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## Reawakening Rochester: The Leadership Styles of Bishop James E. Kearney

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## Reawakening Rochester: The Leadership Styles of Bishop James E. Kearney

### Abstract

Throughout their vocation, Catholic priests are assigned to a parish within their diocese, oftentimes without their consultation, and are called to engage with that church to increase the liveliness and faithfulness of its parishioners and encounter others within the surrounding community. While the geographic location of priestly assignments will impact the immediate influence that one can have on a group of people, it is the inherent identity and leadership abilities of the priest that will dictate the trajectory of the lives of people that will proceed them. After being assigned to the Diocese of Rochester, NY in 1937, The Most Reverend James Edward Kearney, the fifth Bishop of Rochester, had to find a way to earn trust and respect from community members while also attempting to lead the city through tumultuous historical times home and abroad. Through his demonstration as a servant, authentic, and transformational leader, Bishop Kearney became a true, beloved leader and driving force of Rochester. The possession of a societal and spiritual obligation to serve others and demonstrate leadership derives from his social and personal identities. His commitments to addressing areas of social injustice, furthering education at the high school and collegiate levels, and promoting Catholic ideology while establishing relationships with other area religious leaders are still felt today, forever shaping Catholicism in Rochester.

### Keywords

Rochester, Leadership, Catholic, Authentic, Servant, Bishop

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### Introduction

Through their exercise of varying leadership styles, historical figures have discovered a way to captivate the minds of followers and improve the relationship and connection between human beings to advance their social agenda. Historical leaders in America have contributed to the growth of the country through their consistency to become more innovative and highlight social justice within their own communities. Effective leadership has become about increasing communication between leaders and followers. It is about determining a common goal to work towards together morally and ethically, not based on coercion or power domination, but rather authenticity and equity. This new approach to leadership has led to the emergence of multiple types of leadership within the *process-based* and *trait-based* leadership styles. In *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, by Peter Guy Northouse, the American author outlines three theoretical approaches to leading others: *transformational leadership*, *servant leadership*, and *authentic leadership* (Northouse, 2022). This text attempts to explain the complex, multi-dimensional process that is *leadership*, how it defines an individual's connectedness to others, and the method by which they achieve the status of *leader*.

### *Theoretical Leadership Lens*

According to Northouse, *leadership* is a process whereby an individual influences others to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2022). This definition of leadership can hold a broad meaning when not given context. For that reason, Northouse separates the term into two distinct categories, *trait-based*, and *process-based leadership*, to present theoretical

approaches for the way leadership theory can inform others and be practiced in real-world situations. A trait-based leader possesses innate physical characteristics, such as strong speaking abilities, a noticeable presence, and an amiable personality that differentiates them from their peers and naturally draws people towards them. In contrast to this, a process-based leader appreciates the methodology to becoming a *leader*, and their pathway consists of active communication and learning to establish their presence and develop the necessary moral traits required to lead (Northouse, 2022).

An individual that exhibits *transformational leadership* would build a strong foundation on morals and values and emphasize the importance of inspiring followers to accomplish great things to achieve goals as a team. The three theoretical approaches, *transformational leadership*, *servant leadership*, and *authentic leadership*, require leaders to ask themselves the questions: How do I uplift society depending on the social constraints? How do I transform myself in the process of transforming others? Leaders that demonstrate *authentic leadership* fill the need for trustworthy and sound leadership in times of cynicism and distrust. They are self-aware of their internalized moral perspectives and are transparent about them in their interpersonal relationships.

A moral basis type of leadership is important in times of distress in the world and society (Northouse, 2022). An authentic leader would reflect and ask themselves: How do my followers know if I am being sincere? Self-reflection and self-awareness are critical to evaluating one's effectiveness. The last theoretical lens, *servant leadership*, cultivates stewardship, and leaders listen to their followers with empathy, showing a

commitment to the growth of people and building up a community (Northouse, 2022). A servant leader asks the self-reflective questions: What am I doing to serve others, my family, my community, and the world I live in? How am I serving a broader cause? What am I doing to make this world better for those I do not know or will never know in the future?

