

BLIND GUIDES

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JESUS SAID:

It is for judgement that I have come into this world, so that those without sight may see and those with sight turn blind. Hearing this, some Pharisees who were present said to him: We are not blind, surely? Jesus replied: Blind? If you were, you would not be guilty, but since you say, We see, your guilt remains.¹

We live in a period of great crisis for the Church and for human society in general. We live in a period in which there is a world-wide crisis of leadership – not only in the spheres of political action and international relationships, but even more specifically in terms of religious leadership. My purpose in this brief essay can be stated in very simple terms. It is to examine the nature of authority as a general notion, and then to focus more explicitly the nature of spiritual leadership. We can further ask ourselves in the process of this inquiry what it is that distorts true christian leadership, so that those who should exercise such leadership become ‘blind guides’.

The traditional notion of authority as it operates in the Church is based on a hierarchical notion of power, vested primarily in the pope by reason of his office and by way of divine institution. The power thus vested in the Bishop of Rome gives him the authority to rule, guide and teach the universal Church. Correlative to such a notion is the postulate of a deficit of power and capacity in the governed. This deficiency of the governed makes authority necessary, since without the guidance and power of the leader, the governed would be unable to organize and direct their own activities towards their own proper and common good.

Thus authority is necessary for directing the energies of the individual members towards the common good of the community. It is also required for the direction of a variety of functional processes, each of which looks to some particular aspect of the common good, but which must be integrated and directed toward the whole of the common good. Consequently, the exercise of such authority has a variety of functions: it has paternal, unifying, volitional aspects.

¹ Jn 9, 39-41.

Traditionally, the paternal function has been more or less emphasized in the functioning of religious groups. This seems to apply not only in terms of the organization of the Church as a whole, but also analogously has a relevant application to lesser religious groupings, for example, orders, communities, etc.

This traditional notion of authority is one which stresses the divinely instituted power vested in the superior and gives him the capacity to command obedience and submission from his subjects. However, authority can be usefully conceived in alternate terms. One such view is the view of authority in terms of communication. The superior's communication or command becomes authoritative by reason of the acceptance of the command by his subordinates. The member confirms the authority of such communications by his acceptance. Thus the decision as to whether an order has authority or not lies with the inferior rather than with the superior. The concept is a decided turnabout from the more traditional notion of authority as based on power vested in the legitimate superior. But it emphasizes the notion that even in the most absolute form of social organization, authority rests in some sense upon the acceptance of the command and consent of the individual.

The operation of this principle of communication was seen quite dramatically in the aftermath of the publication of *Humanae Vitae*. Before that encyclical, the issue of birth control was largely one of morality. Since that event, however, it has also become an issue of the exercise of authority in the Church. The general sympathy with the Church's authoritative position on birth control has consequently been seriously eroded. The apparent lack of sympathy in ecclesiastical authorities and the seeming unreachability on this issue have not served to increase the willingness of an already burdened laity to accept such authoritative directives. The somewhat surprising willingness of priests and even bishops to speak out against the papal encyclical gives evidence enough of the crisis of papal authority, which the encyclical only served to intensify and dramatize.

These polar concepts of authority tend to place the locus of power in either the governing or the governed. Another approach to the problem of authority and leadership, however, seeks to find a synthesis of these thetical and antithetical attitudes. This synthetic approach shifts the emphasis in authority away from the rooting in power and conceptualizes authority in terms of relationship. Authority would thus consist in a relationship between two or more

persons by which one party lays claim to the cooperation or subservience of the other party, and this other party accepts the claim as legitimate in some area or areas of his own existence. There is obviously power involved in this concept, but it is no longer embedded in a power-bearing person or persons, but rather is envisaged as a quality of the relationship. Thus both the bearer and the recipients of authority emerge as important contributors to the functioning of authority. There is a mutuality and a reciprocal responsiveness inherent in the relationship. The relationship is dynamic and reciprocal, so that consequently one cannot presume compliance on the grounds that the bearer of authority possesses a certain degree of power or holds a certain legitimate office.

The emphasis on relationship makes it possible to consider authority as involving more than simply the distribution of power. From the point of view of the subject, the acceptance of authority rests on more than the inherent dependency on the power-bearing superior. The subject may indeed accept or reject the authority of the superior, even in the face of coercion. Consequently, the acceptance of authority must be based on a broader and more comprehensive view of the subject's motivation to obey. The concept of authority as based solely on power is really only adequate for considering the more limited paternal or unifying functions of authority. There is also a volitional or motivational aspect which cannot be adequately explained on the basis of power alone.

If authority does in fact stem from the nature of society – as we so often claim – and if society is an outgrowth of the fundamental nature of man, it would seem reasonable to conceive of authority as based not only on the human capacities for obedience, but also on other basic human needs and motives. The acceptance of authority cannot be attributed merely to the power-dependence dimension. There must be other dimensions which we can denominate diversely in terms of gratification, self-fulfilment, self-enhancement.

