Opinion
Guest Voices
Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, speaks July 7, 2022, during the Catholic M

Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, speaks July 7, 2022, during the Catholic Media Conference in Portland. (CNS/Bob Roller)



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Well before it was nearly irremediably compromised by the ongoing clergy sexual abuse scandal, the Catholic hierarchical culture was engaged in a losing battle with the concept of authority. What is it? Who has it? Why? How is it exercised? To what end?

What began as a troubling problem in the last century has become an even deeper and more corrosive challenge this century both within the church and in the church's relationship with the wider culture.

While the questions might not yield quickly to certainty, one response was recently demonstrated by Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, in his order that abruptly ended a Catholic-Lutheran ecumenical venture that has been underway for nearly 40 years and that was viewed approvingly by three of his predecessors.

The archbishop, in a letter to the Spirit of Grace community, described his perceived obligation to "guard the entire liturgical life" of the local church. The action, he said, resulted from his discernment of "the needs of the Catholic faithful of the archdiocese, the key principles governing the sacred liturgy, and how best to promote Christian unity."



Worshippers gather at Spirit of Grace in 2016 to celebrate renovations on their church building. About 50% of the members are Catholic, 40% Lutheran and 9% are from other denominations. (Courtesy of Spirit of Grace)

All of that he accomplished, according to undisputed reports from the community, without any discussions with those affected, with no attempt to determine the community's needs, and absent an assessment of the state of "Christian unity" at Spirit of Grace congregation. Members describe themselves as "one community with two traditions" who worship together but separately conduct celebrations of the Eucharist.

Sample's answers to who exercises authority, and how, are distressingly archaic. He alone is the authority, and he exercises it by edict. It is the formula from an earlier era when hierarchies reflected a primitive understanding of the world in which all power and authority presumably resided at the top and most often (in the church's

case, always) in a male figure.



Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley looks on as Portland Archbishop Alexander Sample speaks during the spring general assembly of the U.S. bishops' conference June 13, 2019, in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

The late Eugene Kennedy, a longtime church observer and prolific author, understood earlier than most that authority had become a central issue in the modern era for both church and society. In *Authority: The Most Misunderstood Idea*

in America, a book authored with his wife, Sara Charles, a psychiatrist, the diminishment of the old hierarchical model was hastened, they wrote, by the advent of the space and information ages. In the first case, space flight photos dramatically depicted the Earth as not up or down from anything but amid the vastness of our solar system, an affront to social systems based on an Earth below and heavens above.

The information age democratized what was once the sole province of a select few. "In the golden age of hierarchy, information was perceived as power and was reserved to very few at the highest levels," they wrote. "It was sacred, an expression and source of power, reserved like the Holy of Holies, with access for the elect alone."

In the modern era, Kennedy and Charles wrote, "the great institutions that identify their authority with their hierarchical structure are, in effect, raising an empty monstrance and demanding that people accept the receptacle as if it were the sacrament."

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Hierarchy and its once automatic claim to unchallenged authority is left unmoored, drifting in search of purpose and safe harbor.

Given the tattered state of hierarchical credibility and authority, a question emerges, the answer to which, I think, has a significant effect on each: What is a church to do when fear no longer works?

Fear once kept Catholics in the pews and in line. Generations in this country raised on the transactional theology of the Baltimore Catechism — failed and sinful humans negotiating with an ever-wrathful God — lived lives of holy terror. They were ever mindful that the world was loaded with potential infractions capable of sending one to eternal damnation. Members of the clerical/hierarchical culture, promoted as different to their core from all the rest, were the never-to-be contradicted connection between humans and their God.

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Fear no longer works. As the recent series on the Catholic diaspora demonstrated, bishops closing parishes or sending in new priests to upend ministries; or ending such activities as welcoming LGBTQ Catholics have elicited less than obedient responses. In more than a few instances, Catholics have walked and set up shop elsewhere, often with an ordained woman as pastor. They still call themselves Catholic.

Whether they are a schism in motion or the cutting edge of a future church is to be determined. What will become of the Spirit of Grace community beyond the initial shock and hurt is yet to be seen.

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Many in those earlier generations came to understand things differently in the wake of Vatican II. Fear fell away. Father, we learned, really didn't have the answers to all the questions. Bishops, we learned, were not only human but also could be individually and corporately among the most corrupt and corrupting in the community. Sample's lofty language about his duty to "guard" liturgical practice becomes horribly laughable when viewed against a hierarchical culture that did almost nothing over decades to guard and protect the most vulnerable in the community. In fact, the culture did all it could to hide the thousands of crimes of abuse against children.

Vatican II began reimagining the hierarchy. But such a culture, especially one so privileged and insular as the Catholic episcopacy, does not give up its perks easily.

We are in an awkward time, living with the remnants of a hierarchical model that is well beyond its "use by" date and with a pope, residing at the top of that model, urging a bottom-up reform reliant not on edicts but on collegiality and dialogue, including full participation by laypeople. We have yet to figure out what a church does when fear no longer works.



Pope Francis greets Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, during a meeting with bishops from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alaska making their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican Feb. 3, 2020. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Francis may be running out of time, but what he's given the church — the words, the new metaphors, the insistence on mercy and accompaniment, the profound humility — may be resilient. They are characteristics and qualities that speak to our humanity, so much more dependent on authentic authority than on authoritarianism. They won't exit the Catholic imagination any time soon. We may be in for a longer-than-we'd-like struggle over such matters.

In the meantime, Sample and his ilk will show that the old hierarchical model still has some juice. They will, from time to time, let it be known that what Catholics have built, often over decades, including all the trust developed over years of worship and dialogue together, all the ministries that have grown out of a community's devotion to the Gospel, can be annihilated in an instant. It is not the activity of authentic authority. It authors nothing, but instead disrupts and destroys. It is, rather, the activity of those who can still wield power, the power of the fearful

and insecure. It is the empty monstrance posing as sacrament.