

Pillar and Bullwark of the Truth

The Infallible Magisterium of the Catholic Church

Issue: What is the Magisterium? How should the faithful respond to the Magisterium? What is the charism of infallibility? How is that charism exercised by the Church?

Response: The Magisterium is the Church's teaching office established by Jesus Christ to "guard what has been entrusted" (1 Tim. 6:20). The Magisterium, in service to the Word of God, authentically interprets the Word, whether in Scripture or in the form of Tradition. The Magisterium is exercised by the Pope and the bishops in union with him. Because Christ has instituted the Magisterium to communicate His saving truth, the faithful should respond in docility and joy to the Church's teaching out of love for Christ.

Infallibility is a charism whereby the Holy Spirit protects the Magisterium from teaching error on matters of faith and morals. The Church exercises this charism when she teaches *definitively*, whether in a solemn manner (i.e., through the extraordinary Magisterium) or through the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

Discussion: Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide His Church into all truth. The Holy Spirit teaches the Church "all things," bringing to mind everything that Christ first taught His apostles (cf. Jn. 14:26). That is why Jesus can say, regarding His apostles and their bishop successors, "He

who receives you receives me" (Mt. 10:40). Chosen by Christ, they exercise the Church's Magisterium or teaching office. Christ sends His apostles and their successors as the Father sent Him—with "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18).

To provide a sure source of teaching and to maintain unity in the Church, Christ established the papacy with supreme authority in the Church. The Pope's office is one of succession from Peter and is marked by the authority of "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (cf. Mt. 16:18-19; Is. 22:15-25). As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, "the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 22). Thus, only in union with the Pope does the college or body of bishops have supreme and full authority over the universal Church (*ibid.*).

Jesus did not leave His people vulnerable to the doctrinal whims of competing leaders. Rather, He built the Church on the solid foundation of the apostles (cf. Eph. 2:19-20). He gave the Church His Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, to enable her to be "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Despite the cultural winds that have blown through the ages, the faithful have



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always had a visible, easily identifiable magisterial “rock” on which they could safely stand in all seasons. As the Catechism provides, quoting Vatican II:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, *has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone*. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ” [*Dei Verbum*, no. 10]. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome (no. 85, emphasis added).

Jesus declared that the gates of hell would never prevail against His Church (cf. Mt. 16:18-19). This protection from evil includes protecting the Magisterium from teaching error. Regardless of who the Pope and bishops in union with him may be at a particular time in Church history, the faithful have Christ’s Word that the Holy Spirit will guide His Magisterium in preserving and teaching the truth.

Faith Seeking Understanding

Some Catholics will not assent to a particular teaching unless the Church has demonstrated to their satisfaction that the teaching is true. Some go so far to reserve the right to overrule any magisterial pronouncement with a judgment of conscience. In doing so, they erroneously apply the Church’s teaching on conscience, in essence arguing that every Church teaching is subject to their approval. Faith is not mere agreement, but a humble submission to God’s authority. Thus the Catechism says: “Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*” (no. 150, original emphasis).

Such assent presupposes a joyful obedience to God as He reveals

Himself and His saving truth. “To obey (from the Latin *ob-audire*, to “hear or listen to”) in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself” (Catechism, no. 144). As Jesus said, “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me” (Luke. 10:16). Catholics assent to the Church’s teachings out of faith in God, who has invested the Magisterium, the servant of His Word, with His authority:

What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe “because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. . .” (Catechism, no. 156, footnotes omitted).

Unfortunately, some seek teachers “to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3). Faith, not our own preferences or likings, is what leads us to truth. Because of God’s faithfulness, because of the certainty that comes with His divine light, Catholics can joyfully echo the words of John Henry Cardinal Newman when the temptation to withhold assent is put before them: “Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt” (Catechism, no. 157, footnote omitted). “Mindful of Christ’s words to his apostles: ‘He who hears you, hears me’ [Lk. 10:16], the faithful receive with docility the teachings and directives that their pastors give them in different forms” (Catechism, no. 87).

