



# Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI IESUM

Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church



## **THE PATHOLOGY OF POWER:**

### **Part I**

## **THE THIRD TEMPTATION OF**

## **CHRIST**

**and why we ought to tremble ...**

*“And the devil led him into a high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time; And he said to Him: To Thee will I give all this power, and the glory of them; for to me they are delivered, and **to whom I will, I give them.**” (St. Luke 4.5-6)*

**To each of us**, in some manner, this passage should be construed as one of the most frightening in all Holy Scripture.

Everyone in any position of power, of authority, of dominion over the lives of others in any way, in any measure — especially within the Church — should tremble before these words. Read them once again, and reflect on them.

Prelate or pastor; chairman or manager, senator or selectman ... if you possess power — power over others which you can arbitrarily exercise to their detriment — you should be concerned, gravely concerned.

You presume to know from whom you received the power you possess. It is very likely that in truth, whoever you are or whatever your office, you do not really wish to know—as long as you possess. Power as possession and possession as power; each is signatory to the other, and both are the signature of power.

Do you doubt it? How prepared are you to relinquish your power, to cede even some portion of it to another? How prepared are you to become subject to another as others are now subject to you? If you fear this — why do you fear? From what likelihood of injustice do you flee? And if you would flee it as an evil, why do you now embrace it as a good?

In a word, why does the possession of power please you? Why do you esteem it a good — in fact so great a good that you are unwilling or reluctant to relinquish it? If you do not pause to dwell on that question, and to answer it honestly, then it is power that possesses *you* and not you that possess power. It is power as pathological, subjugating others but no longer susceptible to being subjugated itself. It is the will as recalcitrant to itself.

While able to exercise control over others, it does so in and through the inability to exercise control over itself. It is, in the end, incapable of dispossessing itself. The will and power become synonymous such that the act of willing itself becomes indistinguishable from the power that motivates it. The will retains its primacy, but no longer its autonomy. It is free to exercise power but it is no longer free to relinquish it. It is free to exact, but not to yield; to lay levy, but to pay no tribute, to dominate but not to submit. This is power as tyranny, uncurbed by reason, and were it possible, unrestrained. Its end is always itself and not the other, except inasmuch as the end of another redounds to its own end. In this sense, it is the apotheosis of the self, the self construed as a god.

If we have read Homer, we find that the principal difference between the Homeric gods and men is nothing in the way of exemplary virtue (there is as much turpitude among the gods as among men), but a difference in the magnitude of power, in the exercise of power ... most often arbitrarily ... and almost always tragically.

Or perhaps you alone, among all men, are like unto God in goodness? Perhaps you are the servant who is greater than his Master? Are you? Are you greater than Christ, “Who being in the form of God... emptied Himself, taking the form of a

servant”?<sup>1</sup> Jesus Christ Himself did not cling to power — but submitted Himself to it ... to Caiaphas, to Pilate, to the jeering mob, and in the end to those who drove the nails into His hands and feet.

You are without excuse. All the reasons that you invoke to cling to this euphoric caricature of power are so many pretensions and lies. One day, and not a day of your choosing, that power will be taken from you and utterly cease ... or pass to another. Pharaoh, Caesar, Emperor, King, Prelate — President, Chairman of the Board, Manager, Supervisor — every stratum of power under which man bends ... oppressed, subdued, exploited ... has its end ... and its accountability. Even if it is expunged from history, erased from living memory, it will stand in the dock before God and testify against you!

Before you take the seat of power, then, know the liability that you incur. As the magnitude of power escalates, so too the susceptibility to evil implicit within it, attendant to it, and with ever greater urgency you must ask yourself, from whom, truly, does this power derive — to what end, and at whose expense? If this question does not make you tremble, you can be sure from whom it comes ... for even the *just*, St. Paul tells us, work out their salvation in fear and trembling.<sup>2</sup>

But most especially, in our present article, *it is particularly apropos of those in the Church.*

“Why?” you ask.

