

The Leadership Academy And Theological Reflection

By ZENI FOX, PhD

Before its 2013 merger with Trinity Health of Livonia, Michigan, Catholic Health East (CHE) created a Leadership Academy as an in-house program for top-level executives, primarily lay leaders, which combined advanced ministry leadership formation and succession plan development. CHE invited Seton Hall University faculty from a range of academic disciplines to help build a two-year curriculum for Leadership Academy participants that also would earn them a certificate from Seton Hall, located in South Orange, New Jersey.

Since the merger that is now Trinity Health, Leadership Academy expertise has been applied to the concept of “institutionalizing” Catholic identity, (see story on page 34), as well as developing other skills modern health care requires of its leaders, ranging from working with insurance providers to developing comprehensive systems of care. The academy takes an integrative approach to both the methods and the themes in addressing what Elizabeth McCrea, PhD, a member of the Seton Hall team, calls ministry leadership’s “sweet spot.”¹

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

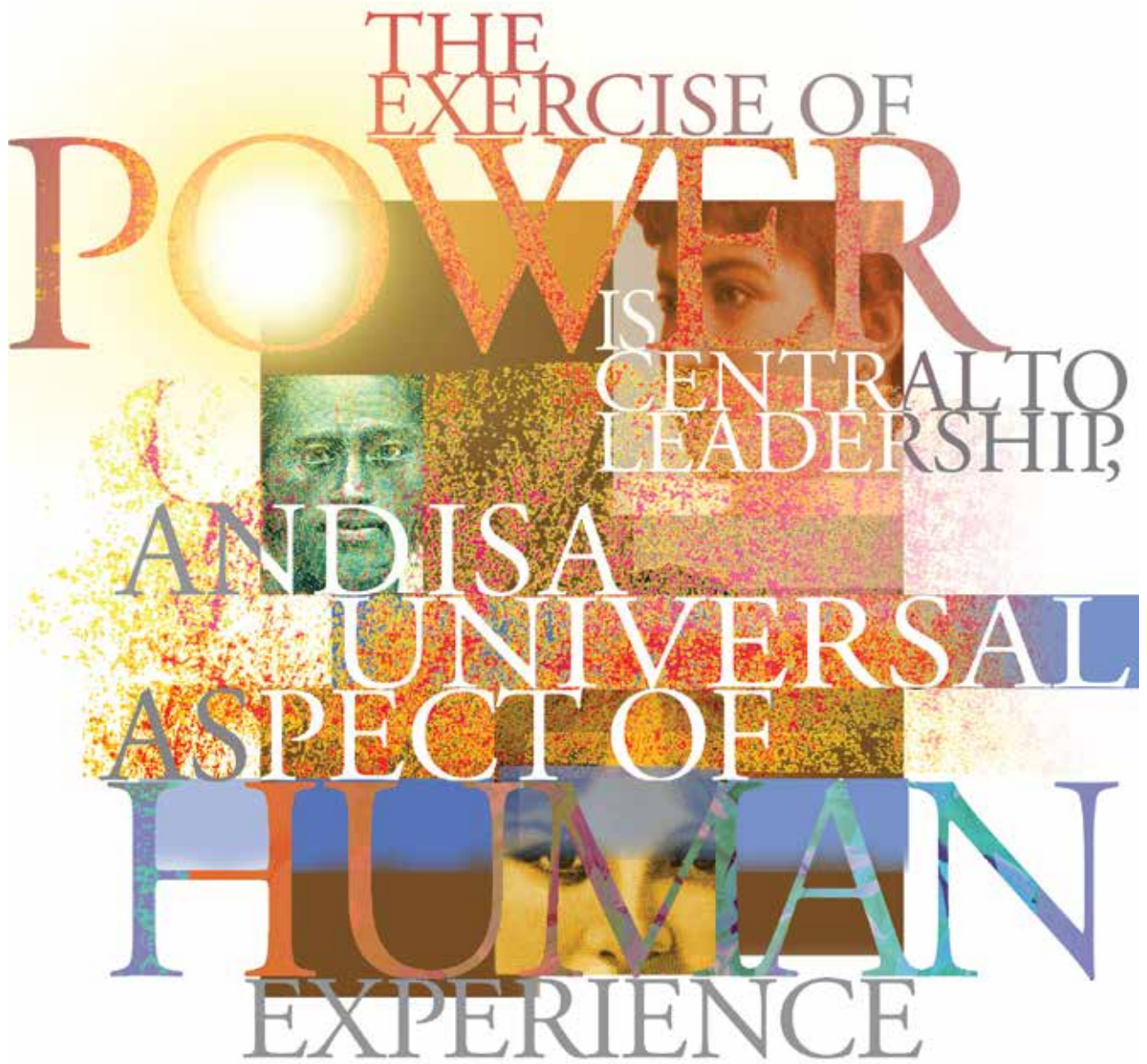
Ministry formation programs often use a technique called theological reflection, and it is an especially helpful method today, when the language and accepted beliefs of Catholicism are no longer part of the common experience of many. Furthermore, many of those in leadership at Catholic institutional ministries are not, themselves, Catholic, though they often have a very deep commitment to the Catholicity of the institution they serve.

