

# Leadership in Religious Life (Part 1)

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## *Abstract*

*Leadership in religious life is a vocation and a journey rather than an administrative occupation. Religious leadership, therefore, demands spiritual formation. The nature of the spirituality of religious leadership differs according to the kind community that one is entrusted with. Religious leadership should emerge out of an encounter with the divine reality. Leading a religious community requires great sensitivity as well as a skill to see God in action in the life of individuals. The purpose of religious leadership is to ensure a continued commitment to the religious life among its members. It is possible to give guidance in a religious community only on the basis of an unshakable trust in God's guidance. Leaders must entrust persons entrusted to them to the guidance of God and to their own spiritual expedition.*

## **Exercising Leadership among Senile and Young Religious Communities**

What are the qualities required for the leadership in a religious community? Hardly needs to say that along with overall competence, financial management, insight into social and psychological factors, knowledge of the societal and ecclesiastical context of a community, and pastoral competence to accompany individual members of the community on their faith journey are also given special credit. This is mostly the case when the community comprises members who are advanced in age and sickly. Old age and vulnerability offer new challenges and options for commitment and service. Leaders of religious communities should first of all be competent to do things for others. They must have the ability to inspire their community by word and example through authentically interpreting and practicing the charism of the religious order they belong to. They must be leaders on the spiritual journey which flows from the institution's foundational

charism which is clearly indicated in its rules and constitutions. They must create a religious context in which all the members of the community can find their respective place.

It is on the basis of generally valued qualities and capacities that leaders of religious communities are chosen and appointed. But the question is, whether those qualities are truly befitting religious leadership or not? Is there such a thing as formation for "spiritual leadership"? In many cases the choices are made according to a trial and error method or on the basis of a variety of motives which are regarded highly and well-considered. The premise of this article, however, is that the "religious leadership" is of a unique and very specific kind. The religious community and its leadership fail to do justice to each other unless their relationship is based on thorough reflection on the specific nature of religious leadership. Certainly, there are courses conducted on formation and spiritual leadership. Just like pastoral formation, spiritual formation too is getting ample attention these days thanks to the new developments in the social and psychological fields. But since spiritual leadership in the past was frequently moralistic and coercive in character and aimed at a comforting conformity of everyone to a fixed pattern of religious life, the spiritual message of these leaders in fact bore no relation to the lived spirituality of the individual members. It was a spirituality that was narrowed down to the private domain. Leadership often restricted itself to drawing up documents and the creation of frameworks instead of generating inspiring dynamics, decisiveness and optimism. It hardly ventured into the depth-domain of the religious life. The actual spiritual journey of the individual religious was left to the confessional or spiritual accompaniment. Spiritual intimacy was kept at bay under the pretext of modesty or in the name of detachment and respect for others. The spiritual journey of the individual was hardly ever shared. In most communities fruitful reflection and mutual exchange of ideas and experiences happened very rarely. Funeral sermons and memorial services never served as occasions for communities to reflect upon publicly the spiritual journey of the religious in question. Feeling uncomfortable with such a practice people often limited their reflections and sermons to the enumeration of memorable facts in the life of the religious concerned. Mention of risks, periods of stagnation, ambiguities which marked a person's spiritual journey, and so on are considered only in the context of a beatification process behind closed doors. The public hagiography of a person was limited to the description of his good example and the depiction of his ideal personality. A spiritual journey of a person is made accessible to

the public only in an idealized form and not as a lived spirituality with its struggle towards God realization. Even when the depth and the radical nature of that process were projected, they were not shared.

