Catholic Leadership INSTITUTE

DISCERNING INSIGHTS About Leadership

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Estupefação

"Let us allow ourselves to be amazed by Christ." – Pope Leo XIV

Portugal had been on my bucket list for a while. While going to Fátima was a major driver, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that the promise of good seafood was definitely a close second. When a friend told me about a parish that was doing incredible things, I thought: "Bingo, time for a pilgrimage!" My wife was kind enough to encourage me to do something fun to celebrate my next chapter, and I felt a little less guilty knowing I'd be going to "assess" this supposed model parish. Truth be told, I was going to prove my friend wrong or minimally, to explain away with all my years of experience whatever anomaly he thought he observed.

I arrived at the historic Basilica da Estrela a little early for their much-hyped Sunday evening Mass. There was a nice crowd 15 minutes prior to Mass, but nothing noteworthy. I sat toward the front of the beautiful 18th-century church and said some prayers while trying not to fall asleep from the jet lag. Hearing a bell ring, I opened my eyes to see high school and college students all around me, filling every pew, lining the aisles. An exquisite choir, full of young adults, led their peers who were also singing. "Beautiful," I thought, "there must be a college nearby." After Mass, I exited to the front plaza where hundreds of people socialized for at least an hour. I approached a table where the choir was selling baked goods. I complimented their singing and asked how long they had been together. "This was our first Mass," was the response, "there's a different choir every week."

A few days later, the pastor and the young vicar gave me a tour of the old palazzo that was connected to the church. They had reacquired it from the government and began rehabbing it as a space for young adults to gather. Room after room was furnished with little more than old couches, folding tables, and worn but amazing frescoes that were spaces full of young people doing homework, playing games, and leading catechetical classes or bible studies. I was greeted by young adult after young adult, and after every question I asked, I got the opposite answer I expected. There was no nearby college. It was not a particularly "Catholic" area. They came from all over. There was no large staff—actually, there was no staff. Instead, there were 100 volunteer leaders leading countless other volunteers.

As the priests invited me to take a photo with a group of leaders, I couldn't help but ask myself, "Dan, why can't you just wonder?" At every turn of this amazing experience, I unconsciously needed to explain it, capture it, minimize it. Why couldn't I just appreciate it? Why couldn't it just be simply the goodness of God? How often in my life, leadership, and discipleship can I "not believe" something because I can't understand, rationalize, imagine, or even worse, take credit for it? Why is God's abundant love not my first theory, but only what remains after I've exhausted every other path?

My site visit confirmed a belief I've held for a long time: leadership matters. But not just any leadership. What matters most is leadership rooted in a clear understanding of *why* one leads and, more importantly, *to Whom* one is called to lead others.

As we begin this new week, let's be sure to give God the first credit, not because He needs it, but because we need to remember how much we need Him. And to my young friends at the Star of Lisbon: Obrigado (thanks) for your witness of what the Lord does through those who believe.



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