

Christian Leadership Paradigm According to Thomas Aquinas and Social Transformation: A Theological Study and Case Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the Christian leadership paradigm based on the 13th-century philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, focusing on its relevance to contemporary leadership practices, especially in addressing social transformation. Amid growing challenges such as moral crises and social inequality, the need for ethical, spiritually grounded leadership has become urgent. The purpose of this study is to examine how Thomistic principles *caritas* (charity), *prudentia* (wisdom), *justitia* (justice), and *bonum commune* (common good) can guide modern Christian leadership. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, this research conducted a theological hermeneutic analysis of Aquinas's writings, comparing them with real-world social transformation examples, such as the La Red community's impact on Bellavista Prison. The results reveal that Thomistic leadership principles provide a moral and ethical framework that not only fosters organizational effectiveness but also drives social change. By focusing on service, justice, and moral integrity, the study highlights how these principles can address the pressing issues of public integrity, structural poverty, and social solidarity in today's context. The conclusion suggests that the Thomistic model of leadership is not merely a theoretical construct but a practical tool for transforming societal structures through moral virtue and a commitment to the common good. Future research could expand on these findings in diverse organizational contexts.

KEYWORDS Christian leadership; Thomas Aquinas; *bonum commune*; social justice; *prudentia*; transformational ethics.



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INTRODUCTION

Christian leadership is essentially a prophetic call to participate in God's work to restore human dignity and lead the world toward the perfection of His love. Christian leadership has become a relevant topic of discussion in recent times, especially given the many social inequalities in modern society, such as public integrity crises, social tensions, and pragmatism that dilute moral sensitivity. Many cases arise in society as a result of leadership that fails to uphold integrity and ethical principles (Menzel, 2015; Senin, Juhdi, Omar, & Hashim, 2024; Sharma, Agrawal, & Khandelwal, 2019; Voegtlin, 2016). The Church is urgently called to present leaders who are not only managerially and technically competent, but who also possess spiritual depth, uphold ethics, and demonstrate a sensitivity rooted in love oriented toward the restoration of human dignity and guiding people to live their daily lives with joy.

In this urgent context, the thought of Thomas Aquinas the Catholic philosopher and theologian of the 13th century, whose monumental work *Summa Theologica* remains widely cited emerges once again as an inevitable reference for the Church. Thomas Aquinas argued emphatically that leadership is not merely an administrative or dominative task oriented toward organisational power, but rather a moral action rooted in virtue, always directed toward the *bonum commune* the common good as a tangible reflection of God's will (Aquinas, 1947/2012).

Aquinas's insistence that true leadership must always be directed at the *bonum commune* resonates strongly with the Church's social teaching, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, which affirms

that the common good is the moral direction of every form of leadership and social structure (Second Vatican Council, 1965). This foundation is essential for building a leadership model that adheres to justice, demonstrates compassion, and maintains a strong orientation toward the restoration of human dignity and the common good (*bonum commune*) (Ayayia, 2024; Hernandez, 2022; Skonje, 2025; Tavanti & Wilp, 2021).

The six principles often associated with Aquinas's vision of leadership *bonum commune*, *justitia*, *prudentia*, *caritas*, *servitium regni*, and *veritas* have been extensively discussed in the study of classical moral theology. However, recent research shows that reflection on the moral and social principles of the Church often remains at the normative level, leaving a gap between theological formulation and its practical implementation in the context of contemporary social leadership (Vogt, 2016). This gap between moral reflection and contemporary social *praxis* remains a pressing concern in today's world.

In the realm of modern organisations, the basis of ethical decision-making is increasingly informed by Thomistic ethical principles including *justitia*, *prudentia*, and *miserericordia* (divine mercy) a trend noted in several recent studies (Farmer, 2022; Robson, 2022). However, the link between Aquinas's virtue ethics and the *praxis* of transformative leadership in the context of the Church or society has not been widely explored, particularly in Indonesia. This article therefore seeks to bridge Thomistic thought with contemporary reality, offering an affirmation of true Christian leadership within a Thomistic framework as a compass for the kind of leadership that many people long for (Ayayia, 2024; Horowski, 2020; Nicolaidis, 2020).