You Better Believe It

Despite the Church’s teaching on faith and assent, some Catholics think that they only have to assent to “*ex cathedra*” and other “solemnly defined” teachings, maintaining that only these are guaranteed to be infallible by the Holy Spirit. As a result, they shortchange themselves, minimizing the wealth of the Church’s teachings. Rather, the Church has three basic types of

teaching, all of which require the assent of the faithful. The first consists of “divinely revealed” teachings, those which God has imparted to His Church through Scripture and Tradition and which are thus part of the “deposit of faith” (Catechism, nos. 84; 2033). These teachings require the assent of faith, based on the authority of God’s Word. One is guilty of heresy if he denies such teachings (cf. Catechism, no. 2089).

The second category consists of those teachings on which the Church has definitively pronounced. These teachings require an assent of faith, but it is based on faith in the Holy Spirit’s assistance to the Magisterium and on the related doctrine of infallibility, which the Catechism’s glossary defines thus: “the gift of the Holy Spirit whereby the pastors of the Church, the pope and the bishops in union with him, can *definitively* proclaim a doctrine of faith or morals for the belief of the faithful. . .” (emphasis added). As the Code of Canon Law provides, “anyone who rejects propositions which are to be held definitively sets himself against the teaching of the Catholic Church” (Canon 750 §2).¹ While not part of the deposit of faith, these teachings are “required for the holy keeping and faithful exposition of the deposit of faith” (Canon 750 §2).

Teachings in these first two categories require full and irrevocable assent. As the Catechism explains, they are taught infallibly:

The supreme degree of participation in the authority of Christ is ensured by the charism of *infallibility*. This infallibility extends as far as does the deposit of divine Revelation; it also extends to all those elements of doctrine, including morals, without which the saving truths of the faith cannot be preserved, explained, or observed (no. 2035, original emphasis).

Thus, these two categories of teachings, infallibly proposed, are equal in scope to (“is coextensive with”) the deposit of revelation. There is a third category of teach-

ings that “leads to a better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals” (Catechism, no. 892). These teachings illuminate understanding, helping revelation to bear fruit. While not definitively proposed, they are presented as true or sure. The Magisterium receives divine assistance in proposing these teachings, to which the faithful “are to adhere to it with religious assent” which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it” (Catechism, no. 892, footnote omitted). An example would be the Church’s recent teaching that the death penalty should not be administered unless “this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor” (Catechism, no. 2267).

High Definition

Thus, there are three types of teachings that require our assent, two of which are proposed infallibly. How does the Magisterium propose teaching infallibly? There are two ways: through the extraordinary Magisterium and through the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

The “extraordinary Magisterium” is so named because it issues solemn or formal pronouncements on relatively rare occasions. The extraordinary Magisterium pronounces infallibly through two types of solemn definitions. The first type of definition is by a Pope alone when he speaks “*ex cathedra*”—“from the chair” of Peter—that is, when “acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine concerning faith and morals to be held by the universal Church.”² Examples include the dogmatic definitions regarding Mary’s Immaculate Conception (Pope Pius IX, 1854) and Assumption into heaven (Pope Pius XII, 1950).

The second type of definition occurs when the Pope and the bishops in union with him solemnly define a teaching at an “ecumenical” or “general” council—a council whose teachings are binding on the whole Church (cf. canon 750 §2). Examples include the various solemn

definitions made at the Council of Trent, including on the Mass, the sacraments, justification, and indulgences.

Some Catholics mistakenly try to limit infallibility to only those teachings that are solemnly defined. They cite a section of canon law, “no doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless this is manifestly demonstrated” (canon 749 §2). This section, however, does not limit infallibility to solemn definitions. Instead, it prohibits placing a doctrine on the level of a solemn definition unless it can be shown to be so. A doctrine itself, however, may be infallible on another level. As Vatican II, the Catechism, and the Code of Canon Law all affirm, *any* definitively proposed teaching enjoys the charism of infallibility, not simply those which are solemnly defined.

