

## CHAPTER SIX

### AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

To understand and perhaps critique the function of authority in the Church we must begin with an understanding of the nature of the Church and its mission. The concept of Church, admits of many approaches and definitions. None of these definitions alone or in combination gives a definitive answer. Ultimately the Church is a mystery, the mystery of a human community as it responds to the creative presence and purposes of God as revealed in Jesus. In opening the second session of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI expressed it this way:

The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and greater exploration.

For our purposes we shall use the concept of the Church as *The People of God*. A people committed in faith to the self-communication (revelation) of God in Jesus Christ. This faith in the God revealed to us in Jesus encompasses a unique understanding of God, self, others and the world as revealed to us by Jesus. Because of what Jesus taught, we now call God our Father, and understand ourselves as children of the Father loved without condition. We also understand all other human beings as fellow members of the family of God and the world as our gift from God to be cared for and nurtured.

Also, for our purposes, we will maintain that *the single mission of the Church is to proclaim and make present the Kingdom of God throughout the world*. An older theology of the Church understood the Church as having two missions, one supernatural (proclaiming the Gospel) and the other natural (making the Kingdom present). The supernatural mission was to proclaim the Gospel so that unbelievers would believe, be baptized and thus join the Church. The natural mission was to make the Kingdom present by working for social justice. In this view, the natural mission was subordinated to the supernatural mission. For example, hospitals and schools would be instituted in missions lands primarily as a means to proclaiming the Gospel.

A new theology of the Church was ushered in by the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World". In this document the Church declares that its mission is to be one of service to the whole human family. In this document the "proclaiming" and "making present" of the Kingdom are not two separate missions, but two dimensions of the single mission of the Church. The supernatural gift of new life (salvation) is meant to transform us so that we might transform our world.

This view was reinforced in a 1971 document, "Justice in the World", issued by the International Conference of Bishops, in this document the bishops stated:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the

world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the church's proclamation of the preaching of the gospel, or in other words, of the church's mission of the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation (note 6)...the mission of proclaiming the gospel in our times requires that we commit ourselves to man's integral liberation, here and now, in our earthly existence (note 35).

The life and words of Jesus make it clear that the Kingdom happens when people give themselves over to the creative purposes of God in this world, that is, when they love themselves, others, and the world. The Good News is that in this transformation of self, others and the world we find our salvation by the power of God (grace).

### **Authority and the Mission of the Church**

*It is in support of the Church and its mission that offices of authority exist in the Church.* Exactly how those in authority exercise this authority in the daily life of the Church is part of that mystery which Paul VI says by its nature is "always open to new and greater exploration". The Church is a living organism and thus it is of the essence of the Church to change. The mission of Church remains the same, but the offices of authority and the way they function in support of this mission have changed throughout history and are open to change in the future. The sole criterion for evaluating the need for change in the exercise of authority in the Church is its effectiveness in supporting the mission of the Church -- to proclaim and make present the Kingdom in this world.

How do we know that authority as exercised in the Church is functioning properly so that changes in its exercise can be initiated when needed? To answer this question we first need to understand the nature of authority and then see what Jesus said about how authority was to be exercised.

#### Authority - A Definition

The English word authority derives from the Latin *auctor*, which can mean an originator or one who causes growth. We speak of an author of a book, one who gives life and substance to a book. God is often referred to as the "Author of Life", with the dual notion of creating and sustaining life. In this sense, *authority is in the service of life*. All true authority serves life.

Therefore, from a linguistic analysis, authority can be defined in terms of service. Thus defined, Church authority is meant to be a life-giving service which binds the People of God together in unity, sustains them in their faith and supports them in their mission to spread the Good News of the Kingdom of God. When this takes place, authority can be experienced as a part of the process of salvation, the process of overcoming the alienation caused by sin and the restoration of unity and peace among people made possible by the grace of God made visible and available in and through Jesus.

In his book *Authority in the Church*, author David Stagaman defines authority in this way:

Briefly, authority is what enables a community to be bound together in all its interactions....Authority makes it possible for a community to determine what it is and to have a sense of purpose. Without it, human beings become a horde of animals in competition with one another for the satisfaction of urges. Authority, then, functions at the heart of our living together. (p. 35)

Like many things in life, this concept of authority sounds good in theory, but what does it look like in practice? Well, like most things in life, it's not perfect. And it is not perfect because people are not perfect, and authority is entrusted to and exercised by people. Since those in positions of authority within the Church are human, their authority can be misused and Church history is replete with examples of tragic misuse. When authority is misused or fails to function properly it becomes sinful, a source of disunity rather than unity and an obstacle to the mission of the Church. For example, the tragic disunity among Western Christians which began with the Reformation can be blamed, in large part, on the failure of Church authorities, (popes, bishops and priests), to function properly. Unfortunately, critics can point to many other such failures in the history of the Church.