A case study of the transformation of Bellavista Prison in Colombia demonstrates that leadership shaped by gospel values and moral virtue is capable of restoring broken and seemingly hopeless social structures. The initiative of the Christian community *La Red*, narrated by Maxwell in *Leadershift* (2025) on transformative leadership, shows that a service-based approach marked by concern for humanity, relationality, and the virtue of love can bring about changes that are not merely symbolic, but that truly restore human dignity. A context in which one murder occurred every day was transformed into a place of love and forgiveness, where the number of murders fell to only one per year. Yet examples such as this are rarely examined from the perspective of Catholic moral theology, let alone through a Thomistic lens. In Indonesia, the study of leadership in the context of the Church tends to remain at the practical pastoral level, without a sharper ethical-theological framework or integration with contemporary social dynamics such as public integrity crises, structural poverty, and weak governance (Hall et al., 2021; Jones, 2018; Stanislaus, Lazar, & Ueffing, 2018; Sule, 2015).

This crucial gap, therefore, serves as the starting point of the present research. There remains a notable lack of academic effort that directly links the Thomistic leadership paradigm whose central vision is moral virtue with concrete cases of social transformation in the contemporary era. This article offers a novel contribution by re-reading Aquinas's principles in light of real social transformation, as presented by Maxwell, and examining their implications for Christian leadership in Indonesia (Linzey & Linzey, 2019; Riyanto, 2025). This approach affirms that Aquinas's thought remains a source of inspiration and a relevant Christian reference, essential for building a leadership model that adheres to justice, demonstrates compassion, and is strongly oriented toward the restoration of human dignity and the common good (*bonum commune*).

Pope Benedict XVI affirmed the same conviction in *Caritas in Veritate*, stating that authentic social leadership must be grounded in love embodied in truth, so that social transformation is not merely functional but born of a moral commitment to human dignity and the well-being of all people (Benedict XVI, 2009). Thus, Aquinas's leadership principles find increasing relevance when brought into dialogue with the Church's vision of the common good and social responsibility.

METHOD

The methodology of this study employed a qualitative-descriptive framework deepened by a review of literature relevant to the theme of the Christian leadership paradigm. The core methodology, however, is an in-depth theological hermeneutic analysis. This approach is chosen in order to establish a meaningful comparison between Aquinas's theological vision and the context of real *praxis* in contemporary life.

Theological hermeneutics enables researchers to explore the depth of meaning behind classical texts not merely to summarise them, but to draw a connecting thread between classical Thomistic concepts and current social conditions.

The analysis proceeds through three interrelated stages of reflection. The first stage is the interpretation of classical texts, beginning with an in-depth analysis of Aquinas's thought and situating it within its original historical and theological context. Through this analysis, the study seeks to uncover the ethical and spiritual foundations that serve as the primary basis for developing a leadership model oriented toward the common good (*bonum commune*).

The second stage is theological reflection, which relates these principles to the Church's teachings and contemporary social dynamics, so that values such as *justitia*, *prudentia*, and *caritas* can be re-read within the life of the Church and modern society. The third stage is contextual application translating theological findings into social *praxis* including an examination of their relevance for Christian leadership amid the challenges of public integrity, structural poverty, and the need for social solidarity in Indonesia.

The validity of the research is strengthened through a critical review of moral theology literature, Magisterium documents, and contemporary scholarship on Thomistic virtues. The analysis also draws on the experience of social transformation carried out by the *La Red* community in Bellavista Prison, Colombia, as a *praxis* verification a concrete illustration of how evangelical values and virtue can restore a fragile social structure, transforming what once seemed a hopeless situation into a sign of hope. The methodological framework constructed here therefore aims to transcend the merely conceptual or theoretical. Its primary purpose is to present a reflection that is both applicable and relevant one that can genuinely contribute to the development of a Christian leadership paradigm that is transformative, just, compassionate, and capable of restoring human dignity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Principles of Christian Leadership According to Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas did not see leadership as a purely structural or administrative function. Rather, Aquinas interpreted it as a moral and spiritual call to participate in God's work that restores human dignity. This perspective is rooted in *servitium regni* service to the Kingdom of God and is directed toward the *bonum commune*, which is the absolute theological

foundation. Thus, Aquinas's reflection is not only a classical ethical concept, but also a hermeneutic window that will be used to analyze the social transformation in Bellavista Prison and in the context of the Indonesian Church today.

