



## Leading with the Head bowed down: Lessons in Leadership Humility from the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia

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### Introduction

Leadership often draws the wrong kinds of leaders. Positions of power and influence have the tendency to attract the proud and the upwardly mobile individualists<sup>1</sup>. Contemporary leadership authors have gone as far as describing organizational leaders as idols, heroes, saviors, warriors, magicians, and even as omnipotent demi-gods<sup>2</sup>. But recently more voices within organizational discourse have been raised to question our perception and acceptance of these power-vested models of leadership. Could leaders be humble, many wonder<sup>3</sup>? It seems that the tide started to turn as the century did, in favor of a virtuous approach to leadership, culminating in the publication of Jim Collins' pioneering article on Level 5 Leadership in the January 2001 edition of the *Harvard Business Review*<sup>4</sup>. Collins proposed that the “most powerfully transformative executives” surveyed in his study all possessed the virtue of personal humility.

Although Collin's work<sup>5</sup> does not describe the process of formation of humble leaders, it does provide an erudite four-fold description of organizational leadership humility:

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. 2005. The Evils of Pride and Self-Righteousness. *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 2005:5.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, J. Andrew, Brotheridge, Céleste M., and Urbanski, John C. 2005. Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility. *Human Relations*, 58/10: 1323-1350.

<sup>3</sup> See Dickson, John P. and Rosner, Brian S. 2004. Humility as a Social Virtue in the Hebrew Bible? *Vetus Testamentum* LIV,4:459-479; and Elsberg, Robert. 2003. *The Saints' Guide to Happiness*. New York: North Point Press.

<sup>4</sup> Collins, Jim. 2001. Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve. *Harvard Business Review*, January: 66-76.

<sup>5</sup> Collins, Jim. 2001. Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve. *Harvard Business Review*, January: 66-76.

1. Personally humble leaders demonstrate a compelling modesty. They shun public adulation and never boast.
2. Personally humble leaders act with calm and quiet determination, not relying on inspiring charisma to motivate but rather inspired standards.
3. Personally humble leaders avoid personal ambition in favor of multi-generational organizational growth and development.
4. Personally humble leaders are self-reflective and tend to appropriate blame towards themselves are not others.

How then is humility formed in leaders? It might not come as a surprise that Jim Collins is not the first person to describe the possibility and power of leadership humility. A sixth-century Christian monk, St. Benedict of Nursia (480-540 A.D.), the father of Western Cenobitic Monasticism<sup>6</sup>, wrote a rule in which he provided his followers with a twelve step process description of how humility is formed in followers and leaders alike. Benedict's rule on humility has worked well as a guide and "*spiritual manual*"<sup>7</sup> facilitating personal and communal transformation within the Benedictine Order and others for well over 1500 years<sup>8</sup>.

### The Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia

Not much is historically known about St. Benedict, apart from the short biography found in the second volume of Pope Gregory the Great's four-book *Dialogues* (593 A.D.)<sup>9</sup>. More telling is the note<sup>10</sup> that Gregory makes that his "*life could not have differed from his teaching.*" Benedict was born within a wealthy family in the Roman town of Norcia, east of Rome. He left Norcia for Rome as a teenager in pursuit of higher education, but experienced a deep aversion in the hedonistic ways of the city and the prevalence of Roman timocratic approaches to leadership. Timocratic leadership (from the Greek word for honor, "*timao*"), is a leadership that is mainly interested in honor, power, privilege and prestige. Benedict fled Rome and took up residence in a cave near the town Subacio where he devoted his time in solitude and in search of God. His reputation for wisdom, humility and Godliness soon drew crowds of willing followers. He responded to this call to lead by establishing communities where followers could "*seek God*" and confront the contemporary pagan culture. He finally settled in one of these communities on a hill above the town of Cassino (today, the Abbey of Monte

<sup>6</sup> Cheline, Paschal G. 2003. *Christian Leadership: A Benedictine Perspective*. American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings 57:107-113.

<sup>7</sup> Waaijman, Kees. 2002. *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Leuven: Peeters.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, Nathan D. 2008. Liturgy and Life: Lessons in Benedict. *Worship* 82/2:161-174.

