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MORAL AUTHORITY AND "THE BIG 3"

Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read Matthew 5:13–16.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

PART ONE: MORAL AUTHORITY AND CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

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Note: This article is divided into two parts: ***Moral Authority and Christian Leadership*** *and* ***Moral Authority in Action: Living Out the Big 3****. It is meant to be broken up into two (or more) conversations.*

There was seemingly little reason for the world to know about Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu.

She was born into a middle-class home in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 20th century. She eventually moved to one of the poorest parts of the world and worked for decades in anonymity, caring for the destitute and tirelessly doing menial tasks that no one else was willing to do.

But slowly, news about her work started to spread. Women from other countries began to join her, and reporters started observing her life and writing about her amazing witness. Her work expanded to other countries, and people from around the world wanted to know more about her. In time, she became one of the most influential women of the 20th century.

In 1979, she received the Nobel Peace Prize. Upon accepting the award, she spoke to the crowd about the demands of real love, how God was the true source of peace and how abortion was the greatest destroyer of peace today. Everyone cheered, even though the crowd had many people in it who did not hold these Christian ideals.

In 1982, she gave the commencement address at Harvard. She received a standing ovation for a speech in which she told young people to embrace chastity and the dignity of all life. How was such a countercultural message received so well at a secular university like Harvard?

Acts speak louder than words; let your words speak and your actions teach.

— St. Anthony of Padua

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The ways of the Lord are not easy, but we were not created for an easy life, but for great things, for goodness.

— Pope Benedict XVI

In 1985, the United Nations honored her at its 40th anniversary celebration, and she spoke before the most powerful leaders in the world. In her speech, she told the crowd that they were children of God and that they needed to pray because they couldn't give what they didn't have. More applause followed — the United Nations was praising a religious message!

General Perez de Cuellar, Secretary of the United Nations at the time, said this when introducing her:

> This is a hall of words. A few days ago we had, in this rostrum, the most powerful men in the world. Now we have the privilege to have the most powerful woman in the world. I don't think I need to present her. She doesn't need words. She does need deeds. ... She is the United Nations. She is peace in this world.[1]

Who is this woman whom the United Nations called "the most powerful woman in the world"? And what made her so powerful? Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu is now known as St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She became one of the most influential leaders in the world — not because of wealth, or fame, or any title or position she held, but because of the remarkable way she lived her life.

DISCUSS

What was it about Mother Teresa that made people want to follow her and listen to what she had to say? How was her kind of leadership and influence different from what people commonly think about leadership today?

WHAT IS MORAL AUTHORITY?

Some people influence the world through their riches, fame, or positions of power. Mother Teresa, however, exhibited a very

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different kind of authority, one that's much more influential, modeled by Christ himself. It's the kind of authority to which any ordinary person can aspire. She had what can be called "moral authority."

Moral authority is the ability to lead others not by our title or position, but by the way we live. In leadership, far more important than one's personality, talents, titles, or techniques is one's moral character. Jesus wasn't an effective leader because he held great titles or offices in the first-century Jewish world. He didn't seek to make a name for himself or build a platform. It was his humility, his courage, his love, his entire way of life that inspired thousands to follow him, and that left a deep and lasting impression on more than a billion people throughout the world to this day.

Jesus' example challenges us to ask ourselves what kind of leader we want to be. Are we striving to live outstanding lives like Christ, to pursue heroic virtue, to give God and the people in our lives the very best of ourselves, like Christ did? St. Mother Teresa made many sacrifices and gave her all to serve the poorest of the poor around the world. Her actions spoke much louder than her words. Her amazing witness of sacrificial love inspired many people to live a little more like her and listen to her message. That's the influence of someone who has moral authority.

DISCUSS

When have you witnessed moral authority (or a lack thereof) in your own life? What are the benefits of leading with moral authority?

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

All this is especially true for anyone stepping into Christian leadership. Because Christian leaders represent so noble a King,

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they must strive to live beautiful, noble lives, reflecting what Jesus taught and participating deeply in Christ's life. The more our lives are conformed to Christ, guided by Christ, animated by Christ, the more our leadership will bear fruit. As St. Paul says, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Our leadership, however, will not be effective if we are not firmly rooted in Christ's way of life. We are less likely to inspire others to daily prayer, for example, if we ourselves don't have a daily prayer life. We won't be effective in inviting people to follow Jesus if we ourselves don't follow his moral teachings in a certain area. We can't give what we don't have. Even more dangerous is living contrary to Christ's teachings, which completely undermines our leadership. We must go above and beyond, living beyond reproach, so that there is no question as to whether we are living a life of moral integrity. Because Christian leaders represent Christ, they will be held to a higher standard in the way they live. According to James 3:1, "Teachers … shall be judged with greater strictness."

