

Humility, *Magis*, and Discernment:
A JESUIT PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION FOR BUSINESS LEADERSHIP
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This paper acknowledges that there is a specifically Jesuit dimension of leadership. That dimension involves humility, the notion of the "*magis*," and the process of "discernment." All three are integral to Jesuit spirituality. The specifically Jesuit dimension of leadership can contribute to the comparative advantage available to graduates of Jesuit business schools. Since humility, the "*magis*," and discernment figure prominently in the history and tradition of Jesuit spirituality, they should be part of education for business in a Jesuit university.

When Gerard R. Roche, senior chairman of the executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles, delivered a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania to Wharton School MBA students a decade or so ago, one of them asked, "What do you recommend that I study if I want to become a CEO?" Roche, who received his Jesuit education at the University of Scranton (Class of 1954) replied, "Study human nature." "The study of human nature" might be a good title for a course on leadership in a Jesuit business school. Indeed, since most Jesuit schools require an exposure to the humanities for all their students, Jesuit alumni might have a leg up on the road to leadership once they move into the world of work.

Descriptions and Definitions

I have a pen-and-pencil holder on my desk that has "The Essence of Leaders!" inscribed on its side. Here are the words: 'A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. He or she does not set out to be a leader, but becomes one by the quality of his or her actions and the integrity of his or her intent.'

Leadership can more easily be described than defined. Chris Lowney (2003) speaks of "whole-person leadership" in his book comparing the "best practices" that were initiated in the 16th century by Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, with the management practices in place today in the secular business world. "What often passes for leadership today," writes Lowney, "is a shallow substitution of technique for substance. Jesuits eschewed a flashy leadership style to focus instead on engendering four unique values that created leadership substance: (1) self-awareness, (2) ingenuity, (3) love, (4) heroism. In other words, Jesuits equipped their recruits to succeed by molding them into leaders who (1) understood their strengths, weaknesses, values, and worldview; (2) confidently innovated and adapted to embrace a changing world; (3) engaged others with a positive, loving attitude; and (4) energized

themselves and others through heroic ambitions. Moreover, Jesuits trained every recruit to lead, convinced that all leadership begins with self-leadership."²

Humility

There is a counter-cultural dimension to Ignatian spirituality that Lowney does not underscore. In the Book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, there is a special Meditation on Two Standards; "the one of Christ, our Supreme Commander and Lord, the other of Lucifer, the mortal enemy of our human nature." (A "standard," as used here, is a military banner or "guide on" employed to lead forces into battle.) The following excerpts from that meditation pertain to the Standard of Christ: Ignatius states that "Christ calls and desires all persons to come under his standard," and then invites the retreatant, in an exercise of the imagination, to place him- or herself in the presence of Christ and listen.

Consider the address which Christ our Lord makes to all his servants and friends whom he is sending on this expedition. He recommends that they endeavor to aid all persons, by attracting them, first, to the most perfect spiritual poverty and also, if the Divine Majesty should be served and should wish to choose them for it, even to no less a degree of actual poverty, and second, by attracting them to a desire for reproach and contempt, since from these results humility.

In this way there will be three steps: the first, poverty in opposition to riches; the second, reproach or contempt in opposition to honor from the world; and the third, humility in opposition to pride. Then from these three steps they should induce people to all the other virtues.

The Standard of Christ offers what is clearly a counter-cultural Ignatian principle of leadership: The three steps to genuine success are poverty as opposed to riches; insults or contempt as opposed to the honor of this world; humility as opposed to pride. "From these three steps let them lead men to all other virtues." (SpEx 146).

It was remarked in 2008 by Jesuit Cardinal Carlo Martini that delivery of the Spiritual Exercises, particularly the proclamation of the Standard of Christ, is "the service that the Society of Jesus is called to perform for the Church today."³ To the completely secular eye, that will be seen as no service at all. To the eye of faith, acceptance of the genuine Ignatian vision and values will be seen as a form of liberation that frees a person to become an effective leader.

There are, according to St. Ignatius, three levels of alignment of one's will with the will of God. The first is necessary for salvation. "I so subject and humble myself as to obey the law of God our Lord in all things" (SpEx No. 165). This level of humility is thus understood as obedience to God's will. The second kind or degree of humility means "that I neither desire nor am I inclined to have riches rather than poverty, to seek honor rather than dishonor, to desire a long life rather than a short life, provided I would promote equally the service of God our Lord and the salvation

of my soul" (SpEx No. 166). This is what is known as Ignatian "indifference." Humility thus understood eliminates one's personal desire as finally decisive.