Therefore, the need for reform and renewal is a constant in Church history.

While those who misuse authority in the Church often do so with good intentions, they must be held accountable to the One who is the source of all authority in the Church - the risen Lord, Jesus. Therefore, we will examine the implications of Jesus as the source and model of authority in the Church.

### Jesus the Source and Model of Authority

Before examining the issues of Jesus and authority, we must again be reminded of the context in which authority operates. First and foremost, Jesus did not form a Church in His lifetime nor did he lay out a blueprint for a church in the future, complete with offices of authority. The word "church" is only referenced twice in the four Gospels, both times in Matthew and there without any explanation. *Jesus only left his disciples with a mission - to live out and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God.*

Jesus did assemble The Twelve, but they actually functioned as a symbolic group to symbolized a new Israel, rather than as an authority structure with specific titles, roles, powers and geographical areas of responsibility. The authority and structure that would naturally develop in the Church would always be established to meet the needs of the Christian community in a specific historical era. Authority is conditional and constantly judged by how effectively it contributes to the unity of the Church and the success of its mission. Authority is a means to an end. Again, the context for understanding and evaluating authority in the Church is its mission.

If we are to understand authority as a principle of life and unity in the Church, it is essential that we remember that the NT knows only one source of such authority, Jesus.

All authority is in relation to Jesus. It is Jesus Who is the life-source of the Church. There is no successor to Jesus. Some may refer to the pope as the “Vicar of Christ”, but whatever such a title might imply, we confess that Jesus lives and is still with the Church. No one, not even the pope substitutes for Jesus.

Jesus says that authority has been given to Him. In many places in the Gospels and especially in John’s Gospel, Jesus make the point that all His authority comes from the Father. The authority of the Father is mediated through Jesus and Jesus in turn will mediate His authority through leaders in the Church. In other words authority in the Church is a gift (charism), not a possession. And those in authority are always held accountable to Jesus and His mission.

Notice also that Jesus is not portrayed as one *in* authority, but as *an* authority. Jesus holds no office or title that establishes His authority, Jesus is *an* authority. This is an important distinction. For example, when we hire a guide to take us fishing it is because he is *an* authority. He knows where the fish are, he knows what kind of fish are biting, he knows the proper bait, etc. He is *an* authority on fishing. The park Ranger, however, is a person *in* authority. He may enforce the rules about fishing - fees, times, catch limits, etc.- but he may not be able to help us succeed in our mission to catch fish.

We also see an example of this distinction in the OT. We see judges and kings as those *in* authority. They are called by God to be servants of the people, instruments of unity. In the days before the monarchy, judges united the tribes for defense, later the king was the focal point of national unity and functioned, at least ideally, as the anointed servant of God protecting and promoting the life of the nation. However, often the prophet spoke out as *an* authority. When those *in* authority failed in their duty, it was the prophet who called the nation back to God, the source of their life. The lesson here is that the life-giving authority of God is mediated not just to those *in* authority.

If Jesus was not definite about the form of the ministry of authority, He made certain there was no doubt about the manner in which the special ministry of authority was exercised. He was the model of authority and instructed His disciples to imitate His example, as we see in the following accounts:

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. (Mt. 20:25-28 and Mk. 10: 42-45)

A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the

greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves". (Lk 22:24-27)

### **The Need for Authority**

Therefore, while it is true that the Church does not exist for itself, but for the Kingdom, it is also true that in order to accomplish its mission to promote and be an effective sign of the Kingdom, the Church needs voices of authority to mediate the life-giving authority of Jesus. And throughout its history the Church has had voices of authority. Early on, the apostles like Peter and James and Paul, the "apostle to the Gentiles" preached the Good News with authority. By the middle of the 2nd century, the primary offices became that of the bishop, presbyters (priests) and deacons. These basic offices remain today.

An important function of the bishops is to teach, to teach the message of the Gospel with authority. As teachers of the Gospel one of their primary objectives is to foster the unity of the Church by keeping the preaching of the Gospel message free from fundamental error so that the teachings of Jesus do not become fundamentally distorted. This promotes a unity in faith.

