

## **Infallible Teaching and the Gift of Divine Truth**

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Because of the importance that she attaches to our achieving life's proper goals, the Church rejoices in the charism of infallibility that distinguishes her teaching office. Thus, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 25: "The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful—who confirms his brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22:32)—he proclaims in an absolute decision a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals." When one considers the fragility of human reasoning left to its own resources, it is easy to appreciate the purpose and necessity of a Magisterium put at the service of saving doctrine and true morality. To teach the truth about human mores belongs to the Church and establishes for her the right to speak, even in the public domain, on matters that affect not only human happiness but also Christian perfection. The same can be said about the doctrines of faith, which, in the order of grace, are logically prior to teachings about human conduct. Even the Magisterium observes the axiom *agere sequitur esse*.

Before proceeding to consider infallible teaching, it is useful to recall a distinction that the scholastic theologians had posited between what is supernatural in itself, "supernaturale quoad substantiam," and what is supernatural in the way that it is communicated, "supernaturale

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quoad modum.”<sup>1</sup> The first category of truths embraces those things that we know only because they have been communicated to the human race through divine revelation, whereas the second category includes those truths which in themselves remain knowable to human reason, but which, for purposes of the divine pedagogy, have also been revealed in the Church of faith and sacraments. The distinction still holds good. The Munich philosopher Robert Spaemann explains that contrary to a now widespread prejudice, the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and the divine judgement which determines our eternal destiny are not merely dogmas of Christian faith or of religions of biblical origins, but they are age-old insights of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul expands on this assertion when he writes in *Evangelium vitae*: “Revelation progressively allows the first notion of immortal life planted by the Creator in the human heart to be grasped with ever greater clarity” (no. 31). For the Christian believer then, there is no room for Hume’s pessimism: “We never advance one step beyond ourselves.” Instead, we know that the Church instructs infallibly on truths that are not foreign and strange to human beings, even when they surpass reason’s ability to capture them.

This progressive clarification of truth especially pertains to the Church’s instruction about the moral life. The promise is not that grace will make nature different, but that grace perfects nature. As *Veritatis splendor* reminds us, nature does not speak with a forked tongue. The same

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<sup>1</sup> The Dominican expositor on Aquinas, Cardinal Cajetan, records the distinction in his commentary on the *Summa theologiae*. For further discussion, see my *Christian Faith and the Theological Life* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 80, n80.

<sup>2</sup> See his forthcoming essay, “On the Anthropology of the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*.”

principle applies in an analogous way when the Church proclaims what is supernatural in itself and not only by way of communication to us, for example, the Trinity, the Incarnation and the mysteries of Christ's life, the Sacraments, and the divinely willed establishment and organization of the Church. These truths of faith also perfect human beings, who without believing them (at least implicitly) cannot achieve the high destiny to which God calls us.

This view that only in Christ does man fully discover who he is and wherein lies his destiny explains the Church's legitimate insistence that Christian believers accept, albeit through different expressions of one formal assent, magisterial teaching about what has been revealed by God. Recent documents from the Holy See help interpret what is taught in *Lumen Gentium* 25. The briefest summation may be found in the concluding formula of the "Profession of Faith" that is presently used throughout the Church. The text distinguishes into three categories the object of faith to which infallible teaching binds the members of Christ's Church.<sup>3</sup> The first concerns the deposit of faith entrusted to the Church: "With firm faith I believe ... everything contained in God's word, written down or handed down in tradition and proposed by the Church—whether in solemn judgment or in the ordinary and universal Magisterium—as divinely revealed and calling

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<sup>3</sup> The "Profession of Faith" should be read in consultation with "Ad Tuendam Fidem" and the pertinent canons from the *Code of Canon Law*, especially, Canons 750 §§ 1 & 2, 752, 753 and Canon 598, §§ 1 & 2. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has also published a doctrinal commentary on the "Profession of Faith:" *Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the "Professio Fidei"* (June 29, 1998; AAS 90 (1998), 544-545). For a recent commentary on these documents, see Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, SDB, "The Magisterium of the Church and the *Professio Fidei*" in *Proclaiming the Truth of Jesus Christ. Papers from the Vallombrosa Meeting* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000). This volume also contains other helpful commentary for those interested in pursuing further technical questions related to the Magisterium.

for faith.” The second distinction extends (in an organic and indeed logical manner) to what is required for the sacred preservation and faithful explanation of the same deposit of faith: “I also firmly accept and hold each and every thing that is proposed by the same Church definitively with regard to teaching concerning faith and morals.” The third expression of assent embraces other authoritative teachings promulgated through the exercise of an authentic though perhaps not definitive teaching act: “What is more, I adhere with religious submission of will and intellect (*religiosum tamen intellectus et voluntatis obsequium*) to the teachings which either the Roman Pontiff or the college of bishops enunciate when they exercise the authentic Magisterium, even if they proclaim those teachings in an act that is not definitive.”<sup>4</sup>

Though the popular imagination is wont to consider any exercise of magisterial authority as an unwarranted intrusion into the sphere of personal determination, the charism of infallibility, which belongs principally to the Roman Pontiff and the bishops in union with him, actually promotes and safeguards authentic Christian freedom. In the past decade, the Holy See has developed this point in a charge to theologians: “The service to the Church which the Magisterium renders is thus for the benefit of the whole People of God called to enter the liberty of the truth revealed by God in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the bond that unites the members of the

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<sup>4</sup> **Serious misunderstandings about what constitutes freedom of choice and other factors have led some contemporary theologians to interpret wrongly the religious "obsequium" or assent mentioned in *Lumen Gentium*, no. 25. For a clarification especially in the area of morals, see the informative study by John R. Connery, S.J., "The Non-Infallible Moral Teaching of the Church," *The Thomist* 51 (1987): 1-16.**

<sup>5</sup> **See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1990 *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, at no. 14. This text is intended to direct theologians to write**

Church to her Pastors should not be compared with the relationship that exists between citizens in democratic republics and their elected officials. One difference is immediately clear: the Magisterium safeguards a “liberty of truth” that is ontologically prior to its being confided to or accepted by any Christian believer.

