

## THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

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Is it possible to say anything new on the topic of the Magisterium and theology? The topic has been subjected to such intense study in the years since the publication of *Humanae Vitae* (1968) that one would seem to be compelled to do no more than summarize and repeat what has already been said by others.

Much of the recent discussion has been preoccupied with the problem of theological dissent regarding the Church's teaching on sexual morality. Here I will have very little to say about public dissent as such—except to note at the outset that the generalized tension between the Magisterium and theologians typical of recent decades is both unprecedented and anomalous. The normal situation is that Catholic theologians acknowledge the authority of the Magisterium for their work. It is a mistake to allow the condition of public dissent to frame or dominate any account of the relationship between theology and the Magisterium.

When the problem of dissent is bracketed, at least for the purposes of discussion, it turns out that there may indeed be something new to say on our topic. If it is true that the doctrine of the Magisterium as we know it today was articulated in contention with modernity, then it may be expected that new developments in understanding the Magisterium and theology will emerge on the frontiers, where modern preoccupations with the principle of autonomous reason are in retreat in the face of the recovery of the communal and traditional contexts of all rational activity that is characteristic of current philosophy. I believe this to be the case and I shall try to sketch what appear to me to be the most significant elements in the new situation for a deepened understanding of the relationship between the Magisterium and theology.

Perhaps the simplest way for me to characterize the new situation is to offer a rather mundane analogy. Imagine a theological symposium underway on a beautiful spring afternoon. Imagine further that the participants decide to decamp to the college playing fields in order to have a game of softball. (Perhaps some of them could do little more than watch from the sidelines!) Suppose that after the captains and teams have been selected, someone asks about the rules to be followed in the game. Perhaps he says, "In Cincinnati, where I grew up, we played this way." But then someone else objects, "No, in Boston we play the game this way." And I say, "Well, in the Bronx, we play this way." And so on. The point of this simple analogy is that a debate about the rules of the game may consume all the time allowed for the game itself. It may turn out, in other words, that their disagreement about the rules of the game would prevent the symposium participants from actually playing the game itself, while agreement about and acceptance of some set of rules would make the game of softball possible on the afternoon in question.

Naturally, for perceptive readers, this analogy will bring the name of Wittgenstein to mind. But there is no need to invoke or defend the entire apparatus of Wittgenstein's philosophy of forms of life and language games to note in the analogy of our hypothetical softball game a deep and important truth about human activities. The rules, far from being a constraint, create the space in which a particular communal and social activity can proceed. To be sure, the rules impose limits. But these limits define possibilities like softball and baseball, soccer and rugby, or chess and bridge, to mention just a few of the more mundane human activities enabled by particular sets of rules. On this view of the matter, the rules are significant because they make the game possible. A disagreement about the rules, as we know from experience, brings the game to a halt, whereas the presumption of an agreement about the rules on the part of all the players is a necessary condition for the game to proceed.

This suggestive analogy goes part of the way in explaining why, in my view, it is a mistake to allow discussion of the doctrine of the Magisterium to be dominated and shaped by publicly dissenting theologians. Dissent about the *authority* with which a doctrine is

taught (like a disagreement about the rules of a game) distracts our attention from the far more important issue of the *truth* of what is being taught (playing the game itself).

Thus, for example, with regard to the Church's teaching about the immorality of artificial contraception, dissenting theologians force us to defend the infallibility of the ordinary magisterium, as represented by the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, instead of focusing on the real issue of the Catholic teaching on sexuality. Or, to cite the example of the reservation of Holy Orders to men, we find ourselves enmeshed in controversies about the authority of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* rather than in the more important task of developing the theology of the natural signification of the maleness of the priest who represents both the victim and the one who offers sacrifice.

When I worked as the executive director of the doctrinal office of the United States episcopal conference, the first question that journalists inevitably posed with regard to new magisterial documents like *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae* was "Is it infallible?" My answer was: "The far more important question is: is it *true*?"

The tendency to give questions about the authority of religious doctrines priority over questions about their truth is characteristic not just of dissenting theologians. It has been typical of modernity itself, and is matched in philosophy by the preoccupation with epistemology and methodology. A refreshing element in the new situation has been a refusal to allow questions about the reliability of the foundations or sources of truth to distract attention from the more substantive issue of truth itself. This reordering of priorities helps us to understand and interpret the history of the formulation of the doctrine of the Magisterium as it has evolved since the nineteenth century.

For the most part, the Church's teaching is directed to the glory of God and to leading us to holiness—the present and future enjoyment of ultimate communion with the Blessed Trinity and with other persons in lives of ever-deepening charity. Through her teaching activities—through the family, through catechesis, through preaching, through the Magisterium, through theology—the Church seeks to cultivate the intellectual and moral dispositions necessary for this

enjoyment, to enhance understanding of its profound meaning, and to commend it to others.

