author James McGee make the point:

“Thus, the critical task of executive leadership is to ‘convert the contractual employees of an economic entity into committed members of a purposeful organization. Purpose — not strategy — is the reason an organization exists. Its definition and articulation must be management’s first responsibility.’”

CONCLUSION
To summarize, an effective shared purpose, in turn, generates an “ethic of contribution,” which Paul Adler, distinguished professor of management at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, describes as a form of organizational life that “accords the highest value to people who look beyond their specific roles and advance the common purpose.” The ability to communicate a shared purpose and encourage an ethic of contribution can be traced directly to a leader’s willingness to integrate and articulate a vocational attitude.

Fostering a vocational attitude among leaders in Catholic health care encourages them to align personal and professional fulfillment with both organizational purpose and the deepest aspirations of the tradition they are called to represent. The follow-on effects can be impressive. As leaders explicitly explore and explain their own sense of calling, they send a signal (a call) that attracts the attention of others. A deeper sense of unity and shared mission emerges as leadership teams embrace a simple fact: Leading a health care ministry is more than a job and not simply a career; it’s a calling.

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