
Being servant leaders today

Why? For what? For whom?

“Leadership, most especially prophetic or servant leadership, rarely takes place in circumstances of the leader’s making or preference”
(Br. Michael Green)

Br. Tony Leon
Educator Training
Prov. Star of the Sea, Australia



My name is Br Tony Leon. Currently, I am blessed to serve in the area of formation of our Marist educators in the new province of Star of the Sea. I also have the privilege of working with the ongoing formation of brothers beyond the province’s border.

One of my current roles is working with Marist Middle Leaders. I am humbled by their tenacious courage in the ever growing complexity of contemporary leadership. Like Mary in the Annunciation, these men and women were appointed because they were highly favoured for their strong values, rather than for their ambition. For many, they continue to discover the cost of their ‘Yes’ to leadership.

James Toop from The Guardian, describes the role of the school Middle Leader as being: *the Engine Room of the school who sit at the heart of the drive:*

They lead teams of teachers - turning senior leadership’s strategy into outstanding classroom practice on a daily basis. They are closer to the action than senior leaders. High performing middle leaders drive consistent teacher quality in their areas of responsibility through curriculum leadership, data analysis to identify pupil underperformance, lesson observations, holding staff to account and developing staff (Toop, James (2013) Making the Most of Middle Leaders to Drive Change in Schools. <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/jul/02/middle-leaders-driving-change-school>).

This is the WHAT, which our Middle Leaders do and the difficulties of the WHAT, which they are asked to do add pressure to their professional lives and to their personal wellbeing. Many have experienced leadership to be like a war on several fronts: Doubting their capacity to lead,



being vulnerable to the critics as well as suffering the belief that they are not enough. Intuitively, one would consider escaping from this role for the sake of their own survival. Yet, despite all these challenges, they stay behind, they persist.

Why? What for? For what?

“It’s for the children.”

“Even if we have only have 1% success rate, that 1% makes it all worthwhile!”

“I can’t ignore them - they need someone - if not me - Who?”

The answer to their WHY? What for? For what? is motivated by the need of the other. It is motivated by the unreasonable power of Love rather than by the logic of personal survival.

It is interesting that the English word WHY? Is translated into Spanish and Portuguese as POR QUE? in French, it is POURQUOI? That is, the compound words FOR WHAT? Perhaps when we question the motive of leadership, we can also add FOR WHOM?

In our Marist institute, we have effective Marist education and social centres, where we do the FOR WHAT? very well. i.e. Academic excellence, Pastoral Care, Innovative Methodology... etc. As professional educators, we continue to cultivate the very best practices. However, it is the FOR WHOM? that brings us closer to the affective reality of Servant Leadership.

What parents and carers desire most for their children is their happiness. Yet, happiness tends to be conditional to the fleeting economy and dependent with what has been achieved or acquired. The Gospel version of happiness is Joy. The joy in knowing there is meaning in one’s life. The joy that is sparked by the Spirit within one’s being. It is counter-cultural as it proclaims the transformative faith in Grace rather than the transactional reasoning of Karma.

To be a leader in a post-pandemic world, we intuitively aim for the certainty of our plans, the security of structures and clearly set boundaries to ensure safety and survival. This is absolutely

essential for safeguarding our future, however *Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans* ('Beautiful Boy -1980 John Lennon - 1940-1980). After the intuitive and orderly planning, the servant leader acts often with counter-intuition in response to the transient and often messy human environment.

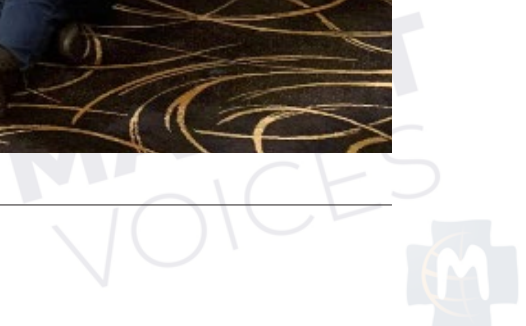
According to another John, John the Evangelist; he reminds us the eternal truth that we are made to love and to be loved.... (1 John 11-13)

This is our foundation Christian principle. As leaders, we strive to live this truth pragmatically, in the places where we serve each day. How can we avoid romanticising this love and do the earthy work of the soul? When the mindful plans, programs, curricula, policies are set in place, the real praxis of the heart begins.

The way of love for Servant Leaders is counter intuitive. Leo Tolstoy. (1818 - 1910) described *the law of loving others could not be discovered by reason, because it is unreasonable.* (*Anna Karenina -1878*). Victor Hugo (1802-1885) similarly wrote, *Love is never stronger than when it is completely unreasonable.* (*Hunchback of Notre Dame - 1831*)

Today, we have a very prominent example of the counter intuitive love of a Servant Leader - the current president of the Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. Once, a comedian who featured in a popular TV show about a humble high school teacher who was surreptitiously videoed in class while he was ranting about the injustice of the government. The video becomes viral and the simple history teacher is elected the president of Ukraine. In this case of Life imitating Art, we have a modest person who finds himself to be the national leader in real life since 2019.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Ukrainian president and his family were offered safe passage out of the crisis. His response was, *'The fight is here, I need ammunition, not a ride.'* With counter-intuition, Volodymyr refused personal security and assured survival. He stayed and persisted, asking for resources to help his people. His leadership was focused on FOR WHOM?





The name of the television comedy series was titled *Servant of the People*. Today, Volodymyr's political party is also called *Servant of the People*. (Слуга народу)

Volodymyr's leadership is widely supported internationally. Perhaps Simon Sinek, in his 2011 book, 'Start with Why,' can illuminate why he is so well followed.

"People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it.

And what you do simply proves what you believe" (Sinek, Simon, Start With Why - How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone To take Action. Portfolio, 2009_

Ultimately, our Marist projects around the world are reflections of our common WHY? Our FOR WHOM?

It is about bringing CHRIST life to birth amongst US.

The Marists understood their Project to be sharing in Mary's work of bringing Christ life to birth and being with the the Church as it came to be born. It was a work which they hoped would touch every diocese of the world and would be structured like a multi branched tree by including lay people, priests, sisters and brothers. (Water from the Rock. Marist General House, 2007 p.25)

This ever nascent Christ life will involve pain, uncertainty and doubt.

Are you staying for the birth?

Why? For What? For Whom?



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