While these theoretical approaches differ, both models of leadership require the individual attempting to lead to gain trust and influence over the group they share mutual goals with at the time. In both instances, a leader has to be a brave and eloquent speaker because the commitment involved in leadership is oftentimes linked to certain social situations that require guidance in future direction (Northouse, 2022). A fearless leader recognizes the risks associated with standing for a social ideology that may not be universally accepted, but the consequences do not stop them from leading since remaining complacent or silent would be worse.

### ***Evolution of Leadership Styles***

The individuals that answer this call to leadership have the power to decide how they want to lead to reach their goals and meet their objectives, and because of this, the definition of leadership has evolved. In the early 1900s, Northouse explains that leadership used to be driven by the desire of an individual to gain control and obtain a centralization of power over their group. This style of leadership possessed a common theme of domination. It stressed that the will of the leader must be impressed on those led to induce obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation. As the twentieth century continued, this accepted leadership style evolved and emphasized dialogue between both parties rather than the leader acting as an individual entity, prompting Northouse to document this shift (Northouse, 2022).

Could this transition have been a learning opportunity for leaders to reimagine the way that they approach positions of power? One historically significant figure that effectively demonstrated all of these leadership styles was the fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester, NY, The Most Reverend James Edward Kearney. With his deep connection to St. John Fisher University, let Bishop Kearney be our mediator as we attempt to make sense of what it means to *lead* as best we can through the lens outlined by Northouse, hoping to understand the purpose for each of us in our lives and on our pathway to leadership.

### **Rochester Leader of Interest**

Red Oak, Iowa—a small town with just under 6,000 people—is a place that was built through the hard work of bricklayers, mill workers, and manufacturers and served as the birthplace of Kearney in 1884. (The Heart, 2022). Kearney’s parents were Irish immigrants who initially decided to settle in Red Oak before moving to New York City to sell furniture and other home goods shortly after he was born (History, 2019). Coming from a simple, hardworking family, he and his two brothers were focused on education and finding their way in the new industrialized era that was taking over America during the Gilded Age. While he was a Midwesterner by birth and spent the beginnings of his episcopal title in the West, Kearney was no stranger to the metropolis setting. As a child in New York City, he acquired a knowledge of urban life through his family’s settlement and attendance in public elementary and high schools.

After graduating high school, Kearney discovered that his vocation was to become a Catholic priest. As he was situated to enter the seminary, his mother urged him to develop a backup plan in case he made the impulsive decision to leave the seminary

at some point in his schooling. Following his mother's advice and plea, Kearney attended the Teachers College of Columbia University, receiving a two-year degree in teaching in which he excelled (History, 2019). This motivation and drive to receive an education and find a purpose in life could be attributed to his mother who constantly pushed him to be better and would shape the type of hardworking, committed individual he would become.

While he would not ultimately be a teacher in the traditional classroom setting with students sitting in rows of desks, he would spend the rest of his life being a teacher of theology and the history of Christianity, serving as an example of how to replicate and implement the teachings of Jesus Christ in day to day life. Although this type of teaching does not involve tests and written papers of its listeners, it is the teaching that serves the purpose of advancing moral behavior. Kearney recognized that he wanted to advance Catholic social teaching, and after receiving his degree, he still felt the call from God to become a priest and entered the seminary in New York City.

Bishop James Edward Kearney was ordained a priest in New York on September 19, 1908, after completing his theological studies at the Catholic University of America the year prior (History, 2019). His first assignment as a priest from 1908-1928 was to serve at St. Cecilia's Church in Manhattan. Following his twenty-year period with this parish, he became the first pastor of a new church in the Bronx, St. Francis Xavier. Until 1932, he would remain there, assisting with increasing the parish family population and opening a new elementary school (History, 2019). In just a short time after being ordained, Kearney was already off to a life of dedicated servitude to enhancing the Catholic

community in the places he found himself assigned to for the time being. His accomplished resume led him to gain the attention of the leaders of the Church at the time, and on July 1, 1932, Pope Pius XI appointed Kearney as the Bishop of Salt Lake City, Utah to again use his critique to establish a new parish and parochial school. Shortly after, on July 31, 1937, he was transferred to the Diocese of Rochester, NY. Kearney was installed, or given authority, on November 11, 1937, signifying the beginning of where he would spend the remainder of his career (History, 2019).

