

The World Seen From Rome

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INTERVIEW

Leadership for Everyone

Interview With Author Alexandre Havard

By Miriam Díez i Bosch

ROME, DEC. 19, 2007 (Zenit.org).- Leaders are not born, they are trained. And leadership is not something reserved to the elite, but is the vocation of many. These are the ideas promoted by the director of the European Center for Leadership Development.

Alexandre Havard further thinks that the more deeply we live the virtues, the more likely it is that we will change culture.

His [center's](#) flagship executive program "Virtuous Leadership" makes the classical virtues the basis for personal and professional excellence.

Havard has just published "Virtuous Leadership: An Agenda for Personal Excellence" (Scepter, 2007). In this interview with ZENIT, he explains why leadership is accessible to so many.

Q: Are leaders born or trained?

Havard: Leadership is a question of character. Character is something we can shape and mold and strengthen. We strengthen our character through the habitual practice of sound moral habits, called ethical or human virtues. Virtues are qualities of the mind, the will and the heart. We acquire them through our own efforts. The very effort to acquire them is an act of leadership.

Character is not temperament. Temperament is innate, a product of nature. It may aid the development of some virtues and hinder others. If I am passionate by nature, I may find it relatively easy to practice courage, and if I am reticent, I may find courage a real challenge. Yet it is precisely because of my defects of temperament that I am so keenly aware of the need to struggle to overcome them. In this way defects are converted into moral strengths.

The virtues stamp character on our temperament so that temperament ceases to dominate us. If I lack virtues, I will be a slave to my temperament. Virtues regulate temperament. The impulsive person, inspired by the virtue of prudence, becomes more reflective. The anxious and hesitant person, inspired by the same virtue, is impelled to stop procrastinating and act. Virtues stabilize our personalities, banishing extreme manifestations.

Temperament need not be an obstacle to leadership. The real obstacle is lack of character, which quickly leaves us drained of moral energy and quite incapable of leading. There are those who think one must be born to lead -- that some have a knack for it and some do not, that leadership is largely a matter of temperament combined with experience. Not everyone can be a Roosevelt or a de Gaulle or a Churchill, they think. Nothing could be further from the truth. Leadership is not reserved to the elite. It is the vocation not of the few but the many.

Heads of state and schoolteachers, captains of industry and housewives, military chiefs of staff and health care workers -- all exercise leadership. People expect them to do the right thing, to be men and women of character and virtue, to be motivated by a magnanimous vision for all those in their charge. And great is the disappointment when they fail. Because leaders must be virtuous to be real leaders, and because virtue is a habit acquired through practice, we say, "Leaders are not born: They are trained."

Q: What does it mean that character is virtue in action?

Havard: We mean that virtues are more than simple values, they are real dynamic forces -- notice the word's Latin root, "virtus," meaning strength or power. Each, when practiced habitually, progressively enhances one's capacity to act. Here is what each of the six virtues under consideration in my book enhances the ability to do:

Magnanimity: to strive for great things, to challenge myself and others;

Humility: to overcome selfishness and serve others habitually;

Prudence: to make right decisions;

Courage: to stay the course and resist pressures of all kinds;

Self-control: to subordinate passions to the spirit and fulfillment of the mission at hand;

Justice: to give every individual his due.

Leaders are magnanimous in their dreams, visions and sense of mission; in their capacity for hope, confidence and daring; in their enthusiasm for the effort required to bring their work to a successful conclusion; in their propensity for using means proportionate to their goals; in their capacity to challenge themselves and those around them. The leader's magnanimous vision is directed to the service of others-- his family members, clients and colleagues, his country, and the whole of humanity.

This noble ambition to serve is one of the fruits of the beautiful virtue of humility. Virtues do not take the place of professional competence, but are part and parcel of it and substantially so. I might have a degree in psychology and work as a consultant, but if I lack prudence, I will have a hard time giving my clients sound advice. Perhaps I have an MBA [masters in business administration] and am a senior executive for a major corporation. Very good, but if I lack courage, my ability to lead in the face of opposition is already compromised. I may have a degree in theology and serve as a minister, but if I am devoid of magnanimity, I will stagnate as a person and as a believer, and will lead my flock into the same condition. Professional competence entails more than the mere possession of technical or academic knowledge. It includes the capacity to use this knowledge well for some fruitful purpose.

Q: Is every human being capable of acquiring and growing in virtue?

Havard: Not everyone can become president or prime minister or win the Nobel Prize for Literature or play center field for the New York Yankees. But everyone can grow in virtue. Leadership excludes no one. A virtue is a habit. It is acquired by repetition. If we repeatedly act courageously, we will eventually do so habitually. If we repeatedly act with humility, it will soon become our habitual way of behaving. Childhood and adolescence have a big impact on our later choices. Our parents should influence us to discern good from evil and choose the former.

