

Presidential Address

POWER AND PUBLIC PRESENCE IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT, THE CHURCH, AND THE CTSA

INTRODUCTION

You may recall the Grand Academy of Legado, that peculiar center of research created by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. Here great minds worked on such promising projects as softening marble to make pillows and developing a new breed of naked sheep.

When Swift's narrator turns to the political science branch of the Academy, he uncovers several equally harebrained schemes. One would attempt to persuade monarchs to choose their ministers based upon "their Wisdom, Capacity, and Virtue." Another would teach government ministers "to consult the Publick Good."

Swift's art presses the point that we ought not to trust those who wield power. But another work of art, one just a few miles from this place, suggests that those who wield power are frequently unaware of doing so.

There is an exhibit at the Getty Museum here in Los Angeles entitled "Le machine d'argent." Here one can view the exquisite artistry of eighteenth century French silversmiths. The central piece is an elaborate silver serving dish that doubles as a centerpiece for the dining room table. On the cover are three dimensional renditions of carrots and shallots, dead birds and rabbits—the fruits of the lord's estate. The serenity and artistic sensitivity of the piece is dramatic, but there is an eerie silence about the power relations in society that made its creation possible. Neither the silver piece nor likely the noble family that gathered round the table took much note of the power that separated these privileged few from the many servants whose quotidian duty was to deliver the rabbits and shallots to his lordship's table.

The invisibility of power—at least from the perspective of the powerful—is more pervasive than its abuse. Those whose lives are lived in the penumbra of influence created by the power of others are far more likely to be aware of power and to be able to articulate its shades of influence, even when there is little abuse. In my own experience over the years, appearing on panels or working on civic committees with CEOs of a few multinational corporations, I have been more than once surprised to hear chief executives say they really don't have much power. As they see it, most decisions they make are clearly indicated, with external forces often not leaving much room for discretion. A similar thing seems to hold true for

bishops and pastors, most of whom are far more keenly aware of the power of their superiors in their lives than of their own power in the lives of others.

But the invisibility of power occurs not just in large organizations. Parents are far more frequently aware of their love of their children than of their power over them, even though for at least the preschool years, children experience their parents as having a near monopoly on power in their lives while love often comes from multiple sources. And lest we forget, college and university faculty members are far more often aware of their concern for their students than of their power over them, even though students experience our assigning of grades as exercising a power that can keep them from their preferred graduate program or job.

I will not present a theology of power today, for two reasons. The first is that I do not know enough; I believe there is much preliminary work that needs to be done first in just about all the various subfields within theology. The second is that very few theologians would be interested in having a theology of power affect their daily work. My goal today is to persuade you differently. The thesis of this presentation is that if our theology is to adequately understand the human condition and play a part in the transformation of the world in the light of the Gospel, it must attend to the realities of power.

MY EXPERIENCE IN GRIP

My own education in the everyday realities of power has come through involvement in a church-based community organization in central Minnesota. My parish was one of about fifteen that made up the Great River Interfaith Partnership, GRIP, part of the Gamaliel network. Modeled on the Saul Alinsky organizations from the 1960s, the purpose of GRIP is to marshal the influence of ordinary believers to transform their communities for greater justice.

GRIP researched some half dozen different local problems, before taking on two housing issues: discrimination in housing and the shortage of affordable housing. I joined the task force on affordable housing and spent the next three and a half years deeply involved in the world of planning commissions and city councils, seeking allies in the local business community, educating churches, Rotary clubs, and local officials on the problem, and engaging in a long struggle with the powerful local builders' association, which at first would not deign to meet with us and later vigorously opposed our campaign.

As you might guess, there were lots of interesting twists and turns, but the effort eventually led to the creation of a "joint powers agreement" on affordable housing among the five cities that make up the small metro area of St. Cloud, Minnesota (total population of about 100,000). Each city council agreed to ensure that 15% of all new home construction—houses, town homes, and apartments—would be "affordable."¹ We recognized that new construction was never going to

¹Affordable housing is typically defined as requiring no more than 30% of total monthly income of a household. The standard for new owner-occupied housing was that

house the poorest in our communities but enough affordable new homes would leave less-expensive older houses and apartments open for those with lower incomes. And over time this could prevent a phenomenon occurring now in many cities, where lower income workers can't afford to live in the cities where they work.

