

“This new and expanded edition of Richard R. Gaillardetz’s invaluable primer *By What Authority?* displays his characteristic thoroughness and nuanced approach to questions of the interpretation of dogma and doctrine. In particular, Gaillardetz’s inclusion of disputed questions in each chapter retrieves ancient Christian methodologies that model constructive dialogue for our increasingly polarized world. Ecclesiologists, historians, and theologians in general will all benefit (as will their students) from this magisterial work.”

— Natalia Imperatori-Lee
Manhattan College

“Richard Gaillardetz offers a reliable, balanced, and systematic guide to understanding key questions of authority in the Catholic Church. Historically grounded and pastorally oriented, *By What Authority?* demonstrates how the church has often sifted through competing and conflicting interpretations in order to arrive closer to a vision of church ministry and teaching that allows the gospel message to flourish around the world in diverse circumstances.

“Of special merit is the Disputed Questions feature that challenges us to wrestle with matters not yet firmly settled. These Disputed Questions invite readers and classroom students into the creative process of discernment, learning, and teaching that must involve all members of the church at every level and in every place.”

— Christopher M. Bellitto
Kean University

“Richard Gaillardetz is the premiere authority on the multiple voices of ecclesial authority. He writes with clarity and grace. His new book with three additional chapters is an expanded version of one published 15 years ago, updated in light of Pope Francis’s efforts to reclaim Vatican II’s vision. It will be a basic text on authority for graduate students, seminarians, and pastoral ministers.”

— Thomas P. Rausch, SJ
Loyola Marymount University

“Richard R. Gaillardetz’s *By What Authority?* is a sound guide and a comprehensive introduction to the complex and often misunderstood world of Catholic belief and teaching. Beginning from a clearheaded discussion of the dynamics of power and authority, it moves from a consideration of Vatican II’s personalist, Trinitarian understanding of revelation, to the canonicity, inspiration, and normative role of Scripture; the meaning of tradition; the understanding of ‘magisterium’; and the various forms for the exercise of the pastoral teaching office by bishops and popes. The strength of his presentation is its description of the interdependence and constant interaction of the pastoral teaching office with the ‘sense’ of all the baptized faithful, including the community of theologians, as the whole church, guided by the Spirit, seeks to discern the meaning and the demands of the gospel. Particularly helpful is the sensible discussion of disagreement in the life of the Church. An excellent resource, this book should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand Catholic tradition and ecclesial life.”

— Catherine E. Clifford
Saint Paul University

“It is hard to imagine that Gaillardetz could improve on his original masterpiece but he has done just that in this revised and expanded edition of his compelling work. Looking through the lens of Scripture, the magisterium, and the sense of the faithful, Gaillardetz offers valuable insight into the many ways that God, ‘the only ultimate spiritual authority in our lives’ chooses to manifest that authority through the sacred and yet quite human instrumentality of the Church. This new edition gives the reader a deeper appreciation for the Church which is at once the recipient and mediator of divine authority.”

— Most Reverend John C. Wester
Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

*Foundations for Understanding
Authority in the Church*

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Richard R. Gaillardetz



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ABBREVIATIONS

Second Vatican Council

- LG Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)
- GS Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*)
- DV Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*)
- SC Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*)
- UR Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*)
- CD Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishop (*Christus Dominus*)
- AG Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*)
- DH Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*)
- NA Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)
- AA Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*)
- PO Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*)

Pope Paul VI

- ES Encyclical on the Church (*Ecclesiam Suam*)

Pope St. John Paul II

- UUS Encyclical on Ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint*)

Pope Benedict XVI

VD Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (*Verbum Domini*)

Pope Francis

EG Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*)

AL Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family (*Amoris Laetitia*)

LS Encyclical on Care for Our Common Home (*Laudato Si*)

International Theological Commission

SF “The *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church”

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

“By what authority do you do these things?” It was a question posed to Jesus by his critics on several occasions. He never gave them a direct answer. The question itself speaks to the very meaning of authority. In effect, what was being asked was this: “Who is the true *author* of your actions?” Jesus’ entire life and ministry offered the only answer possible. God was the true Author of Jesus’ life. His authority was grounded in his relationship to the one he dared address as “Abba.” The church lives to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. It too depends for its authority on God, the Author of life.

This book is about the church’s exercise of that authority. Our focus will be on the exercise of authority primarily as it is oriented toward Christian belief, that is, the authoritative relationships concerned with the Bible, tradition, popes and bishops, creeds and doctrine, theologians and all the faithful. Except in a more general way in chapters 1 and 6, it will not be possible to attend to those aspects of church authority concerned more directly with church governance or the sacramental and liturgical life of the church.

Many of the sad divisions in Christianity have occurred because of disagreements about both the appropriate sources of Christian authority and its proper exercise. Often the authority of Scripture has been played off against the authority of tradition, or the authority of church office (e.g., pope and bishops) against the authority of theologians or ordinary believers. A healthy Catholic view of authority will try to avoid these oppositions and instead demonstrate how these various kinds of authorities interrelate and inform one another.

