Augustine lived in a time of great division among the Christians of North Africa. His actions for the interests of the common good show what it meant to be a leader at that time. Augustine did not have a “theory of leadership.” His focus was practical and pastoral. It may be possible, however, to characterize his actions in ways that are meaningful for leaders today.

HAVING THE OTHER’S BACK
An example from his life is a good place to begin. When he was forced into priesthood by the people of Hippo in 391, he was shocked by what he found in that seaport city. Catholics—a minority of the Christian population—were held in contempt and even subject to violence. Early in his ministry, Augustine wrote a letter to Valerius, his bishop, saying, “Nothing in this life, and especially at this time, is more difficult, more laborious, and more dangerous than the office of a bishop, priest, or deacon.” Having no background for what he was facing, he asked to study the Scriptures so that he could learn how to act “for the salvation of others, not seeking what is beneficial for me, but for many, that they may be saved.”
To care for others, Augustine required a grounding in the “counsels recorded in the holy books” so as to be able to “minister to the more ordinary affairs of the Church or at least to live with a sounder conscience among the bands of the wicked.”

Taking the theological lead, Augustine teamed with Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, who took the administrative lead; and Alypius, bishop of Thagaste, who took the legal and political lead. They worked for some 30 years to strengthen the Christian community from within, developing a vision of Church that was not combative but inclusive of as many Catholic communities as possible.

Leadership, in other words, had a communal dimension, which Augustine put into action in his respectful dialogue with the Donatist bishop Fortunius, and in his invitation to others to join him in a search for truth. These ways of thinking and acting extended to his leadership within the Catholic community, where he insisted on shared service, rather than on his own individual ministry.

This leadership might be expressed as “I’ve got your back” or a willingness to sacrifice for another. Augustine insisted on the work of many, not on personal service. His approach was not so much that of a servant leader as it was of a fellow servant—a description that aligns with his understanding of others as members of the Body of Christ. His appeal to union in Christ was an application of Paul’s words: “What do you have that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7). This emphasis on equality and mutuality fits Augustine’s notion of Church and may be the hallmark of his leadership.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Another quality of Augustine’s life is an insistence on humility. Although humility is often seen as focusing on one’s limits and frailty, Augustine saw it as a robust acceptance of one’s humanity in a down-to-earth (humus) way. Because of his newfound appreciation of the humility of Christ, he could confess his sins in a book-long description of how God had treated him. But he recognized that he had to treat others as he had been treated. He thus led by extending himself in friendship to his adversaries. Instead of trying to exercise authority, he acted with compassion, engaging in conversation rather than criticizing from afar.

Humility, therefore, is self-knowledge. Augustine’s acceptance and even proclamation of his sinful life allowed him to take a leading role in the healing of the division between Catholic and Donatist North African Christians. Leading others to accept their humanity was not a matter of preaching ideals but a process of becoming human.

In fact, Augustine often defended those “accused or convicted of crimes.” His letters show “a constant exhortation to humanitas, which he associates with the recollection of our own humanity and the humanity of others.” Augustine exercised leadership not simply as a placid application of a plan but as a passionate activity. Having accepted his humanity, he used his experience to guide others.

Therefore, the Rule that he wrote for his religious community could say, “The superior, for his part, must not think himself fortunate in his exercise of authority but in his role as one serving you in love. In your eyes he shall hold the first place among you by the dignity of his office, but in fear before God he shall be as the least among you. He must show himself as an example of good works toward all.”

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