

# God, Power, and Control

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Our topic this morning, as for the entire conference, is power. Specifically, I would like to think through with you our understanding of the power of God and the implications that might have for our understanding of power in the Church, especially the power of the leaders of the Church. What I offer (because it is what I am qualified to do) is a theological reflection on power, not a sociological, political, cultural, or other reflection. As such, at least for Christians and Jews, this means we must root our reflection in the power of God as revealed in the actions and word of God recorded in Scripture.

To state the obvious, Scripture and the community and tradition within which it is authoritative clearly present God as a God of power and the people of God as some how participating in that power. What is less obvious, and what I hope to highlight, is that if we attend carefully to how God operates and what is taught in that grand biblical story, we discover that the nature of this power is consistently ambivalent. And I mean that in the literal, root sense of the term: ambi-valent. There are two values or two senses of the power of God coexisting throughout the narrative. One is what we shall call Power Over: the power to control other people or things and direct them to do one's will. This is what we normally mean by power. The other we will call Power With. The meaning of this phrase is less immediately apparent, but I mean by it power in working with others.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows I will make four points: [1] Both these understandings of the power of God are operative in Scripture and the tradition, and both are necessary for properly understanding the God there revealed. [2] We assume that as God's chosen people we are called to share in the power of God over the world, the power to rule or control. [3] Christianity, at least as seen in the teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, calls us to share in the power of God with others: the power to serve, not to be served. [4] There are connections between these understandings of the power of God, our understanding of power in the Church, and sexual abuse by clergy. To make a

proper run at those issues, I would like to take a few steps back for some preliminary observations and guiding principles.

I speak here as a Christian, specifically Catholic, theologian. That means that I offer a Christian take on the biblical story or, perhaps better, that I read it as a Christian story. Thus I read the texts we share with the Jewish tradition self-consciously as part of the Christian Scriptures, ie as Old Testament. By advancing this Christian reflection on the story, I do not in any way mean to suggest that a Jewish reflection would yield a significantly different understanding of the power of God and its meaning for how we think of power in and among the people of God. Rather, I am simply saying, with Paul, that what I know is Christ and him crucified (I Cor 2:2). For Christians, this is the hermeneutic key to all of Scripture and to the nature of God. Obviously Jesus is not such a hermeneutic key for Jewish theology. Hence I do not claim to speak for that tradition.

The phenomenon of clergy sexual abuse has many causes. As with the school shootings in Littleton and else where, it is tempting to try to find the cause, but this is a futile quest based on an oversimple analysis. Many causes converge in any one case of abuse, and each case has its own peculiar dynamics, its own constellation of variables, that distinguishes it from other cases. Addressing one cause will not solve the problem. In all that we say and do on this issue we need to respect and reckon with that complexity, with the multiplicity of variables and the possible relations among them. And yet in the midst of that we need to identify some common features that help us make sense out of it all.

One such common feature that is widely recognized is that sexual abuse is about power and only secondarily, instrumentally, about sex. Thus if our analysis, diagnosis, and therapy focus on sexual issues and miss the underlying pathology or pathologies of power, we will neither understand the problem properly nor be able to treat it successfully.

Since the role, authority, and power of clergy in the Christian community are ultimately justified theologically, it is reasonable to think that our understanding of the power of God would be related to our understanding of the power of the clergy and, by extension, to the matter of clergy sexual abuse. The pathologies of power operative in abuse may be related to theological as well as psychological or sociological pathologies. Hence the point of this paper at this conference. Mindful of the multiplicity of causes of abuse by clergy, I am not suggesting that this is the only significant issue. But I am suggesting that it is one among several relevant factors.

Integral to our reflection here is the theological principle that humans are made in the image of God and, as Christians, are called to imitate Christ. This is the warrant for the connection between the power of God and power in the Church. However, as we consider this idea as it appears in Scripture, we soon

discover (within the span of the first three chapters of Genesis) another deep ambivalence if not a contradiction in the spiritual life as described by Christianity.

