

The Gift of Authority

The Pope, the Church, and the Magisterium

A talk given by Matthew Teel to the Our Lady of Hope Society, meeting at St. Therese Little Flower Catholic Church, Kansas City, Missouri, on Sunday, September 14, 2008.

The topic Fr. Ernie gave me for today is really the heart of why I converted to the Catholic Church in the first place: namely, the role of authority in the Church.

Actually, I'm the one who gave this lecture that title: The GIFT of Authority. Fr. Ernie asked me to speak about 'the Church, the Pope, and the Magisterium,' but I gave it the title "The Gift of Authority," because I hope to make the case that authority—far from being the negative, oppressive, patriarchal, burdensome, stuffy, imperious, troublesome force that most people in our culture assume it to be—is actually a gift given to us by God himself.

Presuppositions

Let me just say, before we go any further, that I am assuming three things in this talk:

The first is that *Jesus is who he says he is.*

And the second is that *Jesus intended to found a Church.*

Let's stop there.

Now, both of those statements are pretty controversial in the Episcopal Church these days, and in much of mainline Protestantism in general. I'm sure I'm not telling you anything you don't already know when I say that there is a sizeable group—a very vocal and growing group—who say that Jesus was **NOT** who the Church says he was: that he was, in fact, just a simple Jewish rabbi who made no claims to be God (or that, if he did, he wasn't claiming to be any more God than the rest of us) and that we are simply to follow his teachings and not get caught up in questions of how he was God or how much of him was God. That's the new mantra for Episcopal clergy, I've noticed: We are here to FOLLOW Jesus, not to WORSHIP him (as though those things are mutually exclusive).

This second statement—that Jesus intended to found a Church—is also controversial among mainline Protestants, because it implies that there is a Church with some sort of divine authority to say, "This is what Jesus wants," or "This is NOT what Jesus wants." Many of the Episcopal clergy with whom I ministered emphatically did not believe that Jesus intended to found a Church—and if he did, it certainly wasn't the sort of Church we've ended up with, with brocaded robes and incense and bishops in miters, and so on. The assertion is made that Jesus was really only trying to reform Judaism, and that the real culprit—the real person responsible for Christianity as we know it—was not Jesus, but Paul.

But as I say, I am not going to be talking about either of these things today, at least not directly. I will refer to them tangentially, but my assumption going into this talk is that you—if you are here and are even perhaps considering the possibility of entertaining the

thought of becoming Catholic someday—probably already believe that Jesus is who he says he is (namely, God, the Son of God, the Word made Flesh), and that he intended to found a Church (whether that is the Anglican Church, the Orthodox Church, the Baptist Church, or ... [drum roll please] the Roman Catholic Church).

I am assuming, in other words, that you believe Jesus left a body of believers behind with specific instructions on what to do next and authority to speak in his name, and that your main question is not “DID he do that?” but “Given that he DID do that, is the Catholic Church the Church he founded?”

The question I’ve been asked to come speak to you on is authority, and I will say right at the outset, therefore, that I DO believe Jesus established a single, visible Church with authority to teach in his Name, and that that Church is the Roman Catholic Church. And that’s my third supposition: the Roman Catholic Church is the Church Jesus founded.

If that’s true (and I believe it is), then the Church is God’s invention, not man’s. I don’t say that arrogantly or proudly; I simply state it as a matter of historical fact. My undergraduate degree concentrated on Church history, and the fact is, if you read the earliest historical records and the writings of the Church Fathers, you find that assertion corroborated time and time again.

Now, does that mean that other Christians aren’t really Christian? Does that mean that other churches aren’t really churches? Those are all interesting questions. But unfortunately, that’s not what I’m here to talk about. I list these three assertions, as I said earlier, because they are the things I’m assuming going into this lecture, so that I can talk about the doctrine of authority in the Catholic Church and where it differs from the exercise of authority in Anglicanism.

So with that in mind, let’s start by defining what we mean by the word ‘authority.’ I always tell my students, if you don’t know where to begin, begin by defining your terms.

What is Authority?

Sometimes, when people find out that I’ve converted, they will say to me, “You know, I would consider converting to the Catholic Church, but I could never do it.”

And I’ll say, “Why not?”

And they say, “All that *stuff* you have to believe in! Papal infallibility and contraception and miracles and the Virgin Mary ...”

And then they go on with the whole litany of things they assume they could never live with: priestly celibacy, a male-only ministry, transubstantiation, Purgatory, Limbo, prayers to saints, and on and on and on.

And there are always two things I want to say to this:

The first is a bit facetious, but it’s true: how are those things any more or less difficult to believe in than the Resurrection?