Theological reflection has the additional dimension of attention to culture, both the multiculturalism characteristic of our society in the United States, and the particular culture relevant to material being explored, especially the varied religions of those providing leadership and service within health care.

The Leadership Academy uses theological reflection as one of its teaching approaches. It is a method for exploring dimensions of the tradition central to the ministry of health care, such as the healing stories of the Gospel, the continuation of this ministry through the centuries, Catholic social teaching and the role of the bishops relative to the ministries of the church. The experience of the participants is elicited in various ways, including journaling, interpretation of images, exercises and conversation in pairs and small groups.

Implicit in this approach are two principles from the Second Vatican Council. One is the valuing of “the temporal order,” a recognition that all of its dimensions “possess a value of their own, placed in them by God, whether considered individually or as parts of the integral temporal

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The image features a central collage of human faces and abstract patterns. The faces are partially obscured by the text and have a grainy, textured appearance. The colors used in the collage include red, green, blue, and yellow. The text is arranged in a vertical stack, with 'POWER' being the largest word. The overall composition is layered and visually complex.

structure: 'And God saw all that he had made and found it very good.' (Genesis 1:31)²

The institutions of Catholic health care, the other institutions with which they interact in carrying out their mission, disciplines of study such as leadership and the faith system of each participant, religious or not, have this intrinsic value. This is a deeply humanistic principle, one which is a long-held part of the Catholic tradition honoring the goodness present in all persons and all that is good in their works. Therefore, health care in itself is a human good; health care in Catholic institutions adds levels of intentionality rooted in the great stories, symbols and teachings of our Catholic faith. The work of health care in Catholic institutions is shared with many, only some of whom are Catholic. Therefore formation in Catholic health care systems must honor this valuing of the temporal order.

A second principle drawn from the council is

that "the ordinary conditions of life ... [and] the performance of their tasks"³ represent a path of spiritual growth for human persons. The academy emphasis on the many and diverse tasks to be performed by leaders and the invitation to be reflective about them is influenced by this teaching. At the same time, there is an intention that the work of the Academy leave space for the individual ways in which diverse persons appropriate the invitation to spiritual growth from within their own meaning systems, whether these are part of a religious tradition or not. The theological reflection method calls for mindfulness of such multicultural diversity.

POWER

To illustrate the theological reflection method and how it integrates varied dimensions of study, consider the Leadership Academy segment on power. Certainly, the exercise of power is both

A DIGRESSION ABOUT POWER

In various settings, I have explored the human experience of power.

Sometimes I have begun by asking participants to list words they associate with power, and then, together, we list a representative sample. When they evaluate the words, participants note the mix of positive and negative responses.