The following six principles summarize Aquinas's ethical-theological framework that is the basis of the analysis in this study. These principles are not only conceptual, but also open up space for contextual applications as described in the research methodology.

1. Bonum Commune (Common Good)

Aquinas viewed the bonum commune as the ultimate goal (telos) of every form of leadership. A leader is called to organize a life together so that it more reflects God's love and will. Within the framework of this study, bonum commune serves as the highest evaluation criterion to assess the relevance of the Aquinas principle in the Indonesian social context, especially related to public integrity and common welfare.

2. Justitia (Keadilan)

For Thomas Aquinas, Justice (justitia) played a truly fundamental role. This role regulates the order of social relations: ensuring that each individual receives fully what is right that is, *sum cuique tribuere*. And, this justitia ultimately serves as a solid link. He brings the legacy of classical moral theology to interact directly with the real challenges and needs that exist in our pastoral social practice today. This is the crucial dimension we need, especially when reflecting on the restoration of the destroyed social structure in Bellavista, as well as in the face of structural injustices that are unfortunately still prevalent in Indonesia. In short, justitia serves as a bridge that firmly connects classical moral theology with the pastoral social praxis that is relevant today.

3. Prudentia (Wisdom)

Referred to as *auriga virtutum* "the driver of all virtue" prudentia enables a leader to make clear and correct decisions in the light of God's will. In the context of methodology, this principle is specifically aligned with the hermeneutic stage. This is why this stage is so crucial. We must have the courage to bring Aquinas's classical texts into a dialogue that is truly alive with all the pastoral issues and social realities that we are witnessing today. The point is that wisdom (prudentia) should not be allowed to become an abstract concept that is only stored in the head. Instead, we must ensure that prudentia is transformed into a truly active moral guide, the results of which we can evaluate and measure in our every action and decision.

4. Caritas (Divine Love)

Aquinas's view saw Caritas or Divine love as a love that goes far beyond ordinary emotions, it is the highest peak of all virtues. Rather, it is Caritas that is the sole source of motivation behind every decision and action in Christian leadership. It is this Caritas that then becomes the driving force for solidarity, forgiveness, and sincere service to those who are marginalized. This value becomes the center of reflection when we examine the relevance of Christian leadership in the restoration of human dignity as seen in the Bellavista case study.

5. Servitium Regni (Service to the Kingdom of God)

Regarding the Servitium Regni, which we define as Service to the Kingdom of God, the focus must be clear. Leadership is a matter of devotion, not domination! This means that we must emulate Christ who came as a servant. Thus, a Christian leader should not make authority a power but on the contrary, his authority should be a truly real embodiment and witness of

love. This principle also binds the hermeneutic approach in research. Leadership must be read not only as a power structure, but as a form of participation in God's work of salvation.

6. Veritas (Truth)

Commitment to truth is the foundation of a leader's integrity. Veritas keeps leadership from falling into abuse of power and remains rooted in clear morality. In the Indonesian context with its complex ethical and social challenges this principle reaffirms the urgency of leadership that is transparent, honest, and in harmony with gospel values.

Case Study: The Transformation of Colombian Prisons by La Red

The Bellavista de Medellín prison in Colombia in the early 2000s was an extreme representation of the failure of the social and moral system. This is not just a prison, but a space where human dignity has been completely destroyed, characterized by high levels of criminal domination and brutality and the absence of a sense of security. The essence of this success lies in a consistent pastoral movement, especially when it is imbued with the love of Christ and fully driven by inner repentance (Maxwell, 2025)."

