

# UNIT ONE: The Psychology of Change for Church Leaders – Changing in Order to Conserve

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LEADERSHIP & MISSION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

“Without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend... (This is all the more important when some novelty presents itself in our lives. Then we have to decide whether it is new wine brought by God or an illusion created by the spirit of this world or the spirit of the devil.) ...**At other times, the opposite can happen, when the forces of evil induce us not to change, to leave things as they are, to opt for a rigid resistance to change. Yet that would be to block the working of the Spirit.**”

Expected and unexpected change tends to trigger strong emotional responses including fears and anxieties. Yet change is the key to growth and improvement and an opportunity for renewal.

**Our perception of change is influenced by a number of factors including:**

- Our culture, religion and social peer group – which in turn influence our attitudes and beliefs and how we think and therefore feel about a situation.
- Health, lifestyle, habits – physical illness or low energy can reduce our motivation and ability to cope in general.

**Personality factors** influence whether we view change as an unpredictable threatening upheaval that will result only in personal loss or seeing it as an opportunity for rejuvenation, progress, innovation and growth.

Being ego centric, self-righteous and obsessional or socially isolated increases the likelihood we won't consider alternative points of view and new ideas

Being open, flexible, agreeable and empathic will help us to adapt.

**Leaders need to understand that change is a process.**

The normal stages include:

1. Immediate emotional reactions – this may include shock, disbelief, fear and anger.
2. A mental response that psychologists refer to as cognitive dissonance –the internal picture does not match the external reality causing inner conflict. This may result in denial or resistance and problematic behaviours such as avoidance or even sabotage.

**We can help people move through these stages faster** by supporting them as they work through their emotions by:

- Listening, acknowledging difficulties and any pros and cons and using praise and encouragement.
- Keeping people involved so they don't fall into feelings of hopelessness and/or powerlessness.
- Managing the natural emotions that will ensue with empathy and understanding.

With every change there are real and/or perceived losses. **Mourning is a normal response to change** even after a happy event. Normal adjustment and healing varies between individuals – it takes time.

**As leaders we must:**

- Be clear about what we are trying to achieve .
- Acknowledge our emotional responses and honestly examine our belief systems.
- Proactively manage any physical and emotional stress we may be experiencing.
- Think hard about how our proposals may impact others and develop the skills we need, for example listening skills.