

“The shifting landscape has never been more challenging for Christian leaders. As such, for those of us called to this ministry, it is critical that we are intentional about being soulfully grounded. Sam Rahberg’s *Enduring Ministry* provides an elegant and thought-provoking invitation to go deeper into who God is calling us to be. This is a resource I will not only continue to use for personal reflection, but will widely share with those I am called to walk with as they discern and form how to use their gifts for God’s mission.”

—The Rt. Rev. Brian N. Prior, IX Bishop of the Episcopal Church,
Minnesota

“Gracefully blending leadership and ministerial experience, spiritual direction, and the fruits of being attentive to one’s own growth and spiritual journey, Rahberg’s *Enduring Ministry* is a valuable resource for any ‘who wish to live faithfully and well towards a ministry that endures.’ This book will have broad appeal not only to those in active Christian ministry, but also all who work with or accompany those called to this service. Anyone who has struggled at times to remain faithful to or energized by their call to serve others will find in Rahberg a wise and understanding companion willing to share his own challenges in finding life and joy through continuing commitment to an enduring ministry of Christian service.”

—Michael Sirany, teacher and supervisor
Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality, Saint Paul, Minnesota

“In *Enduring Ministry*, Samuel Rahberg claims that ministry endures when it is grounded in lived experience and enriched by God’s Word, theological wisdom, and institutional commitments. What he offers is a perspective that helps us navigate the risks and rewards of one’s life calling in a spirit of reflective fidelity.”

—Carol Rennie, OSB, Spiritual Director
Benedictine Center, St. Paul’s Monastery, St. Paul, Minnesota

“Sam Rahberg’s *Enduring Ministry* offers a guide for discerning your transitions. He’s a practitioner that has been seasoned through experience and tradition. This book is bold and brave. For a long, lingering, look at the ‘worth it’ of ministry this book is timely and true to today’s changing culture of Church.”

—Mary Margaret Funk, OSB
Our Lady of Grace Monastery, Beech Grove, Indiana

“Here at the intersection of truth-telling, the ministerial life, tradition, and a naïve response to the vocational call, this book incorporates the complexity and challenges that church leaders face. Passage through a lifetime of ministry is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, or an endurance as the author describes to be aware of one’s progress. Through years of practice, listening, and spiritual direction, Sam Rahberg interprets his experience, and does what one rarely will in leadership; he admonishes church leaders when they are feeling vulnerable and unable to grasp effective strategies for renewal to watch once again for the presence of God and renew their vocational call and spiritual practices. Drawing on the Benedictine charisms, these chapters offer the gift of new perspectives to the rigors of a ministerial life and the means to cultivate the seeds of hope that might keep one from disappearing from the ranks of Church leadership.”

— Barbara Sutton, Director Field Education and Ministerial Formation
Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville,
Minnesota

“Ministry can be exhilarating, beautiful, and life-fulfilling. But it can also be heartbreaking and exhausting, and it demands from the best of us a stamina and resilience we often struggle to maintain. I’m so grateful for Sam Rahberg’s gracious, practical, and deeply honest book which offers an elegant, humane, and sustainable approach to the challenge of lifelong vocation. If someone had put a copy of *Enduring Ministry* in my hands twenty years ago my ministry would have looked very different. I wish they had.”

— Chris Webb, OSB, Deputy Warden of Launde Abbey and author of
The Fire of the Word

“Invitingly authentic. The leader is immediately invited into a reflective process through imagery, Scripture, poetry, and story as Sam’s authentic and wise voice is experienced in his writing. The realities of Christian public leadership are explored through discerning questions and practices, which invite the readers to listen to their hearts and minds as they faithfully reflect on how they lead.”

— Sr. Noreen Stevens
Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership Support
Saint Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church
in America

Enduring Ministry

Toward a Lifetime of Christian Leadership

Samuel D. Rahberg



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*For my parents,
who introduced me to the practice of ministry.*

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Foreword

Leadership in Christian ministry has never been an easy calling. From the very start of the Christian community, life gathered around the Risen Lord seldom followed a straight, harmonious pattern. Some of the apostle Paul's best writing were his instructions about how people were to behave as they followed the new Way. Take, for instance, the brilliant passage where Paul lays out a vision of Christian life breathtaking in its magnanimity (Rom 12:9-18). One suspects, however, that it was an exhortation and not necessarily what Paul found at work among the Christians of Rome:

Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality. Bless those who persecute [you], bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Have the same regard for one another. . . . If possible, on your part, live at peace with all.

In other writings attributed to Paul, there is no vagueness about his purpose. Listen up, friends; what you are doing is a contradiction to the Gospel (e.g. 1 Corinthians).

This all acknowledges that pastoral leadership is demanding and often exhausting. In my years of working with church ministers and facilitating staff development events, I have been amazed at the depth of commitment so many have to their work. But I carry as well anecdotes about acts of ruthlessness, lack of charity, mutual neglect, and anger that confront the power of theology to overcome the inclinations of human nature. All communities are,

after all, made up of human beings. Being a disciple of Christ does matter, but it charges people with the hard work of learning to live together in peace.

