

Respect my authority!
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Robert John Andrews
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"Authority"
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A young man from my first church got sentenced for something he did that was really stupid. He ended up in the Chester County Prison. On my initial visit the guards played some of their usual games. Ever on edge, the guards wanted me to be sure to recognize who was in charge. So be it. For my next visit, I wore my clerical collar. I did not correct them when they deferentially called me, "Father." The visit went smoother.

Several seminary friends felt called to the tough task of prison ministry, serving as chaplains at Rahway and Trenton State. Tough places to work. At Trenton they arranged several softball games between the inmates and our seminary softball team. The prisoners always tried to hit the ball from a homerun over the wall. Go figure. We hit singles and won every time.

Prison ministry can be a depressing ministry. One friend tried to enlist churches in the fight against recidivism but ran into too many stained glass walls. Prison chaplaincy can become more demanding because it also involves ministering to the guards and other staff. These chaplains discovered that if the guards lacked solid grounding, if they lacked a nourishing home life, lacking a spiritual connection, the toxic environment of the prison could eat away at them, where abuse of power could become casual, routine. Respect my authority! Conform to what I tell you! Insecure persons in authority can become infuriated when someone fails to comply, conform, obey.

It's similar to how persons who have been abused can run the danger of becoming abusers. Many convicts victimize because they've been victimized. It's similar to how those shamefully hazed get even by hazing others. It's similar to what can happen to soldiers infected by the misery and cruelty of war. A Ukraine mother recently said to the Russian brutes: "May you be cursed with a mother's tears."

A friend who served as a police officer in Danville mentioned how he was trained to intimate. What's the correct term for the police? Peace officers. It can be a tough and nasty job – with high risk and high reward for a job well done. This is why we count on those who enter this profession to be of the highest moral caliber. We need our peace officers. We want the police. How can we help police officers become better police? It's not just about how they might need to change their attitude, their tactics, it's about how we as a society need to change our violent, unpeaceful ways, renouncing our gun idolatry. Do those folks who post 'support the blue' signs curse under their breath when they get pulled over for speeding.

Power really does corrupt, corroding, eroding the humanity of even those best intentioned, allowing even the most altruistic to justify acts of inhumanity. Let's avoid misconstruing an attempt at an explanation with an excuse for wrong behavior. Simply put, if you keep digesting toxins, you end up spewing toxins. We spew toxins because we suck them up. What's the difference between the Taliban, ISIS, white Christian nationalists? Complexion, otherwise not much. Hatred destroys the hater along with the hated, Martin preached. Hate begets hate, he preached, and toughness begets toughness. It flushes us all into the septic tank. We really need to realize there is a truer definition of strength. Those who resort to violence are the weakest among us.

What is that famous line spoken about Abraham Lincoln? “If you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” For Lincoln, mercy demonstrated the true use of power.

We got a problem whenever society accepts casual brutality and celebrates violence, whether its police officers dishonoring their badge or social media attacks, whether it’s joking about a person slammed with a hammer or thugs committing crash and grab robberies, whether its politicians sowing poison ivy lies or the awkward kid targeted and bullied at school. Worse is when persons in authority are themselves the offenders or turn blind and deaf at the ill-treatment of their charges. I’m grateful our school district is taking this issue seriously. As I’ve written before, one of my proudest high school moments was getting a gym teacher fired for encouraging his football players to mock and abuse mainstreamed special need students. Yes, look over your shoulder. He failed me that semester. I was never prouder.

Simply put, the more authority you receive the more you had better deserve it. Politicians. Police. Teachers. Pastors and priests too.