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Learning From Libermann: Some Practical Thoughts for Academic Administrators

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Dr. Edward Kocher

Dr. Edward Kocher is the William Patrick Power Endowed Faculty Chair in Academic Leadership at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh. From 2000-2014, he was dean and professor at the Mary Pappert School of Music, Duquesne University. An accomplished trombonist, Kocher has staged a host of solo and chamber music performances in America, Europe, and Asia. A recording with Nancy Wilson on the MCG Jazz label won the 2007 GRAMMY. Dr. Kocher serves on the Commission for Accreditation for the National Association of Schools of Music. He has been President of the Board of Directors of the Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society. His current research focuses on using technology to develop improvisation. Prior to his appointment at Duquesne University, he served for two decades at DePaul University in Chicago, IL where he earned competitive grants for technology, improvisation, and diversity initiatives. Dean Kocher earned a Ph.D in Public Policy Analysis-Education at the University of Illinois in Chicago and Masters in Trombone Performance at the University of Iowa.

LEARNING FROM LIBERMANN: SOME PRACTICAL THOUGHTS FOR ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS

This article will 1) provide a brief perspective on the role of a dean; 2) give some context regarding the development of my administrative work; and 3) give examples of lessons learned from Father Libermann regarding “delicate courtesy,” “openness to diversity,” and “developing talent.”

The Role of a Dean

A dean functions as a servant leader in academic middle management, reporting to two highly educated constituencies—the University administration and the faculty. Beyond the campus green, a music dean contributes to the life of local, regional, and national cultural and academic communities. In his book *Deaning*, my former academic advisor and teacher Van Cleve Morris states:

The dean level of academic administration provides a unique vantage point from which to view the entire organization. For one thing, it is the only line position that enjoys routine, in contrast with ad hoc, contact with the full spectrum of organizational elements - students, faculty, department heads, fellow deans, vice-presidents, and president, not to mention staff persons at all levels. The deanship is the seat of personnel administration, the heart of any organization. More than any other officer lower or higher in the hierarchy, a dean is the person responsible for the caliber of academic employees. Moreover, in daily work a dean deals primarily with people, not paper.²

An Opportunity to Learn about Father Libermann

At this writing, I am completing a fourth and final term of service as dean of Duquesne’s excellent Mary Pappert School of Music. My early preparation for serving as a dean began in high school when I became a serious musician and started a journey through a series of educational, teaching, performing, and administrative experiences that helped to form my foundations of leadership. My administrative internship deepened at my previous university, DePaul University in Chicago, IL, where I served for two decades as a professor, department chair, and

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associate dean. At DePaul, our understanding of Catholic Higher Education was shaped by St. Vincent DePaul, the inspiration of the university that bears his name. There, we celebrated St. Vincent’s compassion, gentleness, and ministry to the poor. When I arrived at Duquesne, I was introduced to the Spiritans, one hundred music faculty, fifteen staff, three hundred fifty music students, a welcoming campus community and a robust extended regional and national musical community. From my first encounters with the Spiritans at Duquesne, I experienced the “delicate courtesy” attributed to Father Libermann in *A Light to the Gentiles*.

Delicate Courtesy

In speaking of Father Libermann, Father La Vavasieur states:

One of the things that contributed most to his success in any transaction was his delicate courtesy. His judgment was excellent and he was vividly, keenly, delicately sensitive. When he had to act, he mentally exchanged places with the people concerned and tried to imagine how he would feel if someone treated him as he intended to deal with them. He often said to me...“Try to feel within yourself what impression your actions or word will make on others.”³