In 1937, the western portion of America was not as populated as it is today. Moving to Rochester was a fairly significant switch from a city in Utah. As the Bishop of Salt Lake City, his assignment was to cater to the needs of a group of 10,000 Catholics, but when he was transferred to a diocese with almost 300,000 people, he had to quickly develop a plan of action to learn how to connect with the emerging "boom town" that was Rochester (History, 2019). Wherever he was, Kearney's morals and leadership style guided him to work to advance the community and address its needs. As outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the book that comprises the understanding of Catholic doctrine and teachings, bishops are responsible for teaching doctrine, governing Catholics in their jurisdiction, sanctifying the word, and representing the Church (Catechism, 1992). Kearney had an innate desire to serve others which quickly led to him becoming an unstoppable evangelical force in the Rochester community.

### **Identity Constructs**

When thinking about the style of leadership Kearney had to demonstrate, it's important to consider the aspects of his personal identity, as well as the historical

context of the era, to truly understand the trajectory of his life and decisions. Bishop Kearney was a white, Catholic male of Irish descent who was born an American Midwesterner but realistically grew up in the northeast in the urban setting of New York City. These characteristics make up the *social identity*, or groups that he would be classified into according to the sociological definition that defines this structure for the way people perceive others (Michigan, 2022). Multiple people may fit into his social identity groupings, but it was his *personal identity*, or internal traits and beliefs, that motivated him, that differentiated him from others (Michigan 2022). When paired with his social identity, these personal identity morals and values would determine how he would lead and react to the incidents around him. Where we meet or intersect with others and society is our *social location* in the societal hierarchical system. Leaders become advocates for the social issues with which the situation is linked, as they feel the moral obligation and duty to fix the situation and exhibit their fearless leadership. This mindset followed by a succession of persistent, positive actions embodies an authentic and moral leader.

### **Social Identity**

The location of Rochester posed no problem for navigation into his new role. Part of his identity was being an individual who grew up in an urban setting. Rochester was a city with a growing number of Christian and European immigrants, and because of his Irish identity, he already had a mutual connection to a large population of the people he would be working with as the Bishop. Kearney was fortunate enough to have been relocated to a place where he was accepted from the start, as this is not always the case for many historical leaders.

His identity may have posed minimal problems for his adjustment, but Kearney's rise to leadership coincided with quite a troubling time period. The first phase of Kearney's career from 1937-1950 was spent trying to unite a community involved in the Second World War. How was he supposed to engage in meaningful dialogue and preach about the prosperity and goodness of God at a time when the country was preoccupied with something that seemed much bigger? Northouse explains how leadership relies on increasing the communication between leaders and followers (Northouse, 2022). Yet, how was he supposed to know how to effectively communicate with his people if they were closed off and filled with worry? What could he do to address their spiritual and emotional needs if he did not know what they were? At home and afar, a world of suffering surrounded him.

The Diocese of Rochester began food drives, assisting families of veterans and caring for veterans when they returned, collaborating on mass prayer services, and supporting military training. "Wartime activities would prove beyond cavil his willingness to collaborate with people of other faiths in civic enterprises. Bishop Kearney had led his people in prayers and devotions for peace and human welfare. He had proved himself a loyal citizen and a solicitous shepherd" (History, 455). As a bishop, it was his job to console and give people hope, and he did just that because his social and personal identities told him that is what he must do. In times like these, people turn to leaders for the reason of finding someone to ease their sorrows.

In writing excerpts about Bishop Kearney, it was stated that "He was an able storyteller, witty and urbane, with a delightful, crackling Irish sense of humor. His strictures on such an occasion were never offensively expressed-he was most

careful never to offend-but their meaning was perfectly clear. Such incidents were few, however” (McNamara, 428). The Catholic Church teaches that its religion is based on establishing authentic community and self-reflection. As a Catholic priest, he had a societal and spiritual obligation to ensure that his followers were taken care of, and as a driven, kind person, he had a moral obligation to do so. In his time, he still increased the number of Catholic families joining parishes and brought the Church to life despite turmoil in the country.

