

SAINT FRANCIS AND AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP: LEADING THROUGH CRISIS WITH HEART AND HANDS

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Abstract

The manner in which a leader confronts and responds to crisis is a measure used to assess leadership effectiveness. During turbulent times followers seek a leader that is honest and trustworthy, capable of providing direction and modeling the right behavior. An authentic leader is someone who continuously seeks to discover self and leads with the heart, a genuine concern for the people and hands, willing to toil the land. In this paper we will examine the life of Saint Francis in relation to authentic leadership. Saint Francis's struggle to find meaning leads him on a journey where Francis discovers God and self. When Francis embraces his true identity in Christ, Francis is in tune with self, which allows him to effectively rebuild the house of God, physically, socially and spiritually. Francis influences the larger community and leaves a legacy. Lessons from Saint Francis's leadership are examined to provide an alternative model for authentically leading in a time of chaos.

Introduction

Organizational change is the by-product of internal and/or external forces that cause a shift in how an organization conducts business. A rapid change in the environment demands a quick response from leadership if it seeks to survive.¹ The absence of an intentional response can potentially threaten the life of an organization and lead to death by chaos.² Such was the setting of the Church in the Middle Ages, the period that saw the end of feudalism and the wake of capitalism. At such a time as this, Saint Francis makes an appearance in 1181-1226 and leaves a life-long legacy that is venerated.³

Life circumstances lead Francis to a pew in the chapel of San Damiano in the fall of 1205.⁴ The political arrangement between church and state wreaks havoc. The exchange of money replaces the trust relationship that once existed between patron and customer.⁵ The avaricious obsession for more money becomes an issue as neighbors fight over anything and everything, including property. Pride and voracity contribute to the collapse of feudalism in Assisi, the hometown of Francis.⁶ Concomitantly, corruption runs wild within ecclesial leadership, which leads to the distrust of ecclesial leaders. Money, greed, corruption, mistrust are behavioral consequences

¹ Jerry Porras & Robert Silvers (1991)

² John Kotter (2007)

³ R.E. Gordon George (1926)

⁴ Joan Schatzlein (1994). *Francis of Assisi 1181-1220: Christian History Timeline*. Retrieved from <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1994/issue42/4226.html>

⁵ Michael Colby (2007)

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 33; Christine Rhone (2004)

induced by the signs of their time. The inevitable shifts were changing the purpose and function of a church that evidently was in deep trouble.

During turbulent times followers seek a leader that is authentic, honest and trustworthy; capable of providing direction and someone willing to sacrifice. According to Bill George, *a professor at Harvard Business School*, crisis presents an opportunity for a true leader to step forward.⁷ If a leader knows self and the leader's true north, the leader will be able to cope with the challenges that lie ahead.⁸ In addition, fully developed authentic leaders are "more concerned about serving others than they are about their own success or recognition."⁹ The follower therefore trusts the genuine leader and this connection allows the leader to motivate the followers to a higher level of performance even during times of crisis.¹⁰

Authentic leadership is "the process that draws upon leaders' life course, psychological capital, moral perspective, and a highly developed supporting organizational climate to produce greater self-awareness, and self-regulated positive behaviors, which in turn foster continuous, positive self-development resulting in veritable, sustained performance."¹¹ In essence an authentic leader is in tune with self and continuously seeks to intentionally discover more about self,¹² others and the leader's surroundings in order to lead with the heart and also the hands.

In the *Legend of Saint Francis*, three companions inform the readers that during the uproar of the Church's crisis Francis hears a voice.¹³ It was the voice of Jesus calling Francis to do something about the turmoil that threatened the life of the ecclesia.¹⁴ Saint Francis responds to the call to repair the ruins. His genuine and charismatic approach to life was magnetic and as a result, thousands sought and still seek to imitate Francis.¹⁵ Even though his role was not one of power, he was a man of great influence trusted by others in a time where trust in ecclesial leadership was in question. What distinguished Francis from other religious and community leaders? What was unique about him as a person?

Primary historical documents and secondary resources provide a glimpse into the life of Francis and Francis's leadership praxis. Two pieces of literature that discuss the life of Saint Francis are reviewed in this paper in relation to authentic leadership: *The Legend of Saint Francis by Three Companions* and the *Life of St. Francis* as compiled by secondary resources. The voices of other writers also provide a sense of what was happening within the community and how others responded to Francis. Various principles of authentic leadership surface from the readings

⁷ Bill George (2009). *Leading in Times of Crisis*.

