



Young People, Church, Spirituality and Becoming Leaders.

By

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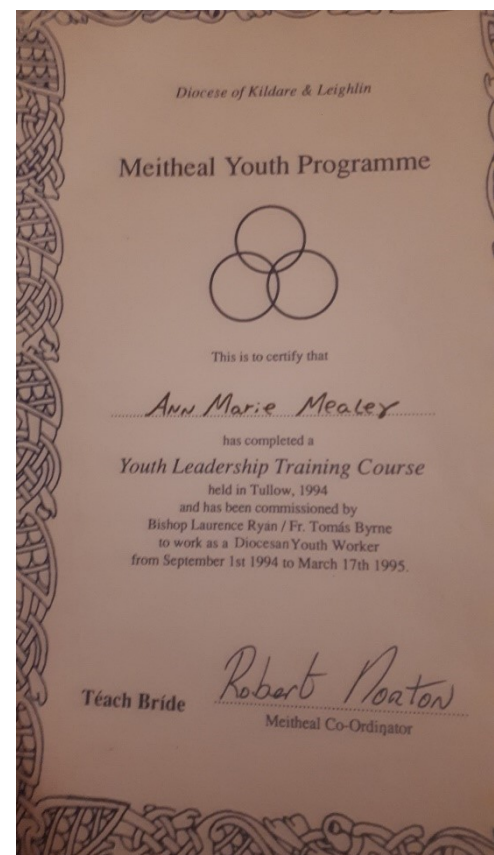


My first experience of leadership was when I was 15. I was selected as part of a team of 10 girls to do a leadership programme called 'Meitheal'. The programme was run (as still does to this day) by Kildare and Leighlin Diocese in Ireland and has the full support of the bishops and school principals of the local secondary schools. The Meitheal Programme trains young people how to listen to others in their environment and act responsibly to effectuate change in their schools. It is pastorally focused and should provide students with the reassurance that school leaders are listening to the needs of the student body and that those girls who were in the more senior years at the schools could provide support and advice to the junior girls who had just started in the school which was run by the Mercy Sisters.

I learned so much on the week-long residential including how to listen to others without interrupting, judging or feeling annoyed if I didn't like and/or agree with what they were saying. I also learned about the importance of being part of the team of people who genuinely respected each other and knew what each other's gift really was. We lived together, ate together and trained together for a week with the leaders of the Meitheal team who were committed volunteers with professional careers. These individuals were so inspirational because they were successful in their careers and yet humble enough to take a week out of their own personal holiday allowance to train young people like myself in the skills needed for leadership and the values around respecting others which was considered vital to the programme. Inspired by the parable of the talents, a key concept that we heard about all week long was the need to 'find the gold' within ourselves and to also see it within others.

I had never even thought about there being 'gold' inside of me before and although I always had a strong belief in God and always felt called to pray when I felt alone, worried, upset or anxious I hadn't really ever considered myself as gold. What an emotional time it was at the end of the week when we were all signing each other's training folders telling each other how brilliant we were and reminding each other that we were gold, special, unique and absolutely brilliant!

Years later I went on to study Theology, obtained a Ph.D in moral theology and published various books and articles in my field of study. It was very clear to me from quite early on in my studies that the Church was always struggling to engage young people fully in what its key messages were. I always found myself telling my students over and over again that the Church is founded on the key message of love found in the Gospel and not primarily on whatever difficult parts of the teachings they knew most about and couldn't accept. But of course sitting down to really engage with that message requires time and perhaps even a deep and painful reflection on one's life that many of us might like to avoid. Laudato





Si' talks about the 'cult of celebrity' which dominates much of the lives of our young people today. Everyone must look beautiful, be acceptable on Instagram, be liked by everyone (or as many as possible at least) be driving the best car and earning the best money as the director of a top-class company.

The journey into faith and Christian spirituality, however, is much more engaged and involved than all of this. The call to be a disciple of Christ may well lead to a brilliant job and a nice car but this should not come about at the cost of another person's opportunity, dignity or circumstances. It should be earned through a genuine commitment to excellence in all things combined with an understanding of what it means to be a good person with a set of virtues that work together for love and for justice.

To say one has a faith and is a leader is a conversation, in my view, which must begin at the place where that person feels invited by God into a relationship, a friendship, a conversation. This conversation with God asks us to see ourselves as 'gold', as 'imago dei', totally and perfectly in his image yet broken and in need of constant healing and support along the journey of life.

