

Reflection on Authority in the Face of Abuse

Gill Goulding, CJ
gill.goulding@utoronto.ca

“Abuse in all forms: sexual, verbal, emotional, or any inappropriate use of power within a relationship, diminishes the dignity and healthy development of the person who is victimized.”

This statement was issued November 23, 2018 by the Union of International Superiors General (UISG). It was a prophetic stand expressing “deep sorrow and indignation over the pattern of abuse that is prevalent within the church and society today.”

There are many instances of the abuse of power and authority other than physical and sexual ones. For the most part, these abuses are not illegal and therefore do not lead to criminal charges. Yet in the way the church understands itself these are no less wrong or sinful and impede the church’s unique mission to the world. They dim the light the church is called to be as an authentic witness to faith and charity in the darkness of exploitation, injustice and the violation of human dignity.

Let me be clear. There is an honorable exercise of authority within the church found deep within the Christian tradition. The fact that authority is sometimes dishonored does not negate that reality. It highlights rather some key theological issues concerning the way authority is exercised and the use and abuse of power.

It challenges us to a theological reflection upon such issues recalling the foundation of true authority; the example of authority given by Christ; the importance of dialogue as an expression of authority and the witness of authority, which might lead to communities of discourse for missionary disciples.

The Foundation of True Authority in Intimacy with God

As Christians we share the conviction that the Spirit of God, the author of both plurality and unity, continues to work in our world; inspiring diversity and multiplicity while at the same time creating unity; forming ever anew a diverse and unified people in the universal church.

The desire of our Trinitarian God for a deep relationship with human persons is mirrored in our own human need to relate in depth to one another. This call to intimate relationship with God and with one another is a life-giving word of hope for ourselves, and all with whom we come into contact.

But hope is no easy option. Hope is a double-edged sword. It offers eternal life secure in a loving God; at the same time, it jerks the rug of false security from beneath our feet. It begins in disorientation, often in the face of the collapse of all that is familiar, but it is God’s word of hope that speaks within the half-light of our uncertainty.

A word of hope born in the eager desire of God to share our vulnerability through the Incarnation. A word that finds its fullest expression in the weak gestures of love from a man dying upon a cross in the paschal mystery. A word sustained in our daily recognition

of God's presence among us, nourished by sacramental life and the trajectory of our lives towards the fullness of Trinitarian life.

How are we open to this life-giving word of hope in our communities?

The Centrality and Exemplarity of Christ for All Authority

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel.”¹

Here we have the supreme example of the exercise of authentic authority as service in the way Jesus taught his disciples. Rooted in the profundity of his relationship with the Father Jesus was always reaching out to his disciples and beyond them to serve the poorest and most forgotten.

It is essential that those in leadership are those who have seen the Lord. “If our vision does not witness to having seen Jesus, then the words with which we recall him will be rhetorical and empty figures of speech.”² From this ongoing prayerful encounter with Jesus, there comes the imperative for dialogue with others.

How are we helping to sustain personal encounter with Christ in our communities?

Dialogue as the Expression of Authority

Fundamental to all dialogue is the call made present in Christ himself, the Word of God in whom God initiates the dialogue. It is this Christ-centred perspective that we must explore further, as it is the primary basis upon which all dialogue stands and to which all dialogue ultimately refers.

Such a Christ-centred perspective also implies that we enter the domain of conversation with a recognition that we are all in need of ongoing conversion to Christ. Accordingly, such a stance should pre-empt the possibilities of arrogance or dominance and facilitate a dialogue that is marked by courtesy, humility and compassion in a common search for truth and reconciliation.

In the attentive listening that forms a key dimension of such dialogue there will be an ongoing reverence of the good in the other(s) to whom we attend.

What characteristics mark the dialogue in our communities?

A Community of Discourse – the Witness of Authority

Christianity when well lived is attractive. It is this witness value that lies at the heart of both proclamation and daily living. Those who exercise authority – and many of us do so both within communities, as educators or professionals of some other form, or through the wisdom of seniority – are challenged to exercise that authority for the well-being of others.

A series of questions to explore in our communities might be helpful. Have we lost a sense of ourselves as ‘kin’ as the people of God ontologically united as the Body of Christ? Is

¹ John 13:3-5

² Pope Francis address to the Bishops of Mexico February 13, 2016. This was also quoted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* Apostolic Exhortation, November 24th 2013, 8.

this moment of the Church's most profound humiliation a radical call and opportunity to an openness and deep purification that we might become once more authentic witnesses to the one we proclaim as head?

The Church is called at this time to an attentive listening to the Spirit at work within the church and beyond. Here, a disciplined re-appropriation of the virtues of vulnerability, humility and compassion would be important. This could assist that disposition of faith and fidelity expressed in the exercise of an authority of service, and a power that empowers the whole church to be missionary disciples.