



Reluctant leadership

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Just as a desire to hold power is not the core attribute of a good leader, reluctance to lead is not necessarily a marker of unsuitability. Sarah Broscombe's survey of the various roots and manifestations of hesitancy to lead suggests that a reluctant leader may be exactly the gift your team or organisation needs for these times.

Reluctance to lead is easy to misconstrue. We can equate it with weakness, idleness, ungenerosity, cowardice, impostor syndrome, or some other vice of underwhelm, but when we do so, we miss the opportunity to discern what is really going on.

Such reluctance is particularly encountered among leaders in the Church. My own intuition is that this phenomenon is going to increase, owing both to a shrinking pool of potential leaders by the simple fact of diminishing vocations, and the increasingly complex task of leadership in this volatile world and changing Church. We need to be ready to respond to reluctance wisely, so we can encourage, resource and form reluctant leaders to grow into leadership as they need to, or where unsuitability is genuine, to respond with a consoled and discerning 'no'.

So, what is meant by reluctant leadership, why do we find a marked pattern of nervousness to lead in religious life and the ethical sector, and how can we harvest the fruits that lie within its humble self-concept to serve the complexities and suffering of our present world?

In a 2024 research paper entitled 'Don't Judge a Leader by their Reluctance',¹ Moralogil *et al.* warn of the danger throughout the corporate world of conflating confidence with leadership

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suitability, and reluctance with unsuitability. Their hypothesis is that HR teams are using skewed criteria to select 'high potential people', resulting in only a subset of suitable candidates receiving formation for leadership.

In the faith sector and religious life, special additional conditions pertain. Whereas in the secular and

corporate worlds, most leaders desire and choose to take on their role, in the world of faith organisations (and, to a lesser extent, NGOs), but especially in religious life, reluctance is rife because so many are beckoned into leadership by an invitation and volition not their own.

Scripture contains illuminating case studies of reluctance that can encourage reluctant leaders and offer solidarity. What follows is not intended as a comprehensive schema; simply a worked example of how I have seen reluctance to lead show up first-hand in some faith settings. Often, several factors are in play simultaneously. Experienced recruiters and missionaries will certainly have additional examples. A person may present primarily rational objections or emotional reasons for being reluctant to lead, but often the reluctance is complex mix of visible, rational, unconscious and 'gut' elements, which require patience and discernment to sift.

I WON'T – unwillingness and Jonah.

Jonah's 'I refuse' is refreshingly straightforward: 'For the (sailors) knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so'.² And he speaks his displeasure directly to the Lord, too. 'But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry...?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die".'³ Downright refusal to lead comes from many sources, one of which is unwillingness to make hard decisions, to shoulder the burden, to place a sign on the volitional 'desk' like Harry S. Truman's in the Oval Office: 'the buck stops here'. In terms of the skill/will matrix,⁴ this is will; attitude rather than competence. In my experience, in faith settings, 'I won't' rarely stems from the classic selfish sources (laziness, avoidance, lack of commitment to the mission, lack of generosity, passivity, apathy, concern about work/life balance, or a preference for ease and refusal to sacrifice). The bigger danger may lie in the need to be approved of, virtuous, the 'good person'. To those accustomed to considering themselves 'on the side of the angels', suddenly becoming the teller of unwelcome truths is a shock both to our self-image and to our perfectionism. Leaders will always be the ones faced with necessary compromises, imperfect raw material, insufficient resources and unwelcome realities. Leadership is lonely, and brave leadership will always involve making some unpopular decisions, being misunderstood, and even disliked and resented by those whose projections we are carrying.

I CAN'T – inadequacy and Jeremiah.

This type of reluctance to lead stems directly from belief that I am not capable. Whether the gap is real or perceived, it is 'skill' in the matrix.⁵ Jeremiah is not the only prophet who expressed this in his moment of calling: 'Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy". But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'".'⁶

Where the gap is real, receiving formation, encouragement and knowing oneself to be well-supported and growing in confidence can be enough to dissolve this reluctance. It seems to be enough for Jeremiah, who dives straight into the work at hand. God even praises his performance ('You have seen well'), exhorts him ('But you, gird up your loins') and promises a good outcome ('They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you').⁷

Where the skill gap is a misperception, and capability is already high, discernment and prayer is a more useful starting point than formation and training.

I DAREN'T – fear and the parable of the talents.