La Red's ministry does not initiate change through structural intervention, but rather through spiritual guidance that emphasizes prayer, Scripture study, and personal companionship. This approach presupposes that true social change grows from a change of heart, in line with the principle that God's grace works through human freedom open to love. From the perspective of moral theology, such acts of companionship are a concrete form of *caritas*—love directed not only to the spiritual needs of the individual, but also to the restoration of damaged social relations. Nevertheless, in the midst of this structural and moral crisis, the ministry carried out by the Christian community of La Red de Misiones is present as a valuable theological counter-narrative.

The findings of Maxwell's study (2025) provide strong support for this view. He shows that fundamental social transformation can only develop if it is based on a consistent pastoral movement, takes its roots from the love of Christ, and above all, must be driven by sincere inner repentance (Maxwell, 2025). The impact of this approach is also evident: within just a few years of implementation, the transformation there has made a significant impact. The proof is that the level of violence that previously haunted almost every aspect of the lives of inmates has now decreased drastically. An astonishing fact is noted by Maxwell: only one murder was reported in a full year after spiritual assistance began to run intensively, whereas previously there was one murder every day. More than the change in violent numbers, the most striking is the emergence of a spiritual community within the prison, where inmates guide each other in prayer, reconciliation, and a more orderly moral life.

From the point of view of Thomistic Moral Theology, the transformation in Bellavista is a strong empirical demonstration that moral virtue is a true social restorative force. This case proves that the *bonum commune*, the common good, is not a utopian goal achieved through coercion, but the fruit of the free choice of the individual to live the virtue. In Bellavista, justice (*justitia*) is realized through reconciliation and more equal relations, wisdom (*prudentia*) arises when prisoners weigh actions in the light of gospel values and love (*caritas*) becomes the prime principle that revives their dignity as God's loved persons.

La Red's service action clearly embodies the dimension of *servitium regni*, which is a service that is completely rooted in the example of Christ as a Servant. Interestingly, the

transformation that took place in Bellavista was not the result of power domination at all. Rather, it is the fruit of a humble living testimony a spirit that is there only to accompany, and never to master. In this framework, Christian leadership appears not as a structural authority, but as a willingness to present God's love in places where humanity is wounded and lives without hope.

The story of Bellavista thus provides us with double proof, empirical as well as theological. This evidence shows how much restorative power there is in leadership formed on the basis of Christian virtue. What happened in Bellavista confirms something for us: the leadership principles of Aquinas did not stand still as a theory at all. In fact, these principles prove to be able to lead us to concrete social change.

"In this world that is often marked by injustice and moral fragmentation, Bellavista is a kind of living example. There, love, justice, and wisdom, when truly practiced consistently, proved capable of forming a much more humane living space and in line with the Divine will. Nggebu (2025) then complements this view, stating that the witness of Christian life—even if it includes suffering and sacrifice actually has great moral power in shaping the culture and ethos of the community. Thus, we can understand the transformation of Bellavista as the result of the witness and spiritual discipline of the community that dares to bring hope in the midst of structural violence."

Theological and Scriptural Reflections

We need to understand that the principles of Christian leadership according to Thomas Aquinas are not just ethical constructions that stand on their own on purely philosophical grounds. Rather, those principles take their roots directly from the testimony of Scripture and Church Tradition. In Aquinas's view, reason (*ratio*) and faith (*fides*) should be seen as two lights operating in harmony both essential to understanding the Divine will. Reason, on the one hand, gives us the ability to read moral orders that are already inherently embedded in creation itself. However, the role of faith then takes over, leading us to enter into the mystery of God's love that brings restoration as well as salvation. Thus, the whole moral virtue is man's participation in the *lex divina*, the divine law that leads the people to a life that is increasingly Christ-like.

This theological framework provides a solid foundation for the six leadership principles described earlier *bonum commune*, *justitia*, *prudentia*, *caritas*, *servitium regni*, and *veritas*. The six are not just stand-alone moral values, but concrete expressions of living according to the Spirit, as guided by Scripture. Theological reflection therefore needs to re-read the Bible verses that form the foundation for Aquinas's vision of leadership.

