INTRODUCTION

Power, Church, and Pastoral Care: Beyond the Taboo

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INTRODUCTION

Soft shepherd or almighty pastor? Or should it be "almighty shepherd" or "soft pastor"? The title of this book, which was also the title of the expert seminar we organized in January 2012 in Leuven (Belgium), is still puzzling me. Most shepherds are not really soft—they are courageous,[1] both in the biblical stories as in daily life, and have to take risks in order to save the sheep. But if they are soft, they might be dangerous, at least when "shepherd" is considered here as a metaphor for "pastor." Being friendly, sweet or even "soft" as not being very strong and lacking power, seeking harmony and avoiding conflict, might disguise forms of power abuse for victims and bystanders. This attitude might function as an easy way to manipulate the other or might be an euphemism for a form of neglect of courageous speaking up for the dignity of others. Soft shepherds are to be shirked, because they might be disguised "almighty pastors." The same is

1. See the image of the "Courageous shepherd," in Campbell, "The Courageous Shepherd."

true for soft pastors or almighty shepherds. Sometimes the metaphor of the shepherd is used in the way it has functioned for many years within the catholic church, namely as the image a powerful clergyman, to be respected and to be honored. This image of powerful shepherd might also be dangerous, and does not sound very attractive to many people, although for some it awakens a form of nostalgic desire. The popularity of pope Francis, who led down quite a few of his privileges associated with power and a high hierarchical position, shows how many people prefer a form of "authenticity": a church that criticizes power, should incorporate this in her deeds, at least also in the agency of the pope. But, even if some of the formal symbols of power (luxary, protection, . . .) are less visible, this does not mean that the church and pastoral caregivers do not have power or have lost all their power during the last decades. In this volume, the multiplicity of power will be demonstrated. Power abuse, but also feelings of powerlessness pastoral caregivers encounter in themselves and in others, cannot be neglected.

These puzzling associations, and the image of the pope and the lack of power-attributes, show us that a reflection on power in relation to church and pastoral relation is really timely and relevant. Power abuse, especially also sexual abuse, should be prevented and dealt with adequately. Before presenting the content of this book, I will explore the theme of power in relation to the church and pastoral care in its broadness. I will give some interpretations and preliminary ideas about the topic. Attentive readers will find different accents in all the texts in this book, but also many similarities. With this first chapter, I hope to raise the interest in the theme and to deepen the awareness of the relevance of more reflection on power in relation to pastoral issues. I write this chapter from my own Belgian Catholic perspective, hoping that many readers will recognize similar aspects in their own context.

DISCUSSING THE THEME OF POWER

Taboo

Power has for many people negative connotations. In church contexts in particular, the word is often taboo. There are many and diverse reasons for this.

In the first place, many pastors and pastoral workers in the church frequently camp with the feeling of impotence. This can be related for example

to a sense of impotency in relation to systems, or to people's suffering, to the context in which they work such as a hospital, prison, or parish, to contemporary post-modern society and its individualized approach to life, and, not infrequently, to other actors in the church. Speaking about power does not always coincide with this experience. At the same time, the experience of impotency does explain, in some cases, why people begin to exert power over others.

Furthermore, a number of people in the church seek positions that offer considerable (hierarchical) power. The latter cannot be openly recognized however, as it is at odds with a number of Christian views on, for example, humility or the attitude of service. The power of every Christian should moreover be considered in the light of God's power. This paradoxical relationship between the fantasizing about and seeking of more power on the one hand, and the theology that calls power into question and the actually experienced powerlessness on the other hand, often makes the discussion of power very difficult. In the words of the German theologian Gärtner: "It is the taboo surrounding power that makes power so powerful."[2]

What Is Power?

Breaking the taboo on power requires that we first reflect on the meaning of power. Power is present everywhere in society in many and diverse ways and in both a positive and a negative sense. Power can be described as "every opportunity in social relationships for asserting one's own will, even in the face of opposition."[3] A person can consequently exercise this power in concrete situations.

Sometimes we are not even aware of resistance and it is especially in such situations that power is often "hidden," but is all the same subtly at work and asserted for good or for evil. Consider for example a priest who preaches—this too can be seen as a form of power that can be used positively or negatively and that does not necessarily arouse opposition. In other situations, in spite of significant resistance, for example from those with less authority, decisions may still be imposed.

In a positive sense, the concept of "power" has associations with the English "agency," which indicates the opportunities persons have to determine their own agenda and to make decisions themselves concerning their

2. Gärtner, "'Doe maar gewoon'?," 260.
3. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 38.

actions, in order not to be merely a victim, or determined by others, or by a particular situation.

