

FROM THE SERVANT GENERAL ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP

November 5, 2008

My dear brethren in Christ,

One of our 7 Core Values in CFC-FFL is Servant Leadership. This is a value that is crucial if we are to become the instruments that God can use for His work.

A proper understanding of Servant Leadership becomes even more critical, given what happened to us in the crisis of 2007 and up to now. We saw how brethren who were at the highest levels of “servant leadership” suddenly acted in unbrotherly and unchristian ways—lying, maligning, slandering, attacking, oppressing. What happened? And can it happen again? Yes, it can, for we are all too human and sinful.

And so we try to look deeper into the meaning of servant leadership.

First we see a seeming oxymoron. The words “servant” and “leader” seem opposed. A person is either one or the other. And so to put the two words together creates a new reality that is somewhat of a contradiction. And indeed, this is where the problem starts.

Being a leader means having position, power, influence, submission from subordinates, and recognition. Indeed, even for a servant leader, this is part of his role. These elements are objective realities that are not *per se* wrong. In fact, these are necessary for him to function well. On the other hand, being a servant means having the lowest position, no inherent power, submission to a higher authority, and even non-recognition of the good one does (Lk 17:10).

What leads a servant leader astray is when he looks to being a leader but not really to being a servant. This is when he looks to pride rather than humility, to power rather than powerlessness, to being first rather than being last, to being applauded rather than anonymously doing his work. This is where he lords it over people. This is when he becomes more concerned about how people look up to him, rather than on how he can look to his people and serve their needs. In other words, the focus is now on himself as leader rather than on others as their servant.

Now Jesus is the servant leader *par excellence*. And the text we often quote is the lesson he gave to his disciples, when James and John, with their mother, tried to secure places of honor at his right and left. Jesus told them, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:25-28).

Jesus gave the principle: the great will be the servant, the first shall be the slave. Then he gave himself as an example. He would model servant leadership. Even if he was the Master, he came to serve rather than be served. Finally, he said what could be the key phrase for our deeper understanding of servanthood, and that is, Jesus would give his life as a ransom.

What do we think of when one speaks of ransom? We think of kidnapping (Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines) or hijacking (Somali pirates in the gulf of Aden). For them to release their captives, whether persons or ships or goods, a ransom is demanded. The ransom is given by someone who has an interest in the person or thing being ransomed. The ransom paid then passes into the total control of the kidnapper or hijacker, to do with as he wills.

Now with Jesus, this is what happened. We were under the dominion of Satan. In a way, since our natural environment as children of God is heaven, we were abducted. Jesus then offered himself, suffered and died for us, paid the price, and secured our release.

How about us? As servant leaders, we too are to give our life as ransom. What does that mean?

We expend ourselves for the good of others, having the utmost concern for their well-being, especially spiritually.

We hold nothing back, even our very lives.

We give up all human desire for power, position and influence; we look not to human acclaim nor to protection of our reputation.

We serve even when those we serve do not appreciate us or might even act negatively towards us.

Remember: a ransom, though having value of itself, in this particular context has value only in relation to the person or thing being ransomed, that is, only as it can provide relief or well-being to the captive. A ransom becomes a mere commodity, an instrument to be used. A ransom substitutes itself for the captive, putting itself in place of the captive, in order to secure the latter's release. A ransom loses its freedom in order to secure freedom for the captive. A ransom gives up its own "life" in order to save the captive from "death."

This is what Jesus did. And in Paul's letter to the Philippians, we see the very fact of how Jesus exercised servant leadership.

"Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."
(Phil 2:6-8)

Being a ransom involves death to self, in order to give life to another.

Servant leaders are called to expend themselves for the sake of those they serve. And though their service is what brings benefit to those served, what is important, for the servant leaders' own sake, is knowing who or what they are rather than looking to what they do. Knowing and living out who they are supposed to be is what will keep them on the right track. What they are able to do then simply proceeds from who or what they are. While their action is to lead; their identity is to be a servant.

A servant leader is not so much about serving as a leader, but rather leading as a servant. Or put another way, a servant leader is not so much about a leader who serves, but rather about a servant who leads.

The call to servant leadership is a wonderful calling. It is the very way of Jesus. It is God's way of caring for His people. Servant leaders are needed in order to accomplish God's plan for the life of the world.

Let those who are privileged to be so called never forget that in the kingdom of God, the greatest is always the least. And those whom the Lord will exalt are only those who have been humbled.

May we be worthy to be the Lord's servant leaders. God bless you all.