The fundamental reference point for our consideration of authority in the church will be the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Held

between 1962 and 1965, the Second Vatican Council effected a seismic shift in Catholic consciousness, unlike anything encountered since the sixteenth century.¹ The impact of the council lay not only in the sixteen documents that the bishops promulgated but also in the new frame of reference the council offered for considering Catholic faith today. This new framework benefited from a series of new relationships being forged where antagonisms had predominated. Once the rise of modern science and critical historical scholarship had been met with suspicion; now the council called for a new respect for science and an unprecedented openness to the fruit of historical scholarship. Where clergy and laity were seen as two “ranks” in which the sole responsibility of the laity was to obey the clergy, the council called for their cooperation and affirmed the shared identity of all believers as the *Christifideles*, “the Christian faithful.” Where the work of theologians had been limited to defending the faith and explaining church teaching to the laity, now bishops and theologians were placed in common service to the Word of God. Where the world was seen as dangerous, now the council stressed the universality of God’s grace and promoted a respectful dialogue with the world.

This new framework for understanding Catholicism did not repudiate the past in favor of novelty or relevance. It was the product of two principal forces at work in the council. The first was the determination to “bring the church up-to-date” in areas where its faith and practice were no longer intelligible to the modern world. Pope St. John XXIII used the Italian term *aggiornamento* to give expression to this impulse. The second was the desire to “return to the sources” of Christianity in order to rediscover biblical, liturgical, and theological insights from the early church that had been neglected in modern Catholicism. Many speak of this impulse by appealing to the French term, *ressourcement*.

This book has been written in “the spirit of Vatican II.” This expression has sometimes been employed pejoratively, as if those who appeal to the “spirit” of the council are conveniently ignoring the text itself. This is not my intention. The documents of the council are a necessary and normative foundation for contemporary Catholicism. But those documents, like other normative elements in our great tradition, can

¹ For a fuller consideration of the ways in which Vatican II transformed modern Catholicism, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), esp. chaps. 1–3.

be interpreted adequately only by attending to both the context in which they emerged and their ongoing reception in the life of the church. Thus, we should not look to the council as if its documents were a kind of answer book for all the pressing questions of our time. As the council bishops themselves admitted:

The church is guardian of the deposit of God's word and draws religious and moral principles from it, but it does not always have a ready answer to every question. Still, it is eager to associate the light of revelation with the experience of humanity in trying to clarify the course upon which it has recently entered. (GS 33)

Every council sets itself about the task of responding to the questions of the time but, inevitably, in doing so it raises new questions. Councils represent, in a sense, both an end and a beginning. Thus, to say that the teaching of Vatican II is normative for the life of the church does not mean that it represents the final word. Such an assertion would represent the denial of tradition as an ongoing and developing reality. In considering the teaching of the council as our primary reference point, we must also consider how that teaching has been received in the life of the church. That will include its reception in postconciliar church documents, in the work of theologians, and in the practice of the faith by ordinary believers.

When the first edition of this book was published in 2003, the church was in the final years of the long and remarkable pontificate of the first non-Italian pope in 450 years, St. John Paul II. His pontificate drew richly from the council documents, even if some of his interpretations of conciliar teaching were matters of some dispute. In his apostolic letter celebrating the jubilee year 2000 he wrote: "The best preparation for the new millennium, therefore, can only be expressed in a renewed commitment *to apply*, as faithfully as possible, *the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church.*"²

Since the first edition of this text appeared, John Paul II was succeeded by his close adviser, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who, as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for over two decades, helped articulate and shape John Paul II's interpretation and implementation of the council's teaching. Taking the name of Benedict XVI, he

² Pope St. John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 20. Emphasis is mine. Accessed online at https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html.

would continue to advance the teaching of the council in accord with his own particular theological commitments. Indeed, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI would play a considerable role in determining the institutional shape and practice of ecclesial authority that proceeded from the council.

Although Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI all carried forward key elements of the council's teaching, Pope Francis has offered a distinctive re-reception of conciliar teaching and is already enacting a bold reimagination of the exercise and structures of authority in the church. This is one of the reasons why the publisher and I agreed that, fifteen years later, the time was ripe for a new edition of this volume, one that would reflect important new developments in our understanding of church authority.

The first edition was divided into three sections. This new edition has added a fourth section, addressing more fundamental themes. As part of this expansion, two completely new chapters have been added (chapters 1 and 6) and virtually every chapter has been significantly expanded and updated. Part 1 considers fundamental themes that provide a necessary background for the consideration of the various topics that will follow. We will begin with a theological consideration of the basic concepts of power and authority in chapter 1, followed by a chapter that introduces the reader to a theology of divine revelation (a shorter version of this appeared as the introduction in the earlier edition). Part 2 considers the authority of Scripture and tradition within Roman Catholicism. Catholics give Scripture a central place in the life of the church, but many are confused about the authority of Scripture. We begin with a consideration of the Bible as a whole, what is generally referred to as the "canon" of the Bible. How exactly did this biblical canon, this definitive list of sacred texts, come into existence in the first place? What is the nature of its authority, as canon? Questions such as these will be explored in chapter 3. This will lead, in chapter 4, to a consideration of various theories of biblical inspiration and the difficult question of whether there can be errors in the Bible. In the fifth chapter we reflect on some contemporary Catholic perspectives on the necessity and authority of tradition, its relationship to Scripture, and the possibility of change and development within that tradition.

Part 3 shifts to a consideration of the magisterium, the distinctive doctrinal teaching of the college of bishops under the headship of the Bishop of Rome. There we address the history of the magisterium

(chapter 6), key ecclesiological principles for appreciating the role and function of the magisterium today (chapter 7), and consideration of the different modalities by which the magisterium is exercised in the church today (chapter 8). Chapter 9 considers the object of formal magisterial teaching, namely, church doctrine. Since not all church teachings bear the same authoritative weight, this chapter will also consider the basic gradations in the authority of church doctrine.