Into this swirl of reality where the good, the bad, and the ugly are always in play, comes this timely book by Sam Rahberg. Its title is a bit enigmatic in that one could receive it in two different ways. For some the arrival of this book might signal a lifeline in the midst of ministerial service where one feels discouraged, unsettled, and even adrift from one's vocational moorings. In this sense, some might be looking for how to bear up, to literally endure situations that feel less and less life-giving. *Enduring Ministry*, however, is not designed for this audience. Theirs are worthy needs, but for Rahberg the focus is on the other sense of endurance—the ability of the Christian vision underlying leadership to last, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. This book, generated directly from Rahberg's own ministerial experience, demonstrates the power of ministerial reflection. Leaders can go about their tasks without taking time for reflection, but my observations are that over time their ministries hollow out. The work becomes just labor—creative, important, necessary—but it teaches nothing to the ministers themselves. That is where the unraveling of ministry begins and the sense of toughing it out emerges.

At the heart of *Enduring Ministry* is Rahberg's core argument that the capacity to sustain oneself across the tumult and chaos of ministerial life resides primarily in the decisions individual ministers makes about how to live and lead. Put more succinctly, if the zeal of ministry is to endure, "manage thyself." Rahberg is not offering one more self-help scheme, a set of steps that lead to happiness. Nor is he unmindful of the wellspring of grace that enlivens all human effort. Rather, his is an invitation to the challenge of being attentive to one's own inner life so that the issues we all carry as a result of the families into which we have been born and the developmental experiences we have accrued do not go unexamined. "Managing oneself" means, practically, that pastoral leaders are not working out on others what they should be addressing themselves. Whether taking this initiative happens in spiritual direction, therapy, ministry support groups, or journaling, the minister is alert to ways she or

he can achieve a measure of freedom, enlightened by their past but not its prisoner.

My experience, once again, is that the most effective (and most satisfied) ministers I know have all pursued ways to manage themselves so that they avoid being taken hostage by the host of often unavoidable circumstances arising in the course of leading. Ministers who hoard anger, re-open again and again the wounds of disappointment, tolerate intolerable working conditions, or work night and day to blot out their feelings of oppression all in the end finally die. Their bodies go on, but their hearts are broken.

While *Enduring Ministry* does not offer a quick fix, it does offer a structured discipline for reorienting how one will lead in ministry. It begins (and ends) with being clear about the vision one holds. Without vision and a compelling mission, it is tempting to chase activity to the detriment of contemplation. The process of reflection that the author lays out honors the importance of the questions to which we need to attend just as we need to be purposeful about the stories that frame and interpret our experience. This is not a text calling for a new level of heroism, especially the sort where ministers allow themselves to be swallowed up by expectations of perfection—either of themselves or of the institutions they serve. Managing oneself means knowing oneself—one’s gifts and limitations. Gaining such self-knowledge is, as Rahberg argues, central to the work of growing and deepening as a minister. It cannot be relegated to the rare gaps in busyness when a person tries to take stock. Rahberg’s own reading of the Benedictine tradition grounds his conviction that paying attention, being purposeful, and embracing a lifetime of discernment opens the minister—the disciple of Christ—to an expansion of heart, mind, and soul. It is in that new space that the minister discovers new possibilities for her or his leadership, finds the courage to make choices that lead towards the light, and rediscovers the transformative power of one’s vocational call.

Pastoral ministers provide indispensable leadership to individuals and communities seeking to be faithful to an inspired vision of God’s action in the world. It is indeed demanding work, and stories abound of its shadow side where leaders simply end up plowing through the misery. But *Enduring Ministry* tells a different story in

the generous sharing of the author's own experience and spiritual practice. This book and the process it provides signal the promise of a new beginning. Managing oneself is as challenging as leading a fractious community. The hope is in beginning, taking the steps, and living into a discipline whose fruits are so brilliantly described in a blessing by the Irish writer, John O'Donohue:

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.¹

Victor Klimoski
Former Director of Lifelong Learning
Saint John's School of Theology • Seminary, Collegeville, MN

¹ "For A New Beginning" by John O'Donohue in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 14. Used by permission.

Preface

When people in ministry get weary, disillusioned or frustrated—as is bound to happen from time to time—it is tempting to swallow hard and bully on. Seldom, over the long run, does that end well or with joy. Eventually Christian leaders and those they serve both suffer. Sometimes ministers kick the dust from their sandals and go in search of greener pastures and, at times, this may indeed be the best option. But what if ministers remain unclear about whether to stay or go, or are leaning toward staying but desperate to reclaim a more wholehearted approach? This book is designed for those who seek a more durable way forward, one that is infused with grace and inspired by good mission. Chapter by chapter we will attend to the shift from merely enduring to lasting and effective Christian leadership.