Within this culture of spiritual reservation, combined with the external formalism of community structures and communal life styles, liturgy, breviary, and other chores, exercising spiritual leadership falls short of becoming a spiritual experience. It turns out to be a task that goes with the office, rather than a vocation and a journey. The crisis in the Church and the society of the past decades and the resulting decrease in vocations, and the lack of visibility of the religious life confront us with the inescapable question of the quality of religious leadership. The leader of a religious community must be much more than a manager, an economist, a specialist in ecclesiastical law, a sociologist or a psychologist. This leads us to the following question: What is the nature of the spirituality of religious leadership? In what does the spiritual journey of leadership consist and how can it be fostered? What are the pitfalls on the path of religious leadership and what are the potentials for its growth and development? Does the responsibility of the community for leading religious life requires that leaders live an exemplary life? Can we consider fulfilling this responsibility as a special vocation? Is it necessary that leaders should achieve great spiritual maturity in order to be able to exercise their assignment effectively? How can they exercise their responsibility as a spiritually oriented team within the order, province or community? What must they do to acquire and foster this spirituality? Is it their responsibility to ensure the possibility of individuals living authentically in light of their religious vocation, or is it sufficient for them to see to it that the individual religious functions well, and be happy when tensions in the communities are manageable and the tasks of their community are properly fulfilled? Is it necessary for them to make sure that each and every member of the community is deeply interested in spiritual progress and is striving to achieve it? Or is it perhaps sufficient for them to be efficient executive officers and managers who know what their community is all about, but leave the responsibility of spiritualization of the community to the experts: those responsible for formation, committees on spirituality, and other functionaries in the area of spirituality? Is it not enough for them to take care of their own personal spiritual life?

Are spirituality, personal well-being, and spiritual health identical? As a rule well-being is associated with physical health and ecclesiastical/societal functioning, and spiritual health is associated

with psychological well-being. In the case of a religious the experience of spirituality and psychological well-being are interwoven. A religious must experience good physical as well as psychological health in order to interiorize the spirituality he aspires to have. Living that spirituality should become natural and spontaneous to that person. Could it also be the other way around, that is, a person's spirituality and psychological health suffer when the spirituality of the order or congregation has not been interiorized and is therefore permanently and on some unconscious level is in opposition with one's own goals and behavior? Even in that case we may ask, what is the task of those who give leadership in the religious community, what precisely should they foster, and how must they do it?

In the present situation of many western religious institutions one could more specifically ask: how can those in the leadership exercise spirituality in an aging community with few or no new vocations? Is not spirituality meant for those youngsters undergoing formation and training? In other words, is not spirituality rather a concern of the novitiate and the period of formation, while it is enough for the "settled" religious who are fully "in touch with things" to limit spirituality to the annual retreat and a few privileged moments of reflection and faith? Is it not true that with respect to spirituality the older members can "live off" the past, at the same time having a chance to catch up on what they have neglected for years? In other words, is not spirituality something for young people and young provinces, while old provinces, like old people, can on the one hand live off the past and on the other hand serve as resource persons to the researchers to the benefit of the young generation and new countries?

It is true that lived spirituality can never be tailor-made for others. However, we cannot turn our face away from creative forms and new initiatives, research and instruction, old and new interpretations and models. Of course, leading spiritual life is the obligation and belongs to the personal domain of every religious. No one can consider himself or herself exempt from this without ceasing to be a religious. This means that spiritual life inevitably is the responsibility of each and every member of the religious community. This responsibility ends only by death or the dissolution of the community. Until that time all those who hold offices of responsibility are accountable for their obligation to exercise spiritual leadership.

According to this view the spirituality of religious leadership cannot be considered as an additional luxury. Spirituality will

always be under pressure in less favorable circumstances, although as a result of it new possibilities may present themselves. A person, who is entrusted with the task of leading the order or congregation that demands him to occupy himself with cutting back structures, provisions and the care of the elderly, should try to develop a spiritual life that suits his situation. Leadership team normally consists of the more active members of the order or congregation. Does the task of serving an aging community require that its leader must personally train oneself in the spirituality of the aging people? More than the aging people themselves, those who are giving leadership should be aware that the time is approaching for them as well to stand in the same shoes that their elders are wearing for the time being. If one limits his/her leadership role merely to the caretaking activities of his/her religious institution, while the society and the Church at large demand greater involvement of the religious in their affairs (not so much to provide personnel, but to make available expertise and funds) attention should be paid. It is essential that those in charge, in the name of their order or congregation and on the basis of a matured consciousness of the charism that is peculiar to it, to spend their time and energy on the ecclesiastical and societal engagement. This is a new and intense form of experiencing and exercising the charism of the institution rather than undertaking a subtle flight to ensure one's own safe existence while no longer playing any role of significance in the Church and the society.