This Church, as we know it today and throughout history, has a definite structure and within this structure there have developed offices of authority. Thus we speak of the authority structure of the Church. From time to time questions arise: Does the Church really need a structure? Does not structure impede the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people? Is Jesus the source of the Church's authority structure or has it been a human addition to the Church? How is this authority meant to function? What does the notion of infallibility imply?

Any consideration of authority and structure within a human community is a sticky business. Without some authority and structure a human community cannot preserve its unity, it cannot preserve its existence. However, once authority is established and structures are created, there are bound to be problems. Authority and structure in a human community involve people, and typically include offices, rules, beliefs, customs, common activities, etc.. In other words, authority and structure create human institutions and human institutions, with all that goes with them, are not perfect. They are in constant need of reform and, unfortunately, by their very nature they resist reform. It makes for interesting history.

And so we are confronted with the sociological fact that the Church, like any group of people, must have some authority and structure to maintain its existence. Given this need for some authority and structure, several questions arise: Is the actual authority and structure found in the Church a human development or does it have a divine origin? If it is of divine origin, where do we find the "divine model" against which all historical developments in the exercise of authority and the various kinds of structure can be judged? Furthermore, does "divine origin" mean that it originated from the teaching and acts of Jesus and/or does it mean that the guidance of the Holy Spirit directs the development and change in the exercise of authority and structure to meet new historical

situations?

These are difficult and important questions, because it is clear from the New Testament that Jesus in his lifetime did not form a Church nor did He leave His followers a detailed blueprint for a future Church with a certain structure and lines of authority. Furthermore, the majority of Catholic scholars agree that the present structure of bishops, priests and deacons is absent in apostolic times and does not appear until sometime in the 2nd century.

While Jesus did not form a Church in His lifetime or set out a blueprint for a future Church, nevertheless, given the natural need for some form of authority and structure in the community of the followers of Jesus, I do believe that Jesus provided a model for the exercise of authority and the inherent sociological basis for some type of structure within which this authority could be exercised.

## **THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF AUTHORITY**

### **A Definition**

#### **Jesus on Authority**

Therefore, the Church, and certainly its authority structure, does not exist for itself, it exists to play a servant role in bringing about the Kingdom of God in the world. Unfortunately, history recounts that the historical structure of the Church and the method of exercising authority have at certain times proven to be obstacles to the realization of its mission -- to embody and preach the Kingdom of God. Again, it goes without saying that the Church, including its authority structure, is in constant need of reform

## Some Questions

### **STRUCTURE IN THE CHURCH**

#### **The Need for Structure in Human Communities**

Having said all this, from time to time in the history of the Church those in the positions of authority have been corrupt and failed in their mission. And so from time to time the question has arisen: Does the Church need a structure? If Jesus accomplished His mission without a church structure, is structure essential to the mission of the Church?

As was mentioned briefly above, the case can be made from the social sciences, that all human communities are by nature structured and possess some source of unity. Family and political society are basic principles never absent from human life. True, the forms may vary, but some structure is vital to all life. And the actual failures of community structures point to the need for structures that operate effectively as they should. For example, the tragic case of a dysfunctional family in which the mother and fathers make life unbearable for the children, does not suggest that the children do not need a father and mother, but makes it obvious that they are in desperate need of a mother and father who love them and are able to provide a life-giving structure.

It is obvious that a life-giving authority structure is a requirement for the flowering of human life in any kind of group -- political, family, church, social. It is in well-functioning groups that we are able to activate our potential to become full, authentic human beings. And since the Church is a community at least we can say that the idea of structure is certainly not alien to its nature.

Jesus did not condemn authority structures as such. Jesus functioned within the structure of the Roman Empire and the Jewish community. He seemed to accept the Roman Empire without comment and while criticizing the religious leaders of the Jewish community, He never condemned the structure itself. While He criticized the laws of the Sabbath, He showed respect for the feast days and the Temple itself.

#### **Is Jesus the Source of the Authority Structure in the Church?**

To answer this question, like St. Thomas would say, we need to make a distinction. If we ask: Is Jesus the life principle from which emerged the Church and its authority structure? The answer is yes. If we ask: Is Jesus the architect of the present or any other particular historical structural form and mode of operation which these leadership roles have assumed? The answer is no.

For our purposes, we shall try to show that the authority structure within the Church did,

in fact, grow out of its life principle, Jesus Christ. Jesus gave His followers (the Church) a mission of service -- to preach the Good News and promote the Kingdom of God. How the Church organizes itself to accomplish its mission, is the ongoing story of the concrete realization of the authority structure of the institutional Church

continue the mission of Jesus: to announce and make present the Kingdom of God on earth.