The third or highest degree of humility implies the desire to be like Christ who is poor, despised, and deemed foolish.

"Humbition"

The leadership lesson to be derived from a consideration of the Third Degree of Humility can be interpreted for business students by reference to a secular setting completely unrelated to the context of Ignatian spirituality, namely, a back-office service company—SEI Investments in Oak, Pennsylvania—where the word "**humbition**" is held up for praise and imitation. "At SEI, the most effective leaders exude a blend of humility and ambition—**humbition**—that relies on the power of persuasion rather than formal authority." It is crucial for a Jesuit school aiming at recognition and excellence in all it does to be able to explain its characteristically Jesuit approach (humility, *magis*, and discernment) in terms that the secular world understands. "Humbition" helps in that regard.

Here is the relevant Ignatian leadership principle: humility, as demonstrated in the life of Christ, is a highly desirable leadership characteristic. Think of it as "**humbition**," an amalgam of humility and the *magis* (the Latin word Ignatius used to describe the extra effort, the greater reach expected of those who would follow Christ), and you have a clue to the Jesuit approach to the idea of leadership. Further assistance in bringing these spiritual ideals down to earth can be found in a famous article by Jim Collins, "Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve." Collins combines "humility and fierce resolve" as a passport to what he calls "Level 5 Leadership," which he understands to be "the highest level in a hierarchy of executive capabilities.

The Trap

The Standard of Satan (opposed to the Standard of Christ) represents, according to Ignatius, a three-step strategy intended to trap the unwary and lead them away from Christ and into perdition. To ignore this warning is sheer folly. And for Jesuit schools not to forewarn their students about this three-fold threat is a tragic failure comparable to permitting them to sleepwalk into an unknown future.

In order to enable the retreatant to consider the Standard of Satan, Ignatius would have him or her "see the chief of all the enemy in the vast plain about Babylon, seated on a great throne of fire and smoke, his appearance inspiring horror and terror" (SpEx, 140). Then Ignatius would have the retreatant "consider how [Satan] summons innumerable demons, and scatters them, some to one city and some to another, throughout the whole world, so that no province, no place, no state of life, no individual is overlooked." And finally, Ignatius would ask those who bring themselves to prayer in this way to "consider the address [Satan] makes to them [the demons],

how he goads them on to lay snares for men, to seek to chain them. First they are to tempt them to covet riches (as Satan himself is accustomed to do in most cases) that they may the more easily attain the empty honors of this world, and then come to overweening pride. The first step, then, will be riches, the second honor, and the third pride. From these three steps the evil one leads to all other vices" (SpEx 142).

Obviously, there is a Jesuit viewpoint that is shaped by the *Spiritual Exercises* and it is clearly counter-cultural. When John Kenneth Galbraith's (1958) landmark book *The Affluent Society* was making the rounds in the late-1950s, the author's comments about the "basic benefits" of having wealth reflected the values of the dominant culture, but they also struck an unintended echo of the Standard of Satan. Here is what Galbraith wrote: "Broadly speaking, there are three basic benefits from wealth. First, is the satisfaction in the power with which it endows the individual. Second is the physical possession of the things which money can buy. Third is the distinction or esteem that accrues to the rich man as a result of his wealth." The power-possession-esteem triad echoes the strategy Ignatius saw as the trap set by the enemy of our human nature. Graduates of Jesuit schools should have antennae that are attuned to these cultural currents.

Jesuit business-school educators should think *humbition*. They should think of the importance Jesuit spirituality attaches to avoiding the trap, to not being possessed by your possessions. They should also think of how far they have to go in persuading their students of the validity and practical worth of the counter-cultural values that underlie the Jesuit brand. Assuming instructional and research excellence on all disciplinary fronts, Jesuit business schools will be first-rate only if they succeed in making *humbition* part of the brand.

The Art of Inducing Others to Follow

Leadership is, from any point of view and by any measure, an art, the art of inducing others to follow. It is, moreover, modeled behavior. The leader shows others the way and they can see the way because they see it in the leader. To be a leader is to be leading by example. Followers follow what they see in their leader. Any organization can be thought of as a big machine; all its moveable parts are people. The leadership challenge is to get those people moving!