The problems and challenges faced by those giving religious leadership to the elderly and the impact of them on their spirituality are very much different from that of those who give leadership to young institutions and communities, where an opposite situation frequently prevails. There exists the danger of religious leadership losing itself in urgent tasks which flow from the necessity of forming structures for formation and training and the development of work and life situations. Here too, there is a temptation to concentrate, on the one hand, on external and material management, and on the other, on the creation of social and psychological conditions for the development of their young members. In both cases one has to pose the question concerning the spirituality of the religious leadership. How can those in leadership position grow in their spirituality while totally involved in urgent tasks? The essential trait of the spirituality of religious leadership is above all fidelity to the fundamental values of the religious life. Situations that demand total attention and time to external affairs obstruct favorable conditions for the improvement in spiritual life which should, in fact, be the characteristic feature of religious leadership. The religious life unfolds when an inner journey is given external form.

Great care and attention should be taken so that the spiritual journey of individuals and communities may not easily be overshadowed by the demands of the endeavors in their practical life. Spiritual leadership should become an example to others who are in search for a healthy balance.

Persons in religious leadership should give explicit attention to the spiritual health of fellow brothers or sisters. This means that the leadership needs to foster spiritual processes which make it possible for them to get closer to their religious vocation. It is easier for a leader to notice the explicit and perceptible external problems while dilemmas in the interiority and spirituality of people may not be always quite obvious. This is especially true when the older members uphold a culture in which one speaks about such matters only with a confessor or spiritual mentor. In a religious community spirituality is not just a private or individual concern. Therefore, the leadership is responsible for the spiritual growth of all the members and the subtle processes of interiorization of the shared spirituality. What we experience now in the west, the avalanche of scandals of sexual abuse, is the aftermath of an unjustifiable individualization and confidentiality. The interiorization of spirituality was easily replaced by convenient external adaptation and appreciated conduct. The advancement of spirituality by the religious leadership was easily reduced to the promotion of "knowledge" through fresh studies and the retrieval and renewal of one's own tradition, and to the organization of possibilities for spiritual deepening. When those in charge of spiritual accompaniment failed to warn and guide those who undertook intense and sometimes shocking trails by which people on the one hand sought to free themselves from immature and oppressive forms of spirituality which they have been mistakenly talked into by others or by themselves, or on the other hand, they embarked on a search for the uniqueness of their own religious vocation in a manner which still has to be invented, and ended up in blind alleys of no return.

How is it possible to pay attention to spiritual progress in a community of senior members, who as a result of the cessation of certain activities and bouts with illness and death, find themselves with nothing to do? These religious brethren need to be assisted to discover their vocation in a new way because they can no longer escape into activities and effort for others, into achievements and the appreciation they received from them. However, another crucial question also emerges, should religious leadership confine itself to giving attention and care to the sick and the dying, or do current leaders bear a special responsibility to foster and call for new

spiritual processes among these aging people? Is aging a horrible phase of dismantlement after a fruitful life, or does it create hitherto-unknown chances to experience one's own spirituality radically and on a deeper level, and to translate one's own charism in a new way in this radically changing phase of life? In fact, often aging people, in a way that is peculiarly their own, undertake a process of recovering the sources of their own spirituality in circumstances which were absolutely unknown before. In this phase of life, the religious leadership must see to it that no one has any reason to complain and that physical and material care is perfectly organized. People, who undergo these painful forms of processing grief, should be comforted by the leaders through their greater closeness and listening ears. Above all the task of superiors is to see to it that aging fellow brothers or sisters be aided in accepting this new spiritual challenge consciously and maturely and thus grow into the fullness of their religious vocation. Is it right from the part of superiors to permit the older members of the community to slowly sink into eternal sleep as in this final phase of life they remain stuck in the same state of the spirituality of their youth or middle age and to the old habits which were so soothing for them? Or should they be creative and foster the idea that older people should take a fresh look at themselves, at their vocation, and at unforeseen challenges to the spirituality from which they have drawn hope and energy throughout their life? Should not superiors, in an intense way, promote the ideal that seniors should become ever younger spiritually? This is not a totally an unrealistic wish. On account of the experience of having nothing to do (being left with "empty hands") they can be gradually freed from every form of curving back upon themselves. As a result they can become ever freer to accept the ultimate implications of their religious vocation. In the case of many religious, aging is an amazing development toward a really mature spirituality. Such a development will not occur accidentally, but on the basis of foundations laid at some time in the past. It is the task of the religious leadership to foster such a development. It is possible that many possibilities and chances are remaining unutilized. It is a true closeness that is required of the religious leadership and one should not readily confuse it with a demand for an affective and caring presence because people are afraid of this step into the dark.

