

Pope Francis: Leading from the front

FR GEORGE PONODATH SJ

Pope Francis is a leader who leads by example and not only by words. Simplicity and concern for the poor are two distinctive marks of a good leader. Gandhiji is a clear example. Pope Francis too tries to lead a simple life. When he was made Cardinal in 2001 he asked his friends and well-wishers from Buenos Aires not to come to Rome but to give that money for the welfare of the poor. As a Cardinal he left his official residence and lived in an apartment; he cooked his own dinner. He travelled by ordinary public transport rather than the official conveyance.

On the day he was elected Pope, he broke several hitherto practised protocols: he preferred his ordinary black shoes to the papal red ones; instead of taking the Pope's limousine waiting for him, he jumped into the bus to go to his residence. After he was elected Pope he chose to live in Santa Marta, a hostel, rather than the Apostolic Palace.

So in the context of the present-day rat race for leadership (or rather, the rat race to climb the political or corporate slippery ladder, because real leaders never get into that rat race), Pope Francis appears to be an enigma. He told a group of students very clearly: "I did not want to be Pope. Is that okay?" Once he became the Pope he rejected most perks which come with the post. Does that say something to leaders of today? What is this leadership all about?

On May 26, 2013 Pope Francis chose to visit Sts Elizabeth and Zachariah's parish situated in the outskirts of Rome. This is not normal; the normal practice is to visit a baroque basilica in the city. Referring to the

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introduction the Pope remarked at the beginning of the Mass: "I like what you said: that the word 'outskirts' has a negative connotation but also a positive one. Do you know why? Because we understand reality better from the outskirts, not the centre. We understand it better."

Very often when they reach the top, leaders tend to look at reality from the luxurious, carpeted cosiness of their chambers. The centre, where the leader resides, represents power. True. But it does not represent the whole reality. It may be a tiny portion in many parts of the world. The greater majority



It is the spirit of reaching out to far-flung regions that governs Pope Francis' visit to Myanmar and Bangladesh. He wants to understand the reality here firsthand.

PHOTO: VINCENZO PINTO/AFP

often live at the "periphery".

Here life is harsh, intense and relentless. The leader who does not experience such realities is at risk of soon becoming irrelevant. That is why Pope Francis seeks the periphery. It is in this spirit, on July 8, 2013 he visited Lampedusa, a small island where asylum seekers arrived prior to entering Europe. There he decided (much against his nature) that he "had to travel." It is in this spirit of reaching out to the far-flung regions (the outskirts) that he visited Colombia. This is the spirit that governs his visit to Myanmar and Bangladesh too. He wants to understand the reality here firsthand. It is in this spirit that he appointed Archbishop Patrick D'Rozario CSC a cardinal. He has to become the voice of the "periphery". The Pope is interested in the periphery; he is concerned about the life of the people at the "outskirts". Let us take another incident. Maundy Thursday is a special day for all Christians. It is the day before Good Friday on which Jesus Christ was hanged on the cross. On Maundy Thursday night Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. This is repeated in a symbolic way in all the churches even today. The Pope too does it and so do other bishops and priests. Usually 12 elderly persons are selected, to represent the disciples of Jesus. In the case of the Pope it is usually the pedicured feet of 12 worthies of Rome that he washes symbolically.

But Pope Francis did not do that. On Maundy Thursday (March 28, 2013) he chose to go to a detention centre at Casal del Marmo. He washed the feet of 12 detainees, among whom were Orthodox Christians, Muslims and two women as well.

The Pope explained why he broke the long-revered

tradition: "Washing feet means 'I am at your service'... As a priest and a bishop, I must be at your service." Here is a leader who stoops to serve. True leadership is not "to be served" but to serve. True leadership is not to wield power but to exercise the authority that is invested in them for the benefit of the people. That is what Jesus Christ had told his disciples: "I whom you call Teacher and Master have washed your feet so that you too may wash each other's feet." This is servant leadership that Jesus taught 2,000 years ago. This leadership pattern is now slowly becoming a viable and popular concept. This is the leadership that the Holy Father practises. Indeed he is the leader of 1.2 billion Catholics. But his leadership is to serve humanity; it is not for self-aggrandisement.