We're told that ours is the first example in the United States of a group of cities agreeing on a common affordable housing policy.

Today I'd like to focus not on affordable housing but on the power it takes to change a system that generates too little of it. Unlike trying to stop a war or end corruption in Africa, here we had the clear advantage of being able to talk to and even get to know all the decision makers involved. And we did. But we also recognized that the preexisting pattern of relationships—among elected officials, civil servants, developers, builders, realtors, mortgage lenders and a host of others—meant that the heavy hand of inertia rested on the status quo.

Every effective community organization trains its leaders. I attended "week-long training," a set of experiences and workshops designed to improve organizing skills—from leading better meetings to analyzing your opponents' power. In fact, one of the most revealing moments during the week came when the organizers asked the 40 or so of us in the room: "Do you personally want more power?"

The correct answer in community organizing circles is, of course, "yes." Power is how you are going to get the city council to do the right thing. Power is how African Americans brought fruit from the civil rights movement. And for women to sit around and simply wait for men to offer them equality would have been like leaving the runway lights on for Amelia Earhart's return.

But there weren't many yeses in this room full of good Christians. Even those of us who knew where the question was going—and agreed with the direction—had trouble saying the word. Christians are deeply suspicious of power, as it seems to operate so differently from love. Power seems to cut moral corners and run rough shod over people. It might be necessary but how can we *want* to do that? I felt I already knew some things about power, as in an earlier life I had helped run local political campaigns and had, after all, drunk deeply from the well of power when I was dean of an academic faculty. But I was naïve.

There are four aspects of what I have learned from this experience that I would emphasize here.

First, power is based in relationships, and whether you're trying to influence another parishioner to attend a church meeting or a city council member to vote for a housing ordinance, if you have no relation with that person, you are unlikely to change her behavior.

15% be affordable for households making less than 80% of the local median income. The standard for new apartments was affordability for those making less than 60% of the local median income.

Second, there are two kinds of relationships: private and public. While it is bad form to reminding your father-in-law at Thanksgiving dinner of mistakes he's made, a similar recounting of failures of policy is not only moral but may be morally necessary at the city council. In public relationships it is not important whether the other likes me or thinks I'm a fine fellow. This was a difficult thing for me. I recall arriving at one of the local city halls ten minutes before a planning commission meeting was to start and from across the room the commissioner most opposed to our affordable housing campaign literally shouted out my name along with an accusation about something I'd written. After three years in this work, it was a sign of growth that I found I really wasn't bothered by his anger at me. Later, when the affordable housing issue came up on the agenda, this same man started the discussion by declaring in a loud voice that he was *not* opposed to affordable housing. He had gotten the message. He would never like me, but I had changed his position.

Third, powerful groups are realistic: they aim for a big enough change to make the effort worthwhile but not so big that the group's power is insufficient to win. GRIP's aim is to choose issues where the organization will win and thereby increase its power. Following its success on housing, GRIP decided to address racial bias at the police department. African American leaders had long been frustrated in their efforts to get the city of St. Cloud to address racial profiling by the police, but they reported that immediately after GRIP's decision to take on the issue, the mayor and police chief became willing to draft a policy.

This brings us to the fourth element relevant to power: consequentialist thinking. Christians are more comfortable with an ethic of intention—acting so as always to aim for our highest goals. But leadership in any organization, especially a large one, requires seeking the good where perfection is not morally optimal, simply because perfection costs too much. Your regional electric utility has a fleet of trucks, and vehicular accidents, though random, are predictable on average. Spending more money on driver training and safer trucks can reduce injuries and fatalities, but reducing them to zero would be so expensive that only the wealthy could afford electricity. Governments at all levels deal with tradeoffs among competing goals. Christians who think responsibly about the power they wield need to do the same thing—whether in proposals to the city council or in public statements by the CTSA.

POWER IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

A review of Catholic social teaching since Leo XIII shows a remarkable anomaly. Although there is a growing awareness of and appreciation for democracy as a form of government during that 116 year period, there are very few references to democratic power, and almost none to the democratic power of citizens who try to improve their government.

