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The Authority of the Good

If we were to select one word, which describes most fully what the authority of Jesus was, and what it meant, it would not be mere power or charisma, although these were His as well.

It was His *goodness* that defined Him and that moved His followers, a goodness without hypocrisy or dissimulation, a goodness that He claimed was not His own, but His Father's who sent Him.

That is why Jesus spoke with such unmistakable authority. His words were beautiful and cogent. They captured the heart with conviction and with hope. They stirred the imagination to nobility and integrity.

His acts, informed by His teaching, were equally effective, rousing the dead conscience to new life, and kindling intuitions of beauty and holiness in a renewal of the mind.

Simply put, Jesus revealed His goodness through His power to remake human personality. And so He is the paradigm for the authority that derives from goodness.

From the paradigm that Jesus is comes the Christian idea of authority. With the same intention of goodness, given in different forms, Christian authority seeks to cultivate the human being.

A perfect example of this idea of authority is given in the exposition of the Fifth Commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother;" which is found in the Offices of Instruction in the Prayer Book (p.288).

The duty described there is "to love, honor, and help my father and mother; to honor and obey the civil authority; to submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters; and to order myself in that lowliness and reverence which becometh a servant of God."

The idea of submission seems very foreign to contemporary ears. We would often rather experience our freedom, and whatever lessons such liberty may teach us, than to place ourselves in submission to someone else. But such a notion of freedom mistakes the intention of Christian authority, as well as the truth of freedom itself.

What Christian authority claims is that by submission, first of all to God, and then to those appointed by God, the human being can grow

into a human person. The institutions of marriage and the family, the state, and the church provide the means for us to mature in goodness, and so into the wholeness of what it means to be a person. We are capable of growing into spiritual entities, of cultivating virtue, and of sharing with others the great gift of charity that God has bestowed on us. But that capacity does not become actual in a vacuum.

An example of this idea of authority may be more plainly seen in the sphere of music. If a student of the piano were never even to consider the undeniable beauty of a sonata by Mozart or Beethoven, he would close his mind to that good revealed through the artistic imagination of a great composer. By closing his mind to this influence he would miss the opportunity not only to master the piano, but also to participate in the spiritual growth that the master's music provides. The same example of authority could be taken from literature or painting, and so on.

The point here is not that a student of the arts must always imitate the masters, and never contribute His own insight, but rather that the very freedom of the student to become as the masters are cannot be developed without them. They are founders of that spiritual city to which the student applies for citizenship. It is through their wisdom that the immature soul participates in such beauty, and actually enters the realm of the beautiful.

The freedom to become a person is found within and not without authority. And so as the Office of Instruction so wisely teaches, it is the choice of submission that offers growth in goodness. Humility is the first step toward wisdom.

We are left however with this problem. What if the authority is corrupt and not imbued with the wisdom of goodness? What if instead of intending to cultivate human personality, the structures of the family, or the state, or the church are infected with the lust for domination and beset with cruelty?

Surely in that case one must choose to serve the good in whatever way is possible. God's service is perfect freedom, and he will accept the most humble sacrifice. What will matter at that moment is not so much the character of the corrupt authority as the character with which we choose to meet it.

But in the end, the possibility of corrupt authority, which history has surely and painfully known, and which in some ways we experience even now, does not subvert the fundamental need for humility or for the institutions that humility requires in order to become good.

Rather, the possibility or actuality of wicked authority demonstrates all the more that human beings need true and peaceful means to become whole and to experience the beauty and charity that is the happiness of human persons.

We are in the position, therefore, to affirm the authority of goodness. Indeed, the only means to renew our very own culture, which is another way of speaking about ourselves, is to demand an integrity of authority, and then to be prepared to support it. The qualities of love, honor, obedience, submission, and service are not abstractions. They are the qualities of a freely chosen spirit. And while they may

sometimes suffer now in the City of Man, they are and shall always be pathways to the City of God.

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