⁸ Bill George (2007). True North. Retrieved from http://www.billgeorge.org/files/media/bill-george-on-finding-true-north-pdf/georgia_tech_bill_george_web.pdf

⁹ Ibid. p. 48

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 49

¹¹ Ronald J. Burke & Gary L. Cooper (2006), *Inspiring Leaders*, p. 84

¹² Douglas R. May, Adriana Y. L. Chan, Timothy D. Hodges & Bruce J. Avolio (2003)

¹³ The Legend of Saint Francis by Three Companions

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 76

¹⁵ Michael H. Crosby (2007)

providing a base to explore an alternative approach to leading authentically during crisis: with heart and hands surrendered unto God and for the service of others.

Leading with the heart

For some leaders, the idea of leading with the heart comes across as a sign of weakness and insecurity. Authentic leaders are willing to defy this notion and lead with their hearts. *Bill George* states that leading with the heart “means having passion for your work, compassion for the people you serve, empathy for the people you work with and the courage to make difficult decisions.”¹⁶ This requires the type of leader that is able to recognize that the purpose of leadership is to benefit others¹⁷ and the focus is not upon self and ones accomplishments. To know and be true to oneself is at the core of authentic leadership¹⁸ and whatever is at the center of the heart will surface as action.

There is an additional strand to consider for ecclesial and Christian leadership, which serves as the basis of leading with the heart. Luke 6:45 states, “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (RSV). The bible also states that wherever the treasure is that is also where the heart is also (Matthew 6:21; Luke 12:34). In the *Life of St. Francis*, *Thomas de Celano* writes the biography of Francis and states that:

“The brothers who lived with him know that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips, sweet and pleasant conversation about Him, kind words full of love. Out of the fullness of the heart his mouth spoke.”¹⁹

Saint Francis’s heart was filled with a treasure, which he referred to as the hidden pearl. This pearl became the greatest finds of Francis’s life. The “pearl of great price, was not only “the Gospel,” but the Christ of the Gospel.”²⁰

Francis did not stumble into an intellectual find but it became a heart discovery. It was spiritual not revealed by flesh and blood, but by the Father who is in heaven (Matthew 16:17). Saint Francis was not known to be an intellectual and was sometimes hostile towards academics whose knowledge led to pride and as a result was of not benefit to God.²¹ Celano’s biography informs us that Francis had very little formal education. During his early childhood years, Francis was under the instruction of the priests at St. George’s and later attended the school of the Troubadours, where he gained his appreciation for creative arts. He was involved in his father Pietro’s successful business of fine cloth and other lucrative items, and even though he became a master salesman and the expected heir, Francis had no passion for the industry. His heart was not in the trade and even though he did not know what to focus on during that time his spiritual experience would lead to a revelation in the heart that transformed the living of Francis and model a new way of doing church in the Medieval Age.

¹⁶ Bill George (2007)

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 50

¹⁸ Douglas R. May, Adriana Y. L. Chan, Timothy D. Hodges & Bruce J. Avolio (2003)

¹⁹ Michael Crosby (2007)

²⁰ Ibid. p. 101

²¹ Ian Morgan Cron (2006)

Frances biography also depicts an overly pampered young man and a favorite amongst his peers, who had an amusing and jovial personality. Julien Green, the contemporary writer of *God's Fool: the Life of Francis of Assisi*, states he dazzled everyone and was unforgettable without really being handsome.²² The wild activities of his youthful years preceded Francis's reputation as the "feat of arms, the leader of the civil revels, [and] the very king of frolic."²³ His presence brought joy and laughter during a difficult time in society. The financial security of the family business allowed Francis to offer carousing as a distraction to his friends, and it also placed him at the center of attention. Francis had the experience of a salesman, the looks of a fine cloth expert and the charm of a poet. These qualities did not disappear but were transformed by God when Francis found his true identity not as a business man or a knight but as someone called to the service of the Almighty.