<sup>9</sup> Butcher, Carmen Acevedo. 2006. *Man of Blessing: A Life of St. Benedict*. Brewster: Paraclete Press.

<sup>10</sup> Cheline, Paschal G. 2003. *Christian Leadership: A Benedictine Perspective*. American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings 57:107-113.

Cassino), where he constructed a rule of life and organization for these communities. The Rule of St. Benedict has served monastic Christian communities since that time<sup>11</sup> and its instructions on spiritual formation and humility have been the foundation for organizational leadership development in many Christian communities<sup>12</sup>. Benedict's Rule was written for those serious about seeking God and being formed in His image. Benedict starts his rule with a prologue in which he gives an invitation to obedience and personal transformation:

*“Listen carefully, my child, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart (Prov. 4:20). Receive willingly and carry out effectively your loving father's advice, that by the labor of obedience you may return to Him from whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience. To you, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever you may be, who are renouncing your own will to do battle under the Lord Christ, the true King, and are taking up the strong, bright weapons of obedience<sup>13</sup>.”*

Of all the chapters and instructions, no greater attention is given to any other virtue than humility<sup>14</sup>. Humility is the road that leads to being formed into the image of God (see the Pauline view of this form of deification in 2 Corinthians 3:18) and for Benedict the ultimate response to a righteous and loving God. He ends his chapter on humility (Chapter 7, the longest of the all the 73 chapters) with the following words:

*“Having climbed all these steps of humility, therefore, the monk will presently come to that perfect love of God which casts out fear. And all those precepts which formerly he had not observed without fear, he will now begin to keep by reason of that love, without any effort, as though naturally and by habit. No longer will his motive be the fear of hell, but rather the love of Christ, good habit and delight in the virtues which the Lord will deign to show forth by the Holy Spirit in His servant now cleansed from vice and sin.<sup>15</sup>”*

## **Benedictine Spirituality and Leadership**

Benedictines spirituality has been summarized by Benedictine scholars<sup>16</sup> with the following three simple words from the Rule (RB 57.7), *“truly seeks God.<sup>17</sup>”* The greater portion of the rule where this “test” is found deals with the criteria for receiving new followers (novices) and reads:

*“A senior shall be assigned to them who is skilled in winning souls, to watch over them with the utmost care. Let him examine whether the novice **truly seeks God**, and whether he is zealous for the Work of God, for*

<sup>11</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>12</sup> Cheline, Paschal G. 2003. *Christian Leadership: A Benedictine Perspective*. American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings 57:107-113.

<sup>13</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books. Prologue.

<sup>14</sup> Cheline, Paschal G. 2003. *Christian Leadership: A Benedictine Perspective*. American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings 57:107-113.

<sup>15</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books. Chapter 7.

<sup>16</sup> Schmitt, Miriam. 2001. Benedictine Spirituality. *Liturgical Ministry*, Fall 2001:198-200.

<sup>17</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books. Chapter 58.7.

*obedience and for trials. Let the novice be told all the hard and rugged ways by which the journey to God is made.<sup>18</sup>*

Exegetical reflections on the rule and this above-mentioned “test” of Benedictine spirituality have yielded three criteria to “verify the authenticity of this relentless, radical, single-hearted search for God<sup>19</sup>”:

1. Eagerness for the work of God.
2. Radical missional obedience.
3. Active humility expressed in service.

Benedictine Leadership finds its definition and mode of expression in the above three criteria. Benedictine leaders have surrendered their own personal ambitions for the greater good of God’s Kingdom, they practice radical obedience to the organization’s mission and they express an active humility in service of others. It is the last criteria of authentic Benedictine leadership that holds the promise for a contemporary understanding and application of leadership humility that is expressed in service.