Although one can point to certain moments in the Church's history when conciliarist movements reached particularly high peak, the true spirit of Catholicism has always resisted attempts to democratize the Church. The reason for this instinctive retreat from democratization lies in the fact that to proclaim entirely the deposit of faith requires that the Church announce truths that unaided reason is unable either to uncover at all or to discover easily. She can only receive this gift of truth from her Divine Lord. By definition then, the full expression of Christian belief realized in the Church of faith and sacraments transcends the ordinary expectations of human reason and sense.

The only humanly compelling reason for dwelling in a Church that proposes for belief truths that explain not only sacred realities, visible and invisible, but also affect personal moral determinations derives from the conviction that an all-true God guarantees the reliability of these claims. Although certain non-Catholic Christians would agree, they do not accept the developed and articulated doctrines that the Church proposes as precise objects of faith, and which, it is held, serve the authentic transmission of biblical revelation. Since doctrines function as external guarantees--the interior guarantee being the True God himself--of the unity of faith, Roman

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**and teach in accord with the principles established in *Lumen Gentium* 25.**

Catholics rightly put high value on those doctrines that allow the Church to become truly catholic, that is, open to every person and nation. This mark of her catholicity shapes the way that the Roman Church regards unmoderated freedom of expression, individual interpretation of scripture, unlicensed academic freedom, and certain other institutes that democratic societies and other Christian traditions variously and variously prize.

It belongs principally to the Church's sacred Pastors to expose the true and full meaning of Sacred Scripture and other authoritative expressions of the Church's faith, so that the faithful can hear and accept God's revelation in all its richness. Theologians assist this mission. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, the "primary and perpetual foundation" of theology remains the written Word of God, understood together with sacred Tradition and as authentically interpreted by the Church's living teaching office exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> The teaching authority of the Church provides a service of truth for all men and women, for it offers a divinely-authenticated instruction about revealed doctrine, including the realm of right human conduct. Because the need for proper instruction about human affairs increases as human learning about life in its natural dimensions advances and becomes more complex, the mission of the Church in the world daily gains increasing importance for the well-being of the human family.

The Church's mission to provide catholic or universal instruction explains, for example, why moral theologians ought to consider sexual preferences less important than what makes for

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<sup>6</sup> See *Dei Verbum* nos. 24 & 10.

good sex, and why proposals for "compromise" in the area of moral norms, for example, about the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death, are rejected as incompatible with the truth about the human person. Who would seriously seek a compromise with whatever is known to perfect the human being? Still, it is counter-intuitive to many persons that they accept the proposition that the Church knows the course to true happiness and can point it out infallibly. The claim of infallibility may even seem to promote sectarian intolerance. But the opposite is true. In his championing of reason against unreason, Pope John Paul II points up the relationship between a philosophy that accepts a universal knowledge of the good and the preservation of the human good: "It should never be forgotten that the neglect of being inevitably leads to losing touch with objective truth and therefore with the very ground of human dignity."<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Pope can encourage a fruitful exchange among persons who hold different views: "To believe it possible to know a universally valid truth is in no way to encourage intolerance; on the contrary, it is the essential condition for sincere and authentic dialogue between persons."<sup>8</sup> Although a climate of intellectual egalitarianism at times makes it difficult, Christians must be prepared to confront the problems of the contemporary world with a confidence born of these strong convictions about truth and dialogue. In this effort, close adherence to the Magisterium supports rather than hinders the Christian believer participate in contemporary debates that involve the *humanum*.

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<sup>7</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, n<sup>o</sup> 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, n<sup>o</sup> 92.

Of course, teaching the truth does not result in every Christian doing the truth; the reality of personal sin and the commonplace of failure require a more elaborated account than is possible in this essay. One thing, however, is sure: such an account would lead us back to the primal revolution in which man separated himself from God. If Christ came to save us from sin, then it should come as no surprise that his Church exists to continue the same mission. Because she is founded on the True Word, Jesus Christ, the Church can speak candidly and convincingly to the world God's own truth about himself and all that exists. Since the happiness of their lives so manifestly depends on abiding in this Truth, men and women today need this kind of truthful teaching. The theologian especially must take up again St Paul's challenge to the Corinthians: "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ" (II Cor 10: 4,5). Only an organic vision of the truth enables Christians to tackle such pressing contemporary problems as promoting peace, establishing social justice, advocating family life, and defending innocent human life.

A more pressing reason for upholding the Church's Magisterium comes to mind when we realize that Christ's revelation has already dramatically changed the way that people think about God. In the 70s, the late French Dominican A.-J. Festugière observed the novelty that Christian revelation introduced: "Even though one may be as unhappy as before, and though there may have been as many crimes and sufferings in the year 1972 as in the time of Tiberius or Nero, an extraordinary phenomenon took place during the first century of our era: man came to believe

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that God loved him.”<sup>9</sup> Only the Magisterium can announce infallibly this truth. And it remains the central truth that undergirds everything that we are required to hold as divinely revealed and that summons from within us a response that the *Code of Canon Law* calls “divine and Catholic faith.”

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<sup>9</sup> *Mémorial André-Jean Festugière. Antiquité païenne et chrétienne, Vingt-cinq études publiées et réunies par E. Lucchesi et H.-D. Saffrey, Cahiers d’orientalisme X, éditions P. Cramer, Genève, 1984, p. 275.*