

Ten Characteristics of Franciscan Leadership
Based on a Case Study of Sr. Margaret Carney, OSF
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Introduction

Perhaps you have all heard this story in some variation or another, but I think that it bears repeating here. A number of years ago there was a gathering of Franciscan men and women who were discussing one of the many variations of the modern approach to Franciscan life and spirituality. During the question and answer period one of the presenters was asked this question: “What would Francis and Clare do if they were here today?” The presenter responded this way: “I hate to break this to you, but Francis and Clare are dead! The question is not what they would do – the more important question is what we are called to do.” The challenge of this response resounds in my heart, mind, and ministry in so many ways. We – you and me and thousands of other Franciscans around the world – are the life blood of the Franciscan movement in the modern world. As such, it is proper to ask ourselves, what exactly is it “ours to do” as followers of Christ in the footsteps of Francis and Clare, Louis and Elizabeth, Angela and Angeline, and hundreds of other Franciscans in the past.

This is one of the reasons that any study of Franciscan leadership must take the way that modern Franciscans exercise leadership in a variety of circumstances and ministries into consideration. One of premises that I would like to highlight is very similar to what I found in Pat’s presentation yesterday - there are many leaders all around us. Often we spend a lot of time looking in the past, especially at Francis and Clare, for a model or paradigm of Franciscan leadership. This is all well and good and we can learn a lot by doing this. However, we also have to open our eyes and see the practice of Franciscan leadership in one another. For the purpose of my study I used Margaret Carney as a willing “guinea pig” – and

I mean that term in the most loving and respectful way possible – however, there are many more. In the “recommendations for further research” section in the closing chapter of my dissertation I put it this way:

This case study provides an analysis of *one* Franciscan woman’s style of leadership and a proposed model of Franciscan leadership based on her perceptions and those of her closest co-workers. Further work on developing a comprehensive theory of Franciscan leadership needs to be done at three levels: (1) a historical/exegetical investigation of the leadership style of Francis of Assisi based on his own writings and on other relevant 13th century sources, (2) a historical overview of the Franciscan approach to leadership through the past eight centuries, and (3) more case studies that focus on female and male Franciscans in leadership positions.

Background to the Study

Before getting into the heart of the study I think it is important for you to understand the situation that Margaret walked into when she accepted the position of President of Saint Bonaventure University.

In February and March of 2003 a scandal rocked the University due to the disclosure of an infraction of the eligibility rules of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Every level of St. Bonaventure University was in turmoil. Before the initial chaos subsided, the institution experienced the resignation of the president, the suspension of the director of athletics (who also served as vice president for athletics), the head coach and the assistant head coach of the basketball team (the president’s son). The institution was further shaken by the suicide of the Chair of the Board of Trustees who was deeply affected by the scandal.

The catalyst for the crisis occurred when a recruiting violation involving one of the basketball players became public. In March 2002, Jamil Terrell, a 6 foot 8 inch junior, transferred into St. Bonaventure University from Coastal Georgia Community College in Brunswick, Georgia. NCAA regulations require that a student who transfers to a four-year college as a junior from a community college must hold an associate degree. However,

according to news accounts at the time and the later NCAA report of the infraction, Terrell successfully completed only the requirements for a certificate in welding (O'Connor, 2003; Wawrow, 2003; Yeager, 2004). The *Buffalo News* reported that officials at the University approached the registrar of the school with a request to overstate his academic record in a way that would allow his acceptance. The registrar refused to modify or adjust the records. When this was brought to the attention of President Robert J. Wickenheiser, he overrode the registrar's objections and the recommendations of those whose duty was to monitor compliance of NCAA regulations and accepted Terrell's transfer (Biemiller & Suggs, 2003; Yeager, 2004).

