

## Leadership: To Be Served or to Serve? That is the Question

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In my previous article “Today’s Leaders / Today’s Followers” which appeared in the May 6, 2003 issue of CNG’s *The Yellow Pages* and the “Última Palabra” section of the April 2004 issue of *ANDA* magazine (Revista de la Asociación Nacional de Anunciantes de Colombia [National Association of Advertisers]), I set forth several propositions, namely: that in a democracy the quality of leaders depends, to a great extent, on the quality of the followers; that leadership should never be considered in isolation from “followership”; that educational institutions and programs need to prepare both high quality leaders and high-quality followers; that both leaders and followers need to be loyal to the ideals of integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness; that all of us are both leaders and followers depending on the situation; and that the best leaders have many times, beforehand, been excellent followers.

What I would now like to discuss is the more comprehensive idea that both leadership and “followership” should be viewed as two expressions of a higher, more noble ideal: service to humanity. From this perspective, a position of leadership; whether it be that of a statesman, a chief executive officer, or a head of a religious organization; is one of servitude to the public, the shareholders, or the religious community. And, if that service-oriented leadership is carried out with rectitude, the followers are able to serve the authority-possessing leaders with wholeheartedness, fidelity, and even enthusiasm. This view also places the most menial task, be it repetitive factory work, janitorial tasks, or unskilled labor, within the highest of human stations – service to humankind.

With such a vision ingrained within one’s way of seeing life, the same person is able to feel comfortable with both leading a group towards some beneficial goal or serving coffee during a meeting; both are expressions of servitude. Was it not Jesus who both founded a new religion that now embraces the entire planet and washed the feet of His disciples?

And when such a worldview is elevated to a spiritual dimension, servitude becomes an expression of an even higher ideal and force – love for one’s Creator, the most natural expression of which is love for His / Her creation: the cosmos, nature, and our fellow human beings. This perspective stands in stark contrast to a certain attitude or value that is prevalent today, namely, that it is better to be served than to serve others; that leadership positions are to be sought because they result in greater income and power which, in turn, enable the leader to oblige others to serve him or her; that one’s station in life can be judged by the job that one performs, i.e., people who hold jobs that are low in an organizational hierarchy are undeserving of respect and that, the higher a person climbs in the hierarchy, the more s/he is deserving of honor. This attitude has been so deeply engrained into various cultures that architectural designs often include “the service entrance,” as if as though the people who pass through the main entrance do not also perform some service for others. And even though certain workers are referred to as “servants,” are not other members of a household or organization also servants of others?

When this new paradigm – that all jobs and tasks, including arts and crafts, are to be seen as means for worshipping God through sincere service to humanity – has been taken to heart by the members of a community, there is a simultaneous humbling of leaders and a “raising up” of the “servants.” I have seen leaders of national and international organizations, who have learned this principle, take on menial tasks such as property maintenance and food service with sincere humility and joy. And I have also seen laborers, who have come to realize that servitude is the highest of human stations and one of the best ways to worship God, carry out their tasks with a new enthusiasm. One middle-aged maid once exclaimed, “Now, for the first time, I love my work. The housekeeping chores haven’t changed, but I have. Now my work – my service to others – with love – is my way of worshipping my Lord.”

In conclusion, I would answer the question, “To be served or to serve?” in the following way. “To be served” is acceptable only under two conditions: (1) that we accept the service of others because it gives us more time to serve others better – allowing others to benefit from our own particular talents and training, and (2) that we understand that any service rendered, even the lowliest and meanest of tasks, is worthy of respect and honor. “To serve” is the more noble aim; it is a deeply worthy, overarching, lifetime goal beckoning to one and all; an ultimately unattainable ideal that can be approached through our day-to-day lives at home, at school, at work, and in our community.