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No Small Matter: Leadership for Institutional Culture in Vincentian Higher Education

By

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Courtesy of the The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

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Abstract: *The consideration of “Vincentian Leadership” exists within the larger context of the loss of religious personnel from Catholic universities across the United States. For the religious mission and identity to remain strong at these institutions, Vincentian leaders must leverage a primarily lay-led, self-sustaining culture.*

Before Vincent de Paul conceived of a congregation of priests and brothers; before he and Louise de Marillac brought together young women as Daughters of Charity; and long before Elizabeth Ann Seton and her successors Americanized and institutionalized the Vincentian tradition in educational settings, Vincent organized lay women and men in local parish communities to work on behalf of the poor in their villages and towns. The convictions and beliefs that are sometimes referred to as “Vincentian spirituality” are not particular to religious life per se, but, rather, are rooted in the service of the poor, a task and responsibility that both religious and lay have historically shared.

This conference examines Vincentian Leadership, long exercised by both lay and religious, but it does so at a particular time in the church’s history when religious life itself is disappearing from much of the first world. For those institutions founded and led by Vincentian religious, there is a growing desire that these institutions be reconfigured in such a way that laity increasingly assume responsibility for the Vincentian character and mission.²

This hope for a handing over of leadership is not unreasonable. Vocations in the United States have been in free-fall decline for four decades now, and laity have assumed the leadership of Catholic schools, religious education programs, hospitals, nursing homes, and uncountable social service agencies. Laity now serve as canon lawyers, tribunal judges, diocesan chancellors, and some now lead parish communities. Forty years ago, all of these roles would have been exercised by religious and priests. The transition of roles traditionally held by religious in Catholic institutions to lay professionals is remarkable by any standard.

² Unless otherwise noted, the term “Vincentian religious” in this article refers to members of the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity and/or Sisters of Charity. There are numerous additional religious communities who root their spirituality in the thought and tradition of Vincent de Paul, but these do not sponsor institutions of higher education in the United States.

Nevertheless, the transition from religious to lay leadership in church-sponsored institutions is more complex than many realize, and indeed this transition may fail at a number of U.S. Catholic colleges and universities. To be more specific, the continuation of the college's religious character and mission is not guaranteed in this transition period. The rich cultures and missions of these institutions are currently disappearing at many, and are at risk at most. Allow me to explain by first focusing on Catholic-sponsored colleges and universities in general, and then by turning my attention more directly to Vincentian universities.

In the past few years, Medaille College, Villa Julie College, Daemen College, Nazareth College, Marymount Manhattan College, and most recently, Marist College all decided to set aside their Catholic identity and chart their course as private, non-sectarian colleges. There are more colleges clearly heading in this direction. In each case, the founding religious congregation had largely disappeared from the day-to-day functioning of the college, and the lay leadership that had been left behind did not feel either capable or inclined to take on responsibility for the religious nature of the institution.

Why did the lay faculty at these institutions feel incapable or disinclined to take responsibility for the religious mission of their colleges? There are at least six reasons. In no particular order, and in egregious simplicity, they include:

1. The Catholic church in the U.S. has largely done a poor job in the religious education of laity, and many of the professionals staffing these universities do not feel competent to speak on religious matters, even informally.
2. The Catholic church itself has largely socialized laity to leave matters of faith and doctrine to "the experts," i.e., priests and religious. Lay people do not generally preach, nor speak in the name of the church in our tradition.
3. Catholic colleges have not, by and large, intentionally hired Catholics or, for that matter, people of religious conviction. Faculty are hired for their disciplinary expertise alone. Administrators, staff, or trustees are not expected to be Catholic, and are hired for their competencies. Presidents are generally Catholics and, as such, are an exception to this larger trend.

