

Reflections

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Authority in the Church

“Whoever wishes to be great among you, must be your servant; and whoever wants to be first, must be the slave to everyone.”

This is a text which the enemies of the Church recall and comment on passionately. Christ never exalted the superior, nor the priest, nor the boss/leader. For Him, what makes one his disciple is not authority, nor science, but service. He expressly rejected as a temptation from Satan, dominion and the absolute power over people.

But we all feel the temptation to turn to those means of government because they seem more effective for leading men and women than do persuasion, liberty and love. Some of the disciples wanted to exercise an apostolate from a throne, and Jesus revealed to them that they would exercise it from the Cross.

The Church has to convert men and women by means of the manifestation of the Spirit of God and his bewildering inventions, and these are expressed in the beatitudes of the poor, the merciful, and the persecuted. But we spontaneously feel better making them subjecting them through the means of an organization which dispenses them from listening to the Spirit and obliges them to obey the bosses /leaders.

Christ is the leader and master par excellence. To see how authority must be exercised in the Church, you only have to see how He used his powers. For Him, his Kingdom was a radical society different from states and other nations. He did not impose on mankind by necessity of nature, but by the option of conscience. His typical invitation appeals to liberty: “If you want to be my disciple...; if you want to be perfect...; you will be happy if you conduct yourself in this way!...” Christian authority has to proceed from conviction, instruction, illumination, persuasion.

But these examples and these instructions from Jesus were, frankly, in contradiction with the natural ambitions of his disciples....this has been repeated indefinitely in the history of the Church. Little by little, the notion of service has been moving in, while special attention to titles, pomp and honors was being conceded.

However, what is most extraordinary in the Church is that her fidelity to the Gospel obliges Her to examine herself and to reform herself without ceasing. The Second Vatican Council has recalled the evangelical demands of service and has confronted them with the notion and the function of ecclesiastical authority.

At present, once again, it is discovered anew that the authority in the Church is not the power of imposing on the members the decisions of a boss/leader, but the capacity to bring forth a conversion. It is not about ordering or banning, but of appealing to conscience and conviction. The boss/leader is not one who gives orders, but the one who creates an atmosphere of faith, love and respect, a communion of ideas and aspirations.

Jesus did not say that in the Church there would be the danger of anarchy, but He denounced greatly the danger of an ecclesiastical power exercised as civil power. Jesus did not say that the bosses /leaders had to govern, but that they should act as slaves and servants; that the true boss/leader is the one who serves the others.

Only an evangelical spirit, only the spirit of Jesus can inspire those responsible clergymen with the way to fulfill this mission. Of the good exercise of authority and the good use of wealth, it is necessary to say with Jesus: “This is impossible for men/women, but all is possible for God.”

The only throne, the only power, the only authority which Christ promised to his disciples is to love as He did, to drink of his Chalice, to give his life for love of mankind.

Questions for reflection

1. How do I exercise authority in my domestic church?
2. How is my relationship with the priests, pastors...?
3. Do I believe the bosses/leaders should serve, or is it a utopia for me?

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