I am less concerned with the specification of terms than I am with the fact that the participation of a member of a group in the activities which are organized under the direction of authority must ultimately be understood and derive from a spectrum of motivations which make that participation psychologically rewarding and in some sense fulfilling. Thus the exercise of and the reciprocal response to authority are determined and conditioned by complex human motivations. These fundamental and often unconscious motivations are at work within the functions of authority, so that we cannot

adequately understand the operations relating to the authority relationship unless we bring these fundamental forces into view.

It seems quite clear from the scriptural accounts that the notion of christian leadership is not one that is rooted in power. Our Lord attacked the spiritual 'blind guides' of his time in vehement terms. He issued a terrible indictment against them on the grounds that they presume to tell other men what is required to gain the Kingdom of Heaven and place intolerable burdens upon them. But they do nothing to help men in the quest for salvation – rather they choose to erect insurmountable obstacles in their way.

The pharisaism of the New Testament is almost a caricature of spiritual leadership – a leadership based in power and devoid of any sense of mutuality or reciprocity or relationship. It is against them that Christ hurls the charge, 'The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted'.²

The teaching is echoed through the synoptic gospels. Luke recounts:

A dispute arose also between them about which should be reckoned the greatest, but he said to them: 'Among pagans it is the kings who lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are given the title of Benefactor. This must not happen with you. No; the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves. For who is greater: the one at table or the one who serves? The one at table, surely? Yet here am I among you as one who serves!'³

Again, almost the same teaching is echoed in a passage of Mark:

You know that among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all. The Son of Man himself did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.⁴

If we can accept a broader and more flexible notion of authority in terms of relationship, and if we can accept the basic notion of christian leadership as rooted in service rather than in power, we are left then with a pervasive and perplexing question. What is it in

² Mt 23, 11–12.

³ Lk 22, 24–27.

⁴ Mk 10, 42–45.

the broad history of the Church, as well as in our own times, that drives the exercise of spiritual authority in the direction of power and its vicissitudes? What is it that turns the feet of well-meaning prelates and priests into the path of the distortion of power and leads them in the direction of becoming blind guides?

Obviously the answer to such a question is not easy, since the determinants of such behaviour are so multiple and complex. I would like here merely to suggest one limited aspect of the problem, but one which may have a considerable sway of influence and may in fact underlie many other aspects of the problem.

It strikes me that the exercise of power carries with it a certain security and protectiveness. The appeal to power carries with it the resolution of ambiguities, of many uncertainties of method and of outcome, the clarification of means and ends, the resolution of basic anxieties. In an uncertain and ambiguous context, it offers the possibility of control and preservation of order. The need for such protective power and control is driven by an underlying insecurity, a sense of peril and threat, a basic conviction that unless control is maintained and power exercised, the alternative is some form of disorganization or chaos, or triumph of the threatening forces of evil.

The recourse to power is a mark of the embattled mentality. It reflects a mind that perceives its environment more in terms of dangers and potential or actual enemies than of a tolerance for diversity and a respect for individual freedoms. The recourse to power requires that the recipients of power be seen as foredoomed to destruction or evil unless the intervention of enlightened capacity is brought to their rescue.

Thus, so often in the history of the Church, spiritual force has been brought to bear for the good of its recipients regardless of the destructive or harmful outcomes that it might otherwise have wrought. It is precisely this mentality against which our Lord inveighed in his attacks on the blind guides among the scribes and pharisees. So often spiritual leadership has been expressed in a defensive adherence to the purity of doctrine and the rigidity of orthodoxy without any concern for basic human needs or rights. The excessive and obsessive clinging to such ideologies – whether they be religious, political, or philosophical – has been the instigator of untold human misery and suffering.

Ultimately, however, the root of such defensive recourse to the security and the unequivocal solidity of a position of power stems from an inner sense of insecurity, fear, and self-hate. Retreat to

positions of spiritual power is a response to inner drives and needs which often lie at an unconscious level, so that their influence is neither sensed nor grasped; yet they remain the essential and driving forces which make it relatively impossible for those who are their victims to place themselves in a position of risk or vulnerability.

It is when the sense of inner freedom is violated and when the capacity for autonomous functioning is undermined by these pervasive inner forces of destructiveness that the capacity for human relationship is correspondingly inhibited and undermined. True christian leadership requires that basic capacity for human relationship. It requires a capacity to tolerate the separateness and individuality and autonomy of other human beings. This is particularly relevant to any discussion of the authority relationship, because it is precisely in this relationship that the issues of autonomy and freedom are intimately joined. To the extent that the participants in such a relationship fall away from its demands and the inner capacities to sustain it, recourse is made to the vicissitudes of power.