Generally, the positive words are named more often by men, the negative by women. An exception was with a group of parish leaders, priests and lay, in Ireland, where the list was overwhelmingly negative. When invited to reflect on this, the group said it was because Catholics in Ireland had been long oppressed, and so they thought of power only in negative terms. Theirs was an extreme example, but it demonstrates how the words that people choose illustrate the varied understandings of power that are operative: power over, power with, power to. An initial awareness of one's own understanding of and attitude toward power

is a prerequisite for a more developed understanding.

In my experience, power is a concept, a deep human reality that seldom is explored in church circles in ways that would assist us to think more deeply about our use of power and failure to use our power. Once, at a public lecture, I asked an eminent theologian, one I deeply admired, why he told a joke in which, in an afterlife, he placed those who exercised power in hell. Were there not positive aspects of power?

He responded that power was a dangerous reality, and he chastised me for asking such a question. A woman approached me later and said that because he was a priest, he was unaware of his exercise of power, whereas I, as a laywoman working in the church, was quite aware of this reality. Similarly, an archbishop, one noted for innovation in his diocese, said, "I have never thought of a bishop as exercising power."

This failure to reflect on power is further illustrated in an experience I had with a lay leader who once attended a workshop that asked "Do Directors of Religious Education have power?" Afterward she said that as church people, we should not be talking about power.

Subsequently I led a program at her parish. At the end, the participants waited and waited for the pastor to come to lead the concluding prayer service. Finally I suggested that we pray without him, and she said no, we were just waiting until the baseball game he was watching ended.

Clearly, this was a failure to use her power for the sake of others -- and probably it was a failure to have any sense of her own power. Such experiences have convinced me that consideration of power is essential for leaders.

— Zeni Fox

central to leadership and a universal aspect of human experience.

Theological reflection draws first on participants' experience; they are asked to write responses to various questions, including: When is a time you felt powerless? When is a time you felt powerful? How would you describe your attitude toward or your feelings about power?

Then they view a brief video of the eruption of Mount Saint Helens — a magnificent display of the power of nature, a power that was incredibly destructive, whole forests felled, strewn down the mountainsides like matchsticks — and a description of the gradual emergence of new life.

A reflection drawn from an article by Sr. Mary Daniel Turner, the late Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, invites participants to consider that we all share in the power of God, the power of a transcendent being.⁴ At the deepest point in ourselves, we are rooted in God, who is creative, powerful. Contemplation of the power of God is a way of growing as leaders.

PSYCHOLOGY OF POWER

A lecture about power draws upon existential psychologist Rollo May's *Power and Innocence*.⁵ His definition of power is "a possibility within me now; an ability to cause or prevent change." This definition is neutral; the possibility, the ability, may be used for good or for evil.

It is easy to think of great evils of oppression caused by dictators. But the more subtle uses of power, such as to "oppress" co-workers or even family members, bear reflection.

The opposite of power is powerlessness. May states that it implies a denial of self, a sense of impotence, which may lead to violence. Powerlessness may be imposed or it may be a self-protective stance, but even in a situation where great power is used to subjugate individuals and groups, a person and a group can choose to act, even if it means risking their lives.

Discussion of Catholic social teaching about the empowerment of the poor helps participants deepen their understanding. Implicit is an invitation for them to exercise leadership in such a way as to empower all participants in the work setting.

The power of leaders is always limited, sometimes in ways that are not constructive, or that even are unjust. In such instances, a spirituality

of powerlessness, as illustrated in the passion of Jesus, willingly accepted, can be fruitful.

May contrasts innocence and pseudo-innocence. The first is like the condition of children, without evil influence or effect, not arising from evil intentions. Pseudo-innocence, on the other hand, is a failure to be aware of evil within oneself and within others. It is a failure to take account of the exercise of one's own power. There is a blindness in some leaders to the impact of their power,

The exercise of power is both central to leadership and a universal aspect of human experience.

especially their power over others and how it is exercised subtly or even blatantly to control, to subjugate. Such blindness wreaks havoc in organizations.