Finally, part 4 attends to a topic that, before Vatican II, had been much neglected in official church documents, namely, the distinctive authority that ordinary believers and the entire believing community exercise by virtue of their baptism. Chapter 10 considers the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the vital role of the *sensus fidelium*, the “sense of the faithful.” There we will reflect on how the whole Christian community discerns the meaning and significance of the Word of God for today. Pope Francis has given this conciliar teaching much greater prominence. This, in turn, will lead us to a very sensitive topic in chapter 11: given that church doctrine does not carry the same degree of authority, is it possible to remain a Catholic in good standing and disagree with church teaching? The goal here will be to find a *via media* that avoids the twin dangers of dogmatic fundamentalism and consumer Catholicism. In chapter 12 we will conclude with a consideration of the proper relationship between theologians, the magisterium, and the sense of the faithful.

In the original edition, the book’s subtitle referred to it as a *primer*, that is, an elementary or introductory textbook. The book has been expanded considerably in this new edition yet it remains, in many ways, a primer. By that I mean it is intended as a basic introduction to the various modalities of authority in the church. My hope is that it will prove useful as a text in undergraduate and graduate theology courses as well as in lay ministry, diaconate, and seminary formation programs. It may also be a useful resource for journalists and theologians who have not done extensive work in fundamental theology and ecclesiology and want to have an accessible reference. Each chapter offers a sample of mostly English-language works for further reading. Some are fairly basic while others would doubtless challenge those without a formal theological education. As will be evident in the pages that follow, I have borrowed considerably from the work of fellow theologians. My goal in this volume was not to provide an original and constructive theology of authority as much as to synthesize and present in an accessible manner

the important foundational work that has been accomplished in the decades since Vatican II.

The main body of each chapter offers a straightforward theological perspective well within the parameters of accepted Catholic belief. However, each chapter concludes with a consideration of “disputed questions.” The tradition of attending to *quaestiones disputatae* is an ancient one in Catholic theology. It emerged in the medieval university with the recognition that the careful reading (*lectio*) of an authoritative text often gave rise to lively disagreement regarding a text’s adequate interpretation. Thus the *lectio* gave way to the *disputatio* so that a diversity of interpretations could be given a fair hearing in the *studium*. The great historian and expert on the thought of Thomas Aquinas, M.-D. Chenu, describes well the distinctive character of the disputation in medieval education:

From this starting point, the pro and con are brought into play, not with the intention of finding an immediate answer, but in order that under the action of *dubitatio* [doubt], research be pushed to its limit. A satisfactory explanation will be given only on the condition that one continue the search to the discovery of what caused the doubt.³

This kind of lively discussion is essential for the vitality of the theological enterprise. Although they cannot be treated in any depth in a book such as this, readers should have some sense of the debates that are being engaged in academic and ecclesiastical circles. Some of the positions summarized in this section concern significant disagreements over issues viewed as open questions within mainstream Catholicism. Other views represent more marginal perspectives. My hope is that when used as a text, instructors might use these “disputed questions” as an opportunity to draw students into a deeper and more sophisticated exploration of the issues that are briefly outlined there. Readers wishing to explore some of the disputed questions will make a good start of it by consulting each chapter’s reading list.

I want to thank Liturgical Press, especially Hans Christoffersen and Peter Dwyer, for supporting my proposal to produce a revised and expanded version of the original book. I am grateful for the work of my two research assistants, Peter Folan, who helped identify sections in the

³ M.-D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regency, 1964), 48.

original text that required updating, and Nicholas Hayes, who assisted with copyediting and indexing the final manuscript. I am extraordinarily fortunate to be able to work at Boston College and among an exceptional group of scholars who daily challenge me by their example to be a better theologian. I am grateful to the many colleagues whose work has had such a significant influence on me. Deserving pride of place are two senior Jesuit theologians whose work on a theology of revelation and the role of the magisterium has been, well, magisterial: Gerald O'Collins and Francis Sullivan. So that readers might have some sense of the theological currents within which I have been swimming over the last several decades, theologians whose work has further informed my thought on these topics include John Burkhard, Catherine Clifford, Paul Crowley, Peter De Mey, Dennis Doyle, Orlando Espin, Bradford Hinze, Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Joseph Komonchak, Paul Lakeland, Nicholas Lash, Richard Lennan, Gerard Mannion, Paul Murray, Thomas Rausch, Gilles Routhier, Christopher Ruddy, Ormond Rush, Sandra Schneiders, and John Thiel.

For the completion of this revised and expanded edition I owe a special debt of gratitude to St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Much of the writing and revisions for this new edition were done during my participation in the Benedictine sisters' Studium program, ably facilitated by Sr. Ann Marie Biermaier and Sr. Theresa Schumacher. For six weeks this remarkable monastic community provided me with a room and office while also extending to me their distinctive Benedictine hospitality. My participation in their daily prayer and meals during much of the summer of 2017 was a marvelous and unexpected gift. This is an extraordinary community of women, whose commitment to the monastic life and love of Christ and his church was matched by their joyful spirit. How appropriate that, working on a book on church authority, I was witness to the humble, loving, and relational exercise of authority called for in the Benedictine Rule.

