



“you will receive **power** when the **holy spirit** has come upon you and you will be my witnesses.”
(Acts 1:8)

Nearly 2000 years ago a young religious leader, a prophet to his followers and a dangerous crank to his enemies, had been handed over to the foreign governor of his province to be executed.

The governor was not certain he deserved to die and tried to help but the young man remained silent. This provoked the exasperated governor to explode, “Are you refusing to speak to me? Surely you know I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?” The reply now was courteous but confronting, “You would have no **power over me at all if it had not been given you from above**”.

The governor did have the power but he had neither the courage nor the conviction to resist the pressures of the mob and handed over this strange young man to be crucified.

We all recognize the story of Jesus before Pilate (John 19: 8-11) and proudly acknowledge that we are followers of that powerless young prophet from Galilee, not followers of the governor, representative of the mighty Roman Empire, whose power then rivalled the super-power status of the United States of America today.

WHAT IS **Power?**

WORLD YOUTH DAY

We know that World Youth Day will be celebrated in Sydney in 2008 when Pope Benedict XVI will visit us.

The Scriptural theme for our W.Y.D. is taken from the Acts of the Apostles: “**You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses**” (Acts 1:8); and as part of the programme of preparation the theme for the 2006 Pentecost Message is “**Power**”.

As usual, student leaders from our Catholic secondary schools and youth leaders from our parishes gathered to discuss the topic and listen to an introductory address. This year it was given by a retired Supreme Court Judge.

A JUDGE REFLECTS ON HIS LIFE'S WORK

The judge's words were deeply appreciated by both groups because they were wise and humane, the fruit of wide experience in public life and the courts, spoken by a man who knows, loves and practises his Catholic faith.

External power was defined as the capacity to direct others and direct the course of events and was distinguished from internal power, the power each individual has to choose, decide and act.

Power is exercised by an immense variety of agents on widely different issues, by older brothers and sisters, school prefects and sports captains, by parents, teachers and police officers and on the broader public stage by politicians, judges and generals. The examples range from an order to pick up the papers in a school yard through to a sentence of life-imprisonment or a declaration of war.

The judge explained that all power comes from outside the agent (and ultimately from God) and is to be used after due reflection for a good purpose and not just for self service. There is always a need for responsibility, for a due sense of proportion (not making a mountain out of a mole hill), for sensitivity but not sentimentality. He quoted the Latin phrase **suaviter in modo, fortiter in re** to explain this: the manner is to be gentle and pleasant, but there must be strength in action. Courtesy and fairness are always needed and toughness sometimes.

Self knowledge and humility are always necessary in all those who exercise power, because power can be seductive, as well as addictive. The judge also spoke revealingly of the other side of the coin, of the personal toll psychologically and even physically on judges who have to examine some of the worst examples of human evil and depravity, judge the guilt of the perpetrators and sometimes condemn them to years in jail. He urged young people not to seek power rashly, but to use it wisely if it was conferred on them.

And finally he spoke of our obligations to follow our conscience, which must be formed in the truth by good living and informed about the matter at hand. To be useful a conscience must be formed and informed.

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON POWER

Many people in our society do not think much about the nature of power, about the differences between the good and evil exercises of power, although they often have strong judgements on particular issues, such as war, poverty, abortion. Catholic schools and parishes should bring us to examine such matters in the light of Christian teaching and specifically Catholic tradition.

The Christian scriptures we follow are quite explicit that power can be good, that the power we shall receive at World Youth Day to be witnesses to Jesus Christ will be from the Holy Spirit just as it was in the early Church (Acts 1:8).

At the time of the Annunciation when Mary conceived her Son Jesus, she was told by the angel that the power of the Most High would overshadow her (Luke 1:35).



Paul too was explicit and provocative, acknowledging that for some people the cross, on which only slaves and non-Romans were executed, was regarded as foolishness, but for believers **the cross is the power of God** (1 Cor. 1:18). So too the gospel is not a reason for shame but **“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”**. (Romans 1:16).