On the one hand we are clearly called to be God-like. Genesis 1 :26 - 27 speak of God creating humans in the image of God. In the Sermon on the Mount as reported in Matthew, Jesus admonishes us to "be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect"(5:48). Then there are all the references in Scripture and the tradition to the godly life we are called on to live as Christians.

This idea is developed most elaborately in the notion of divinization so important to many of the early Christian writers and the Orthodox tradition. As Irenaeus put it, "God became human that humans might become divine." The idea is that our ultimate fulfillment in Christ, the goal of our creation and of the spiritual life, is to participate in the divine life, energy, and power, but not in the uncreated essence of God.

On the other hand, Scripture is equally clear that God is God, and we are not. The story of the first sin in Genesis presents the underlying temptation, the root of the disorder and chaos to follow, as the desire to be like God - and this a scant thirty-three verses after being told that we were made in the image of God. The first commandment or perhaps the prologue to all the commandments, reminds us who God is and admonishes us not to confuse God with anything else, with any of the created entities that are not God. A good case can be made that the primal sin, in a variety of senses, is idolatry: treating some thing that is not God as if it were God.

Much of the drama of the spiritual life, it seems to me, is in navigating the difference between these two, i.e. between imitation and idolatry. If we are so afraid of idolatry that we do not heed the call to be like God, we miss the heart of the spiritual life and end up disobeying the God who calls us into God's life. Conversely, if we seek to imitate God in the wrong way, we end up in spiritual presumption and idolatry. The relations between these two, the way they play themselves out in individual lives, in our institutions, and in the tradition is an essay in itself that we cannot pursue here in any detail. However, it is precisely in the tension between these two principles of the spiritual life - imitatio and idolatry - that we need to locate our reflections on the power of God and its implications for our understanding of power in the Church and to sexual abuse by clergy. To anticipate, my contention is that we more often than not get this wrong. We seek to imitate a quality of God's power where we should recognize that God is God, and we are not.

So much for preliminary observations and principles. I mentioned that we were going to step back to take a run at the issue. You probably did not imagine that we would be stepping back quite so far or running quite so long. The danger in that is that we can be exhausted by the time we get to the race. I hope that is not the case. I decided to step back so far, because I became

convinced in thinking about these matters that the basic principles guiding my reflection may well be of more enduring or widespread usefulness than the results of my particular application of those principles. Thus to review the salient points:

Sexual abuse has many causes. Sexual abuse is more about power than about sex. The understanding of the power of God is a factor in understanding clergy sexual abuse. We must approach this connection in the context of the tension between imitation and idolatry.

Now, back to our theme: the power of God. As you will recall, I maintained that Scripture presents us with not one but two major understandings of the power of God: Power Over and Power With. We need to describe each in a bit more detail, briefly trace them through the tradition and develop their rather obvious implications for our understanding of power in the Church.

First, Power Over. As noted earlier, this is the power to control the forces of nature, other people, or; in a certain sense, oneself (and perhaps even God). It is the ability to direct the world around one, individuals and institutions to do one's will and is what we typically mean by power. By definition, therefore, this power; as Paul Tillich observes in his classic little study *Love, Power and Justice*, "presupposes...something over which it proves its power."<sup>2</sup> It requires an other to control and dominate. Here physics provides a suggestive illustration; for electrical power is measured as a function of resistance. The more resistance it can overcome, the more power there is. So it is with all Power Over. This is an extremely important point. It means that the nature of this power is inherently competitive, agonistic. The basic relationship here is that of a zero-sum game in which the power of two entities is related in such a way that their sum is always equal to zero. As the power of one increases, the power of the other decreases. In this competitive relation the power of the other is a threat to my power. Since my power goes up as yours goes down, I have a stake in disempowering you. The less power you have, the more I can control you and bend you to do my will. Ultimately, to exercise my Power Over I need an other not only to control but to disempower. The basic drive of the relation is thus toward a relation of dominance and subordination. What ever might be said about equality in this relation, as long as the operative understanding of power is Power Over, one cannot finally accept the other as equal. The other is either dominated or dominator.