Authentic leadership does not come easy; but all those who desire to walk in front of others, all those who want to lead from the front, have to be authentic. In order to do this, to be authentic and boldly stand before the people, one has to know them; know, not only the ones at the centre, who normally toe the line of the leader, but also those at the periphery who may not always agree with the leader. On May 18, 2013 in his address in St Peter's Square, the Pope said: "Today's world stands in great need of witnesses, not so much of teachers but rather of witnesses. It is not so much about speaking, but rather speaking with our whole lives." A true leader leads not by words but by his or her life.

Fr George Ponodath SJ is a member of the Society of Jesus, the same Society to which Pope Francis belongs. He was Rector of St Xavier's College, Kolkata and Director of Educational Media Research Centre. He is in Bangladesh as a Missionary.

REMEMBERING ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY A journalist and a gentleman

EHTESHAM CHOWDHURY

TO many of us who are over 60 years of age Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is someone we will fondly remember as a committed journalist and most gracious friend. On November 29, 2014 we lost Zaglul in a freak accident in Dhaka. He had a personal car, but preferred travelling by public transport. While getting down from a bus on his way to a TV talk show, he slipped and fell, and was fatally hit by a bus.

Zaglul was a gregarious man and loved to meet people. He would be seen at most social gatherings and sporting events of all premier clubs in the city. A senior journalist, with a keen interest in national, regional and international issues, he was often invited to talk shows and asked to write columns in various newspapers. He was known for his down-to-earth nature and non-partisan stance. His journalistic career spread over four decades. He specialised in developments in South Asia, with a panache for historical detail punctuated with hilarious satire.

He was born in Piam village under Madhabpur upazila in Habiganj district. His father, the late Nasiruddin Chowdhury, was a well-known personality, politician and a former law minister in the provincial government. Zaglul studied political science at the University of Dhaka. But even before graduation he had started working as a part-time journalist in the Pakistan Observer. After completing his studies, he joined the state national agency in 1970.

At the pinnacle of his career, he became the chief executive of Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS). He attended Saarc, non-aligned summits and Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings. He also reported for foreign magazines like Time and Peninsula of Qatar. This multi-faceted man was president of OCAB and BFUJ and was a valuable member of the journalist trade union.

He left behind his wife, a son, a daughter and lots of heartbroken relatives and friends. Sadly, two years after his death, his wife Tazeen Chowdhury also passed away after protracted illness. Zaglul was known as someone who could smile and make witty remarks even in the most trying circumstances. The man and his work will not be forgotten.

Ehtesham Chowdhury is the brother-in-law of the late Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury.



Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

Why scarcity of data should worry us

A week ago, a colleague and I needed to fact-check a claim about gun deaths across the United States.

We simply googled and found a number of sources. The most cited of these was the US government's own data. The National Center for Health Statistics, like many other federal agencies, preserved an enormous amount of important data on its website.

Data—whether it be about the economy, healthcare, tax or any other important issue—shapes public debate in the western part of the world. On the other hand, here in our part of the world, that same day, another colleague of mine was scratching his head trying to find data on suicide mortality in Bangladesh—statistics one would expect to be easily available. There were several sources, with WHO being the most notable one. However, the most recent credible nationwide data he found relating to suicide had been compiled in 2012—and this too was bereft of much-needed details.

In Bangladesh, one could

commit suicide simply because their exam results turn out to be worse than expected," my colleague explained. "A girl might take her life because of harassment she faces daily while going to school. Both are cases of suicides, but differ significantly in terms of the issue."

To formulate major policies, the government largely relies on data provided by its premier statistical agency, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). However, not only independent experts but also the government itself has repeatedly questioned the credibility of BBS data, because at times it does not make any sense.

In a recent op-ed piece titled "BBS under fire, again" published in this newspaper, Syed Mansur Hashim cited some recent blunders BBS made, earning the wrath of ministries that relied on its data and regretted it afterwards. Some incidents even imply that data might have been manipulated to show a rosy picture. When it comes to predicting yearly economic growth, for example, BBS data portrays a higher growth rate than that suggested by World Bank and IMF data. This year, economists and experts publicly questioned the estimated national economic growth—well above seven



percent—calculated by BBS. If track records are to be taken into account, the nation's renowned economists certify that World Bank and IMF data are much more reliable.