Far too often we use our power and indeed our understanding of Church teachings as a way to show how much we know in comparison to others, or as a means of taking sides on a particular agenda. For me, though, the main question is not what side we are on so much as what aspect of God's calling is he telling us to live out? We need to ask ourselves constantly, 'what is God putting inside of me personally that is 'gold' and how am I going to use that to grow in his image myself and to allow others to do the same?'

This requires deep contemplation and reflection. As Timothy Radcliffe puts it, '[t]he gaze of Jesus is challenging, but not because our every sin is noted down.' (p. 128) It's because whether we like ourselves or not, the gaze of Jesus is always one of love. I remember a student at Leeds Trinity who used to call me 'The Queen' of Theology (a term which I couldn't accept at all) because she really believed that whenever she was feeling overwhelmed about her studies, I could fix it! I never felt that way about myself but she did about me. This is how it works in our relationship with God. 'God delights in our being, our goodness, even if it is sometimes concealed. He sees the saint that each of us is called to be with his grace. (p.128). Young people often greet each other with 'love ya babes!' Well, God's greeting for us is even more affectionate than this! God's greeting is one of excitement and pure joy with arms wide open to hug us in the most loving way imaginable. As Pope Francis wrote: 'Appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraph 284 Apostolic Exhortation, 24 November 2013).

Vincent MacNamara puts it well when he says that this kind of relational approach to the moral life was not always the key focus in the Catholic tradition. 'The earlier moral teaching of command and prohibition in Catholicism did not look like that. It was impersonal, it did not bother to explain itself, it was experienced as a cold legalism. So that it is worth reminding ourselves that the whole of the moral enterprise is about the well-being of ourselves and others' (MacNamara, 2010, p. 141).



As people of faith, therefore, before we begin wondering exactly what to do about a particular situation, in my view, we need to think firstly how am I feeling about being God's friend? And how am I feeling about other people who are also God's friends? It is at this point, theologically speaking, that we begin to learn how spirituality is at the heart of the quest for truth. We need to ask ourselves as God's friends, what virtues do I need to demonstrate through my actions that I am in fact his friend, and I will be continuously trying to shape my personality in such a way that this will become my vocation and my primary stance in the world?

In my view, to bring young people back into the Church more fully, we need to remember the riches of the spiritual life. Most young people that I meet tell me with great pride that they are 'spiritual but not religious'. In most cases, I think this is their way of saying that they wish to stay connected with the more poetic side of the search for wholeness and fulfilment without having to deal with the perhaps heavier questions of dogma, morality or the study of the scriptures for instance. We are often happy to leave that task to the few theologians who are left in the country today as 'that is for them to sort out', not me! However, within this perspective, I feel there is nevertheless still a profound paradox. How can we ever know that our spirituality is healthy and truly life-giving if it is not tried and tested in relation to moral expectations, how we treat other people and the virtues we hold? Is it not rather selfish to focus merely on what we want to take as nourishment for our own well-being alone without any consideration of the impact that might have on others? How can we really say we are happy if we ignore that cry of the poor, or the call from a friend who is in need, or a colleague who is feeling worthless, or a loved one who has just had a breakdown?

Is having our candles lighting for ourselves and engaging in holistic spiritual practices that aim at healing oneself and transforming how we see ourselves enough when others also need our help? This is where morality meets spirituality and the conversation begins in my view. Being a friend of God does mean that we are 'gold' and that when we pray we are receiving comfort and healing but this affair is not just private because God has other friends too. And why would we want to take from them when what God has given us is unique to us?

When I was leaving a 16 year lecturing post at Leeds Trinity University in July 2021, I did not have a leaving party. Instead, I was offered the opportunity to have a Mass said for me and my intentions by the Chaplaincy Team. They told me I could invite a few close friends. I was relieved to hear that I was only allowed a 'few close friends' because I knew I would be emotional and I really felt I had to choose wisely those colleagues and professional contacts that would understand vulnerability – and me! When we are faced with real change and the prospect of the unknown in our lives, we have to admit that we are vulnerable and we may not wish others to see this.

Having been awake all night the night before the Mass wondering whether or not I would be able to read out my leaving speech, I decided to just keep the speech in my bag during the Mass and see how I felt at the end. If I felt too emotional, no one would ever know what I had wanted to say, but if I was able and strong enough they would hopefully learn something from my key messages following such a long time as a tutor in moral theology.



