

Conway, Michael A., 'Priesthood, Authority, and Leadership,' in *Performing the Word (Festschrift for Ronan Drury)*, ed. Enda McDonagh (Dublin: Columba, 2014), 67- 73.

### ***Introduction***

After a number of decades during which any idea of authority was identified with limitation, the misappropriation of power, and the suppression of creativity, there is in contemporary Europe evidence of a new awakening to the essential positive role that authority might play in family, community, workplace, social, and, indeed, ecclesial life.<sup>1</sup> This transition to a more positive understanding of authority is indicative of a change in our culture that has important consequences for an ecclesial ministry that would seek to nurture the Gospel in the European context, a context that has a specificity that is not evident elsewhere. The change has to do with authority, with power, with leadership, and with trust. This short essay is an initial attempt to understand the changing dynamics in our culture, and to suggest how leaders in ministry, particularly priests, might begin to re-imagine leadership in this emerging context.

### ***I A Fixed World Order***

If we look to the recent past, what we see is a certain common understanding of how authority, leadership, and power worked together. Various sectors of society were apportioned different competencies and these in turn handed over to a spectrum of persons who were then deemed responsible. Thus, for example, in matters of health, the doctor, the midwife, and the nurse had the appropriate authority and the concomitant power to act on the other's behalf in matters medical. In issues of the law, the Garda, the solicitor, and the judge were in the positions of responsibility. In matters of faith and morals the responsible person was most often understood unilaterally to be the local priest. He was charged on behalf of the community with maintaining the religious life of the parish and, indeed, at least striving to maintain a certain level of moral decorum in the parish. For most people, this structuring of communal life was virtually an absolute and any idea of questioning this was, practically, unthinkable.

This basic way of understanding social structures and communal order was a well established one that had its proximate roots in the medieval world order, where each person in society had his or her place with a well defined role that was designated for life. Society, reflecting

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the first issue of the French magazine, *La Boussole*, which is entirely dedicated to 'L'Autorité Positive: comment elle peut changer notre vie' (*La Boussole*, Spring Issue, 2014).

this order, was highly structured. This, in turn, reflected a neo-platonic understanding of the cosmos, where everything had its fixed place in a divine order that was structured according to a hierarchical principle.<sup>2</sup> And, of course, this could not be altered. This was its primitive attraction: the divine order being realized here on earth. Thus, for Leo XIII, for example, the medieval world order was what he termed the ‘Golden Age’ and when he thought about ‘Church’ this was his ideal. It was a top-down model, where everyone had a place, knew where it was, and, crucially, knew also everyone else’s place! Any attempt that was made to change things disturbed the entire structure of the world order, and this, in turn, threatened everyone. Communal stability depended on everyone knowing and acting according to their position. It could not be otherwise. Around you, others depended on you being where you ought to be; you could not act in isolation, and if you did you would have to be dealt with severely or removed from the community.

In this model, more than anyone else, it was the priest who was at the centre of the local parish life. He was the leader and authority figure at the centre of communal action and with enormous power. Further, for this model, moral direction and religious education was in the form of *instructed conscience*. This was mandated by the bishop (himself a link in an over-powering hierarchy) in his diocese and carried out by the priests and to a lesser extent the teachers in the parish. People were taught what was to be believed, how they ought to act, what was right, what was wrong, and this was deemed to maintain the correct ordering in, for example, a parish community.

Of course, even with a little theology, it was always recognized that there was an element of voluntary cooperation in all of this. There was an awareness, that the act of faith, for example, was worthless if it were not a *free* act. But this very freedom, the ‘voluntary element,’ so to speak, had such little wriggle room, that it was practically non-existent. Freedom in any real sense around religious or moral ideas was an ideal rather than a reality. There was an enormous over-simplification of moral prescriptions and an extreme lack of trust in lay-people in terms of dealing with the complexities involved in decision making.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘In every well-ordered community each man has his appointed task which he must perform’ (Plato, *The Republic*, III.406).

The model, at least to the degree that it was, and still is, operative, reflects, on the one hand, an *authoritarianism* and, on the other hand, an *infantilization* of others.<sup>3</sup> One group in society, those in positions of authority and leadership, assumes ‘power over’ others, and another group behaves, or is forced (sometimes subtly) to behave, in a fashion that is a good deal less than reflecting mature, competent, responsible adults. To be a ‘leader’ in such a world is to be entangled in a web of often dubious expectations, of paternalization, and of vicarious responsibilities. It is profoundly unhealthy on many levels. It places those in leadership in positions that go well beyond appropriate boundaries and legitimate competencies.

