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Leadership Lessons from the Pope
April 23, 2015

It's not often that a Protestant pastor like myself references the Pope. Not because I have a beef with the Pope, it's just that I don't read a lot from him. But I think there is very good reason to reference him today. Just before Christmas this last year, Pope Francis addressed the Cardinals and other church leaders who are in charge of running the Catholic Church's large array of ministries and functions. He addressed them as leaders, and essentially gave them a leadership lesson. And considering the Pope is the CEO of the largest organization in the world, it's not surprising that he has learned a thing or two about leadership along the way.

What I like about how the Pope addressed the topic is that opposed to telling his leaders the five steps to great leadership, he instead chose to focus in on the diseases (as he called them) that so often cripple leaders. The Pope expressed his desire to have a healthy church, and from his vantage point a healthy church cannot come about without healthy leaders, and that means ones who are willing to confront any diseases that may have weakened them and that perhaps have spread among those they have led. The Pope addressed fifteen such diseases¹; I will mention ten of them to you today in a slightly paraphrased fashion. They are diseases I think you will agree can weaken the positive impact of any leader and the organizations they lead.

1. The disease of thinking we are "immortal," "immune," or downright "indispensable," and thus neglecting the need for regular check-ups. A leader who is not self-critical is one that sooner or later will be an unhealthy leader. A simple visit to the cemetery might help us see the names of many people who thought they were immortal, immune and indispensable! This disease easily comes upon those who turn into lords and masters, and think of themselves as above others and not at their service. The antidote to this plague, says the Pope, is the grace of realizing that we are sinners and able to say heartily: "We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10).

2. The disease of excessive busyness. Once Jesus was dining with others in a house. A woman was listening at his feet. Another woman complained and said the sitting woman ought to be working to get dinner ready. Jesus said the one who had stopped her busyness and sat and listened had chosen the better part (Luke 10:38-42). Furthermore, Jesus called his disciples to “*rest a while*” (Mark 6:31) and for a reason, because neglecting needed rest leads to stress and agitation. A time of rest, for those who have completed their work, is necessary, obligatory and should be taken seriously: by spending time with one’s family and respecting holidays as moments of spiritual and physical recharging. We need to remember that “for everything there is a season” (3:1-15).

3. The disease of “petrification.” It is found in those who have a heart of stone and have become stiff-necked. They are hardened in their ways and in their relations with other. Instead of possessing an alertness or daring, they hide under a pile of papers, turning into *paper pushers*. No longer do they weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice!

4. The disease of excessive planning and of functionalism. When the leader plans everything down to the last detail and believes that with perfect planning things will fall into place, she becomes an accountant or an office manager. Things need to be prepared well, but without ever falling into the temptation of believing that we control every circumstance. Much better to plan but at the same time maintain a spirit of flexibility, and he says a flexibility that has us listening to God.

5. The disease of poor coordination. This disease comes about when a leader doesn’t insure his or her team is working well together. Once leaders lose a sense of camaraderie with his or her team, the team loses its harmonious functioning and its equilibrium; it then becomes an orchestra which produces noise. When the foot says to the arm: “I don’t need you,” or the hand says to the head, “I’m in charge,” the team will inevitably function well below its capabilities.

6. There is also a “spiritual Alzheimer’s disease.” It consists in losing the memory of how God has worked in our lives to get us where we are. Leaders with this disease digress into an arrogance that says they are self-made. They also forget about the many leaders and mentors and friends and family that made them who they are today.

7. The disease of gossiping, grumbling, and back-biting. I have already spoken many times about this disease, but never enough. It is a grave illness which begins simply, perhaps even in small talk, and takes over a person, making him become a “*sower of weeds*” and in many cases, a cold-blooded killer of the good name of his colleagues. It is the disease of cowardly persons who lack the courage to speak out directly, but instead speak behind other people’s backs.

8. The disease of indifference to others. This is where each individual thinks only of himself. It is evident when the most knowledgeable person does not put that knowledge at the service of his less knowledgeable colleagues; when we learn something and then keep it to ourselves rather than sharing it in a helpful way with others; and when out of jealousy or deceit we take joy in seeing others fall instead of helping them up and encouraging them.

9. The disease of a lugubrious (dismal and dour) face. Those glum and dour persons who think that to be serious we have to put on a face of melancholy and severity, and treat others – especially those we consider our inferiors – with rigor, brusqueness and arrogance have this disease. In fact, *a show of severity* and *sterile pessimism* are frequently symptoms of fear and insecurity. A leader must make an effort to be courteous, serene, enthusiastic and joyful, a person who transmits joy everywhere he goes . . . even in difficult situations.

10. The disease of self-promotion. This is the disease of persons who insatiably try to accumulate power and to this end are ready to slander, defame and discredit others, even in newspapers and magazines . . . so as to put themselves on display and show that they are more capable than others. Here I remember a priest who used to call journalists to tell – and invent – private and confidential matters involving his colleagues and parishioners. The only thing he was concerned about was being able to see himself on the front page, since this made him feel “*powerful and glamorous.*” Poor sad soul!

That is quite a list, isn’t it? And what I find interesting is that this list was given to a group of church leaders. Aren’t church leaders supposed to be above such diseases? I’m afraid they are not. Indeed it does not

matter if we are persons of the cloth or we work in the sacred halls of a multi-national corporation, these are diseases that are common to the human condition. But that does not mean we must succumb to them. In fact, I think the message of the church is largely that we don't have to succumb to them. That there is a God who as the Great Physician is more than willing to bring about healing in those areas where we might have succumbed to these very diseases, and even provide some preventative medicine.

¹ [Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis](#), December 22, 2014.