

Authority

THERE CAN BE NO fruitful conversation between us unless we recognize that each of us speaks with authority. We all are baptized into Christ: priest, prophet, and king. The International Theological Commission on the *sensus fidei* quotes St John:

‘You have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge’, ‘the anointing that you received from [Christ] abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you’, ‘his anointing teaches you about all things’ (1Jn 2:20, 27).

Many lay people have been astonished during the preparation of this Synod to find that they are listened to for the first time. They had doubted their own authority and asked, ‘Can I really offer something?’ (B.2.53). But it is not just the laity who lack authority. The whole Church is afflicted by a crisis of authority. An Asian archbishop complained that he had no authority. He said: ‘The priests are all independent barons, who take no notice of me.’ Many priests too say they lost all authority. The sexual abuse crisis has discredited us.

Our whole world is suffering a crisis of authority. All institutions have lost authority. Politicians, the law, the press have all felt authority draining away. Authority always seems to belong to other people: either dictators who are coming into power in many

places, or the new media, or celebrities and influencers. The world hungers for voices that will speak with authority about the meaning of our lives. Dangerous voices threaten to fill the vacuum. It is a world powered not by authority but by contracts—even in the family, the university, and the Church.

So how may the Church recover authority and speak to our world which hungers for voices that ring true? Luke tells us that when Jesus taught,

‘they were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.’ (Luke 4:32).

He commands the demons and they obey. Even the wind and sea obey him. He even has the authority to summon his dead friend to life:

‘Lazarus, come out.’ (John 11.43).

Almost the final words of Matthew’s gospel:

‘All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me.’

But halfway through the synoptic gospels, at Caesarea Philippi, there is a massive crisis of authority, which makes our contemporary crisis look like nothing! He tells his closest friends that he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer, die, and rise again. They do not accept his word. So Jesus takes them up the mountain and is transfigured in their sight.

His authority is revealed through the prism of his glory, and the witness of Moses and Elijah. It is an authority

which touches their ears and their eyes, their hearts, and their minds. Their imagination! Now at last they listen to him!

Peter is filled with joy: It is good for us to be here. As Teilhard de Chardin famously said, 'Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God'. This is the joy which Sr Maria Ignazia talked about this morning, Mary's joy. Without joy, none of us has any authority at all. No one believes a miserable Christian! In the Transfiguration, this joy flows from three sources: beauty, goodness, and truth.

We could mention other forms of authority. In the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the authority of the poor is stressed. There is the authority of the tradition and of the hierarchy with its ministry of unity.

What I would suggest this morning is that authority is multiple and mutually enhancing. There need be no competition, as if the laity can only have more authority if the bishops have less, or so-called conservatives compete for authority with progressives. We might be tempted to call down fire on those we see as opposed to us, like the disciples in today's gospel (Luke 9: 51-56). But in the Trinity, there is no rivalry. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit do not compete for power, just as there is no competition between our four gospels.

We shall speak with authority to our lost world if in this Synod we transcend competitive ways of existing. Then the world will recognise the voice of the shepherd who summons them to life. Let us look at this scene on the mountain and see the interaction of different forms of authority.

Beauty

FIRST, there is beauty or glory. The two are virtually synonymous in Hebrew. Bishop Robert Barron said somewhere – and forgive me, Bishop Bob, if I am misquoting you – that beauty can reach people who reject other forms of authority. A moral vision can be perceived as moralistic: 'How dare you tell me how to live my life?' The authority of doctrine may be rejected as oppressive. 'How dare you tell me what to think?' But beauty has an authority which touches our intimate freedom.

Beauty opens our imagination to the transcendent, the homeland for which we long. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls God

'beauty's self and beauty's giver'.^[1]

Aquinas says that it reveals the final end of our lives, like the target at which the archer aims^[2].

No wonder that Peter does not know what to say. Beauty carries us beyond words. It has been claimed that every adolescent has some experience of transcendent beauty. If they do not

have guides, as the disciples had Moses and Elijah, the moment passes. When I was a sixteen-year-old boy at a Benedictine school, I had such a moment in the great Abbey Church, and I had wise monks to help me understand.

But not all beauty speaks of God. Nazi leaders loved classical music. On the feast day of the Transfiguration, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in a hideous parody of the divine light. Beauty can deceive and seduce. Jesus said:

‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.’ (Matthew 23: 27).

But the divine beauty on the mountain will shine outside the holy city when the glory of the Lord will be revealed on the cross. God’s beauty is disclosed most radiantly in what seems most ugly. One must go to the places of suffering to glimpse the beauty of God.