Everything Kearney did was based around his Catholic identity, and even though it happens that he was a bishop and, of course, had to uphold this, in any position he was placed in, he was going to express his Catholic beliefs and allow them to determine the trajectory of his decisions and words. “Wherever he went, Bishop Kearney demonstrated his ability as a speaker. His literary training revealed itself in the ease with which he composed both pastoral letters and addresses. He spoke with great facility, briefly, to the point, and with an amazing inventiveness that enabled him to deliver as many as four or five different talks at different places on the same day” (McNamara, 428). An individual cannot hide from their identity; it is who they have become through the influence of their family, education, and personal self-reflection. Kearney’s ability to connect with others allowed for meaningful encounters and dialogue because he understood how to be a teacher first and accept everyone despite their differences. This directly allowed him to understand his followers and help them discover their identity and purpose in life.

### **Intersectionality**

The understanding and empathetic demeanor of Kearney allowed him to

connect with the people of the diocese because of his multidimensional personality and commitment to promoting a welcoming environment for all people regardless of their background. Because of this, it supported the meeting of different individuals from multiple faith and ethnic backgrounds together. The concept of *intersectionality* shows us that social identities work on multiple levels, resulting in unique experiences, opportunities, and barriers for each person. “Intersectionality posits that different social divisions interrelate in terms of the production of social relations and terms of people’s lives and they are seen as ‘mutually constitutive’ in terms of experiences and practice” (Anthias, 2012). Rochester was a “boom town” of multiple industries and immigrants, and it was up to him as a leader of the community to establish a place that is inviting to everyone who congregated and settled here for their individualized purpose. He felt the sense of “a higher calling” as a servant leader to always express unconditional love to all and connect people with other faith traditions besides just Catholicism.

After his death, Rabbi Miller of Temple B’rith Kodesh said that “Bishop Kearney has made such an impression on me, I’ll never forget what he said: ‘Guess the Church has come full circle now. We have a rabbi opening our Jubilee Year-the way it probably started’” (Catholic News and Inspiration, 1978). Though the inherent identity of Kearney was Catholic, he was a civic leader that wanted to increase a sense of connectedness between those with other ideologies. It was his faith that helped him approach this and accept all in a non-judgmental way. So, when he met people of different faith backgrounds, he learned to engage in meaningful conversations to understand how the Catholic Church could

help support the ideology of other religions and cultures.

### **Reawakening Rochester**

Now that the background social and identity constructs of Kearney have been understood, let us revisit Northouse's theories of transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and servant leadership in an attempt to understand how one individual could demonstrate all of these. During the time Kearney was the Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester, the Catholic population increased from 223,117 to 357,296 people (McNamara, 1998). While there may be other outside factors that contributed to the increase in Catholicism, statistical data has to stand for something. Is it fair to say that the person in charge must have created a positive environment for individuals to want to inquire more? Only an exceptional leader could have been the architect behind the remarkable increase in numbers. What is even more noteworthy is the thinking about the historical events that were going on at home and abroad. It was noted in the previous sections that Kearney began his reign in Rochester during the beginning of World War II, and he would be present during the Korean War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the beginning of the Vietnam Conflict among many other defining moments in the United States. In virtually all Rochester newspapers and articles, Kearney was recognized for his unwavering dedication to the community during these times.

While he was working to help address societal changes in every aspect, his most noteworthy accomplishments were in the field of education. He had an immense interest in wanting to increase education, and he saw how valuable it was for students to gain quality education to pursue future careers. Like his predecessors in Rochester,

Bishop Kearney was supportive of Catholic education for children. Fundraising campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s helped build Catholic high schools and seminaries around the diocese, including McQuaid Jesuit High School, Bishop Kearney High School in Irondequoit, St. Bernard's Seminary, and Notre Dame High School (McNamara, 1998).