Power can be exercised in five ways. The first four, according to May, are destructive:

- Exploitative power makes use of force — whether that of a gun or a velvet glove. It is power over.

- Manipulative power is the co-opting of the other to do what I want; this, too, is a power over.

- Competitive power is used against others in a win-lose stance.

- When it is used to care for others, power is what May terms "nutrient." Appropriate in parents with their children, and at times in various human interactions, it, too, can be a power over when it infantilizes the other.

- The fifth way to exercise power is in an integrative fashion. This is a power *with*. Participants are equal, they interact in such a way that growth takes place. Collaborative work requires this stance toward power on the part of both leaders and followers.

It is helpful to note that May contends all of these ways to exercise power are present and available within us all the time. He points to the example of young siblings playing together — now playing *with*, now grabbing a toy or hitting the other on the head.

He also contends that love needs power if it is to be more than sentimentality, and power needs love if it is not to slip into manipulation. He sees compassion as the interplay of love and power; it requires some position of power from which one can give concern to another.

Jesus did not permit the use of force. When soldiers came to arrest him, he told Peter to put up his sword.

POWER AND THEOLOGY

May's analysis is done from the perspective of psychology. From the perspective of theology, reflecting on the story of Jesus is very instructive regarding the five uses of power. Certainly, his actions were powerful — his miracles of healing, forgiveness of sins, preaching of the word in a compelling way. But Jesus did not permit the use of force. When soldiers came to arrest him, he told Peter to put up his sword.

Jesus directed his disciples to shake the dust off their sandals and leave a village, if the people did not accept their teaching — certainly the opposite of manipulation. Was Jesus competitive with, for example, the Pharisees? The dominant culture in the United States may well judge him so, but Eastern cultures, more “both-and” than “win-lose” in approach, would not.

Certainly Jesus exercised nutrient power, for example, in raising the daughter of Jairus, then instructing her parents to feed her, and also in the feeding of the hungry multitudes. His integrative power is best illustrated in the story of his sending of the 72 to share the good news with others. He was sharing his own mission with them, treating them as equals, as persons able to carry out a great task.

After discussing power in the context of Jesus, the Leadership Academy participants again consider their own experience. They answer such questions as, What are some ways you exercise power? What do you do? What kind of power is it? When could you, should you, have exercised power when you did not? What kind of situation is likely to call forth in you an exercise of power that is exploitative? Manipulative? Competitive? Nutrient? Integrative?

The final exercise invites each participant to write a prayer, beginning with “O God of power and might ...” The prayers are shared and discussed during this closing segment of the theological reflection on power, providing an opportunity to integrate the theme with the personal experience of the group.

This theological reflection process is what theologian John Shea called a “rope ladder”⁶ over which discussion leaders and participants traverse, back and forth, seeking to maximize the educational impact and to deepen the understanding of these leaders about power, about themselves and about effective, spiritually grounded leadership.

The Leadership Academy goal continues to be integrating leadership theory and skills, the experience of the participants, the tradition of the Catholic Church and relevant cultural realities in such a way that participants will grow in their ability to work, lead and minister.

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NOTES

1. See Elizabeth McCrea, “The ‘Sweet Spot’ of Catholic Health Care Ministry Leadership,” *Health Progress* 94, no. 4 (July-August 2013), 72.
2. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1984), 7.
3. *Vatican Council II*, ed. Flannery, 4.
4. Mary Daniel Turner, “Power and Authority: Rooted in and Fashioned by the Spirit,” in *Called and Chosen: Toward a Spirituality for Lay Leaders*, eds. Zeni Fox and Regina Bechtle (Lanham, Maryland: Sheed & Ward, 2005), 153-66. As a follow-up to the session, participants were asked to read this article.
5. Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).
6. John Shea, *Stories of Faith* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1980), especially chapter 1.

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