

Respecting Authority: Fraternal Dialogue and the Reliable Witness

David Pence MD

The *docsociety* is a group of Catholic men engaged in a personal dialogue of fraternal correction with priests and chancery officials seeking repentance, resignation and reform. Good men have advised us not to “expose” the vicar general and priests who knowingly allow the homosexual and feminist agenda to be taught and practiced in our parishes and schools. They say that the Catholic Church is built on authority and we should obey legitimate authority. We should not add to the culture of rebellion and disobedience initiated by Lucifer, ratified by our first parents and only later corrected by the obedience of Abraham, Mary and Jesus. Catholics do not need more “protesters”. We need more obedience. Our friends raise a serious concern.

The limits of authority

Let us be clear from the beginning. The authority of bishops and priests is real **because it is limited**. If a priest asks you to do some foul act, you don't have to obey. That is what a lot of the

abuse scandal is about—the use of an office to satisfy the twisted individual desire of the officeholder. This is the classical definition of tyranny—a ruler seeks his own benefit rather than the common good. This understanding forms the very limited basis for a Christian defense of revolution and regicide. We advocate neither. The abuse scandal requires that we begin this discussion defining when we have to say “no” to Father. When priests step outside communion with the universal church and use their collars to teach their own religion then we owe them in charity and justice a firm and corrective dialogue. For priests or laymen to ignore such men is spiritual sloth not charity. Every man’s office is exercised in consonance with the authority handed over by Christ to the teaching Church. We are not Unitarians. Catholicism is a team sport and when a man wearing our uniform jumps “off side” we are all penalized. He jumps too often, we can pull him from the field of combat.

When men transgress Church teaching they cannot claim our obedience nor mandate our silence. Defining and correcting historical and modern abuses of office help clarify the real nature of authority in the priesthood, episcopacy and the Petrine office. This is crucial for both clergy reform and the movement toward Church unity. When our Protestant brothers see bishops with no authority to correct heresy but individual priests free to play the

tyrant then the Catholic charism of priesthood and apostolic authority becomes unintelligible. We owe it to them and Christ to reverse this inversion.

The reassertion of authority

We agree with our friends about respecting authority. That is the paradox of our reform movement. All the unwarranted suffering of the innocents caused by this terrible pollution of the priesthood will be redeemed by a **reassertion** of legitimate episcopal and priestly authority. Priestly authority is strongest where it is most closely tied to the message of the gospel, the actions of the sacraments and the practice of the virtues. The *docsociety* differs from many victim and “reform” groups in our advocacy of a strengthened clerical authority to reform clerical abuse. It is wholly understandable that victims’ groups who were betrayed by authority might wage a war on authority. That is the opposite of our strategy. Our group is named after Dan O’Connell(doc) whom we see as a hero and a martyr but not a victim. He is a protecting father not a victimized teen. He is like the men of the flight 93 who went to their deaths bringing down a terrorist group. Dan O’Connell and the detectives who completed his work brought down a predator who no longer has a lifetime to

do his evil. Stopping that predator was not victimization-- it was heroic. It was an act of authority.

We seek to strengthen the fatherly protective authority of diocesan officials over renegade priests. We criticize by name, face to face, and in the public forum, individuals who have abused the priesthood or neglected to act in the curial offices of the diocesan church. We ask for no change in Catholic teaching. We call for men in sin and dissent to repent or leave. We call for good men to have courage. We are highly unsophisticated. We seek no institutional reform-we seek to change the hearts of men. We seek priestly brotherhood and fatherhood where now we find cliques.

The corruption of the priesthood will eventually be cleansed by the institutional exercise of Episcopal authority. We see our work as creating a gravitational center of fraternal communion from which faithful priests and bishops might gather strength to attack the deep corruption of the cliques who hold so much of our church property, institutions, and offices.