4. Even among those faculty who are sympathetically inclined to the religious mission of the institution, few feel competent to assert leadership in this regard. They were largely trained in graduate programs that focused exclusively on their discipline, without exploring the connections between such disciplines and such larger systems of meaning.
5. Universities contain transient populations. Students come and go in four years; or less if they are graduate students. Administrative and staff turnover is frequent. Faculty are tenured, it is true, but in the U.S. tenured positions are decreasing as a percentage of the overall faculty population. Part-time and term-contract positions are growing in their place. Expectations that throughout their professional lives individuals will take on the corporate culture and remain long enough to pass it on to a succeeding generation are difficult to realize in transient populations.
6. Catholic colleges have largely designed structures that require the presence of the religious themselves to instill the corporate culture throughout an organization. The clearest statement of this strategy I have yet seen appeared in 1969 in a statement from the Jesuits at the College of the Holy Cross:

The Jesuit Community of Holy Cross College is the agency by which the Society of Jesus makes the College of the Holy Cross a Jesuit enterprise. It represents a commitment of the Society of Jesus' major resource – capable, professional manpower – concentrated into the service of the College of the Holy Cross in such positions and with such quality and energy of professional effort that the College will be recognizable in the character of its operation rather than in accidental characteristics of organization. The purpose is to influence a college which will be an outstanding witness to the commitment of the Church to the pursuit

*and dissemination of truth in all areas of human activity.*³

For these reasons and more, laity at Catholic colleges and universities, by and large, have understood their roles to be that of contributing a particular professional expertise, while staying out of the way or, at best, tacitly supporting the mission of the religious who staffed the college. This is not all that surprising, given the history. Most of these colleges were largely staffed at their inceptions by religious, supplemented by laity when the religious either could not provide a certain area of expertise themselves or could not provide sufficient staffing for the number of students attending the institution.⁴ These faculty knew that they had been invited into the sisters', brothers' or fathers' college and project, and knew that the religious would take care of that part of the mission.

Again, this is egregious simplicity. Certainly, numerous lay exceptions to the norm exist. All of us can name particular lay men and women who integrated religion and their professions in a way that made a critical contribution to the institution and the lives of its students. From the widest frame of reference though, lay professionals were generally considered (and considered themselves) as critical to the institution, but not responsible for the religious mission of the institution. At most Catholic colleges today that perception continues unabated, to the risk of the universities' religious mission and identity as the religious themselves disappear.

Our conference here in Wisconsin focuses on the specifically Vincentian nature of leadership; and this attempt to "name and describe Vincentian leadership" neatly exemplifies the larger context I have been describing. Our project comes from a realization at DePaul University that the Vincentian nature of our institutions is at great risk unless responsibility for this corporate culture is successfully handed onto the laity who will succeed the Vincentians who have, heretofore, assumed full responsibility for keeping this culture alive. This recently became clear to me at another Catholic college where my colleague and I were told that they felt good about the college's transition to lay

³ 1969 Foundation Statement of the Jesuit Community at Holy Cross College, MA.

⁴ Edward J. Power, *A History of Catholic Higher Education in the United States* (Milwaukee: 1958), 94-96; Philip Gleason, *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: 1995), 202-04.

leadership because “many of the laity at the college had known the sisters personally.” We listened quietly and then suggested that, as a strategy for keeping the college’s particular spirit alive, they were one generation from complete secularity.

The task in front of us is not merely to pass on the tradition to a new generation: a lay generation. The task is to hand over *responsibility* for the tradition to a new generation. We must replace a century-old process of cultural transmission at our universities (that is, priests, brothers and sisters teaching succeeding generations of lay collaborators) with a new process of cultural transmission (lay professionals teaching succeeding generations of lay professionals). If we fail to do so, much like those Catholic colleges that chose to become private non-sectarian institutions, our beloved Vincentian institutions run the risk of losing something that many have found quite precious indeed.⁵

Luckily, it seems to me, Vincentian institutions have an advantage as we approach this complex task. Unlike several other religious traditions associated with religious orders of priests, brothers and sisters, the Vincentian tradition was associated with lay people before it was associated with religious. In our present day, only a fraction of the two million persons who call themselves “Vincentians” are religious. Most Vincentians are members of lay movements and organizations dedicated to continuing Vincent’s mission to the poor. Lay people find the Vincentian tradition attractive and a source of meaning and purpose for their lives. There would be little hope that the tradition would continue after the disappearance of sisters, priests, and brothers if that were not so.

That advantage acknowledged, the project of handing over primary responsibility for the Vincentian mission and identity of an organization remains a complex one. If I may, allow me to sketch out what I believe is required if this transition is to be successful.

