**MATERCARE INTERNATIONAL**

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**AUTHORITY**

**Introduction**

It has been a long hard year in the Church all over the world. The publication of the details and scale of sexual abuse and the cover ups associated with it are unprecedented to my knowledge. Presumably most people feel sad at the events, and wonder how things can be put right again. We must surely go back to basics, the basics of the faith that sustain us.

**Getting to know Christ**

In the first chapter of St.John’s Gospel the first apostles were introduced to Jesus. Peter was introduced to him by his brother Andrew. The introduction was accompanied by the Lord’s invitation: ‘Come and see’. Nathaniel was introduced to Jesus by Philip who opposed his scepticism that nothing good could come from Nazareth with ‘Come and see’. This is the way the very first disciples came to know Jesus (in St. John’s account). They got to know him by being with him. But why did they accept the invitation? What was it about Jesus that attracted them? The gospels are written precisely to answer that question. They show us how the first group came to be formed around Jesus at his invitation. That he chose twelve would have registered with them as very significant. Their call was individual and it was also communal. Do you love me more than these others do (Jn 21:15)? Jesus posed this question to Peter after the resurrection; it was clear that the others loved Jesus too. Why did they love him?

**His authority**

It is striking that in all the gospels the apostles followed him immediately. It would give the impression that they followed him without knowing who he was. Yet we can hardly accept that. After all the people who refused to follow him knew who he was, they knew his family, and Nathaniel obligingly provided a good reason for not following him, indicating that Nazareth was altogether too insignificant for such an important person to be associated with it. Come and see involved getting to know him personally, to listen to his teaching and witness his amazing deeds. Ultimately they recognized his unique relationship with the God they already believed in. And they would come to participate in the authority that was uniquely his.

**Questions of Authority**

The main issue between the Jews and Jesus was his authoritative status. What claims did he make and how could he establish them? All our Gospels answer the question: he claimed or accepted the claim to be the Messiah, God’s Son, and the Prophet. To make sense of his position meant seeing him against the Old Testament expectations of God’s final intervention in history. The world had been made for a purpose, Israel was fundamental in this purpose, and its institutions were fundamental in the realization of these purposes. In this context Jesus made his claims. And in this context the Jews refused them. Was there any way they could have been made to accept them? Seemingly not, for they claimed he was blaspheming, that he was possessed by a devil, that he was a false prophet. They claimed the resurrection was a fraud (Mt 28:15). And ultimately the Christian faith was based on non-substantiated claims.

**Did he found a Church?**

This has been much disputed. Many would say that he did not directly found the church. Rather he founded it indirectly. He appointed a symbolic number of apostles to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. After his death and resurrection these reconvened and thus the Church was launched. But was it hierarchically organized? The answer to this is again disputed. Some say it was never so. Others say that it was part of Jesus’ intention for the community to develop in the way that it actually did. What is the basis of all this? If we take the ‘Scriptures alone’ approach to history then it is hard to see beyond the texts. That would mean that the only structures in place were and should be uniquely contemporaneous with the writers of the N.T. texts. If we notice that Jesus is never recorded as saying that New Testament texts should be written then we can argue from the way that things actually developed- that Scripture is part of the Spirit controlling development of belief. The Church decided to treasure and canonize the Scriptures that Jesus never asked for! Scripture itself is the best attestation of the development of doctrine and of structures in the Church. But who decides all this? Is the historian the only one who will be able to judge the accuracy of the data available for the enquiry?

This is partially true, but the historian is not the guide that guarantees the truth of the whole Christian phenomenon with all its claims and commitments. He has a necessary but not a sufficient role in the research to explain who Jesus was and what he did, and what the Church is and what it represents.

