

Renewal of Ordination vows 'Authority'

People puzzled about the authority with which Jesus taught. They were astounded by his wisdom and the deeds of power he performed. But confronted by offense and unbelief, Jesus withdraws and withholds power and authority. Authority is a mysterious thing. We can't fulfil our ministries without authority, but poorly exercised it can cause enormous harm and grief.

Celia Hahn explored authority in an Alban Institute study. One woman in the study said –

I'd get on trains and they [people] would tell me their life stories, and I'd get on buses and they would tell me their life stories, and I would sit in my mother's [living] room and they would tell me about themselves. As I went on ... I began to be open to the possibility that if people were prepared to trust me with themselves, maybe there was some gift I had; maybe people felt in some way safe in telling me things. I regarded that as a sort of sacred trust, but also as a certain authority to take up my ministry (Hahn, 1994, 9).

Authority is within us in some way as a kind of gift and the presence of that authority dawns on us only gradually.

In childhood, getting the message that 'You are OK' and that 'You can do it' are the beginnings a sense of inner authority. Over time that inner sense deepens until it's recognized by others and, later, intentionally, deliberately taken up.

We can tend to associate authority with the positions we hold. But it's more complex than that. It's also true that we ended up in those positions because we were seen as having some kind of authority. It's not simply the case that you have authority because you are ordained. It's also true that you were ordained because you were seen as having authority.

In the Luke's gospel, as a twelve year old boy, Jesus surprises the teachers with his understanding (Luke 2. 41-47). Even as a twelve year old, Jesus was beginning to show the signs of what would come later. Others are beginning to see in him an inner authority and to wonder where it came from.

As an adult Jesus surprises people because he taught with authority, unlike the scribes (Mark 1.21-22, Luke 20.1-2).

Our own dawning sense of authority grows when other people recognize something in us and respond to it. In that sense, others give us authority and we receive it.

That becomes quite explicit at the end of Matthew's gospel where Jesus says 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' And then the disciples and apostles receive authority from Jesus: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you' (Mat 28.18-20). In turn, as the story unfolds the disciples and apostles invite others to receive that authority too.

Authority is to do with a sense of an inner reality, it is given by others; and it is received as a gift. It is deliberately taken up. All those aspects are true.

They become even clearer on those sad occasions where someone tries to exercise authority and one of those elements is missing. If there's no inner authenticity or if others don't recognize a person's authority, then it usually makes for trouble. One parish priest in Celia Hahn's research said

When I hear my colleagues who are in trouble with their congregations start talking about *their authority as the Priest and the Rector*, I know they are in trouble (Hahn, 1994, 7).

All these dimensions of authority are explicitly present in our ordination services.

At the beginning of the public examination of ordinands, the bishop asks 'Do you believe that you are truly called to this order and ministry ...' Or as the old rite said 'Do you think in your heart that you are truly called ...' (AAPB, 1978, 611). The bishop is asking whether the candidates sense that inner reality of authority.

Then at the laying on of hands the bishop prays 'Send down the Holy Spirit upon your servant ...' (APBA, 1999, 796) or in the older form 'Receive the Holy Spirit for the office and work of a priest...' (AAPB, 1978, 614). Authority is given (by God) and received.

And as the bishop delivers the bible to the newly ordained he says 'Take authority to preach the word of God and to minister the holy sacraments ...' APBA, 1999, 797). Authority is taken up.

Are you truly called in your heart ... 'Receive the Holy Spirit...' 'Take authority ...'

Clergy can point to the moment they were ordained as the objective authoritative moment, as it were. Although the awakening sense of the inner reality of authority and the journey of receiving and taking up authority have been going on for years, the laying on of hands itself is the moment at which all this comes to sacramental focus and institutional reality.

How was it for you? What did the journey of growing in authority look like for you? From the first inklings of inner authority, to receiving that authority as others recognize it, to the moment when authority was formally bestowed on you in ordination, to the occasions in your ministry when you explicitly and deliberately step forward and take up authority, make decisions and accept responsibility?

How do you exercise authority most creatively and productively? When do you get into trouble?

Celia Hahn proposes a developmental framework for understanding authority that can help make sense of our experiences – good and bad..

