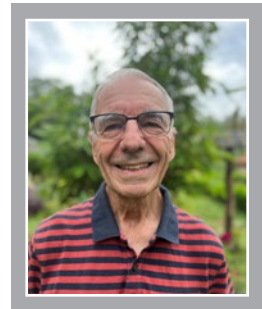

Servant leader or leading servant

We are all called to exercise servant leadership

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I belong to the District of Canada, but I've been on mission in Sri Lanka since 2016. I participated in the formation of the first Lavalla200> group in 2016. There was a clear need for formators in Asia and so, having had the opportunity to work in the field of formation for several years, forming postulants in Haiti and brothers and laypeople in Quebec, I was asked to join the



team of formators at the international novitiate in Tudella, Sri Lanka. I have been doing this work since October 2016.

Because of this, I was invited to share my reflections on the concept of servant leadership and my experience in this area. First of all, I have to admit that it took me a while to get around to writing this article. I asked myself why I couldn't get started. And at last, I seem to have found the reason. It stemmed from the difficulty of putting together the two concepts of leader and servant. No matter how many times I turned them around, it was as if I was not able to put them in the same box. I felt there was a contrast, a contradiction that I couldn't resolve, i.e. I couldn't see the leader, with the different approaches to leadership that I had studied, as a servant. Finally, everything became clearer, like a "eureka" moment.

I realised that, between the one and the other, there is the following cause and effect relationship. I can hope to become an inspiring leader if I decisively take the position of the servant. Jesus did not seek to be a leader. He resolutely took up the option of service. He sought to serve, which means to love. To love = to serve. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life..." (Mt 20:28). He refused to accept the kind of leadership that people wanted to impose on him. The temptation was great, given the force of his charisma. Yet he violently rejected this idea as a trap set by the Evil One. "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Mt 16:23). He opted for love, which means humble service to the point of losing everything, to the point of annihilating his ego, to the point of feeling in his humanity that he was abandoned by his Father, but convinced that he would never be left alone; he "cast him away" for our sake, to the point of feeling his absence so that we could all feel his presence. This is the Servant Leader. He becomes a leader because he has made himself a servant to the very end.

So what consequences for mission can we draw from this? A early pointer emerges clearly. Rather than being a leader, I must unambiguously take up the option of service: seek to serve and the rest (the recognition of leadership) will follow on. And service in mission can take on a thousand colours. I favour two of them: presence and listening. I'm often reminded of the words of Francis of Assisi, which Pope Francis recalled on his trip to Morocco in March 2019: "Go and preach the Gospel: and if necessary, also with words". These words concern evangelisation, but they can be applied in a general way to any mission that aims to evangelise.

"And if necessary, also with words". In my role as a formator there is a trap I fall into: wanting to be the leader who "forms". In a way, I realised at a certain point that I couldn't form anyone, strange as that may sound. And this thought is for me the object of an ongoing conversion. More than a formator, or if you want to be truly a formator, it seems to me that it is necessary to be above all a servant who makes himself present and who listens. If we can hope for some fruit in formation, it will be a consequence of the implementation of these two basic attitudes.

Presence

In practice this means that, in addition to the daily timetable, I try to be as present as possible in the novices' activities: manual work, sport, recreation. At the ripe old age of 74, I have to admit that this sometimes requires a certain amount of effort on my part, especially when a novice asks me to go and play table tennis with him after an hour and a half of manual work. But it's good for the relationship, because it creates closeness and a sense of family. His good humour





becomes my good humour, generating new energy. I even gain in terms of my health. It allows me to move around more.

Listening

Another place of service is listening, especially in accompaniment. What a privilege to be able to accompany these young Marists! I frequently witness the action of grace, of the Spirit, in each one of them, which allows them to become aware of things that bring about major changes in their daily relationships. These are real conversions that sometimes make them cry out with joy. It is the Paschal mystery of death and resurrection lived out on a daily basis. But it is also, on my part, the fruit of a constantly renewed asceticism of listening, of an effort to really listen to the end without interrupting. Then there is a chance that my eventual response or the silence will come from the Spirit. I've noticed that more often than not, people, especially young people, need to be listened to, to be heard in what they're going through, rather than to be given opinions or advice. Unfortunately, I've been present at some spiritual 'abortions' because I spoke too quickly and interrupted the flow. For me, it's a continuous practice.

Presence and listening, then, are two ways of embodying the servant-leader in mission. And how important this is, particularly for us here in Asia! In many ways, the Spirit precedes us and has preceded us in these great religions, thousands of years old. Our mission, if we can use construction terms, is often more like renovating an ancestral house than building a new one. This means picking out the positive in everyone and bringing it into the light. Vatican II speaks of the "seeds of the Word" present in all these religions. And it's the same work that needs to be done with everyone.



In conclusion, in inviting us to become servant-leaders, I am reminded of the advice of a wise old man who died recently in Sri Lanka: Father Aloysius Vanderwall SJ. He was my spiritual director for a number of years. In a last meeting with him, just three weeks ago, he said to me: “Réal, try above all to stay close to the novices, not too much advice, not too many remarks or reproaches, but make yourself one with them in what they are going through”. “Make yourself one”, three little words that could contain the whole notion of the servant leader. This is the way to be a Marist leader in the footsteps of Jesus the Servant, in the footsteps of Mary, the servant leader par excellence, three little words that sum up all evangelical love. And if I don’t have love... we know the rest.



The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Marist Institute.

If you would like to share your ideas, reflections, or experiences about servant and prophetic leadership with the Commission as a result of these reflections, write to fms.cimm@fms.it