'I daren't' is not necessarily cowardice or weakness; it may be honesty. When facing a more challenging leadership role than one has held to date, dauntedness is entirely appropriate. This is more 'will' than 'skill'. Discernment helps us see what we are doing with our fear. In the parable of the talents, the third slave both gives in to fear and over-indexes on possible future consequences.⁸

When we read the parable's punchline in the context of leadership, the 'more' encompasses both wealth and responsibility. 'For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away'.⁹ That 'more' is not the easy road. Refusal is the easy road. The 'more' in this parable includes an 'abundance' of work and responsibility and stretch, with the riches that come from it. The gift of talents requires effort and great care. Those who bury the talents steal the life from them. 'I daren't' becomes a blocker when our reluctance to trust ourselves and reluctance to be visible loom larger than the task itself. Fear of specific consequences stalemates the

third slave in the parable, locking him into desolation and stagnation. “The “enemy” tries to isolate us from other people, to lock us up in ourselves and thus to draw us away from real life’.¹⁰ Moving the attention away from our dauntedness and into the task at hand can help to restore balance, as can seeking support and collaboration.

I’M NOT A LEADER – identity and Moses.

This reluctance is encountered in all spheres of leadership. Moralgil *et al.* summarise as follows: ‘A primary reason is the lack of salience in leader identity, defined as “a sub-component of one’s working self-concept that includes leadership schemas, leadership experiences and future representations of oneself as a leader”’.¹¹ A special form of this pertains in religious life, where many leadership teams are made up of those called at a General Chapter, some of whom had never imagined themselves in leadership. That moment calls for huge trust in God, your calling, your brothers/ sisters in your order and yourself. The response may echo Moses, Isaiah and Peter all at once: ‘O my Lord, please send someone else!’;¹² “Woe is me! I am lost!”;¹³ ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am sinful!’¹⁴ Those daunted chosen ones all offered God some version of the response, ‘you’ve got the wrong person’. It is after that moment of calling that the real work begins. Depending on the one being called, this can be a crucible experience or even a fiery furnace, and the journey of growing in self-concept takes a lifetime.

The myth of the natural or heroic leader plays here too. Even for those who embrace the idea of servant leadership, the heroic model still holds unconscious emotional currency for many of us.¹⁵

NOT YET – unreadiness and Jesus.

The Syrophenician woman¹⁶ is not the only person in the gospels who changes Jesus’s mind; his mother did, too, at Cana. This incident in the Gospel of John¹⁷ seems to me a graceful example of a discerning disagreement.

Jesus says to his mother, ‘My hour has not yet come’. I’m not ready. Mary does not contradict her son: she acts as a discerning partner. Her comment is to the servants, not directly to him: ‘Do whatever he tells you’. It is a very open door of possibility that implies ‘I think you *are* ready’, without contradicting her son’s discernment or committing him to any action. Jesus walks through that door.

‘Not yet’ can of course be genuine unreadiness, in which case we need to grow in competence; it can also be prevarication or self-doubt. This is where discernment can help us to distinguish by ‘tone of voice’ between skill and will.

I SHOULDN’T – unworthiness and Peter.

‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am sinful!’, says Peter. He is right, of course. He, and we, don’t deserve to lead God’s people; nobody does. But the grace that Ignatius makes explicit in the first week of the Spiritual Exercises is that being unworthy to lead simply isn’t a disqualifying factor. This grace is a felt knowledge of myself as an utterly loved sinner. The paradox of my real sinfulness and my utter belovedness evokes a ‘cry of wonder’,¹⁸ where I surrender trying to earn my salvation. This disentangles my calling from my merit. In a Christian schema, none of us is called to leadership because we are worthy of it; we are called because God and God’s people believe us the best fit available at this moment. That can be simultaneously humbling and heartening.

In suggesting that discernment and prayer need to lead when it comes to addressing reluctance to lead as it manifests in the examples above, I am not trying to spiritualise reluctance; beginning by gazing openly on ourselves and our context with God, ‘as one friend with another’,¹⁹ tends to offer revelations not yet available to the rational brain. Spiritual directors are often witnesses to prayer revealing blind spots and parts of our shadow that our conscious mind has previously been unable (or

unwilling, or unready) to perceive. This enables us to decide whether to trust and act upon reluctance, or to read within it an invitation to a deeper expression of our vocation.