Because, as it has been said, “*In the Church where the light is brightest, the shadows are darkest.*” It is the lamp set upon a hill. It is a light to the nations. It is

the preeminent moral authority among Catholic Christians. Here, the grasping for power, the arbitrary exercise of power, the relishing of power, especially to the detriment of the powerless, is not simply utterly inconsistent with, but is an egregious defection from, Jesus Christ, Who emptied himself of power and came among us as one who serves. Yet even here, where the light prevails, the shadows linger, and the brighter the light the deeper the shadows. Here, encountering what is most noble, we also encounter what is base.

## **The Dark Provenance of Power**

*“And the devil led him into a high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time; And he said to Him: To Thee will I give **all** this power, and the glory of them; for to me they are delivered, and to whom I will, I give them.” (St. Luke 4.5-6)*

Ponder that carefully. While the evil one is indeed “the father of lies”<sup>2</sup> ... and we must be careful how we read this, I think that we can be fairly certain—especially in light of history, and in light of our own experiences with people who have exercised power over us, that the seat of power is at best a perilous perch indeed. It is a height that is commensurable to a depth.

We flatter ourselves that we have acquired power through our wit, our talent, our ability, our intelligence; in short, that we *merit* power. We *deserve* it. We have *earned* it. It is ours in justice as in recompense. This, of course, is a fiction.

Another scenario is as likely: we convince ourselves that we have acquired this power through our cleverness. We have insinuated ourselves into power by manipulating people, currying some, crushing others, assiduously constructing a network of “connections” that will be the conduit to the pinnacle of power. We deceive.

In one sense we misunderstand power, politely abjuring it even as we lust for it. The reality, however, is that power — in our own lives, no less than in the life of the Church — can be either magnificently redemptive ... or, as we have more often seen, unimaginably destructive. It can lift up, or it can crush; preserve life or take it. It can feed and it can make famine. It can heal and it can maim. It can exonerate and it can crucify.

The ancient allurement to the unbridled, even the gratuitous expression of our own will against all that would curb it, against the reproach of justice, even against the reproof of reason itself ... is not merely an enticement; it is a frightful human liability; a liability of which satan is keenly aware, and equally adept at exploiting.

Power becomes an asset in itself. When this occurs, our liability to it becomes fully exploited ... and the means to the exploitation of others. And this is to say that

power is always *relational*. It asserts itself through possession and influence; it seeks and claims dominion, uncurbed self-expression and unrestrained self-assertion. It boldly manifests itself not merely in the amassing of material goods, but most perniciously in the acquiring of ever escalating positions, titles, and offices which themselves escalate the power through which they were first acquired. Having become an asset ever increasing in value through escalation, power culminates in personality and power, in the personality that possesses the power, and in the power that possesses the personality.

At this point we confront *power as pathology*. Inextricable from the personality, it becomes the expression of the personality ... but ... because it is always and intrinsically *relational* ... the expression is always exercised to the spiritual, psychological, physical, or moral detriment of others. Power as pathology cannot be otherwise, cannot express itself otherwise, for it is preeminently the power to assert one will against the protest, and always the good, of another.

## **The Sole Antidote to the Pathogen of Power**

But there is another relational power, one that is, in all its effects, contrary to, even remedial of, the relational power of the unbridled will — and this is love. Power as

love, as a munificent expression of the self to the benefit of others, rather than as a pathology expressive of the *self as acquisitive* to the detriment, the expropriation, of others, does not differ in its ability to exercise influence over others — it differs in its *perception* of others — as *ends in themselves* and not as *means to ends that converge on the self*. It perceives others not in terms of itself, and how it will benefit relative to others, but in terms of the other itself, *to the end of the other* — not the end of the self. In fact, this is what we understand by love, and how we differentiate love from selfishness. In a word, love gives, where selfishness acquires. The power to give and the power to acquire are quite distinct, and the means through which each are effected are diametrically opposite. Acquisitiveness deprives; love invests. God, St. James tells us, is “**the Giver of every good thing**”<sup>3</sup>.

It is the evil one, the predator who takes what is not his, who seeks to *acquire for himself*, ever plundering through "taking from", "depriving of", what in justice belongs to another, seeking to acquire that he may corrupt and destroy what he appropriates, that no good may reach fruition or attain to perfection.