By contrast, Power With is cooperative rather than competitive. It works with others to empower them (rather than disempower them). Here the relation is not zero-sum but is such that my power grows as our power grows. I have a stake in increasing the power of the other, in empowering others, not in decreasing their power. The ultimate manifestation of this power is to make the other free, not to subordinate the other to my will. Thus this power is

focused on the good of the other; rather than on the self, and can be understood as a form of service.

In many ways this is a fairly standard typology, drawn in various ways in various contexts by various people to serve various purposes. Clearly it has a profound effect on how we understand numerous relationships in our lives. For example, our understanding of parenting and what counts as success and failure as a parent is different in each model. Our understanding of relationships, organizations and politics plays out differently in each model. Our understanding of the power of God and of the power of clergy in the Church is significantly different in each model.

Before we continue, we need to take note of a problem with this typology, particularly as we apply it to the power of God. At least as I have described it, it is difficult not to see Power Over as bad and Power With as good. Tempting as it is to think that way, in the end I think it is too simple. I think we must hold out the possibility, at least the conceptual possibility, that Power Over can be good. Conversely, both types of power can be - and have been - perverted. Here, however, we are focusing on perversions of Power Over. There are two reasons for this.

First, history. Perversions of Power Over have been far more common in our history and are a far more significant factor in understanding abuse - sexual and otherwise - than are perversions of Power With. Though I would add that feminist reflections on power and sin offer some significant insights into the possible unhealthy dynamics of Power With. Second, I have to confess that when I think about perversions of Power With or empowering, they usually end up being veiled forms of manipulation - Power Over. Furthermore, in considering the corruption of Power Over, we must not lose sight of the fact that, if our description is generally correct, the relation of domination and subordination is not a corruption of this form of power but essential to its very definition.

This is precisely what has to be good if Power Over is to be good. And in the end I think we must say that Power Over is good in some sense because revelation predicates this power in God. Having said that, however, I would add that revelation also makes clear that when Power Over is good, it is placed at the service of and tempered by Power With. As I hope to show, God uses Power Over for the sake of the other. It is always in service of love and the beloved, not in service of self. Or, to be more precise, it is in serving the beloved that God serves Godself. Thus while both powers are necessary for understanding the power of God, they are not equal. In the divine economy Power Over is clearly subordinate to Power With.

Let me substantiate that assertion with a brief review of the character of God and God's power as it is revealed in the biblical narrative. My assumption here is that the basic story and images are well-known, at least to this group, so I

will simply highlight a few particularly revealing episodes. The first and foundational manifestation of God's Power Over is creation, particularly as formulated in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. God speaks, and all that is comes into being reflecting the will and the goodness of God. God's power here is absolute. The creation is effortless. There are no challenges, threats, or obstacles to God's power. The word of God is law everywhere. This is power - Power Over. This is God as Lord and ruler. Significantly, God makes human creatures in the image and likeness of God and gives us a share in this lordship, in this Power Over: "Then God said, 'Let us make (humans) in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air; and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'" (Gen 1:26).

While this is a clear reference to God's Power Over; it is also an affirmation of God's Power With, of em- powering others. In creating humans, God empowers us by giving us life and by sharing dominion with us. There is no evidence that God sees this as a competitive relationship or that God is trying to control or coerce us. The empowering quality of God's power here is especially evident in the difference between the Genesis account of the creation of human beings and the Babylonian account in the *Enuma Elish* wherein humans are made to be servants or slaves of the gods, doing work in the temple none of the gods wants to do.