The leadership of an aging community must resist the temptation to lose itself in excessive care, while that of a young community must not lose itself in the solicitous creation of possibilities for self-development. In the history of the religious life enthusiasm and the success of rapid growth have always been dangers which led to external conformism than to the interiorization of spirituality.

One should build the house on a strong foundation with the required depth and should not be content with quantity and external show which evoke the appearance of "success". Again, emerges the crucial question: how can religious leadership be practiced in such a way that it is expressed in fidelity to the basic values of the religious life? How can one progressively become religious through a "detached" exercise of leadership and thereby become leaders having the transparency of an intensely experienced religious life?

### **The Characteristics of the Spirituality of Religious Leadership**

Hidden behind this seemingly simple question is a host of questions which for us constitute a challenge to reflect upon. I shall attempt to answer the question "how those in positions of leadership in orders and congregations, can foster the lived spirituality of the religious entrusted to their care" on the basis of reflection on the term spirituality? For this purpose I will proceed from the working definition of spirituality as it has been designed at the Titus Brandsma Institute at Nijmegen (Waaijman, 1992, 2002) which reads as follows: *Spirituality is transformation in God*. On the basis of this definition I will try to reflect on the role of religious leadership in relation to the spirituality of the religious.

1. In the first place "God" presents himself in the sphere of one's personal life as the Unconditional Transcendent or Absolute, who touches a person. God attracts people or sets them in motion. That always happens "from the other side," as Dag Hammarskjöld (1988) puts it. That is, it happens suddenly and without mediation as an absolute and unconditional claim or invitation. This "touch" takes place from without or from within, is bound neither to place or time, nor to human patterns of ideas. It manifests itself as an ever-receding track, is free from all fixations and resistant to every previously posited limitation and is therefore experienced as the suspension and "annihilation" of every human perspective. The Unconditional who is encountered tolerates no delay and inevitably evokes the reaction of an unconditional life. In that sense spirituality is the ground, the receptive space, in which the Hidden One can assert himself and be heard.

When we reflect on the spirituality of religious leadership, it is obvious that giving leadership must itself should originate in an encounter with the divine reality. A community cannot properly advance on the path towards its religious vocation unless this vocation is experienced as a movement towards a higher spiritual level. This experience is sparked by the unconditional divine claim



which underlies the personal religious vocation of those giving leadership as well as fellow brothers or sisters. When religious leadership confines itself to perfect organization and pure management and ignores the essential nature of one's religious calling, that is, openness to the voice of God, it reduces this community in practice to something purely mundane. Community as people's communion with each other and as a human organization is something very good and desirable. But in a religious community people are not brought together by friendship or common interests. Within the evangelical context only an unconditional "attachment" would establish real communion. The unconditional attachment forms the center of the religious community. People first of all share this sense of being moved by God with each other and on that basis friendship springs up. Giving leadership to a religious community requires great sensitivity to the layer of being deeply moved by God and the skill to see it at work in people.