Power can be described in many ways. One approach is the threefold distinction: "power over" (hierarchical power), "power within" (internal power, indicating personal power), and "power with" (where several parties are acting together).[4] In general, when thinking of "power," it is "power over" that comes to mind.

Power does not necessarily coincide with a person's hierarchical position. The situation comes to mind of a colleague who has worked in the same place for twenty years and who at every new suggestion makes the comment, "We have done it this way for years, why should we change?"[5] Another example relates to teaching practice. I have power over my students, whom I expect to be more or less silent when I speak, and, I am in a position to enforce this. They exert power over me when they are continually disruptive, or simply do not come to class. Every master is also dependent on the slave, or, to put it another way, almost every sort of assertion of power goes hand in hand with the power that is conferred on a person by someone else (or by others).

Power is also closely linked with the privileges a person has. I possess power in being able to determine, to a great extent, how I do my work, choose how I dress, buy something when I wish to do so, and so forth. I have many privileges that many others do not have because of their financial situation and working circumstances, for example: because of the social pressure they are under compulsion to conceal their sexual preference, because their name alone betrays that they are a foreigner and are therefore frequently dependent on the goodwill of others, and so forth.

Power is extremely complex, that is already obvious. Power can be very easily "abused," or in other words, it can easily be asserted at the expense of others or of oneself. Below, I will analyze the phenomenon of power and the church from three perspectives, each of which is challenged by the experience of victims. I will first give consideration to the tradition and to theology, subsequently to the church itself and the context in which power functions, and, in conclusion, to the individual.

4. Stortz, *PastorPower*, 43–68

5. Van Damme, "Macht en mechanismen in conflicten in organisaties," 21.

POWER, TRADITION AND THEOLOGY

There are many elements in Catholic theology that legitimate certain forms of power. In the theological formation of priests and laypersons in the church, it is important to critically reflect on the images of being a Christian, leadership, sexuality, relationships, family, in relation to power. I will consider here a number of images specifically from the perspective of power.

The theology relating to the priesthood puts the priest in a certain sense in a class of his own. There is also the fact that the "priest" is a believer, together with and in the same way as other Christians. We are reminded here of the words of Augustine, recalled in the Second Vatican Council text, *Lumen Gentium* 32: "For you I am a bishop, but with you I am a Christian."[6] A priest acts "in the context of the community" and he is situated "in the midst of" the community. At the same time, the priest is ordained to act "in the name of Christ, who is the Head of the Church." In this sense, the priest is also positioned "facing" the faith community, implying in a certain sense that the priest is "set apart," although of course many different interpretations may be given to this—in both a more positive and a more negative sense. Celibacy contributes to some extent to this "setting apart" of priests.

Some people use the argument that the place reserved for the priest in the liturgical setting (the celebrant's chair) is not a form of clericalism, but an expression of the Catholic theology of the priesthood. The latter is certainly true, but this theology of priesthood can however give rise to forms of clericalism. What I mean here is an attitude that makes a great distinction between the clergy and the laity, through which a minority comes to possess numerous privileges, while others, on the basis of their being or not being a priest, receive, or do not receive access to, for example, the exercising of certain functions, or the right to make certain decisions. A dualistic approach (as is the clear-cut distinction between priest and laity, but also between man and woman, black and white and so on) is not purely neutral, but is often charged with many value associations, where one side is consequently considered to be more important and more valuable than the other.

In consequence, priests often have many privileges, with the implication that priests can appropriate much power. They can assert this power in diverse ways. Chances are high that "power over" will be opted for,

6. Augustine, "Sermo 340:1."

certainly in concrete situations. This hierarchical form of power provides great opportunity for power abuse—even although the two are not necessarily linked, and many positive things can also be done with the "power" invested in priests.

The following quotation illustrates the idea of clericalism and the possible dangers it may entail: "They (priests) may moreover always depend on being defended by their own group and by their superiors. The clergy demonstrates moreover the characteristics of a sub-culture: there is considerable group solidarity (*esprit de corps*), what takes place within the group must remain within the group (secrecy), and the sub-culture is characterized by a general attitude of us (priests) against them (laity). The sub-culture, united with the status of holiness and unsupervised power presents a structural occasion for power abuse."[7]

The strong emphasis on the special status of priests can also give rise to the fear of facing up to abuse, in particular among those who have been abused. I refer here to an example from one of the testimonies of victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Belgium and demonstrate in this way that sexual abuse always takes place in combination with power abuse. A woman writes, "He (the priest who abused her) was the man who could do everything and I had no respect for him, my mother reproached me constantly for this . . . the 'Reverend Father had to be respected for all that he had done for us.'"[8]

Power abuse linked to a form of hierarchical power is of course something to which many functions may lead, also the positions of teachers and educators, sport trainers and in particular parents.

