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LEADERSHIP, ETHICS & VIRTUE

The Rule of St Benedict as a model for leadership

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Let God's house be wisely cared for by wise men.

Rule of St Benedict

1. The Ethical Deficit

We kid ourselves if we think that the financial crisis is the result of bad banking arrangements or bad luck in investment decisions or misguided fiscal policy. These matters, and more besides, had their part to play, but at root the cause is human failure. Banking systems are designed by people, investment decisions are made by people, and fiscal policies are determined by people. This seems to have been conveniently ignored. Since the crisis began in 2007 official responses have been about improving systems, not about improving the people who operate them. Indeed, as has been pointed out many times, the systems are adequate (apart from allowing the union of retail and investment banking); it is those who operated them who failed to use their powers adequately, and it was their perception of what was ethically appropriate, as distinct from what was lawful, that was at fault. There really is no such thing as a financial crisis pure and simple; there is always a more basic moral or ethical crisis, and more than three years later we wait for this dimension to be publicly recognised, let alone acted upon. For too long moral discussion in the public sphere has been about designing systems to avoid problems recurring and about adopting codes of ethics – usually admirable in conception, but ineffective in operation. As Al Gini, Professor of Business Ethics, Loyola University, Chicago, has said, 'Business ethics' and 'ethical leadership' are two glaring examples of academic oxymorons. Lots of evidence supports the notion that ethics can impede a successful career, and that bending the rules is commonplace – and what characterises the management sets the tone for the whole enterprise, the workforce following suit. Indeed ethics were definitely not allowed to impede the careers of the financial management, as the Oscar-nominated film on the financial crisis, *Inside Job*, shows chillingly. In particular it shows how little leading financiers and economists evaluate options, new products and conduct in moral terms. It is an appalling exposé of the lack of moral compass in the financial sector. The financial deficit is paralleled by an equally serious moral deficit, and this is seen also in other areas of life: MP's expenses, phone hacking and routine cheating in the premier league, to take three of the more glaring examples.

Even where we do know what is ethically right and wrong, and how to design appropriate regulatory systems, it is apparent that we don't know how to design people with the

appropriate internal moral values and the necessary strength of character to operate those systems, and, more importantly, to do the right thing where the system fails or where there is no system. Setting the right standards and ensuring compliance is one of the basic functions of leadership; so also is the formation of character of those who are led, and this, of course, requires attention to matters beyond any system or policy. It requires attention to who we are in the depths of our being, to the values and attitudes that motivate us and give us a sense of purpose and worth. This is, of course, one of the basic tasks of religion, and in large part our moral vision has atrophied because we have abandoned and rejected our Christian heritage, the source historically of the moral framework of both our public and private lives. It would be naive to suppose that the financial crisis will lead us to re-embrace our Christian heritage, but there are models of ethical leadership to hand that draw on that heritage, in particular that of St Benedict of Nursia. Although he lived over fifteen centuries ago, St Benedict offers a way in which the moral framework can be re-accessed, and in a way that speaks to those of all faiths and none. His wisdom has found a ready response among a wide variety of people today, particularly his understanding of the moral nature of leadership.

2. Character & Virtue

Benedict's teaching on leadership is contained in the Rule that he wrote to regulate the life of his monks. Central to the well-being of the monastic community is its leader, the Abbot, and central to his rôle is character formation. The Abbot is not concerned simply to develop in his monks practical skills and aptitudes, *e.g.* the aptitude for prayer, but the strength of character that enables us to live according to our highest aspirations. To quote Al Gini:

Character is the most crucial and most elusive element of leadership.... The root of the word 'character' comes from the Greek word for engraving... it refers to the enduring marks or etched-in factors in our personality, which include our inborn talents as well as our acquired traits imposed upon us by life and experience. These engravings define us, set us apart, and motivate behaviour.

Benedict expected his monks to grow in virtue, and that is the key to the ethical formation of character.

Today's ethical deficit has produced various calls for a return to virtue. Virtue is not something that we hear much about; people speak more about values, but the two are not the same. Values are the qualities and standards that we choose to live by or which shape our work. They are often conventional and are not all self-serving (though some may be, and self-serving values feature strongly in the ethical deficit), but the point is that we like to think our values are self-chosen; values come from me. Virtue, by contrast is something given; it is an inner quality, a grace that enables us to live a life that is morally good. Virtue is prior to values, and the capacity for virtue, like love, is something that we are all born with, but it needs time to grow, and we have to learn how to express it. We might picture virtue as the fountain or well that is usually placed at the centre of the monastery cloister. The cloister is the inner space of the monastery around which its whole life revolves and which connects its various parts. Our inner

life is also an enclosed space around which the whole of our life revolves and which connects its various parts, and virtue is like the fountain welling up inside it, nourishing it and giving it life. Virtue is the agent of inner change and growth, and the pursuit of virtue gives us the moral strength to live by higher qualities and standards than those that simply serve our self-interest.