### **St. Benedict’s Twelve Steps to Humility**

Benedict’s process description of the formation of humility in his rule might be the world’s first 12-step program<sup>20</sup> to help leaders and followers serve in humility and deference. His twelve steps towards humility can be summarized as follows (with short excerpts from the rule<sup>21</sup>):

1. **Respect God:** *“The first degree of humility, then, is that a person keep the fear of God before his eyes and beware of ever forgetting it...As for self-will, we are forbidden to do our own will by the Scripture, which says to us, ‘Turn away from your own will’ (Eccles. 18:30), and likewise by the prayer in which we ask God that His will be done in us.”*
2. **Love not one’s own will:** *“The second degree of humility is that a person love not his own will nor take pleasure in satisfying his desires, but model his actions on the saying of the Lord, ‘I have come not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me’ (John 6:38). It is written also, ‘Self-will has its punishment, but constraint wins a crown.’”*
3. **Submit to one’s superior:** *“The third degree of humility is that a person for love of God submit himself to his Superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord, of whom the Apostle says, ‘He became obedient even unto death.’”*

<sup>18</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books. Chapter 58.7.

<sup>19</sup> Schmitt, Miriam. 2001. Benedictine Spirituality. *Liturgical Ministry*, Fall 2001:198-200.

<sup>20</sup> Cheline, Paschal G. 2003. *Christian Leadership: A Benedictine Perspective*. American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings 57:107-113.

<sup>21</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books. Chapter 7.

4. **Be obedient at all times, especially in difficult situations:** *“The fourth degree of humility is that he hold fast to patience with a silent mind when in this obedience he meets with difficulties and contradictions and even any kind of injustice, enduring all without growing weary or running away. For the Scripture says, ‘The one who perseveres to the end, is the one who shall be saved’ (Matt. 10:22); and again ‘Let your heart take courage, and wait for the Lord’ (Ps. 6[27]:14)!”*
5. **Be transparent:** *“The fifth degree of humility is that he hide from his Abbot none of the evil thoughts that enter his heart or the sins committed in secret, but that he humbly confess them. The Scripture urges us to this when it says, ‘Reveal your way to the Lord and hope in Him’ (Ps. 36:5) and again, ‘Confess to the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever’ (Ps. 105[106]:1).”*
6. **Be content with lowly and menial jobs:** *“The sixth degree of humility is that a monk be content with the poorest and worst of everything, and that in every occupation assigned him he consider himself a bad and worthless workman, saying with the Prophet, ‘I am brought to nothing and I am without understanding; I have become as a beast of burden before You, and I am always with You’ (Ps:22-23).”*
7. **Have a correct, but lowly estimation of self:** *“The seventh degree of humility is that he consider himself lower and of less account than anyone else, and this not only in verbal protestation but also with the most heartfelt inner conviction, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet, ‘But I am a worm and no man, the scorn of men and the outcast of the people’ (Ps. 21[22]:7). ‘After being exalted, I have been humbled and covered with confusion’ (Pa. 87:16). And again, ‘It is good for me that You have humbled me, that I may learn Your commandments’ (Ps. 118[119]:71,73).”*
8. **Stay within the boundaries of the organization and role:** *“The eighth degree of humility is that a monk do nothing except what is commended by the common Rule of the monastery and the example of the elders.”*
9. **Control one’s tongue:** *“The ninth degree of humility is that a monk restrain his tongue and keep silence, not speaking until he is questioned. For the Scripture shows that ‘in much speaking there is no escape from sin’ (Prov. 10:19) and that ‘the talkative man is not stable on the earth’ (Ps. 13[14]:9:12).”*
10. **Avoid frivolity:** *“The tenth degree of humility is that he be not ready and quick to laugh, for it is written, ‘The fool lifts up his voice in laughter’ (Eccles. 21:23).”*
11. **Speak clearly and plainly:** *“The eleventh degree of humility is that when a monk speaks he do so gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, in few and sensible words, and that he be not noisy in his speech. It is written, ‘A wise man is known by the fewness of his words’ (Sextus, Enchirion, 134 or 145).”*

**12. Adopt a humble posture:** “The twelfth degree of humility is that a monk not only have humility in his heart but also by his very appearance make it always manifest to those who see him. That is to say that whether he is at the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the fields or anywhere else, and whether sitting, walking or standing, he should always have his head bowed and his eyes toward the ground.”

It is important to note that Benedict’s steps start with the heart and ends with a posture that communicates humility. His twelve steps describe a process of personal conversion that leads from interior motive to outward behavior (from axiology to praxis). Benedict makes it clear that leadership conversion starts with having the fear of God.