In fact, ignoring instances where power is simply the capacity to do something, the moral connotations of the word "power" in papal encyclicals of all sorts fall into

two categories: good and bad. Good power is exercised by God and by legitimate governments. Nearly all other references to power—whether economic, social, or political—are to bad power, the power of the rich and powerful, who so often take advantage of the poor and weak. The democratic power of citizens' groups is almost never adverted to, though there are some references to the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy without noting how they would make the needed changes. What Michael and Kenneth Himes have termed the "elitist and paternalistic" position of Leo XIII may have carryover even today.²

How is it that the democratic power of citizens' actions has been overlooked? The Catholic church had little positive to say about the French revolution, and played little role in the American. But Catholics played a very large role in the end of communism in Poland and the episcopacy itself got involved in the popular overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines. There are many other examples. How could it be that so fundamental a reality as the democratic power of citizens is so under theorized in Catholic social teaching?

My own guess is that the Church, and Catholic theology more generally, has not understood power with sufficient descriptive accuracy. It is a more pervasive and far more important a part of organizational life than theology has usually recognized.

There is no claim here that theology has completely ignored power. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote extensively about power in the first half of the last century, and the empowerment of the powerless is critical in liberation theology. Power has been addressed to a greater or lesser extent in each of the large systems of thought of Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Alfred North Whitehead, and Paul Tillich. But like Tillich's book, *Love, Power, and Justice*³—and Kyle Pasewark's *A Theology of Power*⁴—these treatments have tended toward the ontological, most often without much analysis of the daily exercise of power that makes organizational life possible. Our own CTSA convention twenty-five years ago focused on the theme of power, investigating in particular various instances of power in ecclesial life.⁵

My focus will be what is called "power-over" rather than "power-to." There is a growing literature on the latter, with Christine Firer Hinze's *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics* a very helpful overview of many of the issues involved.⁶ Donald Dorr has distinguished "dominating power," defined as "power

²Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*, (New York: Paulist Press) 39.

³Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁴Kyle Pasewark, *A Theology of Power: Being Beyond Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁵CTSA Proceedings 37 (1982).

⁶Christine Firer Hinze, *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

over people,” from more humane forms of power.⁷ Other work on the character of power has been done by a multitude of scholars outside theology from left to right.

The paradigm for understanding power I want to employ here, provided by Thomas E. Wartenberg, does not make the distinction between a morally suspect power-over and a more benign power-to, though power can be employed in moral or immoral ways. And as a consequence, I judge, Wartenberg’s analysis provides a perspective on power that better illuminates the daily occurrences of power. It corresponds well with the experience of citizens’ groups trying to change “the system,” and provides insights into the less well recognized power exercised by teachers, administrators, bishops and parents. I make no claim here that this view of power is superior to all others for all purposes. But it is quite insightful, robust to a number of criticisms, and helps to illustrate how theologians might begin to integrate power into their view of the world.

In using the lens of an analysis of power to view a number of phenomena from the classroom to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the CTSA, I do not contend that this lens is adequate to all tasks; employed alone it will give a distorted picture of human life. But this is a shortcoming of all intellectual analyses. Analyzing power is necessary, though not sufficient, for good theology.

A THEORY OF POWER

In his book, *The Forms of Power*, Thomas Wartenberg provides a “field theory” of power.⁸ “It treats an agent’s power over another agent as a field *within* whose effect the subordinate agent acts.”⁹ This differs from theories that focus on power as exhibited in an event¹⁰—as when the city council passes an ordinance—which tends to see power as existing primarily in its exercise. And it also differs from theories of power as a “dispositional property” of the one with power, a capacity of the powerful individual that exists even before it is exercised.

Wartenberg uses the metaphor of a field, based on the notion of a magnetic field, which is the “alteration of the space surrounding the magnet in such a way that the motion of any susceptible object is affected.”¹¹ Similarly, power alters the social space for acting that is occupied by the subordinate.¹² Wartenberg uses Aristotle’s language to say that having power over others means one has caused or controlled the other’s actions somehow and to some degree. Although the control is never absolute, even low levels of power do “cause” others to act differently, to

⁷Donald Dorr, *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power and the Church* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 154.

⁸Thomas E. Wartenberg, *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

⁹Wartenberg, 71.

¹⁰Wartenberg, 71.

¹¹Wartenberg, 74.