How many parallels we find in our own lives — and, alas, for sorrow — in the lives of many even within the Church ... from the great Dicasteries in Rome to the pettiest of parish councils ... how many have acquired — and exercise — power precisely through relinquishing charity! Unable to reconcile the two, they



inevitably opt for one by forfeiting the other. It is a rare man in whom power and charity equitably abide, in whom the exercise of power *derives from* the obligations of love. This mutuality we construe as the virtue of justice and we speak of such a man as a "just man", in whom power and charity reciprocate rather than conflict. Power is not diminished through the exercise of charity, and charity is not diminished through the exercise of power. In the just man we see a reflection of God, for power and charity are preeminently attributes of God, in Whom alone the perfection, and the perfect exercise of each, constitutes the Divine attribute of Justice.

Love does not coerce. Period. It does not diminish the other, deprive the other, depredate the other, reduce to abject poverty that it may appear more magnanimous still after it has lifted what it first crushed. Love is not a taking-from, it is a giving-to; it is not the imposition of the will as an extension of the self, it is the invitation to will the abundance of the other even to the dispossession of itself. It can only find, realize, authenticate its beneficence through benefiting *the other* — not itself. It is solicitous of, and ever in loving service toward the lesser — even the least.

The paradigm of perfect love — because the paradigm for all Christians is Christ — is found in the act of truly loving our enemies ... from whom we can hope,

anticipate, no benefit, no return, nothing that would motivate us through self-interest. This is the possession of power — not over others, which is so easily achieved: it is power over *oneself*, over all our inclinations, our selfishness, our pride; paradoxically even over the inducement to power itself! In loving our enemies we bow down to no one but God — for we refuse to bow down to ourselves, in and through whom alone the perversion of power is possible.

## **The Pathogenesis of Power**

But whence this perverse ambition for power, so likely, so liable, to corrupt, and through its corruption, abuse? The lust for domination and the exercise of a sinful will, together with its attendant misuse of power, is a direct consequence of the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. Of itself, power is not evil. When that which motivates the exercise of power is love, it is a great good. When that which motivates the exercise of power is ambition, it is evil. Power becomes no longer the means, but the end. What is meant, given, to be expendable, becomes instead an asset in itself, an asset to preserve, and not spend, to augment, and not deplete. Love ceases to motivate power and is replaced by ambition. The self, and self-love, becomes the axis of the universe in place of God, the love of God, and the genuine love of others.

It is here that we most clearly see that satan as the perverter of power, the one who works to pervert the good, to plunder and then corrupt the good, making it subject to himself, perverting the power of service to God and man to an instrument of service to the self, to self-adulation as a parody of love, a parody that culminates in the introverted caricature of love which we know as pride.

Promised power and unfettered freedom, together with all the riches and esteem of this world, we are invited, seduced, by this illusory pledge of happiness understood in terms through which, ultimately, no happiness is possible. He promises what he cannot possibly deliver — and has *never* delivered!

No matter what satan may promise, he cannot give us happiness, for it is not his to give ... but as we have seen, power is! Beware! He would have us believe that power and happiness are reciprocal, even synonymous — in effect, that the unfettered exercise of our will brings us the satisfaction, the utter felicity we long for. “If we have all we want, when we want it, and at whatever cost to whomever ... we shall be truly happy ...!”

Who, upon acquiring the desire of his heart in this world, material or sensual, has ever reposed in happiness? In an instant it passes to another, or ceases to be

altogether. We have seen it. It is, after all, how we ourselves have acquired it, by the relinquishing of it by another to whom it no longer belongs nor brings happiness. Among the polities of man, none is greater, none more vast, more numerous, more populous than that in which, one and all, without exception, quietly and incessantly attests to this: *Necropolis* — the vast city of the dead whom we hedge with cypress and yew ... lest we *witness* what we would deny!

We all have within us that weakness, that inheritance of sin from our first parents, that allurements and terrible susceptibility to sin and temptation, to ascend that seductive and sad summit of power ... and to precipitously fall.

Geoffrey K. Mondello  
Editor  
Boston Catholic Journal



Copyright © 2004 - 2023 Boston Catholic Journal. All rights reserved.