

# The Authority of the Church As a Moral Voice

by Fr. Michael F.X. Hinkley

A day doesn't go by without some assault being leveled at the authority of the Church to teach on issues of the moral life. From concerns of justice in the work place, to the dignity of family life, to procreation and euthanasia, there are many areas of the moral life that the Church is compelled to address as a moral voice in the modern world. Thus, a proper understanding of what "authority" entails is essential if the Church's voice is to be heard among the many competing calls for various personal freedoms.

The first thing to appreciate about obedience to authority is that it is the opposite of Adam's sinful desire to be "equal with God" (Philippians 2:6). St. Francis warned against allowing one's own limited view from becoming the authority in life: "He who appropriates to himself his own will eats from the tree of good and evil." The Christian faith seeks to liberate the individual from self – deception and proclaims absolute authority residing in God alone (Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13, Romans 13:10). God's voice in the Old Testament proclaims his authority: "I commanded my people: Listen to my voice, then I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Jeremiah 7:23). Here we should take note of the important link between the words "authority" and "listening."

The New Testament Scriptures are replete with testimony of Christ's appreciation of authority, especially that of His Heavenly Father. Jesus "learnt to obey via suffering" without adding or subtracting anything from His Father's will. Jesus Christ became "obedient even unto death" (Philippians 2:8). This obedience to the divine authority brought about a revolution of new life through the Resurrection: "By one man's obedience are many made upright" (Romans 5:19).

Other forms of authority are related to the absolute authority of God. However, Christ teaches that authority must be properly administered. In Christ all authority must be subject to virtue, particularly a loving humility: "You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

The most fundamental acceptance of authority is discovered in understanding that it is not unrelated to other moral truths and duties. The fact that someone has come into authority according to particular social or civil requirements doesn't ensure that a certain authority is legitimate morally: "Authority does not derive its moral legitimacy from itself" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1902). Authority is not an isolated or personal power, but is integrally related to the moral law found in God. Part of this truth of authority includes the central and intrinsic dignity and value of the human person. "The human person... is and ought to be the principle. The subject, and the object of every social organization" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 25).

Individuals who are entrusted with authority of one form or another must exercise the virtue of prudence in all matters in such a way that the common good, the personal and communal fulfillment of all, is always ensured (CCC, 1906). Thus, an individual entrusted with the gift of authority must understand it as a vocational mission to serve others: "Those in authority should practice distributive justice wisely, taking account of the needs and contribution of each, with a view to harmony and peace. They should take care that the regulations and measures they adopt are not a source of temptation by setting personal interest against that of the community." (CCC, 2236).

Those under authority find themselves with a particular moral obligation of obedience. The citizen at once finds a duty to accept authority and a duty to voice objections when authority overlooks the good of either the citizen or the community. In this way, the Church teaches that those subject to authority "should regard those in authority as representatives of God" and responsibly exercise their personal and civic duty "to voice their just criticisms of that which seems harmful to the dignity of persons and to the good of community" (CCC, 2238).

The moral character of authority is also discovered in the institution of the family. The Fourth Commandment is expressed precisely to children and their relationship to their mother and father. By maintaining a respect for the authority of one's parents the individual also finds the related obligations and duties to respect other legitimate

authorities in life. Thus, this commandment of honoring mother and father leads to graces and personal developments beyond the confines of one's particular family: "Respecting this commandment provides, along with spiritual fruits, temporal fruits of peace and prosperity. Conversely, failure to observe it brings great harm to communities and to individuals" (CCC, 2200, cf. 2207).

In order for the Church's voice to clearly address the moral concerns of our society, it must be seen as humbly serving the needs of others and the common good. Thus, the strength of the Church's moral voice is born in the obedience of Christ to the Father's will. Through Christ we glorify God, who gives the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge of His faithfulness (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20-22). As a Church we are called in Christ to witness to God's willful purpose (cf. Luke 24:46-49), a witness that may include obedience to the point of death.

In Christ, obedience is not a burden but a new life (cf. John 5:3). Only in this way can our Catholic moral teaching be fully appreciated as a legitimate authority in the modern world. Ironic as it may seem, it is obedience to the authority of Christ as "the way, the truth, and the life," that the Church herself serves as a moral authority in our society. In short, the Church's authority is best served when the Church strives to be what the Lord intended it to be – "His body" offering salvation and moral direction to all.

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