

Dutch and Belgian Leaders

Thank you so much for inviting me to talk with you today. I was always taught that before one talks one must listen. I have not listened to you, and learnt what you think, what language you use, what gives you joy and sorrow. And so forgive if it does not make sense to you. I hope that it will not be like when one of my brethren gave a talk in Chicago. When he sat down, the applause was minimal. He turned to the person beside him and said, 'I hope that it was not that bad.' The man replied, 'Oh I don't blame you at all. I just blame however asked you to come and speak in the first place!' So blame the organisers!

You have asked me to talk about leadership. It is difficult to be a leader today. For example in today's competitive world, leadership demands courageous decisions but we live in a society which is risk adverse. Our lives are governed by innumerable regulations which seek to minimise risk but also suppress creativity. We see dangers everywhere. A sixteen year British old boy wanted to buy tea spoons in a supermarket, but he was refused on the grounds that they might be used as weapons. Teaspoons!

Leadership is also difficult because we live in a globalised world, in which people of very different cultures are engaged in instant communication. The chances of misunderstanding are vast. The first time that I went to Latin America, my Spanish was almost non-existence. A bishop in Ecuador was under the impression that I was Irish and welcomed with a speech attacking the English. When someone pointed this out, he blushed deeply. I then began my first speech ever in Spanish by saying 'el obispo esta embarazado.' I thought that it meant that the bishop was embarrassed. Alas, it meant that he was pregnant.

Let me begin by sharing with you very briefly my experience of leadership which will probably be both similar and different from your own. I was Master of the Dominican Order for nine years, which is the length of a term and never renewed. We believe that no one should stay in office for too long!

We were founded 800 hundreds ago and we only re-elected a Master twice, to the best of my knowledge. Once was in the Middle Ages. He had an argument with the Pope. The Pope sacked him. The Dominicans prayed and the Pope died. So we re-elected the same friar! So there was a saying in the Middle Ages, 'Beware of the prayers of the Dominicans.' The other time was in the First World War.

The Dominicans have about 5000 priests, in 107 countries, running innumerable universities, schools, missions, parishes and so on. The General Council had fourteen members. When I was Master they were from fourteen nationalities and five continents. In the Dominican Family there are 30,000 sisters, 3000 contemplative nuns and about 200,000 lay Dominicans. So we are altogether about a quarter of a million people. Our tradition is also intensely democratic. We love debating issues and then voting!

Some of the cardinals in Rome found this hard to understand. The supreme authority in the Order is the General Chapter, meeting every three years for about a month. It is our parliament. It is a bit more effective than the British Parliament at the moment! So that is my experience of leadership: very international and very democratic.

So how can we exercise a leadership that is creative, that is not crushed by administration and management? How can we be brave leaders in a world which is risk adverse? I want to explore these questions by looking at the parable of the prodigal son. This may seem odd because it is about forgiveness and not leadership. But I hope that you will agree that it opens up some interesting questions about what it means to lead.

First of all let's listen to it as a whole, and then we shall look at some key moments.

¹¹ Then Jesus^[b] said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with^[c] the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'^[d] ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father^[e] said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

There was a man who had two sons.

It all sounds rather male. Where is the mother? What about the daughters? Probably the only women on the scene are the servants and perhaps the lamb! I don't think that this matters. The son is every child struggling to grow up The father is every parent trying to help the young live through crisis. The father is not at all patriarchal. He refuses to play the role of the macho male. In Rembrandt's

painting of the father, he has a masculine and a female hand. It is not a story about men but about how despite failure, a way forward is found. That is the role of leadership, always seeking the way forward.

The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living.

This is a full blown crisis. It is not just that his son wants to take his property. He is tearing the family apart. He is destroying the common venture that binds them together. He is undermining the community. How can the father keep the family together? Leaders care for the unity of the community.

The first characteristic creative leadership is being able to live through and beyond crisis. Human beings grow up and mature through crisis. We all begin with the crisis of being born, being expelled from the nice warm Jacuzzi of our mother's womb into the cold fresh air of the world. There is the crisis of giving up the mother's breast and learning to sit down at table as one of the family. There is the crisis of puberty, hormones flying all over the place, alarming changes to the body. The crisis of leaving home and making a life apart. And finally we all have to face the crisis of death. If we dare not face crises, we shall never grow up. Every crisis here is a sort of loss of a way of being alive so as to live more deeply, even death I believe.