Reading the speech 6 months later, I now realise that my message is exactly the same as it was when I was 15 and being trained to be a Meitheal leader in the Diocese. Here is an extract from the speech:

'Through Leeds Citizens, I learned to listen more. Through CAFOD and Justice and Peace, I was challenged to take the Theology out of the ivory tower and bring to bare on ordinary people's lives and lived experiences.

There is still much to do on all of this in the Church, and I'm relying on my past pupils now to help us to do it. I am very proud of the people that you have become, and I'm excited about what the future hold for you.

But if I had one piece of advice to give you it would be: please don't take as long as I did to feel comfortable in your own skin and to shine when the situation requires it. Take inspiration from the people around you – even the ones here today.

We have a former MP and his loving wife (Mary), a Director of Catholic Life, a parish priest saying the Mass, and two Leeds Trinity Chaplains (both past and present).

All of these individuals have taught me something professionally but, perhaps more importantly, they all taught something about myself: 'Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain.' (Leaving Mass Speech, Leeds Trinity University, July 2021)

I concluded my speech by noting the text 1 Timothy 4.14 as my parting message to the LTU community: 'Neglect not the gift that is in thee.'

As places of learning, universities and schools should help students to discern who they are and what their gifts are. This might come through the form of career guidance or at times personal tutoring but in my view it should go deeper. We should feel able to say to students and people we work with what we think is fantastic about them! I am always inspired by young people who tell each other so freely that they love so and so, or that so and so is a 'pure legend'. For God, we are all 'pure legends' but we fail as a young community to see that THIS is the key message of the religious tradition.

Getting back to leadership then, I think we all could admit that we know someone in leadership who we really believed was a 'true legend!' But have we ever asked ourselves what exactly was it about that person that made them have such an impact on you? What is their character all about? What did they DO that made them so brilliant?

Rarely still do we ever take the time to ask the person who we are admiring so much what they had to go through to be such a legend in leadership. From my own experience of those who have led me well and those who have not, the key difference was their behavior, how they treated me and how they made me feel about myself and about my work and potential. I respected those who respected me.

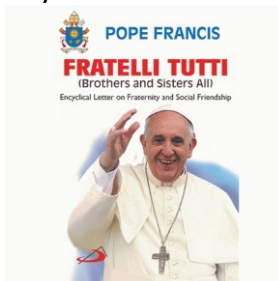
So, all in all, therefore, we keep coming back to the fact that friends of God are people who are 'legends' in the eyes of the one who loves them first and who loves them the most.

Once we accept this relationship with God, we are accepting to be molded into his ways, and into a set of virtues that are borne out of the spiritual. God is the potter and we are the clay.

This dialogue and activity of God in our lives is not an easy one because often when one might want to be kind, one might realize that is in fact justice and a tough decision that is required. Good leadership therefore requires diligence, study, sacrifice and a willingness to



support others, to let others shine without being jealous or spiteful and to always be open to learning more and being told that you 'got it wrong'. In short, it requires the virtues. It is this kind of training that is currently being offered at Notre Dame Sixth Form College through their 'Stella Maris' young leadership awards. These awards encourage all students in the school to be the best that they can be (as they are all precious in the eyes of the school's Catholic leadership team) and to find ways of being a good virtuous person throughout the year. Some students undertake charity work, helping the poor, cleaning up the school premises, helping other students who are finding life difficult, leading on school projects linked to care for the environment and many more. Each student collects points and recommendation for their work from their teachers and these are assessed at the end of the year to determine whether a gold, silver or bronze leadership award can be given out. I was asked to be a judge on two occasions, and to deliver a speech at the last Awards Day in July.



On that day, I reminded staff and students of the text of *Fratelli Tutti* (paragraph 18) which speaks of a 'throw-away' world. For Pope Francis, in such a culture, 'persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled "not yet useful" ... or "no longer needed"' (FT, paragraph 18).

This throwing away of persons damages society, organizations, families and people. It can take the form of bullying, jealousy, racism, ridicule, or disrespectful actions, for example. And if it is seen to be done in the name of progress or to advance an agenda (either individual or collective), then it is seen as acceptable.

