

# Ministry Leadership and The Vocational Attitude

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**T**hose 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. A brief overview of vocation in the Catholic tradition will provide necessary background and reveal features of the tradition that are relevant to contemporary organizational life and leadership.

## 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

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into the “New Jerusalem.” Our journey began in the garden, and it is destined to end in the “Heavenly City,” a metaphor for eternal life. So, call or vocation forms the bookends of the Catholic tradition’s self-understanding. The vocational journey, comprising human life and destiny, echoes the Creator’s love through responsible stewardship. According to the Catholic tradition, love and service are core features of human identity. That is “why this community realizes it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”<sup>1</sup>

The Catholic tradition is not exclusive. The Creator’s initiative is universal. The call thus embraces anyone who is committed to authentic love and service. Each person can hear and respond. Each person has a vocation. As Pope Paul VI asserted, every person is called upon to develop and fulfill himself or herself, “for every life is a vocation.”<sup>2</sup>

Theologian Michael Novak expanded on the point by noting, “The human project is a universal project. We are involved in bringing the Creator’s work to its intended fulfillment by being co-creators in a very grand project, indeed. In this, we are tied to the whole human race.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, a central aspect of the tradition’s sense of calling is the concept of charisma, or the “giftedness” of each person. It is held that each person is given unique gifts — for example, talents, skills and aptitudes — and that these gifts are granted on behalf of the community, not for the personal aggrandizement of the individual. Although the gifts require effort, learning, education and experience to develop fully, they are the mark of a very personal and unique contribution an individual will bring to the community in service of others.

### THE VOCATIONAL ATTITUDE: A CONTEMPORARY RESOURCE

Although rooted in religious traditions, the notion of vocation is very much a part of contemporary

organizational leadership literature. Novak spoke of business as a calling. Andre Delbecq, the late professor of business at Santa Clara University in California, pointed to the “leader as someone who chooses and is ‘called’ to authentically serve a group, an organization, an enterprise, a community, the customers, and a society...”<sup>4</sup>

Current career scholarship demonstrates that those who see their work as calling, as opposed to simple “work” (a series of tasks) or a “career” (a movement through roles and positional advancement) operate from a different motivational perspective. They are more intrinsically motivated, find greater meaning in their work, bring to bear different values and are better able to endure difficulties.

The Catholic tradition and contemporary business studies are in basic agreement: The adoption of a vocational attitude tends to enhance personal satisfaction, professional performance and organizational effectiveness. This convergence of opinion further reinforces the notion that there are definite operational benefits associated with engendering a sense of vocation. No matter the organizational context, the practical payoffs and overall advantages to adopting a vocational attitude seem undeniable.

## 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.

For example, evidence is mounting that leaders who ground themselves in a sense of calling are less susceptible to burnout. By approaching with vocational purpose the pace and pressure of what have been called “extreme jobs,” executive leaders open inner space for themselves. They find a place within themselves that offers temporary respite during trying times. They learn to focus on a deep sense of purpose and personal identity that gives them stability while relativizing the surrounding organizational turmoil.

On the professional level, a vocational attitude can enhance leadership by unveiling the leader’s core commitment. By clearly articulating her

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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."<sup>5</sup>

### CONCLUSION

To summarize, an effective shared purpose, in turn, generates an "ethic of contribution," which Paul Adler, distinguished professor of manage-

ment 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."<sup>6</sup> 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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### NOTES

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