In classical philosophy there are four cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice. *Prudence* is the ability to discern what is both necessary and possible. Prudence is practical wisdom, the ability to see clearly and choose a course of action that will achieve its aims, rather than one which is ideal but likely to fail. *Temperance* is the capacity to restrain oneself in provocation, and desire. Temperance is being sufficiently self-controlled to be able to moderate one's appetites and not be dominated by other people. *Fortitude* is moral strength or courage particularly in enduring pain and adversity. Fortitude also helps us to withstand temptation and being misunderstood. *Justice* is doing the right thing according to morality, equity, law, and reason. Justice ensures that decisions are well-founded, and treats everyone fairly as an individual. There is something in each of these qualities about seeing the wider picture, and being prepared to go beyond one's personal interests. They remind us that there is a selfless quality to good leadership, and this is reflected in Benedict's frequent admonitions to the Abbot to be aware of his motives.

3. Three Basic Tasks

These virtues are implicit in Benedict's approach to leadership. He does not systematise his teaching as we do today, but essentially it revolves around three basic tasks. These three tasks derive from the three vows that Benedictine monks take, vows of stability, conversion of life and obedience.

Stability is essentially a promise of commitment to a particular monastic community; it means becoming rooted in the community, an open-ended commitment to seek your future with them, come what may, and this requires prudence and fortitude.

Conversion of life is a promise to live according to the values of the community and to let those values shape your life. We are all born with certain given skills and aptitudes and personality traits; conversion of life is about shaping what is given so that our lives serve a higher purpose than simply the fulfilment of our personal desires, wants and ambitions, and this requires temperance.

Obedience is about accepting a source of authority outside of our self. Obedience means learning to grow in humility and learning to listen to voices other than our own. Obedience involves taking seriously the wisdom, experience, common values, and the voice of the community. Obedience involves a concern for justice.

Accountability

Building on these vows the first task of the leader is to be accountable, and this derives from the vow of obedience. Time and again Benedict reminds the Abbot that at the end of his life he will have to give an account of his stewardship. *The Abbot must always remember that at the fearful*

judgement of God two things will be discussed: his own teaching and the obedience of his disciples.' (RSB 2.1, 6) A lack of accountability is an important element in today's ethical deficit; it is particularly characteristic of charismatic and authoritarian leaders, who tend to act as if they are their own source of authority, able to dispense themselves from common principles of law and morality. Benedict also requires accountability among the members of the community; he placed upon the monks the obligation of mutual obedience: *'The goodness of obedience is not to be shown only through obedience to the Abbot, but the brethren should also obey each other...'* (RSB 71.1) These two principles take the idea of accountability beyond formal lines of reporting – to superiors, shareholders, etc. – and also beyond institutional boundaries. Vertically, accountability stretches beyond the institution to a higher authority, whether conceived of as divine, common morality, personal conscience or the public interest. Horizontally, accountability extends to colleagues, junior as well as senior, and to stakeholders and to the wider community. The absence of any higher notions of accountability is a major factor in today's economy: To whom were the bankers accountable? Did they acknowledge a higher duty, if not to God, then to the common good?

Caring for Souls

The second task of the leader is caring for souls, and this derives from the vow of conversion of life: *'Let [the Abbot] always consider that it is souls that he has undertaken to rule, and for whom he will give an account.'* (RSB 2.34) The word 'soul' is apt to be misunderstood. As used by Benedict it encapsulates our whole being, and particularly those qualities and attributes that distinguish humans from other creatures, so 'caring for souls' describes the leader's responsibility for the personal formation of those he leads. In secular terms we might describe this as a concern for the whole person, and it is promoted through programmes for continuous professional development and the like. Benedict, no doubt, would approve, but he would ask if these programmes go beyond improving competence and productive capacity to deepening a person's moral resources. This is important, because both incompetence and moral failure contributed to the present crisis: the banks behaved recklessly as professional bankers, and they were also morally culpable. But Benedict would go a step further. Personal development is worth doing not just because better trained, more skilled and more fulfilled workers produce better quality work and higher productivity, but because they become better people. From a Benedictine perspective, enabling personal growth, for its own sake, is one of the basic responsibilities of leaders. This might be described as the secular equivalent of conversion of life. To enable personal growth the leader must be a teacher – it is notable how many times the Rule refers to this aspect of the Abbot's rôle. He is to *'rule over his disciples with two kinds of teaching; that is to say, he must show forth all good and holy things by his words and even more by his deeds.'* (RSB 2.11) There is no room for double standards, no division between words and deeds, nor between public and private conduct; morality is one.

