

Courage- Gift and Craft

Unleash the Spirit's Gift of Courage



Deborah Stollery

Courage: Gift and Craft

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WHERE DO YOU NEED MORE COURAGE?

Courage...what is it really? From the Catholic Christian perspective, it is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So courage is a gift. But what else is courage? Aristotle called it the first virtue because it makes all the other virtues possible. That means courage is a quality of the mind or spirit that begins as a gift but demands skills and practice to flourish. But courage is also connected to the heart. As a matter of fact, courage comes from the Latin "cor" which means heart. So what is courage: a gift, a virtue, a matter of the heart. And it's also a skill that can be learned and then practiced. With that in mind, let's take a look at types of courage on the way to discovering just what kind of skills might be needed right now to exercise ecclesial leadership courageously.

Here are three big kinds of courage we may find ourselves needing: try courage, trust courage and truth courage. What follows is a little more about each, with my deepest hope that you find in these descriptions some clarity about the kind of courage you need, right now! Then you can pray for it, build the specific skills that give you confidence in this area, and seek opportunities to practice it.



Try courage: it's just what it seems. This is the courage to try something for the first time, or the first time in a long time. This can be as simple as a new food or as complicated as a new approach to faith formation. This can be as critical as saving your health or as adventurous as trying your hand at a potter's wheel. When I first moved to West Virginia, a big "try" courage for me was to take myself, by myself, and hike a part of the C&O Canal. Would I be safe? Get lost? Meet threatening people or animals? It was a small "try", but the amount of courage it took didn't feel small! So on a chilly late Spring day I laced up my shoes, grabbed my keys and took myself the 8 miles to the local entrance to the canal. Breathing deeply, watching alertly and facing my fears, I walked about 4 miles in peace and tranquility, spoke friendly words to fellow walkers, joggers and bikers, scratched a couple of dog heads and came home...triumphant. Try courage. Is this what you need right now?

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Trust courage. This one can be very tough for perfectionists, control junkies, those who work for perfectionists or chronic critics, and those pressed for time. Trust courage is the courage to hand over parts of a project, program, or process to others, trusting that they will do what needs to be done and do it well enough. We would not be here as Christians today if Jesus had not practiced this with the first apostles and those apostles then practiced this with others throughout the ages. And yet, despite Jesus' model, trust courage can be very difficult. Why? It often takes longer when you delegate. It can be messier. It almost always turns out at least some different than the plan or imagination. It can go sideways, skid off the rails, create a dust-up of some sort. And it takes more time. Finally, this kind of courage leaves you open to both criticism and blame, and asks you to give acclaim to others when things go well. Yep...trust courage is a tough one. And yet it is the way to form disciples. It is Jesus' way.

Truth courage. This is the kind of courage it takes to speak up or speak out. In the social justice world, the phrase is "speaking truth to power." For so many who are part of staffs, teams, committees, councils or commissions, this is the courage to say what you see or feel, from where you stand, rather than to remain silent. One evidence of a shortage of truth courage is the meeting after the meeting, where one or more people say what should have been said during the meeting but did not. Why? There is less likely for there to be push-back, the need to explain further, or fiery opposition in the meeting-after-the-meeting, so that is where they share their "truth." And all too often, their perspectives are full of knowledge, wisdom and understanding, Spirit gifts that could have made all the difference in the earlier discussion. Does this happen with you, to you or around you? Do you need truth courage with a specific person, group of people or circumstance? What kind of climate is necessary for truth courage to flourish? How can you begin to create that space of psychological (I hope not physical but maybe this, too) safety so that truth courage is welcomed?



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Try, trust, truth...three kinds of courage. Perhaps you can identify which you are most in need of right now and begin to ask for the Spirit's gift of courage. Then you can begin to develop the skills you need to feel confident in exercising it. You will lead more effectively and everything improves when leaders improve!

Looking for some assistance in developing courage? Contact us through our website at www.pentecostvigilproject.org! We'd love to assist you as together we take the #synodjourney.

