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AUTHORITY OF THE CLERGY: SOCIO- THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

Authority is a form of power attached to individuals on account of the social positions they own in the society. The fact that the ordinary men do not have sufficient measures to verify whether authorities exercise power with proper mandate gives chance to authorities to employ far more power than what is attached to their office. Priesthood is a unique profession with high potential to use authority thanks to the sacred nature attached to it. The interplay between the variety of means at their disposal to render security to those who are in ontological uncertainty and their natural crave for social attraction provide them with plenty of opportunities to misuse power. The misuse of clerical authority can be controlled by a gospel-oriented vision of life. In this regard, a revised perspective of authority is indeed necessary. According to the mind of Jesus, who reduced Himself to the status of a slave, authority consists in *diakonia*. In difference to the gentile praxis, He founded authority on the Beatitudes. From an ecclesiological perspective, authority is a gift received from God for the realization of His salvific plan for the whole world. Hierarchy does not possess any autonomous status apart from the people of God. Hierarchy is placed

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in the position of command to structure the responsibility which is common to all. As the unity of Trinity arises from the communion of three persons in God, the unity of ecclesial community is maintained through the communion among its members. Clerical authority is the special call addressed to some members in the Church in order to build up the Body of Christ in love, truth and justice through a witnessing life. It necessitates a shift from essentialist to existentialist concept of priesthood according to which the priest will be like a co-traveller and primary reference in matters of faith.

Keywords: Authority; Clericalism; Diakonia; Hierarchy; Power; Priesthood

Introduction

In reference to certain young priests, I have heard people saying: “what these guys learn in the seminaries? The ‘new gen priests’ are not all humble; they behave like authorities. They are intolerant of even the smallest mistakes of parishioners. The way they speak to the elderly people is not acceptable.” It is really surprising to hear this about the young priests because, a few decades ago, such comments were raised mainly against the priests of old generation. Though we can’t generalize this comment, it is true that some of the newly ordained priests are defensive in responses than their predecessors. Why do the young priests become imposing? Is it the presently anti-clerical attitude that makes the people judge so about the young priests? Or has the identity consciousness of the new gen priests been changed these days?

Reflections on the above said questions lead us to ask more basic questions like: Does the clergy have any reason to be authoritative? What are the sources of their authority? What changes have occurred to the standing of clergy in the society? Is their authority similar to that of secular leaders? If the sacrament of ordination confers special power on clergy what is its purpose? Is it not time to revise the stature of clerical authority if it distances many from Church? Thus goes, the series of questions regarding the clerical authority in the Church. Given that the priests are not merely spiritual heads but also social figures of the given localities, the question of authority cannot be tackled merely from the view point of theology; it must be thought also from that of social sciences. This paper investigates into the power base of clergy and tries to state the nature of clerical authority in Church. Our deliberation begins with understanding how clergy and authority are intertwined and interacted in the context of life.

1. Authority

Sociology is indebted to Max Weber for a developed notion of authority. Authority is generally perceived as a form of power attached to social system, and subsequently, it is considered to be a power not attached to individuals as such but to the social positions they own in the society. For instance, people obey the collector not due to the merits s/he has as an individual but because s/he represents, by virtue of office, the authority of government. People accept the collector's authority since the society has decided it so. Similarly, from the part of the collector, she or he claims obedience from the part of citizens not on the basis of his or her personal assets but on behalf of legitimacy attributed to the office of the collector by the society.

Authority is powerful than any individual power, which is grounded on the physical or mental or moral powers of individuals, owing to the fact that it is produced and controlled by the social system. For that same reason, the legitimacy of the power exercised by authorities depends largely on whether it is being used for the benefit of people. Authority becomes legitimate only when it is administered within the scope and objective of the social mechanism that the public has defined for the same. Subsequently, it also follows that an individual can retain authority only if people share the feeling that the authority properly exercises power.