Terrell was accepted as a student at the University and joined the junior class for the academic year of 2002-2003. As part of his transfer and acceptance he became a member of the varsity basketball team and started in 18 of the 25 games the team played in the 2002-2003 season. He also "led the team with 31 blocked shots, was third with 121 rebounds (4.8 rpg), and fourth in scoring, averaging 6.9 ppg" ("This is Buffalo country: 52 Jamil Terrel," 2003). The irregularities of Terrell's transfer to the school came to light in January when Wickenheiser encouraged the vice president for athletic affairs to request the registrar to change the deadline for class withdrawal without penalty so that the student would not receive an incomplete in Spanish 101, a grade standing that would have made him ineligible to play basketball. The President also assured his academic officers that he had verified Terrell's eligibility, a fact that was later proven untrue. The intervention helped to surface the concerns of several administrators and trustees regarding potential problems with NCAA compliance. Finally, on February 24 the University asked the NCAA to clarify Terrell's eligibility (Yeager, 2004). On February 27 the NCAA ruled that his transfer did not meet the Association's eligibility standards and the University declared him to be ineligible. In an attempt to circumvent official penalties, the University voluntarily forfeited six Atlantic 10

Conference games on March 3 that the team had already won in inter-conference play. On the same day, the Atlantic 10 Conference, the NCAA division in which St. Bonaventure University is a member, voted to exclude the school from its championship tournament. The team players were devastated by this turn of events and voted on March 4 to refuse to play the final two games of the regular season. According to news accounts, the players were supported in their decision by the head basketball coach and the President of the school (Biemiller & Suggs, 2003; Lieber, 2005; Mandel, 2003; O'Connor, 2003). The decision to boycott the games was clearly in conflict with NCAA and Atlantic 10 regulations and with the stipulations of the athletic scholarships that many of the players had. It also threw the conference standings into confusion.

In response to the furor caused by the surfacing of Terrell's ineligibility, the forfeiting of six Conference games, the exclusion of the team from tournament play, the vote by the players to boycott the last two games of the season, and the support the team received from major administrators of the school the Board of Trustees convened an emergency meeting on March 9, 2003 to discuss the crisis. The Board unanimously called for the President's resignation and placed the athletic director, the head basketball coach and the assistant coach on administrative leave (Lieber, 2005). One of the professors at the University, Dominic Monti, a Franciscan friar and a well respected Franciscan historian, was asked to assume the presidency on an interim basis until a national search could be launched. Margaret Carney, who was the Director of the University's Franciscan Institute at the time, was asked by Monti to take on the position of Vice President for Mission and Ministry.

The public reaction to the situation was swift and brutal. For example, the following was published in *US Today*:

The truth surfaced, Terrell was ruled ineligible, the Bonnies forfeited victories, and the conference banned the team from its tournament. One great disgrace was trumped by another. When the players chose to boycott their final two games, neither the president nor the coach bothered to stop them. A sobering dearth of ethics was

punctuated by an amazing lack of leadership, leaving St. Bonaventure as a coast-to-coast joke. (O'Connor, 2003)

The University received hundreds of letters from irate basketball fans, media pundits lauded or condemned the players for their decision to boycott the last two games of the season, and frustrated alumni expressed embarrassment and anger over the event. Alumni sentiment was summed up in the following article that was published in a New Jersey newspaper by a '91 alumnus:

We are pulling framed diplomas down from office walls and walking the long way around the water cooler conversation. We are slipping class rings into jewelry boxes and peeling those stupid stickers off the back of our car windows. We are hiding. We are humiliated. We are America's disgrace. We are St. Bonaventure University. We are shame, shame, shame... We are the worst. We are bottom. We are the crud on the bottom of Tark's shoes. It will take forever to live this down... We're the welders, the quitters, the ones bowing our heads in shame when we turn the corner to find you doubled over and laughing at us. We are St. Bonaventure. And we want our school back. (Wojnarowski, 2003)

Fans and alumni also vented their anger online on Bonnies Bandwagon, a fan-sponsored website that is not directly associated with the University. A number of posts called for and then hailed the resignation of the President and the basketball coach and anyone else who might have been marginally associated with the scandal. Even the Chair of the Board of Trustees, William Swan, was attacked with posts such as "The fish stinks from the head," and "I wouldn't want to work for this guy, he's an Enron guy" (Wise, 2003). It is conjectured that the humiliation and stress of the situation, exacerbated by vitriolic posts on the website along with angry letters and calls from alumni, was apparently too much for Swan to take and he committed suicide on August 20, 2003, six months after the scandal broke (Lieber, 2003).