We are affected more deeply toward God by a ten-minute visit with a saintly person than we are in ten years spent with a mediocre individual.

— Thomas Dubay

Let's be clear. Moral authority is about much more than making sure we "practice what we preach." And even less is it a tactic for gaining worldly respect. We must realize there's a profound *spiritual* principle at work here: To the extent we are living deeply in Christ, living according to his plan — morally, spiritually, sacramentally — Jesus can work through us in amazing ways, in our families, friendships, workplaces, and mission. But if we are not rooted deeply in Christ and living fully according to his plan, our leadership will

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suffer. Christ will not work through us as powerfully as leaders. We become more of a roadblock to the Holy Spirit than his instrument.

Whether we become leaders on campus, in the workplace, in our parishes, or in our own homes, let's strive to be leaders with moral authority. As Thomas Dubay once wrote, "We are affected more deeply toward God by a ten-minute visit with a saintly person than we are in ten years spent with a mediocre individual."[2] Others are depending on us to live our lives well. Let's not settle to be mediocre people. Let's strive to be saints.

DISCUSS

Are you living as a faithful representative of Jesus? Is your life a witness to the Gospel? How might you need to grow to be a more compelling witness of Christ? What change can you make starting this week?

PART TWO: MORAL AUTHORITY IN ACTION: LIVING OUT THE BIG 3

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THE BIG 3

Three key areas are particularly important for living with moral authority today: *chastity, sobriety,* and *excellence*. It's worth giving attention to these because it's especially challenging to live these virtues in our secular world, and when we fall in these areas, we become particularly enslaved. The world tries to promise us that we will find fulfillment in sex, drunkenness, substance abuse, distractions, and amusements that keep us from giving the best of

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ourselves; however, in each of these areas, the Lord desires for us to live in freedom rather than in slavery and shame. Not only does he want our own freedom, but he wants us to be models of this freedom for others. If we're not being intentional about living like Jesus — living beyond reproach — in these three areas, our ability to love others and to influence the world for Christ will be severely undermined.

As we dive into each of these three virtues, take time to pause and discuss after each one. Do not feel like you have to discuss all three of these in one sitting. The information and questions are meant to help you identify areas where you may need to grow and discern how the Lord might be inviting you to deeper healing and freedom so that you can be a more authentic witness of his life and love.

CHASTITY

The definition of love is "to will the good of another" (CCC 1766), to seek what's best for the other person. Jesus' teachings on chastity are all about equipping us to experience and give this kind of authentic, lasting love, which is the kind of love we long for. Our highly emotional and overly romantic culture, however, tends to confuse love with lust, which is focused on self — on what *I* get out of the other person or how I can use them for my own gratification.

Every day we are faced with many choices about whether to love or use others — in our thoughts, in our glances, in our physical actions. Jesus says in Matthew 5:27–28, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

In these verses, Jesus illustrates that chastity is about much more than simply avoiding sex outside of marriage. At its heart, chastity is about having the ability to love others the way God has called us to love: with a pure heart and mind, not as a slave to selfishness or lust. We do this in three important ways.

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First, we must live purity in our *thoughts*. In a world filled with immodest images, pornography, sexting, hookup apps, and sexually explicit content, we must go out of our way to guard our eyes and maintain purity in mind and heart. Jesus says in Luke 6:45, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil."

Second, we also need to live out chastity in our *actions*. Sex is not just a physical act of pleasure: The physical union is meant to express a profound, personal union between husband and wife. In giving their bodies to each other in this most intimate union, spouses are giving their very selves to each other. Sex itself, and sexual actions leading up to sex, are intended by God for marriage. That's why premarital sex and any physical action that causes arousal in you or someone else (e.g., touching sexual body parts, mutual masturbation, oral sex, etc.) is immoral outside of marriage, for it is not oriented toward an act of *total* self-giving. The couple experiences pleasures that are particularly associated with sexual union apart from a total commitment to the other person.

Even within marriage, some sexual acts are not chaste, are not a total gift of self, if they are not open to life. Contraception, for example, prevents couples from fully giving themselves to each other as they hold back that which is most intimately theirs — their fertility — and attempt to have the pleasure of the sexual act without a total acceptance of the other person, including their fertility.

