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The Mother of Jesus as a Model for Ministers

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During our week of prayer for Christian unity we commemorate Francis de Sales, who was born in 1567, five years before the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of Huguenots by a Roman Catholic mob in the streets of Paris, and died in 1622, a few years after the Thirty Years' War had begun devastating central Europe. As a priest of the diocese-in-exile of Geneva, of which he would become bishop, Francis was received by Theodore Beza, leader of the Reformed Church in Geneva. He did not succeed in bringing Beza back to the Roman Catholic fold. A great preacher and spiritual director, Francis de Sales sought to bring all Christians to devotion to God through penance and love, with emphasis on love. He is a reminder that there were people on all sides of the Reformation fractures sincerely working for the salvation of people. In honor of them, especially those who rejected violent means, I offer these words on leadership and ministry prompted by this past Sunday's gospel.

Looking at Jesus in the story of the Wedding at Cana through the lens of narcissism could reinforce a self-centered approach to ministry. The narcissist could envision himself surrounded by admiring followers, keeping his critics outside the inner circle. He sees himself adept at turning down requests that don't fit into his plan or timetable for success. If he thinks better of the request, perhaps he can turn it into an opportunity to advance his own stature among the people. "They're out of wine? I'll show them what real wine is." But the narcissist gets it wrong. He gets it wrong because he wants to be a god. He cannot tolerate the risks of meeting others through his humanity.

We would not have this story without the divine intervention of Jesus. But if we look at the story in its human dimension, the mother of Jesus is a central character. She is the one who takes initiative in the situation. In speaking a word of direction to the servants, she displays a certain personal power or authority. The correction for the distorted vision of the narcissist is to redirect his focus toward Mary.

The mother of Jesus was there. She is present, joining in the festivities, perhaps leading the women in a dance, and enjoying the good feeling among the guests. When the wine runs out, her concern is not just that her own cup has gone dry. Her concern is for the celebration of the people gathered around the bride and the groom.

"They have no wine." Recognizing the threat to the celebration, the mother of Jesus brings it to the attention of her son. Through years of attention to Jesus, she knows that bringing Jesus into the situation is going to help in some way. She doesn't tell Jesus what to do. She trusts that Jesus will do what is needed.

"Do whatever he tells you." Though her son seems to have rebuffed her, the mother of Jesus intuits that this is not the end of the story. Jesus is going to do something. But he's going to do it through additional hands. Approaching the servants, she doesn't give detailed instructions. She confidently encourages them to follow the word of Jesus.

Like the mother of Jesus, the good leader is present with the people, attentive to their lives, and taking initiative out of this awareness. Leadership in an ecclesial community requires a person of prayer, aware of how the triune God has acted in the past, bringing the needs of the people before God, and trusting that God will continue to act for the good of the community. The minister grounded in the human dimension understands that God works through human persons, and that many situations require other people to share in the heavy lifting, whether it is with the body, the heart or the mind. The wise Christian leader trusts that the Spirit speaks through others as well, and gives them the appropriate authority and encouragement to act from their inspiration.

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