

Walk Humbly with Authority

- Red Mass
October 9, 2012
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All of us who are gathered today for this Red Mass at the start of the judicial season—whether judges, lawyers, elected officials, public servants, professors, or priests—have something in common, which is that we live and work and bear and respect authority. I'd like to reflect with you today on what is authority, where it comes from, and what it asks of us.

People tell me that I am comfortable with authority, that I like it, that I use it well, whether as a priest, as a leader of the Jesuits, or as a university president. That's true. Sometimes I think I like it all too well! I have been called "The Alexander Haig of the Jesuits"... whenever there is the least gap in taking control, I say "I'm in charge here!" Once I visited a family for dinner whose five-year-old daughter, Kristina, I had baptized as an infant. Clearly mom and dad had tried to fill Kristina in ahead of time about who I was. When I rang the bell, she was right there, wide-eyed... and a little disappointed to see that I was not more regal or majestic. Before dinner she was reading her "George King of the Jungle" book. Half way through dinner she creeps over to me, tugs on my pant legs and asks me in this very small voice, "So, are you the King of the Church?" No Kristina, not exactly, although sometimes I wish I were. ...Authority; it's good stuff don't you agree?

The prophet Micah tells us how to live authority when he says:

"You have been told, O mortal, what is good,
and what the Lord requires of you:
Only to do justice and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God."

A message for all of us in authority: to do justice, to love goodness, to walk humbly with our sacred trust.

St. Paul seems even more clear about authority in writing to the Christian community in Rome:

"Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist (higher authorities) have been established by God.
...Whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed...(authority) is a servant of God for your good."

Paul believes there is a sacred or holy origin of authority, that like Micah we must be subordinate or humble before it, and that it is the servant of our good.

Finally, Jesus proclaims that famous line “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” which is often misused as a claim for the separation of Church and State. What Jesus is really saying is more like: “How dare you leaders of God’s law have on you a coin which has the blasphemous inscription “Tiberius Caesar, son of God”; fling that coin back to Tiberius; no human authority is divine; pay your submission only to God from whom all authority comes rather than to false claimants of divine authority.

My question for our reflection—we people of authority—is whether we too recognize that the source of authority is a sacred, mysterious source beyond human construction. Our founders believed that all persons are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights and that they the people so endowed are the source of authority. Our laws are ultimately constructed for the sake of the common good, which mysterious and indescribable as it is, gives authority to the law. Some people bear an authority to be respected by reason of title and position in society, church, or institution, but some bear authority simply from the kind of persons they are and the mysterious depth from which they live and speak. Parents and grandparents have authority from their participation in the creation and nurturing of young life. The people were amazed when Jesus spoke because unlike their elders he spoke with authority, not citing the law but speaking simply from a place of convincing truth within himself. You and I all know some people—often simple and uneducated people—who we would say speak with authority because of the integrity of their lives and the depth of humanity from which they speak.

When we entered this church today we stood because of authority; when a judge enters a courtroom all rise in respect for authority; when Governor Gregoire is introduced at the Community Development Roundtable all rise—whatever their political affiliation—because of her authority; when I was a boy in St. Anne’s School in Juneau, Alaska, I’ll tell you we rose and stayed standing when Fr. Whelan visited our classroom. If Mitt Romney were seated in a room and President Obama entered that room, Mitt Romney would rise.

We are all people of authority but we don’t make authority or construct it. It comes from deeper or higher sources, it is given to us, it makes us rather than we it. So when we gather at a Red Mass at the start of the judicial season, gather at a Law School and in a church, we do so not only to ask for a blessing on our work and the people we serve, but also because we hold something which is sacred, something that is good, and something that humbles us. Perhaps the prophet Micah says it best. We have been told what is good and what is required of us: to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with the sacred authority which has been given to us.

I grew up in the Territory of Alaska. My father was a journalist and a leading exponent of the case for Alaska’s statehood. He was elected at large in 1954 to be a member of the Alaska Constitutional Convention, to be one of the 55 delegates—as there had been 55 delegates at the original US constitutional Convention—to write the Constitution for the future State of Alaska. They labored for months in College, Alaska in the winter of 1955 when the temperature hardly rose above minus 40 degrees. Because of his journalistic writing ability he was appointed Chair of the Committee on Style and Drafting. He often loved to say that more than anything else he wanted to draft a constitution which would sing for the peoples of Alaska. Again and again in committee and repeatedly on the floor of the convention he intervened, he tried to whack back the thorn bush of legal language in order to clear the way for language which would be

understandable and would sing. He was not at the time a Catholic or a man of faith, but I have often wondered whether he intuited in trying to write a constitution which would sing, that it would more than inspire the peoples of Alaska, especially new generations, and would pick up the song, the sacred sources of the very life and land of the Eskimos, Indians, and Pioneers of a land so endowed with beauty, majesty, and dignity by nature or by Creator. I believe that he and we know that authority sings for us and for all whom we are called and glad to serve, and that we are gathered today in this sacred place to listen and hear that song.