Third, to lead with moral authority in terms of chastity, we must also be careful not to cause scandal. For those who are not married, resting in the same bed, sleeping over at a boyfriend/girlfriend's house, or having imprudent one-on-one time late at night may not only be a temptation — a near occasion of sin — but it may also give others the wrong impression. For married couples, having too much alone time with someone of the opposite sex who is not their spouse can cause similar problems. A Christian leader does not merely avoid doing evil but is held to a higher standard (Jas 3:1). They must live beyond reproach and avoid doing anything that could give the impression of immoral behavior.

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Finally, pursuing chastity in our thoughts and in our actions, including how our actions could be perceived, is not just about avoiding a long list of sinful actions. It is truly about conforming ourselves to Christ and learning to love through a total gift of self, just as Christ does for us. In the words of the *Catechism*, when "man governs his passions" he "finds peace" (CCC 2339). In spite of what the world often tell us — that enjoying the pleasures of sex whenever we desire is necessary for love and happiness — a life of chastity allows us instead to use our sexuality in a way that brings the authentic love, joy, freedom, and peace for which we long.

DISCUSS

It can be helpful to take an honest look at where we are in regard to chastity and to bring the challenges we face to light. Were there any specific areas of sexuality mentioned here that have been a challenge for you? How might the Lord be inviting you to break old habits, to grow in virtue, or to seek healing?

SOBRIETY

Sobriety is the exercise of the virtue of temperance (self-control) when it comes to alcohol, drugs, and other substances. When of legal age, there is nothing wrong with drinking alcohol in moderation;

Jesus' first miracle involved changing water into wine for a wedding feast. Still, St. Peter cautions us to stay alert: "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pt 5:8).

Some might wonder, "Why is drunkenness or losing sobriety on drugs such a problem? What's wrong with it?" Getting drunk or being high on drugs like marijuana impairs our reason and therefore makes it harder for us to make good, free, deliberate choices and live virtuously. When we drink in excess, for example, we intentionally inhibit our intellect and lose control of that which is most intimately ours — our free will — and we give the devil an opportunity to wreak havoc, setting us up to make other bad decisions that can harm ourselves and others. As a result, St. Paul lists drunkenness as one of the sins that keeps a person from the kingdom of God (Gal 5:21). St. Thomas Aquinas explained that drunkenness is a grave sin because it breaks our relationship with God.

As with chastity, to lead with moral authority in terms of sobriety, we must not merely avoid drunkenness. We must also be careful not to cause scandal by being too closely associated with drunkenness taking place around us. Jesus loved everyone and reached out to people of all backgrounds, even sinners. He was known for having meals with drunkards and prostitutes. But we never read about Jesus hanging out with prostitutes at a brothel while they were seducing their men or having drinks with drunkards during their group drinking binges. Our presence in certain settings might give the impression that we are okay with the sinful activity or, even worse, that we ourselves participate in it. When Pope St. John Paul II once explained the proper balance in his own ministry of accompaniment, he said God called him "to live with people, everywhere to be with them, in everything but sin."[2] This should be our goal as well.

There are a few questions you can ask yourself to gauge your relationship with drugs or alcohol: Am I drinking underage, in violation of Paul's command to respect the law (Rom 13:1–7)? In social settings, am I more focused on the alcohol than the people

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Chastity is a triumphant affirmation of love.

— St. Josemaría Escrivá

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around me? Are alcohol or drugs causing other problems in my life or in my relationships? Do I need additional help in overcoming an addiction? Are my actions with regard to alcohol or drugs leading others into sin? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then it might be time to evaluate your relationship with alcohol or drugs and consider if the Lord might be inviting you to greater freedom through sobriety.

Finally, sobriety allows you to be truly free in the most important areas of your life. Properly using alcohol and avoiding drug use allows you to keep custody over your decisions while also allowing you to celebrate appropriately in situations where it is customary to enjoy alcohol. Sobriety is not about limiting your freedom but rather about allowing you to embrace true freedom and not be dependent on any substance for fun, friendship, or fellowship with others. When we fully possess ourselves and aren't slaves to substances, we can enter more deeply into the relationships that mean the most to us: our relationships with God, our families, our friends, and our community.

DISCUSS

Take a moment and discuss the role of alcohol and drugs in your life. Do you struggle to remain sober with these substances? How do they affect your life? Are you getting drunk, drinking underage, or giving too much attention to alcohol? How are you practicing the virtue of sobriety, and how do you still need to grow?

EXCELLENCE

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Excellence is the ability to give the best of ourselves in our vocation and daily responsibilities. The person committed to excellence does not settle for mediocrity, especially in the things that matter most in life. For married couples, this means striving to be the best spouse or parent they can be. For students, this means giving their finest effort in their studies. In the workplace, with whatever jobs, tasks, or projects are entrusted to us, we should always seek to give the best of ourselves, realizing that we are ultimately serving Jesus in these endeavors. As St. Paul wrote, "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ" (Col 3:23–24).