The principle of *Bonum Commune* (Common Good) fundamentally serves as the ultimate goal of leadership. This vision has very strong roots, namely in Paul's idea of the church as the Body of Christ. It is important for us to understand 1 Corinthians 12:25. This verse emphasizes strongly that one of the main duties of leadership is to prevent division a principle that obliges, so that there is no division in the body, but that the different members look out for each other. This principle affirms that every Christian leader is called to reject fragmentation and ensure that every part of the community, including the marginalized (such as the Bellavista inmates), is cared for and guided towards the common well-being.

The principle of wisdom (*prudentia*) as the basis of righteous leadership is emphasized in Proverbs 8:15: "For I kings rule, and princes decree justice." This text affirms that divine wisdom is the source of a leader's moral legitimacy. It is not power, popularity, or technical ability that is the foundation of true leadership, but the ability to weigh and act according to God's will. In Aquinas's view, this wisdom is the "driver of virtues" that governs the entire moral actions of a leader.

The integration between justice, love, and humility is reflected in Micah 6:8: "O man, it has been made known to you what is good. and what does the LORD require of you: besides to be just, to love faithfulness, and to live humbly before your God?" This verse echoes Aquinas' vision of *justitia* and *caritas*: justice is inseparable from love, and love cannot be separated from humility. Here it is seen that Christian leadership is not primarily a matter of efficiency or organizational structure, but a moral orientation that is in harmony with the character of God Himself.

Third, the call to shepherd the people in a spirit of service is affirmed by 1 Peter 5:2–3: "Shepherd the flock of God that is with you, not by compulsion, but willingly according to God's will; And not because they want to make a profit, but with self-devotion. Do not act as if you are masters over those entrusted to you, but be examples to the flock." This text shows the depth of *servitium regni*: leadership that serves, not dominates. Aquinas understood authority as participation in the self-giving leadership of Christ, so true leadership is never born of personal ambition, but of devotion.

Commitment to *Veritas* (Truth) is also a biblical prerequisite for leadership integrity shown in Ephesians 4:15, where St. Paul exhorts to "hold fast to the truth in love." This truth, in Aquinas's light, is not a cruel truth, but a truth that is the foundation of clear morality and guards leaders from abuse of power a truth that is always lived in the dimension of love.

Christ Himself set the most basic example for *caritas* and *servitium regni* through His act of washing the feet of the disciples, as recounted in John 13:14–15:

"So if I, your Lord and Master, wash your feet, then you must also wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." Through seemingly simple but meaningful actions Jesus firmly established the foundation of the Christian leadership ethos: to lead is to serve humble love. Then, Aquinas emphasized: this love does not necessarily stop at the status of ethical virtue alone. Rather, it is the highest peak of all virtue, for it is the only way for man to participate in and take part directly in the essence of Divine life itself."

At its core, the Scriptural text discussed makes it clear that Christian leadership is a call to be a tangible sign of God's presence a manifestation of justice, compassion, and empathy for a wounded world. Therefore, this theological reflection on Aquinas's thought has proven to produce more than just a conceptual understanding of virtue, but it also demands a profound praxic response. It leads to a profound praxis, which actively encourages Christian leaders to live a life of love, truth, and a spirit of service." In this light, leadership is not just a social role, but a path of holiness a way to live the Gospel in its entirety for the restoration of human dignity and the realization of the *bonum commune* as God wills.

Pastoral Implications for Christian Leadership in Indonesia

A hermeneutic analysis that links the thought of Thomas Aquinas (ethics of virtue) with the case study of Bellavista (the praxis of transformation) shows that authentic Christian leadership has real restorative power in the midst of extreme social crises. The pastoral impact of this finding is a crucial point that we can conclude, the implications for the Church in Indonesia are extraordinary. See, we are faced with three pressing crises: the ever-eroding crisis of public integrity, then the specter of structural poverty that seems impossible to avoid, and most crucially the greatest challenge to foster truly strong social solidarity in the midst of our society.

