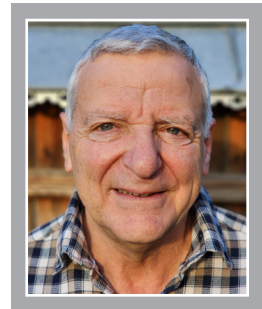

Communication and silence in leadership

“Empathy is more than a communicative technique, it is a philosophy of life. Empathy is service. Empathy is the other’, it is the ‘arise to enter life with me.”
(Marist Voices, Chapter 12)

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I was always told that in Christian culture authority is service and never power, even more so in a religious community, where each member makes a public profession of a life inspired by Gospel values. But history teaches us that it is not so easy to distinguish between service and power.

I am interested in this subject particularly because of my long experience with the Focolare Movement, where the most important value, the constitutive value of every community, of every nucleus, of every “gen unity” is a strong reciprocal love among the members, to the point of generating the presence of Jesus among them, according to the promise of Mt 18:20. Additionally, in this experience, each member of the community is a “builder” of this divine Presence through welcoming and listening deeply to the other, but also through contributing his/her own idea, his/her own point of view, in simplicity, without attachment to it. In the end, something beautiful and unexpected always emerges, the fruit of the mutual gift of oneself to the other. How often I have wondered how to bring this profound but very simple experience to a Marist community!

Certainly Marcellin Champagnat, even with the strictures of his time, formed his Brothers in this mutual love, when he repeated that Mary is the First Superior of the Community, when he indicated the characteristics of a good Superior, when he asked the Brothers to train themselves to live by the “little virtues”? This is his last wish, expressed in his Spiritual Testament.

I would like to reflect on three aspects in particular, where characteristics of servant and prophetic leadership are expressed (cf. Chapter 12, VM).

1. Empathy with the other

A healthy leadership must first of all “get involved” in the experience of its group and of each of its members. It must know how to show empathy with the other who makes you perceive a need, a lack, a discomfort. To do this, one must immediately make an inner leap: listen deeply, form an inner silence by ‘emptying oneself’ (an expression I like very much) internally in order to welcome the other completely. It is natural that, faced with certain words, problems or requests you do not expect, you immediately want to respond, to judge, to reply... It is very important to push all this inwards, to go beyond, not to interrupt, to continue listening with all your capacity, until you “become one”, that is to say, to identify fully with yourself, so that the other feels free to express him/her self fully, feels listened to and truly welcomed. It is not easy to remain silent and not respond; it is not easy not to jump in with an immediate response, but it is absolutely necessary, so as not to block the other’s openness and communication.

Several times I have had the experience that in the end it is the person him or her self who gives the answer needed and finds some light or peace in their situation.

I remember, as a school principal, that I often received parents who were unhappy about some situation, angry about something serious for them, perhaps an accident.... After listening deeply, totally, looking attentively into the eyes of each one, without answering, not even listening to false or exaggerated things... At the end, they would say to me: “But aren’t you going to say anything? We have spoken, don’t you want to tell us your point of view?” And then, the few words I felt like adding would fall on them so that they would really listen too...

This wisdom is learned little by little, especially by cultivating a special familiarity with the Holy Spirit. From his gifts we draw light, patience, wisdom, counsel, fortitude? Putting ourselves into the psychological attitude of wanting to listen well to the other is only an initial help, but the real capacity comes from this deep relationship with the Spirit.



2. Equality

I live in a community named 'LaValla200>' with another brother and a lay Marist. We are from three different countries, each with our own culture, experiences and formation. There is no community superior to refer to.

Together, we organise our prayers, housework, cooking and, of course, our mission in the Day Centre, where we welcome children at high risk of dropping out of school and in danger of social marginalisation. We have left the management of the Centre to a local person, whose role and operational style we fully respect. Together with her we set aside a day each week to meet unhurriedly: to plan the work together, to get to know the situations and problems that arise, to study initiatives and discuss the most useful way of relating to each of the children....

In our community life we seek the same equality, even in practical aspects: every Monday, for example, we go shopping together; in the evening, after dinner, we usually spend a long time at the table, discussing events in our countries, local news, the people we know, the problems that arise in our work and how to deal with them, how to intervene in certain situations with the children, or even with our work colleagues.

It is all the fruit of sharing, which, of course, as there are only three of us is quite easy, with no need for any particular structure, but it is also the fruit of a climate of mutual trust, of a desire to communicate, of a desire for fraternity. On the other hand, it is also easy to escape into one's own private corner... In previous years, when there were four of us, we felt the need for a formal time, and each Saturday morning was dedicated to sharing the week's experience and planning the steps to be taken in the following days.

As with this "LaValla200>" experience of not providing for a formal superior, shared leadership in any community is very important, because the desire of each member is to feel active and to be a protagonist in some aspect. Sharing assignments or tasks is healthy from every point of view, but it is not enough: we need continuous moments of challenge, of sharing problems, of situations that arise, to feel part of them and to contribute to each decision. Otherwise, if the person in charge makes the decisions, everything becomes more anonymous and everyone takes refuge in their own shell.

3. Every idea leads to responsibility

I firmly believe in this principle that I was taught. How often we are confronted with situations and problems that overwhelm us, to which we do not know how to respond! Almost always in these cases the dialogue in the community or within the group aims to achieve something concrete. If a small idea crosses my mind, it is good to express it simply and then "lose" it in the community dialogue. It may not be picked up immediately and it is unlikely to be a decisive idea, but it is never useless, because it can stimulate the mind of another person. It can resurface in different expressions and offer a different point of view.... This is how dialogue is born, the common search for an answer to a problem, for an initiative that can be taken. In the end it will not be "my" idea, but "our" idea that triumphs, that is, the common search and



discernment that expresses something in which we all recognise ourselves. Woe to those who are afraid to express themselves, thinking that it is not necessary, or worse, for fear of being judged! And true leadership consists precisely in this service to the common dialogue.

As has already been said, this is not just a technique. It requires of the leader (and all the members) a spiritual journey, a daily listening to the Spirit by Whom they allow themselves to be guided. It is a matter of having great consideration for each brother or neighbour with whom we are called to collaborate: believing in the other, listening to him/her deeply, forming an interior silence to allow them space, with no immediate answers, and even leaving aside the concern for what I will have to say when it is my turn. From this silence or this speaking out of love for one's brother, discernment and true prophetic and servant leadership is born.



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