

“ The great leader is seen as servant first” – emphasized Robert Greenleaf, author of the servant leadership concept. The idea solves an important problem of persons who strive to merge Christian values with the execution of leadership tasks. This vision is strongly interconnected with Catholic Social Teaching, which attempts to implement a Christian model of behaviour in each sphere of social life. The aim of the article is to analyse the origins of the concept from the historical perspective and to present possible benefits and drawbacks of practicing this leadership model in the modern world. The analysis is founded on the grass-roots papers of the concept, and on contemporary publishing of the Church and academics in the sphere. Based on examples of the leadership of Jesus Christ, the concept seems to be a great answer to current problems in the violation of employees' rights, and more efficient work organisation.

## Introduction

A leader who has a team of five workers is responsible for 10 000 hours of their lives annually. This working time is often longer than the time they spend with their families or friends (TEDx Talks, 2015). This simple example shows how important the role of a leader in each society is. Catholic Social Teaching considers how a person as God's creature, independently of his or her different social roles and statuses, should act in each sphere of his or her life to fulfil the Christian model of being. Leading others is a key function in the proper fulfilment of other roles. It explains the special attention paid by the Church and other social institutions to guiding leaders to perform their role properly.

Nowadays, the Church emphasizes a lot of challenges which the leaders face in their job. There are four main “signs of times” that are the complicating factor in the situation. First of all, globalisation brings global social inequality, difficulties with monitoring capital flows and problems with usage of a “cheaper” workforce in poor countries etc. Secondly, new technologies in the sphere of communication are overloading people with information and creating big obstacles in the way of clear decision-making. The next factor - financialization - makes firms insensitive to social problems, reorienting them to big profits at any cost. The last problem is related to cultural transformations, with a tendency towards individualism, which make people insensitive to each other. The combined result of all these factors distracts us from treating the common good as the main goal of both leaders and workers (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2014, 2).

Servant leadership is a concept which deals with all problems using a strategy based on the Christian model of life. It introduces principles of human dignity, justice, subsidiarity in ruling others, and respect for each individual person (Marek, 2015, 1). It seems to be a great answer to current problems.

## Theoretical Background of the Concept

The most fundamental source of the servant leadership concept comes from the Bible. Jesus Christ by His life and activities showed the core of the concept. He teaches: “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew,

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20:26). St. Mark interprets these words in another way: “if anyone wants to be first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all” (Mark, 9:35). Jesus emphasizes humility and love among people. The fact of devoting His life to ransoming the sins of humankind presents the greatest measure of serving others. This teaching is the most obvious way of proving that to serve is divine.

A more academic approach to the concept was introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970. He invented the term “servant leadership”. R. Greenleaf was an American essayist who wrote a few papers on the issue of servant leadership. The concept was inspired by Hermann Hesse's “Journey to the East”. The plot is built around a journey during which a servant Leo, who seemed to play no crucial role in the band of travellers, disappeared. The whole group then became completely disorganised, was in despair and the journey had to be abandoned. Later on, a man from the band finds Leo in the Order which funded the journey. The man discovers that Leo is a leader and a spiritual master of the Order. Based on this story, R. Greenleaf discovered that “the great leader is seen as servant first.” The author says that true leadership is rooted in the natural desire of a person to serve others first and then lead. Servant leaders consider the needs of other people in the first-place. R. Greenleaf tests if leadership is servant by asking if the served grow as personalities, becoming “healthier, wiser, freer”. The other extreme type of leadership introduced by R. Greenleaf is the leader-first, who is a person of opposite interests to the principles of the servant-first (Greenleaf, 1977, 6, 28).

In academic circles, the servant leadership concept has drawn a lot of attention in recent years. Around 270 papers have been published in the last two decades, with growing interest year by year. In the last four years, 100 articles appeared, with a majority of an empirical nature. This means that the theory is becoming more and more practical. Based on the extended research of the concept, there a universal definition of servant leadership has been created as “an other-oriented approach to leadership manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community” (Eva et al, 2018, 2, 4).