One early example for us to consider is Benedict of Nursia (480–543 AD), a Christian leader of world renown, whose first experience of ministry in community was less than ideal. As Gregory the Great (540–604 AD) tells the story, a group of men sought out the hermit Benedict in a cave near Subiaco. The men wanted Benedict to become their abbot, but he refused almost as long as they persisted. Soon the new abbot's rule of life proved too stringent for the fledgling community and the men attempted to poison Benedict, first through wine, then through bread. Miraculously, according to Gregory, Benedict blessed the chalice and it broke; he blessed the bread and a raven carried it away. Benedict escaped this first experience of community and went on to inspire a legacy of monastic life that has endured for over fifteen hundred years.

Even without personal experience of near-death leadership, this story should pique a sense of curiosity and solidarity in Christian leaders. The dramatic episodes that are told to help us understand

Benedict's vocational discernment remind us that we are not the first to face challenges in ministry and questions about our calling. In his narrative, Gregory stressed that Benedict responded to the broken chalice with full composure—"with a calm face and a tranquil mind," according to the translation by Terrence Kardong.¹ What a gift it would be if Christian leaders could turn toward the challenges and questions we face with that kind of composure. Unfortunately, many of us are more accustomed to variations of anger and sadness, two sensations that are sure to cloud judgment and to make discernment more difficult. I want this book to invite a lessening of our anger, an easing of our sadness, and a renewing of our composure. Such steep outcomes will be entrusted to the grace of God, but I do hope that this sense of invitation engages those who read these pages.

My own story of evolving vocation may sound familiar to other Christian leaders. When I was in my late twenties, I left a lovely little parish in St. Paul, Minnesota. I appreciated the people and a great deal about the community's expression of life together, but after five years of working with lifespan Christian education, I was tired and discouraged by our apparent inability to move forward. I resigned my position and shortly thereafter began serving a Benedictine spirituality center. Now, after twelve years in retreat ministry, I have felt the old waves of disappointment washing over me again. Possibilities seem dampened by realities and I have lost steam. In naming these realities, I mean to place no blame on either community I have served. Rather, I am trying to voice my commitment to keep learning about myself as the common denominator and to offer some of what I am learning for the benefit of others.

I have chosen to remain in my current position. More precisely, I have chosen to stay over and over again, usually taking small bites of six months to a year at a time. I do so because I want to grow into the next thirty years of Christian leadership, contributing my

¹ Terrence G. Kardong, *The Life of St. Benedict by Gregory the Great: Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 22. For an interesting biographical connection to Gregory's own struggle to maintain spiritual composure in the papacy, see 27–28.

best gifts to whatever work is before me. I believe it is important for me to face the patterns underlying my disappointments so that I might become less distracted from my calling. God is here and now, inviting me into more mature forms of leadership. If and when the time comes for me to make a transition, I will depart knowing I have served faithfully and gained a degree of wellness and freedom that I did not quite enjoy when I first left the parish. Decades of ministry lie ahead of me and this important work of formation will enable me to serve in more fulfilling ways than a string of posts that unfold predictably from vigor to burnout to walking away.

My struggle is not unique. Countless hours of spiritual direction and conversation with other Christian leaders tell me that there is a crisis of personal agency in the world of ministry today. Faithful women and men are struggling through a loss of vision and grounding that is negatively impacting their clarity of calling and their courage to respond to the needs they see. I am one among many who are sensing an invitation to turn and face our difficulties today in hopes of welcoming a different tomorrow. I believe that God desires us to cultivate enduring ministries and to experience joy and completeness—even within brokenness—along the way. For me, that journey begins by sharpening the attributes and practices that most help me plant my feet on solid, Christ-centered ground.

A number of influences shape my growth as a Christian leader, including Scripture, liturgy, the Rule of St. Benedict and its commentators, mentors who have formed me for professional ministry, and the faithful women and men with whom I journey as a spiritual director. I have stayed the course of ministry this long because I have also benefited from conversations with strong colleagues, spiritual directors, and some therapists. Let me commend something similar to you at the outset of this reading: surround yourself with good people.

One of the greatest dangers to our being centered is the slow and painful drift toward isolation. When the voices of resistance are the loudest ones in our lives—whether they come from within us or from outside—they become a dirge that weakens our sense of being gifted and called at our core. We hear a voice in this saying, “Maybe I am not the right person for this position, not clever enough, or

do not have a handle on the vision after all.” When that message seems to come from authority structures both above us and below us, the combined pressure can drive us to fragmentation and retreat. Keep nurturing relationships of support and trust. Find or renew your relationship with a spiritual director, mentor, therapist, coach, ally, supervisor, praying community, or combination of the above. Assemble a group of advisors formally or informally, and establish standing coffee dates with people of wisdom. Whatever connect-edness looks like in your life, the purpose is the same: surround yourself with people who embody the grace of God, helping you break down the walls of isolation and helping you keep the indis-pensable questions about giftedness and calling in the light of day.

It is my hope that in writing this book, fewer women and men leave ministry in anger or defeat and that more Christian leaders will find an inner spaciousness that allows for better discernment. That requires us holding a creative tension between the real chal-lenges of ministry and the spiritual life that undergirds it. It means making the commitment daily to participate in the mission of God without surrendering hope and faithfulness to the all-too-common anxieties and frustrations of life in community. In that respect, every word that follows applies to all the baptized. Whatever your unique calling, whether in a secular or religious context, you share the Gospel’s call to discipleship that leads to service.