I mean, you can believe that a dead man rose up on the third day and walked around and ate dinner with his friends, but you can’t believe that a piece of stale bread and

a sip of wine can become so suffused with the glory of God that it becomes, in actuality, the very Body and Blood of Christ? THAT'S somehow going too far?

You can believe that he walked through a door into the Upper Room and talked to his friends, but you can't make yourself believe that an old man in a white robe speaks the Truth every now and then?

You can believe that God became a baby and was laid in a manger, but you can't believe that he would take his Mama with him to heaven?

My question is always, why draw the line HERE but not THERE? As an orthodox Christian, you've already swallowed six impossible things before breakfast; why not a seventh?

Since leaving the ministry, I teach philosophy and religion at a little community college in the Ozarks. I have a student this semester who believes in (and worships) the Greek gods and goddesses. She's a lovely girl; I love to talk with her. But when I asked her once if she also believed in nymphs and dryads, she gave me a snide look and said, "Don't be ridiculous."

Ridiculous? I'm asking: where is the dividing line here? Believing in Artemis is logical, but believing in mermaids isn't? Did I miss something? How does she distinguish between one bizarre belief and another?

Well, I imagine she could put the same question to us: You believe that he rose again from the dead, but you just can't get yourself to believe that the saints pray for you? I'm sure she'd say, "Where's the dividing line here? How do you distinguish between one bizarre belief and another?" And she'd be right to ask, I think.

Now, for most Protestants, the dividing line is whether or not something is specifically mentioned in the Bible. And that's a good point; we'll come back to that. But suffice it to say, there are all sorts of problems with pitting the Bible against the Church, not least of which because the Church itself is the basis for the Bible's authority.

But as I said, we'll return to this in a minute.

The second thing I think when people give me the list of things you HAVE to believe when you're a Catholic is this: at no point in the three years I have been Catholic have I woken in the morning to find one of the Swiss Guard standing over my bed—in his red and orange uniform, with the white gloves and the ruffled collar—holding a saber to my neck, wanting to know what I believe about the Immaculate Conception.

Not once.

The simple fact is, if you become Roman Catholic, there is still no one who is going to MAKE you believe anything. The Church has teachings, yes. She holds to those teachings; she expects her members to hold to those teachings. But she has no way of FORCING you to believe them. Because that is not what authority is. It's a sad statement on our culture when 95% of the people confuse the word 'authority' with 'power.'

Having authority is not the same thing as being able to command someone to do something. Having authority means that something is within your particular charge. Authority means something is your right and your duty. And sometimes—as with a military man or a police officer—that charge includes forcing people to do this or that. But that is not within the charge exercised by the Church, and so is not part of her authority. Her authority lies not in power, not in force, but in proclamation. Proclamation: she has a

duty and a right, given to her by her Lord, to proclaim hard truths, even if—especially if!—no one wants to hear them.

I occasionally hear my students say that they could never become Catholic because they can't abide the Church's teaching on contraception. (Actually, knowing college students the way I do, it's probably the Church's teaching on fornication that they have a problem with, not contraception.) But I have to tell them, the pope has never climbed through my bedroom window at night to see what Kathy and I are doing. I didn't have to fill out any forms in triplicate and send them to Rome to certify that I was or wasn't doing something the Church says is moral or immoral. The Church's authority lies in its right and its duty to proclaim the Good News given to it by Jesus Christ.

So, understand this: if you become Catholic, the Church will not FORCE you to believe any of the doctrines you currently don't understand, or perhaps even find distasteful. That doesn't mean you don't, as a Catholic, have an obligation to try to understand why the Church believes as it does. It doesn't mean that you have the right to pass your own opinion off as legitimate Catholic teaching either (which is the beef the Church currently has with certain men and women who call themselves 'Catholic theologians' but who teach, in the Church's name, things contrary to the Church.).

But it does mean that the Church will not force you to believe something you can't yet believe. There really is no assumption on the part of the Church that you will apprehend the whole thing at the beginning. There is a sense in which we become Catholics, yes, but there is another sense in which we are constantly in the process of becoming Catholic. The Church takes us as we are. She doesn't expect you to have a PhD in philosophy and theology, and she won't cross-examine you on your beliefs before you come in. The expectation is that, through the daily struggle of prayer and faithful living, we will become *more and more* Catholic, until—hopefully—we come to understand the larger picture of how this distasteful teaching we never really understood (or perhaps did understand and never really liked) fits in with everything else.

So, in answer to the question, "What is authority?" we must say, first, that authority does not mean 'power,' it means 'right' and 'duty.' The Church's authority lies primarily in its right and its duty to proclaim the message entrusted to it by its Founder, Jesus Christ.

