

Being a Servant Leader

Objective:

Servant leadership is a leadership style that puts others first. Jesus was the greatest example of a servant leader. You do not have to be an official leader to be a servant leader. Learn more about this way of leading through service and how it can affect your professional and personal life.

The term “servant leadership” was first coined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. There are many versions of what this term means, but in general it is the idea that one can inspire people to do their best by deeply caring about them. If a leader serves others, then a relationship of trust and collaboration develops where the individuals of the group are looking out for each other, where they are empowered to exercise their skills and creativity to their potential, and where the leader’s greatest success is not personal achievement but the growth and advancement of the individuals in the group.

For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate example of the servant leader. He showed compassion to sinners while still instructing them in the truth. He was not intimidated by powerful people, and he sought out the weak and marginalized. The early Christian community saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” (Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12), indicating that this kind of leadership involves a willingness to suffer for others, but knowing that such suffering can obtain a higher goal. However, servant leadership is not reserved only for Jesus or even people in management roles in the business world. Servant leadership is a way of interacting with others, regardless of official titles, and seeking the good of others for their own sake and for God’s.

Suggested Song: God Has Chosen Me

Bible & Catechism Readings:

Matthew 20:28

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

John 13:5-10, 12-15

Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said him, “Lord, do wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”

When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Catechism 580

In Jesus, the Law no longer appears engraved on tables of stone but “upon the heart” of the Servant who becomes “a covenant to the people,” because he will “faithfully bring forth justice.”

Catechism 608

Christ’s whole life expresses his mission: “to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Saint: St. Thomas More was the king’s good servant, and God’s first.

<https://www.ncregister.com/blog/st-thomas-more-kings-good-servant-but-gods-first>

Vignette:

Mark had signed up again to spearhead the fundraiser for the annual campaign to help inner city kids. From experience, he knew where he could go to get the resources organized in a few phone calls to meet this year’s goal. There were however a group of very eager yet inexperienced individuals with “new ideas” they were anxious to execute to raise the money. Mark was well aware of the incremental effort involved in actually implementing some of the “new ideas” from the first-time volunteers. He contemplated what action he should take moving forward. How could his time be best utilized? What would be the best for the organization long-term and those anxious to support it?

Questions for Large and Small Group Discussion:

Think of a story about Jesus where you think that he is shown as a servant leader. What quality of servant leadership stands out for you? How did others feel about the approach Jesus took?

Do you consider yourself a leader, regardless of whatever official roles you may have? How can you apply some principles of servant leadership at work..... or at home?

Sometimes people think that servant leadership is a weak way to lead. St. Paul said that “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Later he told the Corinthians that the Lord told him in prayer that “my power is made perfect in weakness,” causing Paul to conclude: “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9, 10). What does Paul mean, and how can it apply to our lives?

References:

1. Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership:
<http://www.slideshare.net/sevenpillarsofservantleadership/seven-pillars-of-servant-leadership-leaderserve-model>
2. Servant Leadership: To Serve, Not to be Served
<https://catholicwomeninbusiness.com/articles/2022/2/2/servant-leadership-to-serve-not-to-be-served>
3. Positive Power of Servant Leadership | Tom Thibodeau: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RC9OwLLW5HQ>
4. Servant Leadership Liturgy of the Word:
<https://decandsusan.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/servant-leadership-liturgy1.pdf>

Action Plan:

1. This week focus on one aspect of servant leadership and apply it in your professional or personal life.
2. Spiritual leadership in the family is an important role for a parent. One day this week consciously be a spiritual leader to your family. Some possible things you could do are: lead your family in prayer, lead them in a discussion of a spiritual matter, teach your children something about the Catholic faith, or read the Gospel for the coming Sunday prior to going to mass and/or discuss it after mass.
3. In the coming week take some time to think about who you have known in your life whom you would describe as a servant leader. Identify what was most appealing about that person's approach, and take to prayer how you can apply that aspect to your life and your interaction with others.

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