Then there was the incident when a BBS survey result caused widespread disbelief as the data showed that the Hindu population in Bangladesh had dramatically

increased going against the fact that there have been decades of consecutive decline—raising questions about the sampling process involved.

Keeping aside government data, the data provided by many NGOs may have their own flaws. If someone wants to research the incidence of rape and sexual assault

in this country, for example, NGOs are the only sources for the relevant data. Unfortunately, NGOs mainly document rape incidents based on secondary data, that is, newspaper reports.

The police also keep track of crimes reported to police stations across the country. In their website, one can find the number of cases filed under "Women and Child Repression" every month. But this data too is problematic and does not necessarily reflect the reality on the ground because, firstly, not all rape victims report the case due to the social stigma attached to it, and, secondly, "Women and Child Repression" cases are at times filed to exploit its "non-bailable" provision. Moreover, the Women and Child Repression Prevention Act covers a range of crimes including rape. Therefore, for a researcher, the likelihood of finding specific data, say on the incidence of rape, is low while that of the data available being faulty is very high. Unfortunately, this is the scenario when it comes to documenting problems that are rampant in our society.

For journalists, the problem is even more daunting. Data-based journalism has been gaining momentum for years. Yet, the unavailability of data is a prime

reason why data journalism has not flourished in our country. The scarcity of data also explains why we do not see more infographics along with news reports in our newspapers.

Recently, there's been some noise in the capital's economic arena about the need for evidence-based policymaking. Indeed, important policy decisions need to be made based on solid evidence, good data and concrete analysis. However, few have raised the question as to why there are not more organisations to collect and analyse data. True, our policymakers make blunt decisions based on presumptions instead of precise evidence. But it is also problematic that we have very few organisations that do the hard part—the research required.

That research is one of the most underfunded areas of our universities is a good indicator of our inability to comprehend the importance of data. The *Financial Express* recently reported that BBS, the nation's pristine statistical agency tasked with producing data we need, itself suffers from a dearth of statisticians. As ridiculous as this sounds, it is also an indictment of our utter neglect towards data and hard evidence.

Nazmul Ahsan is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote



LAO TZU

ANCIENT CHINESE PHILOSOPHER AND WRITER

Can you step back from your own mind and thus understand all things? Giving birth and nourishing, having without possessing, acting with no expectations, leading and not trying to control: this is the supreme virtue

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Catcher's need
- 5 Musical work
- 9 Computer shortcut
- 10 Of the kidneys
- 12 Bothered
- 13 Winesap, for one
- 14 Hot season
- 16 Old card game
- 17 Snare
- 18 Cooling season
- 21 Capitol Bldg.
- 22 Face
- 23 Apple drink
- 24 Hit on the noggin
- 26 Unruly crowd
- 29 Cold season
- 30 Do a KP chore
- 31 Play division
- 32 Warming season
- 34 Kit's cousin
- 37 Cowboy contest
- 38 Praline nut
- 39 Conspicuous
- 40 Tenant's fee
- 41 Turn down
- 42 Snare
- 43 Cooling season
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- 94 Cooling season
- 95 Capital Bldg.
- 96 Face
- 97 Apple drink
- 98 Hit on the noggin
- 99 Unruly crowd
- 100 Cold season

DOWN

- 1 Grow up
- 2 "The - Cometh"
- 3 Chaplin persona
- 4 Carry
- 5 "...man-- mouse?"
- 6 Vitality
- 7 Remove from power, in a way
- 8 Bible dancer
- 9 Ship poles
- 10 Writer Uris
- 11 Oakland team
- 12 Road sealer
- 13 Climbing plant
- 14 Lynx or lion
- 15 Lead on
- 16 Lass
- 17 Like an old cuss
- 18 Sired
- 19 Not new
- 20 Hornet's kin
- 21 Urge on
- 22 Galloped
- 23 Blasting stuff
- 24 Squabble
- 25 Lead on
- 26 Lass
- 27 Like an old cuss
- 28 Sired
- 29 Not new
- 30 Demonstrate
- 31 Urge on
- 32 Galloped
- 33 Blasting stuff
- 34 Kit's cousin
- 35 Chaplin persona
- 36 Vitality
- 37 Praline nut
- 38 Conspicuous
- 39 Tenant's fee
- 40 Turn down
- 41 Do a KP chore
- 42 Play division
- 43 Warming season
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



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