The pursuit of excellence also challenges us to reflect on how we use our time, including our down time. Do we spend a lot of time playing video games, watching television, browsing social media, binging on Netflix, looking at our phones, or wasting time on YouTube? While there's nothing wrong with moderate use of these media, these passive forms of entertainment weaken our will and character when we use them habitually. The amount of time spent in these activities greatly affects your ability to give the best of yourself to others and do great things with your life. If you don't intentionally practice self-control in these areas, you will develop habits that makes it difficult for you to give the best of yourself — the best of your time, attention, love, and sacrifice — to your work, your spouse, your children, and your friends. Are you training your will to deny yourself, make sacrifices, take on challenges, and persevere through difficult tasks? Or are you training your will to prefer being passively entertained and your mind to be constantly distracted? Do you fill your mind more with the true, the good, and the beautiful or with frivolous amusements and images that drag you down? Are you intentionally setting parameters around how much time you spend on your phone, on social media, or on screens watching shows? If you are not intentionally practicing a little bit of self-denial in these areas, you are likely becoming gradually enslaved by them.

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As Christians, we should be pursuing excellence in every area of our lives.

We must also be careful not to allow our pursuit of excellence to turn into perfectionism, which is a distorted sense of excellence. It often involves having unrealistically high standards, an inordinate desire for achievement, and overcommitment. Perfectionism doesn't originate from true piety, from a desire to give God our best, but from insecurity: the fear of failure or rejection, the need to please others, a sense of self-reliance, or the belief that we need to earn God's love, which we know is not true.

Finally, when we live excellence in all the areas where God is calling us to serve — our families, our work, our studies, our downtime, our commitment to the Church and our community — we cooperate with him to build the kingdom of God. These aren't "extra" aspects of life that don't affect our relationship with God. Rather, they are the important settings he wants to use to mold us, shape us, and draw us closer to himself.

DISCUSS

Are there any areas of your life where you are struggling to live excellence (spiritual life, relationships, family/vocation, job/education, health)? Are you struggling with perfectionism? If so, why? What would it look like for you to be excellent in the area in which you are struggling the most right now?

TAKE ACTION

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Oftentimes, sins against the Big 3 become habits, and sometimes they have been habits in our lives for a very long time. But Jesus can triumph over any habit, wound, or addiction. You may not overcome these sins overnight, but with Christ, growth and healing are possible!

After you have identified any areas of the Big 3 that are holding you back from the life and leadership Christ is calling you to live, make a plan to begin building habits of virtue using the practical steps below:

- **Prayer and Sacraments.** We can't overcome our sins by ourselves. We need the help of God's grace to strengthen us in virtue and holiness.
- **Accountability.** To help you grow in virtue and root out sins in the areas of the Big 3, develop a plan for avoiding temptations and pursuing healthy behaviors, and then discuss it with an accountability partner who can support you and help hold you accountable to your plan.
- **Seeking Additional Help.** Sometimes our struggle with chastity, sobriety, or excellence requires more attention than what our accountability partner can provide. There's no shame in admitting that you need additional help; consider joining a support group or seeking out a professional.

KEY CONCEPTS

Moral Authority: The ability to influence others by the way we live, not by the position or title we hold

The Big 3: To have and lead with moral authority in today's culture, we especially need to live out chastity, sobriety, and excellence.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

True Leadership by the Harbinger Institute for Catholic Leadership, Ch. 6: "The Second Foundation — Character: Who am I?"

From focusequip.org: Path to Freedom (For Men) or Uncompromising Purity (For Women)

From the FOCUS Blog on focusequip.org: Cultural Apologetics series — see specifically these features:

- "Sex and Sanctity: A Discussion of Sex Before Marriage" by Jason Evert
- "Porn and Relationships: A Discussion of the Problem of Porn" by Matt Fradd
- "The Pill: No Small Matter: A Discussion about Contraception" by Dr. Janet Smith
- "A Catholic Approach to Alcohol: A Discussion of the Virtuous Use of Alcohol" by Dr. Jared Staudt

Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love by Dr. Edward Sri

CCC 2337–2359: "The Vocation to Chastity"

CCC 1803–1832: "The Virtues"

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[1] Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary, "Blessed Mother Teresa's Address to the United Nations on the Occasion of its 40th Anniversary," Piercedhearts.org, accessed March 4, 2020, https://www.piercedhearts.org/purity_heart_morality/mother_teresa_address_united_nations.htm.

[2] Thomas Dubay, "*...And You Are Christ's*" (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 121.

[3] George Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 104.