In looking back, I can see that the influence of Father Libermann was deeply entrenched on campus when my first visit to Duquesne University occurred in summer 2000. The purpose of the visit was to interview for the position of dean of the Mary Pappert School of Music. Even though I had performed concerts throughout the US and Europe, this was my first visit to Pittsburgh. As a twenty-year veteran of Catholic Higher Education, I felt comfortable on Duquesne’s lovely urban campus and with the warm hospitality shown by the search committee and the University administration. The two-day interview process on the Duquesne campus was grueling, but my feelings of ease with Duquesne increased with every meeting. On the second day, I shared lunch with the deans and the vice president for student life, Father Sean Hogan, C.S.Sp. Father Hogan began the luncheon with a tender, reflective invocation, asking God to be with my family and me as we made difficult decisions. His prayer was heartfelt and inviting and it touched me deeply. With that invocation, Father Hogan conveyed a sense of delicate courtesy that set a wonderful tone for my future work at Duquesne and offered a glimpse of the many gifts that our Spiritans would show me throughout my service to Duquesne.

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...the mission “to serve God by serving students” permeates all aspects of campus life.

Father Hogan’s encouraging welcome was enlarged and amplified robustly in the weeks that followed. When I was appointed to the faculty to serve as dean, I discovered that an important element of my role was to serve as a Spiritan Campus Minister in support of our Mission. At Duquesne, it is evident that the mission “to serve God by serving students” permeates all aspects of campus life. Each year the various offices that make up the Division of Mission and Identity host events and programs that bring the mission to life on and off campus for the Duquesne community. As a newcomer to Spiritan Campus Ministry, the opportunity to participate in campus programs provided a superb opportunity to learn and grow in the Spiritan tradition. The Mass of the Holy Spirit, Founders Week, and Libermann Luncheons are three campus traditions that helped me develop an increased openness to diversity.

Openness to Diversity

Live in peace with the outside world. Be genuine in your dealings with poor Frenchmen who have no religion... In general, you ought to like all men, no matter how they may feel about religious principles or about you.⁴

The Mass of the Holy Spirit is the traditional opening of the academic year when we pray for God’s guidance and protection in the coming school year.

The Mass of the Holy Spirit is the traditional opening of the academic year when we pray for God’s guidance and protection in the coming school year. People of all faiths are welcome. Founders Week is an annual university-wide celebration to honor the legacy, vision, and values of Duquesne’s Spiritan founders. Held in early February, the event features activities focused around Spiritan education, the university’s mission, and how the university community lives that mission each day. Spiritan Campus Ministry hosts a reflective Libermann Luncheon monthly throughout the academic year. The Libermann Luncheons consist of a simple meal followed by an informational and inspirational presentation. Over the years, I have attended many Libermann Luncheons and, without exception, have always left the meal with a motivation to do better in my service to students, faculty, and administration. When a tongue-in-cheek Father Ray French C.S.Sp offered that I was the “official trombonist” of Spiritan Campus Ministry, I was tickled to be invited to perform on the trombone at a Libermann Luncheon with my colleague, Professor Guenko Guechev, Chair of Voice and Opera. We performed a musical selection based on a beautiful poem, “The Windhover” by the Jesuit priest, Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. Composer Newell Kay Brown set the poem for the unusual combination of bass voice and trombone. At the luncheon, Professor Guechev and I explained the complex vocabulary, rhythm, and melody of the poetry and music, and demonstrated the flight of a windhover (European Kestrel) via

video. We performed the six-minute composition twice and concluded the raptor themed luncheon with a community sing of the familiar hymn, *On Eagles Wings*, accompanied on piano most capably by music student, Amanda Plazek. The luncheon attendees reported that they especially appreciated the diverse elements of our performance. Our performance entourage consisted of a Scottish Spiritan master of ceremonies, an operatic singer from Bulgaria, a symphonic trombonist from Chicago, a pianist from Pittsburgh, a composer from Salt Lake City, a Victorian Jesuit poet from England, and a kestrel from Europe.

Developing Talent

...Father Libermann's teachings regarding developing talent.

Earlier in this article, I pointed out Morris' assertion that "the deanship is the seat of personnel administration, the heart of any organization." Regarding personnel administration, I have learned much from following Father Libermann's teachings regarding developing talent. Here are some expressions of this culled from Fr. Van Kaam.