Etty Hillesum, the Jewish mystic drawn to Christianity found it even in a Nazi concentration camp:

‘I want to be there in the thick of what people call “horror” and still be able to say, “Life is beautiful”.’[3]

Every renewal of the Church has gone with an aesthetic revival: Orthodox iconography, Gregorian chant, Counter-Reformation baroque (not my favourite!). The Reformation was in part a clash of aesthetic visions. What

aesthetic renewal do we need today to open a glimpse of transcendence, especially in places of desolation and suffering? How can we disclose the beauty of the cross?

When the Dominicans who first arrived in Guatemala in the sixteenth century, beauty opened the way for them to share the gospel with the indigenous people. They refused the protection of the Spanish conquistadors. The friars taught the local indigenous merchants Christian songs, to be sung as they travelled in the mountains selling their goods. This opened the way for the brethren who could then ascend safely into the region still known as *Vera Paz*, True Peace. But eventually the soldiers came and killed not just the indigenous people but our brethren who tried to protect them.

What songs can enter the new continent of the young? Who are our musicians and poets? So beauty opens the imagination to the ineffable end of the journey. But we may be tempted like Peter to stay there. Other sorts of imaginative engagement are necessary to bring us down the mountain for the first synod on the way to Jerusalem.

The disciples are offered two interpreters of what they see, Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. Or of Goodness and Truth.

Goodness

MOSES led Israel out of slavery into freedom. The Israelites did not wish to go. They hungered for the safety of Egypt. They feared the freedom of the desert, just as the disciples feared to make the journey to Jerusalem. In *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky, the Grand Inquisitor asserts that

‘nothing has ever been more insufferable for humanity and society than freedom ... In the end, they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us; “Better that you enslave us, but feed us.”’

The saints have the authority of courage. They dare us to take to the road. They invite us to come with them on the risky adventure of holiness. Edith Stein, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, was born into an observant Jewish family, but became an atheist when she was a teenager. But when by chance she picked up St Teresa of Avila’s autobiography, she read it all night. She said,

“When I had finished the book, I said to myself: This is the truth.’

This led her to death in Auschwitz. That is the authority of holiness. It invites us to let control of our lives and let God be God.

The most popular book of the twentieth century was *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien. It is a deeply Catholic novel. He claimed it was the romance of the Eucharist. The martyrs were the earliest authorities in the Church, because boldly they gave everything.

G. K. Chesterton said,

‘Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of readiness to die’[4]

Are we afraid to present the dangerous challenge of our faith? Herbert McCabe OP said,

‘If you love, you will be hurt, perhaps killed. If you do not love, you are dead already.’

Young people are not attracted to our faith if we domesticate it.

‘Perfect love casts out fear.’ (1 John 4:18).

Brother Michael Anthony Perry OFM, former Minister General of the Franciscans, said:

‘In baptism, we have renounced the right to have fear.[5]’

I would say we have renounced the right to be enslaved by fear. The courageous know fear. We shall only have authority in our fearful world if we are seen to risk everything. When our European brothers and sisters went to preach the gospel in Asia four hundred years ago, half of them died before they arrived, of disease, shipwreck, piracy. Would we have their mad courage?

Henri Burin de Rozières (1930-2017) was a French Dominican lawyer based in the Brazilian Amazon. He took to court the great landowners who often enslave the poor, forcing them to work on their vast estates, and killing them if they tried to escape. Henri received innumerable death threats. He was offered police protection, but he knew

that they would most likely be the ones to kill him. When I stayed with him, he offered me his room for the night. The next day he told me that he could not sleep in case they came for him and accidentally got me!

So the authority of beauty speaks of the end of the journey, the homeland we have never seen. The authority of holiness speaks of the journey to be made if we are to arrive. It is the authority of those who give their lives away. The Irish poet Pádraig Pearse proclaimed:

‘I have squandered the splendid years which the Lord God gave to my youth—in attempting impossible things, deeming them alone worth the toil. Lord, if I had the years, I would squander them again over. I fling them from me.’[6]

Truth

THEN there is Elijah. The prophets are the truth tellers. He saw through the fantasies of the prophets of Ba’al and heard the still small voice of silence on the mountain. *Veritas*, Truth, the motto of the Dominican Order. It drew me to the Dominicans even before I met one, which was perhaps providential!