I will here further consider church positions and theological legitimation of power and do not want to limit myself solely to theology concerning the priesthood. The metaphor of the good shepherd is another example of a theological perspective that may legitimate power in pastoral settings. The word "pastor" and "pastoral" refer in themselves to the image of the good shepherd. Pastors are too often depicted as shepherds on the basis of the story of the good shepherd. The picture of the shepherd can illustrate how the shepherd risks his own life in order to take care of the lost sheep, but it can also be interpreted as a person who knows what is best for the

7. Demasure, "Na schandalen seksueel misbruik. Kerk moet in eigen boezem kijken," 51.

8. Adriaenssens, "Verslag activiteiten Commissie voor de behandeling van klachten wegens seksueel misbruik in een pastorale relatie (onafgewerkt wegens inbeslagname op 24 juni 2010)," 65.

sheep, which follow him obediently. It is the person of the shepherd who is central in the metaphor and not so much the community of believers (the sheep), or their reciprocal care. A form of clericalism is concealed here in which an excessive emphasis is put on the person with the "priestly office," in contrast to the "herd," or to the laity, who are expected to obediently follow. The risks inherent in this shepherd metaphor also exist where the pastoral worker is a layperson.

The picture of the pastor as a good shepherd refers to the shepherd as a metaphor for Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd (see John 10:1–21), who even gave up his own life for the sheep. This Christological reference can on the one hand encourage pastors to put their own power in perspective and to relate it to the broader framework of who Christ is. Some individuals will however interpret the reference to Christ as a legitimation of their own power (often understood as "power over")—and in this case the picture of the good shepherd is "abused" in order to exercise power "over" others and possibly also to legitimate power abuse.

It is however not so that power abuse only occurs when there is a great difference in power between different actors, where the weakest person has the least possibility of protesting, involvement, or self-determination. Power abuse also occurs in relationships where there is a perspective that minimizes the distinction between the pastor and the person being ministered to, namely where the picture of "friendship" is used to describe a pastoral relationship.

The picture of "friendship" suggests a form of symmetry and seems to rule out the possibility of differences in power playing a role in pastoral relationships. Types of sexual abuse in pastoral relationships, in particular between adult partners, are often legitimated on the basis of "friendship" being characteristic of the pastoral relationship. This example illustrates the dual character of "friendship" in a pastoral context. A woman speaks of the sexual abuse she endured from the chaplain responsible for the youth movement, "He was of course very friendly toward me. Nothing was too difficult for him . . . After a folk-dancing party we were allowed to sleep over at his house. Very kind of the man! But he evidently meant this very literally."[9] Friendliness and intimacy may conceal forms of abuse. This example demonstrates how hierarchical functions and intimacy often go together and in some instances lead to power abuse.

9. Ibid., 16.

Sometimes we lose sight of the fact that the function of pastor involves a form of "power" and that complete symmetry is impossible in a pastoral relationship. It is therefore very important to recognize differences in power, to dare to mention them and, in light of the differences in power, for those in a pastoral relationship to subsequently seek an appropriate way of relating to each other.

The power of the individual can thus be legitimated on the basis of certain theological concepts. This does not mean that this will happen, nor does it mean that the theology is problematical as a whole, but it means that certain theological perspectives should be subject to critical questions since they are more likely to lead to abuse than other perspectives.

Additionally, there is also the power of the church as an institution, which is legitimated by theology and tradition. One of the central tasks of the church is to develop a (ethical and theological) perspective on all dimensions of life and a neutral position is neither possible nor desirable. It is however important to realize that every ethical statement is in some way an assertion of power, which as a consequence (whether justifiably or not) bestows more "power" on some than on others . . . In terms of liturgy or dogmatics, some positions may also include or exclude people. A theologically educated women who was extensively involved in the church, experienced this power that excluded her by a "simple" question. After she had expressed her opinion, a clergyman responded, "have you been baptized?" Such a comment is a form of asserting power over another person (power over). Many people today are afraid of expressing their opinion because they are wary that others are going to consider me as "not being Catholic enough." Reflection on power also means that we consider to what extent the church and theology allows for diversity.

It is in the first place important to be aware of the fact that power mechanisms are at work and subsequently, in theological reflection and writing, to take these mechanisms into account so that a theological legitimation of power abuse may be avoided as much as possible.

POWER, CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Another way of looking at power and the church today does not start from "tradition" and "theology" as we have developed in the previous part, but starts from an analysis of the situation and the processes that are taking place in church and society today.

Disciplinary Power

Michel Foucault speaks of disciplinary power as a phenomenon that is present throughout society.[10] Many norms exist in our society that determine what is normal and what is not normal, which may or may not be endorsed within the church.