It now seems merely *pro forma* for an author to acknowledge his spouse and children in a preface such as this. I fear the reader will fail to appreciate the true depth and sincerity of my gratitude for my wife Diana as we now approach three grace-filled decades of marriage. You cannot live authentically with another person for that long and not have your most basic convictions tested and shaped by the engagement with your partner. Her patience and encouragement have long sustained me in my theological vocation. When I wrote the first edition of this text,

my four sons (Greg, Brian, Andrew, and David) were young boys ranging from eight to thirteen. They are now adults and their many questions over the years, often regarding the challenges and dysfunctions of ecclesial authority, have deeply shaped my approach to this book's topic. I am not only a better theologian but a better person for having them in my life.

PART ONE

FUNDAMENTAL THEMES

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF POWER AND AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH?

In this volume we will be giving most of our attention to the various forms of authority in the church directly concerned with Christian belief. Consequently, we will be considering the authority of Scripture and tradition, the magisterium and doctrine, the Christian faithful and theologians. But of course, church authority is not only concerned with matters of Christian belief; it is also concerned with Christian practice. Questions of church authority come into play not only with regard to teaching, but also with governing, that is, pastoral leadership, and the exercise of authority as it relates to pastoral care and the sacramental/liturgical life of the church. It will be helpful, therefore, to offer at least some general reflections on the exercise of ecclesial authority in its diverse forms.

Moreover, we cannot properly grasp the nature and exercise of authority until we have also dealt with a theological understanding of power. This is all the more necessary since both power and authority have become controversial topics in the church today.¹ Sadly, for far too many Catholics these terms bring to mind not the enabling of authentic Christian freedom but tragic instances of abuse. I will argue in this chapter, however, that while the church has too often succumbed to

¹ The material in this chapter has been adapted from Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Power and Authority in the Church: Emerging Issues,” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 87–110.

unhelpful and even damaging exercises of power and authority, in fact, both are necessary for the flourishing of the church and, indeed, for all human communities.

So, let's begin with some basic definitions. For our purposes, we may think of "power" simply as *the capacity for effective action* and ecclesial power, when it is exercised authentically, as *the capacity to engage in effective action in service of the church's life and mission*. "Authority," in turn, can be understood as *the legitimate, trustworthy, and accountable exercise of power*. Note also that you can have power without authority, but you can't have authority without power. A tyrant can exercise power without having legitimate authority. Yet a person cannot have genuine authority if they don't have real power (i.e., the ability to engage in effective action). As we will see, although it is common for us to use both terms, power and authority, as if they pertained to certain entities (e.g., the Bible) or persons (e.g., the pope), both terms are more properly concerned with a set of relationships. Although these two terms overlap considerably, it might help to consider each term on its own.

THE CHRISTIAN TRANSFORMATION OF POWER

In our common use of the term, we tend to think of power as a quantity, a kind of "fuel" for human action, something that one can have more or less of. This popular view presumes what we might think of as a zero-sum understanding of power such that, within any given community, some have power and others do not. Thus, in the arena of US politics, when we say that the Republicans are "in power," our assumption is that the Democrats are not. Power is conceived as a finite quantity. As our example suggests, this conception of power generally comes from the realm of politics and law. Power in this sense is often perceived as dominating and even coercive. For many, the most apt example of such dominating power is the bully on the playground. This dominating view of power has led many people to believe that Christians must repudiate claims to power altogether. We often speak of the need for prophets to "speak truth to power," a phrase, interestingly, that comes not from the Bible but from the Quaker tradition of nonviolent resistance. In this view, the Christian is called to repudiate dominating power in imitation of the powerlessness of Christ. Yet this line of thought identifies power only with its negative, coercive, and dominating forms. James Davison Hunter rightly challenges the assumption that the way

of Christ is the way of powerlessness: “Only by narrowing an understanding of power to political or economic power can one imagine giving up power and becoming ‘powerless.’”² Christians should not yield so easily to this narrow, dominating understanding of power. In truth, any form of authentic human existence will require the exercise of power in relation to others, and this is no less true within the church.

The human exercise of power has certainly been distorted by sin, hence Lord Acton’s famous dictum, “Power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely.”³ Our God-given power to sustain life-giving relations with others can indeed devolve into a submission to the “powers and principalities” about which St. Paul warned (Eph 6:12).⁴ This is power in its abusive form, a power that feeds on the distortion of human desire and is bent on domination, manipulation, and control. Jesus understood his own ministry as one of combating the “powers” of this world. His ministry, however, represented not the renunciation of power but its radical transformation.

Jesus exercised power as a manifestation of the love of God (the key Greek terms here are *dynamis* and *exousia*, which are often translated as “power” and “authority,” respectively). His exercise of power was vulnerable and liberating. Jesus healed the sick and forgave sinners, embodying in his ministry the profligate mercy of God (Matt 9:20-22; Mark 2:1-12). The life and teaching of Jesus subverted the habits of worldly power and domination in favor of power exercised as humble service (Mark 10:42-45). That distinctive form of power was evident in Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples and his command that they do likewise (John 13).

Jesus promised his followers that they too would receive a power that comes from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). Christians, then, are both recipients and agents of God’s reconciling power. St. Paul reminds us that God “who reconciled us to himself through Christ . . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18). The work of reconciliation accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth, through the power of the Spirit,

² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 181; italics in the original.