The ordinary and universal Magisterium is the normal or usual means by which the Pope and the bishops in union with him infallibly propose teachings to the whole Church. It is exercised when the Pope and bishops agree that a particular doctrine is to be held definitively, and is typically carried out when the bishops are dispersed throughout the world in their respective dioceses. The ordinary and universal Magisterium also teaches infallibly when, without issuing a solemn definition, it definitively confirms or reaffirms the Church’s teachings at an ecumenical council, e.g., through a dogmatic constitution.

If a teaching is taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, it is necessarily definitive and therefore infallible. However, controversies sometimes arise as to whether a particular doctrine is in fact a teaching of the ordinary and universal Magisterium. On such occasions, the Pope can definitively confirm or reaffirm that a particular doctrine is indeed infallibly taught by that Magisterium. In such cases, the Pope does not make an *ex cathedra* pronouncement. Rather, he infallibly and definitively pronounces that a doctrine “has been constantly maintained and held by Tradition and transmitted by the ordinary, universal Magisterium.”³

The definitive character of such papal pronouncements is rooted in the very Tradition they confirm. Thus, the infallibility of these reaffirmations follows in part from the infallibility of previous teachings they affirm. As Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, the secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has explained, “a papal pronouncement of confirmation enjoys the same infallibility as the teaching of the ordinary, universal Magisterium. . . .”⁴ These definitive pronouncements provide a more concrete way of knowing that a doctrine has been proposed infallibly.

Pope John Paul II’s definitive pronouncement that only men can be ordained to the ministerial priesthood is a recent example of an infallible papal confirmation. He made his pronouncement in his 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone):

[T]hat priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents. . . . Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk. 22:32), I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful (no. 4).

Ordinatio Sacerdotalis is a good example of a definitive papal pronouncement that confirms or reaffirms a teaching of the ordinary and universal Magisterium. The Pope states that the teaching regarding priestly ordination is “the constant and universal Tradition of the Church.” He thus definitively identifies the teaching as magisterial. The Holy Father then definitively states that his pronouncement is a confirmation (“in virtue of my ministry of confirming

the brethren"). Finally, affirming that he is acting to remove all doubt on the matter, the Pope adds that his "judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

Another example of how a Pope can definitively pronounce without an *ex cathedra* statement concerns contraception. In 1930, the Anglican Church broke with longstanding Christian Tradition and taught that contraception could be allowed in some "difficult" cases. In response, Pope Pius XI issued that same year his encyclical *Casti Connubii* (On Christian Marriage). Speaking "in token" of the Church's "divine ambassadorship," Pius XI reaffirmed that this teaching belonged to "the uninterrupted Christian Tradition," proclaiming anew that "any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature. . ." (no. 56).

Pius XI's definitive pronouncement illustrates that the issue of contraception was definitively settled long before Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which itself affirms that same "uninterrupted Christian Tradition." Other recent examples include John Paul II's definitive pronouncements regarding abortion, murder, and euthanasia in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life).

Christ has provided the Magisterium as a great gift to His Church, so that the faithful may give free and grateful assent to the saving truth God has revealed to His Church. The Magisterium enables the faithful to live God's truth in the abundantly fruitful manner He intended. When the Magisterium pronounces definitively on a matter of faith or morals, the Holy Spirit ensures that the Church will not teach erroneously. The Church can pronounce infallibly through the extraordinary Magisterium as well as through the ordinary and universal Magisterium. He who hears and obeys the Church hears and obeys her founder, Jesus Christ. And, as Jesus promised, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the

truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:31-32).

¹ Pope John Paul II amended the Code of Canon Law, adding Canon 750 §2, through his 1998 decree *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (To Protect the Faith).

² Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, chapter 4; as cited in J. Neuner, S.J., and J. Dupuis,

The Christian Faith: In the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church—Sixth Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Alba House, 1996), no. 839, 297-98.

³ Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly English Edition), January 29, 1997, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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