¹²Wartenberg, 74.

some degree.¹³ And power operates in a field because it alters the opportunities, the options, faced by those whom power affects. Power makes some things more costly for the subordinate to do. The set of our choices, what Wartenberg calls our “action-environment,” is altered. So the definition of power is this: “a social agent A has power over another agent B if and only if A strategically constrains B’s action-environment.”¹⁴

For example, when you assigned that low grade to an undergraduate student last month, you exercised power. He may find that with the now lower GPA, he can not get into that grad school program he wanted or may be overlooked for that most desired job after college. Creating some healthy student apprehension, of course, is part of the logic of grading. It creates an incentive for more and better student work, and the incentive comes from the power.

Grading also exemplifies the “field” character of power. Most students might hardly notice whether you gave them an A or an F if no one outside your classroom ever took notice. The power you wield in assigning a grade is dependent on those third parties Wartenberg calls “aligned social agents.” In this case, it’s the graduate admissions committees and corporate HR departments that take note of the student’s grades and draw some conclusions from them. You would have little power in the grade if others didn’t notice, which is why many second semester seniors who already have a job or a grad school admission often care less about grades than they previously did. Your power to alter their alternatives is now weaker, even though you’re not doing *anything* different. The same dependence of power on third parties hold true for the most powerful tyrant.

In general, power works because third parties employ some marker in the relation of A to B (in this case, grades given) as a criterion for B’s access to certain things B wants (a job or a grad school admission) but that the third parties control.

To take another example, consider the discussions over the *mandatum*. The power that U.S. bishops traditionally had over theologians depended on a field of aligned social agents, typically diocesan bishops or religious superiors who were willing to reassign priest theologians deemed unorthodox. This alignment has little impact on the available options of lay theologians, a new phenomenon on a large scale. The *mandatum* is a marker, a judgment by bishop A of theologian B, but if no one else noticed, this alone would not generate power. Of course, the Holy See pressed for the *mandatum* with the same awareness held by the theologians who

¹³A note on “cause”: Even the hurricane that floods city A isn’t the only cause for the flooding. Why? The same hurricane wouldn’t have flooded city B for a number of reasons. We focus on the “intervening” event as the cause but it is really only a new cause interacting with many preexistent causes. So causality is always a matter of degree.

¹⁴Wartenberg, 85. If I had more time, I would explain why I’d drop the word “strategically” from this definition, since many times power is exercised without any decision to affect those it does. The unintended negative effects of transnational corporations would be a case in point, and the ignorance about power in business and economics circles is a real problem.

resisted it: the day might come when aligned third parties—mainly the universities—looked to the *mandatum* as a signal of appropriateness in hiring.

Let me remind you that in such examples I am not claiming that power is the only reality at play. The point is that power is present and functions through a field of influence, not simply from A to B.

Wartenberg identifies three types of power: force, coercion, and influence.

Force is a physical intervention by A to prevent B from doing something.¹⁵ Force prevents action by B but cannot *make* B do anything. It closes off options and can even end in death, but there is still a choice, even if under great duress.

Force is not by nature immoral. Parents prevent their children from walking into the street. Police keep citizens back from a crime scene. And you might physically restrain an hysterical neighbor to prevent her from reentering her burning house to search for a missing child. We need a moral analysis to evaluate the morality of power as force

Coercion is the second form of power. It occurs when a social agent A is able to affect B significantly, threatens to do so unless B acts in a certain way, and B, because of the threat, then decides to alter what he would otherwise do.¹⁶

Two clarifications are needed here. First, if B does not accede to A's threat, there is no coercion. Some usages identify coercion with the threat itself (and if you prefer, you could use another word), but I agree with Wartenberg that it is most useful to distinguish the threat from coercion. Coercion is better defined as the effect of a successful threat.

Second, coercion is not by nature immoral. Some define coercion as always wrong, the effect of an *immoral* threat. But it's better to name the phenomenon of threat and response as coercion, and then distinguish between good and bad coercion. If we don't, we will more likely misunderstand the dynamics of morally appropriate threat. Even the best parents coerce their children, explaining that they must do this or must not that, under penalty of some consequence. Every syllabus you hand out contains an implicit threat that if the student doesn't do X, you will assign a failing grade (and that's a form of coercion even when we employ the prevailing euphemism that the student "will *earn* a failing grade"). Elizabeth Farians got to be the first woman to attend the CTSA banquet in part because of coercion, as she threatened the priest blocking the door that she'd return with a news reporter. And each time I decide to drive no more than five miles per hour over the speed limit when I would prefer a higher speed, I have been coerced, for the common good.

