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Social Justice



President Donald Trump speaks during the daily coronavirus disease outbreak task force briefing at the White House in Washington April 21. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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If anything galvanizes the gurus of serious thinking in the United States, it's the concept of leadership. Business schools live on it; publishers feed it wholesale to the country, book list after book list; online business and technology magazines use it as clickbait; historians analyze it; philosophers muse about its moral and ethical dimensions; social psychologists study it in group after group; and communication departments labor over the best ways to inculcate it.

Leadership, in the United States, is big business.

So ... exactly what happened to us in February when the news of a pandemic was a "hoax" rather than a danger-in-waiting, when it was a Chinese — a racist — problem, rather than a global one, and the government "ate, drank and made merry," despite the fact that scientists around the world were trying to tell us to get ready for it? When, in other words, we could have done things to prepare ourselves for it — but didn't.

It's exactly that kind of leaderless situation that gives the scholars pause. How is it that leaders — nations, systems and governments sworn to protect the people — forfeit their ability to make independent judgments just when the world needs them most?

Where were our leaders then? Or is this ~~brave~~ new world of partisanship and imperial presidencies now considered "leadership"? And if so, what happened to democracy when we weren't looking?

Why is it, that in the midst of a pandemic, we had only one naval commander who stood up for care in a care-less system? We had one public health doctor stand up for ethical experimental processes in the national science laboratory in a country of thousands of them? And he lost his job for doing it.

How is it that leaders suddenly assume power when, clearly, "leadership" and "power" are two different things? Nazi concentration camps ran on power but there

was not enough leadership in the system to stop the enforcement of its rawness, of its bestial efforts at conquest. And all of that in the very age when the world's witnesses to it are still alive.

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Or have we made a mistake and set our sights on power rather than leadership all along? Has power corrupted the last century and is it on its way to destroying the moral fiber of this one, as well? While the rest of us, with our souls asleep, say nothing about the passivity that allows the corruption of so noble a concept and still call it "leadership."

Instead, there are multiple formats now that tell us how to run meetings, how to get workers to work, how to organize groups, how to get our private interests passed, how to impose our will, how to placate the ego of the king as long as it gets us the status and money to do as we please.

Clearly, if this pandemic does nothing else, it ought to require us to address these questions about the nature and meaning of leadership. We should pursue those answers at the highest level before every one of our agencies, departments, offices and institutions are eroded by the lack of genuine leadership.

As academics love to tell students — "We should be requiring that the researchers put their report on the nature of leadership on the national desk of a silent Congress and on the docket of the Supreme Court given its decision to allow dark money to buy our elections." And have it there before the next election maybe.

Before we choose our "leaders," surely it is time to remember again that leaders are meant to call a group to become the best of itself, not to prey on the worst of human appetites. Leadership unifies a group; it doesn't divide it. Leadership pursues the common good, not the personal good. Leadership saves the future for us rather than render it stillborn in the present.

Making use of the resources of a group for personal gain is public thievery, not leadership. Taking personal profit from the work of the group for private purposes is not leadership. On the contrary, it is what history has always deemed to be public "corruption." Then the so-called guardians of society become its predators, not its protectors.

And what would ever justify such a social condition? Only one of two things: undue subservience to a rudderless leader or blind obedience in the name of holiness.

> The saints and martyrs and prophets of the church never taught a cloying subservience in the name of obedience when the world needed prophetic truth.
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Subservience is a psychological ploy for approval, a substitute for the cultivation of internal strength that fails to give good counsel when good counsel, not fawning, is exactly what's needed.

Blind obedience, the religious contribution to this kind of enigma, was cemented in the laws of the church and meant to serve institutional purposes. But blind obedience was never at the base of the deepest streams of ancient spirituality or the Gospel that nurtured it. The great spiritual traditions were all founded in response to some overarching social evil. Each of them boldly confronted the world they lived in with an alternative lifestyle, a different set of values, or by taking direct aim at social systems that served rulers rather than the ruled.

Benedictines in the sixth century concentrated on classism and created community. Franciscans in the 12th century eschewed the financial immorality of the rising mercantile system. Dominicans in the 13th century sought to educate people in a theology that had given way to concentration on myth and sin rather than spiritual adulthood. The Jesuits in the 16th century stood up to the state that persecuted the church with relentless audacity. The modern orders — religious orders founded after the 16th century — taught Catholicism in an anti-Catholic culture. All of these spiritual traditions ranked courageous honesty higher than servility to secular powers.

The saints and martyrs and prophets of the church never taught a cloying subservience in the name of obedience when the world needed prophetic truth.

Leadership meant holiness, meant authenticity, meant caring for the people rather than playing minion to the king. Even when it meant risking your own prestige, social status, public approval — or sometimes even your life — to do it.

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From the first martyr, St. Stephen, who defied the oppression of early Christians, to Maximilian Kolbe in our time who offered his life in place of a Jewish father in a Nazi concentration camp, the essence of the spiritual life has forever been a commitment to spiritual leadership. It is a pledge to do the good that must be done, whatever the face of the opposition. It calls us to do the works of righteousness rather than simply go along to get along. It requires us to be spiritual leaders even in the most ignoble of public situations.

For the real saints of every system, leadership is not about strategic planning and decision-making skills, about team building and delegation of authority, about communication techniques or innovation. Those are leadership tools that can be taught to anyone. They are not what defines a real leader.

Real leadership is about the quality of life the leader shapes for the entire society. Leadership is about the compassion the leader shows to those who seek good at the gates of the nation that promises good to all. Real leaders carry the beacon of justice and truth within themselves and so shine the way for others to carry it on after them. The leader exists to maintain the highest values and virtues of the land, so that those values may live forever in the hearts of the people s/he leaves behind.

From where I stand, we have been confused about the difference between power and leadership. We have been too long in awe of tumult devoid of vision. We have lost a taste for real solid gold leadership and accepted the gold-plated lookalike instead.

We have bought into the tinny, tepid emptiness of soul that takes a people, a nation, a culture, into the clutches of political subservience. Rather than be committed to intellectual independence, we find ourselves in the thrall of subservience to empty promises. Modern monarch-types whose addiction to personal power rather than the

good of the nation threaten the future and squelch the ongoing struggle to make democracy real.

But there is a holy text, which if really internalized, could take us beyond our fear of what will happen to us if we don't soon demand truth from the powers-that-be. "If the blind lead the blind," Jesus says in Matthew 15, "both shall fall into a ditch."

Sound familiar?

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Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Joan Chittister's column, From Where I Stand, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page to sign up.*

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