Leadership is not a science (although there are indeed theories of leadership), nor is it a craft (although leaders "make" things happen by "carving out" solutions, "hammering down" loose ends, and "fixing" broken policies). Just as politics is often called "the art of the possible," leadership is the art of getting things done willingly (it not always cheerfully) by the coordinated efforts of others. Why not think of the leader as an artist, if leadership is, in fact, an art? I think we should. And the image of an artist can serve as a helpful corrective to the king-of-the-hill. Leader-as-hero image that many uncritically assume to be an accurate portrayal of real leadership." Few business schools stress the utility for leadership of a blend of humility and "magis" or ambition. That's why "humbition" is a word worth adding to the would-be leader's

vocabulary. The nature of leadership is both complex and completely human. And leadership itself is in dangerously short supply today in America. So how can Jesuit business schools help to remedy that situation?

Jesuit Pedagogy

For well over 400 years Jesuit pedagogy has aimed at cultivating in its students what is known as "*eloquentia perfecta*," what we would call today the development to a high level of the oral and written communication skills. I have my students write something every week and they find themselves frequently in front of the class speaking—loudly and clearly, in sentences that can be diagrammed, and in a style that is concise and persuasive. On occasion, video replay helps to call their attention to the importance of eye contact, the frequency of their use of non words like "umm," "ahh," "you know," "I mean" and so many more.

Another characteristic of Jesuit education is "*cura personalis*," personal attention to the individual student. Not all of us excel in making that a reality in the undergraduate or graduate experience of our students, but we should; and if we do, it will help to set Jesuit educators apart from the rest.

A brochure that describes the Center for Ignatian Spirituality at Boston College offers a clear and concise response to the question, "What is Ignatian spirituality?" in the following three paragraphs that summarize the spirit that Jesuits want to share with their lay colleagues, students, alumni, and friends:

- *Ignatian spirituality originates out of the experience of Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) a Basque courtier, who during a period of enforced convalescence from battle wounds, gradually awakened to the action of God in that God can be found anywhere.*

- *For Ignatius, God's action leads to peace and commitment—peace with oneself and commitment to help others. Consequently, Ignatius emphasizes magnanimity, a generous willingness to work for great enterprises, especially those that help the greatest number of people and have the most enduring results. For Ignatius the prime example of a life lived generously for a great enterprise is Jesus Christ; and that conviction explains, in large part, his insistence that the order he founded be called the Company or Society of Jesus.*

- *Throughout his spiritual teaching, Ignatius stresses the principle of adaptation. By that he means that God works with respect for the freedom of each individual, with regard to the history, temperament, and talents of each man or woman. Ignatian spirituality, then, is about encounter not performance, about freedom not manipulation, about individual choice not group pressure. Consequently, Ignatian*

spirituality invites ecumenical participation, enculturation, and inter-religious dialogue

Jesuit Purpose and Strategy

Ignatius of Loyola had a vision, a commitment, and a pattern of living that eventually became known worldwide as the Jesuit way of life. Every Jesuit school, college, and university has been touched by that influence.

The *Spiritual Exercises* is a handbook that serves as an outline for a spiritual retreat aimed at ridding oneself of sinful attachments and discovering the will of God for one's life. Several short paragraphs at the beginning of this handbook constitute what Ignatius calls the "First Principle and Foundation" of the Exercises. These words have been pondered often and deeply by every Jesuit throughout his Jesuit life. They help to explain why Jesuits do what they do, including establishing educational institutions. These words can serve as a personal mission statement for those who see life and faith from a Jesuit perspective. They relate to purpose. Purpose, it should be noted, sets leadership apart from management where process, as opposed to purpose, holds center stage. Here is the way Ignatius would convey this notion of purpose to a young graduate or to anyone associating him- or herself with a Jesuit work today:

You are created to praise, reverence, and serve God your Lord,
and by this means to save your soul.
The other things on the face of the earth are created for you to help
you in attaining the end to which you are created.
Hence, you are to make use of them in so far as they help you in
the attainment of your end, and you must rid yourself of them
in so far as they prove a hindrance to you.
Therefore, you should make yourself indifferent to all created things,
as far as you are allowed free choice and are not under
any prohibition. Consequently, as far as you are concerned, you
should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor
to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all
other things.
Your one desire and choice should be what is more conducive
to the end for which you are created.

It takes spiritual maturity to catch the Ignatian vision, to see the "Principle and Foundation" as a basis for living, as a focus that helps one find God and God's love in all things.

Ignatius was a mystic who saw the world from God's point of view. He founded his religious order—the Jesuits—for like-minded men called, as he was, to be contemplatives in action and "to travel anywhere in the world where there is hope of God's greater glory and the good of

souls." That phrase—"God's greater glory"—appears on the logo, the coat of arms, of many Jesuit institutions and organizations: "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam."