Coercion is part of the software of organizations, part of the "operating system" that allows daily life to boot up. And as such, coercion can be good or bad; we need a careful analysis to evaluate the morality of any instance of coercive power.

¹⁵Wartenberg, 93-96.

¹⁶Wartenberg, 96.

Wartenberg observes that, like force, coercion can't *make* anyone do anything. It relies on the subordinate's own decisions to act as the dominant agent wants.¹⁷ Though never named this bluntly, coercion is sometimes employed in community organizing, as when there's an explicit statement to a city council member that without support for our effort, he or she will be "held accountable" in the next election. The council member still gets to decide whether or not to vote with us. Similarly, Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen chose to alter various diocesan practices after Roman authorities in 1985 appointed Donald Wuerl to be an auxiliary bishop with highly unusual final authority in several areas. Hunthausen could have refused to change anything, but the threat of further penalty led to his decision to change.

But, Wartenberg adds, like force, coercion creates resistance: those subject to threat from power seek ways to resist that power of the dominant agent to alter the set of alternatives they face. Archbishop Hunthausen, with the assistance of other members of the U.S. hierarchy, eventually worked out a compromise with Rome in 1986 in which Bishop Wuerl resigned, Hunthausen's full authority was reinstated, and Bishop Thomas Murphy was named coadjutor.

Consider an example of resistance from the world of politics. Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein is today sharing power with the Rev. Ian Paisley in Northern Ireland, an unthinkable act of cooperation just a short while ago. One major factor in the IRA's change of position is the resistance of Irish Catholics to the power of the IRA after the brutal 2005 murder of Catholic Robert McCartney by IRA men outside a bar in Belfast. The usual IRA threats to ensure the silence of witnesses met resistance and failed to coerce. Led by McCartney's sisters, many Catholics refused to knuckle under IRA threats any more. The loss of power of the hardliners within the IRA increased the power of those inclined to compromise.

Wartenberg argues that to *prevent* resistance, dominant agents often try to develop misunderstandings among subordinates about whether they're actually being coerced.¹⁸ Those with coercive power try to make it look like persuasion, or claim "not to have any choice in the matter." This is why transparency is so critical for those with power who want to be moral, not just in their goals but in their methods as well. In fact, authentic efforts at persuasion by those in power will be undermined when the subordinate has reason to wonder if the cloak of deception is being wrapped around an immoral coercion. Administrators, whether prime ministers, theology department chairs, or diocesan bishops, who simply expect subordinates to trust them without exhibiting transparency and accountability do not understand the coercive power they wield.

This is one of the reasons why theologians need to acknowledge and study power. Life in all sorts of communities can be more authentically communal if

¹⁷Wartenberg, 101.

¹⁸Wartenberg, 103.

everyone involved acknowledges the exercise of coercive power and applies to that exercise commonly recognized moral standards.

The third type of power is influence, though not all instances of influence are instances of power. As Wartenberg puts it, A influences B when A's *communication* leads B to "alter her assessment of her action-environment in a fundamental way."¹⁹ Influence can occur through persuasion based on rational argument, on personal trust, or on expertise, a combination of argument and trust.

Influence is a kind of power when the information conveyed by A is accompanied by A's alteration of B's action environment. Wartenberg argues that this form of power is more stable than either force or coercion, since B *willingly* does what she does.²⁰ This is the kind of power most often wielded by community organizations and it was a common pattern in GRIP's affordable housing campaign. Two or three of our people would meet with each city council member in the five city area, explaining our proposal, how it would assist lower income families, and how the resale limitations would keep a newer home affordable over time. This was information that almost none of these city leaders already had heard. But in the background of that conversation—and in the foreground when we filled the city council chambers—was the fact of electoral politics. If they voted with us, they could count on our support at the ballot box, if not, they couldn't. And as often happens in the exercise of power, they never knew just how many voting churchgoers (those third party "aligned social agents") would be influenced by GRIP's power, exercised through the identification of allies and opponents of affordable housing. (And if truth be told, we didn't know either.)