What would Benedict’s twelve steps of humility look like if it was written today? Could the steps be adapted to contemporary organizational leadership? Craig and Oliver Galbraith<sup>22</sup>, a father and son management authoring team, wrote an insightful little book on the management principles within the Rule of Benedict (2004), entitled; “*The Benedictine Rule of Leadership: Classic Management secrets you can use today*”. Galbraith and Galbraith translated the rules’ twelve steps of humility in the following way<sup>23</sup>:

1. **Revere the simple rules:** Humble leaders strive to obey and follow the basic rules of courtesy and the organization. They model good behavior to those around them.
2. **Reject your personal desires:** Humble leaders curb their own desires for fame and achievement, ever aware of the possibilities of pride and arrogance.
3. **Obey others:** Humble leaders readily follow and obey those placed over them in positions of authority.
4. **Endure affliction:** Humble leaders willingly “*turn the other cheek*” in situations of conflict and work towards peace and harmony.
5. **Confess your weaknesses:** Humble leaders are honest and transparent about their own limitations and weaknesses. They communicate these regularly to those that follow them.
6. **Practice contentment:** Humble leaders try to be content in their current positions, jobs and general situation in life.
7. **Learn self reproach:** Humble leaders adopt the disciplines of internal reflection and do not seek to place the blame on others.

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<sup>22</sup> Galbraith, Craig S. and Galbraith, Oliver. 2004. *The Benedictine Rule of Leadership: Classic Management Secrets You can use Today*. Avon: Adams Media.

<sup>23</sup> Galbraith, Craig S. and Galbraith, Oliver. 2004. *The Benedictine Rule of Leadership: Classic Management Secrets You can use Today*. Avon: Adams Media.

8. **Obey the common rule:** Humble leaders obey all the organizational rules, not just in letter, but also in spirit
9. **Understand that silence is golden:** Humble leaders control their speech and adopt plain and clear avenues of communication.
10. **Meditate on humility:** Humble leaders consciously seek to cultivate humility and seek to understand what this means in an organizational setting.
11. **Speak simply:** Humble leaders talk in a low voice, speak gently, and with kindness to everyone in the organization.
12. **Act humbly in appearance:** Humble leaders act humble in appearance as well as in the heart.

Galbraith and Galbraith's work on the Rule of Benedict is a helpful popular-press guide on how to incorporate the values of Western Christian Monastic witness in attempts to lead from a virtues-based organizational philosophy. This has been a growing trend within the domains of organizational discourse. Many contemporary authors<sup>24</sup> and scholars<sup>25</sup> continue to explore how ancient spiritual wisdom can benefit those organizational leaders who desire to make sense of their journey and purpose in this world.

## Organizational Leadership and Humility

Two recent Organizational Leadership studies<sup>26</sup>, following up from the work of Collins<sup>27</sup> on humility, revisit the ideal of leadership humility and the possible formational processes that lead up to it. Both these studies confirm Benedict's original concepts of a process description of organizational humility without making direct mention of the Rule. Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez's<sup>28</sup> 2004 study defines leadership humility as a "competitive advantage" and proposes five strategic practices that could promote organizational humility:

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<sup>24</sup> See Bonomo, Carol. 2004. Don't quit your Day Job: A Sixth-Century Saint can teach you a thing or two about work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *U.S. Catholic*, 69, No. 9: 50; Graceffo, Mark 2005. Somebody's knocking at my Door. *U.S. Catholic*, 70, No. 3: 47; and Hendrickson, Mary Lynn. 2008. St. Ben's Excellent Adventure. *U.S. Catholic*, 73, No. 6: 49.

<sup>25</sup> See Morris, J. Andrew, Brotheridge, Céleste M., and Urbanski, John C. 2005. Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility. *Human Relations*, 58/10: 1323-1350; Munzer, Stephen R. 1999. Beggars of God: the Christian ideal of Mendicancy. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27/2:305-330; Raverty, Aaron. 2006. Are we Monks, or are we Men? The Monastic masculine Gender Model according to the Rule of Benedict. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3: 269-291; and Vera, Dusya and Rodriguez-Lopez, Antonio. 2004. Strategic Virtues: Humility as a Source of Competitive Advantage. *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 33, No. 4: 393-408.