Despite a fundamental readiness and good will on the part of the leaders, being sensitive to the divine layer in another person is not that easy, because these leaders themselves have undergone a marked development in their religious experience and their spiritual concepts. Consequently, they sometimes sense within themselves powerful resentment towards certain expressions which for them may sound too immature in their reference to God. They have grown up in and been shaped by a critical attitude toward a devotional, ascetic, and dogmatic religious culture. Though they are contemporaries, the leaders and the members of a religious community sometimes live in totally different worlds. In that case a temptation may arise to offer (or in subtle ways to impose) one's own language and ideas (possibly secularized and critical of society) to other as a valid alternative to that which they hold on. In so doing, a person replaces one religious thought system or worldview with another, while the Ineffable absolutely eludes every attempt to human definition, even that of the religious leadership. Drawn along in the tracks of the ever-receding, we can only stutter as we search for words. Although we may believe we have arrived at clear concepts and formulations, all our talks of God are still by definition imperfect and ambiguous. However well-intended, the propagation of an enlightened and modern religiosity may rob people of their roots in the tradition and of their contact with moments of intense sense of being moved by God. Religious leadership must foster religious growth and the deepening of one's spirituality, but if we may no longer speak in our own language and images about God, how then can they teach us continually "to forsake God for God's sake" (Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 13*).

The religious life is never a closed system or a world of safe ideas which gives us status and something to hold onto. Ever renewed, we need to forsake the God whom we ourselves have invented, who coincides with our own spiritual experience. God who defeats all the logic and language of our own relates us to a Center outside ourselves. When we throw in our lot with God, we inevitably get ever farther away from home. In speaking of the Ineffable, modern "secularized" linguistic puritanism is just as dangerous as the moral and ascetic perfectionism of the past. Instead of dragging religious out of a fixation upon themselves, their incessant self-preoccupation, by relating them to the irreducible otherness of the Unconditional, we leave them ever more stuck within themselves. God breaks through all frameworks so that we never really know where we will end up. This leads to the danger that we will fixate on our own credibility and the relevance of our life form. Since this was always one of the dangers of the religious life, it is precisely what our religious leadership should fortify the religious against.

It is of great importance for the religious leadership to help the community by challenging them to move continuously forward from the known to the unknown realms of the divine revelation. This is possible only through a personal intimacy of every religious with God. Superiors should keep a respectful distance from it. However, it is part of the responsibility of the religious leadership to persist in confronting religious with their own vocation and to challenge them to continue their inward journey toward ever-unknown distant horizons. For this purpose the people in charge need not approach or accompany them all personally. But they must create the conditions which make this inward journey possible. These conditions include observable forms of religious culture such as liturgy, formation, buildings, institutions, and others. These cultural forms need not be so structured as to be soothing and comfortable, corresponding to the personal needs of the religious and to the present state of development of the person (Superiors need not accept all sorts of excuses, such as "I am not yet ready for the liturgy," or "for the time being I'd rather not speak about God, because I can't do anything with that concept." However true such statements may be as a description of experience, they fail to do justice to the absolute divine claim which constitutes the basis for a religious vocation). On the contrary, these religious institutions must be structured so as to make religious restless in the face of the unremitting confrontation with the Ineffable. They must not ensconce the religious in a safe haven of their own - regardless of whether it is traditional piety or a progressive struggle for freedom - but expose them to the merciless interior workings of the Unconditional who ever and again

presents himself in ways that are totally different from what we expect. Religious leadership bears great responsibility for these forms of religious architecture, not in the sense that (as in the past) it must impose them on the community, but because it has been chosen to give creative and stimulating leadership to a common search. The religious culture of the community can never be left to the free enterprise of the individual's experience as that spontaneously and haphazardly presents itself. When superiors refrain from guiding the formation of a religious culture (however thankless such a task may be) they have in fact tacitly decided on a shutdown of the order or the congregation.

Religious leadership, on the one hand, should see to it that this architecture is in fact the expression of the lived spirituality of the religious. Consequently superiors must be in continual dialogue with practicing religious, listening to their experience and struggles. On the other hand, they must be conscious that religious architecture shapes experience, gives focus to it, and opens up avenues of discovering, in ever new ways, the face of the Invisible. The fact that the religious architecture is fundamentally different from individual and personal experience, that is, from its otherness, not only constitutes a form of alienation in the sense that this culture - and time-bound forms do not fit present day experience, hence constitutes a violation of the spiritual health of the individual. On the positive side, this distance (in a Freudian sense) creates the optimal frustration needed for individuals to develop into psychological and spiritual maturity. When religious leadership bears responsibility for the adherence of the religious to their vocation, it must be careful not to make them sick by insisting on all sorts of needless frustrations which have no other meaning than that they are repetitions of what used to be, but must also see to it that the architecture of the community continually challenges them to step outside of themselves in order to encounter the other. The purpose of religious leadership is not to soothe, not even to be reelected, but to ensure the continued 'radicalness' of the religious life. Perhaps we have to say that in many countries the great problem of the religious life is not the shortage of vocations but that many religious have forgotten that they themselves are the vocation. The truth is that when religious fully exemplify the radicalness of their vocation, there is vocation and that in abundance. Real vocation from God either exists or does not exist, is heard or refused, but can never be the object of human calculations, statistics, or predictions! A vocation is not counted but heard! Inasmuch as a divine claim is not an object of human observation the response of people or the lack of it definitely also