Specific Examples of the Exercise of Authority

Now, let's take two specific cases.

The first is women's ordination.

In all of the conversations about whether women can or can't be ordained to the Catholic priesthood, the response of the popes has always been: we do not have a right to do this. It might be a bad idea or a good idea or a great idea, but that misses the point, because we cannot make this change. It is not within our authority to change what the Lord himself handed on to us by example:

- The Church has always taught that only baptized men could validly receive sacred ordination;

- The Lord Jesus himself chose men to form the college of the twelve apostles; and
- The apostles did the same when they chose their successors.

So the Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord. It is her duty to conform to the Founder.

Now obviously, I'm familiar with the arguments in favor of women's ordination. Some people say, "Jesus never spoke about this one way or the other." Others say, "Jesus was a first-century Jew: he was culturally bound to his time and place, where women were always subservient." They say, "The Bible can be interpreted in a variety of ways." (The one that makes me angry is when someone says that the Catholic Church is 'arrogant' for its refusal to ordain women. The truth is, I find it difficult to understand how following the example of the Lord can ever be arrogant. Rather than arrogant, it seems to me to be humble. And if the Church is arrogant, then so is her Lord, because he ordained no women.) The truth is, the Church acknowledges that there are many women who have gifts for ministry ... but she has no authority to change this teaching on ministerial priesthood. And that pretty much settles the matter.

It's often pointed out that women in the priesthood might solve the problem of dwindling numbers and declining vocations. And that may be true. But the refusal to do it shows, I think, how seriously the Church clings to the vision of the Founder: even when it would be more expedient to jettison the teaching, she doesn't do it, because she doesn't have the authority.

So that is one example of how authority is exercised as right and duty in the Catholic Church.

The second is the issue of artificial contraception.

Essentially, the Church's teaching is and always has been that having children is one of the ends of marriage and that, though certain forms of birth *control* are legitimate—such as self-observation and the use of infertile periods in a woman's cycle—forms of birth *prevention* are not.

Now, this is one of the most misunderstood and (if you believe the mainstream media) least followed of all the Church's proscriptions. But does that mean that the Church should jettison it? Well, to hear some people talk, yes. Something like 90% of self-styled Catholics don't follow this teaching, they say, so why does the Church continue to teach it? It should get with the times, throw the baggage out, and allow people to use artificial forms of contraception.

So why doesn't she do that? Because, she says, it is not within her power to throw out a teaching because it isn't popular. Theology in the Roman Catholic Church is not done by majority vote. As St. Augustine of Hippo once noted, right is right even if nobody believes it, and wrong is wrong, even if everybody does it. And the Church, again, has a duty to proclaim what was handed on to it, which is that a child is not something added onto the love of two people, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and its fulfillment.

That people don't follow this teaching is tragic, but it is hardly the point. Even if no one followed it, the Church would not have the authority to change it.

So again, the Church's authority resides in her right to proclaim the Lord's message and her duty to stick with it, even when it's not popular.

A Third Quality of Authority

Now, right and duty are not the only qualities of authority, because they also imply a third quality, which is responsibility. The person with the authority to do something is also the person with the responsibility to do it. And this is where my take on the Church's authority diverges a bit from the academic to the personal ...

Anglicans have never really had a clear doctrine of authority. Anglicans are never really clear on where the theological buck stops. Is it the Bible? Is it the bishop, or a particular bishop (like the archbishop of Canterbury), or the House of Bishops, or General Convention? Is it the 'unbroken tradition of the Church?' Is it ALL of those things, working in some sort of checks and balances? It's never really clear.

Sometimes Anglicans will refer to the so-called 'three-legged stool' of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason—though it must be said that that actually isn't written down anywhere. It's sometimes ascribed to Richard Hooker, who was an Anglican theologian living in the 17th century, but he never actually said that.

Sometimes, Anglicans will point to the 39 Articles as an authority, but those have never been mandatory. Certainly not in America. And they don't really say much of anything. They're better for telling you what Anglicans don't believe, than what Anglicans do believe.

Sometimes Anglicans will appeal to the Prayer Book itself, but that's very difficult since there are so many different Prayer Books now. Do you mean the 1662? The 1928? The 1979? And even if you do appeal to the Prayer Book, the prayers are written so that they are open to a variety of interpretations.

Pretty quickly after I was ordained, I realized that I—as an Episcopal priest—had no authority to which I could turn for definitive answers to people's questions. People come up to clergy and ask all sorts of questions like, "Who do we believe Jesus is?" or "What do we believe about the Virgin Mary?" or "What do we believe about praying to the saints?" and I really didn't have any place I could point them to for a definitive answer.

