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## Leadership: Dr. Stephen Coan

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*Providence College*

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# **DR. STEPHEN COAN**

## **BIO**

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Dr. Stephen Coan is married father of three from the town of Newton, Massachusetts. He earned his bachelor's degree from Brandeis University, and both a Masters in Management degree and a doctorate in social policy from the Heller Graduate School at Brandeis. Now living in Connecticut, Steve has been an officer of the Sea Research Foundation since 2001. In 2004 he was appointed chief operating officer and two years later, in 2006, he was appointed president and CEO. Since then he has raised more than \$20 million in private and public funds for Mystic Aquarium. In doing so, he has advanced Mystic into one of the top American aquariums. Steve has worked to reorganize, refinance, and rebrand the Sea Research Foundation bringing its mission to both a national and international level (Mystic Aquarium, 2012).

Before beginning his work with the Sea Research Foundation, Steve was highly involved serving as CEO of the JASON Foundation for Education, now better known as The JASON Project. He also is a trustee of the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, Pine Point School, Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, and a founding trustee of the North American Marine Environment Protection Association. Steve has also served as a youth minister for many years (About JASON, 2012).

## **PERSONAL GROWTH**

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The Boston Globe printed the first story on the cover-up in the Archdiocese involving the sexual abuse of children in 2002. It is without question that the acts of the Archdiocese of Boston shook not only Boston Catholics but Catholics nation-wide. For weeks, and then months, news would continue to trickle out from multiple sources about priests who had abused children, lies perpetrated by the hierarchy to prevent knowledge of these crimes from going public, financial mismanagement, and always, consistently about the efforts of those in the Archdiocese to remain in power.

Steve at one time worked for the Cardinal Archbishop of Boston and learning of the cover-up felt like a punch to the gut. Having known individuals personally involved in the cases it was difficult to digest. Shortly after the crisis hit Boston, and rippled to affect the whole of the American Catholic Church, Steve moved out of the Boston suburbs to take on a new position. This move also provided an opportunity; after being actively involved with the Catholic Church for years, and shaken to the core by the events of years past, Steve had three choices: to remain active within the Church, to change his religious affiliation, or to stop religious practice all together.

While working as a lay staff person at the Archdiocese of Boston, Steve attended a workshop on the danger of cults approaching young immigrants. What, he questioned, differentiated the Catholic Church from the very cults targeted to protect the youth from. The singular difference was that religion always emphasizes personal conscience and a personal relationship with God. But if personal conscience remains supreme, why then were the leaders of the Church insisting upon absolute allegiance and unity of belief, instead of nurturing faith as a delicate relationship constantly changing and evolving between the person and their God?

Having chosen to continue his Catholic tradition, Steve faced a personal challenge. Watching his children go through the Sacraments of Initiation into the Catholic Church he questioned whether he led his

children into a culture that is inherently corrupt and has hurt thousands, including himself, or rather into a culture that is fundamentally good and true at its core. Struggling with this internal debate, Steve had a conversation with a Rabbi friend. Together they discussed the differing religions, asking if one religion had gotten it right while the other wrong. His friend answered that God would never say one was right and one wrong but rather "He [God] wants us to work within the system that we have been given, to be as faithful as we can and live the best lives we can... each of us needs a system in which to understand God. It is not that all beliefs are right or equal." (Coan, 2012). The name of the religion itself does not matter, as God is not one to judge. Instead one must live a faithful and virtuous life. One's belief structure is a very intricate part in one's being however, especially if it has been reinforced for years; to change such a structure would be extremely difficult and would require work.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE**

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Moving from Boston, Steve took the position of CEO and President of the Sea Research Foundation, which, upon his arrival, was an organization facing bankruptcy. In his position, Steve was looking at potential layoffs, downsizing, and piles of unpaid bills. Faced with the institutional challenge of transforming the aged Mystic Aquarium into a dynamic and compelling space Steve referred back to what he had learned throughout the Boston Archdiocese crisis. This organizational crisis could be solved like that of the Church crisis with self-serving bureaucratic actions, or he could look into the core of what he found so attractive about the Catholic faith, the teaching of social issues, or social justice. While in DC on business, he had a quiet conversation with a bishop from a small diocese; this bishop stated that to struggle with faith is to ask for belief even when one does not want to believe. In practical terms, a leader must always be compassionate, even when others are not, and find a way to fulfill their own mission against all odds. Steve took this insight to heart; he fought this institutional challenge with faith and integrity, taking from the core of the Catholic faith fighting for social justice. As stated above, changing the basic structure of an institution is an extremely daunting task; however, if approached with an educated mind willing to read, write, and think critically, then a structure can be created that supports great actions.