Every Christian experiences the joys, the frustrations, and the hunger for renewal that accompany service. Not everyone has been called to lay or ordained ministry in parishes or nonprofits, but we are each called to integration and the search for ways to stay en-gaged with what we believe God is calling us to do in this particular place, at this particular time. In these pages I cannot help but use the language of “ministry” because it is a theme that is so often in my ears and on the tip of my tongue. Daily I encounter stories about ministry from individuals across the lifespan and serving in diverse settings. Here I will speak primarily to “Christian leaders” from my vantage point as a person trained for parish ministry and exercising leadership within a religious setting, but I write with the intention that my emphases will also resonate for others.

Readers will come to this text with different needs and hungers, and each will find their own way to make use of what follows. The

first matter is one of pace. Some may scan quickly for themes and language that help them get a feel for the big picture, while others may prefer to move slowly and steadily along. There are questions available at the end of each chapter so that those who wish to linger and reflect might do so. If anything strikes a chord in you, pause to give some room for the insight to breathe. There is also a matter of focus. The first chapter about the renewal of vision will be of interest to Christian leaders in any season of ministry. From there, some may benefit from a more targeted reading. Those who are feeling worn thin by the intensity of their circumstances and relationships will likely find the first section, *Grounded in the Moment*, most helpful in their practical approach to situational difficulties. Those chapters may be enough to consider when one is really struggling. Later chapters will appeal to those who have caught a second wind and are eager to chart a new course. The reader for whom the day-to-day aspects of leadership are modestly well in hand might turn to the second section or the third. Those feeling energized about the process of synthesizing and applying what they are learning to Christian leadership may find section two, *Perched in Conversation*, of primary interest, while those wrestling with the complexities of loss and ambiguity may wish to turn directly to section three, *Soaring in the Midst of Ambiguity*. However you choose to approach this text, I encourage you to do so as a point of conversation with other supportive people.

One final note about the reading. Lest I seem to have suggested in any way that enduring ministry is primarily about Christian leaders finding their own willpower to stand up, dust themselves off, and move on, let me reinforce what I hope infuses every charge along the way: We serve at the invitation and by the power of Christ who dwells within us. It is by the grace of God that any minister or ministry endures.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. What are you bringing to this text?
2. What do you seek?

Acknowledgments

The spiritual discipline of helping ideas take shape on a page is undergirded by the contributions of many people. Among them all, I am most deeply touched by my wife and children, who came often to my writing desk bearing hugs and smiles. I am also grateful to the staff of Liturgical Press for choosing to support a publication like this for the sake of Christian leaders and the church. Their affirmation and guidance have been enlivening.

Faithful conversation partners like Sr. Eleanor Wartman, OSB, Michael Sirany, James Michel, Steven Arnold, Peter Watkins, and Linzy Martin have helped me sharpen my thinking, as have others who have joined me for retreats and workshops. The insights that these conversations yielded have been tested and refined in collaboration with the Sisters and staff of St. Paul's Monastery, generally, and the Benedictine Center, specifically: Sisters Carol Rennie, Virginia Matter, Benita Gerold, Sharon Schiller, and Susan Bourauel, as well as Chris Folkenson, Nancy Vaccaro, and Kelly Czajka.

Few recent experiences have helped me better interpret my role as a Christian leader than being involved in the *Conversatio* life-long learning program of Saint John's School of Theology • Seminary, Collegeville and participating in Foundations of Christian Leadership, sponsored by Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, Durham. I am grateful to both of these institutions for helping leaders like me reflect upon Christ-centered ministry.

I continue to treasure the Spirit's mysterious work in the lives of women and men with whom I journey as a spiritual director. Being entrusted with their stories and invited to experience God's presence at their side is among the greatest privileges of ministry I can imagine. Where I have shared elements of their stories that emerged in spiritual direction, I have done so with permission.

Finally, over the last decade one man has held me to the fire of my own convictions like no other. By his encouragement, candor, and wit, Victor Klimoski has helped me strengthen my sense of calling and clarity. The fruits of his enduring friendship can be harvested from these pages.

Vision

Move toward Clarity

One crisp fall day high above an untamed shoreline, I hiked with my family through a beautiful forest of changing trees along the edge of a ragged cliff. Without so much as a sound, an enormous bird eclipsed the sky directly above us, moving its shadow slowly and smoothly from the woods toward the water. Unlike gulls that toss and turkey vultures that wobble, this golden eagle, breathtaking in its deep brown body, gilded nape, and wingspan of over six feet, glided without the slightest tremble until it reached the cliff. There, no more than a stone's throw away, the eagle seemed to pause in mid-air, a massive, powerful creature floating in place on unseen currents. She captivated me.