The sensing guidelines in the Spiritual Exercises of 'motions' of the spirit, towards God and away, teach us to notice how the 'good spirit' and the 'bad spirit' are present and active in our state and thinking processes, as well as in our decision-making. The good spirit leads us to tell the truth, to ourselves and to others; expression of a reluctance is sometimes an act of courageous truth-telling. The bad spirit is a master of disguise and confusion. Therefore, we also need to be alert to the 'flick of the serpent's tail'²⁰ in our well-intentioned reasoning. Ignatius writes, 'it is characteristic of the bad spirit to harass, sadden and obstruct, and to disturb with false reasoning'.²¹ What then occurs is 'darkness and disturbance in the soul... disquiet arising from various agitations and temptations. All this leads to a lack of confidence in which one feels oneself to be without hope and without love'.²² Strong words, describing dangerous trajectories.

Consoled reluctance and desolate reluctance are profoundly different states. For example, if I am genuinely wrong for a role, the 'good spirit' tone will be one of peace and clarity. The bad spirit's 'I am wrong for a role' is more likely to have a tone of inadequacy, resentment, passive aggression or shame. Desolate reluctance is fertile ground for the bad spirit. The 'devil as the angel of light' and the 'flick of the serpent's tail' act as litmus tests of this. 'The bad angel assum[ing] the form of an angel of light', as Ignatius puts it, disguises unfreedom and desolate reluctance as virtue. To illustrate this, here are examples of 'flicks of the serpent's tail' related to the six reluctances detailed above.

'I won't' (unwillingness). I may justify my refusal as non-ambitioning, where the flick of the serpent's tail might judge my 'virtue' against others' 'vices'. I may conflate 'power'

with 'abuse of power', thus justifying my refusal to exercise any power to bring about necessary change, trapping me in a double bind of 'power is bad' alongside 'empowerment is vital'. Stuckness and stagnation are often glimpses of the bad spirit's traps and prisons.

'I can't' (inadequacy). Here, I may journey along what Nikolaas Sintobin SJ memorably describes as 'the path of systematic self-under-estimation',²³ where my impostor syndrome disguises itself as spiritual humility. Self-absorption is a flick of the serpent's tail, when our fascination with our own inadequacies increases, leading to growing disheartenment and self-doubt.

'I daren't' (fear). Fear may baptise itself as prudence; I may confuse dauntedness with caution. Again, the 'smell' or tone of voice can help discern between the clarity and centredness of prudence, and the constricting, contracting choke-hold of the serpent's tail. Signs of the bad spirit may be an imagination full of possible bad outcomes, humiliation and dire consequences, with growing detail of dangers and risks. Energy pouring into memories of past bad experiences, failures and inadequacies may also be an indicator. Where are my attention and energy going?

'I'm not a leader' (identity). Again, the risk is a distorted humility, which denies my vocation. Real humility does not denigrate my vocation but rather smiles at my own smallness. In Sintobin's words: 'Humility makes a person gentle and shows the way to humour and healthy self-mockery. Humility means that imperfection is no longer seen as an obstacle, but as an invitation to enter into a real relationship with the other and to receive and learn from each other'.²⁴ The antithesis is to tune in to my sense of calling.

'Not yet' (unreadiness). 'Not yet' can self-perpetuate by demanding infinite proofs of readiness. Our healthy self-awareness and

commitment to grow can be diverted into waiting for perfection before we move into action. The bad spirit loves prevarication and confusion, ‘disturbing with false reasoning’,²⁵ leading to ‘darkness and disturbance in the soul..., disquiet’ and ‘a lack of confidence’.²⁶ The good spirit offers an open door of possibility, where I am free but not compelled to make the move from ‘not yet’ to ‘now’.

‘I shouldn’t’ (unworthiness). Shame can disguise itself as a fitting sense of sin. ‘I have failed myself, God and others in the past, so I am not to be trusted with leadership’. Shame stunts our belovedness, and the bad spirit inflates it whenever possible.