Our world has fallen out of love with the Truth: Fake news, wild assertions on the internet, mad conspiracy theories. Yet buried in humanity is an ineradicable instinct for the truth, and when it is spoken, it has some last vestiges of authority. The *Instrumentum Laboris* is

unafraid to be truthful about the challenges we must address. It speaks openly about the hopes and sorrows, the anger, and the joy of the People of God. How can we draw people to the One who is the Truth if we are not truthful about ourselves?

Let me mention just two ways in which this prophetic tradition of truth-telling is needed. First of all, in speaking truthfully of the joys and sufferings of the world. In Hispaniola, Bartolome de Las Casas, had been leading a life of mediocrity, when he read the sermon preached by Antonio de Montesinos OP in the Advent of 1511, confronting the conquistadors with their enslavement of the indigenous people,

“Tell me, by what right or by what interpretation of justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? By what authority have you waged such detestable wars against people who were once living so quietly and peacefully in their own land?”.

Las Casas read this, knew it was true, and repented. So in this Synod, we shall listen to people who will speak truthfully about

‘the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time’ (*Gaudium et Spes* 1).

For truth, we also need disciplined scholarship which resists our temptation to use the Word of God and the teachings of the Church for our own purposes. ‘God must be right because he agrees with me!’. Biblical scholars, for example, bring

us back to the original texts in their foreignness, their otherness. When I was in hospital, a nurse said to me that he wished that he knew Latin so that he could read the Bible in the original language. I said nothing! True scholars oppose any simplistic attempt to enlist the scriptures or tradition for our personal campaigns. God's Word belongs to God. Listen to him. We do not own the truth. The truth owns us.

All love opens us to the truth of the other. We discover how they remain, in a sense, unknowable. We cannot take possession of them and use them for our purposes. We love them in their otherness, in their uncontrollable freedom.

So on the mountain of the Transfiguration, we see different forms of authority are invoked to lead the disciples beyond that great crisis of authority of Caesarea Philippi. All of these and others are necessary. Without truth, beauty can be vacuous. As someone said, 'Beauty is to truth, as deliciousness is to food.' Without goodness, beauty can deceive. Goodness without truth collapses into sentimentality. Truth without goodness leads to the Inquisition. St John Henry Newman spoke beautifully of the multiple forms of authority, of governance, reason, and experience.

We all have authority, but differently. Newman wrote that if the authority of government becomes absolute, it will be tyrannical. If reason becomes

the sole authority, we fall into arid rationalism. If religious experience is the only authority, then superstition will win. A synod is like an orchestra, with different instruments having their own music. This is why the Jesuit tradition of discernment is so fruitful. Truth is not arrived at by majority vote, any more than an orchestra or a football team led by voting!

The authority of leadership surely is ensuring that the conversation of the Church is fruitful, that no one voice dominates and drowns out others. It discerns the hidden harmony.

Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, wrote.

'In turbulent times, there is an almost overwhelming temptation for religious leaders to be confrontational. Not only must truth be proclaimed but falsehood must be denounced. Choices must be set out as stark divisions. Not to condemn is to condone.'

But, he asserts,

'a prophet hears not one imperative but two: guidance and compassion, a love of truth and an abiding solidarity with those for whom that truth has become eclipsed. To preserve tradition and at the same time defend those others condemn is the difficult, necessary task of religious leadership in an unreligious age.'[7]

All power comes from our Triune God, the one in whom all is shared. The Italian theologian Leonardo Paris asserts, 'The Father shares his power. With everyone. And he configures all

power as shared

It is no longer possible to quote Paul – “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28)

– and appeal to synodality without recognizing that this means finding concrete historical forms so that each one is recognized as having the power that the Father has willed to entrust to him or her.[8]

If the Church becomes truly a community of mutual empowerment, we shall speak with the authority of the Lord. Becoming such a Church will be painful and beautiful. This is what we shall look at in the last conference.

[1] ‘The Golden Echo’

[2] ST III. 45

[3] *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-43*, Persephone Books, London, 2007, p. 276

[4] *Orthodoxy* London 1996 p.134

[5] Benotti p.66

[6] Quoted by Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor, ‘Fiftieth Anniversary of Priesthood’, in Daniel P. Cronin, *Priesthood: A Life Open to Christ* (St Pauls Publishing, London, 2009), p. 134.

[7] ‘Elijah and the Still, Small Voice’, www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/pinchas/elijah-and-the-still-small-voice

[8] Leonardo Paris, *L’erede. Una cristologia*, Querini-ana, 2021, pp. 220-221. Soon to be published in English by Brill, with a Foreword by Massimo Faggioli.