A second foundational example of God's Power Over is in the establishment of the covenants with Noah, Abraham and, most definitively, with Moses and the people of Israel at Sinai. Biblical scholars tell us that the model for this covenant relationship is the suzerainty treaty of the ancient Near East. In this treaty a superior party enters into a relationship with an inferior. The superior (suzerain) has power over the lesser party (vassal) and could conquer it if it so chose; but instead it decides to enter into this treaty relationship. Thus the structure as well as the content of the covenant manifest God's power over us and show the expectation of submission and obedience by us to God as Lord. Together the doctrines of creation and covenant are the foundation of the biblical understanding of God and of our relation to God. Central to both and hence central to the biblical vision of God is the claim of God's power over the world and over us as Lord. This is why I think we must say that Power Over is an essential characteristic of the God who is revealed in Scripture. If we say that Power Over is inherently bad, we must say that God is bad, or we create a God different than that in Scripture.

However; in the covenant as in the creation there is an element of empowerment. God does not enslave the Israelites but chooses them for a special relation. Because of the covenant relation going back to Abraham, Israel is God's chosen people. But chosen for what? Clearly there is a promise in the relation that God's chosen people will share in the power of God over

the world; that we are chosen for dominion and sovereignty. But there is also the possibility that we are called to share in God's Power With, God's empowering relation to the world. History will show that we tend to act as if we are called to sovereignty. Subsequent revelation suggests that we are called to service not to sovereignty.

The connection between God's power and our power is particularly evident in the history of the monarchy in Israel. The king is in some sense a representative of God on earth with the power to rule over others and the world. From the start the biblical texts show an ambivalence toward the monarchy. When the people first ask Samuel for a king like the other nations, he is reluctant, observing, as per God's own teaching, that in adopting a king they are moving away from their reliance on God as their king (I Samuel 8 :1 2). And yet, God also tells Samuel that if the people persist in their desire for a king despite their warnings, he is to anoint a king - Saul. Thus we see both God's uneasiness with the idea of a monarch and that God has chosen the king, instructed Samuel to anoint him, and sent the Spirit of the Lord upon him. Though God is sovereign and sees the desire for an earthly king as an act of bad faith, God also empowers the people to have what they want even though it is a bad idea.

Along with the monarchy, prophecy arises within Israel. One of the primary tasks of the prophet seems to be to remind the monarch of the covenant. Prophets frequently chastise the king and the people for forgetting God and the covenant and for failing to care for the poor and weak in the kingdom. Again the message is that Power Over needs to be used to serve Power With, to empower others, not disempower them, to liberate not to enslave. As the monarchy and the kingdom begin to disintegrate, the promise of a messiah who will re-establish the kingdom as God's kingdom is heard with increasing frequency. Late in this prophetic tradition there also emerges the idea of the suffering servant of God, which will be so important to the Christian understanding of God's power in Christ.

Finally, the teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth bring the interplay of these two senses of God's power to a head -at least for Christians. Christianity proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah but also that he is both more and less than the Messiah we expected to get. More in that he is the Son of the living God, Emmanuel, God with us. Less in that we - not just Jews, not just people of the first century, but all of us - want the Messiah to be a king like David - or Rambo or Superman - who would overpower our enemies, lead us to grand victories and restore once and for all the kingdom of God to its right ful place of sovereignty in the world. Through this king and kingdom God will rule the world, and we will be God's viceroys. We want to share in the power of God over others and the world. As God's chosen people we expect to be chosen for sovereignty. Instead of all this, of course, we get a Messiah who

suffers and dies an ignominious death on the cross. And we are called to follow this king. Yet to the end there is ambivalence, for the Christian claim is that the one on the cross is none other than the Lord God, creator and sustainer of all that is, seen and unseen. The one on the cross is the one who healed the sick, drove out demons, and calmed the storm. Clearly, power over nature and the forces of evil. But at the center; the cross. Always the cross. It shows the limits of the model of Power Over. What is clear here and throughout the grand story of God's dealings with the world is that this Power Over is always in service of others, always directed to empowering others, not disempowering them. It is power in service of love. The kingdom of God is to be such a kingdom of love, service, and empowerment. This is the power of God at work in the world. This is the power of God we are called to imitate and share. But this is not the power we want. Like Peter, we do not want the Messiah, the son of God no less, to suffer and die. Surely it is God's will that the chosen ones share God's power as Lord and ruler over others and nature.