I have come to believe that what enchants us about encounters like these is the clear intersection of being and purpose. The eagle cannot be other than it truly is. Its behaviors appear natural and fitting within its own environment, demonstrating a genuine comfort with what it was made to be. It is our own capacity for authenticity, clarity of identity, and purpose, our own desire to be most fully who we truly are, that resonates so strongly with sights like these in nature. That is why everyone has stories about a sunset, landscape, wild critter, or gentle breeze that broke into a moment and awakened a new sense of clarity. We carry these images with us because they remind us that it is indeed natural for being and purpose to meet.

In contrast to the energy and assurance such images inspire, it is a lack of clarity about our being and purpose that most harms

our joy and readiness for Christian leadership. One author writes that “underlying all of the causes of burnout is a perception that something is *lacking*, which produces frustration and hinders us from taking action.”¹ This observation suggests that burnout is not primarily about exhaustion from working too hard; it is about the weariness that comes from a loss of vision. Whether it be a personal or communal vision that seems to be missing something or to have become muddled, the results are the same. Random efforts and activities, especially ones that persist over time, eventually increase our fragmentation and sap our energy. If that is true, then one of the most important responsibilities for a leader is to bring people together in ways that steward the vision. Leaders must hold up questions that help communities attend to the unique calling of God to these people in this place at this time, and yet the capacity to help shepherd a shared vision must begin at a more personal level.

All Christian leaders yearn for the renewal of their own vision and strength within the context of ministry. If we are to sustain a lifetime in leadership, we must embrace the central and recurring challenge of reclaiming and refining an orientation that infuses our leadership with direction and meaning. That is no easy or short-term endeavor, especially when the demands of everyday ministry create a drift toward ever greater complexity and ambiguity. As an ongoing act of discipleship, we continue to submit to the discovery of who we are in Christ and how we are being called to contribute to God’s mission in the world. Individuals and communities alike move toward that kind of clarity in organic, often indirect ways. Sometimes it is a stirring encounter with an eagle that can open our eyes.

Throughout history, human beings have longed to soar and today’s Christian leaders are no different. In this chapter, at the outset of our exploration about enduring ministry, we will take a fresh look at an ancient symbol. We will first consider the eagle, which generations have admired for its strengths and its weaknesses, drawing some parallels to modern ministry along the way. We will also set the stage for the chapters to follow, considering the eagle to be an archetype for the exercise of Christian leadership and an ambassador who extends to us God’s promise to renew our vision and strength.

The Eagle as Timeless Symbol

The eagle has been a political and philosophical symbol for centuries. It became the national emblem of the United States in 1782 and still appears on the official seal of the federal government. Chosen to signify strength and liberty, the image of the eagle continues to arouse a popular sense of independence, patriotism, and freedom, and yet citizens of the United States cannot claim to be unique in their appreciation of the eagle. Countries from Albania to Zambia, along with countless family crests, use some species of eagle as a central symbol. This reflects what philosophers and theologians throughout history have always known: that this mysterious creature captivates the human imagination. A brief survey of some of the key elements in their writing will help us understand more clearly the fascination that has developed over time.

The eagle appears often in Greek mythology, especially as a companion to Zeus, and it is Aristotle, writing in *The History of Animals* in 350 BC, who points to a unique attribute prized by the ancient world: the eagle was thought capable of looking directly into the sun. So essential was this power that eagles were thought to rear their young according to this standard. Aristotle writes, “The sea-eagle is very quick-sighted, and compels its young to gaze on the sun before they are feathered. If any one of them refuse, it is beaten and turned round: and the one of them which first weeps when gazing on the sun is killed, the other is reared.”²² About four centuries later and in his own *Natural History*, the Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) echoes Aristotle’s assertion that eagles force their young to look into the rays of the sun, but he also adds other elements that contributed to the eagle legends: “[Eagles] meet their end not from old age nor sickness but from hunger, as their upper mandible grows to such a size that it is too hooked for them to be able to open it.”²³

Suggestions like these built up the mystique around eagles, and not without a biblical twinge. Following Pliny the Elder, the fascination with eagles continued to swell. By the ninth century, teachers like Hrabanus Maurus (780–856 AD), a Benedictine abbot and archbishop of Mainz, were compiling encyclopedias as handbooks for Christian preaching. Hrabanus observes that the eagle

suggests God's "holy people," who with sharp sight are "lifted up to the teaching of God" and "nourished by the hope of heavenly things."⁴ References from Scripture like Psalm 103:5, "your youth is renewed like the eagle's," may have inspired other stories about the eagle's power for resurrection. Guillaume le Clerc (a thirteenth century cleric, likely from northern France) perpetuates the ideal of looking directly into the sun and refines the legends about the eagle's rejuvenation:

When it is old it becomes young again in a very strange manner. When its eyes are darkened and its wings are heavy with age, it seeks out a fountain clear and pure, where the water bubbles up and shines in the clear sunlight. Above this fountain it rises high up into the air, and fixes its eyes upon the light of the sun and gazes upon it until the heat thereof sets on fire its eyes and wings. Then it descends down into the fountain where the water is clearest and brightest, and plunges and bathes three times, until it is fresh and renewed and healed of its old age.⁵