A key meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises*, as I noted earlier, involves a comparison of the strategy of Christ, who is intent on saving the world, with the strategy of Satan, "the enemy of our human nature," who wants to divert humankind from God's plan for salvation. This meditation is a reflection on two competing ideologies, two mindsets, two strategies—the Standard of Satan as opposed to the Standard of Christ. The strategy of Satan is to attract humans to a love of riches that will bring a measure of honor and lead on to pride. The three-step sequence is: riches, honor, pride. The opposing strategy of Christ is to draw us to detachment from material possession, to poverty of spirit, and then to an acceptance of insults and contempt that are associated with being poor, and ultimately to humility. From humility, Christ will draw us on to all other virtue, just as from pride, Satan will attempt to lead us to all forms of vice.

Education in the Jesuit tradition should be explicit about the poverty-insults-humility strategy as a positive contribution to the good life. We also do our students a great favor by exposing them to the riches-honor-pride strategy of the "enemy of [their] human nature." In other words, to point out the traps that are out there waiting to be sprung.

Discernment: A Jesuit Way of Decision Making

Thus far we have emphasized that a Jesuit perspective on Leadership education includes an emphasis on humility and magis, or what one company has called, *humbition*. A third distinguishing characteristic of Leadership education in the Jesuit tradition is the distinctly Jesuit notion of *discernment*. Leaders make decisions. Jesuit spirituality emphasizes a special way to make decisions that bears directly on the way one can search out God's will. It goes by the name of discernment—"discernment of spirits."

Discernment is a centuries-old "way of proceeding," a tested method of sorting things out so that you can make your way through the human predicament with some degree of confidence that you are following God's will in a particular set of circumstances. Discernment is a characteristically Jesuit way of "testing the spirits," as in the advice found in 1 John 4:1: "Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Or, to put "discernment of spirits" in the language of 1 John 4:6, "This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit."

During a long recuperation period after being wounded in the battle of Pamplona, Ignatius had his "first reasoning," his first reflective experience, "of the things of God." It happened this way. The only books available to help him pass the time were a four-volume *Life of Christ* and another book containing selections from the lives of the saints. He read these, reflected at intervals as he worked his way through them, and noticed that his reflections were accompanied

by feelings of warmth and attraction toward the person of Christ and the generous deeds of the saints. An alternative past time was daydreaming, turning over in his imagination, as he recounts it in the *Autobiography* "what he would do in the service of a certain lady, the means he would take so he could go to the country where she lived, the verses, the words he would say to her, the deeds of arms he would do in her service."

" This reflective imagining gave him an immediate feeling of pleasure that invariably dissolved into a feeling of dryness and discontent. He then found himself doing something of an "archaeology" on his contrasting moods, desires, and feelings (the "spirits" he sensed within himself). When he cut under them, he recognized that what was happening within him, in his "interior life," as the spiritual writers would put it, was a struggle between two competing forces or spirits—one drawing him toward good, the other toward evil. His *Autobiography* mentions that "this was the first reflection he made on the things of God." Later on, when he was putting together his book of *Spiritual Exercises*, it was "from this experience within him that he began to draw light on what pertained to the diversity of spirits."¹⁰

This can work for individuals or for groups in search of God's will. Here is a method of group decision-making, of choosing a course of action that grew out of these Ignatian insights. It is traceable to the earliest deliberations of Ignatius and his first followers concerning the establishment of what is now known as the Jesuit order and it is avowedly religious. Ignatius grew in his faith experience of God by taking an "archaeological" approach to his moods and feelings. He would also have his facts lined up before attempting a decision. Ignatian discernment includes judgment of fact and assessment of feeling.

Here's how it works. If a choice is to be made or an action taken, the relevant facts should be laid out first. This means having the necessary data and information in hand. On the basis of the available information, appropriate judgments of fact are made. Does this in fact add up? Does it all compute? Do we have adequate and correct information?

After judgments of fact comes the question: What now shall we do? Options— each representing a plausible choice; each representing a relative good—are raised. Then the "goods" are weighed and measured against the feelings stirred in the decision maker in the face of any particular option.

Given a certain state of soul—tranquility, for example, or anxiety, or dejection-Ignatius would have anyone interested in this method examine the origin of that feeling. Is the Spirit of God trying to alert me to something? Or perhaps the origin of the mood is me; the feeling is no deeper than my own selfish preference for the inertia of the status quo, and the anxiety is, in fact, resistance to change. Or, perhaps an altogether different force can be operative—a diabolical influence referred to by Ignatius as the "evil spirit" and the "deadly enemy of our human nature."

Although Ignatius saw life as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, he also saw God in all good things. He was a realist who took careful account of the reality of evil in the world. He had a healthy respect for what he saw as an adversarial relationship between divine and diabolical activity.