And so we come to a fundamental theological question: If it is the case, as I have argued, that the power of God as revealed in Scripture manifests both Power Over and Power With and that both are needed to understand God properly, how can we argue that we are to be like God in the sense of Power With and not in the sense of Power Over? For Christians, the answer lies in the fact that what we are to imitate in God is given in Christ. There we see kenotic self-emptying in the incarnation, we see a life of lowliness and service in which his teachings and actions empowered others, we see one who suffered and died on the cross so that others might live. Finally, we see the resurrection, the dramatic demonstration by God that - all appearances in this world to the contrary - what endures is precisely the power of love and service, the power to empower and give life, the power of Christ. It endures finally because it is a participation in the eternal power of God.

This then is what we are to imitate. This is how we are to become God-like. To seek to be like God as Lord, to exercise that divine power over creation and over others, is idolatry. Sadly, our history as individuals and as institutions is one of repeated idolatry. The drive for power over others and over the world (*libido dominandi*) is strong and persistent. Perhaps this, not sex, is the real energy of original sin. As we attempt to wield this Power Over it rapidly gets out of control, becoming corrupted into the power to coerce, to disempower others, the ultimate manifestation of which is the power to abuse, the power to rape and to kill.<sup>3</sup> But this is clearly not God's power. For God, even God as Lord, the defining power is the power to give life - not take it - and to make this life free. This is the ultimate empowerment.

While this call to imitate God's life-giving power, the power to work with and empower others, is addressed to all the baptized, it applies in a particular way to those who occupy positions of power in the Church, such as the clergy. This

is especially so when those positions are explained - as they are in the Catholic Church - as a participation in or extension of the power of God in Christ. In such a situation it is critical that we properly understand the power of God. The misunderstanding and abuse of this power is related to the abuse of others, including but not limited to sexual abuse. If it is true that sexual abuse is about power and not about sex, we need to try to identify pathologies of power; which may not yet have become manifest in sexual relations. While significantly different in all sorts of important ways, the dramatic, incomparably tragic cases of sexual abuse by clergy may best be understood on a continuum with other instances of abuse by clergy - including verbal abuse. I hear countless stories of staff people and volunteers who have been verbally abused by clergy This too is about power.

Thus while we must continue to look for signs of dysfunctional or unhealthy sexual relations or attitudes to help identify potential abusers, we also need to take on the power issues. This means serious engagement with structures of power; with the way we institutionalize power in the Church. Does this system operate with and model healthy relations of power; or does it model unhealthy relations of power? To what extent does our clergy formation instill or perpetuate an understanding of power as Power Over; an understanding in which one measures the extent of one's power and worth by the extent to which one can get others to submit to one's will? This clearly is not how God exercises power - not even as Lord. Theologically, then, we as the Church need to ask at some point whether our power relations - personal and institutional - make present sacramentally the power of God, the power of God's kingdom, or do we only manifest the power of the world and its kingdom (one of the temptations of Christ)?

This I would think is the sort of systemic issue ISTI is designed to address. It is clear to me - as I hope it is to you- that it will take a great deal of courage to do this. It will take courage, first of all to see the problem. Then it will take courage to act on what we see. WC

Footnotes:

1. While I am a theologian and not a social scientist, I do know that this distinction parallels distinctions drawn in more social scientific analyses of power. I would be naive to deny any influence of that analysis here. However, my aim here is to reflect theologically on the power of God as presented in Scripture and the Tradition. I might note too that I tried for a while to find different terms to make this distinction, like "force" and "power," but meeting with no success, I decided that I like prepositions and prepositional distinctions because the grammatical function of prepositions is to indicate relationality. The different kind and quality of relationship is precisely the difference between these two types of power.

- 2.(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) 37.

3. After all, isn't that how we measure the power of nations - their ability to coerce and to kill, if a nation can do little of either, it is not considered very powerful.