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The Church: Sign of the Times

'Authority and Obedience'

By REV. ALBERT SHAMON, S.T. Patrick's, Victor (Eighth in a Series)

Today one of the great crises in the Church revolves around authority. This problem has arisen, I believe, not only where faith is weak but also wherever Church authority is erroneously equated with secular authority. Too many today, I think, do not see any difference between civil and ecclesiastical authority. And there, in that error, lies the root of the problem.

Authority in secular society means simply the "power to rule." As such it is an extrinsic power—something outside society and above it. Its fundamental function is the execution of laws. Somebody has to decide whether everybody shall drive on the right or left side of the road.

Somebody, wherever common action is demanded, has to have power to say to another: "Go, and he goes; and Come, and he comes; and Do this, and he does it" (Matt. 8:9). The symphonic orchestra needs a conductor, else cacophony will result. Society needs authority, else chaos and anarchy will reign, destroying it.

To achieve unity, however, is not the sole purpose of authority in the Church. For the Church is more than a human society; it is divine. And so it has a twofold authority: because it is a society, it has an authority of command; and because it is divine, it has an authority of truth.

The Church's authority of command, however, is hardly like the State's. In the State, the prime function of authority is to promote unity. Yet one of the marks of the Church is precisely her unity. The Church is one in its seat of power, one in its doctrine, one in its worship. Its great center of unity is not so much an authority extrinsic to herself, as Someone intrinsic in her—the same One who is the source of unity in the Trinity, namely, the Holy Spirit. He, in the Church and in her members, together with the Church, furnishes a basis for unity even stronger than that which can be effected by the supreme authority vested in the college of bishops in union with the Bishop of Rome.

Through this inner unity afforded by the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist, the Church is precisely one. Her boundaries transcend nature, embracing the making of all one—on one people of God. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jew or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). Therefore between the members of the Church there cannot be the sharp distinction existing in the State between rulers and the ruled.

All members of the Church are members of Christ and share in His priesthood, His prophetic function, and His kingship. Authority of command is in the Church. It must be there, as we have said; yet it is modified, mitigated by the fact that all are others in Christ, and that it must be an authority that is essentially fraternal—an authority exercised between brothers. This is the first point about ecclesiastical authority.

The second point is this, namely, that Church authority includes the authority of truth: the power to teach. The apostles had eye-witnessed the words, works, and resurrection of Christ. So they were authorities on the subject of Christ. In fact, when the last one of them had died, public revelation was ended.

Just before ascending into heaven, Christ commissioned His apostles to teach and baptize. By this commission, the authorities were authorized to

bring to mind is that of a foundation on which to build a building. But in the Old Testament the image of rock was not used for a foundation. In the Old Testament rock suggests a secure defensive position from which one could repel attacks, like the Rock of Gibraltar.

Thus the Psalmist calls Yahweh a rock, that is, a refuge, a sure defense against one's enemies (Ps. 17:3). Furthermore, the Church is not a building. She is the people of God called by Christ to proclaim to all nations what she believes about Christ. So much rested on her faith! It must never waver. Christ saw in Peter the kind of faith on which she could rest securely. A glimpse of its strength flashed out momentarily, as day after day he professed his faith in Christ. Struck with admiration, Christ cried out: "Thou art a rock!" Later on, Christ told Peter, "I have prayed for thee that thy faith may not fail; and thou shalt strengthen thy brethren" (Lk. 22:32). Strengthen them by giving them that firmness of faith from which he got his name.

But Peter is to be leader not only in faith, but also in love. This is the meaning of the shepherd-image which Christ used in conferring authority on Peter after the resurrection.

On that occasion, Peter again makes a confession to Christ. This time not a confession of faith, but a triple confession of love. And once again, Christ rewards Peter's love by making him shepherd of His flock (Jn. 21:15-19). In ancient times the title of "shepherd" was a common designation of kings. The Egyptian kings carried as part of their royal insignia the shepherd's crook. It indicated responsible authority.

The fact that Christ conferred authority on Peter under the image of shepherd shows He meant it to be an authority of service: feed my lambs and feed my sheep. That He conferred it only in the context of love shows He meant it to be a service like that of the Good Shepherd—a giving even unto death. Thus in the following verses Christ tells Peter he will lay down his life for his sheep. This is the leadership he must have: a love for the flock. Like that of the Master's—to death Bishop Sheen eloquently put it this way in his installation sermon: "The first, the second, the third condition of exercising authority over others is that Christ be loved. And the criterion by which I may judge my love of 'Lord is service: feed my lambs and sheep'—the innocent ones, the faint and the clergy."