At the same time, there is much possibility for the misuse of power as authority is founded on the common belief that those who are in positions generally act according to the common consent of the society. The ordinary men do not have ample measures to verify should the authority act with proper mandate, and therefore, they do not dare question the power operators. On account of this ambiguity, administrators get the opportunity to put on far more power than what is attached to their office. In this sense, the chance for misuse of power could be seen as already built into the very structure of authority itself. This is very true in the case of charismatic figures because the charisma functions in terms of the collective attributions given to certain leaders by their beholders.¹

Authority is generally perceived at two levels: theoretical and practical.² The theoretical authority derives from the authenticity of

¹Allan G. Johnson, "Authority," *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, New Jersey: Blackwell, 1998, 18-21.

²Leslie Green, "Authority," *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy Vol.1*, Edwards Craig, ed., London & New York: Routledge, 1998, 584.

certain beliefs. By practical authority we mean authority over action. In both types of authority, the concerned persons are expected to subordinate their will to an authorised person or to a belief in a binding manner, independent of their content. Put another way, the opinion of an expert or the directive of a ruler, parent, manager and so on is itself meant to be taken as a reason, irrespective of the grounds on which that opinion or directive is based. Consequently, the alleged subjects are bound by the requirement made by the authority and it paves the way for the administrators to mishandle power.

Authority has to be understood also in relation to power. Power is the ability of the individuals or groups to make their own interests or concerns count even when exist obstacles and oppositions. Power may be sometimes used directly to attain the goal. In political or religious realms, power is acquainted by an ideology or belief-systems which justify the action of the agent using power.³ While for Karl Max, power is rooted in economic relation, to Max Weber, power resides in the ability of individuals or groups to realize their own will in a community even against the resistance of others who are participating in that action. To Weber, power comes from the social positions and personal qualities and talents.⁴ The main difference between authority and power is with regard to their legitimacy. While authority is a form of power that is endorsed by the social systems, and thereby supported by those who are subjected to it, power lacks the legitimacy of the public.⁵ Power resides rather in the individual or in a group who succeeds in making the subjects obey on account of fear or force or veneration.

2. Clergy

In sociology, clergy is a unique profession exercised by a group of trained persons, who possess knowledge and skills not accessible to the general public.⁶ They enjoy a certain autonomy in relation to the faithful thanks to the sacred nature attached to them by way of ordination and ascetic life; but at the same time, their stature is controlled, on the one hand, by the powerful bodies through appointment, and on the other hand, by the response of the people

³Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, 338-339.

⁴Richard J. Gelles & Ann Levine, *Sociology: An Introduction*, Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1995, 281.

⁵Allan G. Johnson, "Power," *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, 210.

⁶Dean R. Hoge, "The Sociology of the Clergy," *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Peter B. Clarke, ed., Oxford: University Press, 2011, 581.

whom they serve. Clergy is supposed to exercise their ministries without any worldly motivation and monetary gains. Though from the religious point of view, clergy or priesthood is understood as a call to detachment, in practice, their services have political and social consequences. Due to these ambiguities about the identity of clergy, there is a debate as to whether priesthood is a profession or a vocation.

According to the Catholic perspective, the source of clerical authority is Christ who gave St Peter the order to lead His sheep (Jn 21:15-19). Church enjoys the fullness of God-given authority through the succession of Peter. The Pope and the bishops are its custodians. The priests, by way of ordination, share this authority and thus they are presented as the voice of Christ in the Church. This mediatory role that clergy play between Christ and the faithful attributes to them a great deal of symbolic power. They are, in the eyes of people, persons who take orders from God for people. Their presence, words and deeds are supposed to reverberate something spiritual. Even though their discourses are not fabulous as those of secular leaders, they are heard and respected on account of their association with God.⁷

The role clergy occupies in the religious world is immense as it responds to the fundamental need in man for an ultimate guarantee against the contingent nature of the world.⁸ Whenever and wherever ontological security becomes shaky, people are in search of measures to repair it and Church disposes various means for the same through the priestly ministry. People are ready to submit their dilemmas and doubts to religious authorities provided they can gain higher returns. They do transfer their needs to God via clerical agency due to the faith that their own religious power is insufficient to surmount the crises, whereas the priests wield great religious power. The advantage of clerics is that they are invested with special transcendental power through a socially established institution like Church. By special attributes conferred on them and by their distinctive life-style marked often by celibacy, clergy men possess incalculable religious capital. Faithful feel free to ask guidance from the clerics even in their personal matters because they can't fully trust anyone else. And clerics, being aware of the prestigious space they have, affirm strengthen and restore the ontological security of petitioners.