If someone asks a Catholic priest a question, he can answer by appealing to the Magisterium (the 2000-year-old teaching of the Church and the popes). He can pull out the Catechism and say, "THIS is what the Catholic Church teaches about this subject. You may FEEL differently. You may not believe this personally, but this is what the Church believes, whether we like it or not."

A Lutheran pastor can do the same thing with Martin Luther and the Book of Concord.

A Presbyterian can appeal to the Westminster Confession.

A Baptist will pull out his Bible.

But I, as an Episcopal priest, didn't really have anything like that. There was no place where I could say, "HERE. Read this: this is what we believe as Anglicans."

If I appealed to the Bible, the person could say, “Well, we don’t have to believe that part.” Or “That’s just Paul: I follow Jesus.” Or “Well, we don’t know that Jesus actually said that. That’s just what some of these men wrote down.

If I appealed to the tradition of the Church, the person could (and sometimes would) immediately say, “But we don’t HAVE to believe that.” Or, “We’re not Catholic.” Or (my least favorite), “We don’t live in the 8th century. We need more modern and up-to-date teachings than that.”

If I appealed to reason, I ran into a problem up front because reason means ‘logic,’ but most people think it means science.

In the end, I realized that the only reason these people believed what I said was because they believed me personally. They liked me and I made it sound plausible. But if you think about it, that’s a pretty flimsy reason to believe anything. Snake oil salesmen have the same sort of authority.

So it didn’t take me very long before I realized that all authority in the Episcopal Church comes down to personal authority. But here’s the thing: if that’s all I have, then it’s also all people like Bishop Spong and Bishop Schori have. And I really can’t believe—given that (a) Jesus is who he says he is, and (b) Jesus intended to found a Church—that all he left us with was a set of ambiguous texts and a vague desire that we ‘muddle through.’ If we’re talking about eternal salvation here, wouldn’t he have left us a better source of authority?

I said earlier that the issue of authority is one that figured prominently in my own conversion. But there was a specific circumstance in my life that caused authority to come to the foreground in my own thinking, and it wasn’t so much theological as parental: I became a father.

Those of you who are parents know that you suddenly get a different take on authority when you have the right, the duty, and the responsibility to raise another human being. When I became a father, it got me started thinking about what my own rights, duties, and responsibilities were toward this child. And that prompted me to start looking at the Church’s authority in a very different way than I had before.

Now, up until that point, I was not very happy with the lack of authority in the Episcopal Church. It seemed to me that anyone could do anything and call it legitimate. No one was really ‘in charge.’ The buck didn’t stop anywhere.

With the Catholics, the buck stopped with the pope.

With the Baptists, the buck stopped with the Bible.

But we just muddled through and came to our own conclusions.

I remember one of my professors in seminary telling us, with some pride in his voice, that Anglicanism is ‘Christianity for adults’—the implication being, of course, that we weren’t like those ‘children’ in the other churches who needed to believe that they could get all the answers from someone. Only very weak people need to believe that the pope is infallible. Only very childish people need to believe that the Bible is infallible. We Anglicans don’t need anything to be infallible: we are responsible for ourselves. Don’t take your answers from some guy in Rome, we’d say, or some book (no matter how holy): forge your own path. Find your own way. Figure things out for yourself. This is Christianity for adults!

And as I said, I wasn't too enthusiastic about that, but I bought into it and I thought I could live with it. For a while.

And then I had my first child.

And it was the experience of having a child that forced me to the conclusion that that is a very sad way of exercising one's authority. Parents have a RIGHT to tell their child how to act, they have a DUTY to raise them right and tell them the truth, and they have a RESPONSIBILITY to give them direction.

Have you ever known a man or a woman who refused to take responsibility for raising their children? They don't want to tell the child to stop jumping on the couch because they don't want to be perceived as mean or grumpy. They don't want to tell the child to do his chores because they don't want to be perceived as a buzz-kill. They want to be the cool dad, the friend dad, the buddy dad. And what happens to those children? They generally act like brats and run roughshod all over everybody else and bring the whole family down around them. Which is basically what we see going on in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

It was the experience of having children and being a father that told me that NOT exercising the authority you've been given is actually very CRUEL.

Here's what I have learned in being a dad for twelve years:

When you are speaking to your child, especially about something very important, you give them very clear and simple directions, so that they can understand what you're saying. And you tell them what the results will be if they decide not to follow through. And sometimes, that doesn't even require coming up with some elaborate punishment for them; sometimes, the results of their actions will be enough.

"Abby, don't stand on the coffee table or you'll fall and hurt yourself."

"Abby don't stand on the coffee table or you'll fall and hurt yourself."

