

HMWN Radio Maria - Book of the Month

Book review for January - February 2009

Virtuous Leadership: An Agenda for Personal Excellence

Allan Bloom makes this comment in *The Closing of the America Mind*: “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely sure of; almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students’ reaction: they will be uncomprehending. . . The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so [the students] see it. They have all been equipped with this framework early on, and it is the modern replacement for the inalienable natural rights that used to be the traditional American grounds for a free society.”

In *Virtuous Leadership: An Agenda for Personal Excellence*, the author Alexandre Havard outlines a plan for those who want to pursue excellence in leadership. In terms of good leadership, Havard takes Bloom’s observation about university students’ view of truth in the post-modern world and turns it on its head: there is a prescriptive truth about great leadership; it’s never relative. Good and true leaders are not free to do what they want when they want. In fact, leadership is a principled discipline shaped by exercising moral and theological virtues. A good leader begins with a plan to live a more virtuous life; this always includes being ready to serve others and help them improve along the way to excellence. True leadership is virtue in action.

Havard says that his ideas have been inspired by Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* and by Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei. In the Russian writer, he sees a witness to truth and one who fought valiantly against the evils of Communism. In the Catholic priest and saint, he admires the challenge proposed with the words from Matthew, “be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect.” The theme that animates much of the book is that through virtuous leadership man can do a great deal to better his life, but true excellence in that role is achieved only with God’s grace.

The book is divided into five sections. The first two parts deal with the essential virtues needed for virtuous leadership: prudence, courage, self-control, justice, humility and magnanimity. This is followed by sections which look at leadership as self-fulfillment; nobody is innately a leader. Leadership develops from virtuous character training skills which need to be learned and applied to life. The final section addresses how Christian leaders, as well as those who are not Christian, can further infuse their actions with the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity.

Christian leadership must by definition connect to the transcendent if its actions are to be sanctioned and blessed with sanctifying grace. At this level, the virtuous leader wants to lead by the willingness to help others in order to better mankind while trying to do the will of God. Leadership, viewed this way, becomes a vocation to a higher calling.

The essential point is that there is nothing relative or selfish in living out virtuous leadership. Leaders need to make sacrifices in order to change their lives and become virtuous. This takes place when leaders use their free will to make determined choices. Havard stresses this point in Chapter three, titled "Just Say No." He says the first step in becoming an excellent leader is to have the strength of character to know oneself and understand the world around us. The good leader must learn to say no to egoism, to cynicism, to materialism, to individualism ("doing your own thing") and no to political correctness. Here's how the author puts it: "Human freedom is not liberation from external influences, which is impossible in any case. Rather, it is a question of 'freely' choosing the influences you 'freely' choose to submit to. One who chooses wisely has a chance of becoming a magnificent human being." (Page. 49)

A leader must strive to build an objective truth. A good leader cannot let whims and preferences get in the way of living and creating an environment where virtuous living is promoted and lived. Letting people be lead by their egos and greed will eventually result in some individuals taking advantage of others. According to Havard, when virtues are lived, they shape character and provide the formation for good leaders. The only power that a true leader has is through a preparedness to serve others and God.

This service relationship will give rise to a sense of trust. It's an approach which aims to do away with the usual conflict that one finds between leaders and those that are lead. Its goal is to foster greater co-operation because the authentic leader cares for others, has their welfare at heart and wants everyone to become better persons by striving to live virtuously. (Just think how far this leadership idea would go both in our personal lives and as we try to resolve the current global financial crisis.)

At present, the world has been trying to deal with both a financial and moral crisis. There has been no shortage of opinions from leaders, in both business and government, trying to explain and correct the huge mess. Virtuous Leadership is a much needed and refreshing antidote to the bromides being offered. As it maps out and defines the essence of leadership, this book proves all too well that a Christian approach, in dealing with the tough issues of the day, can offer very practical and valuable solutions. Ironically, Havard's book is the ultimate self-help book on leadership even though its transcendent message is a call to serve others, if we want to truly help build the common good. Verbally massaging ourselves with self-help leadership books, even those found on the bestseller list, that indulge in self-referential rhetoric will not produce great leaders.

Virtuous Leadership should be mandatory reading at all the international business schools. The book's contents are healthy food to nurture student souls and minds as they prepare for the world of work. I urge The Schulich and Rotman School of business here in Toronto to include this book as part of their curriculum. This is important because students who are now taking courses in the MBA programs will need the required skills and ethics to become excellent future leaders.

Lastly, leadership, for Havard, ought to be seen not as something deserved, but as a gift like divine grace. The award winning Canadian author, Margaret Visser, in her latest book *The Gift of Thanks* makes a number of observations about grace which aptly help to describe virtuous leadership. In her words: “Grace includes acts of ‘ordinary’ kindness such as forbearance, disinterested encouragement of others, taking someone else’s part and not because it is in one’s own interest to do so, making decisions out of confidence in another’s worth, opening oneself to somebody not ‘one of us’. These and thousands like them are daily acts that call forth gratitude, the reflection of grace received. They go to create the ‘fabric’ of decent social relations, helping to ‘knit’ societies together.” (Page 379)

Havard’s book argues that excellent leadership rests in sharing this gift of grace by giving tirelessly of self to others. Here’s a recent example of this ideal. After 12 years, the Headmaster, Hal Hannaford left Royal St. George College, a private Anglican school for boys. During those years, according to an article in the *Toronto Star* (Jan.1, 2009), Hannaford tried to create a Georgian culture of compassion, honesty and respect. One teacher said that he had “an ability to bring out the best in those around him and make them feel valued.” I think Havard would agree that this is a sign of true and virtuous leadership.

In the end, it’s also realizing that everything, including self-fulfillment and superior leadership, is a gift from God. If you’re a parent, a community leader, a business or government leader or anyone who is remotely thinking or now exercising a leadership role, I highly recommend *Virtuous Leadership* as required reading.

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