

THE AUTHORITATIVE SINNER

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH has earned the reputation for being authoritarian. Critics cite as evidence from the past affairs such as the Inquisition, the treatment of Galileo and the Syllabus of Errors. They also refer to current history: to the suppression of public debate about contraception, to the refusal to ordain women, to the appointment of bishops unacceptable to the Churches which they will lead, and to the disciplining of theologians without due process.

Those who defend the Church's style of government reply variously. They may argue that critics are never in possession of all the facts, that there are intangible checks and balances, and that the Church as a human society must maintain discipline and cohesion in human ways. Some would argue further that the Church is not a democracy, and that given the importance of unity of faith and life, she is not authoritarian enough by half.

The debate usually ends inconclusively. But in its thrust and parry the deeper issues at stake can easily be overlooked. For the way in which authority is exercised in the Church is of broader significance than as part of the Church's record. It goes to the heart of the claim, formulated at Vatican II and often repeated since, that the Church 'is a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race'. In more direct language, this description means that when we look at the life of the Church we should expect to see disclosed the way in which God relates to us and the way in which we human beings should relate to one another.

Because a source of many human discontents lies in a wrong understanding of the way in which God bears authority over human beings, in wrong understandings of the nature and limits of human authority and in destructive ways of exercising authority, the patterns of authority in the Church are very significant. The life of the Church should commend a credible and evangelical image of God's relationship to us. It should also commend a vision of

the way in which authority could be understood and exercised by human beings in civil society. The abuse of authority through timidity, arbitrariness or oppression should be challenged by an attractive alternative use of authority within the Church.

If this challenge is taken up, it will be taken up in ways which are credible because they smell of human frailty. But the challenge has really hardly been recognized in the understanding of authority in Church life. Whereas it is generally recognized that the inner relationships of the Church should be characterized by the kind of justice which will make the Church a sign of human unity, it is novel to believe that the exercise of authority in the Church is of interest or concern to society as a whole, or that it is part of the Church's mission. Many people would be content if the Church received a good pass by the best standards of the contemporary world. To think that the Church should be able to teach the world something about authority would appear either arrogance or naivety.

In this article, I would like to argue that the reason for this defect of vision lies in part in the very limited way in which reflection within the Church has drawn upon the resources of the New Testament. I shall begin with a sketch of the way in which authority in the Church is commonly seen. Then I shall move on to consider the other aspects of the presentation of Peter in the New Testament which bear on the understanding of authority. Finally, I shall reflect on the implications of a fuller understanding of authority both for Church and for world.

The common understanding of authority in the Church is that it comes from Christ, and that it is exercised hierarchically. This understanding is grounded in the stories of the gospel, and centrally in the relationship between Christ and Peter. Just as Christ gives a place of pre-eminence to Peter within the Apostles, so he continues to give authority within the Church to the successors of the Apostles and, among them, Peter. The way in which authority in the Church is conceived will vary further, depending on whether Peter is seen primarily as the representative of the Apostles or as their leader. But in both cases the authority of bishops within the Church and of the pope among the bishops rests on the relationship which Christ has with the Apostles and with Peter.

In this representation, authority is a responsibility to be accepted and a trust to be safeguarded. Within the Church, this aspect of authority has always been emphasized strongly. The pastor bears

a heavy responsibility before God for the souls of his flock. But responsibility is felt the more heavily because the person who has authority does not merely receive it from Christ. He exercises it in place of Christ. In religious orders, the monk who obeys the superior obeys Christ in him. Christ is to be seen both in the superior and in the cook. The sacramental basis of authority in the Church can pose a heavy burden of responsibility, one which seems unique to authority within the Church.

But the burden of responsibility is lightened to some extent by the emphasis upon service. Peter's authority is to be one of service, and Jesus's relationship with Peter, particularly in John's account of the washing of the feet, emphasizes the need to serve. But in practice exhortation to see authority as service is ambivalent. While it is possible to speak of authority in the Church as unique precisely because it is to be exercised as a form of service and so different from other ways of exercising authority, it is also possible to claim that all ways of exercising authority in the Church are in fact forms of service. In this understanding, authority becomes an appropriate form of service when it is exercised most authoritatively. The emphasis on service can even be suspect, because it may incline us to sentimental or liberal images of authority.