Forming Community

The third task of the leader is to form the community. As the poet John Donne said, 'No man is

an island, we are all part of the main.' Accountability and personal growth are not simply individual endeavours, but take place within a community, and the leader is responsible for creating that community. This task derives from the vow of stability. 'Community' is so over-used that the word has been almost emptied of meaning. Community is not something that arises of its own accord around those who happen to live or work in the same place; as Benedict knew well, forming a community requires hard work. Those who join in community make an open-ended promise to make a journey together come what may; but making the journey and forming the community are symbiotic. It is travelling together that enables the journey to be made, and it is perseverance in the journey that forms the community and helps it to grow. Community is about bonds that are not negotiated; it is not the result of a carefully worked out balance of interests; it is much more to do with establishing a common purpose and identity, binding people together at a deeper level than the material and the protection of common interests.

The moral dimension of community has to do with holding the memories that give us our identity and sense of purpose. A community is at heart a community of memory. Part of the communal memory is the identity and values of the enterprise, which are both held and safeguarded by the community, whether it be a monastery or a business. Community should help us to see ourselves as part of a larger story which continues to give meaning to our lives despite its ups and downs, and from a Christian perspective that story will not be about conquest and power but about the aims and hopes that bind us together. It is easy to see what this means in a monastery, but if the monastic insights about community are true, then the challenge to business and other organisations is to work out what it means for them. An answer was offered by Pope John Paul II in 1991 –

The purpose of business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavouring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society. Profit is a regulator of the life of a business, but it is not the only one; other human and moral factors must also be considered which, in the long term, are at least equally important in the life of a business.

Personal growth and a sense of usefulness are among the basic needs of the community, and are two of the 'other human and moral factors' that regulate the life of a business along with profit.

4. Personal Qualities

Anyone reading the Rule is bound to be struck by the huge authority that Benedict vests in the Abbot: he directs all aspects of the life of the monastery and the last word is his, secured by the vow of obedience. But the more closely we read the more we see that he is considerably constrained in the way he exercises his powers. Benedict constantly reminds him of three things: that he is accountable to God; that there is a moral framework within which he must act; and that the monks are always to be treated as individuals and never as a category. The Abbot leads as a servant, not as a master; he is constrained by the whole moral teaching of the Bible; and he must show a special concern for those with particular needs. Benedict eschews

uniformity of provision in favour of individual need, and he warns the Abbot that he *'must bear in mind the weakness of those in need and not the ill-will of the envious.'* (RSB 55.20-21) These three constraints, together with the three basic tasks, lie at the heart of ethical leadership, and to lead in this way requires particular personal qualities.

Secular lists of leadership qualities include things like drive and self-management; the ability to think strategically, get things done, and work under pressure; being able to work with people and to motivate and care for them. Benedict stresses rather different qualities: self-awareness, fairness, balance, collaboration, discretion and humility. These two lists are not incompatible, but they place the stress at different points; Benedict stresses the qualities that underpin ethical leadership.

Self-Awareness is essential in an ethical leader. Time and again Benedict reminds the Abbot that more is demanded of him to whom more is entrusted. He must know himself as others know him; correcting the actions of others should foster a critical self-awareness, and make him careful of his own state: *'And so, while he provides by his instructions for the amendment of others, he will be brought also to the amendment of his own faults.'* (RSB 2.31; 39-40) He must govern by deeds not words. (RSB 2.12)

Fairness requires a leader's actions and decisions to show both integrity and consistency. Benedict reminds the Abbot that he must not let his personal preferences or the social status of the monks determine his decisions. Rank is to be determined by merit, not by status or seniority, and he should not pretend that he does not see the faults of offenders. Fairness demands that he must be both a tough master and a loving father. (RSB 2.16-26)

Balance is one the keynotes of the Benedictine life: *'Benedict has measure and moderation,'* says a modern-day Abbot, Korneel Vermeiren. While Benedict is very clear about how things should be done, this does not lead to an obsessive or dictatorial approach. The various needs and considerations must be prudently weighed and a measured course taken. But achieving balance does not mean an off-hands approach as though the leader were an umpire: the Abbot must be of profit to his brethren and not just preside over them. In striking the right balance some things are clear: *'he should always prefer mercy to judgement... Let him hate sin, let him love the brethren.'* In rooting out wrongdoing he should not be too zealous, *'lest in removing the rust the pot is broken,'* and *'it should be his aim to be loved rather than feared.'* (RSB 64.8, 10, 12, 15) Balance also requires a personal prudence: *'Let him not be restless or anxious, not over-demanding or obstinate, not a perfectionist or full of suspicion, or he will never have any peace.'* (RSB 64.16)