## Servant Leadership in Practice

A broad interest in the field of application of servant leadership principles caused a great number of leadership coaches interested in spreading the idea to appear. The most well-known activist in this sphere is John Maxwell. He is a teaching pastor of the Christ Fellowship Church in the USA. The popularity of Maxwell's training and books show that in the modern world the servant leadership concept is effective and supported by practitioners. J. Maxwell has sold 26 million books in fifty languages. His foundation has trained about 6 million leaders from

every country in the world (Christ Fellowship Church, 2018; Maxwell, 2018). For more than 40 years J. Maxwell has been teaching how to be a truly servant leader. He emphasizes that during his lifetime, he has observed how leadership has evolved from the top-down approach towards establishing leadership teams with multiple competences “to complement each other”. Finally, J. Maxwell says that nowadays a leadership model has been worked out which is the most effective regardless of the time and culture in which it is embedded. The primary principle of the model is described by J. Maxwell as considering one’s success as the leader’s success. The author teaches leaders to apply the servant leadership in the simplest way. He tells them just to serve people, to add value to them and to enjoy their success. As a result, servant leaders gain the most loyal people around them. This effect is achieved by letting people see not only the leadership skills of the person, but first of all, “the heart”. Before such conduct, when each employee knows that the leader is ready to devote him or herself to them, the worker will give all needed efforts to do the same. This model leads to “the beautiful life” of both the parties (The John Maxwell Team, 2018).

Besides coaches and activists, servant leadership is presented by prominent CEOs as an effective remedy for companies. Cheryl Bachelder, “a passionate restaurant industry executive”, a CEO of the Popeyes company, proved the power of servant leadership by her own example. In 2007, the share value of the Popeyes company declined almost 65%. A board meeting was held to deal with the crisis. The board tried to figure out a new strategy to save the company. A decision was made and brave goals were set to convert the failing firm into “the Hottest Concept in Quick Service Restaurants”. The key of the strategy was to dare to serve others. Among a broad range of possible interest groups to serve, the franchise owners, “challenging human beings”, were chosen. This group had not been paid sufficient attention before. C. Bachelder found out that the franchisees were putting in a lot of effort into the company’s success. They are the people who engage the most in establishing restaurants, caring about employees and are the front desk in front of customers. Before the new strategy, they were almost ignored, but the daring “win or lose” board decision was to support them. They found out that the most important people in the company were not “the favourite people” before, and that this should be changed. The strategy was to “listen to people, (...) to work with them side by side” and even more - to love them. Afterwards, when the strategy had been implemented, an annual survey has been held to monitor if the franchisees are satisfied with the leadership model. In 2008, the satisfaction rate was 76% and, in 2014, the rate grew to 93%. C. Bachelder invented her own method to achieve success along with workers’ success. She presents three steps in the method. First, there should be a bold desire to dare to serve. Then, the leader should serve people and love them. The third step is delivering great company results as a shared result. C. Bachelder proved the effectiveness of the “dare to serve” principle. The sales of Popeyes have grown since 2007 by 30%. The profitability of the firm has increased by 40%. The company grew and went international. Popeyes’ share price has grown 4,5 times since 2007 (TEDx Talks, 2015).

## Conclusion

“For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more” (Luke, 12:48). The teaching of Jesus perfectly

translates what servant leadership is about. The concept is very demanding. It requires leaders to give themselves entirely to their employees. The leaders “transcend individual self-interest, serving others by helping them grow both professionally and personally” (Ebener et al, 2010, 315). Such a leadership model leads organizations to great results, as has been proved in practice. It causes positive phenomena as:

- voluntary subordination of a leader to serve others as it is his or her natural vocation, not only a job to do;
- authentic self of leaders who are persons characterized by “humility, integrity, accountability and vulnerability” towards others;
- acceptance of others, the way they are, and letting them grow and experiment;
- responsible morality to lead people and achieve results in accordance with the common good idea;
- transcendental spirituality to link internal purposes with external challenges;
- and, finally, transforming influence on others to enrich their personalities (Sendjaya et al, 2008, 406-408).

Current tendencies of businesses show a positive attitude to the approach. Academic research is also very interested in servant leadership, and the Church as well promotes the concept. This coincidence proves the words of J. Maxwell, who underlines that this model of leadership is an outcome of long historical exploration to find the perfect model. Servant leadership may in the future improve business performance, making leaders feel more comfortable in fulfilling their vocation, based on their own moral principles, to be authentic simultaneously in private and professional life and bring the common good into modern society.

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