## ***II Personal Freedom and Diversity***

In general European culture, this authoritarian model has, for the most part, completely collapsed. The collapse was precipitated to some degree by another powerful dynamic in Western culture, namely, the emergence of ‘personal freedom,’ a discovery, so to speak, of the ‘voluntary element’ that I mentioned above. This has now come to the fore as a central value in how we understand ourselves and structure our lives. It is a definite achievement: one that has been hard won over an extended period of time beginning with the so called nominalist controversy of the late Middle Ages, given an enormous impulse through the Reformation, and hammered out between the Enlightenment and the Romantic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is important to recognize that this is not something that has suddenly arrived from nowhere and is now knocking on our doors. It has been emerging over a very long period in the European Christian tradition and, curiously, nowhere else. The surprising thing is how quickly, in the last few decades, it has spread in the general culture. It now means that personal freedom, the subjective, the singularity that is each person, and the narrative history of the individual can no longer be treated as accidental or ancillary and subsumed under any so called ‘objective’ system, be it economic, political, moral, or religious.

When tensions now arise between an external authority, such as Church teaching, and personal conscience, the trend is clearly against an exclusive exterior voice and in favour of an interior trusting of one’s own conscience. There is nothing strange about this in contemporary culture; it simply expresses the idea of ‘moral autonomy,’ which is a core

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Charles Taylor, ‘Magisterial Authority,’ in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 259-69. This entire volume contains a number of important essays on authority in the Catholic tradition.

value in a liberal democratic culture. In our European (and, indeed, North American) culture, this is neither a localized phenomenon nor a passing phase. In matters of faith, of religion, of spirituality, and of morals, people decide increasingly for themselves in the final instance. This is understood as a matter of integrity and authenticity. In our personal lives subjectivity now counts, singularity matters, and no decision has value unless the crucial voluntary component is explicitly given a real place. This has not always been the case; it is this that is new. The more traditional discourse on religion and morality focused on the objectivity of doctrines and teachings and on passing these on to others, usually in a downward direction.

Now, a by-product, if you like, of this fact is an *enormous diversity* of expression vis-à-vis religion. Some are heavily engaged in the local parish and are fully at home there, attend Mass regularly, and so on. Some have a more marginal relationship to the stable, visible Christian community. Some will be leaving shortly, only to return to regular community involvement in a few years. Some will reconnect when they have children, when they get ill, or when death knocks at their door. Some will never come near the Church again. Some will find another Christian group where they will feel more at home (and their numbers are increasing). ‘Belonging’ is now no longer a simple either/or, an ‘in’ or an ‘out’. There is a spectrum of positions: always, never, sometimes, occasionally, sort of, when needed, never but glad its there, and so on. It is the diversity that is now striking, and it is a significant factor in contemporary living.

### ***III Freedom and Dignity***

This has enormous implications in terms of effective leadership at parish level, where there are increasingly very different expectations when it comes to being a leader in a community. In line with the above, people now increasingly engage with parish, with Church, and with religion, and with the ‘practice’ of religion very much from their own subjective centres. They decide for themselves what that engagement will be, and in this they have achieved significant freedom. They cannot any longer be frightened or shamed into religious conformity. Those of us who are leaders in ministry are well aware of this: people can leave if they wish; and return if they wish; they can move around between parishes; and, increasingly, they simply put together a religious or spiritual profile for themselves that best suits their own needs. Spiritual or religious leaders are no longer in a position of ‘command and control’. We now have to recognize, respect, and engage with this new found freedom. We cannot make demands and have expectations that bypass the voluntary element. It is a

limit point for us, and we need to learn to recognize it and mark it. And people need to know (and it needs to be clear in our discourse) that we are, at least, conscious of this *or they will never trust us*. This is what makes our leadership so utterly different from leadership in, say, a workforce or a company or a business. There, there are legitimate expectations built into the contract itself of the work environment, and these necessarily suspend or modulate the ‘voluntary element.’

The dynamics of a work environment cannot and do not transfer into life in general for a parish situation. The days of telling people ‘what to do’ and ‘how to live’ are over. Now the interesting thing is that they are over not because of some political expedient (whereby the Church must adapt in order to survive). They are over because they no longer correspond to how we understand the dignity of the individual human person, whose life and action is always singular, personal, and only ever *said* once. We cannot and should not ever speak for another, who is capable of doing so for themselves. At Vatican II, this became more and more apparent as the Council progressed: Thus, in *Gaudium et spes* we read: ‘There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable.’ And among those rights the document named: ‘the right to act according to the dictates of conscience and to safeguard their privacy, the right to just freedom, including the freedom of religion’ (26). This ‘growing awareness’ was also affirmed in the very first sentence of the council’s last document, *Dignitatis humanae*: ‘People nowadays are becoming increasingly conscious of the dignity of the human person’ (1). This idea that there has been a *development* in our recognition of the dignity of the human person is expressed in the statement: ‘the leaven of the Gospel has long been at work in people’s minds and has contributed greatly to a wider recognition by them in the course of times of their dignity as persons’ (12). We have hardly even begun to draw out the implications of this new awareness.

