

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (2018 - B)

Our holy Gospel today tells us that Jesus spoke with such authority and His teachings were so impressive and so clear that people were astonished, and furthermore, because of His teachings, unclean spirits, that is, demons, were filled with fear and obeyed Him.

Because this idea of authority is so important in everyday life, and because it's even more important when it comes to religion and religious teachings, I want to say more about it today.

So to begin, what does it mean when it says that Jesus **“taught as one having authority?”** To answer that question, we all need to be clear about what we mean by authority, and for that to happen, we need to have a common definition of authority. That way we will all be on the same page when we are talking about it.

OK, so here is a definition of authority: “The right to give orders or to make decisions or to teach definitively or reliably about something.” Authority can also mean an accepted source of information or advice about something.

For example. A captain in the army has authority to command soldiers below his rank. He has the authority to give orders to lieutenants and sergeants and corporals. A police officer has the authority to pull you over and ask for your driver's license. A teacher has the authority to tell her students to open their books to page 84.

It's also the case that we seek out advice from certain people because they know what they're talking about. They are experts in their fields; they have authority to speak on certain matters. So we ask grandma, “You always make a wonderful Thanksgiving turkey, please show me how to do that.” When our car is making a strange noise, we take it to a mechanic. We call the vet when our cow is sick. We pay attention to guys who have years of experience in the trades when they give us advice on how to wire our garage or how to plumb our bathroom or frame our house. They know what they are doing. They have authority.

The point is that you should listen to those who are knowledgeable in their field. They all have studied their subject matter, and they all know what they are talking about. They have authority to speak on those matters.

Now notice something else about authority. It is not the same thing as power. People who have power aren't responsible to anyone else for how they use their power. So the owner of a private company can do what he likes with it. He can move it to another state. He can sell it or expand it, or he can close it. He doesn't have to ask permission from anyone else or seek approval from someone else to do these things.

So power and authority are two different things. The important thing to remember about authority is that it's either granted to someone by someone else, or authority is acquired by years of study or learning or experience.

That said, here's one more thing about authority. You can't just assume authority for yourself. For example, if I decided to put on black robes and get myself a big bench and began to call people in and charge them with violating certain laws and then pass sentence on them, everyone would say "You can't do that. Who do you think you are? You aren't a judge."

Or suppose I started handing out medicine and said take this for your blood pressure and take that for your heart problem, people would say, "When did you become a pharmacist? Where is your license? What authority do you have to hand out medicine? Stop that, you're going to hurt someone."

I mention these things because we all know when someone has authority to command. We understand that a teacher or a judge or a coach or a military officer has authority to tell others what to do. We all know when someone is worth listening to because of their study or experience or skill, and because of that, we would be wise to put our trust in their authority.

OK, so what about religion? Who has the authority to speak about religious matters? Who has the authority to speak for God? And furthermore, how do you get that authority?

Quite frankly, I don't think many people ever think about this question. Instead, even though religious truths are more important than anything else in this world, most people never ask "Who has the authority to speak for God?"

Instead, lots of folks just decide on their own that they have authority to decide religious matters. They just say, "I think this about God" or "I think that about God." Or, "I think this is moral behavior" or "I think that is moral behavior." They are like self-appointed judges except in this case, they are self-appointed authorities in religious matters.

But what are their credentials? Have they studied about these things? Have they consulted someone who is an expert? Oftentimes not. Once I was explaining a certain Church teaching to a college student, and I showed her where she could find this teaching in the Bible. She happened to disagree with this teaching and so when I showed her the relevant Bible passages, she just said, "Well that's just your interpretation."

No, it was not. It was Church teaching straight from the words of Jesus Christ. Yet because it was a religious matter, she felt her opinion, based simply on how she felt, was equally valid to years of study and the authoritative teaching of the Church and the clear words of Jesus Himself as found in the scriptures. And that young woman is not alone.

Think about it this way. Who of us would go up to a structural engineer and tell him he has designed his building all wrong and needs to start over? Or, who of us would tell an experienced cook (like our grandmother) that she has been making her brownies wrong all these years and need to do it differently? Or who of us would tell a heart surgeon, you should use a different procedure when you are repairing heart valves?

And if that engineer or cook or surgeon asked us why he or she should do things differently, you just said, "Oh, I just think that's how you should do it," or "I feel it would be better my way," or "That's just my opinion, but you are welcome to yours because they're both equally valid," how ridiculous would that be?

So why do people do that when it comes to religious matters?

Why do people listen to others who have no authority to speak about religious matters? Like newscasters or reporters for example. What makes them experts? In fact, not only are they not experts, but many of them have agendas, and they slant their stories and reporting and programs to support their agendas. The point is, don't listen to people who have no authority.

Now, suppose you actually are seeking out an authority when it comes to religious matters. Suppose you are consulting someone who has made a serious study of religion, for example, a college professor in religious studies. What then? Do they have authority to teach?

That depends. They may have knowledge, but are they honest and are they clear about what they believe? Are they upfront about where they are coming from? Are they looking at Christianity from a position of faith or purely as a field of academic study?

It's a fact that many experts today approach Christianity with biases, and so they are not always honest. Instead, they leave out things which don't support what they believe, or they distort things. So, here again, we have to be cautious and find out where people are coming from before we believe everything they say.

So what about other Christians? Here we can assume a sincerity because they both love and believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. That said, there is still this question: Do they have authority to teach in His name? The answer is, not entirely, not in a full sense, and here's why. Not everyone who loves the Lord has full authority to teach in His name and to govern the Church.

Consider this. Jesus taught with authority because He was the Son of God. Furthermore, He claimed to have all authority. In Saint Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Mt 28:18).**" Then, after saying this, He commanded His Apostles to go and make disciples of all the nations and to teach them all that He had commanded them. Notice that Jesus did not entrust this authority to all of His disciples. Not all of His followers were given this explicit task. That means not everyone has the same authority to teach in the name of Jesus, even if they are His followers.

Also consider this. Jesus gave a special authority to Saint Peter. Jesus said that Saint Peter was the rock on which He would build His Church (not churches), and to him, Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

From all this, we can see that Jesus established one Church, and He that gave to certain members of His Church authority to teach in His name and to govern in His name.

In 325 at the Council of Nicaea, the bishops of the world affirmed that His Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. So, in religious matters, it is Christ's Church, the Catholic Church, and it alone which has the full authority from God to teach accurately and to command justly in religious matters. Amen.