For a Christian the greatest crisis is the Last Supper, when Jesus gathered his disciples on the night before he died. They were about to betray him, deny him and run away. Before him lay only suffering and death. There was no future it seemed. Three years ago I visited Syria. I stayed in a monastery just four kilometres from the frontline with Da'esh, ISIS. We were kept awake by gunfire, and the awareness of people so near who would love to cut off your head. The snoring! Then in the morning, we celebrated the Eucharist, which is the great sign that no crisis need be the end, as it was not for those disciples eating and drinking with Jesus before his death.

So we should not fear crises. They are inevitable. What matters is to live them fruitfully. I went on about this to the American Dominicans and they gave me a T Shirt which said, 'Have a good crisis!' Alas it seems to have shrunk and so I can no longer wear it!

So how does the father live through this crisis? He is calm. Notice that the father did not treat his son's departure as a dramatic event. He does not make a scene. He does not threaten him or offer to double his pocket money. Life goes on. When a young friar was recently elected as Prior of my community, I said to him that the only two important things were to love the brethren and keep calm.

I lived in Italy for nine years, and sometimes it was like an opera by Puccini! But for us Christians the great drama has already happened. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. One of the

ways in which we lead the community is by keeping calm whenever everyone else is getting dramatic and panicked. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran theologian, was imprisoned and murdered by the Nazis. Just before his death he wrote to an English bishop, 'the victory is certain'. Keep calm.

Let me tell you about a dramatic event when I was a young student friar. The Prior was a Scot called Fergus Kerr, a great theologian. The Priory in Oxford was attacked by a right wing group who resented our involvement in left wing causes, such as our promotion of anti-racist legislation. They set off a small explosive which went off at 2am, made a lot of noise and blew in all the windows. It woke up the whole community except the Prior. We all rushed to the front of the house. I was interested to discover what the brethren wore in bed! Pyjamas, boxer shorts, nothing! The police and the fire brigade came around. But where was the Prior? Finally the youngest friar was sent to wake him: 'Fergus, the priory has been attacked, wake up.' 'Is anyone dead?' 'No'. 'Is anybody wounded?' 'No'. 'Well, let me go to sleep and we will think about it in the morning'.

That was my first lesson in leadership! OK, the church has burnt down. Keep calm. The treasurer has run off with the money and one of the priests has had a sex change. No worries; Christ has risen from the dead.

And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and went to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced and kissed him.

When the son comes back, his father sees him from afar. He had been keeping an eye open. He knew that he would come back. He waited. He is patient. I must confess that this is one of my weaknesses. I find it hard to be patient, whether going through security at airports or coping with crises. When I had a problem with one of the brethren, my temptation was to want to deal with it immediately, to send off an immediate letter. Sometimes the secretary general would hold back a letter and ask me the next day, 'Are you sure you want this sent?' Being calmly patient is the essence of leadership. The philosopher Wittgenstein was asked what he would say to another philosopher. He replied, 'Take your time.' In a society which is dominated by the short term, the immediate, in which there is instant communication, leadership means thinking long term, being patient.

The father has confidence in this young person. He knows that he will come back. When St Dominic sent out his youngest friars to preach, barely after they had joined the Order, the Cistercians warned him that he would lose them. They would run away with wild women. Dominic replied, 'I know for

certain that my young men will go out and come back, will be sent out and will return; but your young men will be kept locked up and will still escape.¹ Leadership implies a confidence in the young who must be free to make mistakes and start again.

His son wants to grab the future. According to one scholar he is saying to his father, 'I cannot wait for you to die. I want the future now'. There is a sense in which we must give the young the future we cannot imagine, even though not necessarily by dying!

We must make space for the young to do what we cannot do or even imagine and be unlike us. We must let the present die so that something new can happen. I do not prepare the young Dominicans to take my place since the world in which they will operate will not be my world. They must be prepared to face a world which is only coming into existence.

Preaching at a solemn profession, our rugged Scottish Provincial, Ian Hislop OP, said, half jokingly, 'I am coming to the end of my religious life and you are now beginning yours. As I look back over my religious life, and it has been a long one, I think of all that I have laboured to build and to support. Often I have laboured hard to construct something, to leave some monument behind me, when, inevitably, some idiot has come along after me and torn down all that I have built and called it progress. So, I want to give you this piece of counsel, whatever schemes you may hatch, whatever plans you may formulate be sure of one thing, God will frustrate them!² '

Leadership includes giving the young the freedom to do and be what we cannot understand. We make space for the future.

In the world of administration, leadership is about control. Keeping your hands on the levers of power. Charles Taylor, the Canadian historian of ideas, has shown how after the Reformation, the whole of society was taken over by a secular culture of control. We see the emergence of the centralised state, the explosion of law, and in our days, the endless growth of health and safety. It has infected the Church too which became more and more centralised and controlled. At the heart of Pope Francis' leadership is undoing the mechanisms of control, reducing the power of the Vatican, giving responsibility to bishops' conferences, trusting synods to take decisions. Push power downwards.