### The General Ministry

The continuation of the life and mission of Jesus is, therefore, entrusted to the entire Church, not just those who hold special offices within the Church. In the Creed we profess and Apostolic Church. The apostolic mission was given by Jesus to all His followers -- the Church. However, the Church is not the pope in Rome, the bishops, or the priests alone, but it is the people, all the baptized. The fundamental dignity of Christians is established by baptism, not by any special ordination to service within the Church.

St. Paul teaches that all the baptized are called to continue the mission of Jesus. And while all are equally members of the Church, they may have different duties to perform within the Church. St. Paul speaks of the Church as a body with many members, each member is distinct and performs different functions, but all members are needed and one is not greater than the others because of their function within the body. Together they form a unity in love (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Given this diversity of functions, each member is still commissioned by Jesus to continue His mission on earth. All are ministers of the Lord.

### The Special Ministry: The Apostles and Peter

Let us now turn to the testimony of the Gospels about the role of the apostles and of the special role of Peter. The Gospels bear witness that, among the followers of Jesus, a group called "The Twelve" were chosen by Him (Luke 6:12-16; Matt 10:14; Mark 3:13-19) and held a special position (Matt. 10:5-11; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6). The twelve apostles are understood as symbolic of the twelve tribes of the Old Covenant. They were to be the foundation and leaders of the New Covenant people.

It is also clear that Peter is described as holding a special position of spokesman among the apostles (Luke 22:31-32; John 21:15-19). All of the Gospels, except Mark, also give some kind of "commission" to Peter, e.g., in John 21:15 ff, Jesus "commissions" Peter to "feed my lambs" and "feed my sheep." In the Catholic tradition, the text of Matthew 16:13-20 has been a major "proof text" for the special position of Peter in the structure of the Church:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one

of the prophets.” he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

### The Legacy of Jesus: The Exercise of Authority in the Early Church

Reflecting the “commission” given by Jesus, the leadership of Peter is clearly evident in the process of selecting someone to replace Judas and as the one who preached to the crowds on Pentecost (Ch.1: 15-26; 2: 14-42). But this is not to say that Peter is *the* leader of the early Church in the sense of the papal office as we know it today. There was no such office in the early Church. In fact, James seems to play the predominant role in the Jerusalem community and Paul acts independently and owes obedience to no central authority. Paul bases his independent action and some of his teaching on a special “revelation” from the Lord.

Furthermore, throughout Acts 1-12, Peter’s decisions are always made in association with the other Church leaders. And in Gal. 2:11-14, Peter is even rebuked and corrected on a major “doctrinal” point by Paul. The “doctrinal” point was the question of whether or not Gentile converts had to be circumcised. It seems that an agreement had been made earlier in Jerusalem (Acts 15), that no such circumcision was required, but in Antioch Paul accused Peter of giving in to those of the “circumcision party” who opposed the Jerusalem decision:

But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party....I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal. 2:11-14)

However, Paul was very sensitive to the need for authority. There were divisions in the early Church and issues that needed to be settled by one in authority. Paul quite forcefully tells the Galatians that even “if an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8). The majority of Paul’s Epistles were written to address problems in the various Churches and to address them with authority. Again, Paul exercised his authority for one purpose -- to preserve the unity of the Church.

### In Summary

So what do we make of all this? Certainly Jesus did not set up Peter as the “pope” with a set of organizational guidelines that have endured to the present day. If modern popes profess to be successors of Peter, it is a Peter who was in no way “in charge” of the various Churches and who did not go unchallenged on important issues, even from one like Paul who was not even one of the Twelve.

To understand why Jesus chose the apostles and spoke in a special way of Peter, the Gospels make it clear that the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus was a fulfillment of the Old Covenant. In the Old Covenant, we see those in authority, whether judges, kings or prophets, as agents of God acting with authority from God as instruments of unity. In times of military crisis the judges united the tribes for defense. The king was the focal point of national unity and functioned, at least ideally, as the anointed servant of God protecting and promoting the life of the nation. The prophets were agents of spiritual authority, calling the nation back to the Covenant, back to unity with God, the God that had saved them from slavery and was the source and sustainer of their life as a nation.