The incident made central in the presentation of Peter's authority is his recognition of Christ's identity in Matthew Chapter 16, and Christ's subsequent commissioning of him with the keys of the kingdom. Here Peter's authority is derived from Christ's gift, and within Catholic theology, the story is taken to point to Peter's unique role among the Apostles. This scene is developed and drawn upon in the liturgy of the Roman Rite associated with Peter and with popes. Peter and his successors are seen as leading the Church. Their leadership takes the form of strengthening the Church in faith, a task which is a charge directly given them by Christ.

Because Peter's authority comes to him by direct gift from Christ, it is natural to see the source and exercise of authority within the Church as unique. We cannot easily speak of authority in civil society and of authority in the Church in the same breath. The characteristics of Christ's relationship to Peter and to the Twelve are explored to show that leadership in the Church must be exercised by males, that the Church can never be a democracy and, in some theologies, that authority derives from the successors of St Peter. The forms of government outside the Church are not applicable to the Church. This emphasis does counteract the

tendency to see Christian faith and Church life through the lens of one's own culture, but it can have its own disadvantages in allowing us to defend the indefensible. Augustine's words, which admittedly need to be set in a complex historical context, still act as a chilling reminder of what good and reflective Christians can countenance:

There is a persecution of unrighteousness which the impious inflict on the Church of Christ, and there is a righteous persecution which the Church of Christ inflicts on the impious. Moreover, she persecutes in the spirit of love; they in the spirit of wrath. She persecutes so that she might correct. They persecute in order to overthrow.

Quotations of this kind illustrate the need to evaluate the understanding and the exercise of authority in the Church by the best standards of contemporary society. But they also perhaps point to the need to reflect more deeply on the figure of St Peter and the character of his relationship to Christ, as he is presented in the New Testament. Even a cursory reading of the New Testament will reveal that Catholic reflection on authority draws only on a narrow strand of the presentation of Peter.

Peter is seen as missionary, conveyed through the image of fishing. He is also the shepherd. He is presented as receiving special revelation from God, particularly in being one of the chief witnesses of the Resurrection of Christ. He appears in the Fourth Gospel as a martyr for Christ. And in all strands of the New Testament, he is described as impetuous and as a forgiven sinner. Peter fails to understand the implications of what he sees and of what Jesus says, but Christ on each occasion leads him beyond his blindness and his failure.

The central feature of the presentation of Peter in the New Testament may well be the relationship between two apparently discordant elements: his privileges of revelation, authority and pre-eminence on the one hand, and his sin, blindness and failure on the other. The connections are made frequently. In the Fourth Gospel, he is commanded to care for the sheep only after he is asked three times if he loves Christ. The threefold question inescapably refers back to his threefold denial of Jesus in his Passion. So, the commission to care for the flock follows the remembrance of previous betrayal, which itself is presented as the place where love can grow.

The other Gospels also associate Peter's commission with his sinfulness. Luke describes Peter as expressing his reservations about Jesus's instructions to fish on the other side of the boat. After the great catch, he confesses his sinfulness and is then called to be a fisher of human beings. Commission again follows the recognition of sin.

In Mark's Gospel, the commission to Peter is more muted. But his sinfulness is strongly stressed. After Peter confesses Christ as the Messiah, a confession which in the context of Mark's Gospel is ambiguous, he then tries to dissuade Jesus from taking the path to the cross. He is then rebuked in words which constitute both a rejection of the path which he urges on Christ and an invitation to follow him. The one who is behind Christ in the stage-directions of Mark's Gospel is both sinner and follower, as we see clearly in the procession to Jerusalem in Chapter 11.

In Matthew's Gospel, too, where the commissioning of Peter is not directly joined to his sinfulness, Peter's weakness and failure are presented in a perhaps more unrelieved way than in any other Gospel. Authority and sinfulness are allowed to stand alongside one another without any attempt to harmonize them.