The Sea Research Foundation took on a new structure: it was reformed emphasizing that social justice would be the top mission of the company. Workers that had been outsourced were reinstated with wages and benefits, national educational programs were started in order to reach out to at-risk youth, local food banks were supported, and staff were encouraged to engage in volunteer opportunities. In doing so, morale was turned around and new sources of revenue helped The Sea Research Foundation to emerge from the brink of bankruptcy to a healthy and thriving company (Coan, 2012).

Saint Paul warned about the importance of balancing faith and works. In this case, Steve's works were what helped him to find new meaning in life and in faith. However, focus on works does not always prove so beneficial; the focus on works alone led Church leaders to create the disaster that was the Boston Archdiocese crisis. Believing that disclosing information about the abuse would hurt the works of the Church, the abuse was covered up; once the cover-up was exposed, leaders continued to focus on the works of the Church without realizing the immense damage they were doing to the faith through their dishonesty. Steve still struggles with his faith, but he understands the wisdom to know the balance between works and faith is one that comes with time and experience. As Saint Paul states "This saying is trustworthy. I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have put their faith in God may devote themselves to good actions. These things are good and helpful to other people" (Titus, 3:8) meaning good works must be accompanied by faith. James too teaches that faith and works are intertwined; he states "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18). Faith is not living unless it is outwardly shown or demonstrated because faith is something that takes place in the heart and mind. Although God knows whether or not one has faith, there is no way for anyone else to recognize its

existence unless their works directly point to it. It is in this last point that James and Paul come together providing a cohesive understanding of the important of works and faith (Justification by Faith).

## **VIRTUE**

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Although having accomplished so much in his life, Steve has faced many trials along the way both personal and institutional. That he has persevered through them all while holding himself to a higher standard is incredible. Through the Church crisis Steve remained true to himself; he did not falter and bend to fit the mold of those around him. He showed the virtue of integrity by never compromising his morals. He questioned those around them and their actions, but remained true to himself and to the core principles of the Catholic religion. When Steve acquired his position with The Sea Research Foundation he faced a major organizational challenge. Once again he persevered showing the virtue of integrity he had learned from years before. Instead of downsizing and immediately eliminating jobs from an already struggling company he reworked the company from the inside out. Altering the structure and focus of the company, he acted like a virtuous Catholic looking to enforce equality and solidarity. Social justice happens across social classes and occurs when one recognizes and values human rights, seeing dignity in every person. The hierarchy of The Sea Research Foundation does not serve to power the individuals which make it up, but empowers employees to reach out and help those around them whether it is through personal volunteer work or setting up programs to reach children nationally. Dr. Stephen Coan is an incredibly accomplished, real world example of a virtuous leader. When asked if a piece could be written about his work and faith, he was quick to offer a few individuals who he felt were more deserving. Although modest, there is no question that Steve is deserving; he continues to be a charismatic leader working tirelessly to help better the greater good, all while remaining true to his religious background and upholding its virtuous core.

## **CULTURAL ILL**

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The Roman Catholic tradition is a continuous argument that attempts to determine the good of the Catholic practice. Steve maintained a flourishing tradition at first by questioning the power within the Church; as stated above he was unsettled with the power struggle within the hierarchy of the Church. Recognizing and growing from his experience, Steve works with a different mentality; he never aims to advance his position for power's sake but instead to increase his ability to work and help the greater good. In this tradition, Steve tackles a cultural ill that often plagues power hungry individuals. In addition to questioning the power within the Church, Steve questioned the Church's focus on the core of Catholicism. The internal good of Catholicism is the union with God, but throughout his life he saw the Church focusing their attention elsewhere. Instead of nourishing the unique relationship different individuals have with God, the focus remained on the works of the Church and strayed away from the faith. Discussed above, both James and Paul encouraged and stressed the importance of balance between works and faith, and in his daily life Steve works hard to maintain that balance not only with his organization but in his personal life as well.

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