Both the prodigal son and the father illustrate another aspect of leadership. Each takes the initiative in different ways. The prodigal son steps out to go and seek his father, and his father steps out to go and greet his son. The son does not wait to be reassured that his father will have him back. The father does

¹ ed. Simon Tugwell OP *Early Dominicans: selected writings* Ramsey N.J., 1982 p.91

² Sermon by Allan White OP *The Acts of the Provincial chapter of the English province of the Order of Preachers* Oxford 2000. p. 66

not wait until he has received the apology. Both step out towards each other. Leadership means being prepared to take the first step towards the other person.

Leadership means risking vulnerability. We must be the first ones to shed the strong image, We must be those who first say sorry, even if we happen to think that the other person has wronged us more than we have wronged him. We must step out front, climb out of the trenches, and expose ourselves to attack and criticism. So the real leader is unafraid to appear vulnerable.

For this leadership, son and father must both cast off their dignity. The son comes to the father not claiming the dignity of a son, happy to be one of the hired servants, and the father casts of all his patriarchal dignity, and galumphs across the field as if he too were a kid, making a fool of himself. We exercise leadership precisely by not caring about our dignity. The moment we try to care for your own dignity, we become absurd figures. Pope Francis showed us the way right from the beginning, but refusing the grand papal car, and just getting into the bus with the common or garden cardinals.

So a genuine question that I would leave with you is this: How far does your role in leadership require that you have a certain dignity, a status? How far can you or should you be prepared to disregard that dignity? Do you need to keep a certain distance from people lower in the hierarchy? I would be really interested to know.

But the father said to his servants, 'bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to make merry.

He gives him shoes, the sign of a free person. He cares for his dignity. When I was Master of the Order, nothing was more likely to keep me awake at night than the fear that I had let slip a word that might have humiliated a brother. It so easy to do. A witty joke, an off the cuff remark, and that brother would always remember that he met the Master just once and was made to feel small.

They began to make merry. This is of course the fundamental point of the parable. Jesus had been provoked into telling the parable by the Pharisees and scribes murmuring, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' The climax of the story is the father's invitation to the elder son to celebrate with them: 'It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'

This summer in Vietnam we elected a new Master of the Order, a young Filipino. He asked me what was the most important thing that he must do. I told him that his collaborators, especially the General Council, should enjoy working with him. They should be happy. Every week we had an informal dinner together on the terrace overlooking Rome, and relaxed together. Twice a year we went away

for four days, so that we could catch up on how we were, share the joys and the sorrows, go for walks, pray and enjoy each other's company. When Archbishop Murphy O'Connor came to Rome to become a cardinal, he said to me, 'Now Timothy you know how lonely it is at the top'. And I replied that I had never been less lonely in my life. The boss must care for the joy of the people with whom he works.

Jesus has to tell this parable because, at least in part, he has been misunderstood. If you party with prostitutes, this is inevitable. If you hang out with tax collectors, some people will think that you are in favour of squeezing the poor. But you cannot say anything worthwhile if you do not take the risk of being misunderstood. If you side with the poor, like Helder Camera, people will think you a communist. If you open your home to gay people, they will accuse you of rejecting the Church's teaching. I can assure you of that! In my leadership, I discovered that you can never do anything worthwhile if you are too afraid of being misunderstood. Is this your experience too?

We have just a moment for the eldest son. 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.'³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Notice how he talks of his brother: 'this son of yours.' This is the language of contempt. And he accuses him of having wasted his money with prostitutes. There is no indication of this in the text. It seems to be the projection of his own fantasies. He has always played with the idea of having a wild time with prostitutes and he projects that upon his younger brother, whereas maybe he just gambled the money away or spent it on whisky.

Fundamental to leadership is how one speaks of other people. Does one use the language of contempt which undermines people, and degrades them? Or do we use words that strengthen and lift up.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, walking along a narrow pavement in South Africa, was confronted by a big white man coming in the opposite direction, who said: 'I don't give way to gorillas.' At which Tutu stepped aside, made a deep sweeping gesture, and said, 'Ah, but I do.'

So leadership is about much more than administration and management. It is about creativity, about letting the new happen. It is about living through crises as moments of renewal. This involves deep calm, confidence in the young, caring for each other's dignity, especially in the words that we speak. It is daring to do things that may be misunderstood. It even involves leading the way to the party!