“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged.” *Deuteronomy 31:8*



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SKILLS TO UNLEASH COURAGE

I'd like to take a look at what builds or strengthens courage once the gift of the Spirit is present in one or more forms. Please keep in mind, these skills strengthen courage. They do not create courage, for that is a gift of God's grace, a product of experience, and/or an immediate necessity in the face of danger.

So you've identified that you need to use try, trust or truth courage. Where do you as an ecclesial leader go now to bolster one of these types of courage? Well, let's start right here with remembering that you, as a church leader, have already used one or more of these three different kinds of courage. You try new things, you trust those around you with significant responsibilities and you speak Jesus' truth in sometimes uncomfortable situations. Try, trust and truth...three kinds of courage. So start with remembering what supported your courageous action? And what skills did you use?

Now let's consider three skills that can strengthen one or more of the kinds of courage. By strengthen I mean to give structure, language, and methods to you. Here are three skills that do just that:

1. Vision-casting
2. Mindfulness
3. Remembering



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- **Vision-casting.** Ecclesial leaders don't need a vision. Jesus gave us that: the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. But leaders have to be able to cast that vision for the people entrusted to them. As you begin to do that, step by step by 1) knowing who you are and, 2) identifying what God has entrusted to you, 3) knowing where the vision is asking you to lead your people next, 4) identifying why this is the next destination, 5) painting a picture of what it will feel like as you journey together to this destination along the way, 6) specifying what you want others to do, 7) sharing the overall plan, and 8) specifying outcomes and rewards, courage is strengthened because there's more than a vision, more than burning hearts...there's a way and a leader. Vision-casting is a skill that can improve TRY courage.
- It's easy to get caught up in a vision and a plan, to get moving and be swept along in the enthusiasm of carrying out an effective plan or project. And it's also easy to be overcome by the stress of leading into a vision, meeting resistance, overcoming setbacks, looking fear in the face and moving on. **Mindfulness** helps reduce stress and that strengthens courage. Mindfulness strengthens courage as you learn how to manage yourself in stressful situations, and as you become more self-aware and discover both personal triggers and the means to control them. Scientists tell us this literally rebuilds the grey matter in the brain, creating a strong mind free of stress, and that supports courageous actions. The skill of mindfulness supports TRUST courage.
- This one is perhaps the simplest in some ways and yet can be the most difficult when fear and related stressors erupt. It is the skill of **remembering** when you've successfully moved through fear and continued to act, when you looked fear in the face and then took the next step that builds courage. It is when you remember how Jesus, the apostles, the martyrs and the saints stood firm. This builds courage. For ecclesial leaders, remembering is happening when you are able to retrieve knowledge, apply your theological understandings, tell the story of God's action in the midst of your current situation, draw from other knowledge streams and remain curious. This skill set builds the kind of courage required to speak Jesus' TRUTH in often hostile situations.



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So there you have it...three skill sets that strengthen the gift of courage. Courage is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But it also takes our cooperation to develop and strengthen it so that we might lead others closer to Jesus in a world that wants anything but that.

The final chapter takes Jesus' courageous leadership methods and applies specific elements of his kind of courage to one of the demands of our times: racial reckoning.



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JESUS, SYNODAL LISTENING AND RACISM

Jesus' entire life was dedicated to one thing: showing everyone he met God's vision of the Kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven. And that took courage. First, it took the *courage of conviction*. He knew, with every fiber of his being, that this is God's dream and that he had been sent by the Father to reveal that dream. It's plausible that each time he went off to pray after revealing a piece of the dream, he was praying once again for conviction so that he might continue to have the courage he needed to teach, preach, and heal.

Jesus also displayed the *courage that flows from being passionate* about something. You know the kind of passion I am talking about, the kind that makes you put aside your own health, well-being and relationships in order to pursue it. Friends, that takes courage: to step away from your own needs, the demands of friends and family, and even your safety! Jesus had that kind of courage, courage fueled by passion. And he reminded us that we will need the same to follow him. He said that we have to “hate our father and mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters”^[i] in order to follow him. That is a description of passion that fuels real courage.