The above are just examples. Ignatius – who himself was no stranger to reluctance, declining the first invitation to become the first General of the Society of Jesus in 1541 – describes the bad spirit as infinitely cunning and adaptive, so each person’s discernment ‘nose’ must attune to the particulars in their first-hand experience. The tactics are different, but they have a kind of family resemblance. Does this voice wish me ill, or wish me to shrink, self-obsess, despair or give up? If so, it’s a clear sign of the bad spirit, and my attention must turn to the quieter voice, the voice that calls always towards hope, love and faith. As Rob Marsh puts it: ‘Notice the asymmetry of the two sets of motions. The bad spirit ... stagnates, nothing happens and an old opinion is set deeper in stone. The good spirit doesn’t just do the opposite but goes somewhere creative, opens up a new space’.²⁷

Ignatius’s concept of ‘*agere contra*’ invites us to act against the bad spirit. Sometimes in desolation, *agere contra* is all we have to hand; refusing to collude with the bad spirit ‘stealing, killing and destroying’²⁸ is our entry point to collaborating with grace. Tuning in to one’s calling is a powerful *agere contra* when it comes to reluctance. Considering our whole journey of calling and purposeful choice puts us closely in touch with the good spirit’s ‘style’, tone of voice

and accompaniment as we have lived it. Reasoning may help to dissolve a reluctance, especially if it is skill-oriented, but it is rarely sufficient alone. Arguing a person into a rational corner where they have no remaining ‘no’ to stand on tends to increase their reluctance even further, but also drive it underground, which is fertile territory for the bad spirit.

In their article, Moraligil *et al.* hypothesise that those with a medium amount of reluctance to lead are likely to be better leaders. One strong reason is inoculation against abuse of power. Another is an aptitude for collaborating, delegating and power-sharing. Leaders with some reluctance are more likely to lead collaboratively, be more attuned to their fallibility and less likely to be blinded by their own assumptions.²⁹

If we are willing to learn from it, reluctance can offer the opportunity to disentangle our modesty, our humility and our self-doubt, in order to follow the good spirit outwards into aliveness, rather than following the Pied-Piper-pull of the bad spirit into obsessing about failings and inadequacies, the details of which can be seductively fascinating. As Nikolaas Sintobin puts it,

the dynamic that Ignatius extracts from the example of Jesus can serve as a spiritual pedagogy. It allows us not to have to endure human limitations as a tragic destiny. It teaches us that we should no longer be frightened or feel ashamed of being confronted with our smallness, vulnerability and even, sometimes, stupidity through the experience of humiliation because of our failures. It is not necessary to repress these experiences or rationalise them to make them harmless. We may, on the contrary, admit to them, trusting that something good will result.³⁰

As well as learning more about ourselves, we may also need to re-envision leadership itself. ‘It’s time to end the myth of the complete leader: the flawless person at the top who’s got

it all figured out. In fact, the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organizations will be ... Only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete – as having both strengths and weaknesses – will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others’.³¹ We need shared clarity on what leadership is and isn’t for our organisation or institute. We need to re-envision leadership as a wise and accurate gathering of talents, not a demand to be complete and perfect ourselves. And we need honest open conversation about the costs and sufferings of leadership,³² at formation stage as well as when recruiting for, stepping into, and assessing one’s own experiences of leadership roles.³³

Praying in a leadership team with Scripture passages and characters such as those above can be a legitimising and graceful opening to a conversation around reluctance, willingness, ideas of leadership and self-concept. To any senior leader in specifically Ignatian contexts dealing with reluctance in missioning, it is worth spending time with Nikolaas Sintobin’s article on the Two Standards and Ignatian leadership.³⁴ To women in leadership, or people missioning women to senior roles, reluctances specific to women also bear additional research.³⁵

The three practical tactics offered by AAPL in their article, ‘Why capable people are reluctant to lead’, may be relevant: support risk-sensitive colleagues, manage conflict well, and give low-stakes opportunities to lead. They are clear that the responsibility lies with senior leaders and teams, not just the reluctant candidate: ‘Ultimately, empowering people to lead starts with acknowledging – and mitigating – the reasons they may be hesitant to step up’.³⁶

Reluctance is a strong experience, and often discomfiting. Yet every reluctance contains seeds of spiritual opportunity. It’s vital that reluctant leaders do not ignore reluctance or judge themselves for it; rather, dignify it as it deserves, and give it the patience Ignatius rec-

ommends.³⁷ Seek out its sources and nature to discern the best way forward. The focus is not on the reluctance itself, but on how this experience of reluctance beckons you further into the truest depths of your calling. Take action, and seek support from trustworthy companions. You probably won’t end up turning water into wine – you might rather come to a consoled ‘no’ that brings sharper clarity about your ‘yes’ to something else. On the other hand, as with Ignatius, your humility and awareness of the sacredness and magnitude of the mission might daunt you but clarify your suitability to others.