**What is the authority of the Church?**

It cannot be greater than the authority of its Founder. But where does it get its security from? Clearly this is the interest in studying what the Gospels attest about what Jesus said and did, and what was expected of those who accepted him. But have we not argued in a circle? Not at all. Because we are taking the Scriptures to be the privileged written witness to the faith of the primitive Christian communities. The Scriptures never existed without the communities; but the communities did exist without the scriptures, for they pre-existed them. But what did these communities live off if they did not have the Scriptures? The answer must be Revel-ation. Thus follows the question: what is Revelation? The answer must be Jesus himself and what he said and did and was and is. Because of his call, the first fixed community was that of the apostles themselves, experiencing the preaching and teaching and relational life of Jesus himself. Then by their own preaching and teaching and healing further communities were formed. By fidelity to that preaching and teaching and practice the Church has been nourished ever since. So Revelation is not just a set of documents and not a set of activities and commitments. These only bear witness to Revelation. Revelation is God revealing himself in Christ to those who believe in him. So when we say that we accept Revelation we mean: accepting Christ as the one who discloses who God is, and what acceptance of that truth implies for Christian living. Revelation is personal. Scripture and Tradition bear witness to this: they are not Revelation itself. To believe is to have an intimate relationship with Jesus personally, and that is the act of faith and commitment to the Person of Jesus and his will. This is further substantiated by the emphasis expressed in the writings of St. Paul first, and then later by St. John. Paul said that “For me to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21)- his identification with the person of Jesus could not be closer. He was not claiming his authority on the strength of his expertise as a successful pupil of a famous rabbi. He had been encountered by Jesus on the road to Damascus who asked a question: why are you persecuting me? (Acts 9: 4-5). Paul was made to experience that Jesus and the Christian community he was persecuting were the same reality. That was the community he joined, and the reality he identified with.

In the writings of St. John we read: I am the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). And I am the vine, you are the branches (Jn 15:5). No closer identity is possible. Those who believe in Jesus belong to him, and he to them. This is another way of saying that Christianity is a religion of the Person, and only secondarily and analogously of the Book.

**Subsidiary authorities?**

Authorities are part and parcel of the experience of belief through history. A good example here is Saint Paul. He had to fight for his authority in his day. It was a major battle. And it was not fought independently of other contemporary authorities, then and now. I say ‘then’, as is clear on the question of the role of The Law and of Israel’s institutions for Gentile Christians. Paul accepted that the OT was the authority until Jesus came. Then Jesus was the authority. The experience of Damascus was fundamental to this. But Paul saw himself as a second order man in comparison to Jesus on the question of the meaning and the means of salvation. It is clear on seemingly secondary issues, for example on the question of divorce. He spoke of the traditions of the Churches, as on the question of women speaking in the Christian assembly. It was a localized and time conditioned decision by him. He declared that massive freedom involved prudence and charity on delicate issues. But there was no compromise on who Jesus was and his meaning as Revelation for salvation. Paul’s authority ‘now’ has been questioned by those who give him only a sociological reading, as for instance on homosexuality. They say he was just wrong about it, accepting what was Jewish traditional lore and that such is quite irrelevant for those looking for salvation today. But who then decided what the content of faith and morals should be? This is the dividing line between Christians. Was it the dividing line between the believers in the different Christian communities of the New Testament as well?

**St. John’s Gospel**

The Fourth Evangelist is more clear than any other Gospel writer about the divisions in his community. He was not just talking about the traditional opponents of Jesus, the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Romans. In chapter six he speaks about those who were disciples and abandoned Jesus. On three different occasions he speaks of Christian believers being expelled from the synagogue, and deprecates those who negated that witness to Jesus if it meant becoming non-synagogal (7:13-fear of the Jews; 9:22;12:42). Seemingly Christians were still going to the synagogue, and rejoicing in all its social and economic benefits. In chapter 17 he makes a major plea for unity, and clearly paints the contrasting picture of those who belong faithfully to the community and those unfaithfully to ‘the world’ – those outside it who hate it and who symbolize refusal to accept Christ. We also find within the Gospel a certain tension: there is a Beloved Disciple and his faithful adherence to Jesus exists through thick and thin, and Peter who from the first chapter is ‘the rock’, but whose performance in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the High Priests’ Courtyard, and in chapter 21 invited reflection and repentance. The Beloved Disciple is certainly ideal, and why not historical also? (Jesus has entrusted his mother to him, 19:27), but Peter is the Chief Shepherd after Jesus (ch.21) and not the Beloved Disciple. However it is always stressed that the Holy Spirit will lead them into all truth.