This true identity leads Francis to a place of peace and deep love for God. Francis spends the rest of his life embodying the incarnate Christ. This embodiment was a process related primarily to the *heart* as opposed to the *head*. Francis had what William James calls *a felt experience with the divine*.²⁴ Francis's religious experience was not related to "ideas, concepts, or theological doctrines"²⁵ and his conversion and drastic change was not the result of an intellectual argument but a matter of heart and feelings. From this position is where Francis leads. Not as an authentic leader first but as an authentic person who leads from the heart and with the hands.

Leading with the hands

When Francis hears the voice of Jesus telling him to rebuild the ruins of the temple he responds with a trembling voice, "Gladly will I do it, O Lord."²⁶ He sets forth on a mission to rebuild what Francis understood to be the physical condition of the building which was in a very bad state as a result of its old age. Francis exits the chapel of San Damiano, sells some of his father's cloth and other belongings. He then returns and finds the priest who is sitting near the entrance of the door. The *Legend of Saint Francis by Three Companions* states, that Francis gave the priest all the coins he had in his pockets and told the priest he would continue providing the finances necessary to maintain the chapel. Francis remained true to his promise even after the spill-out with his father, Pietro. Francis was disowned, and as a result he lost his inheritance and any source of income. This did not detain the relentless, committed and obedient Francis, who went door-to-door asking people to donate stones so they could rebuild the walls of the church. Initially people questioned Francis but eventually they all caught the vision, he modeled. Francis

²² Julien Green (1985). *God's Fool: The Life of Francis of Assisi*. New York: Harper & Row Publishing.

²³ Paschal Robinson (1909). *St. Francis of Assisi*. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved April 5, 2012 from <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm>>.

²⁴ As cited by Michael Crosby (2007), p. 97

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 97

²⁶ Emma Gurney Salter (1875). *The Legend of Saint Francis by Thee Companions*, Kindle Location 323

led the people in collecting enough stones to repair three churches.²⁷ Francis behavior and actions persuaded others to join his strategic efforts. It was not long before Francis also caught on to God's vision and the call to rebuild the temple that lied in ruins. He gave himself not only to improving the aesthetics of the church but to the people; all people.

Francis's sincere, honest and trustworthy spirit allowed him to model change when the church and its leadership were moving in a questionable direction. This was a way of life for Francis. His behavior was genuine and appealing and characteristic of authentic leadership.

“Authentic leaders are not necessarily transformational, visionary, or charismatic leaders. They don't stand out every day. But these are the leaders who, when called upon by the hand of fate, will be the ones who take a stand that changes the course of history for others, be they organizations, departments or just other individuals.”²⁸

That fully describes Francis as the leader who put every effort into imitating Christ and his every action and decision made on behalf of others including the poor.

Michael Crosby states that “authentic Gospel-living demands a new way of being in the world.”²⁹ This new way of being was very evident in the life of Francis who was known to cringe with nausea at the very thought of lepers. After his conversion, there was an exchange of kisses with a leper. The sense of repulsion Francis once felt disappeared and he served and cared for lepers along with the poor all throughout his life. Early on Saint Francis exchanged clothes with a poor man and begged with those living in poverty finding contentment and joy in his experience. *The Legend of Saint Francis by Three Companions* quotes Francis who stated, “We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way.”³⁰ This was the real expression of Christ's love and what drove Francis to meet with Muslim leader and Sultan, Melek-el-Kamel in an effort to bring peace and reconciliation between the Muslims and the Christians and end the Crusades. Francis's prayer was “Lord make me an instrument of your peace” to which the Sultan declared, “if all Christians are like this, I would not hesitate to become one.”

The ability to lead by modeling is visible throughout the life of Saint Francis whose preaching ministry began in the streets and gained quite a following. Francis preaching was not based upon theological arguments. “His preaching was more autobiographical than intellectual, more performative than argumentative, more spontaneous than scripted, more genuine than contrived, more about transformation than about information.”³¹ Francis preached to the commoner in a language they could understand. He spoke about finding peace and reconciliation with God. This drew in many crowds who gathered on corner streets to listen to Francis speak. The following grew to such a degree that Francis eventually appears before the Pope with eleven followers to present a Way of Life, and to request they be recognized as a formal Order of the Catholic Church. This decision to go before the Pope is spurred by Bernard of Quintavalle and Peter of Cantanio, two key individuals who sought the moral and ethical guidance of Saint Francis.