The whole ensemble of Catholic doctrine—the *depositum fidei*—embraces all the teachings that together serve to shape and direct our lives toward holiness. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* demonstrates, such doctrines answer questions about what must be believed, how divine grace transforms us through the liturgy and the sacraments, which courses of action should be pursued and which shunned, which interior dispositions must be cultivated and which avoided, and so on, in order to enjoy the life of ultimate communion to the full. Much of the teaching activity of the Church, including the authoritative teaching of the Magisterium, is concerned with questions of this kind.

But another range of questions can arise. These are concerned not with what must be believed and undertaken in order to grow in the life of grace and charity, but rather how it can be known reliably that such things *should be* believed and undertaken.

Recent philosophical analysis of the nature of religious doctrines helps us to distinguish these two types of questions, and as well us to understand how the modern preoccupation with the authority and sources of truth compelled the Church to articulate the largely implicit doctrine of the Magisterium over the course of the past two centuries.

The philosopher of religion, William A. Christian, has suggested (in his book *Doctrines of Religious Communities*) that, in response to the two different kinds of questions sketched above, the teaching activities of religious communities generate two types of doctrines: *primary doctrines*, in which a religion commends the beliefs and practices that constitute its distinctive pattern of life, and *governing doctrines*, in which a community states the sources for its primary doctrines.

According to Christian's analysis, governing doctrines respond to such questions as the following: Is this really a doctrine of our community? What procedures do we have for deciding? Is this doctrine more important than other doctrines? Is it consistent with them? Is it appropriate to develop understandings that seem implicit

in our doctrines? Should these also be considered doctrines? Who in the community is authorized to decide? In his study of different religious traditions like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and others, Christian explores these different types of questions, which generate what he calls “doctrines about doctrines” or, more simply, governing doctrines.

The history of the Catholic Church has afforded many occasions for developing and invoking governing doctrines. Particularly germane to our topic is the fact that questions about the authenticity of its primary doctrines have been pressed upon the Church almost without interruption for the past two hundred years. Thus, for example, more explicit attention has been devoted by the Magisterium to the doctrine of revelation during this period than in all the previous centuries taken together.

Throughout this period, the Church has gradually formulated a range of previously implicit governing doctrines to affirm that her primary doctrines authentically express what is contained in Scripture and Tradition, that Scripture and Tradition themselves constitute the single source of revelation, that revelation involves a real divine communication mediated by Christ, the prophets, and apostles, that the scriptural record of this revelation is divinely inspired, that the liturgical and doctrinal tradition embodies communally authorized readings of Scripture, and that the Church under the Successor of Peter is divinely guided in its formulation of primary doctrines of faith and morals.

The increasingly explicit formulations of the doctrine of the Magisterium over the past two centuries is part of a response to the growing need for a clear articulation of the governing doctrines of the Catholic faith. In circumstances in which the authenticity of Catholic doctrines was a matter of persistent and unrelenting controversy, it was natural that doctrinal developments addressing this issue should take place along several fronts at once: the nature of revelation, the interpretation of Scripture, the authority of Tradition, and the scope of the Church’s teaching office. Each of these topics was central to the agenda of Vatican Council I and, in varying degrees, has remained prominent.

In the Constitutions on Divine Revelation and the Church, Vatican Council II attained a new level in this developing articulation. While reaffirming the central teachings of Vatican I, these constitutions located the teaching office of the Church in the broad context of the governing doctrines that make explicit her conviction that the truth she possesses and transmits is itself a *gift* to be received in faith, hope, and love.

From the vantage point of the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seems clear that the definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I was but an early stage in the Church's continuing endeavor to articulate a consistent set of governing doctrines in the face of modern challenges. Viewed in this context, the nineteenth-century emphasis on the official Magisterium and the twentieth-century prominence of the papal Magisterium will appear not as an unwarranted inflation of papal power at the expense of other teaching authorities in the Church, but as a necessary aspect of a developing articulation of her governing doctrines in response to the challenges posed by modernity's exaltation of autonomous reason.

In the face of such a challenge, the Church must affirm her faith that human beings cannot create the truth, but must receive it as a gift. Despite the continuing influence of modernist cultural assumptions of religious individualism and autonomy, the atmosphere generated by more recent intellectual trends is somewhat more receptive to Catholic convictions about the communally and traditionally constituted sources of truth.

The fundamental strategy, as pursued by thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre, is to recover a truth that was repressed in modernity: Tradition is not an enemy of reason but a child of reason. Rational activities in all fields—from the natural sciences to philosophy, the arts, and the humanities—are not constrained or obstructed, but, on the contrary, enabled and directed by a wide range of traditions and by the communities that develop and transmit them. According to this view, rational inquiry is itself tradition- and community-dependent. Communities of scientific, philosophical, theological, and other kinds of scholars conserve and transform traditions of inquiry

that cumulatively enlarge and deepen various bodies of knowledge, and at the same time they undertake to initiate and cultivate new generations of students to continue in their footsteps.

