

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 31, 2009 at 8:47am

Servant leadership

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NCR Today

I often hear the term "servant leadership" used to describe the leadership model that should be used by church leaders. Bishop Tom Gumbleton talks about this idea in his homilies; see for example, his homily for Sept. 24, which on our Web site, we titled Hierarchs and lower-archs in the church.

When Timothy M. Dolan was named archbishop of New York in February, Catholic News Service reported that he "pledged his life, his heart and his soul to the people of the archdiocese."

At a press conference, he said to the Catholics in New York: "I am so honored, humbled and happy at the prospect of serving as your pastor."

Dolan told the priests of the archdiocese: "The priests are on the front lines. I am their servant. You can count on me to help them. ... That's not a chore; that's a choice." (I don't mean to single out Dolan; he just popped up first in the word search.)

"Servant leadership," I suppose, is most often applied to bishops and pastors, but it would also apply to lay men and women who have leadership roles in the church.

But what does it mean? I think I gained some insight to that listening to National Public Radio this morning. The story was about a doctor, Suzanne Mitchell, who had come to a crossroads in her career/vocation. At the crossroads, she met a patient named Dick.

Read the transcript or better yet, listen to Mitchell tell the story, for the details, but here's the money quote on servant leadership:

Mitchell says Dick taught her the difference between medical treatment and medical care.

"To be willing to follow your patient to where they want to go is an uncomfortable journey, and it changed me forever," she says.

She's no longer afraid, she adds, "to allow my patients to take me on their journey. Whatever expertise we have, the patient holds the wisdom of their life. And we need to be with our patients ? really be with them."

That's a great quote to stick on the refrigerator for 2010.

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