²⁷ Ian Morgan Cron (2006)

²⁸ Douglas R. May, Adriana Y. L. Chan, Timothy D. Hodges & Bruce J. Avolio (2003)

²⁹ Michael Crosby (2007)

³⁰ Legend of Saint Francis, p. 58

³¹ Ian Morgan Cron (2006)

In an era where clericalism was the most prevalent sin within church, Francis responded by modeling an alternative style of leadership. Francis “strove to correct abuses by holding up an ideal.”³² He was not trying to offer this or any other type of leadership. It was his genuine response to God’s call which made him an authentic person and leader that others wanted to follow.³³ The result was the Order of Lesser Brothers whose members were willing to follow the gospel in such a way that all were equally seen as brothers and sisters of one common Father. Even though Francis was the founding father of the Order of Lesser Brothers, he would not assume the title of leader or priest.³⁴

Conclusion

Francis is summoned to go and repair the house of God that is in ruins.³⁵ Initially Francis responds to the literal call and sets out to structurally repair the building, also in ruins. However, through a series of events, God reveals to Francis a deeper need to spiritually, socially and emotionally repair the house within that lies in ruins. The journey, which led to transformational change, did not begin within the Church, the community or its leadership. This was an inside job. From the inside out, God changes Francis as an individual, and then uses Francis to impact the world.

The unethical actions and activities of leaders in visible positions are always on display on center screen.³⁶ Society is at a loss about how high the standard of moral living should be for those in leadership positions. During this time of history many behaviors appear to be permissible and what a leader does in her or his private life is regarded as personal business and no one has a right to get involved. However, this type of approach can potentially lead to the path of destruction and creates chaos within the institution. It generates uncertainty in the workplace, and it blurs the follower’s perception of the leader’s effectiveness.³⁷ As a consequence, productivity declines, and the quality of service plummets, and employees are left with low morale and little motivation.³⁸

Scholar Bill George states that authentic leaders:

“Use their natural abilities, but they also recognize their shortcomings, and work hard to overcome them. They live with purpose, meaning and values. They build enduring relationship with people. Others follow them because they stand where they stand. They are consistent and self-disciplined. When their principles are tested, they refuse to compromise. Authentic leaders are dedicated to developing themselves because they know that becoming a leader takes a lifetime of personal growth.”³⁹

³² Paschal Robinson (1909)

³³ Michael Crosby (2007)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Linda L. Neider & Chester A. Schriesheim (2011)

³⁷ William L. Gardner, Claudia C. Cogliser, Kelly M. Davis & Matthew P. Dickens (2011)

³⁸ William L. Gardner, Claudia C. Cogliser, Kelly M. Davis & Matthew P. Dickens (2011)

³⁹ Bill George (2003)

When ecclesial leaders are involved in inauthentic behavior it generates confusion. It seems so contradictory to what one expects of church leadership and yet in many levels the outcome is not much different than that of corporate world. The stakes however are higher and there are kingdom and earthly consequences. The church is left desperately crying for leaders who understand that permissible does not mean all is good.⁴⁰

As it was during Saint Francis's life period, there is an urgent need for leaders but the focus has been on those who are intellectual and articulate, possessing the head knowledge. During crisis one can only benefit to a certain degree from an intellectual leader, and it is imperative that the leader lead with head but especially with the heart and hands. Authentic leaders see humans as a powerful resource capable of changing any situation.⁴¹ They are not fixated on the job title, the power that follows the position or the remuneration package. Their commitment to better self does not center upon themselves but it is with the purpose of serving others as Christ so desires.

Saint Francis of Assisi modeled authentic leadership that continues to impact the lives of many today. "My Lord Jesus Christ," he prayed, "grant me two graces before I die. The first is that during my life I may feel in my body as much as possible the pain which you, dear Jesus, sustained in the hour of your most bitter passion. The second is that I may feel in my heart, as much as possible, the excessive love with which you, Son of God, were inflamed to willingly endure such suffering for us sinners." Till death he modeled leading with the heart and the hands embodying the incarnate Christ.

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⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:12 (RSV); 1 Corinthians 10:23(RSV)

⁴¹ Chris Argyris (2006)

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