I am blessed with frequent opportunities to speak with sponsoring congregations, trustees, presidents and this new breed of administrator, “vice presidents for mission.” Working together, they

⁵ The conference at which this paper was presented focused specifically on the Vincentian nature of these institutions. As might be surmised, the Roman Catholic nature of these institutions is similarly vulnerable. On this, see Melanie M. Morey and Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., “Leadership and the Age of the Laity: Emerging Patterns in Catholic Higher Education,” *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 23:2 (summer 2003): 83-103.

have undertaken numerous initiatives to broaden corporate familiarity with the spirituality and/or values of the founding congregations. They have rewritten their mission statements; developed impressive training sessions for new employees; designed and distributed terrific brochures on the founder and the institutional mission; organized “mission weeks;” seen to it that religious artwork is added to the campus in strategic places; and added speeches at student orientations, faculty convocations, and other university gatherings. It is wonderful work. Unfortunately, it is not enough.

To understand what is needed, the notion of “corporate culture” can be helpful. It is instantly obvious, for example, that the U.S. Army has a different culture from Ben and Jerry’s. And, those on the inside know that the U.S. Army has a different culture from the Navy, the Air Force and the Marines. People who spend their lives within these various organizations often internalize particular corporate values and traditions into their very bones. Sometimes they are not even aware the extent to which they have done so until they transfer to another organization and realize that they “don’t fit.” The Jesuit Volunteer Corps, for example, understands this when they advertise to prospective volunteers that a year of service will “ruin you for life.” The message is that once you have spent time in their organization, the values and ways of seeing the world that you will adopt will make it hard to live in a society that has very different values and ways of seeing the world.

I believe the question at the root of our conversation is one of organizational culture: How do we leverage a Vincentian corporate culture that sustains itself over time, if the Vincentian priests and brothers are not present? To that end, it helps to observe how organizational cultures work. Edgar Schein, the grandfather of organizational culture studies, noted after a lifetime of research that “midlife organizations” – those several generations away from the founders – require strong leadership “to manage change of some cultural elements while maintaining the core.” He observed that a failure of cultural leadership has dire consequences for such an organization. “If the attempt to manage the change fails, the organizations may go bankrupt – and start all over again, building a new culture with new management, or be acquired and find a new culture imposed on it.”⁶ In short, leadership matters enormously.

⁶ Edgar H. Schein, *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (San Francisco: 1999), 12-13.

To influence a corporate culture, the power of leadership comes not from written words, or even spoken words. The power of leadership comes when a leader embodies the institution's values.⁷ For some reason, marines become marines because they meet marines, come to respect them, and then desire to become them. They become marines because they meet marines. No one ever became a marine because of a training manual. Anyone can get into great shape physically, and learn technical and physical skills. To be a marine, means so much more. It is a culture. It is a set of values. It is an adopted history: one writes one's life into the group's history. There is an honor to it, a camaraderie to it, and a willingness to go to the grave for it. It is the classic difference between knowledge and commitment. One becomes a marine because one has met marines. Cultures are transmitted to succeeding generations by living, breathing embodiments of those cultures. There is no other way.

So too with Vincentian Leadership. If our institutions wish the Vincentian mission to continue, then any solution or program must focus on creating a culture whereby living, breathing embodiments of the mission meet new recruits, and thereby transmit the culture to a new generation. There is no other way for cultural transmission to successfully take place. Simple information, such as education sessions when new employees are hired, or pamphlets explaining the Vincentian tradition, is not enough. Such efforts provide information, but they do not create conviction. They are enough if you simply want people to know about the work that others will be doing in the organization, but they are ineffectual if you want to create a cadre of people who will take on the project themselves.

In our specific case, Vincentian leaders must love the poor. Vincentian leaders must speak and act in a way so that everyone knows they would give all their talent, skill, resources and time to remake the world so that poor people are valued and assisted. Vincentian leaders must know the names of actual poor people. It can not be a romantic ideal, but rather it must be real love. As the students say, it must "be real." Students know. They immediately know integrity and they immediately know when they are being fed a line, when the bearer of the message does not live the message her or himself. Our colleagues know too.

⁷ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, second edition (San Francisco: 1992), 230-45.