Prior to his death, Swan instituted a review of the processes the Board of Trustees used as it dealt with the scandal. In addition to the work of review, the Board also played a significant role in the facilitating the change of leadership at the school. Monti and Carney remained pivotal figures at the University as it dealt with the fallout of the scandal, the

impending sanctions of the NCAA and the Atlantic 10 Conference, the death of the Chair of the Board of Trustees who was instrumental in guiding the institution through the early days of the scandal and the presidential search that took place through the fall of 2003 and early spring of 2004. At the end of the search Carney was selected to lead the University and was inaugurated as the 20th president of the school on October 1, 2004.

The case study relied on data collected through in-depth interviews with Margaret Carney and other administrators at St. Bonaventure University who were present during the period of the basketball scandal, the presidential search, and those who were active colleagues at the time the interview. Relevant documents from the university including minutes of meetings, policy statements and NCAA reports were also examined. Newspaper and periodicals were consulted to provide background information that deal with the events under study.

The participants for this study included: Sr. Margaret Carney, OSF; Bro. Tom Blow, OFM; Bro. Ed Coughlin, OFM; Robert Donius, Joseph LoSchiavo, Skip Saal; George Solan, Brenda Snow; and Joan Zinc (one Franciscan sister, two Franciscan friars, four laymen, and two laywomen).

The specific areas that were explored in the case study included:

1. The factors that led to Carney's selection as president of Saint Bonaventure University and the challenges she has faced since her installation.
2. The effect of the basketball scandal at the University and the ways that Carney has tried to deal with the aftermath of the scandal.
3. The role of ethics and ethical behavior in presidential leadership and in Carney's own leadership style.
4. Carney's leadership style as perceived by Carney herself and how it is perceived and experienced by her closest co-workers.

5. The influence of Carney's Franciscanism and gender in her leadership style.

As part of my study I examined three feminist critiques of leadership theory¹ and their attempt to develop a model of feminist leader or, more precisely, a “feminine” model of leadership that one of the authors, Jana Nidiffer (Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor) refers to as “emergent leadership.” She states that “Emergent leaders are collaborative, empowering, connective, communicative, authentic, and team-oriented” (Nidiffer, 2001, p 111).

Jean Lau Lau Chin (dean at Adelphi University in Garden City in New York and past president of division 35 of the Society for the Psychology of Women) writes that the feminist approach to leadership,

emphasizes the objectives of leadership as promoting a social agenda and defining leadership as empowerment. When we identify the different roles that leaders play, including that of (a) stewardship of an organization's resources, (b) creating the vision, (c) social advocacy and change, and (d) promoting policy, we need to take a feminist perspective to examine transformational leadership as empowerment to promote a feminist agenda. (Chin, 2004, p. 7)

The three presentations of feminist critique that I looked at are consistent in highlighting the fact that (1) most traditional theories are primarily based on and promote a masculine model of leadership, (2) women approach leadership in ways that are different from men that is, they tend to be more collaborative, democratic, and egalitarian, (3) an important aspect of the feminist critique is the need for empowerment, both for the leader and for all the stakeholders, (4) inequitable and oppressive power structures need to be identified and dismantled and, (5) there is a need for a new model of leadership that is based on ability rather than on gender, race, or class.

1 Brady, J. F., & Hammett, R. F. (2000). Reconceptualizing leadership from a feminist postmodern perspective. *The Review of Education/ Pedagogy/ Cultural Studies*, 21(1), 41-61.

Chin, J. L. (2004). Feminist leadership: Feminist visions and diverse voices. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 28(1), 1-8.

