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What effective leadership looks like

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Clint Eastwood's latest film, "Invictus" (Latin, "Unconquered"), stars Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa who served 27 years as a political prisoner in that country, and Matt Damon as Francois Pienaar, the captain of the national rugby team that Mandela used -- successfully -- as a means to bring the racially divided nation together.

During his long years of incarceration, Mandela studied his Afrikaner enemies, not only learning their language but understanding the role that sports, especially rugby, played in their psyche.

Their national team, known as Springbok, was beloved by the whites and despised by the black population, to whom it had become a symbol of their oppression by the Afrikaner government. When Mandela's supporters (modern political terminology would call them his "base") demanded that the team be dismantled, renamed, and their colors and logo banned, Mandela balked, against the advice of some of his closest black advisers.

To follow the will of his base, he believed, would only confirm the fears of the Afrikaner minority that Mandela's election in 1994 would initiate a period of revenge and recrimination. He wished instead to pursue a program of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Enlisting the team's captain to his side, Mandela challenged Pienaar to turn his team's losing ways around and to bring his players, as any good leader should, to exceed their present expectations.

The film, *Newsweek* critic David Ansen wrote, is about "strategic inspiration."

"We witness a politician at the top of his game," Ansen observed. "Freeman's wily Mandela is a master of charm and soft-spoken gravitas." It is a film, Ansen noted, that is "such a soul-searching story -- one that

would be hard to believe if it were fiction. The wonder of 'Invictus' is that it actually went down this way."

It is not only Mandela who is shown exercising effective leadership. The captain of the Springboks is also adept at leadership. Even after his meeting with Mandela in the presidential office, Pienaar doesn't force anything on his teammates.

He asks that they learn the lyrics of their new national anthem. When many of them strongly object, he doesn't force the issue. He makes it clear, however, that he will be learning it. He works his team hard, and leads by showing himself as willing as the others to follow the new work ethic.

Based on John Carlin's book *The Human Factor: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Changed the World*, the film is set just after apartheid had ended in South Africa and during Mandela's first term in office.

"Invictus" explores how the political prisoner-turned-president used the 1995 Rugby World Cup, which pitted the Springboks against New Zealand, as a means of bringing blacks and whites together after decades of violence and mistrust.

Before a mixed home crowd, South Africa won the match and the World Cup.

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But the purpose of this column is not to provide movie reviews, or book reviews either, unless there is some connection with church-related matters. In this case, there is.

The Catholic church (and other churches and ecclesial communities within the body of Christ) is in the midst of a period of internal tensions and divisions. What the Catholic church needs now, more than ever, is the kind of enlightened, unifying leadership that was exhibited so powerfully by Mandela, and to a lesser extent by Pienaar.

Instead, too many of our bishops -- although certainly not the majority -- function in ways that are directly opposed to Mandela's example.

The names of these high-profile bishops are known to anyone who is more than casually aware of Catholic developments.

These bishops trade in recrimination and self-righteous moralizing, looking upon Catholics, especially those in public office, who don't agree 100 percent with their particular approach to pastoral issues as "bad Catholics," who should not receive Communion and who should even think seriously of leaving the church. As if the third of Catholics who have already left the church isn't enough.

Unfortunately, the Vatican itself has also exercised a form of leadership that is directly opposed to Mandela's. The current "visitation" (read: "investigation") of communities of religious women in the United States, and the "doctrinal assessment" (read: "harassment") of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents 95 percent of these communities, are the most dramatic cases in point.

If Mandela had followed the example of the Vatican or that of many of our bishops, South Africa would still be a divided nation today, with blacks and whites at each others' throats.

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