Receptive authority is the authority that others have over us or that we receive ready-made as it were in a given role. We are passive. It comes to us rather than being shaped by us. It's very important in the lives of young children and for those who are dependent in their later years. But it's also important for others. Jesus said 'Unless you become like a child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven'. And prayer is all about receiving from God, being open to what God wants to give. So being passive, being receptive has an important place throughout our lives.

But it can be overdone. If we are only ever passive eventually something will happen that jars our own deep convictions and remaining passive means we betray ourselves. If we never rock the boat because we're frightened of upsetting others then we undermine ourselves and probably rage beneath the surface.

So most people grow into a second style authority which is more active, more self-directed, more autonomous. There's a whiff of protest about it; a preparedness to stand up and be counted. One participant in Hahn's study described the shift like this:

People will come to me out of a committee meeting and ... it's clear to me what they're saying is 'I don't want to have to say this to such-and-such a person; would you do it?' And I will not get in the middle of that sort of thing. I'll help them to see that that's a problem they're having. But they've accepted responsibility for this task and it's not going to kill them to exercise it (Hahn, 1994, 19).

Autonomous authority means having the courage to take decisions that might be unpopular, so it can lead to a kind of loneliness. Taken too far it can romanticise loneliness and lead to a belief that you're the lone ranger. That's destructive because a lone ranger can never allow him/herself to become fully part of the group. Having rescued the town, at sunset he's always riding off into the distance alone.

So this kind of courageous, heroic isolation isn't the end of the journey. Mature authority is about engagement, not isolation.

The third style Hahn calls assertive authority. That involves remaining engaged and active despite a degree of loneliness that comes with tough decisions and responsibility. Assertive authority is taking initiatives to make a difference; accepting responsibility to make things happen.

Its shadow side is controlling or dominating others; needing to call all the shots. Going too far with 'Me' and not allowing enough room for the 'Me' of others. Trying to control everything and everyone is a recipe for overload, resentment and burnout.

The final style Hahn calls integrated authority, which she says is a paradox. It involves self-assertion and it leaves room for others to assert themselves as well. It can feel all wrong; like the hard won journey to assertiveness is being surrendered. It can feel like you're losing something. It involves re-embracing reception and passivity and the authority of others. But this time it happens in a new key.

The paradox involves both living out of one's own being, the centre of one's own life, so self expression, and at the same time self-emptying.

You see this paradox in Jesus' life. He clearly lived out of his own inner being, secure in his own self. 'He taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes' (Mat 7.29). And rather than teach in the conventional Jewish way by citing what the authorities before him had said, Jesus would say, 'You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ...' (Mat 5.27-28). Plenty of self-assertion there.

But at the same time 'he did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' (Phil 2.6-7).

This paradox rings through the passion. The very word passion means that things were done to Jesus, that he was passive as he was betrayed, unjustly condemned, mocked, spat on, tortured and killed. Yet John's Gospel has Jesus saying, '... I lay down my own life in order to take it up again. No one

takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and power to take it up again' (John 10.17-18).

The paradox of integrated authority is that it expresses powerfully the centre of our own being, but at the same time we are not full of ourselves and make space in our hearts for the other.

Integrated authority includes, integrates, all the other styles. It is passive and receptive, it is self-assertive, and it is self-emptying. 'Either/or has become both/and; what had appeared to be opposites' Hahn (1994, 33) says, 'no longer stand in painful contradiction'.

Authority is not about getting your own way. It's not control. In fact this authority can be exercised when you are definitely not in control. People who visited Nelson Mandela in prison noticed –
a curious authority that the prisoner seemed to exert over his warders. When they escorted him, he set the pace. One visiting lawyer remembered how Mandela marched briskly into the visiting room at the prison accompanied by four warders one day and said, 'George, I'd like you to meet my guard of honour.' He then courteously introduced the warders. (cited in Hahn, 1994, 11).

'Do you believe that you are truly called to this order and ministry ...'
'Do you think in your heart that you are truly called ...' (AAPB, 1978, 611).

'Receive the Holy Spirit for the office and work of a deacon, of a priest...'
(AAPB, 1978, 614).

'Take authority to preach the word of God and to minister the holy sacraments ...' APBA, 1999, 797).

Are you truly called in your heart ... 'Receive the Holy Spirit...' 'Take authority ...'

Hahn, Celia Allison

1994 Growing in authority Relinquishing Control: A new approach to faithful leadership. The Alban Institute.