⁷Paul Avis, *Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church*, London: Mowbray, 1992, 12.

⁸Meerten B. Ter Borg, "Religion and Power," *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Peter B. Clarke, ed., Oxford: University Press, 2011, 198-204.

The clerics have various chattels to appear as agents of transcendental world. They have special dress code, behaviour and life style. The cultic ministry renders them unimaginable power. In interpreting holy texts, administering sacraments and performing para-liturgical services they are believed to be inspired by God and as transferring grace to people. In this regard, there exist gradations in the priestly class itself. Those clerics who give appealing and popular interpretations of the Scriptures may gain more power than other colleague priests among the devotees. Similarly, pastors who seem to have special gifts of prophecy and healing get massive popularity. The power of clergy augments also as they have control over the institution of marriage. The sanctifying tie-up between man and woman is sanctioned through the clerical world in the Church. The power invested in clergy to administer the Sacrament of Reconciliation is incredible as it touches the sexual and ethical life of people. Although not as pivotal as the cultic ministry, the altruistic ministry, when done with dignity, adds to the symbolic capital of clergy. When a priest listens to the problems of people and accompanies them in their joys and sorrows, his influence undoubtedly goes higher. In brief, the symbolic faculties inherent in priesthood grant the clerics a great autonomy in the society and opens before them new avenues of power games.

3. Psychological Aspect of Clerical Authority

Clerics, though they function as inter-mediators between the divine and human worlds, are vulnerable human beings. They are controlled by the human and worldly passions like any other human individual. Consequently, in our attempt to understand the undercurrents in the clerical use of authority, sufficient importance is to be given to the psychological dimension. Of all the human desires, ambition for power and glory are the supreme. In general, we find these two lusts interwoven in humans. One who has power seeks for glory and one who has glory seeks power to retain it. The craze for power and glory is relatively high in those who don't have to be worried about the basic needs of life. The nature of these lusts is that man never ceases to thirst for having them more.

The authoritative nature is often a consequence of childhood formation of parental image. We are used to consider the domineering nature as a sign of strength. Reality is just the opposite. It arises from the weak and dependent mental frame. The feelings of weakness and self-contempt constantly create in men the need to prove themselves strong. Such persons are attracted to the features of

the conventional middle-class: rigidity, uncritical submission to authority and acceptance of inexplicable beliefs and superstitions. They lack tenderness and become condemnatory in reactions towards those who don't share their value systems. They lack the capacity to handle new ideas and different situations, and hence, any deviation from the traditional pattern is seen by them as disloyal and even immoral.⁹

Coming to clergy men, they have more chance to become authoritarian because they enjoy, as part of their profession, both authority (legitimized by society) and power (as a result of the personal calibre). Power and authority prompt social attraction. Social attraction refers, in a restricted sense, to inward liking for another person and to having positive feelings about him/her. In a broader sense, it refers to being drawn to another person for any reason whatever it may be.¹⁰ The feeling of being attracted by others brings certain changes in the attitude of the person who attracts, for instance, a quest to prove oneself as attractive. It happens because one's ability to associate oneself with the concerned people defines the type and size of benefits that one can reap from the public.

In the case of clergy, the response of lay people depends largely on how they find priests as attractive associates. Similarly, the effort clergy takes to attract lay people depends on how he finds them liking his association. Thus the attraction between clergy and lay people depends on how both anticipate the grade of reward they promise each other. The crave for attraction leads one to be impressive. Generally, one tries to impress others through the talents and qualities one has or through the services one renders to others. By performing them in an excellent manner he conveys the message that association with him will be rewarding. An individual, who is not in a state, to attract others in the above said manner has no other option but to use force to make others rewarding towards him.

