

The Church: Teacher and Mother

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Mater et Magistra—Mother and Teacher! With these words the late Pope John XXIII began his encyclical on Christianity and social progress. They were applied to the Catholic Church, founded by Jesus Christ and entrusted with "the double task of begetting souls unto herself, and of *educating* and governing those whom she begets, guiding with *maternal providence* the life both of individuals and of peoples." Holy Mother Church, then, is a teacher. But, we may ask, what is the source of this teaching authority? Why must the Church teach? What is the precise nature of this function? How is the Christian obliged by the doctrines proposed by Christ's teachers? In the following pages we shall attempt to answer these questions, explaining, in the process, certain unique functions of the teaching authority or *magisterium* of the Catholic Church, Mother of all Christians.

The Source and Purpose of the Church's Teaching Authority

In the Scriptures we find many moving descriptions of God's enduring love and care for men. His interventions in history on behalf of the wayward and unfaithful Israelites are understood as the actions of a God whose merciful love would not let His chosen race wander very far from the path that would lead them back to Him. He wanted their obedience and love, that He might give them eternal life and happiness. He even went so far as to send His son, Jesus Christ, the God-Man, into the world to live, die and rise again that all men might share in the eternal beatitude of life with Him.

St. Augustine tells us God arranges that we find no true and lasting joy in anything save Himself. "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." Every man, then, is to find

genuine happiness and peace in God alone. Moreover, our Father and Creator has taken positive steps to facilitate our journey to Him.

God has seen fit to achieve our eternal union with Him through the mediation of His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ. "God has put all things in subjection under his [Christ's] feet; that is all things have been made subject to him, except indeed that power which made them his subjects. And when that subjection is complete, then the Son himself will become subject to the power which made all things his subjects, so that God may be all in all" (I Cor. 15:26-28). Our everlasting union with God, therefore, is to be effected through our subjection to Jesus Christ.

It is, of course, true that Christ came into the world to redeem man from sin. However, He also came to teach him the way to eternal life, to make known to him the true path back to our Father and Creator (John 14:6). Jesus taught as the Father's ambassador, preaching the way to salvation exactly as the Father had instructed Him (John 12:47-50). Consequently, as the obedient Son of God, He had an authentic teaching mission; "... and he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

Our Lord, however, according to the Divine Plan, died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. He was not to remain forever present in this world in His human nature. Who then was to point out the way of salvation to the many millions of souls who lived after the time of Christ? Again, Jesus limited his preaching to a relatively small area of the world. Who was to make known His saving words to those who did not directly hear His message? Christ ordered His disciples to teach all nations that each and every human being might follow the will of God as preached by Him (Matthew 28:16-20). By reason of this command, Christ's Church was to continue the Master's work. As the continuation of Christ in this world, the Catholic Church has received from its Divine Founder the authority to teach men truths which are necessary for their eternal salvation.

What Is the Magisterium?

The power or authority of the Church to guard, defend and make known those truths which have been divinely revealed for the salvation of souls and the instruction of the faithful is called the teaching function of the Church or the *magisterium*. This function includes not only a right, but also a most serious obligation to preserve and defend the truths of faith in order that the faith of the Christian people might retain its integrity and their charity its fervor in the face of any opposing doctrines inimical to their achievement of eternal salvation. There is also the very positive duty

to teach revealed truth with the supreme authority granted to the Church by God through Christ. To this authority there corresponds, on the part of the faithful, the obligation of listening to and respecting the teachings of the Church.

The teaching authority of the Church, then, is primarily and directly concerned with truths of the supernatural order, for instance, that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. However, in order to insure the salvation of the souls committed to her care, the Church at times extends her magisterial function into the realm of natural truths and temporal matters. Holy Mother Church will pass judgment on doctrines of a profane nature and offer her teaching on such subjects as war, matrimony, private property and freedom, because of the intimate connection between these temporal questions and the eternal destiny of her children.

The Infallible Magisterium

We have mentioned that Christ's teaching mission was authentic. He faithfully proposed divine truths according to the will of His Father. The power to teach which He granted to His Church is endowed with this same authenticity. "As the Father has sent me, I also send you" (John 20:21). Moreover, Jesus told His preachers, "He who hears you, hears me; and he who rejects you, rejects me; and he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

Over and above its authentic quality, the *magisterium* in certain cases teaches infallibly. Infallibility is a special external assistance from God by which the teaching Church is preserved free from error when proposing truths about faith and morals, truths which are, moreover, indispensable for salvation. God assists the teaching Church in this manner in order to safeguard His children from error and the dangers to their eternal destiny consequent upon their adherence to such errors. On the positive side, infallibility is ordered to the engendering of the true faith in the souls of those who were incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body by the sacramental rite of Baptism.

