

Jesus as Leader

by Fr. Jack Peterson, YA

Jesus is the Light of the World. His light shines brightly upon mankind. One of the brilliant colors that make up the prism of His light is the gift of His leadership. His leadership serves as a model for all Christians, especially for youth ministers. As men and women called to serve young people, our ministry will be effective if we truly strive to imitate Christ. Our efforts to journey alongside a young person will be illuminated by the light of Christ if we incorporate His style of leadership. Let us explore some of the leadership gifts that Jesus demonstrates in the Gospels.

Jesus is Confident

Jesus exhibits a strong and attractive confidence that comes from having a very clear vision for His life. While walking upon this earth, He knows God intimately, and He fully understands God's plan for mankind. In fact, Jesus comes into this world with the purpose of bearing witness to the truth regarding who God is and His plan for His beloved children. Since Jesus dwells in a very unique union with the Father in the Holy Spirit and has a clear vision for His role in Salvation History. He speaks and acts with a confidence that makes Him a very attractive leader. It is a confidence rooted in truth and love, not pride and arrogance. As a result, His followers are amazed at how He speaks with authority and not like many other religious leaders. The crowds are drawn to Jesus because of His humble confidence.

Jesus Shows Care

Furthermore, Jesus cares deeply about individuals. He demonstrates God's enduring and personal love for each person with whom He comes into contact, no matter the person's cultural difference or level of ability. Through His actions, words, gaze, and gestures people have a profound sense that they are the only person that matters to Jesus during their encounter with Him. This deep, selfless care transforms lives, renews hope, and restores life to the flock. Plenty of examples in the Gospels come to mind, including the woman with the hemorrhages, James and John along the lakeshore, the woman at the well, and Matthew at His tax collector's post. Jesus can look into a person's eyes, reveal His great love for them, heal their brokenness, and call them to a brand new way of life. Jesus' personal care for the individual makes Him a great leader.

Jesus is a Team Builder

As a leader, Jesus knew that He needed a good team for the future. He turned out to be a master team builder! He handpicked a group of twelve that He called, taught, nurtured, coached, journeyed with, and transformed into a group of disciples that served as the foundation of the Church which quickly spread throughout most of the known world. The grand finale of His Paschal mystery, His saving work, was the supreme Gift of the Holy Spirit. The Advocate was the final transforming gift to His disciples. The Holy Spirit, the love of God which came to dwell in the hearts of the disciples, gave them tremendous courage, wisdom, and apostolic zeal to spread the light of Christ to the ends of the earth.

Our Lord sees goodness and talents in people that are often hidden by brokenness, sin, and pride. His gaze penetrates the soul and enables Him to see the gifts that the Father has given

to each of us. By healing them with His forgiveness, consistency, and the warmth of His love, He then is able to draw out the leadership skills in others and place His disciples in the right place in His kingdom where they can bear fruit that will last.

Jesus is Prudent

Jesus' leadership is also manifest in the exercise of tremendous prudence in pasturing the flock. He knows when to be gentle, patient, and understanding with His leaders and with the crowds. He also knows when to be firm, challenging, and unbending with the same people. This gift of prudence makes Him a tremendous shepherd of souls. This gift comes from His profound concern to speak the truth with love and to draw people into an ever deeper relationship with God over time that leads them to the fullness of life. Jesus, in the Gospels, leans heavily on the gift of patience, often choosing to hoe for another year around the barren bush. However, He also finds the proper moment to point out sin, poor judgment, and mistaken intentions. For instance, His prudence and courage lead Him to turn over the money changers' tables in the temple area or to tell Simon Peter that he is thinking as Satan does.

Jesus is a Servant

Jesus is a uniquely effective leader because He exercises servant leadership. He spends nearly every waking moment during His three public years serving those around Him, especially those in need. Even when others would push people away, Jesus invites them to His side, extends His love, His healing, His wisdom, and a loaf of bread. When the twelve are distracted by their own ambitions and debate among themselves which is the greatest among them, Jesus turns their silliness into a teaching moment and explains the importance of being a servant. Greatness in His kingdom is measured by our willingness to humble ourselves and serve the needs of our neighbor. The washing of the feet of the Apostles on Holy Thursday is a shocking, prime example, eclipsed only by the next day when He lays down His life for the flock on the cross. Jesus is a great leader because He truly cares more about others than about His own comfort or need. This style of servant leadership wins the hearts of countless followers.

Modeling Christ

As we grow closer to God in prayer, deepen our faith through study of the Word of God, develop a clear sense of God's plan for His children, and root sin out of our lives through Penance and the development of virtue, we build a sense of humble conviction about Christ. That conviction and gentle confidence make the faith attractive to young people. In other words, as we grow in holiness, young people will flock to our program for many of the same reasons they came to Christ.

Our Care for Young People

God has asked us to be His ambassadors to young people. We must beg Him for the grace to care deeply for them as He does. We show that care by our genuine interest in them and the things that are important to them, by making sacrifices of our time and energy to spend quality time with them, following up on past conversations, finding creative, encouraging ways to share our faith with them, and even by offering a needed challenge at certain moments. Our care has the potential to prepare their hearts to accept Christ's care for them. Usually, young people come to embrace God's care by experiencing genuine care from other adults in their lives. In this way, our ministry builds upon and reinforces the work of their parents in the home. Young people are

quick to sense if we are ministering to them from a faith and a heart that is riveted with authentic care. This care is an essential ingredient.

Jesus Recognizes the Gifts of Others

Another essential ingredient in our work with young people is the art of discovering gifts in students, calling those gifts out, creatively putting them to use in the program, and developing them over time. These gifts may be in the area of acting, singing, speaking, running a small group, explaining the faith, or putting people at ease with a positive sense of humor. Young people often battle with low self-esteem and a poor self-image. This art of calling out gifts and putting them to use can help them see the hand of God in their lives and grow in their faith and trust in Him. It also helps to strengthen our program by getting the right people into proper places of leadership and using important gifts to spread the light of Christ.

Gentleness and Firmness

Since many young people wrestle with immaturity and love to test boundaries with adults, it is really helpful to develop the Christ-like balance of gentleness and firmness. Young people need adults who are gentle, supportive, encouraging, patient and joyful in their lives. St. Paul strongly encouraged these gifts in His letters to the Galatians and the Colossians. These gifts should be what stands out in our ministry. At the same time, we are given plenty of opportunities to offer a challenge or a correction to a young person. Even when we discern those moments, it should be offered in a positive manner, highlighting other strengths and gifts, framing it as an opportunity to become an even better Christian and leader among their peers, encouraging them to be responsible for their actions and to see how they can affect others negatively at times. Of course, we should always offer corrections in private when possible. They should never be given when we are overcome by our anger and frustration. To offer correction then would run the risk of ruining in a few moments what we have been working hard to build up for a long time. As we spend time praying with the Gospels, ask Jesus to cultivate in you this leadership skill.

In conclusion, we can learn everything that we need to know about Christian leadership from the example of Jesus Christ. He teaches us plenty by word and deed, and He sets the bar rather high for youth ministers. It is really helpful to remember that He promises to be with us always until the end of time, especially in the Eucharist. It is also good to remember that He has poured forth the Holy Spirit upon us, the Spirit of power, who enables us to be witnesses to the Resurrection, to grow in charity and holiness, and to humbly let His light shine through us into the lives of young people by exercising the leadership gifts that He models for us.

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