"We are faced with three major problems that are urgent to address and this is not trivial. Therefore, the leadership paradigm based on *bonum commune* (common good) and cardinal virtue must be raised as the main service framework (*servitium regni*) of the Church in the contemporary era.

1. Strengthening Integrity Through *Justitia* and *Veritas*

In the context of Indonesia's ongoing public integrity crisis, Christian leadership must prioritize *veritas* as the foundation of non-negotiable governance. This demands that the Church's building program should target accountability and transparency in its own organizational structure. The principle of *justitia* here does not stop at distributive justice alone, but as justice that demands truth and honesty (in harmony with Ephesians 4:15) in every decision-making, both within the Church and in public engagement.

2. Responding to Structural Poverty Through *Caritas* and *Bonum Commune*

What we see from La Red's experience in Bellavista is very clear: *caritas* (love) we cannot let ourselves be stuck in momentary charity or sentimentality. Instead, it must be elevated into a truly restorative transformative force. The implications for the Indonesian context must be translated into prophetic actions that are bold and directly challenge structural poverty. Pastoral leadership is required to mobilize the faithful to actively participate in advocacy, education, and empowerment programs all directed for the *bonum commune* of the whole citizen, beyond the boundaries of ecclesiastical exclusivity. The goal is clearly to ensure that the Church becomes an agent who fully fights for human dignity for those who are marginalized, in harmony with the spirit of 1 Corinthians 12:25.

3. Building Ethical Decision-Making Capacity Through *Prudentia*

The principle of *prudentia* (wisdom) requires leaders to have tested moral wisdom—the ability to apply moral principles to complex situations (*recta ratio agibilium*). Therefore, leadership development programs must focus on forging strong critical dialogue: juxtaposing Aquinas' classical texts and the Church's teachings with contemporary Indonesian ethical dilemmas (e.g., environmental issues, identity politics, and intolerance). This is a way to ensure that a leader not only wants good, but has the ability to do so effectively and wisely, as emphasized in Proverbs 8:15."

4. Leadership Model as a Testimony of *Regni's Servitium*

Taking the example of La Red and Christ as the Servant (John 13:14–15), the leadership in Indonesia must avoid a model of domination and bureaucracy that only pursues power or profit. In contrast, *servitium regni* demands a model of leadership that is present, accompanying, and sacrificing especially for the marginalized (1 Peter 5:2–3). This principle

is an affirmation that true authority is gained through humble service and a willingness to present God's love in the midst of social ills.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the Thomistic Christian leadership model, with its focus on virtues such as *caritas* (charity), *prudentia* (wisdom), and *justitia* (justice), offers a transformative framework that not only serves organizational effectiveness but also addresses moral and ethical dimensions of leadership. The theological principles of Thomas Aquinas, particularly the concept of *bonum commune* (common good), provide a comprehensive foundation for leaders to pursue decisions that are both spiritually and ethically grounded. The real-world case of Bellavista Prison demonstrates how these principles, when embodied in leadership, can effect profound social transformation. By emphasizing leadership as a moral action directed toward the common good, this study reinforces the importance of integrating spiritual integrity and ethical courage into leadership practices, particularly within religious and public institutions. Aquinas's approach challenges modern leadership models to not just aim for managerial efficiency, but to foster leaders who are committed to justice, compassion, and the restoration of human dignity. Future research could explore the application of Thomistic leadership principles in various sectors beyond the Church, such as in secular organizations, governments, or business leadership. A comparative study could be conducted to examine the effectiveness of Thomistic leadership principles in addressing contemporary social challenges like corruption, inequality, and environmental degradation. Furthermore, research could focus on practical methodologies for integrating these ethical principles into leadership training programs, assessing their impact on leadership behavior and organizational culture. Finally, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of Thomistic leadership practices on organizational transformation and societal change, with particular attention to developing countries like Indonesia, where moral and ethical leadership is in critical demand.

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