

Authority

Several readings for weekday Mass this past week brought out the subject of “authority.” On Tuesday, the first reading was from Hosea where God said: “they made kings in Israel but not by my authority; they established princes, but without my approval.” The Gospel on Wednesday said that our Lord gave the Apostles authority over unclean spirits. This small sampling illustrates the point that the subject of “authority” is a central one in Scripture, and thus a central one in a person’s ascent to Heaven. It can’t be set aside if a person is to reach the blessed happiness and fulfillment of eternal life, or even find peace in this life; it has to be reckoned with. We can even say that a central “theme” in the first temptation was that of authority and it has continued to be a central theme in temptation ever since. The subject of authority, then, has a certain centrality in the question of life or death, eternal happiness or never-ending, inescapable suffering.

Authority is often a sore subject in our own culture today. Even the very word can make people bristle. This is probably due in part to the corruption caused by original sin, but it is almost certainly also due to a lack of understanding of what is meant by authority and the good of having *true, genuine* authority. So what is genuine authority, what role does it play, what good does it bring, why does God Himself bring it to our attention?

It might help to start with what authority is not. When people hear this word, they might often conjure up the notion of some sort of tyrannical oppression, of someone (the one with authority) taking advantage of others, using others to satisfy their own self-interests. If this is what the word authority brings to mind, maybe we should take at least a moment to drop the hackles a little bit and seriously ask: do I really believe that this is what a good and loving Father, our Lord, actually means by authority? Or, could it be something else? Of course, *of course*, this idea of authority being “a position of power used to dominate others for the sake of my own self-interests” is *not* what our Lord means or intends by “authority.” In fact, He said so very explicitly. When the mother of James and John approached our Lord and asked that her sons sit at His right and left (positions of authority), the other Apostles became outraged, they got *their* hackles up! So our Lord had to teach them that this is not the meaning of authority. He said to them: you know that amongst the Gentiles those in authority lord it over others; but it shall not be so among you. So whatever genuine authority is, it’s not that.

If *genuine* authority is not: power used to dominate others for the sake of getting what I want, then what is it? Let us begin to approach this question by first saying that the word ‘responsibility’ is almost entirely synonymous with the word authority; authority can mean a little more than that but certainly authority implies responsibility. Responsibility, in turn, necessarily entails sacrifice of one’s self for the *true* good of the one you’re responsible for. This is the clear teaching of our Lord. Continuing with our Lord’s teaching on authority to the Apostles, He went on to say: “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.” Service? We have to be careful with this word as well. Too often what service brings to mind is something like service at a restaurant: you bring me or give me whatever I want, you wait on me however I desire. But this is not the meaning of service here. Service here means first and foremost service to God, building up the Kingdom of God, which always entails sacrifice of one’s self. Service does not mean just satisfying the whims and desires of another; it means doing what is truly best for the other, whatever helps them get to Heaven. Given the corruption of desires by original sin, that service will often actually entail saying no to the desires of others in order to teach them the way of God.

Authority-service-responsibility implies protecting and providing for the one you have responsibility for, or authority over. Is this something we really want to reject? No matter how powerful or influential someone thinks they are in this life and this world, their power and influence is limited and they are and will be subject to forces more powerful than themselves. The rich / famous / powerful also get sick or injured, they also die. The power of demons is greater than the power of any man, something one has to know and accept if he is to get to Heaven. We might think of a stoutly built building protecting one from a severe storm. This is the service provided by genuine authority.

God is *the* authority, but He gives man a share in His authority, a share in the responsibility of building up the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of true goodness. He does this because sharing in the work of the Father is an indispensable part of building relation with the Father. We should be able to see the truth of this even from our own everyday experience. When a son works with his father, he learns from the father, he begins to take on his characteristics, he knows the father in a way that he would not otherwise know him. He forges a mature relation with the father, one where the father is still the father, but one of mutual regard all the same.

Since genuine authority is something good, of course it is something attacked by temptation. Two major corruptions of authority are: 1) usurpation of authority – trying to claim or grab authority that is not mine to have, and 2) laying down, not exercising, not carrying out the genuine authority/responsibility that God has given to a person – the work that He has given them to do. Of course we might say that a 3rd corruption is some sort of brutal, tyrannical abuse of power, but, as already mentioned, that is not even genuine authority. We are speaking here, now, of genuine authority/responsibility, given by God.

The Lord gives man a share in His authority in numerous ways but one major one is parenthood. Mothers and fathers have been given a genuine authority/responsibility over/for their children, and He expects you to carry it out. It's unfortunate that this needs to be said at all today, but it seems that it is now necessary to emphasize it. Dr Brant Pitre mentioned this one time in one of his commentaries on the Sunday readings. He said that when he's in a store (or out in public anywhere), it's sometimes hard to tell who's the parent and who's the child, that the kids all too often seem to be making the decisions. It's not that a parent can't say yes to kids sometimes when they want something, nor is it that kids don't need room to learn, including making mistakes, and it's not that kids shouldn't be given more responsibility as they get older. But the parent needs to be the parent, they need to exercise the responsibility given them by God Himself. He will hold us responsible for the authority He's given us on the day of judgement. The parent must be prepared to say yes and no to their child, according to what is right and good and true. The child needs this. To carry out parenthood, then, the mother and father must know what is right and good and true, which means they need to learn what our Lord has revealed, what He teaches us, and not deviate from it. They need real wisdom, they need to know, for example, the purpose of life – that this life is just a trial period in which we must choose to accept and follow our Lord. Kids need to see the parents living this out. Parents: don't be afraid to be parents. God is with you.

In the space left, let us consider perhaps the most significant participation in God's authority that He has given to man, namely in His Church. One of the most important aspects of authority that our Lord has given to His Church, and perhaps the most beleaguered today, is teaching authority. How many church-going Catholics today believe that this can be set aside? How many think that "what the Church says" (teaches definitively) is just one opinion among many? The teaching authority/responsibility of the Church is not a gift to those who especially bear this responsibility (clergy, and especially the Magisterium), it is a gift to us so that we can know for sure the way home. Rejection of the teaching authority of the Church is rejection of our Lord. This authority is one that is corrupted in both ways: it is at times usurped by those to whom it does not belong, and it is all too often laid down by those who have been given this responsibility. This too creates chaos which always leads to tyranny, "order" brought about by force, not by love. Laying down this authority...who, today, wants to stand up today for the true nature of sexuality, for example? Who wants to oppose the sexual immorality of today, and thus be hated, even by those who would be friends (church going Catholics)? I know I don't, but want to or not, this is the responsibility that our Lord has given to His Church and He expects us to carry it out; we will answer for it on judgement day if we do not. At the same time, when this authority is laid down by those to whom it genuinely belongs, it is usurped by those who do not have the authority to speak on matters of faith and morals – governments or individuals. I recently heard about a Belgian woman who sued her diocese for not being allowed to enter the diaconate formation program, and the court sided with her. This is a gross usurpation of authority but it occurs in countless other smaller ways as well.

Take time to think about genuine authority, enough time to realize its goodness, its necessity, and then begin to think and live accordingly. You will experience a much greater peace in this life and most importantly, it will set you on the path to eternal life. You can't reject it and get to Heaven. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.