

October 17, 2010

Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Many folks who have never read him may be familiar, nonetheless, with the most famous *mot* of Lord Acton: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men . . ."

Although this pronouncement is frequently quoted, it is rarely analyzed, it seems to me, and even less often assessed. However, it warrants, by its popularity, at least some comment from time to time, and I propose here to make my brief contribution. Three headings, probably, will suffice.

First, when Acton made this comment---in the course of a 24-page letter to Bishop Creighton---the immediate context of the "power" was not secular but religious; Acton had in mind, explicitly and first of all, the Borgias, the Roman Inquisition, and other religious scandals. When he mentioned "the general wickedness of men in authority," he began with "Luther and Zwingli and Calvin and Cranmer and Knox." Only then did he go on to list Henry VIII, Philip II, and others.

It is difficult---futile, too, and hopeless---to understand Acton's observation apart from the way his conscience was strained to the limit by what he regarded as the major abuse of ecclesiastical power during his own lifetime: the declaration of Papal Infallibility in 1870. In several places in his correspondence, Acton complained bitterly of the way Pope Pius IX, to promote this teaching as a dogma, connived and forced the hand of the bishops at the First Vatican Council.

In this respect, his biographer, Herbert Butterfield, remarked of Acton that "something in him had been bruised by the spectacles he had to witness, whether in the past or in the present." The wound apparently went deep; I am among those who suspect that Acton's discouragement after Vatican I best explains his failure to write a *magnum opus*, a large and significant contribution to Church History. His friends, borrowing an image from Henry James, sometimes referred to that great, unwritten project as "The Madonna of the Future."

For myself---if permitted a personal assessment of Papal Infallibility---I venture this much: Had Pope Pius IX not fancied himself infallible, he would be among a minority of bishops familiar to me over the years. (Modesty, here, encourages silence.)

Second, if the deplorable attitude and behavior of Pope Pius IX did lie at the root of Acton's comment on corruption by power---as is arguably the case---it is not obvious he was right. I have read biographies of this particular pope, and my impression of him hardly includes "power." As to his opponents, yes: Cavour, Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel II---these were men of power and were arguably corrupted by it. Pius, however, that abject "prisoner of the Vatican," pouting and complaining to his fellow bishops---no, no, *power* is not the word that comes to mind.

Third, and consequent to the foregoing observation, it is my impression that weakness tends to corrupt---at least as much as power. It is more probable, for example, that a poor man will steal than a rich man. Lying may be common in the halls of government, but is it really less widespread in alleyways?

This experience allows of exceptions, of course, but in general---and especially when the power is derived from high office---men seldom increase their authority by abusing it, and they normally know this. Even when they don't, experience testifies that the powerful also prefer to be liked and admired; this preference may lay at least some restraint on them. Weak and vulnerable men, on the other hand, are less likely to be controlled this way.

Notoriety is a consideration here. If a man in public office abuses his authority, all the world can see it; all the world may comment and condemn. But consider the plight of those placed under that authority. They are powerless, and, being powerless, are vulnerable. Now when the powerless and the vulnerable are abused, they not infrequently turn to rebellion. And a rebel is just as readily corruptible as a tyrant.

In the Church, where rebellion is impossible, power may equally corrupt everybody. It must be evident, after all, that a powerful bishop is no more disposed to corruption than the person who anonymously maligns him. Is this, I wonder, what Acton had in mind?

Anyway, Acton's celebrated dictum---with which, in its original context, I am in sympathy---seems to lack something as a moral theorem.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php