An infallible teaching authority in the Church is essential to the salvation of souls. If anyone should refuse to believe Christ's message, by that very fact, he suffers the loss of eternal life (Mark 16:15 ss.). Because belief in Christ's teaching is so necessary for salvation, Our Lord, in justice, has made provision that there should be always a true and genuine proclamation of His doctrines through the Church He founded. Thus, through His continued assistance (Matthew 28:20) and the special help of the

Holy Spirit (John 14:26) Christians may be certain that the Catholic Church is truthfully teaching the doctrines of Christ.

Thus, Christ commanded His Church to teach men the way to everlasting life with God. This function bears the authentic character of the teachings of Christ and includes the special quality of infallibility or freedom from error. We shall now discuss the precise nature of this teaching and those who exercise the function in the Church.

The Subject of the Teaching Authority of the Church

"The teaching Church is the hierarchy—the college of bishops, the successors of the Apostles, in union with and in subordination to the Roman Pontiff."¹ These men, therefore, are the teachers of Christ's doctrine. They primarily have the right and obligation to transmit or give eternal truth to God's children. In speaking of the subject of the teaching authority of the Church, it is useful to distinguish between the extraordinary *magisterium* and the ordinary *magisterium*, both of which are infallible in the circumstances specified.²

The extraordinary *magisterium* may be exercised by the pope alone or by the bishops in union with the pope and is characterized by a certain solemnity. The bishop of Rome teaches in an extraordinary manner and infallibly when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, "when acting as the supreme pastor and teacher of all Christians, he defines with his supreme apostolic authority a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the entire Church, in virtue of the divine assistance promised to him in the person of Peter, (then he) is vested with that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed his Church . . . to be endowed" (Vatican I, Session IV, D 1839, DS 3074). Consequently, when the Holy Father teaches in this way, every Catholic is held to assent to the truth proposed because it has been revealed by God. An infallible proclamation of a pope is not a revelation of a new truth. Rather, it is the proposing to the belief of the faithful a truth already

¹ Maurice B. Schepers, O.P., *The Church of Christ*; Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963, p. 75. This statement does not mean to deny any participation in the teaching mission of the Church to other Christians. It is a fact that priests, religious and secular, nuns, brothers and laity do participate in this mission. We have chosen to limit our discussion to the teaching office of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

² The following remarks are to a great extent a summary of Chapter IV of *What Is The Church?* by André de Bovis, S.J. This work is volume 48 of *The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism* published by Hawthorn Books, New York in 1961.

contained in the holy Scripture and sacred tradition. The teaching of the pope is an authentic interpretation of such a truth and the authenticity of the teaching in no way depends upon the approval of the rest of Christendom.

Again, there is no special protocol to which the pope must adhere when speaking *ex cathedra*. He speaks thus when he makes known his intention of teaching as the head of the universal Church. The sole requirement for the promulgation of an infallible doctrine is that he make sufficiently clear his purpose to bind the whole Church to belief in this particular revealed truth about faith and morals. We have instances of the extraordinary magisterium in the definition of the Assumption of the Blessed Mother by Pope Pius XII and in the definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God by Pope Pius IX.

The bishops of the Catholic Church exercise an infallible extraordi-



nary teaching authority when they are gathered in union with the bishop of Rome at an Ecumenical Council. Such a council is "an assembly of the bishops of the Catholic Church which treats of questions of faith and the Church's life and organization, in union with and subordination to the head of the episcopal body and the teaching Church—the bishop of Rome."³ The latter has the sole right to convoke an Ecumenical Council, to preside over it and to confirm its results. Hence, with the death of Pope John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council came to a close and could not validly be resumed, unless so ordered by Pope Paul VI. That Pope Paul preside over Vatican II is also necessary for the validity of its teachings, since the work of the bishops at an Ecumenical Council must be carried on in union with and in subordination to the pope. The Council's affinity with the pope is evidenced by his own physical presence at the sessions or that

³ Schepers, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

of his representatives. We might add, that the physical presence of each and every bishop is not required for the validity of an Ecumenical Council. The fact that a certain bishop may leave Rome before the conclusion of a particular session in no way affects the validity of that session's teachings. Finally, to be effective and binding on all Christians, the results of the work of Vatican II will have to be confirmed by Paul VI.

In fine, an Ecumenical Council exercises an extraordinary magisterium and teaches infallibly, when the bishops in union with the pope solemnly propose truths in matters of faith and morals which are to be believed by the faithful. Again, the intention of binding the whole Church must be sufficiently evident. The doctrine of the infallibility of the pope and his primacy of jurisdiction was taught in such a manner.

