



Servant Leadership

St. Francis University Summer Seminar

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The annual summer seminar at St. Francis University, held this year from July 9 to July 12 was attended by more than sixty participants from thirteen regions, and friars representing the OFM, TOR and OFM Conventual congregations. The seminar was comprised of eight sessions presented by Fr. Michael Higgins, TOR, and Mary Frances Charsky, OFS.

Mary Frances set the atmosphere for the seminar with prayer selections, hymn recommendations, and a display of posters and TAU crosses from Assisi. She designed the group work, role-playing scenario and “best practices” sessions to exemplify the concept of servant leadership. The formal sessions began with a call to the participants to take an inventory of their own leadership styles. The inventory was taken from the [*Handbook for Secular Franciscan Leadership*](#), pages 121-126. The inventory is a useful tool for assisting leaders to identify their strengths and areas for growth in leadership abilities. Everyone has specific gifts, and a good leader will be able to recognize the gifts in others and develop them so as to empower them.

Fr. Michael Higgins, TOR, spoke first about the principles of servant leadership. He referenced both Robert K. Greenleaf, a Quaker who lived from 1904-1990, and Max DePree, a current expert on artful leadership. Both uphold leadership in the light of Christianity.

The ten characteristics of servant leadership, as noted by Greenleaf were reviewed. They include: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of the people and building community. The four characteristics of artful leadership identified by DePree were also discussed, and include integrity, building and nurturing relationships, community building, and fostering and preparing future leaders.

Character traits that can contribute to dysfunctional leadership were discussed in a later session. These include: loneliness of command, addiction to power, fear of envy, fear of success, narcissism, transference, and psychopathic personality disorder. This presentation left us feeling somewhat “down,” but also with an understanding of the reality that some leaders are not leading to serve.

On Saturday, the leadership of St. Francis, St. Clare and Pope Francis were the topic of the fifth session, presented by Fr. Higgins. Francis did not want anyone in the Order to have a title; the leaders were not to be called priors, but rather, ministers. The minister was the one to wash the feet of the brothers or sisters.

Francis encouraged the brothers to love their brothers as a mother loves her son, and established an atmosphere of forgiveness and charity. St. Francis did not write specifically about leadership, but there are many references to his ideals on leadership reflected in the Rule, letters and Admonitions.

St. Clare’s life in her community was that of a servant leader. She washed the feet of the sisters when they came back to the convent from walking the streets and begging for food. She lived to meet the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of her community. Clare conveyed the Franciscan Spirit as a way of life to her household, and we are encouraged by her example to do the same for our fraternities.

Pope Francis is a Pope who is not only thinking, but doing things outside the box! Fr. Higgins highlighted the leadership style of Pope Francis s taken from the book *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads.*: Lowney, 2013, Loyola Press.

- 1) Live fully - be who you are
- 2) Wash feet - authentic power is service
- 3) Dusty shoes - immerse yourself in the worlds joys and sufferings.
- 4) Kneeling alone - commit to a regimen of reflection in order to survive
- 5) Build on stones - live in the present, reverence tradition
- 6) Create the future -take up the challenge of leading through change
- 7) Don't be afraid of the journey

Fr. Higgins shared the following success story based on principles of Franciscan servant leadership. Sr. Margaret Carney, OSF, was named the first female president of St. Bonaventure University in 2003. Her journey began after a scandal at the university occurred in 2002. She was first named interim president, then inaugurated to the office in 2003. Her *modus operandi* was that of a servant leader. After several days of interviewing her, Fr. Higgins found recurrent themes emerging in her leadership style. Sr. Margaret has a deep respect for all individuals, seeing them as created in the Divine image as a son or daughter of God. She strove to empower and collaborate with others, knowing she did not have to do everything herself, and invited others to assist in decision making. Communication was open; she listened to the thoughts and needs of others including faculty, staff and students. Lastly, she approached all actions from an ethical world view. Over time, her servant leadership style transformed a once-disgraced institution into a success story.