And as we've seen, a dominant agent may misrepresent his power as simple persuasion because B is much less likely to resist.²¹ But every one of us who has power over others faces the moral ambiguity of at times wanting to persuade those others without exercising our power. Consider your discussions with a student whose views you disagree with. In spite of your best efforts to remove the power of the grade from this context, your attempts at rational persuasion will always be colored by the power you hold. You may not be aware of it, but the student will be. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has a similar problem. There are a number of sanctions it can employ in disciplining a theologian, and so even efforts simply to identify errors will be perceived as acts of power. Whether it's you or Cardinal Levada, when person A's effort to persuade B is accompanied by A's altering of B's available options, power is being exercised.

This general insight into the inevitable transformation of relationships by the presence of power stands behind the sexual harassment regulations that many universities and states now have in place. It can come as a shock to that new

¹⁹Wartenberg, 105.

²⁰Wartenberg, 110.

²¹Wartenberg, 104.

assistant professor that, because of his power, making a pass at a student of his, even once, can be grounds for dismissal.

One final characteristic of power is worth emphasizing. Power, as Wartenberg puts it, “*exists in relationships*—it has a primary location in the ongoing, habitual ways in which human beings relate to one another.”²² This is similar to Michel Foucault’s concept of “networks” of power.²³ In community organizing, it’s often said that the most powerful person in the city usually has the longest list of phone numbers. Relationality is why power is always dynamic; it changes over time as relations change. In this sense, power is like virtue: it is created by consistent, recurring actions, and slowly atrophies when the activities stop.

This has certainly happened between Church authorities and theologians, as bishops used to have dinner with “their” theologians at the local seminary and now often don’t even know the names of the theologians at the local Catholic college or university. I was reminded of this when after a day of meetings as the representative of the CTSA to Archbishop Pilarczyk’s committee on the *mandatum*, three bishops thanked me for being so reasonable. I replied, “I think you’ll find most theologians are.” It’s much harder to trust people you don’t know.

Avoiding contact with the superior agent is one approach for the subordinate, but this is largely a sophomoric strategy, typically based in faulty presumptions about the nature of power. A key principle of community organization is that you meet for conversations not just with your allies but with your strongest opponents as well. You need to find out how they think about the issues that divide, what matters most to them, and what they would need on their side before they can accept what we’re proposing from ours. You don’t alienate an opponent except in those rare cases when you’re sure it will do more good for the cause than harm.

Organizations whose leaders exercise too little power will slowly wither. Leaders in those situations sometimes overreact, grasping out of insecurity for the more stringent forms of power. Well structured organizations have patterns of power that are predictable and functional for both those who are charged with exercising power and those whose options are limited by it. Power is part of the software of organizational life, of relational life. And ignoring it in any view of human life—especially in a theological view—can only handicap the attempt at understanding and undercut any attempt at transformation. Attempting to understand human life while avoiding any analysis of power is like trying to play ping pong while ignoring a strong crosswind.

²²Wartenberg, 165.

²³See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 95; cited in Wartenberg, 168.

POWER AND THE CTSA

This analysis of power has, I believe, some implications for power and public presence in the CTSA. Ten years ago, Richard John Neuhaus had this to say about our professional society:

[T]he CTSA as an organization has—its claims to the contrary notwithstanding—withdrawn from the community of ecclesial reflection devoted to ever more clearly expressing and transmitting the Catholic faith.²⁴

Similar statements have been made by conservative Roman Catholic leaders after other public CTSA statements before and since. Yet the CTSA boards and members responsible for those statements do not recognize them as any sort of withdrawal from Catholic faith or teaching.

It's true, of course, that outside commentators have often not read our statements carefully and have often attributed to them views not expressed there. But even this is a lesson in power.

It's difficult enough to achieve mutual understanding in a one-to-one conversation. In public relationships, it's much more difficult and it's a big mistake to presume that the other will hear exactly what we intend to say. Whether an organization like the CTSA can influence "public" understanding depends not just on the words we use but on the preexisting institutional relationships—including the electronic and print media—that will interpret our words and in most cases make only some of them public. Most people who learn of a public statement never read it, but gain their understanding of it from third parties. In an era of sound bites and ideological splintering of news sources, it would be naïve for us to craft statements without gauging their public effect.