In the field of higher education, Bishop Kearney established two diocesan institutions—St. John Fisher College and Nazareth College—that would, in less than ten years, become very respected places in the Rochester community for young men and women. Kearney was deeply invested in the promotion of Catholic education, but if he wanted this idea to become a reality, he had to effectively influence the stakeholders around him to provide funding for the project. The college drive ultimately ended up collecting \$1,235,057 from 48,575 pledges (Catholic News and Inspiration, 1957). For a leader to amass this amount of money, they need to appeal to their followers and develop a trusting relationship that the donors see the potential for investing. People were drawn to his authentic leadership, trusted his vision for this institution, and gave their money willingly. As part of his vision, Kearney stated, “St. John Fisher College aims to produce men who think, judge, and act constantly and considerably in accordance with right reason, illumined by the supernatural light of example and teaching of Christ” (Catholic News and Inspiration, 1957). When expressing his feelings about the construction of the new institution, Kearney revealed that the opening of St. John Fisher College was “the most important undertaking of my first ten years in the Diocese” (Catholic News and Inspiration, 1957). With many responsibilities to take care of within the Diocese of Rochester, Kearney still



emphasized supporting the fundraising efforts to open the doors of a new college, St. John Fisher, for men in 1948.

### **The Lasting Impact on Rochester**

Legacy is what you leave behind; achievement is what you have accomplished. Rochester was positively impacted by the leadership of Bishop Kearney during his thirty-year reign. Inhabitants of the city and surrounding communities continue to feel his legacy and impact today, most notably those graduating from institutions that he spoke into existence. His amiable and calm demeanor led people to naturally gravitate toward him. As a result of this, he was able to advance his sociocultural ideas at the community, state, national, and international levels. Multiple newspaper articles contain anecdotes, quotes, and perspectives on the life of Bishop Kearney, and in each one, individuals make it a point to state how his kindness and dedication to Rochester were inspiring. Most of these writings come from priests, business owners, and educators in the area, and they have nothing but positive things to say about the late leader.

Bishop James Moynihan, Ninth Bishop of Syracuse, New York, who served as private secretary to Kearney in his early priesthood wrote, “He was such a real person, at home and in any company. The friendships he made were everlasting” (Catholic News and Inspiration, 1957). His humanizing personality and ability to develop a strong sense of connectedness as an *authentic leader* allowed him to gain a following because other priests trusted him and what he stood for as bishop. While he was able to connect with other people in positions of authority, like Most Rev. James Moynihan, his ability to connect with lay people as a *servant leader* was even more important for moving his agenda forward.

Rochester native and acquaintance of Kearney, Mary Denniston, gave an anecdote to the newspaper about her encounters and frequent family dinners with Kearney and said, “He was such a good soul. Each family felt as though they owned him. He was one of the kindest men who ever lived” (Catholic News and Inspiration, 1957). For thirty years, Kearney was a teacher and student, constantly learning and determining ways to improve the diocese, engaging in dialogue with others in Rochester to see what his followers, the people whose opinions mattered most, wanted. He helped shape Rochester by his *transformational leadership* abilities, and in doing so, became one of the most historically beloved figures in the Diocese of Rochester.

In that spirit, let us learn from our previous leaders to become who we are called to be and find our purpose. The teachings of these leaders must not be put to rest but expanded upon and learned from for future generations. Throughout their vocation, Catholic priests are assigned to a diocese around the country, oftentimes without their input, and are expected to engage with the parish community to increase the liveliness and faithfulness of its parishioners for the greater glory of God. The geographic location of priestly assignments impacts the influence that one can have on a group of people and who they can reach. Before being assigned to the Diocese of Rochester, the city did not have a sentimental meaning attached to it as one might with their hometown. However, once Kearney became the Bishop, Rochester became *his* place, and it was up to him how he would impact the trajectory of the city through the influence of the Catholic Church. Through continual self-reflection, good works, and development of the complex theories and practices of leadership, what can we do to become leaders of our communities, rooted in the

philosophy that this institution established?  
How can we embody the vision that Bishop  
Kearney had in laying the foundation for  
this institution 75 years later? The potential  
for adjustments to be made to address the

sociocultural, historical, and political  
underpinnings of inequality and injustice  
must motivate future leaders to keep moving  
forward, even when the end is not clear.

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