Drawing on these and other writers, a modern scholar offers a composite explanation of the eagle metaphor to make even more explicit the theological implications as understood by Medieval Christians:

As the eagle renews its youth, so too can the man with "old clothes and dim eyes", who should seek the spiritual spring and raise the eyes of his mind to God. The rock on which the eagle sharpens its beak is Christ, on which man can sharpen his soul; the eagle also represents Christ, who came from heaven to catch souls, just as the eagle catches fish. The eagle's ability to look directly at the sun represents Christ's ability to look directly at God, and as the eagle lifts its young to the sun, so do angels lift worthy souls to God.⁶

Looking at a mere handful of writers spanning thousands of years, we cannot mistake the connections that developed between the image of the eagle and visions for the Christian life. Even these few stories help us appreciate the inspirations within our tradition that led to so many artistic renderings of eagles in sculptures, paint-

ings, and mosaics near baptismal fonts. For Christian leaders the symbol is worth unpacking even further. Some interesting parallels come into view with help from the modern study of eagles.

Eagle Strengths

The eagle's strengths are many, but three—its eyes, wings, and talons—are truly extraordinary. They represent aspects of its nature that relate directly to matters of its survival. The eagle must be able to see, fly, and hunt if it is to endure in the wild. As we watch an eagle live into its own existence, we cannot help being amazed and inspired. The strengths of the eagle can encourage us to see Christian leadership at its best.

First, eagles have remarkable two-way vision. Studies have shown that eagles possess a sense of sight so strong that they are able to clearly identify their prey at a distance of well over two miles. That is not just picking up the movement of a rabbit or noticing a small blurred ball. Miles away, eagles see a rabbit's nose twitch. To take advantage of that kind of vision, eagles must choose their point of perspective carefully. Very often they glide high above and watch open ground or water, but when they use a stationary perch, they choose one with a long and clear view. Leaders in ministry must seek out opportunities that enable them to look ahead, far beyond what is right under our own twitching noses. At the same time, we cannot lose track of those with whom we journey. With two focal points and an astonishing 180-degree field of vision, eagles see simultaneously what is beside them and in front of them. This suggests to us that awareness of who and what is around us is just as indispensable as looking far ahead.

Second, the enormous wings of an eagle enable their broad frames to take flight. Even at mature weights of ten to sixteen pounds, they can fly at speeds of up to thirty miles per hour. However, they do not always move under their own power. As we saw at the outset of this chapter, an eagle's wide wingspan makes them capable of riding invisible air currents, whether it be a wind that pushes upward after hitting a geological structure like the cliff, or a thermal that circulates in the open air and carries the eagle higher and higher. The hunt requires even more. When eagles extend their

wings and harness the energy of gravity and wind, they can dive at over one hundred miles per hour. Likewise, Christian leaders may be able to fly at impressive speeds alone and they might gracefully ride momentum by themselves, but the execution of a good mission requires something more. When the time for action comes, we need one another and the exceptional gifts each person brings.

Lastly, an eagle's talons are evidence that they are no mere scavenger. While they may occasionally take advantage of an easily accessible meal, they are certainly capable of capturing and dispatching their own prey. It requires an impressive combination of speed and force to latch on to running prey while diving from the air. Considering that the average adult squeezing a hand might exert forty pounds of pressure, the eagle is herculean by comparison. With the snap of a grip, it snatches a meal in its talons with over four hundred pounds of pressure. Christian leaders may resist the comparison to the exertion of deadly force, but most would admit that there are times when it is essential for those in leadership to demonstrate the ability to identify what is important, move swiftly, and hold on with enormous strength. The wellbeing of our communities sometimes depends on that decisiveness and firmness. This sense of power also reminds us to remain open to the possibility that our every keen skill might be transformed into an instrument for good.

Eagle Vulnerabilities

The eagle's strengths are not the only dimension of the symbol that lends insight to Christian leaders. The truth is that an eagle's vulnerabilities, particularly its solitary nature, its limits in flight, and its occasional clumsiness, are equally as instructive. Everything that makes the eagle an extraordinary bird—its size, glide and hunting acumen—all come with trade-offs, and yet these weaknesses help us better appreciate our own need for wholeness.

One weakness, as least judged according to Christian sensibilities, is that eagles are not flocking birds. With the exception of wintering over in common places like the river valleys of southeast Minnesota or hunting from mutually convenient locations like the spit in Homer, Alaska, eagles remain rather solitary. At best, we might find

inklings of relational habits in the way they establish long partnerships through the aerial tumbling ritual called “cartwheeling” or the way they commit to certain territories by carefully maintaining enormous nests. Similarly, Christian leaders must remember to foster community and stability in our lives lest we become tempted to withdraw too far from the intensity of our work with people.