Jesus also revealed the kind of courage that comes when you know that even if you make a mistake, if your message falls on deaf ears, if your companions fail you, *the mission goes on*. There's nothing that can permanently derail it because it is God's will. Yes, there can be setbacks, betrayals, denials and fallow periods where there's no apparent progress. But still the cause is so just, so right and so aligned with God's intention that mercy and forgiveness reign and the mission goes on. Jesus' unending message of forgiveness is a bedrock of courage, for it permits us to get up and focus on the mission again!

With Jesus' courage as the backdrop, let's take a minute to see just what kind of courage ecclesial leaders need when it comes to leading in this time of racial reckoning...a facing of the intentional, systemic and generational denial of an entire race of people their dignity as human beings and their rights as human beings and as citizens in this country.

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- **Courage flowing from conviction.** Courage begins with self-awareness. What do we, as leaders, believe about racism in our country and in our Church? Are we absolutely convinced that not only is this real, *but that it contravenes God's intention for the way in which human beings live together on the earth; that as long as racism exists, God's kingdom is far from coming on earth as it is in heaven?* If we are struggling to believe this, why might that be so? What needs conversion, experience, knowledge or story to help our conviction? Whose stories do we need to listen to?
- **Courage born of passion.** It's one thing to intellectually assent to the reality of racism. It's another thing altogether for that intellectual assent to combine with the heart-felt knowledge of the suffering of our brothers and sisters: those you love, but more importantly, those "others" that God loves and commands that you love in the same way. Courage is a matter of the heart, and so without passion that drives us to relentlessly stand up and speak up, then there's not the Jesus-like passion that fueled 40 days without food or water, that compelled walking through Samaria, that drove him to overturn tables in the temple. His heart was fully human, ached with compassion, raged about injustice and wept in grief. He was passionate. That passion birthed courage. This is why it's a matter of the heart and a gift from the Holy Spirit! Whose story do you need to feel in order to be passionate?
- **Courage grounded in mission and fueled by mercy and compassion.** When it comes to being a white female ecclesial leader learning to be an anti-racist, I am counting on this. I am counting on the reality of the Kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven, and on the necessity for mercy and compassion. As Dr. Brené Brown says, "I am not here to be right. I am here to get it right."^[ii] But that means I am going to get it wrong, maybe more times than I get it right. It means I may never get it more than a little right. That means I have to trust that mercy and forgiveness permeate the Church's culture, as together we face racism. Otherwise, we are not doing this as Jesus did, as the Church teaches, or as we need in order to persist. And I am committed to continue to listen with mind and heart, to discern with others and to act for justice, as I go on the #synodjourney.

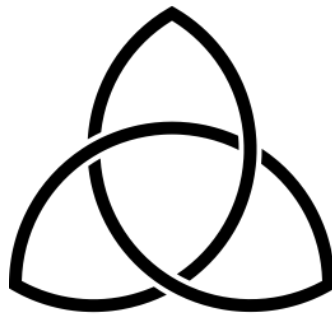
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All of this is the work of ecclesial leaders. We are the people who embrace courage as a gift, work to strengthen it with skills in casting the Kingdom vision, practicing mindfulness, and accessing memory. We are the people who know we need different kinds of courage in different circumstances: try, trust and truth courage. We are the people tasked with building courage in others. And finally, most importantly, we are leaders who courageously lead as Jesus did, with conviction, passion and a mission focused supported by mercy and compassion.

We are leaders, on the #synodjourney, listening, discerning in common and acting in justice. Won't you join others on the #synodjourney at www.pentecostvigilproject.org? Follow us on Facebook and Instagram, and invite others who are embracing the vision of a synodal Church to come along. We make this road, as they say, by walking together!

[i] Luke 14:26

[ii] <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2020/02/13/the-courage-to-not-know/> Accessed 5/12/21





Courage: gift, virtue, heart, skill

The Pentecost Vigil Project, Inc. is a new nonprofit dedicated to supporting the embrace of synodality in the US Catholic Church. We want to connect those who are embracing this journey, first together in Christ, then with each other and with us, as we pray, listen, and work ...guided by the Spirit. Please join us: www.pentecostvigilproject.org!

Together with the Spirit, synodality becomes the way we are the Church.

