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## Power Belongeth unto God

This phrase comes from the Psalmist, "God spake once, and twice I have also heard the same, that power belongeth unto God" (Psalm 62:11).

If we think about the attributes of God, those qualities that inhere in his very substance, we dare not forget his power. Like his being, and wisdom, the attribute of power describes an aspect of his divine life. God's power is never inadequate to his wisdom, nor does he act in power apart from his wisdom. He is able to do whatever in his perfect wisdom and goodness he wills to do. Each of God's attributes is infinite and equal as the qualities of his being. He is, therefore, properly called the Almighty.

When it comes to creation, God shares his power with angels and men. And so, while the power of God is absolute, that of his creation is derived and dependent. Some angels are given the power simply to love God and to adore him. Others do his bidding in creation, providence, and the works of redemption. And when it comes to man, he is given dominion over the creatures.

The great problem of God's creation has appeared, however, in the way that angels and men have abused their power. The fallen angels have chosen to rebel against their order in creation. They desired to be first in the place of God. And men have followed suit, in using their freedom not for the love of God but for the love of self.

It was the temptation of the old serpent that Eve and Adam, choosing to do what was forbidden, would become "as gods." Eve and Adam preferred to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it was "good for food," "pleasant to the eyes," and "desired to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). In other words, creation became not the sphere of man's free stewardship, but rather a dominion in which he placed himself and his desires tyrannically at the center.

Jesus was tempted in basically the same way. Stones into bread, the spectacle of leaping from the Temple's top, the rule of the kingdoms of the world – all these were temptations for usurped power – contrary to the Word of God and in league with the diabolical intention (Matthew 4: 1-11).

It turns out that both of these, the first temptation and fall in the Garden, and the great second temptation and obedience of our Lord in

the wilderness, reflect what St. John terms the "lust of the flesh," "the lust of the eyes," and "pride of life." (I John 2:16). The entire soul and its various powers are bound up in this temptation: the gratification of the senses; the aesthetic and intellectually curious and fascinating; and finally, at the center of the will, the exaltation of the ego.

Within the history of the church's life, it was St. Augustine of Hippo, perhaps the greatest original thinker of the western church, and certainly one of her most passionate saints, who showed how these corruptions of the soul's powers are deeply ingrained in the habits of every man, even of the Christian.

In his own experience, he found that the desires of sexual promiscuity which had been so much a part of his young life were still present, active, in his memory. He was himself susceptible to moments of unhealthy curiosity that lured him from attention and devotion to God. And most of all, even as a Christian Bishop, he fought in himself the desire "to be feared or loved by men" not, as he says, for the sake of God, but in the place of God.

We are ourselves acutely aware, I think, of the abuse of power on the larger scale. As we enter into an election year, the posturing and propaganda of political aspirants and officials are replete with promises crafted to please every imaginable interest group. We have become accustomed to such rhetoric.

Even the news media, which is built on the notion of objectivity, cannot help but display its political prejudice. And sadly, the church is not immune from these problems. Just consider how the Episcopal Church is more concerned with its own canon law than it is with the spiritual communion of the worldwide Anglican Church.

And finally, on the smaller and more personal scale, we ourselves are not immune to the abuse of power. Often we do not realize exactly what we are doing, what our motives are deep down beneath the surface. But often we do. The old Adam moves in us still, and our habitual lust for power is present even in the structures of the church, in her clergy, and ruling committees, and various organizations. Arguments and disagreements are often nothing more than a play for power, or at least another intention tinged with power. And so we too must take account that our nature is fallen and the habits of our sinful wills can and do misuse power. Our souls are ill; even the Christian soul needs the ever present healing grace of the great Physician.

It might seem, therefore, that we are trapped by the devices and desires of our own hearts, and indeed we would be, if not for the grace of God in Jesus Christ. His power is greater than that of diabolical intentions. When Jesus refused the great temptation, he set forth the path for our redemption and ultimately for our perfect transformation. Now by his grace we have a fighting chance. "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (I John 4:4).

In the last analysis we must trust in God and his Word. At the moment of the great trial, when Pilate declared that Jesus was within his power either to release him or to crucify him, Jesus replied that Pilate had no power at all except what was given him from above. The truth of our condition is that God in his providential grace surrounds the workings

of evil, and keeps them within the bounds of his almighty power. We possess still a wonderful and terrible freedom. By grace that freedom can become ever freer in the truth. But only by grace. To do it by our own power is just a manifestation of the same problem.

There is a remedy for the abuse of power and that is humble charity. St. Augustine recognized this remedy as an antidote to his own troubled inclinations. He wrote, "But in the family of the just man who lives by faith and is as yet a pilgrim journeying on to the celestial city, even those who rule serve those whom they seem to command; for they rule not from a love of power, but from a sense of the duty they owe to others – not because they are proud of authority, but because they love mercy" (The City of God, XIX, xvi.14).

It is only by the practice of humble charity, by the love of mercy, that our inclinations to abuse power are healed and transformed. And here the greatest of all power is revealed. It is the power of God in Jesus. If he lives in us, then his power of goodness through the cross has prevailed over our selfishness, and we are becoming, little by little, those who love mercy. And so the Psalmist can declare again, "God spake once, and twice I have heard the same, that power belongeth unto God; and that thou, Lord, art merciful; for thou rewardest every man according to his work (62:11, 12). And our work is already done, and continues, in the gift of Jesus to us.

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