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With thanks Maura Parda and Dean Mason and many other peers for conversations on this topic.

¹ Bahar Moraligil *et al.*, ‘Don’t judge a leader by their reluctance’, *Human Resource Management Journal* 35, no. 2 (Sept 2024), pp. 495-513:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384074044_Don%27t_judge_a_leader_by_their_reluctance.

² Jonah 1:10.

³ Jonah 4:9.

⁴ Templates such as the one offered by AIHR offer helpful guidelines on diagnosing and motivating colleagues depending upon whether skill, will or both are out of balance:

<https://www.aihr.com/blog/skill-will-matrix/>.

⁵ The skill-will matrix summarises the development need here as ‘provide guidance’:

<https://www.aihr.com/blog/skill-will-matrix/>.

⁶ Jeremiah 1:6-7.

⁷ Jeremiah 1:12, 17 and 19 respectively.

⁸ ‘Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did

you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents”.' (Matthew 25:24-28)

⁹ Matthew 25:29.

¹⁰ Nikolaas Sintobin SJ, 'The Two Standards and Ignatian Leadership', *The Way* 57, no. 4 (October 2018), pp.119–128: <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/574Sintobin.pdf>.

¹¹ Moraligil *et al.*, 'Don't judge a leader by their reluctance', p. 5.

¹² Exodus 4:13.

¹³ Isaiah 6:5.

¹⁴ Luke 5:8.

¹⁵ Deborah Ancona *et al.*, 'In Praise of the Incomplete Leader', *Harvard Business Review Magazine* (February 2007): <https://hbr.org/2007/02/in-praise-of-the-incomplete-leader>.

¹⁶ Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28.

¹⁷ John 2:1-11.

¹⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* (henceforth Sp Exx), §60.

¹⁹ Sp Exx §54.

²⁰ Ignatius explores this in the second set of rules for discernment in Sp Exx §334.

²¹ Sp Exx §315.

²² Sp Exx §317. C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* reads to me as a full worked example of the serpent's tail.

²³ Sintobin, 'The Two Standards and Ignatian Leadership'.

²⁴ Sintobin, 'The Two Standards and Ignatian Leadership'.

²⁵ Sp Exx §315.

²⁶ Sp Exx §317.

²⁷ Rob Marsh SJ, 'Discernment: the good, the bad...the Ignatian', *Thinking Faith* (13 February 2018):

<https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/discernment-good-bad-%E2%80%A6-ignatian>.

²⁸ John 10:10.

²⁹ 'Moderate RTL can enhance leadership by promoting power-sharing and follower self-leadership, which is characterized by humility and a servant mentality.' (Moraligil *et al.*, 'Don't judge a leader by their reluctance', abstract)

³⁰ Sintobin, 'The Two Standards and Ignatian Leadership'.

³¹ Ancona *et al.*, 'In Praise of the Incomplete Leader'.

³² The book *Leadership on the Line* by R. Heifetz and M. Linsky (Harvard Business Press, 2002) is a great starting point for this, especially chapter 11 on the sacred heart of leadership.

³³ For those in senior leadership, systemic questions may arise from this learning stage. One example is the process by which leaders are selected in your order or institution, which may have been set in stone for centuries. Reluctance is not a synonym for unsuitability, but when people lacking the breadth, maturity or capacity for leadership roles are placed into them, reluctance is the most sensible response, and we must be ready to dignify and take seriously their wisdom in it. Otherwise, our leadership team may find its energy diverted into living with the consequences.

³⁴ Sintobin, 'The Two Standards and Ignatian Leadership'.

³⁵ The book *How Women Rise* by Sally Helgesen & Marshall Goldsmith (Legacy Lit, 2018) is full of helpful insights into women's hesitations about stepping into leadership. The following white paper details helpfully how reactivity tends to show up differently in men and women leaders:

<https://leadershipcircle.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Research-on-Female-and-Male-Leaders-White-Paper-2022-03-17.pdf>.

³⁶ Chen Zhang *et al.*, 'Why Capable People Are Reluctant to Lead', AAPL (25 December 2021): <https://www.physicianleaders.org/articles/why-capable-people-are-reluctant-to-lead>.

³⁷ Sp Exx §321.