When we read the Johannine Epistles then the problem is really acute. The ‘heresy’ seems to be clear in Jn 1:1ff. Some are denying the humanity of Christ, that he came in the flesh. But what do you do with them? First of all why are they saying what they are saying? Is it due to an overemphasis on the divinity in the Gospel? But the entailments are serious. If the body is unimportant then respect for it is unimportant. Rampant immoral sexuality follows. This seems similar to what was happening in Paul’s Corinth. The intellectuals- those with ‘knowledge’ were doubly endowed. They had the Spirit, and intelligence, and doubtless riches and independence- so they could do what they liked. But who could stop them? Paul seemed to think that the community could. But who in the community had the authority? Paul himself had to fight tooth and claw for his own authority over them. It is hard to imagine that anyone else could be successful in excommunicating someone sinning massively against all the canons of propriety. We do not know how it all worked out in Corinth. Now when we go back to the Epistles of Saint John we face the same difficulty. Who is in charge? With what power of self-justification and of sanction? We do not know.

**Communities with structured authorities**

We do not find these in the ‘communities’ that we postulate behind our New Testament writings. For comparative purposes what would we look for? The structure of the synagogue, perhaps. We can postulate that in Mt 18. In this chapter we find recognition of real community problems. The way of dealing with them is typical of the synagogue. But how long did that last? Jewish Christian ‘communities’ disappeared. In the Pastoral Epistles we see the emergence of bishops, and the responsibility they have to preserve the tradition. Ultimately we have only what we have got today, namely what was initiated there. And what is that? As RC’s we have the whole hierarchically constituted system.

**Why did the Church ‘succeed’?**

One of the most intriguing aspects of Christianity is its persistence, and its flourishing. How did it manage to remain essentially the same from the beginning? The same in its faith and its morals? To answer this is to study a lot of history and still not come up with a completely satisfactory historical answer. But the importance of the question is obvious. Christianity is still a major reality in the world today, and all over the world, even if only represented in a tiny way in some places. There is a common faith based on Tradition and in the scripture documents, a common Eucharistic and sacramental worship, and a common way of life, or ethic. The communities with their liturgical and ethical practices following on the NT communities used the OT and NT documents as their own. And the converts kept coming, despite all the sustained opposition directed against believers. Why? Not just because of its clear dogmatic formulae of belief, but also paradoxically because of its morals and community life. Christian morals were a major factor in spreading the Christian faith. This is not just a question of sexual morality- so powerfully questioned today even in the Christian community—but because of its charity. Christianity was never closed in on itself- even when it was illegal? Henry Chadwick writes: “By the year 251 the resources of the church in Rome had grown so much that it was supporting from its common purse not only the bishop, 64 presbyters, 7 deacons, 7 subdeacons, 42 acolytes, and 52 exorcists, readers and doorkeepers, but also more than 1500 widows and needy persons, all of whom were ‘fed by the grace and kindness of the Lord’….But the distribution of alms was not confined only to believers. The assistance provided by the church was impressive in a world where, except for a period during the second century and again during Julian the Apostate’s brief attempt to incorporate the church’s ideals within paganism, the government did not expect to undertake a general programme of social welfare” (*The Early Church*, Penguin Books, 1967, p.58). Christianity was especially successful among women-the sanctity of marriage offered a powerful safeguard to women.

In Cardinal Newman’s *Grammar of Assent* (Image Books, New York, 1955, Introduction E.Gilson, p. 354)we find reviewed the five reasons given by Edward Gibbon for the success of Christianity in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776-1789).* These were 1. The zeal of Christians, 2. Doctrine of a future state, 3. Claim to miraculous power, 4. Their virtues, 5. their ecclesiastical organization. But Newman insists: “They preached Christ; they called on men to believe, hope, and place their affections, in that Deliverer who had come and gone; and the moral instrument by which they persuaded them to do so, was description of the life, character, mission, and power of that Deliverer, a promise of his Presence and Protection here, and of the Vision and Fruition of Him hereafter.” It was personal and communal from start to finish. Believers lived in communities and experienced from the beginning the meaning of reconciliation, overcoming their differences and being at peace with one another.

**Learning from the Past**

What Newman has written here can be very helpful for us. It shows us how knowledge of the past can free us and encourage us. Newman says that it was “The preached Christ” that made all the difference in presenting belief….. It was the Thought of Christ, not a corporate body of doctrine, which inspired that zeal which the historian (Gibbon) so poorly comprehends; and it was the Thought of Christ which gave a life to the promise of that eternity, which without Him would be, in any soul, nothing short of an intolerable burden” (p.358 ff.).