Christians are advised by the evangelist John: "It is not every spirit, my dear people, that you can trust; test them, to see if they come from God.. ." (1 Jn. 4:1).

Acknowledging, then, the presence of divine activity in the world and a divine will for all men and women, and acknowledging as well the possibility of divine communication to human persons (inspiration or "in-spiriting"), believers, following the promptings not only of divine revelation but of logic and self-interest as well, consider it wise to count God in on their decision-making processes here and now. This calls for more than just a quick invocation or prayer of petition; the decision-making process has to be laced with a quest for God's will. This can apply to personal, individual decision-making or to group decision-making on the part of persons who share the same beliefs and goals and who can identify how they *feel* in the face of this option or that.

Ignatius and his first followers did this relative to the structure, purpose, and organization of their "company," the formal grouping of a committed band of brothers into what gained papal approval as the Company or Society of Jesus. What shape was this new enterprise to take? They processed the question in a structured, prayerful way and came up with an answer that produced not just acceptance, but peace in the heart of all participants in the decision.

Based on that early experience, the Jesuit procedure would have each participant in the group decision-making process ask: "How do I *feel* about the issue?" Next: "What is the origin of that particular feeling?" Is it from God, or not from God? The "not-from-God" feelings can be from self (from ignorance, obstinacy, indigestion), from other persons (whose position on this particular issue may be "not from God"), or from diabolical sources.

To sort out all the elements, not only of the issue to be decided but also of the sources of my feelings related to that issue, is a subtle exercise. Even those who know the theory of spiritual discernment back off from the practice because of an unwillingness or inability to meet the four prerequisite demands. To discern or decide well, one must be: (1) ready to move in any direction that God wants, therefore radically free; (2) open to sharing all that God has given him or her, therefore radically-generous; (3) willing to suffer if God's will requires it, therefore radically patient; and (4) questing for union with God in prayer, therefore radically spiritual.

What is the relevance of all this to leaders in business? This is another way of asking what the relevance of religious faith is to business or professional practice. I would never concede that there is no place for prayerful persons and faith-based decision making in corporate America

today. Indeed, more of this sort of thing may be precisely what corporate America needs. To the extent that Jesuits and their lay collaborators apply this decision-making approach in their schools, the probabilities increase of seeing the method spill over into secular decision-making circles.

To bring this lofty discernment discussion down to earth—indeed to the classroom "earth" where professor and student meet in any Jesuit business school—let me repeat what Washington-based executive search consultant Jonathan E. McBride wrote in a "Manager's Journal" essay for the *Wall Street Journal* (December 9, 1985). When asked to counsel a promising candidate for a managerial position he finds himself saying, "If your head says 'go' and your heart says 'no,' don't do it; if your heart says 'go' and your head says 'no'—give it a whirl! You can usually find facts to support your feelings; you can't really massage your feelings around to support the facts." And when I asked him about the relevance of all that I've outlined here about discernment to a specific personal business decision of taking or not taking a new job opportunity, Jon McBride told me that it is always wise to start with the feelings. "Career decisions will be more successful and more rewarding when a candidate's head and heart both embrace a job-changing decision." And I would add to that comment this characteristically Jesuit perspective: the believer can always count on finding God there at the intersection of head and heart.

An explicitly Jesuit perspective on business leadership would include this emphasis on discernment and teach students to attend to the head and the heart in making decisions. Following the approach described in this paper, business students in the Jesuit tradition will also understand the distinctly Ignatian dimensions of humility and magis in the art of leadership.

END NOTES

Lowney, Chris. *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 150-Year-Old Company That Has Changed The World* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003).

2. *Ibid.* 9.

i. See Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S.J., "The Service That Jesuits Can Offer to the Church Today." In *Jesuits: Yearbook of the Society of Jesus* (Rome: General Curia of the Society of Jesus, January 2008), 110-112.

4. See William C. Taylor and Polly LaBanc. *Maverick at Work*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2008, 240.

5. *Harvard Business Review* (January 2001), 67-76.

6. *Ibid.* 68.

7. *The Affluent Society* (Houghton Mifflin, 1958, 88).

8. For a fuller discussion of the notion leader as artist, see "Toward a More Adequate Myth: The Art of Leadership." Chapter Nine, in Sharon Daloz Parka. *Leadership Can Be Taught* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005). 201-230.

9. John C. Olin, ed., *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974). 23-

10. Cited in Candido de Dalmases. S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola: Founder of the Jesuits* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985). 44.