³ Lord Acton to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 5 April 1887, in *Historical Essays and Studies*, ed. J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurance (London: Macmillan, 1907).

⁴ All biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*, Catholic Edition.

is to continue in the mission of the church. In service of this mission, the church must become a school of discipleship in which dominating power and a preoccupation with control are transformed into the power of reconciliation. In that school, we acquire the habits of power appropriate to followers of Jesus.

What we are moving toward here is an understanding of power, not as a quantity or fuel that some have and some don't, but as a dimension of all human relationships. Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away. Even the so-called powerless—think of those in prison or the poor—can find ways to exercise power through protest or resistance. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. both witnessed to the power that can be exercised by the oppressed.

In the Catholic Church, we sometimes rely on a too exclusively juridical or legal understanding of power, the kind regulated by canon law. This kind of power does exist and indeed is necessary for any community to function, but it shouldn't be our primary understanding of power. In Catholicism, without ignoring the role of juridical power, we must recover that more comprehensive dimension of ecclesial power that comes from baptism and is animated by the Spirit. In a classic work, the great French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, drew on biblical insights in reflections on Christian conceptions of power:

We must get back to the true vision of the Gospel: posts of authority in the Church do indeed exist; a real jurisdictional power does exist, which the shepherds of God's people receive from Christ in conformity with the order which Christ willed and instituted (at least in its essential lines). But this power exists only within the structure of the fundamental religious relationship of the Gospel, as an organizational element within the life given to men by Christ, the one Lord and the one Head of his Body, for which each is accountable to all the rest according to the place and measure granted to him. So there is never simply a relationship of subordination or superiority, as in secular society, but always a loving obedience to Christ, shaping the life of each with all and for all, according to the position which the Lord has given him in the Body.⁵

For Congar, the witness of the early church did not undermine the need for institutional church structures, but it did challenge the way in which power was too often exercised in and through these structures.

⁵ Yves Congar, *Power and Poverty in the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1964), 98.

Feminist theologians have reflected on the situation of so many women in the church, across the centuries, who have had painful experiences of exclusion on the basis of their gender. Consequently, these theologians have given considerable thought to the question of power in the church and have helped us recognize where unhealthy power relations have been in play. The unhealthy manifestations of power often take the form of a “power over,” that is, a relationship that calls for domination-submission.⁶ The Protestant theologian Pamela Cooper-White nicely sums up much reflection on the topic and advocates for a different conception of power, one that eschews domination in favor of mutuality. Mutuality, she insists, should not be reduced to sameness: “Mutuality involves empowering each other to find and express what each can truly know and do, each one’s unique contributions, not the dulling uniformity of the lowest common denominator.”⁷ This approach to power emerges out of a deep intuition regarding the interconnectedness of life. The result is an affirmation of “power-within,” as that power that proceeds from one’s own spiritual resources—one’s wisdom and insight—and “power-with,” which is “the power of an individual to reach out in a manner that negates neither self nor other. It prizes mutuality over control and operates by negotiation and consensus.”⁸ Feminist Christian theologians are inviting the church to recover more Gospel-inspired conceptions of power that empower and enable God’s people for the life of discipleship.

Cooper-White admits that one of the principal difficulties with the typical feminist view of dominating power is that “there has been very little successful work on constructing an actual workable alternative. More often than not, feminists have tended to shy away from the exercise of any explicit sort of authoritative power in women’s organizations, experimenting instead with models that are largely collective and leaderless.”⁹ For example, she admits that the “power-within” and “power-with” language offers no panacea. “Power-within” can lead to a kind of solipsism that absolutizes one’s own voice, and “power-with” can sometimes suppress conflict in favor of harmony and become bogged down

⁶ Pamela Cooper-White provides a helpful synthesis of this feminist analysis in *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Much of my treatment here draws from her work.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

in decision-making processes. She even wonders whether feminist thought may need to revisit “power-over” to consider whether there are leadership exercises where such an authority can be legitimate and nondominating. This leads her to turn to yet another power modality, what she refers to as “power-in-community.” This broader framework affirms the legitimacy of each of the three other modalities (“power-over,” “power-within,” “power-with”). Any and all exercises of power can only be intelligible and fruitful when they are realized within an adequate account of community.

A Catholic feminist theologian and biblical scholar, Sandra Schneiders, has also made helpful contributions to a Catholic reflection on power. She defines power simply as the capacity to move or influence oneself or others “either physically or spiritually.”¹⁰ Schneiders sees power as essentially neutral. It can be exercised coercively (“power over”) or in a way that empowers and enables others (“power for”). Schneiders defines authority as “persuasive power.”

If the church is a school of Christian discipleship, in this school we learn of the transformation of power in the light of the Gospel and in service of God’s kingdom. This transformation of power can occur in many ways. In the celebration of the Eucharist, for example, we are drawn into the subversive power of God’s self-giving love. In the family, we exercise a radically different form of power in the daily practices of forgiveness, generosity, and hospitality that constitute the household as a “domestic church.”¹¹ Communities for consecrated life can accomplish something similar in their intentional common life. Parishes can transform power in their support of communal practices of solidarity with the poor and vulnerable and in their sacramental and nonsacramental ministries of reconciliation. In the opening weeks of his pontificate, Pope Francis provided a dramatic example of the transformation of power when he celebrated an ancient Holy Thursday ritual, not by

¹⁰ Sandra Schneiders, *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World*, Religious Life in a New Millennium, vol. 3 (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 435.