<sup>26</sup> See Morris, J. Andrew, Brotheridge, Céleste M., and Urbanski, John C. 2005. Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility. *Human Relations*, 58/10: 1323-1350; and Vera, Dusya and Rodriguez-Lopez, Antonio. 2004. Strategic Virtues: Humility as a Source of Competitive Advantage. *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 33, No. 4: 393-408.

<sup>27</sup> Collins, Jim. 2001. Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve. *Harvard Business Review*, January: 66-76.

<sup>28</sup> Vera, Dusya and Rodriguez-Lopez, Antonio. 2004. Strategic Virtues: Humility as a Source of Competitive Advantage. *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 33, No. 4: 393-408.

1. Exemplary leadership models humble behaviors to followers.
2. The explicit inclusion of humility as an element of the organization’s strategy and culture.
3. Hiring practices that look at the individuals’ humility or their intent to improve it.
4. Promotion practices that reward humility.
5. Public rejection of arrogant or overconfident behaviors.

Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez propose that this kind of organizational humility becomes a “critical strength” for those possessing it and a “dangerous weakness” for those falling short of it. Another study<sup>29</sup>, the following year (2005), seeks to define the antecedents and consequences of leader humility. Morris, Brotheridge and Urbanski’s work convincingly argues that narcissism; Machiavellianistic approaches to leadership, low self-esteem and defensively high self-esteem negatively predict leadership humility.

In contrast, a compelling case is made that reality-based feedback, religious conversion and humble mentors could all contribute to leaders that are humble. The major contribution of the Morris, Brotheridge and Urbanski paper is the consequences of leadership humility that it describes in an erudite and persuasive manner. According to this study<sup>30</sup>, leadership humility positively predicts the following organizational behaviors:

1. Leader humility predicts supportiveness towards others.
2. Leader humility predicts a socialized power motivation.
3. Leader humility predicts participative leadership.

Humility, it seems, is no longer receiving the bad press it used to get in organizational leadership discourse. But, the question on how this kind leadership conversion occurs still escapes those writing and thinking about it. This is where Benedict and his rule become helpful. For Benedict, true conversion to humility starts and ends with God<sup>31</sup>:

*“The first degree of humility, then, is that a person keeps the fear of God before his eyes and beware of ever forgetting it. Let him be ever mindful of all that God has commanded; let his thoughts constantly recur to the hell-fire which will burn for their sins those who despise God, and to the life everlasting which is prepared for those who fear Him.”*

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<sup>29</sup> Morris, J. Andrew, Brotheridge, Céleste M., and Urbanski, John C. 2005. Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility. *Human Relations*, 58/10: 1323-1350.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, J. Andrew, Brotheridge, Céleste M., and Urbanski, John C. 2005. Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility. *Human Relations*, 58/10: 1323-1350.

<sup>31</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books.



## Leading with the Head bowed down

The leadership wisdom of Benedict of Nursia lies in his insistence that all development in virtue starts with the source of true virtue, God. Organizational leaders can transform their leadership style and mode from narcissistic self-interest to humble and empowering participative leadership if the quest for formation starts with God and it follows the natural progression that authentic devotion to His will and purposes brings. Leaders that have integrated their virtuous value of humility with their public actions, lead with their “heads bowed down<sup>32</sup>” in an aesthetic pedagogical manner<sup>33</sup> that leads to organizational conversion and transformation. Benedict, in the second last chapter of his rule (72), says it best. This kind of leadership brings us all together to a life that is better and ultimately everlasting:

*“Just as there is an evil zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from vices and leads to God and to life everlasting. This zeal, therefore, the brothers should practice with the most fervent love. Thus they should anticipate one another in honor (Romans 12:10); most patiently endure one another's infirmities, whether of body or of character; vie in paying obedience one to another – no one following what he considers useful for himself, but rather what benefits another – ; tender the charity of brotherhood chastely; fear God in love; love their Abbott with a sincere and humble charity; prefer nothing whatever to Christ. And may He bring us all together to life everlasting!<sup>34</sup>”*

## About the Author

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<sup>32</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books. Chapter 7.

<sup>33</sup> Zaleski, Carol. 2006. The Lowly Virtue. *Christian Century*, May 16, 2006:33.

<sup>34</sup> Fry, Timothy, ed. 1981. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. New York: Vintage Books. Chapter 72.

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