

LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

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IN THIS ARTICLE I would like to examine some reasons for the current crisis of the relationship between many Roman Catholics and the leadership of their Church and reflect upon possible ways of dealing with this crisis of authority.

The crisis of authority in Church and society

There is a broad consensus that at present the Roman Catholic Church is experiencing a crisis of authority. The authority of an all-male priesthood has come under vigorous attack, not only by concerned women's groups in the Church who demand that the patriarchal structures of leadership should be abandoned in favour of new structures which enable all men and women to participate fully in the ministry of the Church. Moreover, the separation of Church members into lay people (literally 'people-people') and clergy—supported by a metaphysical theory which claims an 'essential' difference between the two groups of people—has been questioned not only by many lay Catholics, but also by many members of the clergy. The traditional role of the magisterium, that is the teaching office in the Church, has been criticized not only by Catholic theologians who are concerned that this office makes a critical review of the Church's mission and ministerial organizations increasingly difficult, but generally also by those Catholics who cannot understand the purpose of such a centralized doctrinal office or consider it to be of little authority except perhaps as a kind of *advisory* body on questions of faith and ethics. Especially the recent pronouncements by this office on matters of sexual morality and the relationship between Christian faith and political emancipation in Third World countries have been rejected by many Catholics with reference to their own informed conscience which suggests different ways of thinking and acting. As a result the debate on the question of who and what legitimately informs an individual person's conscience has intensified significantly in the Roman Catholic Church. Questions such as these are particularly characteristic of this debate: to what extent is human conscience autonomous and to what extent does it

require guidance by external authorities? Which spiritual experiences are able to provide authoritative guidance for the individual Christian's conduct of life? How could a Christian community be organized so that the individual's experiences and longings are more fully respected? Should Christian leadership be redefined now more in terms of how it can enable Christians to respond more fully to God's call rather than in terms of who 'rightly' controls or presides over this or that aspect of our Church life?

Although the reactions to this crisis of authority and leadership in the Church vary significantly, the diagnosis of the fact of this crisis is widely shared. Of course, this experience of a crisis of authority is not unique to the Roman Catholic Church. The phenomenon of a crisis of authority is acutely felt in all realms of our Western cultures: parental authority, educational authority, spiritual authority, political authority, military authority and many other forms of authority have become objects of great suspicion. Whose interests do they represent? Does authority only wish to maintain a certain order suitable to those who already hold power or should authority be handled in such a way as to promote the greatest possible emancipation of and participation by individual people?

In this situation of confusion about authority in our cultures, many commentators have strongly urged that we ought to relocate ourselves in the best of our classical traditions of knowing and acting. The Greek heritage, the biblical tradition, one or other post-biblical Christian tradition have been recommended by some for a constructive retrieval today, while other analysts have warned against any such effort of looking for orientation and authority solely in the past. Similarly, the theological debate in Christian churches has reached the point where some theologians see salvation from our current crisis of authority only in models established by certain epochs of the churches' history (e.g. nineteenth-century integralism), while others continue to warn against any uncritical acceptance of any particular leadership model of our past.

Almost thirty years after the end of the Second Vatican Council there is a still growing feeling that the Council has not really empowered all Catholics fully to come to terms with modernity. While the Council affirmed repeatedly that human experience in its diverse forms should be taken more seriously in the Church, it did not provide sufficiently adequate theological and organizational models for guaranteeing that human experience is in fact respected as one of the sources of Christian spirituality and showing how human experi-

ence could be made to relate more constructively to our traditional sources of Christian wisdom, namely the biblical and post-biblical Christian traditions. This ambiguity in the Council's documents has encouraged two radically different groups of interpreters to claim to be the most adequate interpreters of the conciliar texts; namely on the one hand the group defending the hierarchical structure of authority and leadership in the Church, and on the other hand the growing group of people claiming to be allowed to participate more fully in the leadership of the Church on the basis of their own interpretation of the Christian message and their own personal experience.