As regards laymen, in so far as they want to be in the Church and to benefit from the sacraments, they have no other way than remaining subservient to the hierarchical order. This opens possibilities for the clerical mishandling of authority in the Church. But, following the incessant scandals regarding money and sex in the recent past, the resources of the clergy to attract devotees has at present diminished to a large scale. The faithful have begun to doubt

⁹Avis, *Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church*, 39-40.

¹⁰Peter. M. Blau, "Exchange and Power in Social Life," *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, Craig Calhoun and others, ed., New Jersey: Blackwell, 2004, 99-101.

whether they went wrong in keeping high regard for bishops, priests and religious. The feeling that they have been exploited brings in contempt towards clerics.

Besides, absence of church practices due to the pandemic Covid-19 has augmented the negative attitude toward clergy. Clergy does not have opportunity to impress the laity either through administration of sacraments or witnessing life. Nothing to wonder if, in future, the lack of reward from laymen lead certain clerics to use more force to get the appreciation, which may make the situation verse. Anyhow, it is indeed urgent that clergy takes measures to regain the confidence of the society. The following thoughts are destined towards reflecting on the identity of priesthood and developing new perspectives through which clergy can better translate the face of Christ and improve their role of mediation in the contemporary society.

4. Ecclesial Authority – Theological Perceptions

4.1 Ecclesial Authority not Devoid of Secular Nature

It is one among many contradictions of Christian living that the Church authorities are keen in executing and retaining power in life whereas they proclaim values of simplicity, humility and service in liturgical and catechetical instances. In Church discourses, power and glory are presented as honours reserved to God alone but in practice we find authoritarianism and pomp setting the tenor of ecclesial life. It is also striking that hierarchy is adamant towards those ideologies and politicians who rudely exercise power, while in their own circles they are not always ready to put into practice the principle of subsidiarity.

Some may think that this criticism is not valid in the case of Church as the latter is led by spiritual motives. There is a point in this argument since Church authorities do not use physical force to get things done by the faithful. But at the same time, there exists ample evidence for leaders employing moral or spiritual pressure on believers. This fact gives rise to a serious question: Can Church fully ignore the secular understanding of authority on the basis that Church is not a purely a secular entity? Answer is no because authority is a concept related to both secular and sacred domains. Being a social institution, Church has both secular and sacred natures. Hence any reflection on ecclesial authority must encompass reflections from secular as well as religious sciences.

From the secular point of view, no authority can exist in vacuum because it is based on relationship. It can continue in the world only

by struggling for the aims of the community as its very goal is the wellbeing of society. What is true in the case of secular authority is valid also for Church for she is a social entity as well. The power of ecclesial authority depends on how much the members of the Church are convinced of their leaders representing their cause. Only through sufficient contact and interaction with those who come within the boundary of Church and those who live at her periphery, she can survive in the world as a social entity. However, theological stands cannot be founded on mere sociological reasons. We need a renewed understanding of authority which is constructed on the basis of the vision and praxis of Jesus, of early Church and of eminent theologians.

4.2 Jesus' Vision

At the time of Jesus, the power-centre was Rome. Roman law and order were imposed on people with the help of the army which repressed any sort of resistance to authority. The governors retained power attaching divine dimension to emperor and to themselves. Although both historical and mythical elements are intertwined in gospel narratives, it is certain that while, on the one side, Jesus challenged the misuse of power by religious and political heads, on the other side, he encouraged a different mode of power-exercise. He presented authority as a call for *diakonia*.¹¹ The law of service in God's kingdom is in opposition to the law of governing in the world. In the context of the request made by the mother of James and John, we find Jesus giving the following advice to the disciples: "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-27).