¹¹ Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Christian Household as School of Discipleship: Reflections on the Ecclesial Contributions of the Christian Household to the Larger Church,” in *The Household of God and Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church*, ed. Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi, Gerard Mannion, and Peter De Mey, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium Series (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 111–21.

washing the feet of twelve males as liturgical law had dictated at the time, but by visiting a juvenile prison and washing the feet of troubled youth, including women and Muslims.¹²

CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF AUTHORITY

We shift now from a consideration of ecclesial power to reflection on the various authority relationships within which authentic ecclesial power is exercised. As we saw in our consideration of the exercise of power, our modern age has experienced a widespread suspicion of authority as inherently dominating, coercive, and opposed to the exercise of human freedom. What is needed is an account of legitimate authority that supports and enables human freedom.

Authority in Service of Human Flourishing and the Common Good

David Stagaman has criticized our modern tendency to speak of authority as if it were the property of persons or things. Although we may speak of the Bible as *an* authority, that authority actually resides in the relationship established between the Bible and those who acknowledge it as a source of revelation.¹³ The Bible has authority only for those who recognize it as a testimony to God's revelation. As a consequence, for the atheist, a Bible will hold no authority. This is just as true when speaking of the authority of a teacher or the authority of a pope. A teacher has genuine authority only to the extent that the students grant it to her. If they do not recognize her authority, they may still respond to her dictates and classroom requirements for fear of a failing grade (that is, they will respond to her exercise of power), but they will not allow her to actually teach them. Healthy authoritative relationships do not exist as an abstraction; they are exercised concretely and cooperatively in the life of a community.

According to Victor Lee Austin, "Authority is built into what it means to be human, and we never will escape from needing it for our

¹² Pope Francis would later revise the church's liturgical law regarding this ritual.

¹³ David Stagaman, *Authority in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 24–28. Joseph Komonchak also considers authority as a particular kind of social relationship in his "Authority and Magisterium," in *Vatican Authority and American Catholic Dissent*, ed. William May (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 103–4.

flourishing.”¹⁴ Austin provides a helpful distinction between *substitutionary* and *non-substitutionary* forms of authority. The former is evident in parental exercises of authority inasmuch as the parent’s authority is filling in for (*substitutes* for) some lack of maturity or experience in the child. The parent tells a young child not to cross a street because the child is incapable of making such a judgment for himself. Substitutionary authority compensates for a fundamental lack in the person subject to that authority. It also functions as a corrective against some defect in the other. The authority exercised by law enforcement is often substitutionary in character to the extent that it responds to the social defects of criminals. One hopes that, as a person matures and develops, the exercise of substitutionary authority would diminish correspondingly.

The more mature exercise of authority, Austin contends, is non-substitutionary and functions so as to coordinate individual human activity for the sake of a community’s common action. Non-substitutionary authority creates the conditions for individuals and groups to make the most of their gifts and abilities. Here, authority is enabling more than constraining. Austin uses the example of the authority of the symphony conductor who exercises her authority to maximize the individual gifts of the musicians so as to produce a coordinated human activity.

Austin’s depiction of non-substitutionary authority draws on the work of the late French Thomist and political theorist Yves Simon.¹⁵ Simon distinguishes between *materially* and *formally* willing the common good. Every member of a community is obligated to formally will the common good of the community. So, the members of an orchestra should all be concerned about the orchestra’s performance of a particular piece of music. They are *formally* concerned with the overall performance. *Materially*, however, they must be concerned with their specific duty to perform those parts of the composition assigned to their particular instrument. The conductor, however, is both formally *and* materially concerned with the overall performance of the work. To offer another example, as a faculty member of a Catholic Jesuit university,

¹⁴ Victor Lee Austin, *Up with Authority: Why We Need Authority to Flourish as Human Beings* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 2. Much of what follows is drawn from Austin’s helpful study.

¹⁵ Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962).

I am *formally* committed to serving the university's mission. At the same time, I accomplish this *materially* by dedicating myself to the practice of theology and the initiation and formation of our students into that practice. It is for those directly responsible for the leadership of the university, not only formally but also materially, to will the achievement of the university's mission.

The point that Austin and Simon are making is that these exercises of authority are concerned not with domination but with acting in such a way as to best bring about, materially, the common good. They do this through the empowerment and coordination of those in the community who are working to achieve a vast array of particular goods. This argument offers insight into the authentic exercise of governing authority, or pastoral leadership, in the church.

One of the principal contributions of Vatican II was its recovery of the role of the Holy Spirit in general and the recovery of the biblical understanding of charism in particular. The council taught that the Spirit "guides the church in the way of all truth (see Jn 16:13) and, uniting it in fellowship and ministry, bestows upon it different hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs it and adorns it with his fruits" (LG 4). In this passage, the phrase "hierarchic gifts" refers to stable church office (e.g., ordained ministry) while "charismatic gifts" refers to those many charisms or gifts the Spirit distributes among all the faithful (which includes both the laity and the clergy). In council teaching, charism and office are not opposed to one another since both have the Spirit as their origin. This means that ordained pastoral leadership need not compete with the exercise of the many gifts of the faithful. Each requires the other. According to the council's teaching, those ordained to pastoral leadership are not to absorb into their own ministry all the tasks proper to building up the church. Rather, the distinctive authority exercised by the church's pastors must be directed toward recognizing, empowering, and ordering the gifts of all God's people. Those who have charge over the church "should judge the genuineness and orderly use of these gifts, and it is especially their office not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good" (LG 12; see also AA 3; PO 9).