Collaboration ensures that decisions are owned by the whole community, and guards against direction according to the personal whims of the leader. Benedict requires the whole community to be consulted when anything important has to be decided, and this must include the youngest as they often have the best insights – a remarkable requirement in a patriarchal age! In less important matters it suffices to consult only the senior monks. For Benedict there is more to leadership than telling people what to do. Al Gini articulates a Benedictine approach when he writes:

The vision and values of leadership must have their origins in the community of followers of whom they are a part, and whom they wish to serve. ... Leaders may offer a vision, but followers must buy into it. Leaders may organise a plan, but followers must decide to take it on. Leaders may demonstrate conviction and will-power, but followers... should not allow the leader's will to replace their own.

Discretion and compassion are essential qualities in an ethical leader. Time and again Benedict sets out a principle and then leaves the Abbot discretion over its implementation, often reminding him of the special concern he should have for the weaker brethren. Faults must be corrected, but with prudence and charity. The Rule exemplifies the cardinal virtue of prudence, the practical wisdom that achieves its aim and keeps everyone on board: *'In giving his instructions he should have forethought and consideration... let him be discerning and moderate... [and] settle everything with foresight and justice.'* (RSB 64.14, 17; 3.6) Leadership is a finely-balanced act requiring a well-honed discretion; towards the end of the Rule Benedict nicely summarises his approach: *'[The Abbot] should so regulate everything that the strong may desire to carry more, and the weak are not afraid.'* (RSB 64.19)

Humility is the basic Benedictine virtue, and more than any other quality is underlies ethical leadership – and significantly it is not one that figures in most secular lists. Humility is the doorway to your inner self, to that part of our character that connects and gives life to all the other parts. 'Humility' comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning earth. Humility is about being earthed, being in touch with the source of our being, with what is real. Humility is an inner strength that comes from a true appreciation of our place before God and within the community, that is, of who we are and where we stand. Humility is a strength that means that you do not have to have your own way all the time. As Abbot Christopher Jamison says, 'Humility helps us to achieve an inner freedom that frees us from selfish impulses and allows us to be shaped by other people's lives.' Humility is an essential foundation for the cardinal virtues and for the three tasks of leadership. Its like a narrow door that you have to go through in order to find the treasure within – your true self. Humility is important in a leader for several reasons. It keeps the leader from becoming overbearing and from believing that his/her ideas are the only ones with merit; it promotes self-awareness and self-criticism; it allows the talents and insights of others to be recognised and gives them space to make their contribution; and it promotes peace of mind.

5. Conclusion

Classical economics is based on the presupposition that people will act rationally in the pursuit of their self-interest. Acting in our self-interest may indeed be the default position, but human behaviour shows other motivations, among them justice and compassion, conformity and fashion. Its not just Christians who wish to emphasise the former and discourage the latter; the financial crisis shows the catastrophe that results from self-interested action that ignores justice and compassion and the common good, and which bases its ethics on what everyone else is doing, conforming simply to the morality and fashions of the crowd. True self-interest requires

a long term perspective, durable institutions and relationships, and enduring values. Repairing our economic deficit requires us also to repair our ethical deficit, and this requires leadership based on virtue. As Joanne Ciulla says, 'Leadership is not a person or a position. It is a complex moral relationship between people, based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good.' Benedict helps us to understand the nature of this complex moral relationship and what it requires of the leader. True self-interest requires leadership that will not forsake the care of souls for worldly advantage. (Cf RSB 2.33)

Notes

Quotations from *The Rule of St Benedict* are taken from the translation by David Parry OSB (Darton Longman & Todd, 1984).

Al Gini, Professor of Business Ethics at Loyola University, Chicago, is quoted from his essay, 'Moral Leadership and Business Ethics' in *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership*, Joanne B Ciulla (ed.), Praeger, Westport, CT, 2004.

Centesimus Annus is an Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, written in 1991 to mark the centenary of the first of the so-called social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*, written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891.

Korneel Vermeiren OCSO, *Praying with Benedict* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999)

Christopher Jamison OSB, *Finding Sanctuary – Monastic steps for everyday life* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006)

Joanne Ciulla, is quoted from her essay 'Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory' in *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership*, Joanne B Ciulla (ed.), Praeger, Westport, CT, 2004.