"Abby don't—okay, see? What did I tell you? I told you you'd fall and hurt yourself and you did. Yes, I know it hurts. Yes, I still love you. But now you know, don't you?"

A good parent says, "This is what you need to do, and this is what will happen if you don't do it." Or he says, "Don't do that. And if you, here are the consequences." And it seemed to me that, no matter how much I loved Anglicanism—and she was a good mother to me in many ways—she had to do more than let me parent myself.

Here's another:

A good parent does not say something that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, unless it doesn't MATTER if it's interpreted a variety of ways.

My oldest daughter is a little Jesuit. We tell her all the time: she needs to go into the law as a profession: she will find the loophole in whatever direction you give her.

"I told you not to eat cookies before dinner."

"Yes, but you didn't say I couldn't eat a SANDWICH before dinner."

A good parent will frame his directions in such a way that he will catch the loopholes. Do you do that because you're the tyrant your children always say you are? No, you do it for their own good, even if they don't understand that.

Let me ask you: would you leave a morally ambiguous babysitter in charge of your children? Of course not. Would you leave NO babysitter in charge of your children? Of course not. But that's what I, as an Anglican, was asked to believe about Jesus: he left no one in charge. And if he did, the directions are so ambiguous they can be interpreted in a thousand different ways. Only a cruel or neglectful parent would do that.

Just like that: the Church has a RIGHT to teach what it believes to be the Truth. She has a DUTY to give clear directions, so that anyone who hears them will understand, even if they don't immediately understand why it's important. And most especially: she has a RESPONSIBILITY to do that, because it is the job God has given her to do.

After several years of trying deal with life in the Episcopal Church—where there were no clear teachings, no clear directions, no advice, nobody exercising any authority—it occurred to me that only a very cruel God would say to us, “Strive to enter by the narrow way,” and then not tell us where the narrow way is.

If he tells us that we must take up our cross, then he also has a right and a duty and a responsibility to tell us HOW to do it. But I could never get anyone in the Episcopal Church to answer that question for me. Because no one was in charge.

At last, it occurred to me that Jesus must have left behind a Church that was at least as good as I am at giving clear directions, outlining consequences, and exercising authority in the things that matter. Anglicans don't have an authority and, by and large, they don't want an authority. They don't want someone telling them what to believe or what to do. “Anglicanism is Christianity for adults.” But I realized that I do need an authority: because spiritually, I'm not an adult. I'm a child.

I'm a child of God. And I need someone to give me some clear and simple directions:

- go to mass every Sunday
- say your prayers
- fast
- avoid mortal sin
- go to confession

I need someone to tell me what will happen if I insist on having my own way. (“If you use that condom, then understand that you will miss out on the joy of adding another person to your family.” “If you commit adultery, understand that it will cause everyone you know to lose faith in you.”)

I need clear, unambiguous statements:

- Don't receive Communion if you're in a state of mortal sin
- The Mother of God and the saints and the angels pray for you, and you can ask them for their prayers

It occurred to me that, if Jesus is who he says he is, and if he really did intend to found a Church, then he would surely have founded a Church that understood enough to exercise its own authority. Not in a controlling way: because again, authority isn't about

control. But in the sense of proclamation: not flinching when it's time to say what needs to be said, even if the whole world is against you.

It was at that point that I realized that Anglicanism may be Christianity for adults, but I'm not an adult. I'm a child. I want to go to heaven and I don't know how. And I need some authority in my life to show me and tell me. Because that's what this is supposed to be about, after all.

"I thank thee, Father, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them to little ones."

I accepted Christianity as the revelation of God. And I accepted that the Bible and the Creeds were inspired. But I came to see that there must be someone in authority to preserve these things and interpret them rightly for each succeeding generation. Because only a dead religion thinks that written records are enough; for a religion to be alive, it has to be able to adapt itself to a changing environment without losing its identity and compromising its message.

Friends sometimes ask me, "Do you really believe everything the Church teaches?"

My answer is: I sincerely want to. There are some things that make more sense to me than others. If I was running the show, I might do things a little differently. But fortunately, I'm not running the show anymore. I'm not burdened with that. It doesn't depend on me anymore. And that's why I refer to the 'gift' of authority.

It is such a gift to be in a place where the rules are clear and I know what is expected of me.

It is such a gift to be in a Church where the teachings are simple and well-defined, and can't be changed by majority vote, because they aren't ours to change in the first place.

Most especially, it is a gift to be in a Church where the popes and the bishops and the priests understand that they have a right and a duty and a responsibility to cling to what the Founder said and did. And who will teach me what my rights and duties and responsibilities are as well.

Thank you very much.