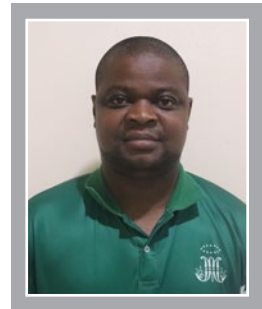

Leadership is simply a question of influencing people

“We grow when there is passion and commitment to something which becomes meaningful, life-giving or relevant, for something that inspires and captivates, that is good, just, and noble”

(Marist Voices, chap.20 - Br. Luis Carlos Gutiérrez)

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Leadership is simply a matter of influencing people. Nothing more, nothing less,” says John Maxwell.

From its independence to the present day, the Central African Republic has remained a poor and unstable country due to a lack of enlightened leadership.

When I was chosen as one of the Brothers to take part in this training course on prophetic leadership and service, it was a relief for me, because for the past year, I had been the Headmaster, and my aim was to build on those who preceded me in this position.

To do this, I had to be able to influence the students, teachers, and members of the administration to do an effective job and build a good reputation for the school. This way, we would make the school more attractive to other young people in the region.

But that is no easy task in a country where the education system has suffered a significant drop in standards as a result of the “white years” linked to bad governance, military, and political turmoil.

What’s more, teachers have the lowest standard of living of all Central African government employees, due to the fact their salaries have remained static since 1976. This led them to indulge in practices that sullied this noble profession, especially when it came to national examinations.

I had noticed a lack of motivation among students preparing for national exams. Even though I went into the classrooms to talk to them, I noticed that many students lacked confidence in themselves.

My inquiry with the students and their parents led me to discover that it was the teachers who were at the root of this apathy. In fact, some teachers made it clear to students that they would never be able to pass national exams by relying on their academic performance. Some went from house to house asking parents for money to get their children into the baccalauréat or brevet.

I called a meeting of parents and teachers to discuss the matter. The parents put the blame on the teachers, who they said were pressuring students to compensate them for allowing them to take the national exams.

On the other hand, the teachers accused the parents of undermining their own children's studies by providing them with cellphones which precipitated a lack of concentration on their studies. In fact, the arguments were all valid. The culpability was shared.

We made an important decision. No telephones were allowed on school property. Any teacher suspected of malfeasance would be dismissed on the spot, in accordance with the code of conduct of the Ecoles Catholiques Associees de Centrafrique (ECAC).

Despite the directive, we still confiscated more than a hundred phones over the course of a year. At the same time, I terminated the contracts of five teachers who did not follow the mandate.

As we started the new school year, I felt that everyone was trying to show good faith, which meant that we could look forward with great optimism to a successful school year.

The Central African Republic is a country whose survival is sometimes threatened by tribalism. Even within the Church, there are cases of religious leaders surrounding themselves with people from their own ethnic group, just as politicians do.

But a prophetic leader is someone who has fallen in love with God. When you are attached to God, all ethnic barriers are broken down because God makes no distinction between his children, and he loves everyone equally. The servant leader must rise above his own tradition and culture to live according to the values of the Gospel, creating around him a working environment where everyone feels at home and spreads a spirit of belonging among his colleagues.





Indeed, of all those who have presided over the St. Marcellin Champagnat school, I was the only one from the region. When I first took up my post, some students, teachers, and parents would come up to me and address me in their dialect. Berberati is a cosmopolitan town. There are pupils and teachers from all over the world. To speak in dialect is to discriminate against other employees. I tried to persuade them to accept French as the sole language of communication within the school. This helped to create a climate of trust in the school administration in that everyone felt accepted and protected.

Returning to John Maxwell's words, we need to know what kind of influence a Marist Brother needs to have on his co-workers to witness as a servant leader.

Personally, we need to lead the way, by conducting ourselves the way we want others to behave. In fact, when I was appointed as a math teacher at Lycée Champagnat in 2017, I was not at school full-time. I would come to teach my classes and then leave to do other work.

Now that I'm Principal, I'm the first to arrive at the school and the last to leave. It's a sacrifice I'm making to show my colleagues the pedagogy of presence advocated by our founder St. Marcellin Champagnat. This pedagogy of presence is intimately linked to a love of work, a value that must be inculcated in our teachers at all costs, because most of them work just for the money.

During our first year as overseers of the lycée, we noticed that many teachers had problems with the school timetable. Classes start in September, but until mid-October, the pupils are unable to properly study all the subjects on the syllabus because some teachers, who work in several schools in town, have difficulty scheduling their lessons, and this has a negative impact on the progress of the subject matter. That is why we have taken steps this year to ensure that only teachers who have enough time can sign a contract to teach at our school. To accomplish this, we have recruited retired teachers who only work at our school. Thanks to our permanent presence, we were able to identify and remedy the problem.

A very important aspect of this course on servant leadership is knowing how to act with humility. As the saying goes, humility comes before glory. Indeed, in our Mission as Marist Brothers, we seek to promote the glory of Christ. But Christ can only be glorified through our acts of humility.

At the beginning of this school year, I had an experience that made a deep impression on me. In fact, given that the teachers and pupils were arriving very late for the first period at 7:30, I decided to push back the time to 8:00. I thought this would satisfy everyone, but to my great surprise, the teachers were not at all happy with this decision. They let it be known through their representative, but I downplayed their concern.

One morning, before lessons started, they called on me directly in their room. I went in and listened to them. They were angry that the administration was making decisions without consulting them beforehand, and without creating a peaceful working environment. After listening to them carefully, I decided to reverse my decision. I asked them to be patient for the current week because you cannot abruptly reverse a decision.

Together, we had to make the pupils aware once again that we were going back to the old system, because the new system had more negatives than positives. The teachers applauded, and when I got back to my office, I called my assistant to brief him on the situation, because the proposal in question had come from him. He was dead set against it. He said that if I went back on the decision, it would be a humiliation for us as an administration. But I told him that it would be better to humiliate ourselves in the interests of the students and teachers.

In the end, he agreed and the atmosphere in the went back to normal. This is to say that in servant leadership, it is important to be humble in order to seek what is good for the members of the group.

The servant leader is committed to serving the needs of others in everything they do. They do not seek to command or dominate, but only to serve. Their only objective is the happiness of their community. So, when I had finished placing teachers, I received a delegation of students preparing for the science baccalauréat. They did not want the biology teacher that the administration had allocated to them. In fact, the town of Berberati had this problem of qualified teachers.

The only one who taught well was appointed Principal of a state secondary school, and he did not seem to have the time to do the job properly. But the students insisted that I intervene on their behalf. Seeing their determination, I went to see the teacher to beg him to help us despite his busy schedule. He finally agreed, which reassured the students because biology is a basic subject for them.



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