The *ordinary teaching authority* of the Church is exercised continually by the popes and bishops in encyclical and pastoral letters, decisions of the Roman Congregations, sermons and books, when through these means, they propose truths to be believed by the faithful. The ordinary *magisterium* is the sum total of these acts extending throughout the entire history of the Church. Infallibility or freedom from error is also a characteristic of this *magisterium*. And its teaching is free from error when there is, at least a moral unanimity concerning a particular doctrine. An example of the infallible teaching authority of the *ordinary magisterium* is the doctrine that the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. However, it should be noted that not every teaching act of this *magisterium* considered in itself and in isolation, even when it concerns a doctrinal matter, is infallible. Thus, the papal encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, or a pastoral letter of a local ordinary is not in itself infallible. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should restrict our assent only to the definitions of the bishop of Rome or an Ecumenical Council. For "all teaching put forward by a pope or a bishop in the exercise of his duty, and out of loyalty to that duty, has a right at least to our respectful assent."⁴ We must always bear in mind the supernatural authority of the teaching Church and that she teaches from a very serious and loving motive: the wish to safeguard and take positive steps to achieve the salvation of every member of the Mystical Body, and even, of every man. Nor should we forget that ecclesiastical leaders are the representatives of Christ. God in the mysterious workings of His Divine Providence, has chosen certain individual men to be teachers in His Church. He has given them definite talents and certain skills whereby they may faithfully fulfill

⁴ de Bovis, op. cit., p. 119.

this serious obligation. This is not to deny that by certain, sometimes overly rigorous, standards a certain teacher may not possess the greatest intellectual ability or eloquence in speaking. Yet, it is through these same human beings that Christ has chosen to govern His Church and complete His plan of Redemption. We have only to recall that Christ selected the unlearned fisherman, Peter, as the first head of His Church, when it was within His power to raise up a brilliant philosopher or administrator to accomplish the same task.

The Teaching of the Church on Temporal Matters

At the present time we are accustomed to the issuing of papal encyclicals devoted to a consideration and the teaching of non-revealed truths. Witness *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem In Terris*. These documents are mainly concerned with truths of the natural order. Yet, to teach in these areas is not outside the jurisdiction of the teaching authority of the Church. Popes present the Church's position on nuclear warfare, labor relations, private property and the like because these truths are intimately connected with the spiritual nature of man and his eternal salvation. Bishops, too, speak on temporal matters in order to encourage conditions which are favorable to the faith of Christians and non-Christians. Pope and bishops intervene only where Christian faith and morals are concerned, with the hope that by such action Christians and all mankind may be directed to Christ with a greater intensity and effectiveness.

It is not the main task of the *magisterium* to teach on temporal matters. Rather the primary object is revealed supernatural truth. Hence, encyclicals and pastoral letters dealing with social problems, the profane sciences, etc., and not of their nature infallible. But because of the supernatural character of the office of the pope and bishops, such pronouncements do demand an attentive consideration and a respectful acceptance on the part of the faithful. Any Christian who is in a position to take action according to the dictates of a particular teaching is bound to do so in proportion to the gravity of the issues and the nature of the pronouncement. Thus a dutiful Christian in public office should exert his influence in order to improve the lot of minority groups in accord with the directives found in *Pacem In Terris*. In *Humani Generis*, Pius XII had this to say about the authority of papal encyclicals:

Nor must it be thought that what is expounded in Encyclical Letters does not of itself demand consent, since in writing

such letters the Popes do not exercise the supreme power of their Teaching Authority. For these matters are taught with the ordinary teaching authority, of which it is true to say: 'He who heareth you, heareth me.'

Conclusion

Finally, we should like to conclude by stressing two important aspects of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church; namely, that this is a living *magisterium* employed by the Church as a loving Mother.

In exercising its teaching function, the hierarchy does not limit itself to preserving and defending the deposit of faith. Rather, it attempts to apply divine truths to the unique and varied demands of different ages. As a living *magisterium*, the Church supplies the modern world with the truth for which it so deeply yearns. The truths of faith are eternal and at the same time applicable to every man and every age. Hence, the Church possesses the truth necessary for and capable of conducting the souls of every era to their heavenly reward. She will not, in virtue of the obligation given by Christ, hesitate to teach these salutary truths to her children and to the entire human race.

This consideration leads to our final point. As a mother expresses her love and care for her children by teaching them those things which are necessary for a happy and secure existence, so also Holy Mother Church guides us by her teaching authority, enlightening us and putting us on the road to eternal happiness, which as we have said, is to be acquired by our subjection to Jesus Christ. The late Pope John XXIII expressed this in the opening words of *Mater et Magistra*.

The Catholic Church has been established by Jesus Christ as Mother and Teacher of nations, so that all who in the course of centuries come to her loving embrace, may find salvation as well as the fullness of a more excellent life.