eludes our arithmetic or models of calculation. Vocation is not a matter of quantity but of quality which is mirrored in unconditional receptivity to the divine claim which fundamentally transforms a human life.

It is not up to the religious leadership to judge whether people think or speak correctly about God; its task, rather, is to foster the spirituality which breaks through one's own logic by its reference to the unconditional reality of God. The result of this is that the fixations and mental fortresses which shield us from God's claim upon us are blown apart. Spirituality, accordingly, forms the atmosphere, the space and receptivity in which the Hidden One can assert Himself and be heard. For its space spirituality needs institutions where the encounter between God and humans (an encounter no one can organize in advance) can take place. Religious must be continually challenged and thrown into confusion in order not to become deaf and blind to the Unseen and Unheard by ensconcing themselves in their own comforting ideas, regardless of whether these ideas are traditional or modern, secularized or critical of society. Nevertheless, superiors may not canonize their own radicalness, nor impose the heroics of a moral choice on the members of their community (somewhat as a membership card proving they belong to the group which has the clout and knows what it is talking about). This would only be a new fixation, which keeps a person from growing up. This would of course be a modern version of the earlier submissiveness which subjects one person to another without contributing to the "obedience" (from the Latin *oboedire*, to listen to) we owe to the voice of God.

In the second place, on the level of the religious community the unconditional reality of God presents itself in the form of *values*. The consequences triggered in the life of religious by the divine sense of being moved, after all, are captured and mediated in formulations, modes of conduct, institutions or spiritual models. The religious experience of the founders is distilled in the charism of the order or congregation which as a result becomes a socially accessible form for new members. Thus, on the one hand, spiritual tradition becomes a lifestyle, an atmosphere with a peculiar redolence of its own, which appeals to the subjective intuitiveness of the individual who is called; on the other hand, this tradition takes the form of a spiritual architecture or value system which as an objectivizable and registrable reality that can be passed down in texts and testimonies to which new members can in turn be introduced by processes of formation. In this manner the value

system of an order or congregation can be sustained and ever further developed by the lived spirituality of its members, but at the same time it presents itself as an objective culture one can opt for and appropriate, and in which it can gradually grow into spiritual maturity. It is precisely these values which are normative for the development of the religious architecture of a community. In its shared value system a "community" becomes visible as a spiritual space. The religious leadership, accordingly, bears explicit responsibility for the authentic perception and practice of these spiritual values and needs to create the right conditions for them. Naturally this is impossible if leadership figures have not immersed themselves over a long time and in depth in the central values of the religious community, have not personally appropriated them, and have not, by a process of faith communication, made these values into a common point of departure of their religious leadership. Those who are called to positions of religious leadership need to be leaders and models in the shaping and deepening of the spirituality of the community.

Also, in order to be able to speak about spirituality, superiors must see to it that the values which are handed down and appropriated do not become an ideological system that offers a place of security in which people can make themselves at home and is used as a fortification against unconscious needs which are inconsistent with or contrary to the values confessed. It is *not* the primary task of the religious leadership to make certain that the value system remains intact as a soothing factor and that the ideological identity of the order or congregation is preserved, but that these values serve as the space in which God can be encountered. This space, in the nature of the case, belongs to no one, since we can never use God to champion our causes. While values mark off the playing field, they do not exempt anyone from playing the game. The concern of superiors, accordingly, should not be the preservation of common values as static data; their business is to see to it that these central values will present themselves in the life of the religious as an unconditional appeal, hence as a deregulating factor which exposes a person to God's transforming power. The task of the religious leadership is not to ensure the physical continuance of the community but to preserve the interior vocation in every person who is confronted with God's unconditional claim. The issue, after all, is the space in which God can be encountered, not human togetherness, intimacy, social and psychological well-being or the exercise of power. Religious leadership needs to vouch for the space which it cannot create, preserve, or organize, since it originates only from within God's gratuitous claim upon us. Religious men

and women are exclusively in the hands of God and religious leadership has to promote and safeguard the awareness of this divine reality.

