

THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST IN A PRIEST MUST BE MANIFESTED IN HIS ACTIONS

by

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In every organization where there is power there is a search for more power. "All power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely", wrote Lord Acton. To overcome jealous, angry altercations, Our Lord taught his disciples the lesson of littleness. After the Transfiguration, on the way back to Capharnaum, the twelve disputed about who would be the greatest among them. Arriving at Peter's house, the Lord asked: "What were you arguing about on the way?" (Mark 9, 33). They were embarrassed because it was a sign that the Lord knew the subject of their discussion. Sometimes the Lord's disciples and priests can little understand the nature of his truth.

The cult of pre-eminence is not foreign to the Church; even the passion today for higher education can sometimes be used to sharpen the claws for competition. Perhaps because Peter was called 'Satan' by the Lord, some of the disciples, especially James and John were ready to take over the primacy with two co-equal seats. How to be humble when in power was one of the hardest lessons the Lord ever had to teach his priests: namely, that they can be prayerful, compassionate and generous, but at the same time grossly defective through their self-seeking. The Lord uses a child as the vehicle for instruction: "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and the servant of all" (Mark 9, 35). Jesus here halts the boast of heraldry and the pomp of power; he stops the human parade of greatness and makes the "somebodies" the "nobodies" and the "nobodies" the "somebodies." He said this authority, like His, must be administered in a moral atmosphere.

ABUSING AUTHORITY

There are two ways of abusing authority: one is to elevate oneself unduly over others; the other is to denigrate rightful authority. The more modern abuse of authority is to demean it, deny it or seek to play another role than the one the office of priesthood demands. The pride that once sought the first place, now seeks the last place in order to be more noticed. The older sacerdotal pride was jealous of the first place; the new modern pride is jealous of the last. The priest who is unconscious of power never abuses it because it is Christ's power. "By God's grace, I am what I am". (1 Cor. 15, 10). The priest who ridicules the authority of the Church and Scripture and the Pope is proud of saying "I am not what I am".

No Church is strong when it is "tolerated" by the world. The Church is weak when its delegates are afraid of not "keeping in the good grace of those who flaunt the authority of Christ". It is only because the salt is "divisive" to the meat that it gives flavour. It is only because the light is "divisive" to darkness that it illumines. The new hypocrisy now is envisioned in the "New Christianity" (I am distributing copies of this article to all of you) which some Christians would advocate just to be able to give way to their own whims which could be entirely different from what Christ's visible Head would want us to do. It used to be that the priest enjoyed prestige and general acceptance because of his function as an ambassador of the King of Kings. Today, because of a denial of authority, the ceding of pre-eminence to the spirit to the world, a priest often has to earn respect. He does not enjoy status. Scandals have diminished respect for his authority. The task now is to re-earn it by personal fitness and repentance which restores the innocence that was lost. If there is anything that keeps a priest humble in the exercise of the Kingly Office of Christ, it is the remembrance of his own sins. The priest becomes the model of humility when he knows he is not innocent. He is most strong in the affirmation of the authority of Christ when he is most conscious of his own weakness, for then command and compassion become inseparable.

The second manifestation of authority of Christ in the priest is service. Our age is not as anti-authority as is commonly believed. One kind of authority it always accepts; that is, who does what he commands. The command without the deed, the telling without the doing, is what prompts rebellion against authority. It is the example rather than the precept that inspires obedience. Authority is service.

At the Last Supper, the Lord enforced this definition of authority when he washed the feet of his disciples.

In every society there must be authority and subordination. But the authority must be exercised in sacrificial love for those who do not have that authority.

Test of sincerity

The problem behind authority has been well expressed by Jean de Rougenant: "If my neighbour is stronger than I, I fear him; if he is weaker, I despise him; if we were equal, I resort to subterfuge". The answer to this dilemma is for the strong man to recognize his moral weakness in the light of faith, and for the weak man to recognize his moral strength through the grace of God. As Paul Tournier puts it: "The martyrs were not, in the main, 'strong' by nature, and yet they faced persecution and death with indomitable courage". Such were the Apostles after Pentecost, who a few weeks before had all fled from the Garden of Gethsemane. When the rich serve the poor, they learn how poor they were on the inside; when the learned professor spends time with the mentally retarded, he discovers an innocent wisdom of which he knows little.

Finally, two telling touchstones of a priest's life are his attitude to the Crucifix and the Eucharist. In every age where humility, purity and loyalty decline, there is a thrusting aside of the recall of the Cross and the Presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

Wilderness Church

The Church today is like the Church in the Wilderness. By the Church of the Wilderness we mean the Israelites, the people of God who after 400 years of slavery in Egypt, started out for the Promised and of Canaan. The modern Church of the Wilderness is like the old Church of the Wilderness in three ways:

- 1) contempt of Hierarchy, Manna or the Eucharist,
- 2) rebellion against authority,
- 3) want of balance during a transitional period.

The Church up until the Vatican Council was more separated from the spirit of the world than now. But, since the rightful emphasis on being more involved with the world and its needs

was made, there began to be a yearning for the fleshpots of modern Egypt. Some priests and religious felt much less comfortable in being identified with what they called the "Establishment".

Self-selected standard

A decline in reverence for the Eucharist developed in the Church as there was a rejection of the Manna among the Israelites. "Will no one give us meat? There is nothing wherever we look except this Manna? In Egypt we had fish for the asking, cucumbers and melons onions and garlic". (Num 11, 4-7). Abortion, violence, divorce and repudiation of vows which belonged to the Egypt of the world were now by some accepted and defended. It was no longer what the Church believed or the Holy Father taught or what the Word of God cautioned; the individual conscience of and by itself became the sole standard of right and wrong: "Each of us doing what he pleases". (Deut. 2, 8).

The second reason why we are like the Church of the Wilderness is that in both there is a rebellion against authority. The People of God protested against the authority that Moses and Aaron had over them: "You take too much upon yourselves. Every member of the community is holy and the Lord is among them all, Why do you set yourselves up above the assembly of the Lord". (Num. 16, 3). Why should the Pope guide them in morals any more than Moses?

The Church like Israel is in transition. As Israel stood between Egypt and the Promised Land so the Church stands in this present wilderness wandering between what it is and what it will eventually become. We can only pray God that his period of wandering in and out may last no longer than forty years. As the Israelites were brought out of Egypt but not brought at once into Canaan, so the Church today is in between. This middle state does not mean that when the Church recovers from this secularism, that it will be a perfect Church. When the Israelites passed into Canaan they had seven battles to fight. Canaan is not heaven.

The Church today is undergoing its wandering too: the cloud and the pillar of fire move her from one position to another; no sooner does an experiment begin than it ends in a waterless waste. Nothing seems to be fixed except that God is leading us. "Have no fear, I am with you, says the Lord of Hosts; my Spirit is present among you". (Haggai 2,4, 5).

For a greater energy

My dear Brothers and Sisters: there are two kinds of "atheism"; of the right, which professes love of God and ignores neighbour; and the athelism of the left, which professes to love neighbour and ignores God. The incognito Christ operates in history and many are serving him and loving him unwittingly. But our problem here now in the Philippines, is the one who feels that the lifted Host and raised Chalice are impediments to the serving of bread and wine to the hungry and thirsty.

Our days are not safe; they are hard days of testing. Let us then make sincere and self-searching withdrawal from the world to charge our batteries for action so that a new ardour would burn in our breast to receive new thrusts of God for a greater apostolic energy.

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