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SECULAR FRANCISCAN LEADERSHIP

ANIMATE AND GUIDE WITH A LEADERSHIP OF SERVICE

Fr. Hernán Eguzquiza, TOR

Introduction

Every generation has its challenges. Today we, all over the world, are fighting with covid. The pandemic puts into test our personal as well as institutional spirituality. In this new Easter season the Lord invites us not to lose hope, to maintain peace and trust. This is fundamental in the face of such an invasive reality that we feel in all areas of our daily lives. This reality affects all our relationships, at home with our loved ones, in the neighbourhood, on the streets, in politics, at work, etc... The risen Christ calls us to empower the best of ourselves and of our institutions to serve with joy and to maintain trust in God and in humanity.

The OFS is spread throughout the world with brothers and sisters meeting regularly in the name of the Lord since almost eight hundred years. It has goals to achieve and a call to respond within the Church. Thus, the Secular Franciscan leadership is called to animate and guide the fraternities to live in each time and context the Franciscan spirit as lay people inserted in their parish and national community.

The “from where” the authority is exercised

Leadership is given an authority to exercise the power to decide the direction of the group. This authority can be exercised in different ways.

On April 20, 2017, Cindy Wooden of the Catholic News Service published an article on the Franciscan idea of leadership following an interview with Fr. Michael Anthony Perry, the OFM

Minister General and with Massimo Faggioli, professor of Villanova University. Fr Michael started by pointing out these questions:

“Does leadership organize things in order to have total control over everything? Or does the leadership seek the direction of the authority of the people so that there is a synergy, a combination of all the forces within a community?”¹.

Trying to answer these questions, we want to look *from where* we are called to exercise the role of leadership in our fraternities. That is, from where, from which worldview the group is being guided. In our case, it is exercised from our Christian and Franciscan spirituality. Hence, we have a referential framework in the biblical teachings and in those left by Francis of Assisi.

From the biblical tradition

Fr. Manuel Alvarado OFM, in his reflection on *Franciscan leadership*, summarizes the biblical tradition on this topic and indicates that when we refer to Jesus of Nazareth we are talking about the Jewish context in which he lived and from where Jesus the Messiah revealed us the heart of the Father. In biblical language, this is very powerful, because whoever is at the head represents the people, in him the promise of God’s protection is deposited, and the happiness of his own people depends on his fidelity to the covenant. This is what today we call corporate personality. So, this is the importance and centrality of those who must lead the chosen people, the king, the prophets and the priests, all of them men and women called to pro-existence, that is, *to abandon their relatives and their own legitimate interests to make their lives a service to others, with preference to the weakest and the poorest*. In the NT, leadership is focused on Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who is the Johannine icon of a good leader (Cf. Jn 10). *He cares for his sheep and takes them out to graze, care for and nurture those he calls, even to give his life*. But the text of the New Testament that most clearly expresses the Christian mystique on the exercise of leadership is “Jesus called them to him and said: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mt 20, 25-28)².

From the Franciscan tradition

Fraternity for the OFS finds its origins in the inspiration of Saint Francis of Assisi, to whom the Most High revealed that fraternal fellowship is, in essence, following a gospel way of life (CC.GG

¹ WOODEN Cindy, <https://ofm.org/es/blog/franciscana-gobernabilidad/2017>.

² ALVARADO Manuel, <http://manuelfranciscano.blogspot.com/2007/06/liderazgo-franciscano.html>.

28.1). The OFS is part of the Franciscan family and so the experience that Francis of Assisi had is a fundamental element in the exercise of authority.

Francis's experience of a poor and crucified Christ

Pope Francis has pointed out that this experience has deeply marked the spirituality of Francis of Assisi. The encounter with the poor God present in our midst in Jesus of Nazareth: a humble and hidden presence that the *Poverello* adores and contemplates in the Incarnation, on the Cross and in the Eucharist. On the other hand, it is known that one of the evangelical images that impressed Francis the most is the washing of the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper. It is the same logic of “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (Cf. 2Cor 8,9). The logic of “spoliation”, that Francis put into practice literally when he “stripped himself of all earthly goods, to give himself entirely to God and others”³.