He also developed this same thought, the Christian understanding of God’s strength working through human weakness, in another direction by claiming that he would rather boast about his own personal weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in him (2 Cor. 12:9).

It was Our Lord himself who said that we must give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what belongs to God (Mt. 22:21), not only the foundation for our doctrine of the separation of Church and State, but also a recognition of the importance of government, of State authority. Every society needs government, police, judges and countries need armed forces. These agencies can act for evil purposes, but generally they do more good than evil. This is certainly the case in Australian history.

Christian teaching also explicitly recognizes that power can be exercised for evil purposes, that some acts are wrong, even when the agents are unaware of their evil. Jesus’ execution was an evil exercise of power, but Jesus himself said that his executioners did not know what they were doing and asked his Father to forgive them (Luke 23:34), while Paul was present at the martyrdom of St. Stephen and approved. (Acts 8:1).

The judge also gave examples of power being used for evil purposes citing the Nazi fire bombing of London during the Second World War as well as the Allied bombing of Dresden in Germany and the American use of the atomic bomb on Japan to end the Second World War. These were evil because non-combatants, the elderly, women and children were directly targeted for destruction.

These examples are still controversial for some, who justify these killings as more quickly ending the war, saving the lives of many soldiers on both sides.

Some of the student groups also argued that war was always wrong and followed Martin Luther King in accepting that violence will never bring lasting peace. I am not sure that this is true for national states rather than individuals, as I believe the Allied governments were justified in going to war against Hitler and Japan in World War Two. Peace, admittedly an imperfect peace, did follow for many.

Such discussions take us a long way from the power of the Spirit and the example of Jesus himself, but they are also useful in forcing us to identify the criteria we use to decide when power is used well or for evil purposes.

IS GOD ALMIGHTY?

Although God cannot square a circle, Christian scriptures and tradition are unanimous in their recognition of God’s power. We often pray in the Mass to the “almighty and eternal God”, while the Scriptures call on “the Mighty One of Jacob”, “the Lord of hosts”, powerful in heaven and on earth. We believe the one true God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe as well as the Lord of history.

However God’s creation is imperfect, a fruit of original sin, as we recognize in tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes and droughts, while human beings are free to become saints or to act like devils.

It needs faith to believe that God is good as well as interested in us, because God can seem absent and incapable of stopping evil.

Evil and suffering are mysteries which can strain or strengthen our faith, but evil is less of a mystery than the existence of truth, goodness and beauty here in this life, even before their promised triumph in the last times.

The key to resolving this riddle, this extreme challenge to belief, is found in God the Father revealing his almighty power through the voluntary humiliation and suffering of his Son on the cross followed by his glorious resurrection. Christ crucified is **“the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men”**. (1 Cor. 1:24,25).





HOW CAN WE USE THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Coming to know the truth empowers us to solve problems, remove obstacles, make progress. Our spectacular advances in science and technology have only come from such discoveries of truth by geniuses such as Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein.

So too in religion when we come to acknowledge through the Spirit that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6) immense sources of strength (or grace) for worship and service are unleashed. Everyone from Pope to pauper is obliged to seek the truth and is empowered by the recognition and acceptance of truth.

When we know the truth and can control our wayward impulses we become free, having the power to love and the power to reject evil. This means that we can take a stand on principle, and reject the temptation to go with the flow when it is mistaken.

This is easier when we have companions who are supportive, who refuse to be submerged by the worst level of standards, and jointly work for good, for example, with Caritas, or pro-life groups, or St. Vincent de Paul or the Catholic Missions.

No individual can make peace alone, because effective peacemakers must have power and must work together. It is the peacemakers, not the peaceful, who are blessed (Mt. 5:9).

We can break the cycle of weakness and secularism which regularly presses upon us. Our Christian faith is energizing and empowering. Together we can do so much more. We should begin now and preparations for the 2008 Sydney World Youth Day provide such an opportunity. I invite all young people to visit the website www.wyd2008.org and join the Pilgrimage today.



+ George Card. Pell

✦ **George Cardinal Pell**
ARCHBISHOP OF SYDNEY
Pentecost Sunday, 4th June 2006