True spirituality is system-resistant; it can be defined as a countermovement. This is not so much the case because it takes shape in ecclesiastical or social protest movements but because authentic spiritual values consistently subvert all human systems. Granted, true spirituality takes shape in the experience of concrete people, but it derives from the shocking and 'deregulative' touch of God. This oppositional character applies as much to the religious community itself as to the ecclesiastical and societal context. True spirituality in an authentic religious community is never a safe haven, a soothing system, a "conservative" bulwark where humans are in charge. On the contrary, it is the open space in which humans are mercilessly exposed to the divine logic which turns everything upside down. Although the spirituality of a religious community takes shape as an objective and phenomenal culture and through tangible social structures, it is essentially an anti-structure as Victor Turner would label it.

In spiritual values, therefore, there is constant tension between the logic of the unconditional love of God (which asserts itself so forcefully that it deprives the human perspective of its validity) and the human experience which permits itself to be carried along in the tracks of the Unconditional and yet remains itself. God, who touches and disorients people and nevertheless keeps himself inevitably out of our grasp, at the same time, asserts himself within the framework of human thought and speech. The Ineffable, after all, is discussed in the framework of the human language which attempts to express this inexpressible experience in descriptions of the spiritual journey and of spiritual values within the framework of the order or the congregation as a school of spirituality, within the celebration of the liturgy, within processes of formation, and others, Religious leadership has the responsibility to organize these objective and socially accessible forms in the interest of the community, but at the same time has to make certain that these forms remain an open (and blank) space in which the voice of the Ineffable remains audible.

The need for security and rest, pious inwardness or sense of community, a clear engagement in pastorate or liberation struggle, may never persuade religious to organize their life according to the bourgeois logic of individual responsibility, personal achievement, success and societal relevance. However central these values may be in our modern culture, in following this logic we

make ourselves the cause of our own existence. This is perhaps understandable and warranted, but if religious leadership wants to be responsible for the authentic perception and practice of the religious vocation, it must continue to stir up unrest and call attention to the deregulative claims of the Unconditional. Leadership may never acquiesce in the status quo of the religious experience people have acquired, but must continue to foster the growth of that experience into spiritual maturity. Leaders, accordingly, must see to it that within the current individualized and fragmented context no single group succeeds in seizing control (for their own ends) of the spirituality of either order or congregation, and that spirituality does not become the arena of an internal power struggle. On the contrary: they must create the conditions necessary to ensure that the absolute claim of the Unconditional will affect the position and security of all humans without distinction. Religious leadership cannot force people to continue to grow but must certainly create the conditions that are conducive to continuing spiritual growth.

### Subject

When speaking of lived spirituality, we have to observe that it is always sustained by a person or group. Even though the initiation of spirituality does not start with ourselves but with God who, as unconditional reality and in an unfathomable way, *starts* a relation and as the *source* of its intensity permeates everything, we must at the same time assert that this relation is always entered into with a living person existing in time and space. In interplay with the two other poles of spirituality, that is, God who “touches” people and the values which give direction to human experience, the human person introduces himself or herself as the third pole. Spiritual experience is colored and shaped by the concrete history of this person as it is present in this person’s consciousness and inwardly directs this person from within his or her psyche. It is always a concrete human being who is touched, drawn, and moved by God and who, based on this appeal, enters into the encounter with God and subsequently commits him/herself.