Not infrequently, pastors also experience forms of powerlessness in this sort of context in relation to the system. This is something that happens with great frequency in juridical contexts and in the army. At the same time, the pastor may also assert a particular form of power in such contexts, for example by expressing criticism of the system, or of those higher up in the hierarchy. We speak here of prophetic pastoral situations, with the possibility of proceedings being taken against the pastor as a consequence. Criticism of the system is not always appreciated. The pastor's use of such a form of power in the context of disciplinary systems—for example in the form of the breaking of set opinions determined by for example the logic of financial power—are however a very important and pre-eminent form of Christian response. It is the pursuit of more structural justice that is involved here. In other words, pastors, and more broadly the whole church, are called to condemn contextual, systematic forms of repression that obstruct the positive exercise of power (as in *empowerment*) by others.

There are also forms of "disciplinary power" within the church itself, for example in the area of territorial pastoral service. People who volunteer in diaconal services are not considered to be part of the "church community" as quickly as those who attend Mass every week. If a new pastor wants to become a part of the new local community, it is in most cases the Eucharist in particular that counts, much more than social welfare activity. Certain norms regarding what it is to be "church" make their influence felt in local church communities.

Consider also for example the norm that continues to be implied that one should be well dressed to go to church. A child who does not wear special clothing for his or her first communion or confirmation is likely to be looked down upon.

10. See Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*. See also Part 1, "Fundamental Philosophical and Theological Reflections on Power and Pastoral Care."

Identity

On giving further consideration to what characterizes church and society today, we come face to face with post-modernity.

Our post-modern society is characterized by a multiplicity of perspectives, opportunities and points of view both inside and outside the church. For many people, this creates a need for new certainties. The identity discourse often takes the form of a quest to distinguish oneself from others, which not infrequently involves reacting against perspectives and people who are outsiders. Power is also involved here and differences in power and privileges are created. The theological and ethical discourse also plays a role here and contributes to the creation of "identity" for certain groups within the church. Where not so long ago the power of the church could also be considered as "territorialism," the attempt to "have an influence" on all aspects of life, to be present as church in every town and in every facet of society, in our postmodern society, where the gap between church and society is much greater, power comes to the fore particularly in the creation of image and identity.

The Continuity of the Power

In a hierarchical structure where "power over" is a very much present form of power, the phenomenon that power is self-perpetuating also plays a role. Many people within the Church seek (whether explicitly or not) an increasingly higher office in the hierarchy, but to achieve this demands however adherence to the predominating dynamic of the institution and to its hierarchical thinking. People holding a certain office are on the one hand "kneaded" by the dominating views within the institute, and on the other hand, they also help to keep the institute as it is. In the light of the revelations concerning sexual abuse, we likewise see how many attempt to defend the church.

POWER AND THE SUBJECT

A third way of reflecting on power relates in particular to the person and the professionalism of the individuals who are engaged in the church. To speak of power as though it only relates to the theology and the church institution (including the ordained clergy) presents a false picture. There

is also a personal component linked to power abuse, one that often goes back to a person's having been himself a victim of others who abused their power, or is linked to a strong sense of powerlessness. There may be moments when people who are themselves vulnerable, or have been violated, take it out on others. They are themselves responsible for their actions, but it may be helpful to consider these in the context of their life history. What is important in this context is that in the supervision of those who are engaged in the church (priests and laity), specific attention is given to the theme of power and that adequate supervision, coaching or spiritual direction is provided.

Similarly, it is important to give attention to a spirituality that recognizes its own power, both in a positive sense and with awareness for its possible abuse. Didier Pollefeyt calls the "desire for power" a "daily vice," something with which every person wrestles and that every person needs to dare to recognize as a possible risk, one that should be avoided as much as possible.[11]

In this context it is important to encourage a spirituality in which it is not the ideal of self-sacrifice that is central, since the discourse on self-sacrifice can conceal power mechanisms ("look at all I do for you," "you should be thankful for me"), or which in the end implicitly put the person himself in a more central position. In the literature, reference is made to the "messiah complex" or to "the helper's syndrome."[12] A healthy spirituality takes power into account by consciously recognizing it and by striving for forms of shared power (power with) without obscuring or magnifying differences in power.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

This short overview of the vastness of the field of power in relation to church and society is not complete. This whole book is required in order to gain a glimpse of what power may involve, to reflect on power in relation to the church and pastoral relationships. And, far more than this one book is needed. But it may help researchers, students and practitioners to reflect on their own ideas and practices in relation to the theme of power.

11. Pollefeyt, "Ethics, Forgiveness and the Unforgivable after Auschwitz." See also the contribution of Pollefeyt in this volume.

12. See Dillen, "The Complexity of Power in Pastoral Relations."

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