The distortion on the part of the leader is to assume increasingly the exercise of power and the dominion over others. The distortion on the part of subjects leads them in the direction of excessive compliance and submissiveness to the exercise of power in the leader – equivalently a retreat from and an evacuation of their own proper responsibility and participation in the relationship. Too often the outcome is a paroxysmal outburst of rebelliousness against authority, which signals the critical breakdown in the relationship and the deterioration into a power struggle.

Redressment of such deteriorations requires something other than an elevation of the struggle so that the prerogatives of power win out. It requires rather a return to fundamental, shared human concerns embedded in the concerns and dimensions of human relationship. For it is only through such a critical reassertion of the vital importance of relationship that the common objectives for which it exists can be meaningfully achieved. It seems clear at this juncture that the recourse to the vicissitudes of power serves only to threaten the underlying vulnerabilities of those who are subjected to it, as well as of those who wield it.

If we stop to consider the implication of the basing of leadership and the exercise of authority on power, there is a reinforcement of the sense of vulnerability and powerlessness in those who are subject to such power. There is no single human dread as pervasive and destructive as the dread of powerlessness. It is destructive of the

inner fibre of a man and leaves no place for freedom, responsibility, capacity, initiative, decision – in a word, power. From the opposite side of the relationship, the assumption of power in the leader is in effect a defence against his underlying insecurity and sense of powerlessness. Consequently, while the led are trapped in the agony of powerlessness, the leaders are no more than escaping from the same taint – and they find a way to do so by reaffirming and reconstituting the powerlessness of others.

The dire consequences of such an interactional process are ominous in the extreme. But we need to remind ourselves that the same mechanisms and forces are at work in the realms of more benign and everyday experience. The corollary of powerlessness is worthlessness. We need look no further for at least one major dimension of the massive problems of pervasively undermined self-esteem and depression in so many religious personnel. We can conclude that the exigencies of power eat away at the inner fibre of the human soul, creating a reservoir of unresolved aggression which must unavoidably take its toll. The price will be paid in terms of depression, apathy, desolation, resentment, rebelliousness, and other forms of destructive and counter-productive behaviour. Is it any wonder, then, that our Lord said of the blind guides, 'Leave them alone. They are blind men leading blind men; and if one blind man leads another, both will fall into a pit'.⁵

A reflection on the history of authority and leadership in the Church in the light of these comments leaves us with a considerable dis-ease. The concepts of authority that have found their way into the workings of the Church have by-and-large been derived from the secular models provided by the surrounding political contexts. By historical accident, then, the Church's authority, both at large and in particular, has been cast in the model of hierarchical, authoritarian and power-based structures. It is exactly against these models that Christ's words are directed. But let us not fault the Church or her leaders for their adherence to the traditional structures and concepts of power in the order of Church administration and functioning. Let us not fail, however, to cast a vote against the failure of the Church's leadership to nourish the true basis of spiritual strength and leadership.

We can perhaps steal a page from Nietzsche here. He observed that nowhere was the will-to-power carried to a higher pitch than

⁵ Mt 15, 14.

in the souls of ascetics. It is the enigma of self-mastery – the superior force. The thirst for submission both conceals and expresses this will-to-power. The subordinate subjects himself to a higher power precisely to gain a sense of inner power from the alliance. The will-to-power constantly seeks to disguise itself and to find devious ways to appear other than it is – even to present itself as its own opposite. Spiritual guides become blind guides, when the motives of service based in christian charity and humility are contaminated by the motives of power, and humility becomes the mask of the will-to-power.

There is an ethical principle embedded in the basic mutuality of relationship. It is an ethical dimension that need not but frequently tends to be undermined by the uses of power. The life of ethical authenticity and spiritual vitality requires a high degree of freedom, initiative, and the capacity for responsible action. As Erik Erikson has phrased it – ‘Truly worthwhile acts enhance a mutuality between the doer and the other – a mutuality which strengthens the doer even as it strengthens the other’. It is this strengthening that is elementary to the sense of christian service: to act and respond in such a manner that the good of that other is enhanced, along with his inner freedom and integrity. The same dimensions enter into the relationship of authority, and the same ethical demands are operative in the dynamics of leadership. It is this aspect of leadership that the motives of power tend most easily to override and abuse.

But power – even if it go by the name of spiritual power – and the prerogatives of position have a considerable propensity to make men blind. The demands of organization and the preservation of good order have an inner exigency that provides its own self-preservative rationale. It provides the justification for the valence of power and the resort to its utility. But we must constantly remind ourselves of the sensitive and delicate and all too fragile requirements of true christian leadership and followership. They are too easily lost – too easily ignored – preserved only at a cost that may often seem too high. The pharisees could not believe that they, the spiritual guides and leaders of the synagogue, might be blind. But our Lord said: ‘Blind? If you were, you would not be guilty, but since you say, We see, your guilt remains’.