#### ***IV Authority in Community***

As regards ‘authority’ it is evident that we have a deep need for authority. It is an immensely creative power for the individual and in a community, and we seek it out and we search for it at all levels in life and in many different places. We require authorities to structure and to shape our world. People who stand out for us, who affirm us, and whom we aspire to emulate are vital if we are to realize our full potential.

In terms of religion, faith, and parish life, where the acknowledgement of personal freedom is increasingly recognized to be an inviolable norm, *authority* is very definitely a two sided reality: on the one side, it is claimed, among others, by priests (and bishops) as leaders, but, on the other, it is recognized, welcomed, and accepted by those whom it might serve. If it is not accepted then it no longer exists. Or better it merely exists in the minds of those of us who might claim it. It becomes, however, unreal, imaginary, and lifeless. It is not real in that full, authentic, life giving sense of the word. Whereas you can give someone power, you cannot give authority. It is a characteristic of an authentic leader-in-community; and it requires essentially that communal recognition. An authority that is not recognized and accepted by others or that alienates others is a pseudo-authority. To be a healthy, life creating leader in ministry is to be someone with authority in that real living sense, and it is this that we urgently need to understand if we are to be effective leaders at parish level (or in our various ministries). Leadership is a vital service in a community. We are moving from positions of ‘command and control’ to positions of participation, of affirmation, of enabling, and of encouraging. Necessarily, this requires a fully developed ability to listen with integrity and to learn from others in the common project that is community.

### ***V Authority in Transition***

Leadership and authority are in transition. It is no longer possible to treat others as objects that might be manipulated or moved around in the name of some larger reality, however one might define or justify it, against their expressed or even tacit wishes, and without real exchange and engagement. This means that those in positions of authority and leadership need to recognize the importance of listening, of hearing, of accompanying, and of responding. Not to do so is to violate something fundamental that we are discovering about ourselves. This is an enormous change for the family, social, cultural, and Church fabric of our society.

And this is a dilemma that we find ourselves in at the moment. On the one hand, we need authority (and derivatively leadership), and, yet, on the other hand, the way that authority works for us is changing and must change. And we know that we cannot repeat the patterns that we have inherited. The fixed authoritarian and non-consultative forms of the past are no longer viable in a contemporary European context. They do not draw that agreement that they would need to embody the hopes that communities have and the affirmation that they require as they journey toward the future. And this is vital: authority is intimately connected

to the future and, indeed, to hope: personal future, communal future, Church future, society future. As opposed to authoritarianism that attempts to coerce, disenfranchise, and manipulate others, real, living authority is open, transparent, and just in meeting others. We are beginning to recognize that we need healthy, strong, affirming, just, wise, and enriching authority. And, in particular, in our parishes, we need priests who embody this powerful presence for everyone. This is a service in the very best sense of this word (see Mt 20: 25-28). My concern is not so much that priests as leaders are going to fall back into the oppressive dynamics of tribal authoritarianism (and, for some, this is a possibility); rather my concern is that we may be fearful about taking up our distinct and important place as affirmers of the future. There is no doubt that most of us do not wish to repeat the dynamics of the past, but there is a danger that we would avoid altogether anything to do with authority beyond the very minimum that is required of us.

We are gradually moving from structures that were based culturally and socially on power-over others to a *new form of authority and leadership* that is based on the structures of gathering and empowering others. The only form of authority that has a future in our culture, and for which, in terms of the Christian community, priests have a special role to play (and it's not exclusive of the leadership of lay men and women) has to do with *solidarity*. It is a matter of bringing and holding people together, while respecting difference and personal freedom. It is not directed towards a union that requires *uniformity*—or that aspires to uniformity—but, rather, is directed towards a solidarity that appreciates the individual person as a singularity with a unique identity. The credibility of authority and leadership in contemporary European culture rests on the ability to maintain solidarity in freedom, be that in a family, in a community, or in any ecclesial setting. Ultimately, this is to realize that the world belongs to God, and it is to trust in each person's, in each family's, and in each community's journey into God.

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