The crisis of modernity could well be described as the crisis of coming to terms with the plurality of human experience. In modern times, however, the Roman Catholic Church on the whole has a very poor record when it comes to respecting the authority of the individual's experience. Whether with regard to scientific insights, to the development of new models of social theory, to the emergence of interpretation theory and its impact on biblical interpretation, to the emergence of the women's movement in Church and society, or in terms of a general appreciation of the authenticity and legitimacy of any particular insight into God's will or Word, the hierarchical leadership of the Roman Catholic Church has tried to defend the structures which favour a single concentration of Church authority in the clerical office, and especially in the Vatican bureaucracy. This radical refusal to accept the authority of individual Christian experience as one source of Christian discourse has, of course, not favoured the establishment of structures in which individual experience could be brought into a mutually critical relationship with the faith and vision of the entire Church. In the absence of such structures, the more and more intensified call by individual Christians for Church reform meets, therefore, with more fear on the side of those office holders in the Church who can no longer rationalize their claim to exclusive authority in a convincing Christian way.

Moreover, many Catholics experience a radical difference between their ordinary lives as citizens, as professionals and as responsible and accountable persons in a great network of different private and public relationships on the one hand and on the other hand their limited role of influencing and shaping the Church to which they wish to belong in order to respond both individually and communally to God's call.

In this situation where purely formal claims to authority are no longer acceptable it seems appropriate to consider once again the

material connection between the mission of the Christian Church in this world and the structures of ministry, authority and leadership which this mission requires. This calls for a theological reorientation which in the context of this article, however, can only be outlined very briefly.

Theological reflections on the authenticity of Christian spirituality

All theology is second-order activity which means it is an effort to come to terms with the past and present experiences of individual and communal Christian existence. But as such a second-order activity, theology provides an opportunity for everybody within the Church to reflect critically and constructively on every aspect of Christian life. That again means that theology offers the potential of critique and renewal. A theological critique of traditional models of authority and leadership is especially necessary today in order to provide possible orientation in the current crisis of all models of leadership and authority. In short, we need to rethink our model of authority and leadership in the Christian Church.

One of the sources for such a discussion is the bible, another is the rich heritage of Christian experience throughout the centuries. The problem, however, is that nobody can have purely objective access to any of these sources. Rather, everybody who searches for answers to our questions in the texts of the bible or the traditions of Christian life brings his or her perspectives to the texts under examination. Nobody can therefore claim to have absolute or final knowledge of any text. Instead, every interpreter of texts must remain open to correction by other readers. In the Roman Catholic Church this never-ending process of interpretation has been cut short by the actions and self-understanding of the teaching office which demanded that any interpretation of Christian sources be assessed finally by its authority, and which thus has cut any new Christian experience with these sources back to the limits of its own official perspective. However, the study of the biblical texts has led many people to question the very authority of such a central office and to demand that our interpretation of our sources be subjected to a much wider and continuing process of understanding. This process requires a community structure so that every reading can be heard and assessed by fellow readers.

This new freedom of interpretation has in turn motivated many new efforts to correlate the liberating biblical message with situations of human suffering and oppression. For many Catholics the bible has

become a new spiritual authority for the first time. Unfortunately, however, while some have succeeded in overcoming the dangers of a central control of biblical interpretation, others have fallen into the opposite illusion that a certain form of literalist reading of the text provides the only authentic access to the biblical message. It is the difficult task of critical theologians today to help people to appreciate both the dangers of a centralist and of a fundamentalist approach to the message of the bible. The authority of the scriptures lies in their ability to transform the reader to become a more responsive follower of Christ, rather than in any formal or external imposition from whatever side. Thus, the spiritual authority of the bible must be experienced anew by its Christian readers themselves.

Moreover, the bible is, as we have seen above, only one of the two major sources of Christian existence. The other source is human experience. However, human experience, too, must be interpreted in a critical way. Otherwise the hidden ideologies would not be exposed and overcome. And again we need a community in which our different experiences can be discussed and evaluated. No external body can ever fully understand and assess our own experiences on our behalf. We must therefore develop such community structures in our Church in which our individual and communal stories can be discussed in terms of their participation in the great Christian vision of working with God on his great transformative project.