Nidiffer, J. (2001). New leadership for a new century: Women's contribution to leadership in higher education. In J. Nidiffer & C. Terry Bashaw (Eds.), *Women administrators in higher education: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 101-131). Albany: State University of New York.

Interviews with the Participants

The interviews with Margaret and her administrative staff took place during the week of May 7 - 13, 2006, on the campus of Saint Bonaventure University. The interviews were conducted either in the private office of the individual participants or in an adjoining meeting room. The researcher conducted two separate interviews with Carney over a two-day period, for a total of two-and-one-half hours. The transcript of the interviews generated thirty-eight pages of single-spaced text. The researcher also conducted interviews with eight members of the senior administrative staff of the University. The participants included Carney's executive assistant, two presidential assistants, the director of the Quick Arts Center and the vice presidents for academic affairs, finance, student affairs and campus ministry. Of these, two were lay women, four were lay men and two were religious brothers belonging to the First Order. The interviews lasted an average of an hour and a half and the transcripts of each generated between eight and fifteen pages of single-spaced text.

Structure of the Interviews

The interview questions were constructed so as to elicit the participant's personal experience of Carney's leadership style. They included questions about the events surrounding her selection as president, the way she dealt with the basketball scandal, and specific elements of her leadership style - including the role of ethics in presidential leadership, her approach to decision making and the challenges she faced as a result of her gender and Franciscanism.

Each of the participants was asked to respond to the following 12 questions:

1. What factors led to Sr. Margaret's selection as president of Saint Bonaventure University?
2. What challenges has the University confronted since her installation?

3. The basketball scandal of 2003 played a significant role in setting the stage for Sr. Margaret's selection as president of this institution. What lessons has the University community learned from the experience?
4. In what ways has Sr. Margaret tried to help the institution deal with the scandal?
5. In your opinion, how would you describe the role of ethics and ethical behavior in her leadership?
6. How would you describe Sr. Margaret's leadership style?
7. How does Sr. Margaret make decisions?
8. In your opinion, please explain whether Sr. Margaret's leadership is perceived as effective or ineffective.
9. In your opinion, in what way is Sr. Margaret's leadership style influenced or shaped by her Franciscanism?
10. What challenges has Sr. Margaret faced as president of Saint Bonaventure University as a result of her identity as a member of the Third Order Regular?
11. What challenges has Sr. Margaret faced as president of Saint Bonaventure University as a result of her gender?
12. What insights can Sr. Margaret's experience offer to those who have aspirations to be a president or a chief executive of an institution of higher education?

These above questions were adapted for Carney's interviews so as to invite a personal reflection from her of the specific topics.

I will not discuss the results of each of the questions – if you feel so inclined you can read these in the text of the dissertation. However I would like to share the results of question number 6. The participants were asked to respond to the question: “How would you describe Sr. Margaret's leadership style?”

Question 6: Sr. Margaret's Style of Leadership

Carney's opening comment regarding this question is that her leadership style is growing or repositioning as a result of her first two years as president of Saint Bonaventure University. She goes on to describe her desire to exercise a style that can be referred to as Franciscan or evangelical and servant-leadership. The Franciscan aspect is based in her own

religious vocation and is motivated by spiritual - Gospel based - values, a specific vision of God, and her personal experience of leadership within her religious congregation. This is the area and time of her life “where everybody shared a language, spirituality, and a theological vision” (M. Carney, personal communication, May 9, 2006). She points out that she finds that it is a real challenge to apply this kind of vision in a secular institution like a university and with people who do not share the same common vision or language.

The second element is described by Carney as servant-leadership and includes a conscious attempt to be collaborative, empowering to other people, decisive when necessary, and non dictatorial. She stated that she deliberately tried to set the tone for this style of leadership during the Eucharist that was celebrated before her inauguration as president.