The challenge, then, exists not in disseminating information about Vincent or the poor or the university's heritage; though all this is important and useful. No, the challenge is to create the conditions whereby lay professionals feel empowered, encouraged, and rewarded to live, breathe and speak the culture; and thereby impress and encourage others to follow.

So, what could that mean for a university? I offer eight quick reflections...

1. When it comes to creating corporate culture, many people throughout the organization (at all levels of the organization) can leaven its culture. At Niagara University, everyone on campus knew Rose Bonaro, her love of her God, and her love for those in need. Rose worked in the copy office and spoke to everyone who ever dropped off copy work. It will be critical for the university president, VP's, and deans to live and breath the culture, to be walking embodiments of the culture, but the man or woman who vacuums the dormitory can also become the person who changes a student's life. There is an opportunity for "Vincentian Leadership" that goes beyond the organization's traditional leadership structure.
2. That said, senior leadership is critical. A few months ago, my research colleague interviewed a college president and asked about the college's core values. He paused for a moment, got up, walked to the door and said, "Hold on, I think we had them framed and put on the wall of the outer office." The president, VP's, deans, department chairs, and others must know, but more importantly must embody the institution's values. This is quite serious. If they are not walking embodiments of the mission, they should be replaced. Yes, it would also help if they spoke of the values and tradition from time to time, but words are far less important. I always liked Saint Francis' suggestion to his friars: "Preach the Gospel, sometimes use words."

3. Symbols are powerful things and there may not be a more important symbol than the lay person who is charged with tending to this corporate culture. Whether it is a director or co-director of mission, a mission committee member, a VP of some functional area or the CEO, some lay person must embody the culture, but also take responsibility for creating the conditions whereby others feel safe to do the same. To put a religious solely in charge of this project is to send a message that this is really the religious' project. I mean no disrespect to those religious who currently lead these efforts; they do magnificent work. But lay people will notice an effective lay leader and begin to see themselves and measure themselves against the commitment of that individual in ways that they simply do not when a religious is leading the effort.
4. There will be no more effective way to form people to share Vincent's convictions than simply introducing them to the poor. It has notably changed some faculty's teaching at Niagara University, as they have become involved in trying to revitalize the city of Niagara Falls, a city with desperate poverty. The students receive an amazing education about the poor, because their faculty have come to know the poor. Bringing our colleagues in contact with the poor will do much of the work for us. Vincent did not teach his collaborators about the poor, he introduced them to the poor and then reflected with them on the experience.
5. Stories are fundamental to corporate cultures. At Ben and Jerry's, every employee can tell you about the founding of the company. At Microsoft, the stories about Bill Gates and his early collaborators fuel the company's ongoing quest for building the most widely useful and adopted technical products. At Nordstrom, stories about personal service abound, highlighting employees who made personal deliveries to customers' homes after work in order to assist

a specific customer's needs. A Vincentian Leader must have a knowledge and facility with the stories of Vincent's life and the writings from Vincent's pen that hold within them the heart of our culture. Telling those stories and repeating those maxims from Vincent's writings will make all the difference. That said, organizations also need stories of heroes from within the organization. Our institutions tell stories all the time of famous "heroes and villains" who were priests and brothers and sisters, but if lay leadership is to take hold, it will be critical that stories of lay heroes from our institutions be identified, told, celebrated, honored, and put in artwork and on the names of our newest buildings. Lay leaders need lay stories and lay heroes.

6. Organizational cultures benefit from clarity. Far too many Catholic universities have mission statements that use inspirational but ultimately vague and vapid language. In our case, let me suggest that to be a "Vincentian" University adds three components to our already estimable mission as a university: (1) That our institutions make every reasonable effort to educate the poor, and thereby break the cycle of poverty and change their lives; (2) That our institutions introduce all students to the poor and to the Vincentian tradition, creating a magnificent pool of alumni who show concern for the poor throughout their adult and professional lives; (3) That our institutions direct our considerable resources to the service of the poor in the world. This could range from research that examines the underlying causes and solutions of poverty, to offering our buildings to groups who wish to serve the poor in their own ways.

Educate the poor; introduce all students to the poor; direct our resources to the service of the poor. That is my formulation, and yours may differ. I offer it merely to say that a very clear mission has a power that a diffuse mission does not. Say it clearly, and you will generate energy.