I would argue that for all the good done by the public statements of the CTSA over the past quarter century, and I include here the 2000 statement on the *mandatum* whose drafting committee I chaired, they have also done us damage—but not because they were erroneous. The problem is that these statements become the public face of the CTSA for nearly everyone who doesn't attend our conventions. Taken together, they present us as individuals who come together as a group primarily to defend ourselves against hierarchical authority. We insiders know this is only a small part of what we're up to. But no group can control its public image completely, and in my opinion we have done too little thinking about this. To intend to influence the public without analyzing the effect of our efforts is like intending to teach without asking what students are learning.

Of course, insights about power also illustrate shortcomings in the work of Church authorities as well. Failing to attend to the dynamics of power, and the concomitant temptations of authorities to disguise the exercise of power as simple persuasion, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has preferred secrecy and

²⁴Richard John Neuhaus, *First Things* 75 (August/September 1997): 74-91.

has publicly renounced the due process guarantees of canon law (canons 1732 ff) out of a mistaken notion that issues of doctrine are so important that the complexities of transparency and due process pose risks to the true faith. But if the CDF were to understand the power it wields, and the quite natural character of suspicion and resistance that typically accompany a subordinate's experience of coercive power, one would conclude that the importance of the issues mean that authorities should be even more careful to exhibit transparency, accountability, and due process in cases of disputes about Catholic doctrine. Thus completely apart from any evaluation of the substance of theological judgments, the recent calls by some European theologians for a revision of processes at the CDF are well founded from the point of view of the analysis of power.

But in addition, I would argue that both we in the CTSA and our leaders in episcopal authority have misunderstood the notion of credibility, which according to the dictionary is not a matter of the strength of one's arguments but of their capacity to elicit belief. As the CTSA statement on the *mandatum* put it, "proclaiming the truth is not the same as proclaiming the truth with credibility."²⁵ If we make a public statement and those who read it aren't persuaded, either of us could be wrong. But if we make a public statement and, because of this, third parties who haven't read the statement learn things about us that are inaccurate and hurtful to us, we need to reevaluate making those kinds of public statements. This does not exonerate those who either inadvertently or malevolently misrepresent what we have clearly said, but only the naïve ignore an ongoing pattern of misinterpretation.

I would provide one simple bit of evidence that occurred last November, when some officers of CTSA and the College Theology Society had our annual dinner with some of the bishops from the Committee on Doctrine. At the suggestion of President-elect Margaret O'Gara, we began with more thorough introductions than usual and also handed out a listing of session titles from our last two conventions. The bishops present got to hear what these theologians are really doing and to see the ordinary work of the CTSA. They seemed authentically appreciative for what they learned and, unlike some past experiences, conversation focused not on our differences but our common dedication to the Church and Catholic theology. No grand transformation of relations happens from a single meeting, but I believe the experience short-circuited the bishops' presumption that what we do in our public statements is what we do at our conventions.

But giving a false impression to outsiders is only one of the two reasons why I believe our public statements have caused us problems.

The second is rooted in the *internal* cost of making them. Put simply, there are a lot of conservative theologians who used to attend the CTSA convention who no longer do. A goodly number are no longer members. I don't believe the problem has

²⁵"Theologians and the *Mandatum*," Address to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Atlanta, Georgia, *Origins* 30/27 (14 December 2000).

been that their papers, when presented, have been panned. Rather, they have no longer felt welcome, largely out of a sense that they are on the margin of a group that too easily pokes fun at Vatican shortcomings and too quickly puts the name of the CTSA on statements conservatives do not endorse.

The CTSA mission statement says our purpose is threefold: to promote studies and research in theology, to relate theological science to current problems, and to foster a more effective theological education. Only a single means is cited: by providing a forum for an exchange of views among theologians and with scholars in other disciplines. The CTSA should be the place where Catholic theologians from all perspectives within the Church come to do their theology. Our church is wracked by divisions caused in part by ideological simplicities—on all sides—that a professional society like ours can challenge and improve. Our church and our world need a broader dialogue *within* the Church than is occurring today. I judge that part of the price of achieving that dialogue is making fewer public statements that defend theologians against ecclesiastical power.

To repeat, I'm not claiming that anything we've said is erroneous or that we should never make public statements. They have had good results along with the unfortunate ones. But I believe the price has been too high compared to what has been gained. This is thoroughly consequentialist thinking, but appropriate for an organization whose public presence is recognized as related to power.

