

Fr. Perozich comments —

“For the holy Spirit was promised to the successors of Peter not so that they might, by his revelation, make known some new doctrine, but that, by his assistance, they might religiously guard and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles.”

“Legitimate papal authority, in other words, is exercised when the pope “religiously guards and faithfully expounds the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles.” But it’s an illegitimate exercise of power when he tries to “make known some new doctrine.” Even a pope has limited authority in the Church, although in modern practice he has almost unlimited power. And if a pope has only limited authority, then surely so do bishops and priests as well.”

Eric Sammons attempts to provide distinctions between power and authority. In some instances, it is clear that power being exercised is in conflict with Divine Authority such as in sexual license and redefinition of marriage by German bishops..

Regarding rites and worship, authority to govern the liturgy and the power exercised may have a greater overlap, even though it appears that the exercise of power is what is being wielded rather than divine authority.

Certainly abuses of power by bishops over some priests seem to go against divine authority. Also it seems that power wielding may be more satisfying than really proclaiming the gospel.

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Power vs. Authority in the Church

ERIC SAMMONS



The recent Vatican directive that parishes can't advertise their scheduled traditional Latin Masses was met with widespread mockery on social media. For anyone who has worked in a parish, the idea of a curial bureaucrat in Rome trying to tell Mrs. Jones at St. Joseph parish in Des Moines what she can put in the bulletin is laughable and ridiculous. Heck, some pastors can't even control what goes in the bulletin!

But behind the mockery is a deep insight into the differences between power and authority, even though in today's world these two distinct ideas are often muddled. This confusion has led to profound misunderstandings among Catholics as to the nature of authority in the Church.

Unfortunately today, many Church leaders have power behind their commands, but not authority. They know that they can command obedience from most Catholics to their directives, and so they exercise power for their own sakes or for the sake of their ideology, instead of for the common good.

- The German bishops who want to [normalize gay marriage](#) might have the power to do so among German Catholics, but they do not have the authority.
- The U.S. bishops who [allow pro-abortion politicians like Joe Biden receive Communion](#) might have the power to do so, but they do not have the authority.
- Cardinal Cupich might have the power to [abolish *ad orientem* worship](#), but he does not have the authority.
- Pope Francis might have the power to [abrogate the Latin Mass](#), but he does not have the authority.

We must always keep in mind this distinction between power and authority. Former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick for decades had the support of high-ranking Church officials, even though many knew of his monstrous misdeeds. Why? Because he had immense *power* in the Church, even after he was retired and had little to no *authority*. If Cardinal Cupich bans *ad orientem* worship, he might not have that authority under Church (or divine) law, but he can make life miserable to any priest who dares disobey. That's power.

Power comes from below—it is only possible if it has consent (whether forced or given freely) from the people under control. Joseph Stalin had power in the Soviet Union because no one below him dared resist him. Mikhail

Gorbachev also had power, until the people of the Soviet Union no longer gave it to him.

Authority, on the other hand, comes from above, ultimately from God. A father or a bishop or even a Catholic monarch has authority in certain spheres given to him by God for the common good of his family, diocese, or kingdom, respectively. Those under authority are obliged to follow the superior's commands, not because of their consent, but because the authority ultimately comes from the One who has true authority over all.

Due to the Fall, power can become virtually unlimited in this world, through force or influence. What could Stalin *not* do during his reign? A person with power also usually wants to acquire more power. As Lord Acton noted, “power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Being able to tell people what to do can be intoxicating.

Authority, on the other hand, is always limited in scope. Only God has unlimited authority, and He only delegates aspects of his authority to individuals as needed to bring people closer to Him.

And it's important to note that this limitation applies to *everyone* with earthly—including ecclesial—authority, for only God Himself has full authority over man, as St. Thomas Aquinas notes, “Man is subject to God simply as regards all things, both internal and external, wherefore he is bound to obey Him in all things. On the other hand, inferiors are not subject to their superiors in all things, but only in certain things and in a particular way” (ST Pt. II-II, Q 105, Art. 5).

Vatican I recognized these limitations in office of the papacy as well. It states,

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Legitimate papal authority, in other words, is exercised when the pope “religiously guards and faithfully expounds the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles.” But it’s an illegitimate exercise of power when he tries to “make known some new doctrine.” Even a pope has limited *authority* in the Church, although in modern practice he has almost unlimited *power*. And if a pope has only limited authority, then surely so do bishops and priests as well.

Problems arise when leaders mistake their God-given authority for power. They abuse their authority because they have the power to get away with it. So the abusive father is able to command his children far beyond his authority, because his children are unable to resist him. He has power over them. A bishop decides he can do whatever he wants—reassign priests he doesn’t like, use diocesan funds for private jet trips—because he has the power to do so.

Our Lord strongly condemned this abuse of authority through the illegitimate exercise of raw power:

You know that the princes of the Gentiles lord it over them; and they that are the greater, exercise power upon them. It shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be the greater among you, let him be your minister: And he that will be first among you, shall be your servant. (Matthew 20:25-27)

True authority, which comes from God, is always put in the service of those under the ruler. St. Gregory the Great well

understood this, saying that “Whoever calls himself universal bishop, or desires this title, is, by his pride, the precursor to the Antichrist” and instead called his role as pope “the Servant of the Servants of God.”

It is also the lack of distinction between power and authority that often confuses today’s debates over obedience. Most faithful Catholics instinctively know that obedience is an important and necessary virtue. But when a Church leader issues a questionable directive, the entire focus of discussion seems to be on those under his authority and their need to obey. But there is little to no discussion of whether the Church leader is exercising his authority or simply flexing his raw power. And in fact, quiet obedience to false directives increases his power, leading to more false directives in the future.

How do we distinguish between commands given from legitimate authority and commands pushed through from the exercise of power? **The line between authority and power comes in the nature of the command given.** The father who tells his six-year-old son to eat his vegetables is exercising his legitimate authority as the provider of his family. But the father who tells his son he’s actually a girl because he likes to dance is forcing his power over him. The first command is for the good of the son, but the second is harmful.

Thus, legitimate commands are those within the sphere of authority for the ruler, and for the good of those under his command. Anything else is an exercise of power.

The Catholic Church is suffering a crisis of authority today, not because she does not have legitimate authority, but because too many of her

leaders are drunk with power. Instead of using their God-given authority for the common good—our salvation—they are enforcing their wills by raw power. Catholics need to accept the hierarchy’s authority while rejecting its misuse of power. Only then will today’s clericalist imbalance be restored to something more in line with Our Lord’s desire that our leaders be servants who inspire and lead us, not dictators who revel in their own power.

[Photo: Cardinal Cupich presenting the Spirit Of Francis Award to then-Cardinal McCarrick in 2016]



By [Eric Sammons](#)

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