The miracle of Dialogue, the necessity of Debate

We are not afraid of debate. A lack of **open** debate about these issues in Catholic universities has fed the covert culture of deception. There is a contradictory divide among priests about the meaning of sexuality. Yet, when have two opposing spokesmen joined this battle in words? It is a great failure of all (“conservative” and “liberal”) Catholic educators that no great debate has occurred. There is truth and men can understand it. Any biblical personalist theory of Catholic communion demands that deep disagreements are encountered in person. There really is a miracle in dialogue and the miracle is not compromise but conversion. Catholic universities, the diocesan priest councils, and the bishops’ conference are collegial structures meant for men to engage one another in communion and fraternal correction. A major principle of our group it is to prod men-laymen, priests, and bishops to engage one another. Brotherhood is impossible without truthful dialogue. We are not seeking areas of agreement—we are seeking to resolve our disagreements. We do not seek common ground. We seek argument.

*The Authority of the Priesthood, the Tyranny
of the Renegade*

The authority of the priesthood is grounded in the sacramental acts and the preaching of the Gospel. The ability to forgive sins, to celebrate the Mass, and to preach the Gospel is no little authority. All sorts of other proclamations about abortion laws, marriage amendments, tax rates and social services for the poor are less authoritative than the central message of the gospel and the sacramental life of the church.

There is a deep personal authority that a bishop, pope and priest can exercise as a spiritual father. Sacramental authority does not depend on the priest's state of grace. His personal authority, however, rises only to the extent he is in personal communion with Christ, Peter and the great tradition.

We do not seek to diminish the authority of priestly or diocesan offices. We do not seek to diminish the personal charisma of the priest in a state of grace. We call for new men to strengthen the offices. These new men will use authority in communion with Christ and Peter to cleanse the priesthood so it can reliably witness to the world that the tomb was really empty and He has come to bring us eternal life. Our rule is that we will criticize individuals

but we will not criticize the Church or the structure of her offices. The inverse of this rule has become all too common.

Individual priests and bishops do not always stand in consonance with Christ, Catholic tradition, or even common sense. No Catholic theory of authority and no honest reading of history assures otherwise. It is a despot's notion that respect for authority means never criticizing the king's person.

Renegade priests have "absolved" people in irregular marriages and homosexual relationships from obeying the laws of the church. They have virtually abolished personal confession. These priests have built considerable followings and have no doubt done many real acts of kindness as well as offered the true gifts of sacramental ministry. All in all, they are pretty amazing—they annul marriages, they repeal human nature, they hand wave the Trinity and wink at the "physical resuscitation" of the Resurrection. They act in their fiefdom parishes as bishop, sex-change surgeon, marriage tribunal, and Council of Nicea. What a tyrant indeed is "Father Bob". He would be a hard act to follow, even for the Cure d'Ars—especially for the Cure d'Ars.

It is all done of course with the Catholic label because if Bob breaks away and sets up a storefront his enchanting charisma will somehow fade. He really needs that collar he so seldom wears. And when someone slips and call him "father"—they both smile and

acknowledge whose treasure house is really being plundered. To use the king's offices to build a personal web of friends and indebtedness was recognized by Christ as a form of worldly wisdom. This inversion of priestly authority for the petty tyranny of a local well heeled congregation and "empowered staff" presents a welcoming public face. It also created the culture of deceit expressed by that other face ---of the leering liar who violated the teen age boy.

***The Lesson of Martyrdom: Evangelization and the
Reliable Witness.***

The Gospel is not a mathematical proof. Translating the sacred message depends on our reliability as witnesses. The beauty of our worship, the charity in our hospitals, the intellectual accomplishments of our schools are living signposts to the world that our Communion has access to the truth, beauty and goodness who is God among us. It is the action of the Trinity which brings men to Christ but our human role is to allow the face of Christ to be seen, his healing hand to be felt, and his illuminating mind to be known. We live in an extraordinary time ripe for evangelization
The *docsociety* seeks to amplify the authority of the church by

restoring the reliability of her witnesses. Only then can we turn outward again to fulfill the great commission.

The most eloquent of all Christian witness is not right doctrine or good service but the sacrifice of the martyrs. Dan O'Connell did not seek to be a martyr. Simply by being a brave and decent man, he was an eloquent witness to the mandate of the beatitudes. He was a peacemaker protecting the weak. He thirsted after justice. For this, he was murdered. Inspired by his witness, we too will expose the Prince of Lies so the Vine may be pruned and flourish anew.