But upbringing alone does not determine character. It is not uncommon that children raised in the same home come to use their freedom differently and thus turn out to be

very different kinds of people. Ronald Reagan, for example, was utterly different from his brother Neil, two years his senior. They made different choices. Ronald set forth to conquer the world. Neil stayed at home in Illinois and worked in the insurance business. Ronald was an idealist. Neil's concerns were more mundane. Freedom springs eternal and assures that we continue to grow even after we have entered adulthood. It is not unusual that grown-ups develop a longing to live virtuously and decide to acquire what may have passed them by in childhood.

Like temperament, our cultural environment may help or hinder the development of certain virtues. In a society given over to sensuality, it can be hard to cultivate the virtues of self-control and courage. In one that tends to produce people who are reticent and disinclined to say what they really think, it can be hard to practice sincerity. Where people recognize only empirical data as the basis for belief, it is hard to practice prudence.

It can be hard to live virtuously in today's cultural context, but it is by no means impossible. The ability to say "no" gives us great power. We are free to decide the extent to which we will allow the culture to affect us. If we opt for virtue, we will be able to take what is good and reject what is bad.

The more deeply we live the virtues, furthermore, the more likely it is that we will change the culture, rather than being content with merely shielding ourselves from its more pernicious effects. We must choose virtue -- freely, consistently, joyously.

We have freely chosen to be what we are. Vice or virtue? It's up to us. Virtue implies and depends on freedom. It cannot be forced on us. It is something we freely choose. If we embrace the virtues and practice them assiduously, the path to leadership will be open. Leadership begins when we use our freedom responsibly.

Q: How does your program help participants to achieve personal excellence through the cultivation of such virtues as magnanimity, prudence, justice, courage and self-control?

Havard: First, we insist on the anthropological unity of virtue, that is, on the unity of reason, will and heart. For reason, will and the heart enable us to do the three things vital to growing in virtue: Contemplating it so as to perceive its intrinsic beauty and desire it strongly -- a matter of the heart, acting virtuously habitually -- a matter of the will, and practicing all the virtues simultaneously with special attention given to prudence -- a matter of reason.

Second, we examine the concrete steps to make meaningful progress in living the virtues. These include: a method for assessing one's own behavior, values and priorities - - i.e., examination of conscience; guidance from a qualified spiritual director; devising and conscientiously living a "plan of life."

In the examination of conscience we are seeking insight into where we stand in our daily quest for personal excellence. It has nothing to do with psychoanalysis or navel gazing. If done persistently and well, it should give rise to a sincere change of heart. It is future-oriented because it impels us to improve tomorrow what we failed to do well today. The exam is intended to weed out our vices and defects so that we remain in top spiritual condition for pursuing our quest.

Spiritual direction helps us overcome our tendency to go easy on ourselves. A director will remove our illusions and give us orientation in our daily quest. Without his expert guidance, we risk spinning our wheels. The first time we heard our own voice on a tape recorder, we probably could not believe it was us. The realization that that is how we sound to others very likely came as a shock. Just as we may be shocked at seeing a candid photo that shows us as we really look. This salutary shock of recognition is what good spiritual direction provides. The director is the camera, the tape recorder, showing you to yourself as you really are.

Examination of conscience and spiritual direction are part and parcel of a larger "plan of life." It's a question of regular spiritual exercises throughout the day, mostly prayer and meditation -- conversation with God. In prayer, leaders acquire the light to decide prudently and the energy to act courageously. They purify their motives, affirm their values, and contemplate Christ, whose life they see as intimately bound up with their own.

In him they discover their destiny and vocation, and develop a deeper awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. The grace obtained in living a plan of life should spill over into the fulfillment of our ordinary responsibilities.

That means living each moment of the day heroically: rising punctually and not lingering in bed after the alarm goes off, working conscientiously without daydreaming or killing time; avoiding the temptation of doing the agreeable task first and putting off the one we don't like; finishing a job as well as possible; correcting subordinates -- charitably -- even if we find this hard; sticking to our scheduled time of prayer even if we are thoroughly distracted or have no taste for it and feel we are getting nothing out of it; being friendly to people we are not terribly fond of; smiling when it's the last thing we feel like doing;

putting up cheerfully with setbacks great and small; playing with the kids when we get home even if we're dead tired; eating what is put in front of us even if it's not to our liking; and generally being bearers of the light of Christ at all times and in all places.

If we have learned to do these things, we have achieved the greatest victory possible.