If we follow the chronology of the stories of the New Testament, Peter continues to combine authority and sinfulness after the Resurrection. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul represents Peter as cowardly and as compromising with principle in his attitude to Jewish practices. Paul claims to have stood up to him to confront him with the true demands of the gospel. He admits Peter's authority, and needs to confront his sinfulness. It is perhaps significant that the Roman liturgy for the feast of the Vigil of Saints Peter and Paul chooses the passage from chapter 1 which stresses Peter's authority, while overlooking the conflict in chapter 2 which records Peter's failure.

In the New Testament, then, Peter is consistently represented as one who is given authority to witness to the faith and to strengthen his brethren in the faith. He is also consistently described as the sinner who is loved and is empowered to love and follow Jesus. The juxtaposition of sinfulness and authority cannot be denied. We may ask, however, about the precise ways in which Peter's authority is bound to his sinfulness. Is it the case, as Matthew's account of the commission of Peter might suggest, that his authority is associated directly with the special revelation given to him, and that his sin is typical or unfortunate, but in any case

has no inner connection with his authority? Or is Peter given authority precisely because he is a sinner called to repentance, as John's account may suggest? In this version, Peter is chosen to lead and confirm his brothers precisely because he is sinful, is forgiven, and sins and needs forgiveness again. This latter position is suggested in the iconography of the Eastern Church, where Peter's sin and forgiveness are central in his representation. I would like to explore now what this understanding of the relationship between sinfulness and authority might mean for the way in which we see authority in the Church, and how life in the Church might illuminate the way in which authority is conceived in society as a whole.

It is difficult to see authority and sinfulness as mutually entailed in the Church. It would not merely mean that authority in the Church is in fact exercised by people who, regrettably, are sinful and so need to seek forgiveness and to be forgiven. Nor would it simply mean that because all human beings are sinful, so too must be those who bear authority in the Church. Something more is implied: that God chooses people for authority precisely because they are sinners and are called to forgiveness in ways that do not protect them from further sin. Because forgiveness of sin and commissioning go together, divine authority can be seen to be such only when those who bear it are recognizably sinful.

If the connection between authority and sinfulness holds, it means that the debates about the shameful lives of popes like Alexander VI would be misplaced. While self-seeking and spectacular self-aggrandizement in Church leaders would be regrettable, the heart of the scandal would not lie in the sinful deeds but in the failure to show public repentance and a public conviction of forgiveness after public misdeeds. Moreover, of equal danger to the life of the Church would be the lives of leaders whose weakness and sinfulness were invisible, because in their case the connection between authority and sinfulness would be blurred. The holiness of the Church is the forgiveness and sanctification of forgiven sinners, and this should be shown in the life and in the exercise of authority within the Church.

In this respect, too, the life of the Church would say something to the wider society. We should expect both more and less of our leaders: less, because we should not expect their normal lives to be consistently exemplary, and more, because we should expect them to be honest about their failings. Perhaps the older images

of emperors doing penance because of their misdeeds are more attractive than the contemporary confessions by television of leaders caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, but that judgement has more to do with the perceived lack of honesty in politically expedient confessions than with the belief that it is inappropriate for leaders to acknowledge their sins.

The gain in the understanding of authority implicit in this public acknowledgment of weakness lies in the conviction that those in authority and the people whom they serve are linked by their common weakness and by a common grace. That conviction would then emphasize the place of forgiveness, mercy and acceptance in the exercise of authority, and the primacy of the weakest among the beneficiaries of the exercise of authority.

Where authority is based in a common weakness and a common need for forgiveness, the expectations made of those in authority, and by them of those for whom they exercise authority will be less crushing. For authority will be of weak human beings living among other weak human beings. In our day, perhaps the most alienating and monstrous form of authority has been that exercised in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge years. There all authority was attributed to a faceless organization, the Angkar, which was distinct from but embodied in its local representatives. All decisions, all cruelties, were made by the organization which was totally without human form, and so without human defects. Most Cambodians first heard of Pol Pot only after he was driven from power. Where the human relationships involved in the exercise of authority were minimized, and the sinfulness of the rulers was denied, the organization became sinless, inerrant and punitive. In such an alienating form of government, even the emphasis upon service became the more alienating. The survivors of the regime record how functionaries of the Angkar could speak gently with kindly faces while presiding over the most degrading punishment, secure in the knowledge that what was done served the real good of the people. Alienation of this kind is less likely where authority is conceived to involve the personal responsibility of one weak human being to another.