A second weakness is that eagles can carry only one-third of their body weight in flight, a total of about three to four pounds. The writers of the medieval encyclopedias were convinced that eagles could do battle with animals the size of deer and modern anecdotes prove that it is indeed possible for eagles to maim or kill animals much larger than we would expect. Even so, whether fishing over open water or hunting on dry land, eagles must eventually be selective about what they carry. In order to fly away they must choose either to abandon a portion of their prey or consume it in place. The same weight limits will always apply. On a related note, eagles must regurgitate fur and bones in the process of digesting their prey. While this may test the bounds of a tasteful metaphor, we would be wise to consider the mental and emotional burdens that we attempt to digest and carry as ministers. There are always limits to our capacities. If we are to fly, we must set down some of the weight.

The final weakness, and perhaps the one most apropos for Christian leaders, is that eagles are clumsy about takeoffs and landings. An eagle hunts from a soaring or perched position because it is far easier for the enormous bird to drop into flight. Otherwise, the majestic eagle fumbles to leave the ground. Upon landing, the usually proud and competent creature is humbled by the complete inability to touch down gently. The stories of Christian leaders I know are similar. Unless a person feels sufficiently supported and in control of the variables, it can be just as hard to take flight as it is to slow down gracefully. Almost invariably, transitions in ministry are accompanied by questions of vocation and calling, often specifically about whether or not one should take off or land. Christian leaders may have the ability to focus on far off things, soar high, and swoop down when a job needs to be done, but these very same assets can make it most difficult to stop and restart well.

The Invitation to Renewal

In some respects the renewal of vision is about slowing down and restarting with grace and clarity. It may be difficult to embrace the discomfort of the potentially clumsy process, but it is the price we pay for the tremendous privilege of employing otherwise majestic gifts. Once we accept that the true source of our weariness is a vision that is lacking, we must ask what does, in fact, touch us most deeply. If we peel back the layers with honesty, we will soon pass the failed aspirations of a particular program and the fleeting disappointments of short-term projects. Even difficult relationships do not fully explain the loss that cuts closest to the core—the same part of us that is reawakened by the sight of an eagle. In that sacred interior place we intuit the need to tend a fundamental vision that accompanies us as individuals wherever we go. It is a vision of two dimensions.

The first and most important dimension of this vision is God's loving acceptance. Renewal begins by drawing near to the image God holds of me. In that light, my identity is cast as one who is wholly and unconditionally loved. I am not accepted on the basis of what I have accomplished, nor on conditions of who I might become. I am received and embraced as the less than perfect person I am right now. Here, completely exposed and vulnerable, God has called me his own. Can I bear to look directly into the brightness of that truth? It is only possible with the confidence that my life is in Christ, the truest and most enduring source of my being and purpose. Henri Nouwen, master of the vocabulary of grace, considers this confidence the foundation of Christian leadership. He writes, "Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance."⁷ Growing clarity about this relationship is crucial because it is the source of any vision to follow.

Self-acceptance is the second dimension to this core vision that is in need of renewal. This dimension is colored by an intimate knowledge of my own strengths and weaknesses, often obscured by the latter. It can become clouded by fickle voices, internal and

external ones, which are not of God. Thankfully, self-acceptance is renewed by God's acceptance. Brennan Manning, well-known author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, urges us to cultivate a truer vision of self, infused with God's vision of us, through solitude with God: "The indispensable condition for developing and maintaining the awareness of our belovedness is time alone with God. In solitude we tune out the nay-saying whispers of our worthlessness and sink down into the mystery of our true self. . . . Our identity rests in God's relentless tenderness for us revealed in Jesus Christ."⁸ This is reminiscent of Hrabanus' exhortation that those with dim eyes should become "nourished by the hope of heavenly things." God's relentless tenderness is already at work in us, renewing and strengthening. We have only to turn toward the mind of God. With even the slightest recovery of self-acceptance underway, we begin to reconnect with our sense of purpose. Manning seems to speak directly to Christian leaders when he goes on to write, "The recovery of passion begins with the recovery of my true self as the beloved."⁹ In that declaration we hear the echoes of the ancients convinced that the eagle was renewed and restored by plunging deep into the waters of life.

The eagle symbolizes the call to renewal and makes clear that the recovery of our core vision will not be of our own making. The Scriptures assure us that it is the Lord who lifts us up. Exodus 19:4 describes the Lord's presence to Moses and the people of Israel as an eagle that spreads its wings and bears its young aloft. Psalm 103 speaks a blessing to the God who redeems, loves, satisfies, and, as we have seen, renews our youth like an eagle. This faith reaffirms Isaiah 40:31, which has stirred hopes for the weary throughout the ages:

They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength,
they will soar on eagles' wings;
They will run and not grow weary,
walk and not grow faint.

The Lord consistently promises to renew our strength and yet we are reminded that we may well expect some element of waiting. God's redeeming, loving, and renewing will not necessarily come immediately, swiftly, or within the boundaries of our expectations.

We might more readily assume that we are being invited to take part in a gradual and graced movement toward clarity that continues unfolding our whole lives long.

A Vision Clarified through the Act of Ministry

Even in the waiting and the unfolding, Christian leaders are called to re-engage ministry with whatever degree of emerging clarity we currently enjoy. The entire process of renewal, not just the end result, is part of the re-orientation toward ministry. Ultimately, we seek a vision for ministry that is always being sharpened on the rock of Christ. Although external circumstances may actually change very little, an interior awareness of our vision-in-progress helps us turn toward our experiences of ministry with a greater degree of receptivity and discernment. That means trusting our lived experience itself as formative material.