Moreover, the words "servant" and "to serve" had none of the euphemistic connotations they were meant to be. In the original language of the text, "servant" meant the service of a slave, servile work. Christ intended His mission and the ministry of His ministers to be the service of the one who is to be served. He said: "I am in your midst as he who serves" (Lk. 22:27). Then I dramatized these words by washing the feet of His apostles. In other words by performing the service of a slave (Lk. 22:20).

Perhaps John included this incident in his Gospel because the original force of the word "to serve" is the early Church.

I can think of John wanting to stress this point about service because there is this about a slave: he is a person whose function is not determined by his own will. He is entirely at the disposal of another. He cannot go against the command of his master. That is why Christ likened His coming to save men to the service of a slave. For He came not to do His own will but the will of His Father—"not my will but Thine be done." He emptied himself and took the form of a slave. For He was obedient to His Father's will even to dying on a cross. By His example, as well as by His words, Christ was saying to His ministers: "This power to rule that is yours should be one of service. Self must never intrude itself in your ministry. I was as obedient to my Father's will as the slave is to his master. So you must be totally dedicated to my will. You must exercise your authority only to achieve the mission for which I gave you that authority. I sent you to teach and baptize. In a word to serve." Thus after having become Pope, John XXIII said: "I am the servant of servants."

What precisely this service was to be in relation to teaching and baptizing Christ implied when He promised Peter the authority to command and then conferred it upon him. On these occasions, Christ used two metaphors: one of Peter as the rock, and the other of Peter as the shepherd.

When Peter confessed that Christ was the Messiah, Christ promised that Peter would be the rock upon which He would build His Church (Matt. 16:18). The first image this metaphor

brings to mind is that of a foundation on which to build a building. But in the Old Testament the image of rock was not used for a foundation. In the Old Testament rock suggests a secure defensive position from which one could repel attacks, like the Rock of Gibraltar.

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Much of this harmony depends on those in authority. For authority is a mirror. When it is rigid, rigid, fearful, and formal, it will be reflected in the obedience given. On the contrary, if it is warm, open, human, loving and faithful, it will evoke the corresponding faith and devotion which smooths the path to obedience.

The motion of John XXIII was obedientia et Pax: Obedience and Peace; for Pope John's path to peace of soul was through obedience especially to the commands and directives of the Holy Mother Church (a thought well worth remembering in these days when so much arbitrariness is being injected into obedience). Of this motto on the episcopal coat-of-arms, John said: "There lies the secret of my successes."

The response to the Church's authority of truth is an act of the intellect, namely, consent. We do not obey truth, we consent to it, acknowledge it. There are, of course, different degrees of consent and assent. To truths proposed infallibly, there must be the assent of faith; to other truths there are varying degrees of assent. To the conciliar teachings, for instance, there

The Church is a unique society—a community of love; so its authority is unique—an authority of command and of truth that express themselves in a service of faith and love. Correlative to her twofold authority is a twofold response. The Church's authority of command should evoke the response of obedience, an act of the will. And since the Church is unique and is not to be confounded with political society, the obedience to her is also unique and not to be confounded with civil obedience.

The citizen obeys for the sake of society; the Christian obeys for God's sake. There must be a supernatural quality about their obedience. "Who hears you hears me." This does not mean that every command given in the Church is the command of God. Every command in the Church should be given in the name of Christ and all obedience should be rendered in the same name. When there is harmony between command and obedience, the sign that the Church is meant to be again shines forth before all men.

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Rome Tells Young Jesuits Avoid Vista, Peace Corps

Portland, Ore.—(NC)—A program under which Jesuit seminarians were due to work during the summer for VISTA, the poverty program's peace corps, has been cancelled due to a directive from the Vatican.

The directive was relayed from Father Pedro Arrupe, Jesuit general in Rome, in a letter to Father John J. Kelly, Portland provincial, who had announced the program in January.

Father Arrupe, who had previously appraised the volunteer work, told Father Kelly that the Jesuit headquarters in Rome had been "unofficially" informed by the Congregation of Religious—that the program would be contrary to an earlier congregation directive telling

superiors to "discourage Religious who desire to join the Peace Corps."

"In light of this letter," Father Kelly said, "I can see no other alternatives but to discontinue our plans for the summer VISTA program."

He said the decision might cause "a certain morale problem" in the ranks, but added that "during these particular times we have to be ready for anything."

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should be the consent that highest authoritative teaching has a right to demand, namely, religious assent.

Catholics everywhere should sincerely try to enter into the conciliar teaching of Vatican II, possess it, make it their own. The virtue required here is what scholastics call "docility"—the readiness to learn, openness to the Church. For God has given her His Spirit; and hell's gates, one of which is error and the other persecution, will not prevail against her.

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