The council situated ordained pastoral ministry within the Christian community. The ordained minister is responsible, among other things, for the discernment and coordination of the charisms and ministries of all the baptized. To transpose the council's teaching into Simon's account,

we might say that ordinary believers are *formally* concerned with the common good of the whole community, but *materially*, they will pursue that by the exercise of their particular charisms. Church leaders will not only be *formally* concerned with the common good but will make this their *material* concern, directing the exercise of particular charisms in ways that will build up the church in the pursuit of its mission. Thus, the pastor and other church leaders will pursue the common good of the community by identifying, empowering, and ordering the exercise of individual charisms toward the church's larger mission.

Authority, Trust, and Accountability

The sociologist, Max Weber, contended that authority was simply *legitimate power* and that this power could be legitimated in three distinct ways.¹⁶ (1) *Traditional authority* was legitimated by way of past precedents for determining present action. This authority finds warrants in customs, founding myths, and so on. In the life of the church, appeal to this kind of authority usually takes the form of “as the Bible says . . .” or “according to the teaching of the Catechism. . . .” According to Weber, such exercises of authority are largely resistant to change. (2) *Legal-rational authority* depends on accepted rules and conventions that are associated with a bureaucratic entity of one kind or another. Here too we can see an ecclesial example in the highly bureaucratized activity of the Roman Curia and the application of canon law at all levels of ecclesial life. (3) *Charismatic authority* is legitimated by the distinctive gifts of an individual or group of individuals that make them heroic or exemplary in some way and thereby elicit allegiance or adherence. In the life of the church we might think of the authority of a figure like St. Francis of Assisi or any leader whose authority is associated with their charismatic personality.

Weber's analysis is helpful, but it does not go far enough in describing the demands of authentic authority in the life of the church. For Weber, authority is legitimate only to the extent that people consent to it. In our contemporary ecclesial context, however, the nature of this consent requires more attention. Joseph Komonchak characterizes au-

¹⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Günther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1:215–45.

thority not just as legitimate power but as “trustworthy power.”¹⁷ This trustworthiness can be established in multiple ways. First, we must assume the goodwill of those who exercise authority. Those who consent to another’s authority must be able to trust that the subject of a particular authoritative relationship is acting out of good intentions and a commitment to act in support of the common good. If I suspect that a person in authority is concerned not with my well-being but with their own career advancement or the preservation of their reputation, for example, their authority will be fatally compromised. Second, the trustworthiness of one in authority requires competency. When I visit my doctor to complain of shortness of breath, I do so presupposing her competence as a physician and the consequent trustworthiness of her diagnosis. That trust in her competence allows me to accept her quite reasonable diagnosis that I need to lose some weight. However, the presumption of competence that I grant her is not absolute. Should she suggest to me that my shortness of breath is the direct consequence of my failure to trim my toenails, I might call her competence—and therefore her authority—into question! In the long run, authority cannot function in any meaningful way when competency is lacking. This too has implications for the exercise of ecclesial authority; we cannot simply assume that a cleric, for example, has the requisite competency simply by virtue of his ordination. The sacrament of holy orders does *not* confer competency on the ordinand!

Standard accounts of the exercise of authority generally distinguish between those who are *in authority* (exercising authority by virtue of office) and those who are *an authority* by virtue of some specialized knowledge, charisma, wisdom, competence, or aptitude.¹⁸ When a police officer pulls behind me on the highway and hits his lights, I pull over, not because of the officer’s knowledge or charisma, but because of the authority of the office.

Yet this distinction can be overdrawn. The authority of office, after all, generally presupposes that the officeholder is in some sense *an authority*, that is, a person who has a specialized knowledge, wisdom, charisma, experience, competence, or aptitude for a set of tasks. It is

¹⁷ Komonchak, “Authority and Magisterium,” 107.

¹⁸ Richard E. Flathman gives detailed consideration to this distinction in his *The Practice of Political Authority: Authority and the Authoritative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

possible, of course, and in fact rather common, that one would assent to the exercise of authority by an officeholder who lacks the requisite knowledge, experience, competence, or aptitude in the short run. This does not mean, however, that such an exercise of authority is likely to be effective in the long run. Over time, the exercise of authority by those who, in spite of their office, do not possess any of these things is bound to damage the life of the community. The fact that one may assent to the actions of one *in authority* who lacks the requisite personal knowledge, experience, charism, competence, or aptitude in the short run does not mean that this exercise of authority is likely to be effective in the long run. Any society would suffer in the long run, and no less the church, when those who are *in* authority fail to demonstrate that they are in some meaningful way also *an* authority on matters related to their exercise of leadership.