Our involvement in the church and in communities is the learning environment in which we practice giving expression to our vision and continue refining it through the lens of experience. In this way, the practice of ministry is not only the expression of vision, but also the very means of sharpening it. Kathleen Cahalan, in *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, articulates well this integrative dynamic: “The professional practice of ministry constitutes the dynamic interaction of what we know, competence in the skill to act, and the moral virtues of the person we are and are becoming. Practice is the integration of doing, knowing, and being.”¹⁰ Part of the genius in Cahalan’s observation is that integration does not always flow predictably from clarity of being or knowing into doing. Sometimes the dynamic of discovery is actually initiated through practice and, in turn, shapes our sense of knowing and being. We are able to return to the trenches of ministry with partial clarity if we can trust that it is possible for our visions to continue being renewed in the midst of our service to others. That renewal might even be contagious.

One summer day near Mt. Rainer in Washington State, my wife and I hiked with our then nine- and seven-year-old children, Zoe and Nathanael, up a trail that gained a daunting three thousand feet in elevation. The trek was nearly four miles each way, a tough

but not insurmountable challenge, and we had more confidence in the children than they had in themselves. As the trail curled and climbed and as the children became more tired and impatient, we adults became even more diligent in extending encouragement and comfort. Truth be told, there was also some firm prodding. When at last we reached the summit, we encountered a sky so bright and clear that we could see the region's four mountains, a rare occurrence in the often overcast Northwest. Against that backdrop, red faced and sweaty, Zoe raised her fists high in the air and shouted, "I never thought I could do that in a hundred years!" Together we had engaged an exhausting climb one step at a time, and a little girl made her way down the mountain feeling like a giant. It made me wonder if I had just caught a glimpse of God's relentless tenderness, the way God firmly encourages and gently accompanies a beloved child up and down the mountains of life. The name of the pass, by the way, was Eagle Peak.

Eagle Grounded, Perched, and Soaring

It is not every day that we revel in clear skies and mountain tops. The ordinary realities of ministry will always ensure that there is more to Christian leadership than the thrill of reaching great heights. Whatever the circumstances might bring, we are called to sustain our core God-given vision and to give expression to that vision through the exercise of ministry. At that intersection of being and purpose, the eagle archetype can continue to invite Christian leaders to renewal. The sections to follow take their cues from the eagle to demonstrate nine qualities for leadership. Each chapter strives to combine some re-energizing perspective with useful applications. They do not necessarily flow in a linear fashion and the order should not be understood to suggest that one quality is more important or advanced than another. Consider them interdependent attributes, arranged for clarity, which tend to reinforce one another as leaders learn and grow over time and through experience.

There are moments when we find ourselves somewhat awkwardly at ground level, trying to regain our bearings within the heat of the moment so that we might act with integrity. Chapters 2 to 4 explore the qualities of awareness, poise and intentionality. Sometimes we

will have the advantage of a perch that offers a better vantage point and the potential for more purposeful conversations. Accordingly, chapters 5 to 7 will take up conviction, mutuality, and readiness. Finally, despite any illusion of ease and grace, the call to soar often comes upon the turbulent currents of change and ambiguity. Chapters 8 to 10 will consider the necessities of courage, honesty and hope to the faithful practice of ministry. The majestic eagle has long inspired others with its clarity of being and purpose whether it is grounded, perched, or soaring. Let us consider how the same is true for Christian leaders.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. Read Isaiah 40:27-31.

2. Pray this fine hymn by John Bell, member of the Iona Community:

Take, O take me as I am.
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart
And live in me.

3. What aspects of your calling seem most clear at this time?

4. What strengths and weaknesses do you carry into ministry?

5. What happens as you begin to look directly into God's relentless tenderness for you?

Notes

¹ Robert Wicks, *Bounce: Living the Resilient Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.

² *Aristotle's History of Animals in Ten Books*, trans. Richard Cresswell (London: H. G. Bohn, 1862), 9.23, 253.

³ *Pliny Natural History with an English Translation in Ten Volumes*, Vol. III, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 10.4, 301.

⁴ *Hrabanus Maurus: De Universo, The Peculiar Properties of Words and their Mystical Significance*, vol. 1, trans. Priscilla Throop (Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2009), 262. I am grateful to Catherine and Gary DeKrey for their assistance with this citation.

⁵L. Oscar Kuhns, trans. “Bestiaries and Lapidaries,” in *Library of the World’s Best Literature, Ancient and Modern*, vol. 4, edited by Charles Dudley Warner et al. (Project Gutenberg EBook, 1896), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13220/13220-h/13220-h.htm#BESTIARIES_03.

⁶David Badke, “Allegorical/Moral Meaning of the Eagle,” *The Medieval Bestiary*, <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast232.htm>. Used by permission.

⁷Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 42.

⁸Brendan Manning, *Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 34–35.

⁹*Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), xi.