It means that Jesus did not want his followers exercise power in the model of Pharisees and Scribes. In the sermon on the mountain, He indicated not the Law of Moses but the Beatitudes—poverty, meekness, righteousness, compassion, purity, peace, suffering—as criteria to have place in the Kingdom of God (Lk 6:20-28). To Jesus, the power relations have to be defined by love, service and communion. The triumphant entry of Jesus into the Jerusalem temple on a donkey instead of a horse (Mk 11:14) shows his distance with the rulers of the terrestrial world. He himself took the role of a slave at the last supper by way of washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:1-20).

Coming to St Paul, his advice in Ephesians is worth discussing. In 4:11-12 Paul recollects that Jesus gave different gifts to his followers:

¹¹Ivoni Richter Reimer & Haroldo Reimer, "Power as Service: A Critical Reading of Power from the New Testament," *Concilium* (2020/3) 35-37.

some are made apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers. And then Paul adds that it is meant to equip the saints for the work of ministry which is building up of the body of Christ. From this, it is clear that the stature a Christian possesses in the Church is not on account of his/her merit; rather it is a gift received from God for the realization of His salvific plan for the world.

4.3. Ecclesiological Reflections

Yves Congar (1904-1995), the French ecclesialogist, has made significant contribution to the understanding of ecclesial authority. According to him, the hierarchical authority is situated in relation to the ecclesial community. Hierarchy does not possess any autonomous status and value apart from the people of God. Certain members are placed in the position of command to structure the responsibility which is common to all. Congar compares the Church to an organic body in which every cell is alive. The hierarchical functions are like organs of movement: joints, muscles and tendons. Every cell in the body offers to God the sacrifice of its own life. In this sense, all members of the Church are priestly in nature. At the same, some members are qualified as priests to organize the priestly functions of the believers. It is Christ Himself who opted for the hierarchical ordering of His Body by selecting the twelve apostles.¹²

Congar's Trinitarian reflection of authority is worth mentioning in this context. He shows that the unity of the Trinity arises from the communion of three persons in God. Likewise, the essential unity of ecclesial authority exists in the communion of love among its members. In the Church, all members are animated by the same Spirit, who gathers everyone into the body of Christ. The striking point here is that unity presupposes a specific order. As there is unity in essence and diversity in functions in the Trinity, there must have distinctiveness for each member in the Body of the Church while the essential unity of the Church is kept intact. In other words, all members in the Church have authority of different kinds, which complement one another for the health of the entire Body of Christ.

This relative nature of the hierarchical authority had already been dealt by St Augustine centuries ago. Regarding the authority of bishops, he writes in the *City of God* as follows: "bishop who loves

¹²Yves Congar, *Ministères et Communion ecclésiale*, Paris: Cerf, 1971, 34-39. For a detail study on the topic, see Anthony Oelrich, *A Church Fully Engaged: Yves Congar's Vision of Ecclesial Authority*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011, 98-101; 136-138.

pre-eminence than good works should understand that he is no bishop.”¹³ It means that special status given to some members in the Church is meant for doing good on behalf of believers. Authority is meant for building up God’s community in love and charity. We see that Vatican II has warned against the danger of clergy assuming an over-whelming position in the Church: “Let the layman realize that pastors will not always be so experts as to have a ready answer to every problem that arises; this is not the role of the clergy; it is up to the laymen to shoulder their responsibilities under the guidance of Christian wisdom and with eager attention to the teaching authority of the Church” (GS 43). We conclude this point by saying that authority in the Church is the ordered responsibility of each of the baptized with the corresponding spiritual power to build up the Body of Christ.

5. From *Essentialist* to *Existentialist* Concept of Priesthood

The theological position outlined in the previous unit presupposes a paradigm shift in the very understanding of priesthood. According to one of the long traditions, known as ‘essentialist,’ priesthood has an indelible character. The ineffaceable character is imprinted on priests by virtue of a grace that is handed on to generations through the apostolic succession. This divine gift is from the ‘above-beyond.’ But there is another tradition regarding priesthood, called ‘existentialist’ which sees priestly vocation as emerging from the realities of the world and then developed as symbol of Jesus’ mission. According to this perception, priests are leaders of the Church engaged in discovering the living presence of the kingdom of God in the diverse walks of life. Their role consists in living as sacraments that disseminate grace to people through authentic Christian discipleship.