There is no convincing theological reason why leadership in the Roman Catholic Church *must* be structured around a male, celibate clergy. Rather than following one or other ancient model, e.g. the model of community administration favoured in the later Roman Empire, every generation of Christians ought to develop their own leadership structures according to their best insights into God's will and their own potential of response. Obviously, any community requires some measure of organization and order. But instead of copying some form of civic order from ancient times, it would seem to me to be much more responsible to develop such structures of church life and leadership which guarantee best the active and responsible participation of all in today's Church. Such a view of Church is based on the belief that Jesus has reminded his disciples of their own freedom of response to God's call.

The authority of responding to God's call

The Church exists in order to respond to God's call to help to co-create God's universe. One of the images used in the New Testament

to describe the goal of this process is 'the kingdom of God'. The Church is not the kingdom of God but proclaims it and works towards it. This dynamic nature of the Church's basic orientation towards responding to God's call puts a question mark against all forms of static authority in the Church. This tension between the actual state of the Church and its goal has always led to an internal critique of the operations and structures of the Church. If the criterion for a review of our ways of being Church is our orientation towards God's kingdom then we need to attend very closely to our understanding of this process, but also to our present experiences of this world in which this kingdom is to be established, and assess both along the following lines: To what extent does Jesus' message of God's closeness call for a process of liberating and emancipatory action in this world? To what extent does our community of disciples of Jesus Christ reflect the radical equality of all heirs to the kingdom? To what extent are we Christians open to God's continuous transformation of our spirit?

Authority to respond to God's call has been given to everybody who wishes to follow Jesus in responding to God's will. In this regard we are forcefully reminded by Mark's Gospel how Jesus in his conversation with Peter redefines the meaning of discipleship. Christian discipleship does not mean clinging to Jesus, but following his example by carrying one's own cross (Mk 6). This text thus corrects inadequate models of leadership in the Christian community. Leadership is seen here in terms of enabling others to develop their own responses, rather than prescribing certain blueprints to be blindly copied. Moreover, the gospels portray Christ's ministry not by pointing to a certain presupposed authority structure, rather they point again and again to his willingness to serve and redefine any claim to authority according to the demands of this ministry.

Accepting this God-given authority to develop our own individual responses to God's call, however, does not mean that Christian faith is merely an individual business, a private concern. Rather the very message of transforming this world into God's kingdom emphasizes the social dimension of Christian discipleship. Christian faith is concerned with the place of the individual in God's project, but at the same time it is concerned with all the other dimensions of God's creative project, and these include among others the social, the political, the ecological, liberationist and emancipatory dimensions.

While in the past Christian Church leaders often tended to define the identity of Christian faith exclusively in terms of orthodoxy and

often have used their authority to exclude those responses to God's call which seemed unimaginable or heterodox to them, we need today a more inclusive description of what represents an authentic response to God's call. But how can we then assess the emerging plurality of actual and possible responses to God's call? Are there criteria which help us to consider whether or not a particular response participates in the communal response to God's call and thus promotes God's creative project? In other words, we need some form of description of Christian identity which encourages every Christian to respond as imaginatively as possible to God's call, but at the same time we have to formulate some criteria which help the individual as well as the community to orientate their search for their best response to God's call.