Finally, we can say that legitimate authority must be not only trustworthy but also accountable. Paul Lakeland insists that where the exercise of authority is concerned, “credibility is directly proportional to the level of practice of accountability.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, discussion of accountability in the church has been handicapped because of the term’s association with the political and business sectors. The then-bishop of Pittsburgh, Donald Wuerl (now the cardinal archbishop of Washington) made a helpful contribution to a volume on governance and accountability in the church. Wuerl was frank in his admission that Catholic Church leadership needed to be more transparent in its exercise of authority, but he also cautioned that “when we address accountability in the church, we must be careful not to use a political model for a reality that transcends human political institutions.”²⁰ Ecclesial accountability, he insisted, differs from its political analogue because the authority of the apostolic tradition and the divine origins of the apostolic office bind the church in a unique way. Wuerl defined ecclesial accountability as requiring an openness and transparency sufficient to allow one to assess whether church leaders are acting in fidelity to their divine mandate.

¹⁹ Paul Lakeland, “Accountability, Credibility, and Authority,” *New Theology Review* 19, no. 1 (2006): 8.

²⁰ Donald W. Wuerl, “Reflections on Governance and Accountability in the Church,” in *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church*, ed. Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York: Continuum, 2004), 18.

Wuerl's views are shared by many in the church. Many bishops are willing to admit that "mistakes have been made" by those in authority, and they will often affirm the need for a more transparent and collaborative style of leadership. There seems to be a default assumption, however, that the divine origins of the church and its apostolic office preclude the bishops from being accountable to the baptized. Church leaders, they insist, are accountable only to their hierarchical superiors and ultimately to God. As John Beal has pointed out, this attitude toward ecclesial accountability is enshrined in canon law:

Since all lines of accountability point upward in canon law, only hierarchical superiors are competent to judge whether their subordinates have adequately fulfilled the obligations of their offices or abused their powers. Bishops, pastors, and other officeholders are accountable for their stewardship to those who appointed them, not to those they serve. The faithful may express disgruntlement about the shoddy performance, nonfeasance, and malfeasance of their pastors and even bishops to their hierarchical superiors, but superiors are free to give these complaints as much or as little weight as their discretion dictates when deciding whether to retain, remove, or discipline their subordinates.²¹

According to this logic, any other form of ecclesial accountability would reflect at best an unacceptable Protestantizing and at worst a capitulation to the secular culture.

This view suffers from an inadequate appreciation for the trinitarian foundations of the church. Accountability to Christ must not be separated from accountability to the Spirit alive in the church today. As Yves Congar reminded us, "The Spirit did not come simply in order to animate an institution that was already fully determined in all its structures." In fact, the Spirit "is really the co-instituting principle" of the church.²² Accountability to Christ and his Spirit requires both a fidelity to the apostolic tradition and openness to the witness of the Spirit in the church today, including the Spirit-breathed witness of all God's people. Faithful obedience to Christ will be manifested in practices of communal discernment that listen for the voice of the Spirit speaking

²¹ John P. Beal, "Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Law: Canon Law and Its Discontents," in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 150.

²² Yves Congar, "The Church Is Made by the Spirit," in *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 2:9.

through a faith-filled people. When all in the church come to discover the dignity and demands of their baptism and the concrete shape of discipleship in service of the Spirit's promptings, "accountability" becomes simply another word for *koinonia*, our "shared communion" in Christ.

First the Protestant Reformation and then the Enlightenment encouraged what has been a long-standing suspicion regarding the role of power and authority in the church. The Catholic Church reacted to this suspicion with a heavy-handed reassertion of its authority, an authority that too often devolved into authoritarianism and clericalism. The Second Vatican Council called for a more balanced view. The Holy Spirit animates the church, working through a wide range of offices, charisms, institutions, and relationships that together empower the church and its members for the fulfillment of its mission. The task of the church today, as a school of discipleship, is to cultivate habits of power and authoritative relationships that are in keeping with the One who came not to be served but to serve.

DISPUTED QUESTIONS

(1) One of the principal disputes regarding a theology of power concerns the legitimacy of coercive power, or "power over," in the life of the church. Such power is often manifested in the form of disciplinary action within the community, including excommunication. Canon lawyers would insist that excommunications are intended to be "medicinal" rather than punitive and that they should always be accompanied by pastoral efforts to restore that canonical communion. Nevertheless, many theologians contend that such coercive power is never appropriate for a community seeking to follow the way of Jesus of Nazareth. Others argue that the need to regulate the life of faith requires binding laws that may require "coercive power" to preserve the good order of the community. As we saw, even some feminist theologians who have been most critical of dominating power admit that, at least as a last resort, some coercive power may need to be exercised.

(2) The relationship between being *in* authority and being *an* authority plays out in the life of the church with regard to how the community calls forth candidates for ordained leadership in the

church. Consider the situation in the church's process of calling forth and forming candidates for ordination to the diocesan priesthood. Our current process is frequently dominated by a theology of vocation that sees vocations as the private possession of an individual. When a man presents himself to a vocation director with the claim that he might have a vocation to the priesthood, there will eventually be an investigation into whether there are canonical impediments to his ordination. There will be, one hopes, some assessment of the candidate's sanctity and basic mental health. If no obstacles present themselves, the candidate will likely be accepted into the seminary. Now let us presume that over the course of his period of formation he passes all of his courses, dutifully attends daily Mass, sees his spiritual director regularly, does not manifest heretical views in his academic work, preaching, pastoral counseling, or field education. Even if this candidate manifests no aptitude for genuine pastoral leadership, is there not still considerable pressure to ordain this candidate? Our reflections on authority suggest the need for the church to consider more thoroughly its current processes for vocational discernment and formation.

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