The model I have is represented by my pitcher and bowl (*indicating a pitcher and bowl on a shelf in the office*) - they were presented to me publicly on the Sunday before my inauguration. We had a beautiful Mass with all the students and their parents; it was parents' weekend. We read the passage regarding the washing of feet. The students enacted it and then presented me with a pitcher and bowl. That was the first insignia of office that I received. Then I received all the secular insignia the following week. So it made a very clear statement that this is two things combined and sort of separated the two ceremonies: one is in the context of the Gospel and the other is in the context of the charter of the university. (M. Carney, personal communication, May 9, 2006)

Carney admitted that this style of leadership is a kind of a balancing act, particularly when it comes to making decisions. She pointed out that there is a significant difference in the way that leadership is exercised in religious communities and the way that it is carried out higher education administration. A religious council, made up of elected representatives of a congregation, is actively involved in every decision that affects the community. At times its role is purely advisory; at other times it is deliberative. In its advisory role the council expresses its opinion and concerns about individual programs, but the major superior makes the final decision about whether and how they are to be implemented. In its deliberative role, a council can allow programs or projects to go forward, it can modify them, or it can block them entirely. The Canon Law of the Church and the official documents of the congregation

spell out when the council has an advisory role and when it has a deliberative role. In both cases the leader is required to provide all the necessary information about every significant decision to the members of the council and to work very hard to reach a consensus with them. Carney recognizes that her work with the other major administrators at the University is very different. She stated that,

...the cabinet really has no legal authority, or executive authority, other than what is delegated, so I can sit with my cabinet and say I'd like to hear what you all think, but I'm not obliged to do that, and I am certainly not obliged in any way, shape or form that I must act in a way that is consistent with their advice. I mean, obviously, you don't want to be stupid and not do that. What I find is I have a tendency to sometimes lure my past experiences into the present and be, perhaps, too eager to develop consensus when what I really needed to do is hear them, decide, and move on. And I'm learning that I need to develop a little bit more of an executive side of my style, not to bring everything to them because it's a waste of time - and that's not true of servant leadership in a small evangelical community. (M. Carney, personal communication, May 9, 2006)

Finally, Carney stated that it is important for her to maintain good communication with other members of the University community - especially with the Board, the faculty, and the students. Regarding the Board of Trustees, she pointed out that she works very hard to be both a servant and peer by providing "important material or analysis of issues or guidance about what needs to be on the agenda... and helping to lead their agenda by giving them experiences that will help them function better as trustees" (M. Carney, personal communication, May 9, 2006). She stated that it is very important to her to maintain good communication with the faculty with whom she shares governance responsibility around curriculum and other areas that deal specifically with the educational function of the University. She also pointed out that it is important to empower and develop the place of student government in the University, which, she noted, seems to be underdeveloped at the moment, and to help the students find their own voice.

One participant provided an interesting summary of Sr. Margaret's style of leadership by asserting that she is (1) transformational in her approach to leadership, (2) transactional

and charismatic, and (3) that she is truly a servant leader. Of these, the respondent maintained that the one that best captures her style was expressed in the ritual that Carney mentioned regarding the presentation of the pitcher and bowl during the Mass before her inauguration. For this participant, the ritual symbolized “that she was going to be a foot washer and a real servant to the community - and she’s done that” (Participant 8, personal communication, May 11, 2006).

The other participants used the following descriptors to characterize Sr. Margaret’s style of leadership:

1. **Strong:** In one way or another, the majority of the participants report that Carney is perceived as being a strong leader. As one respondent put it, “I can’t really say that she has one style or another because I’m not good at that. I would simply say that she is the strongest leader that I’ve ever worked with” (Participant 5, personal communication, May 8, 2006). The other participants observed that she is strong, direct, challenging, strategic in planning and in execution of projects, not afraid to make decisions, open to hearing dissenting opinions, and that she requires that other administrators be accountable for their areas of responsibility.
2. **Collaborative:** Six of the participants reported that Carney is collaborative - that she strives to build consensus, encourages people to be accountable, and that she is supportive to her coworkers. As one participant observed, Carney “is a terrific boss. She provides us time, resources, encouragement and guidance - when we ask - and then gets out of the way and lets us do our jobs” (Participant 1, personal communication, May 8, 2006).
3. **Informed:** Five of the participants remarked that Carney is a detail-oriented person, that she is analytic and that she tries to gather a lot of information before making decisions. One pointed out that this can be detrimental at times, especially when she

asks “for too much information in such a way that it can get into her or others’ way... but, not for long because she doesn’t have time” (Participant 7, personal communication, May 11, 2006).