The authority of Christian community

We have seen already that our attempt to relocate the centre of Christian authority in the concrete response to God's call points the individual disciple of Christ necessarily to the community of disciples. No individual Christian can be satisfied with his or her way of relating to God. Rather according to Jesus Christ's proclamation the very relationship to God demands loving attention to the neighbour and to the world. Moreover, our theological reflections on the sources of Christian spirituality earlier in this article have also stressed the need to seek clarification about our Christian convictions and aspirations from the community of the faithful. Thus, it seems that the traditional Roman Catholic insistence that Christian authority must be rooted firmly on the level of the Church was not entirely wrong. What went wrong, however, was on the one hand the neglect of many valuable individual and communal experiences (women, laity, the poor etc.) and on the other hand the centralization of Christian authority in a clerical profession and more recently in the Vatican. Hence, in the light of our reflections it would seem to be of great urgency for Christian communities within the Roman Catholic Church a) to rediscover a sense of local authority built on local responses to God and on local co-responsibility for God's kingdom, and b) to develop a post-clerical understanding of leadership.

Such a new understanding of leadership is, of course, not opposed to the idea of a professionally trained corps of ordained ministers, but it does reject the claim that these ministers hold a status different from other Church members. Moreover, it would seem that our sacramental celebrations would not only suffer from such a re-evaluation of

leadership, but perhaps become again an occasion for all members to experience more fully the presence of God in their midst and the urgency to let themselves be transformed into active respondents to God's call.

Different forms of leadership

In the past we have been too reticent about rethinking our leadership structures radically, partly because there was a general belief that our faith required one and only one God-ordained structure of authority in the Church. But once one accepts that no form of authority and no structure of Church organization is infallible, but has to be measured according to its promotion of God's kingdom, the process of renewal of leadership structures in the Church can be reopened. However, as long as one views the present form of clerical leadership in the Roman Catholic Church as a God-given and immutable structure, no real renewal of Church life seems possible. Thus, the question whether or not we wish to renew our perception of authority in the Church and subsequently our approach to questions of leadership depends first of all on our willingness to discuss the theological nature of authority and leadership in the Church.

If we redefine the centre of spiritual authority in our biblical texts and our post-biblical traditions of experiencing God's presence, and if we distinguish more clearly between the need of having forms of leadership in Christian community and the particular forms of leadership used in the Roman Catholic Church in the past, then we can begin again the process of searching for more adequate forms of Christian leadership today, and thus respond critically but constructively to the widespread crisis of authority discussed at the beginning of this article.

The need for a local response to God's call requires also the development of locally functionable forms of leadership. Hence, it may well be the case that different local communities within the Roman Catholic Church may for good reasons opt for different forms of leadership. Such a plurality of leadership forms is in no way threatening to our Christian identity, rather it may well encourage us to take our local responsibility for the Church much more seriously. Also it may help us to redefine the role of the centre in Roman Catholicism. In our model of leadership, the Vatican may be considered in terms of a centre which enables the local Church to respond more adequately to God's call in Christ and to ensure that communication between the different local Churches flows easily.

In this article I have attempted to offer some theological clarifications in view of the current crisis of authority and leadership in the Roman Catholic Church. According to the principles outlined above we need a wide-ranging discussion of possible ways of redefining authority and leadership in the Church in order to encourage all members of the Church to be able to assume responsibility for the leadership in the Church according to their particular vocation. The apostle Paul reminded us that the great variety of gifts in the Church is a blessing as long as they are exercised in a way which promotes the health of the whole organism (cf. 1 Cor 12). The conversation on who can offer what will unavoidably lead to a certain confusion in terms of organizing our communal response to God's call. But this will be a limited confusion which will produce hope and confidence in our ecclesial vocation. This kind of confusion does not produce crisis and despair, but space for each honest follower of Christ to contribute to the health of the entire Church. I understand my limited thoughts as a contribution to this open-ended conversation on how we can renew our lives, our Church and our world in response to God's call in Christ.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Daly, Gabriel: 'Catholicism and modernity', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 53 (1985), pp 773-796.
- 'Dogmatic constitution on the Church' (*Lumen gentium*), in Flannery, Austin, O.P. (ed): *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1988), pp 350-426.
- Gunton, Colin E., and Hardy, Daniel W. (eds): *On being the Church: essays on the Christian community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989).
- Jeanrond, Werner G.: *Theological hermeneutics: development and significance* (London: Macmillan, 1991).