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Authority and Jesus

By Fr. Jerry Pokorsky

“And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.” (Mark 1:22)

The teaching authority of Jesus is unique.

Authority is conferred in various ways. Authority comes with appointment and position, with learning and credentials, with age and experience.

The authority that comes with holding an office, position, or appointment is exercised by managers and supervisors in charge of departments, locations, projects or constituencies. The authority of office does not stand alone. It is representative of the chief executive, stockholders, or the voters. The authority of an Old Testament prophet is defined by God. The authority of a priest is defined by the Church.



Responses by those under authority can vary, ranging from servile fear and self-interest to a mature understanding of a working hierarchy. Playing well in the organizational sandbox, respecting legitimate authority, is not just a means of personal advancement, but generally is a sign of maturity and good judgment.

Some authority comes from earning academic credentials or certificates of achievement. Credentials show basic levels of knowledge and competence in various areas of expertise. Often holding a credential opens the door to a position of authority. The scribes of the Gospel probably had some kind of verbal or written credential conferring their authority as scriptural commentators.

We can find ourselves in awe of a credential or an achievement: “He has three doctorates!” “He knows 15 languages!” Or another response can be envy or scorn: “He’s a PhD but he can’t balance a checkbook.” At times, we may find ourselves relying too much on certified experts and disregarding the more truly authoritative guidance of those with true wisdom and experience. Thus the wisdom of grandparents in raising children is too often ignored, and dangerous modern innovations suggested by hallowed experts end up spoiling the kids. (Or, increasingly in our day, morally damaging and degrading the children.)

Finally, a good deal of authority flows from age and experience. A man of experience has seen and encountered many situations with success and failure. Even his failures

contribute to his manifest authority based on experience. This form of authority is often underrated and under-appreciated. Most of us would not want to undergo the first operation by a newly graduated heart surgeon, despite his impressive academic credentials.



Respect for the true authority that comes with experience requires humility on the part of those holding positions of authority and those holding credentials of achievement. The ideal exercise of authority is the integration of all three: the authority that comes from office, credential, and experience. When egos are not allowed to interfere with the proper response, the exercise of these three types of authority gets jobs done in an orderly and professional way. Goods are produced and profits made, battles are won and men land on the moon.

But the authority of Christ is unique. He held no earthly office. He directed attention to His Father. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." (Luke 18:10) He achieved no academic degrees. He had no work experience besides that of a carpenter. He was, after all, only 30 years old when He began his public ministry. Yet all were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority." (Mark 1:27)

Jesus exercised His authority to cast out demons, to heal the sick, to walk on water, to calm the seas. He simply spoke on His own unique authority as He forgave sins. He spoke to the woman caught He in adultery, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? ... Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." (John 8:10-11) Every one of His words is authoritative and carries out what He intends.



Perhaps the most perceptive comment concerning His authority comes from the lips of Peter. After Jesus disclosed that it is necessary to eat His Body and drink His Blood in order to gain eternal life, many of His disciples abandoned Him. Jesus does not budge from the truth. When He turns to His Apostles and asks them if they, too, will depart, Peter responds in a way that cannot be applied to anyone other than Jesus: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68)

The Apostles' obedience to Christ's authority is not servile or based on fear. The horror of the Cross was the cure for their petty self-interest. Ultimately their obedience is based on their response to love. "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:10-11)

He shocked those in the Garden when He identified Himself with Yahweh: "I am" (cf. John 18:5-8). But He is not an oracle of wisdom disassociated from mankind, like the pagan gods. Early in the Gospels, St. Luke provides a clue as to the accessibility of Christ's teachings. He tells us that Jesus as a young man "increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man." (Lk 2:52) Mysteriously, His wisdom and

authority are perfectly compatible with who we are because they flow in part from His sinless humanity.



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So it is profitable to search and ponder His words and mighty deeds and to be continually astonished by His unique authority. For He alone indeed has the words of eternal life.

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