**Jesus the Healer**

Jesus’s preaching and teaching and healing were foundational in his bringing about the Kingdom of God-his mission. St. Luke has presented the picture for us at 4:18: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim relief to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. Here Jesus is citing Is 61:1-2. It is his programme for inaugurating the kingdom of God. The text is telling us that the people in Nazareth who heard him were saying: Physician, heal yourself. Then it is recounted that those who worked miracles, like Elijah and Elishah, did so because there was faith in the hearts of those for whom they worked miracles - faith involving miracles of feeding and healing. Jesus tells his fellow inhabitants of Nazareth that he is like a typical prophet in his own habitat; he will not be able to do anything because they have no faith; they do not accept him as speaking for God. He escapes from them when they try to throw him over the precipice near the town. Then he went to Capernaum, where he preached powerfully, cast out demons from a possessed man, healed the mother in law of Simon, and then healed any and all who were sick by laying hands on them. Demons recognized him as the Son of God. When people tried to reserve him for themselves he said: I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose. The whole programme is thus set out. The kingdom of God is present as Jesus overcomes all forms of alienation, moral, mental and physical, and brings about the order in the world which is consonant with God's will. This is the context in which we find Jesus the Healer- integral to the meaning of The Kingdom of God is among you (Lk 17:21).

**Sin**

In the biblical world sin is apparent everywhere. It is the name given for human beings always getting things wrong, being offensive against others, contrary to the pertaining demands in a religious context. From the beginning of the Biblical narrative right and wrong were distinguished. One knows what is right and one knows what is wrong. What is right has been prescribed by God in the Torah-the Law. It seems to be also that which makes human beings recognize their better selves; it never involves depriving others for the sake of one's own personal profit. The law is articulated in detail and is everywhere operative in the reciprocal relationships that make up life for the people of God. The contravention of law is sin. Sin is both communal and personal. In ancient Israel it always has communal implications even though it may often seem to be just something purely personal, as for example some self-indulgence by a king. The relationship between David and Bathsheba was not just something private between two people; ultimately all the people in Israel were affected by it. Everybody suffered. In questions of suffering it was normal to ask who had sinned; was it the man personally or his parents or ancestors ?(Jn 9:2). A look at Lk 13:1-5 shows how usual the idea was even in the days of Jesus. Despite Jr 31:29ff., and Ez 18:14 the idea of the ancestors being causative of the suffering of their children remained intact. But Jesus, surpassing the famous prophets before him, rejected this idea. People are responsible for their own sins, even if they are not responsible for their own suffering. A man can hardly be blamed for being born blind.Sin therefore is a religious term for stating that something is radically wrong with the world. Indeed there is even a sin of the world that, according to John the Baptist, can be taken away by the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29). This refers to all the wrongs perpetrated by everyone everywhere. With the arrival of the kingdom of God, foreseen in the Old Testament and proclaimed in the New Testament, there is stated and enacted what God wants for the world, and in the world. It is brought to realization in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Clearly the whole life of Jesus culminating in his death on the cross was fundamental in bringing this about. Sin was shown to be, and graphically illustrated, what it really destructively was, through recounting the relationships of everyone with Jesus during his life, passion and death. Why did Jesus suffer like that? Did he have to suffer like that? How did it all unfold and develop?

**The authority of goodness**

To round out our thoughts we see in action the authority of Jesus. He had no institutional authority in earthly terms. But he had charismatic authority, being a prophet, and exercising his powers for goodness, healing, preaching, forgiving, so people followed him; he loved them into goodness. He reflected perfectly the goodness of God as his Son. In a sense he was the perfect expression of the total harmony between charismatic and institutional authority. As such we see how he was experienced in concrete detail, how people related with him. And the Church he founded is supposed to manifest the same features. When it does it is marvellous. When it does not it is in need of reform, and because we are all its sinful members it is always in need of reform. And it always has given to it the power to be renewed from within. That is faith and grace attested amply in history and still with us today: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me… I am with you always even to the end of the world (Mt 28:19-20).

Rev Richard J. Taylor  
Spiritual Advisor, MaterCare International