Religious leadership is responsible for the order or congregation as a school of spirituality (the spiritual culture and spiritual architecture of the life form in question) but cannot and may not bear responsibility for the interior life journey of individual religious. It may not demand obedience with respect to the lived spirituality, for that would lead to submission to the arbitrary insights or spiritual experiences of those temporarily in charge. As was the case so often in the past, spirituality would then become a

straightjacket, which prevents rather than fosters growth. Those in positions of leadership may only be people “who walk ahead of us” in faith and in the authentic perception and practice of the spirituality of the order of the congregation - never tyrants.

It belongs to the specific charism of the religious leadership of the order or congregation, the unique vocation of leaders to have so interiorized that spirituality that they are instinctively able to inspire religious to enter into the confrontation with the unconditional reality of God and to endure the tension of that engagement. As for the persons entrusted to their care, leaders must in turn entrust them to their own spiritual journey and the guidance of God. In a religious community it is possible to give guidance only on the basis of an unshakable trust in God’s guidance. The spiritual structure of the vow of obedience is solely aimed at making sure that superiors are obliged to foster a state of affairs in which the will of God will take shape in the life of every religious belonging to their community. This is true even when the will of God (tested in a careful and critical process of discernment) impels this religious in a direction which is unrecognizable or incomprehensible to those in charge. Although this is a thankless task, religious leadership will have to entrust religious to their own destiny, their own confrontation with the Unconditional, and their own spiritual journey. This is not to say that all individuals can go their own way and act in light of their own needs and insights, for religious live under the claims of their vocation. Freedom from compulsion can be far removed from inner freedom. It is the task of the religious leadership to talk in a most penetrating way to religious about their own vocation and original inspiration. This mode of speaking can be very painful and confrontive but this makes religious free to remain faithful to themselves in situations in which the original layer of their religious vocation threatens to be swamped.

Religious leadership is called upon to organize a great many things, but the subject of spirituality, that is, the person who in a slow process proceeds, step by step, to interiorize this spirituality, cannot be organized. The house can be built but the inhabitants can only genuinely reside there when God touches them (suddenly and unexpectedly). The subject of spirituality will often be imperfect and immature, and he or she will perhaps not (or only in part) meet the demands posed in light of the central values of the spirituality. Nevertheless, it is not the task of religious leadership to lay down the rules for a spiritual perfectionism or for an ideal religious community which makes a strong impression on bystanders and interested parties. This temptation may exist but such solutions remain stuck in fine appearances and undermine



the spiritual health of the religious group instead of fostering it. In relation to the subject of spirituality, accordingly, the religious leadership of a community has only a limited task. It can create favorable conditions and foster growth, but it cannot extort or demand, nor can it take over from individuals the process of interiorizing the lived spirituality.

### **A Relational Process**

Spirituality is realized in the interaction among the three poles listed above. God presents himself in his unconditionality as "touch" and "personal address" in relation to *this* person. He or she in turn becomes conscious of this unconditional appeal, reacts to it, and "opts for this being chosen." This consciousness is subsequently expressed in a system of values which on the one hand is handed to the person in question and which s/he then gradually appropriates and interiorizes. Thus spirituality occurs "in the center," that is, as a vital relation and incessant dialogue among the three poles. Spirituality is not "something" demonstrable, but the "way" or "journey" one travels. Often this journey takes place in the dark and in an unknown country (beyond the boundaries of one's own safe world). Spirituality is the lived relation to God and the shaping of life in light of this relation. By means of spiritual values and evidences of spiritual experience a personal life is transformed in all its strata. Religious leadership must develop eyes and ears to be able to perceive this subtle spiritual process. To this end the leaders themselves must live spiritually and expose themselves to the indissoluble field of tension that is integral to spirituality. They themselves must travel the journey which they want to foster in others. Good leadership gradually grows in the direction of the capacity to "look" the spiritual process in religious into being, without feeling the need to interfere with it. In that sense I would wish to say (in my terminology) that good religious leadership is in essence contemplative, because it learns to "see" how God "works" in people. In that case superiors do not merely give guidance to the observable and "organizable" exterior of the religious community but acquire the ability to see the things that are invisible and undoable because it lies totally outside of our reach and does not fit within the boundaries of our human logic. Good religious leadership, therefore, liberates persons and gives them access to their own deepest layers, that is, the layers of God.