Among these two models, the first one is based on Heb 7:11-28 where Christ is presented as the high priest. Understanding of priests as mere functionaries or ministers of sacraments may be the result of a wrong reading of this biblical passage. However, this is not the only image of Jesus. In the New Testament, there are other illustrations like Good Shepherd, True Vine, Way and so on which cope with the existentialist perspective. In these allegories, the priestly aspect is applied to the entire people of God and the ordained priests are like their guide. In fact, the existentialist understanding of priesthood conforms better to the form of discipleship envisioned by Jesus. To

¹³Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book XIX, chap. 19, New York: New City Press, 1998.

Jesus, priesthood was a means to build up Father's reign in the world.¹⁴

When we examine the history of the Church we can find both these models and their combinations from the very beginning. We take up here only three types of exercising authority in Church.¹⁵ One is authority that is acquired through spiritual power. It is derived from various gifts the leaders have and the roles they play in the community of believers, namely, apostle, prophet, teacher, healer, administrator, helper, etc. This type of power is based on the servant model of Jesus. Irrespective of the responsibility, the leaders of early Church did not dominate over others. This trend, close to existentialist model, persists in the Church thanks to the monastic and prophetic traditions. The mystics and prophets, each in their own way, remind the believers that authority is not to be confounded with the authority of the world.

Another one is juridical model which originated during the Constantine's reign. While Church was made free and was raised to the official religion of the empire, the bishops became public men of rank. The hierarchy became more secular and formal in discharging their duties. Canon Law became the basis of administration. The Pope acquired power over kings and kingdoms. The medieval Church adopted many of the vocabulary, style and ideology of the imperial court and appeared to be a worldly structured power. The formulation of the doctrine of the papal infallibility was one of its highest expressions.

A third category was that of practising authority through collaboration. One principal event that paved the way for the decentralization of power was the emergence of several protesting movements, which challenged the centralized power in the Catholic Church. Though the initial reaction of Vatican was defensive, the theologians began slowly to emphasize the need of collegiality and synodality in administration. The principle of subsidiarity has become inevitable in a world of pluralism and small traditions. Today, the diversity of local Churches, geographical settings and political regimes are creatively integrated into Church life through the principle of subsidiarity. Whatever be the form of exercising authority, the Church has to be distinct from

¹⁴Terence Card, *Priesthood and Ministry in Crisis*, London: SCM Press LTD, 1988, 117-121.

¹⁵T. Howland Sanks, "Authority in the Church," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A. Komanchak, Mary Collins & Dermot A. Lane, ed., Bangalore: TPI, 1996, 74-76.

other religions and human organizations by following the servant model of Jesus.

Conclusion

Authority as well as priesthood are realities attached to social system. At the same time, these are entrusted with individuals and therefore the personal interests are interwoven into the exercise of power. It means that clerical authority does not exist as an abstract phenomenon. It can be altered in relation to changing ideological patterns and character of power executers. As implementation of clerical authority is thus vulnerable, its praxis has to be constantly observed and corrected.

A true antidote to fight against the misuse of clerical power shall be a sound theology of authority and priesthood. Ecclesial authority is to be seen as the structured way of fulfilling responsibilities among the people of God. Priesthood is the institution to order the priestly services of the entire people of God. This relational understanding of authority and clerical life shall help them to be in the right path. In a social system where power is shared by several agencies, the position of clergy has to be that of a co-worker or an animator. The main challenge for the future priests would be to become the primary reference for the people even while they behave not as rulers but like facilitators.

Until now, the traditional mind-set of the society and conventional interpretations of clerical identity have been creating a conducive environment for a positive reception of clerical authority. But the contemporary culture has made authority something "to be acquired" than "given." Consequently, the clergy has to gain authority by their sincere, holy and committed life. The clerical authority consists in their competence to keep people in union with the Transcendent, which is basically to be gained through a credible and witnessing life.