

When Vatican officials train for leadership

The Jesuits offer members of the Roman Curia and religious congregations a way to envision new methods for decision-making

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In the Vatican, leadership training for members of the Curia and religious congregations. (Photo of St. Peter's Square April 2020 by ANDREAS SOLARO/AFP)

"Act like Wonder Woman."

At the bottom of a wooden amphitheater, the man with salt and pepper hair puts his hands on his hips.

With a Roman collar around his neck, he continues to give instructions from behind his black face mask: "Plant your feet firmly on the ground, rotate your body, and shake your hands."

The some 40 people in the audience imitate his motions like good sports.

They are priests, male and women religious and even lay people employed by the Church who have come for a week-long **leadership** training workshop.

It took place from October 19-26 at the General Curia of the Society of Jesus, just a stone's throw from St. Peter's Square.

The man who is directing the course is Father David McCallum, vice-president of Jesuit-run Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York.

A graduate of Columbia University, he draws directly from methods imported from business schools, many of which are run by his fellow Jesuits in the United States.

"What is the dream of your dicastery? Of your congregation?" he asks the group.

"The temptation is to shrink dreams. These dreams continue; they are Jesus' dreams," he says.

"Now is the time to make decisions"

The week-long training session is in English. Three weeks earlier, the Jesuits held the initial session in Spanish.

Most of the Catholic leaders in attendance hold major positions in the Roman Curia, the so-called Vatican Bank or religious congregations. But what are they looking for in these training sessions?

A better method for making decisions, several of them say.

"We have worked a lot on personal discernment, but we still need to discover what this means for a group or an institution," explains Victor Assouad, general counselor for the Jesuit superior general for Western Europe.

Father Assouad is one of those taking part in the training.

"The epidemic is a time for change," he continues.

"There is a chance here to come out of it all different. Now is the time to make decisions," the priest says.

He's quite comfortable with the word "leadership", although he admits that it can "embarrass many people in the Church."

"Detectors of Grace"

The aim of the organizers, above all, is to find ways of decision-making that are both effective and adapted to the Church.

"There are two ways of doing things in religious congregations," explains Father McCallum.

"We can either say God will provide and wait for the rest to follow, or we can pay a lot of money for consultants to come up with some kind of business plan, as though it were any kind of business. Neither option is satisfactory. So, we try to define a middle way," he says.

"Our specificity is that we take into account vulnerability," Father John Darvis, one of the trainers, points out to the participants.

"We must be aware of everyone's shadow side, not forgetting that it exists," he cautions.

Father Darvis also urges those present to be "detectors of grace".

"For years, the Church has been a very good detector of disgrace and faults, especially in the field of sexuality. We must not stop there," he tells them.

"We have to be open to improvisation"

Above all, the organizers also want to implement "subsidiarity", an old principle of canon law regularly put forward by Pope Francis.

"Train your collaborators, support them, don't give them missions that exceed their capacities," Father Darvis says.

"Pope Francis' approach obliges the dicasteries to collaborate and work differently," chimes in Father McCallum.

He cites the migrant crisis and global warming.

"In these two areas, if we want to reflect and decide, we need to combine different skills and different services. Otherwise, we won't succeed. We need to be open to improvisation," he insists.

This is a rather rare word in the Roman Curia, where hierarchical structures are very strong and decision-making processes are often set in stone.

Sister Roxanne Schares follows attentively.

She's the Superior General of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, a congregation of 2,200 religious sisters in 30 countries. This former missionary in East Africa also insists on the difficulty of making decisions in a changing world.

"In our congregation, we have been very invested in education," she says.

She points out that it's become more difficult to make decisions in a changing world.

"Today, the way of being educators is not the same as it was a century ago. The laity have taken (the sisters') place; they need to be trained," Sister Roxanne notes.

"How can we accompany this change? How can we better associate the laity who work with us? It is an immense challenge."

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