And so the structure of the New People of God was a natural transition from the structure of the people of the Old Covenant. As the early Israelites were structured into twelve tribes, so Jesus selected twelve apostles. And as the people needed certain individual leaders -- judges, kings and prophets -- to protect the unity of the people in times of civil and spiritual crisis, so too Jesus singled out Peter and the apostles as instruments of unity for His followers, the Church.

From its infancy the Church knew it needed leaders to exercise authority. There was from the beginning a need for those with a special ministry of authority to settle disputes and thus preserve the unity of the Church. There is no doubt that the special ministry of authority developed naturally from the nature of the Church and was necessary for the Church to accomplish its mission -- to proclaim the Kingdom of God. There is no doubt, that for all its human failings, the authority structure of the Church is sustained by the abiding presence of the Risen Lord who gives the gift of the Spirit to guide the Church in its mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

### **Did Jesus Leave Us with an Ideal Model of How Authority is Meant to Function?**

That Jesus intended some authority structure without spelling out the details of how the structure would look.

### **Participation of All the Baptized in the Structure of Authority**

In the creed we profess an apostolic Church. The apostolic mission is given to all the faithful by their baptism. Clearly then, the Church is not the pope in Rome, the bishops or the priests alone, but it is the people of God, all the baptized. All Christians are first and foremost equal members of the Church, each however with different duties to

perform. St. Paul speaks of the Church as a body with many members, each member is distinct and performs different functions, but together they form a unity in love.

The Catholic Church teaches, that through baptism all members of the Church share in the three-fold office of Jesus. Jesus was priest, prophet and king. The entire Church shares in the priesthood of Jesus, for all are called to worship. It is the entire Church that has been made a royal priesthood: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1Peter 2:9). It is within this common priesthood that we also find the ministerial priesthood, different in kind and not simply degree, but taking nothing from the priesthood of the faithful.

A prophet is one who speaks for another. The OT prophets have been referred to as the "mouthpieces" of God. Jesus was truly a prophet for His entire life and teaching was a witness to God. John called Him the "Word of God" and Jesus says in John 14:10: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.". In the same way it is the mission of the entire Church to give witness as Jesus did, to speak of the Father as Jesus did and to send forth the Spirit of truth into the world as did Jesus.

Finally, as Jesus was king, so too the entire Church is commissioned to live and spread the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of peace and justice, the Kingdom under the life giving rule of God. Just as the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus, so too the fundamental mission of the Church is to help bring about and give service to the Kingdom of God in this world. As Jesus taught us to pray -- Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven -- so too we must work as Jesus did to make the Kingdom present in our ordinary lives. The fullness of the Kingdom is that condition of *peace* which was depicted in the Genesis story - one of right relationships with self, others, the world and God. This peace is established by lives of service to others in the imitation of Jesus.

So in a true sense all the baptized are part of the authority structure, all are called to service in sustaining the life and mission of the Church. As Paul reminds us that we are all parts of one body, the Body of Christ, each with different gifts and duties, but each a part of the whole.

### **The Special Ministry of Authority - Pope, Bishops and Priests**

### **The Role of Dissent in the Church**

see Theological Studies March 2002 - Authority in Church - Bernard Hoose  
He sees the Church as a community of moral discourse in which dissent play an essential role in the pursuit of the truth. The question centers on how to structure the Church to make it an effective community of moral discourse that values dissent. The history of Vatican II reveals the dissent of the bishops to the conservative element in the Church, especially the curia, and the result was a gift of the Holy Spirit in a new understanding of

the Church and its relationship to the world and several instances of true development of doctrine, e.g., a new understanding of religious liberty.

## **The Future**

see Stagaaman p. 2 paradigm shift.

While authority and structure go together, they are distinct and can be considered separately. We can investigate the meaning of authority and how it can be exercised, while understanding that this authority can operate effectively in a variety of organizational structures. For example, the teaching authority of the Church is presently exercised from the top down - Pope, to bishops, to the people. It was not always so and it need not be in the future. For example, instead of most initiatives coming from Rome, the teaching mission could originate with organized input from the laity and theologians, then pass on to national conferences of Bishops, supplemented with regional or universal councils. The role of the Pope could be limited to interventions in times of crisis.

David Staganman in his book *Authority in the Church* makes an important distinction between people who are *an* authority and people who are *in* authority.

The near total control currently exercised by Rome in the last century is actually a historical innovation. It is open to the critique that the exercise of authority in the Church is slipping into *authoritarianism*, which demands total obedience without recourse to reason or attention to dissent. The power of the office is enough. If this is happening, some reform is no doubt indicated.