The connection between sinfulness and authority also argues against the search for charismatic leaders. While the gifts of leadership are varied, the gifts of personality and the ability to captivate an audience would be less valued than honesty and competence in developing and implementing good policies. The

image of Peter argues against the projection of sinlessness and daily inerrancy on to the leader, and where authority is seen to be rooted in sinfulness, such a projection becomes implausible. It would be gratifying also to be able to say that there would no longer be any place for the packaged leader, but if the path to success as a leader became the impression of shared weakness, there is no doubt that such an image would be projected. But if the image were closer to the reality, then the effects would be less harmful.

Within the Church, the link between sinfulness and authority would lay to rest the challenge posed by the Donatist heresy, where the legitimacy of authority in the Church and the validity of the sacraments are made to depend ultimately on the faithfulness of those who bear authority. The challenge was met historically by insisting that the sacraments are efficacious of themselves and cannot be invalidated by the quality of the life of their ministers. But the attractiveness of the Donatist approach lay in its conception of the relationship between Christ and the minister. They saw the minister as representing Christ in his sinlessness, so that where the minister was spectacularly sinful, the relationship was destroyed and the Church events became non-events. The relationship between Christ and Peter, however, suggests that the minister is not Christ's representative because he is sinless, but precisely because he is sinful. It is not the person who is sinless, but the person who is sinful and forgiven, who can mediate Christ's forgiveness. As a result, the Church is fully Church where those who represent her are known to be sinners and confess their sins.

This understanding of the Church leads us also to reflect on the place of the sacrament of reconciliation in the Church. The popular understanding of the sacrament in the Church is that it is a sacrament administered by those who bear authority in the Church to those who have no authority. The minister is present in the sacrament as representing Christ as judge. So, while ministers are commended to take advantage of the sacrament as part of their spiritual life, it is *par excellence* the sacrament of the faithful.

If the argument which I have developed in this article is valid, the sacrament of reconciliation should be associated above all with authority in the Church. The sacrament of sinfulness and forgiveness should bring out the inner connection of these central realities of the gospel with authority. Whereas at present the reconciliation of the faithful laity tends to take place most publicly in the Church, while the reconciliation of the faithful clergy and

episcopacy is not a public event, perhaps we need to develop forms of reconciliation which develop the connection between authority and the need for forgiveness. Such forms, of course, are always in practice soon overlaid with a panoply of liturgical adornments which conceal the human realities which the gospel speaks about so clearly. But if such forms of reconciliation could be adopted which would speak simply of the reality of sin and forgiveness, it may commend the use of the sacrament of reconciliation to the Church as a whole in more powerful ways than by exhortation.

When all is said and done, however, we may wonder whether it will make much difference to the world if Christians see authority in a different light. The merit of reflecting on authority in the Church in a fresh light may lie simply in the way it encourages us to relate the life of the Church to the insights and needs of our wider society. If it leads us to ask about the legitimacy of charismatic, bureaucratic and paternalistic exercise of authority in both Church and in society, then something is gained. The connection between sinfulness and authority in the image of Peter is naturally conducive to seeing the exercise of authority as being responsible to people and not for them. But if it is true that sinfulness and authority are related intimately, then we should also expect authority in the Church and society to be exercised in sinful ways, one of which is to take authority too seriously.

If my argument is valid, we should not expect to create new and sinless ways of understanding and exercising authority. We should expect to find, recognize and see God's hand in the bond between authority, sin and forgiveness. And perhaps we should be led to find new meanings in old symbols—could the bishop's ring be a sign of his authority precisely because it links him in innocent vanity to his people?