Libermann's constant preoccupation with the problem of developing leaders in the Church.

In the midst of his prodigious activity, Father Libermann never lost sight of his first love: the guidance of priests.

Father Libermann insists that we begin by gratefully accepting as a treasure from God's hands the nature we have received.⁵

Musicians live in a world of seeking perfection. In order to achieve the highest levels of performance, a musician exercises strict discipline, gives inordinate amounts of time to the task, and listens with an uncompromising critical ear. Over time, the perfection seeking mindset can erode confidence and spawn feelings of inferiority. Father Libermann's advice regarding encouraging good people is highly applicable to the music faculty. He observed:

...it is utterly necessary to lift the spirits of good people who are too conscious of character weaknesses.

It seems to me that it is utterly necessary to lift the spirits of good people who are too conscious of character weaknesses. They have to be buoyed up, made to understand and feel that they are free, and made to sense the beauty of that freedom and equality which they share with all God's children. The idea of inferiority should be rooted out of their minds, for it further weakens their natural aptitude and lowers them in their own estimation. That's very bad.⁶

Moving Forward

My decanal service to Duquesne is nearing its conclusion. It has been a magical deanship that has given my wife Kamie and I a treasure trove of beautiful friends and memories. Soon, in my role as the William Francis Power Faculty Chair in Academic Leadership, I will speak about “Communicating in the Academy” at the annual meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music. An important part of my presentation will be to share the maxims of Father Francis Libermann. Father Libermann was a leadership expert, espousing perennial themes that have been echoed many times in the leadership literature throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Here is some of his advice:

Never act hastily or impatiently, when you meet obstacles, but wait peacefully till these obstacles be removed; and if they cannot be removed, step over them, or turn them around.⁷

Libermann regarded problems and difficulties as important factors in the process of maturation.⁸

Francis envisioned simplicity as a courageous and genuine faithfulness to what is really authentic in us, to what is in accord with God’s plan for us.⁹

Take a measured approach to policy. Never listen to the first thought that comes to your mind. Let it mature before you put faith in it, especially if it was an idea that seized you violently and stirred you up to some degree.¹⁰

He called for a general refinement in business affairs.¹¹

In *A Light to the Gentiles*, Father Adrian van Kaam offers this superb summation.

His portrait of the new apostle, then, is one of a man who develops that great gift of God, his own personality, as broadly and richly as he can—not by repressing his nature and throttling his aptitudes, but by unfolding his individuality with the help of grace. He is receptive and attentive to the ever-changing situation around him, always keeping his mental and emotional balance lest mere impressions and feeling dominate him. He is realistic, precise, and practical. He plans his projects carefully and with full psychological understanding of men and situations. Always a gentleman, he cultivates courtesy, politeness, and personal neatness. He is full of good will and tolerance toward others, yet courageous in facing the hardest tasks. The ideal that Father Libermann holds up is a timeless one valid for all ages and climes.¹²

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In closing, I thank Father Okoye for the invitation to share these thoughts and extend my warmest wishes to the readers of this article in hopes that Father Francis Libermann's ideas will further inspire our service to the Church, the community, the nation, and the world.

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Endnotes

¹(Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University, 1959).

²Morris, Van Cleve. *Deaning: Middle Management in Academe*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 7-8.

³Van Kaam, *A Light to the Gentiles*, 273.

⁴Ibid., 271. *N.D.* IX, 248f.

⁵Ibid., 227, 258, 259 respectively.

⁶Ibid., 261.

⁷Goepfert, Prosper. *The Life of the Venerable Francis Mary Paul Libermann: Founder of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary*. (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1880), 485.

⁸Van Kaam, *A Light to the Gentiles*, 262.

⁹Ibid., 264.

¹⁰Ibid., 267.

¹¹Ibid., 273.

¹²Ibid., 274-275.