In virtuous leadership, however, persons matter a great deal. Their dignity is of paramount significance and that is the lens through which the eyes of the faith or spiritual leader are drawn and moulded in order to see the world differently, to challenge the status quo, to exercise strong judgement around people's dignity and to use their power for the liberation of others rather than the continuation of their oppression. Put simply, it encourages us to have the courage to 'imagine, recognize in literary accounts, project oneself into, and transform' (Junker- Kenny, 2019 p. 70) our moral thinking so that subsequently the ways in which people currently view how organizations should be run and how people should be led and guided.

So, for any young person out there who wants the glamour of being a director, a school principal or a leader in any kind of organization, try to ask yourself 'what kind of leader do I want to be?' Begin with the question: 'what are my values as a person? And then asking, 'are those the right kind of values to have in order to occupy a leadership position?' These are tough questions and there is no short-cut to doing the reflection concerning who we want to be as leaders of the future. And of course if we were to be totally honest we don't really like to have to say to ourselves: 'am I of "the cult of celebrity" school' of leadership rather than the "friend of God school of leadership?" This is understandable as the latter involves sacrifice, doing the right thing, going to the depths of our conscience, to the 'secret core' and 'sanctuary' that *Gaudium et Spes* spoke about in paragraph 16 at the Second Vatican Council. It is in that sanctuary where we are alone with ourselves and God that we can truly make a choice about who we want to be as a leader in front of the one



who truly loves us. As the much-respected and loved moral theologian Kevin Kelly wrote that we must always continue '[b]eing a cry for a more fully human life [because] it is God's voice calling us into the future, inviting us to take up the challenge to continue creating a more human world (Kelly, 1999, p. 153).'

How we do this requires engagement with activities that help us to develop our leadership qualities and to understand what our predecessors have taught us. A very creative example is cited by Mary Judith Reiss in an article entitled 'After Five Centuries of Mixings, Who Are We? Walking with Our Dark Grandmother's Feet'. In this text, she talks about how a women's network in Latin America would get together to share experiences of the holy in their lives and what they had learned from this. She says, '[d]uring a recent ritual to honor our many unknown ancestors, we were asked to "walk back" through history by imagining ourselves first walking in our mother's feet, then in our grandmother's, great-grandmother's, and so on, back through the generations. We were each to see in her own landscape, going back in time 500, 600, even 1,000 years ago (Mary Judith Reiss, 1996, p. 51). This 'going back' to reflect on what we have learned or can learn through the lens of others is really important in leadership as it helps us to receive the wisdom of the past and to ensure that we change our approach so that the sins of the previous generation are not perpetuated but used as vehicle for change and positive future development. Furthermore, as I argue in my first book, we need to engage in spiritual practices that attune us to what a relationship with God is all about. [...] [E]ngagement with the spiritual practices of meditation, worship, fasting and praying with the Scriptures, to name but a few, ... are akin to personal training. They are training for the mind and the heart in the ways of Jesus and in the ways of goodness' (Mealey, 2009, p. 106).

At present, Leeds Citizens is offering such an opportunity for 'personal training' in authentic leadership for free in the community. Free master classes for young people across the city of Leeds are being offered by this organization in the hope that the future generation of leaders can begin to reflect on who they might want to be as leaders of the future. These sessions allow young people to come along to listen to established, eminent leaders from different walks of life to talk openly about what they think good leadership looks like and what key insights they would like to pass on to the next generation. The approach is a supportive, 'around the fire-side' style talk with an expert where young people can freely and respectfully ask questions about leadership from someone who is successful in their career and has done it with grace, dedication, sacrifice and kindness. The hope is that we can find a way to create the leaders of the future who can hopefully (with the help of the wisdom offered by the experts) avoid perpetuating the same mistakes that we see made by leaders over and over again.

Finally, it is perhaps fitting to conclude with the prayer that is found at the closing section of Pope Francis' Fratelli Tutti entitled a 'prayer to the Creator' in order to help the reader of this piece to begin to enter into the 'secret core' and 'sanctuary' of leadership:

*Lord, Father of our human family,
you created all human beings equal in dignity:
pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit
and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter,
dialogue, justice and peace.*



*Move us to create healthier societies
and a more dignified world,
a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war.
May our hearts be open
to all the peoples and nations of the earth.
May we recognize the goodness and beauty
that you have sown in each of us,
and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects,
and shared dreams. Amen.*

Here's to God's leadership 'legends' of the future!

AM Mealey, Horsforth, 07/01/2022.

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