7. A corporate culture should be true to the whole organization or it is not truly a corporate culture. In my observation, Catholic universities often focus their mission activities and planning on the resident undergraduates, but they often forget the commuters, the graduate students, the part-time evening students, the external programs, the adult learners and the distance learners. It helps to ask whether these students know that they are attending a Vincentian university in any meaningful way that changes their lives.
8. Our institutions have existed for more than a century each, and many generations and cohorts have passed through our halls over the years. What has enabled that culture to remain consistent throughout those changing years and many transient populations of faculty, staff, and students, has been a small group of Vincentian priests, brothers, and sisters at the center who were recognized by the larger organization as responsible for and embodiments of the tradition. It may be necessary for our colleges to recreate a similar core group at the center of the organization that is recognized as responsible for and embodiments of the mission, and who accept the task of keeping the culture vibrant and alive. I say this simply, but I realize this eighth and last reflection raises extensive and important questions that could become the focus of an entire conversation.

Eight reflections. Hardly the last word on the matter.

What is clear to me, and to all who study corporate cultures, is that corporate cultures are not imposed. They are accepted by individuals who want them. The old adage has always been, "Values are caught, not taught." Any attempt to leverage and sustain a vibrant culture will depend on deeply respecting the enormity of what we are seeking. We are asking another human being – in fact, many human beings – to see the world as Saint Vincent saw it. We are asking them to accept a set of life-altering values, and to align their priorities and actions according to those values. There is enormous hubris in asking



Saint Vincent's Circle at DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

our colleagues to become Vincentians. We do so because we have found great meaning and purpose in the tradition ourselves, because we believe the world is better because of this 400-year-old tradition, and because we believe that God is somehow desirous that the poor be cared for.

In the end, we are inviting our colleagues into something wonderful, but something hard. The most pressing task for Vincentian Leadership for our generation, in my opinion, is to foster a corporate lay culture whereby succeeding generations embody the mission and take on the responsibility to pass it on to those who follow. It is an overwhelming task, but not so overwhelming if it begins with the realization that Vincentians become Vincentians because they have met Vincentians. Any endeavor to create Vincentian Leadership, in my opinion, must keep this at the heart of its efforts.

* * *

Perhaps a concluding story will make the point more eloquently. Mahler's 2nd Symphony, more popularly known as "The Resurrection Symphony," has five movements, the first three of which are orchestral. In these sections, Mahler paints the experience of a friend's funeral, a friend who had died at far too young an age. Musically, one encounters the body, attends the service, and fears deeply that death is indeed the end. The music, while laced with moments of lightness and energy as memories are relived, is more often unsettling, terrifying, lonely, and empty. Then, in the fourth

movement, something changes. A single contralto voice is heard that simply and insistently requests entrance into the next world, claiming God's promise: *"My beloved God will shed a little light for me, and will illuminate my way throughout the everlasting blessed life."* That single voice is followed by a chorus who sing faith and belief against music which had nearly despaired of any hope. The voices erupt in cacophony, and then exquisite beauty. As fragile faith is spoken against the musical despair, the music itself changes, becoming cathartic and hope-filled, lifting the listener into a place of healing and belief.

The night I last heard this piece, the Buffalo Philharmonic had lost its choral conductor, Thomas Swan, to cancer two days earlier. He had rehearsed the chorus for that very concert, and the concert was dedicated in his memory and honor. The room was palpably charged with the fear of death against the fragility and triumph of human hope. Tears flowed. Six curtain calls were demanded. It was an extraordinary evening.

Musically, I was struck that Mahler could move his audience to that place of fear, doubt, despair, and the place of God's seeming broken promise, using the orchestra alone. I was equally struck that when he needed to move his listeners beyond that place of doubt to hope, he chose a single, human voice. Then a chorus.

It became clearer to me than ever that night that the transmission of hope and faith and ultimate purpose requires human voices. The transmission of Vincentian values from the present generation to the next also requires voices. Vincentians become Vincentians because they have met Vincentians. All the rest of our planning and activity is support work. Obvious perhaps, but a helpful corrective I think to our present strategies.