At times, our Church and world need us theologians to be prophetic. My proposal would be to depend on individuals and groups within the CTSA to begin that process, crafting statements and inviting others to sign. The CTSA, for its part, would be a place for dialogue where every theologian and all ideological gradations of Catholic theology are respected, and where the majority does not employ the mechanics of majoritarian democracy in a way that undercuts the *mission* of the organization by producing public statements that the minority will find offensive. I wish we weren't facing this trade-off, but I am convinced we are.

This is even more important now when so many bishops don't have personal relationships with theologians in their dioceses and they form their view of us based on our public statements, frequently interpreted for them by their chosen advisors, sometimes conservative theologians who don't attend our conventions. Evidence for the importance of personal contact arose in how I was asked to address the general assembly of the US bishops on the *mandatum* in November of 2000. My hope was to press Archbishop Pilarczyk's committee to allow the CTSA president, Kenneth Himes, to address the bishops. I knew Ken well and I was convinced that besides his being president, his humor, easy going style and being a priest would make him the best possible speaker. But, after a short history of several hours spent together with these bishops in committee, I found myself resisting a suggestion that I give the presentation. I was unsuccessful and was appointed to the task by Archbishop Pilarczyk's simple statement: "But we don't know Fr. Himes. We know you."

CONCLUSION

Although my comments about the internal workings of the CTSA may be the raciest part of this presentation, they are not the most important. The main conclusions I would hope you would draw from these reflections are two. First, power is a ubiquitous and essential dimension of human life and more frequently than not is exercised by persons, including ourselves, who wield it without reflecting on doing so. Second, if theology is to fulfill its mission, it must make power visible and examine it in the light of Christian doctrine. At its best, coercive power is the organizational embodiment of love. At its worst, it cloaks its destructive effects with the mantle of rational argument or paternal care.

My purpose this morning has not been to present an adequate theology of power. No one of us is able to specify what changes might occur if we all took power more seriously. I would suggest a few but do not mean to imply that nothing has already been done in these areas. A doctrine of God is no doubt the place to start in reflecting on creative and destructive power in human life. Pneumatology will help us understand power as a gift of the Holy Spirit, and the role of the Spirit in grassroots efforts to check the immoral uses of power. Christology might ask whether we have overspiritualized Jesus' view of power. For example, although he did rebuke his disciple for severing that ear in the Garden on the night he was betrayed, he apparently had authorized the carrying of swords by his disciples in the first place. Christian anthropology needs to account for the ubiquity of coercive power in human life, and ecclesiology would address the proper forms of coercion in church life. Sacramental theology can assist us to understand how power and sacrifice can coexist. Liturgical theology can help us celebrate power, along with all the other gifts of the Spirit in our gatherings. Fundamental moral theology has serious work to do on such criteria as transparency and accountability required for the moral exercise of coercion. Scripture and history have an abundance of instantiations of power to employ to help us gain perspective on our situation today. Particularly important is spirituality, both theoretically and practically. We need reflection on the character of an appropriate humility of the powerful who embrace their power and acknowledge its attendant temptations. The point here is that theological responsibility for addressing power should not simply be assigned to the social ethicists or even the moral theologians.

As persons who wield power, we who are teachers need to employ that power for the well-being of our students, which has a better chance of being done well if we first acknowledge and embrace the coercive power we regularly exercise. For many, it will be hard to change a mind-set that has denied any interest in *having* power, a mindset based, I believe, on a misunderstanding of power that has characterized too much of Christian theology for too long.

This isn't easy. I have been thinking along these lines for years, and have prepared this presentation. But this very weekend I have had two unrelated conversations about transparency in CTSA procedures and took positions just

yesterday that I now realize were mistaken—mistaken precisely because I was forgetting that as president and board member I wield power over my colleagues and thus face higher standards of accountability and transparency. Like the nobleman who owned that silver dish, we are *all* quickly aware of the realities of power when it constrains our own options and often unaware when our power constrains the alternatives of others.

Power is an ordinary dimension of human relations. It is as fundamental a part of human life as conversation or cooperation. It is as important an idea as intelligence or individuality. It is as ubiquitous as persuasion or friendship. Power, I would suggest, deserves our careful theological attention.

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