4. Open to learning and developing as a leader: Several of the participants agreed that, even though Carney has had years of experience as a leader, she is still open to learning. As one participant opined, “it’s been interesting to see her leadership style evolve.... she’s still learning to be a president... the future is bright in that respect” (Participant 7, personal communication, May 11, 2006).
5. Communicative: Three of the participants specifically mentioned that Carney is a good communicator, very articulate, a good listener, inclusive and tries to empower people - especially by treating them with respect and concern.
6. Compassionate and fair: Three of the respondents reported that Carney is concerned with how her decisions impact others, that she is concerned about their feelings and that she is an extremely fair person.

There is a general consensus among the participants that Carney is a very good and effective leader and that she exhibits many of the traits that are traditionally associated with servant leadership - that is, that she is collaborative, empowering, respectful, communicative, well informed, compassionate, and fair.

Ten Characteristics of Franciscan Leadership

An in-depth analysis of the transcripts of the interviews revealed ten primary characteristics of Franciscan leadership that emerge from this case study: respect for the individual, empowerment, collaboration, communication, ethical world view, commitment to the growth of people, informed decision-making, openness to learning, compassion and fairness, and demonstration of a servant attitude. The depth of the information provided by

the interviews highlight other characteristics as well. These ten were chosen as those which, in my opinion, form the basis of Carney’s approach to leadership.

10 Characteristics of Franciscan Leadership

Characteristic	Description
Respect for the individual	A Franciscan leader instinctively cultivates respect for individuals based on the belief and recognition that all are sons and daughters of God, created in the divine image.
Empowerment	A Franciscan leader becomes empowered by striving to empower others.
Collaboration	A Franciscan leader invites others to share and actively participate in decision-making and in the execution of common projects.
Communication	A Franciscan leader strives to have open, honest, and consistent communication with co-workers and other stakeholders.
Ethical worldview	A Franciscan leader bases her or his behavior and decision-making on a deeply seated value system and does what is ethical simply because it is ethical.
Commitment to growth of others	A Franciscan leader is committed to assisting others to grow and develop as people and as professionals.
Informed decision making	In making decisions, a Franciscan leader: (1) defines the situation or problem, (2) gathers the necessary information, (3) confers with those involved and affected by the decision, (4) attempts a consensus, and (5) makes the decision if a consensus cannot be achieved.
Open to learning	A Franciscan leader recognizes that they may not have previous experience relevant to every decision but is open to learn through experience, consultation and ongoing personal education.
Compassionate, fair and strong	A Franciscan leader is compassionate and fair, but knows how and when to be decisive.
Servant	A Franciscan leader is a servant leader based on the example of Christ who washed the feet of his disciples.

Taken from: Higgins, Michael J. (2007). *Sr. Margaret Carney, OSF: The First Full Time Woman President of Saint Bonaventure University A Case Study of Franciscan Leadership in Higher Education*. Doctoral Dissertation, Capella University, Minneapolis, p. 164.

This case study on the leadership style of Margaret Carney adds to the existing literature about how women exercise leadership in higher education. It also clarifies, or at least offers one example, of how key elements of Franciscan spirituality can influence and inform the practice of leadership. In addition to providing some fascinating insights into the development of a model of Franciscan leadership, this study also points out how effective it can be even in the midst of confusion, difficulty and discouragement. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as challenging his followers with these words near the end of his life: “The Lord has shown me what is mine to do. May He now show you what is yours to do.” Margaret Carney’s experience at Saint Bonaventure University provides a privileged glimpse into how one of Francis’ followers has taken these words to heart and is exemplary of them.

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