We are fraternity

“The Order of Franciscan Seculars is expressed in Fraternity at various levels”. The purpose being to provide a well-ordered structure, that fosters fellowship and reciprocal relationships among the brothers and sisters, and encourages their active and communal presence in the Church, both local and universal. (CC .GG 28.2)

In the Secular Franciscan Order, as every group that is part of the Franciscan family is made up of “*fraternities*”, leadership in the fraternities is exercised among equal brothers and sisters. Leadership is not to be seen as a pedestal to be on top of the brothers and sisters and all this is due to the spiritual heritage left by Francis. In this sense, it is interesting to look at the importance of “being a brother” within our spirituality that motivated a request, “a privilege” that the General Ministers of the four branches of the Franciscan Family - the OFM, the OFM Capuchins, the OFM Conventuals and the Third Order Regular - asked Pope Francis to grant Franciscans the “privilege” that religious brothers who are not priests can be elected to leadership positions, including those in which they hold authority over ordained priests. The word “privilege” means special permission for something that is not generally provided by the Law of the Church. In Canon Law, governance in the Church is linked with Ordination.

And precisely this request is inserted in this direction, that of the strength of fraternity in Franciscan spirituality. In his answer, Pope Francis pointed out that the need to express their

³ MARTINEZ Renato, https://www.vaticannews.va/es/papa/news/2017-11/el-papa--_la-minoridad-franciscana-es-comunion-con-dios--el-homb.html

fraternity in Christ should make their interpersonal relationships follow the dynamism of charity, so that, while justice will lead them to recognize the rights of each one, charity transcends these rights and calls them to fraternal communion; because it is not the rights that you love, but the brothers, whom you must welcome with respect, understanding and mercy. Brothers are the most important, not the structures⁴.

Leadership from a Secular Franciscan perspective

At every level, each Fraternity is animated and guided by a Council and Minister (or President). These offices are conferred through elections in accordance with the Rule, Constitutions and their specific statutes. (CC.GG 31.1)

Animating and guiding are the two characteristics of exercising the authority of the seculars who follow Jesus Christ in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi. Leadership among Secular Franciscans is precisely aimed at serving the brothers and not the structures as Pope Francis told us. Let us now look at some points that the Constitutions of OFS indicate in the way of exercising this service.

- *The brothers and sisters share responsibility for the life of the Fraternities to which they belong, and for the OFS as the organic union of all the Fraternities throughout the world. For members to realise that they are co-responsible, certain habits are necessary. These are – personal presence, personal witness, prayer, being willing to be as active as possible given personal constraints, and undertaking other responsibilities for the encouragement of the Order. (CC.GG 30. 1-2)*
- *The office of Minister and Councillor is one of fraternal service, a commitment to make oneself available and responsible to each brother and sister and to the Fraternity, so that every member will realise his or her own vocation. Each Fraternity will be a true ecclesial Franciscan fellowship, actively present in the Church and in society. (CC.GG 31-2)*
- *Ministers' and Councillors' task to lead is temporary. Resisting all ambition, brothers and sisters show fraternal love by their spirit of service and by being prepared both to relinquish and to accept office. (CC.GG 32-2)*
- *Ministers and Councillors live and foster the spirit of fellowship and reality among the brothers and sisters, among the various Fraternities, and with the wider Franciscan family. Above all, in all that concerns Fraternity, let them have peace and reconciliation in their hearts. (CC.GG 32-1)*

⁴ WOODEN Cindy, <https://ofm.org/es/blog/franciscana-gobernabilidad/2017>

- *In the Fraternities and throughout the Order, leadership and co-ordination have to foster the individual personality and capacity of the brothers and sisters, and of the Fraternity itself. Respect is to be shown for the numerous ways in which the Franciscan vision is expressed in the Fraternities and in the diverse cultures. (CC.GG 33-1)*

Conclusion

We have made a journey to the fundamental aspects that constitute the exercise of Franciscan leadership. Today more than ever, in this difficult time of the pandemic, the presence of Franciscan leaders is needed as guides and animators. Looking “from where” the authority is exercised is an important frame of reference to locate ourselves “from” our call in the Church and in the world. When contemplating it, makes us to see, on the one hand, that focusing leadership on the quest to be in control of everything does not reflect the Franciscan spirit and on the other hand, it encourages us to continue working among ourselves in the exercise of charity. Seen in this way, the exercise of authority invites us to assume it with a fraternal attitude, detachment and as temporary service for the good of the fraternity.

Likewise, this fraternal service is a call to the service of the brothers and sisters and not of the structures that permanently need to be revised and updated so that the brothers and sisters would receive what is necessary to respond to the present challenges in the places where they live.

And finally, in this endeavour, the call to a service of authority as guides and animators reflects the spirit that Saint Francis has left us as an inheritance in dealing with our brothers and sisters. This task of leading requires the entire fraternity, not only the brothers and sisters who temporarily exercise it, but also the collaboration in obedience and availability of all so that the fraternity continues to respond to its mission.