This perspective is helpful for understanding the relationship between the Magisterium and theology. On this view, the Magisterium acts not to constrain but to enable theological inquiry to proceed. With Scripture and Tradition, it is one of the conditions for the very possibility of theology. The 1990 Instruction prepared by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, entitled “The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian”—surely one of the most significant official documents on the relation of theology to the Magisterium—recognizes and affirms this.

Although the documents of the Second Vatican Council mentioned theology and theologians at various points—perhaps most notably in the Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum* 23-24), the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium* 23), and the Decree on Priestly Formation (*Optatam Totius* 12, 14-16), the council did not make this theme the focus of an extended treatment. Given the impact that the council had on the work of theologians, this may come as something of a surprise.

Reprising significant elements of the Catholic tradition as articulated in conciliar and post-conciliar teaching, the Instruction forcefully argues that the theologian’s vocation is a properly ecclesial one, and that the bonds of ecclesial communion implied by this relationship can be expressed juridically. As is well known, the Instruction takes up in turn the divine gift of truth, the vocation of the theologian, and the role of the Magisterium. Under its consideration of the role of the Magisterium, the Instruction gives extended attention to the problem of theological dissent.

But what is particularly noteworthy is that the Instruction begins, not with the Magisterium, but with the gift of divine truth. Indeed, the Instruction’s Latin title is *Donum Veritatis*, “the gift of truth.” Because theology is not simply an ancillary function of the Magisterium, we need to locate the theologian and the work of theology in the broader context of the life of Church, precisely as she is the locus of a truth which she did not generate, but which she received

as a gift. At the center of this truth is the person of Jesus Christ, who reveals the divine desire to draw us into the communion of trinitarian love and, moreover, who enables us to enjoy this communion.

The function of the Magisterium is to guard and teach in its entirety the truth that the Church received as a gift and is bound to hand on. For this reason, according to then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Instruction “treats the ecclesial mission of the theologian not in a duality of Magisterium-theology, but rather in the framework of a triangular relationship defined by the people of God, bearer of the *sensus fidei*, the Magisterium, and theology.” In different ways, therefore, both the Magisterium and theology are servants of a prior truth, received in the Church as a gift.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Instruction is to have secured in this way what Pope Benedict has called the “ecclesial identity of theology” and, correspondingly, the ecclesial vocation of the theologian. In the words of the Instruction itself:

Among the vocations awakened... by the Spirit in the Church is that of the theologian..., [whose] role is to pursue in a particular way an ever-deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church..., [which he does] in communion with the Magisterium, which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the deposit of faith (*Donum Veritatis* 6).

The theological vocation responds to the intrinsic dynamic of faith, which “appeals to reason” and “beckons reason... to come to understand what it has believed” (6). In this way, “theological science responds to the invitation of truth as it seeks to understand the faith” (6). But the theological vocation also responds to the dynamic of love, for “in the act of faith, man knows God’s goodness and begins to love Him... [and] is ever desirous of a better knowledge of the beloved” (7).

The gift of truth received in the Church thus establishes both the context for the vocation and mission of the theologian, and the



framework for the actual practice of the discipline of theology. This ecclesially received truth, as articulated in the deposit of faith and handed on by the Magisterium, constitutes not an *extrinsic* authority that poses odious limits on an inquiry that would otherwise be free, but an *intrinsic* source and measure that gives theology its identity and finality as an intellectual activity.

Examined independently of the assent of faith and the mediation of the ecclesial community, the texts, institutions, rites, and beliefs of the Catholic Church can be the focus of the humanistic, philosophical, and social-scientific inquiries that together constitute the field of religious studies. But Christian theology is a different kind of inquiry. Cut off from an embrace of the truth that provides its subject matter and indicates the methods appropriate to its study, theology as the Church has always understood it loses its specific character as a scientific inquiry of a certain type. Its precise scope is to seek the intelligibility of a truth received in faith by the theologian who is himself a member of the ecclesial community that is “the place of truth,” as Cardinal Walter Kasper has called it.

The theologian is thus free to seek the truth within limits imposed, not by an intrusive external authority, but by the nature of his discipline as such. As the Instruction points out: “Freedom of research, which the academic community holds most precious, means an openness to accepting the truth that emerges at the end of an investigation in which no element has intruded that is foreign to the methodology corresponding to the object under study” (12).

Theology cannot “deny its own foundations,” to use the words of Cardinal Avery Dulles, for the acceptance of the authority of Scripture and doctrines in theology is “not a limitation but rather the charter of its existence and freedom to be itself.” The freedom of inquiry proper to theology is, according to the Instruction, the “hallmark of a rational discipline whose object is given by Revelation, handed on and interpreted in the Church under the authority of the Magisterium, and received by faith. These givens have the force of principles. To eliminate them would mean to cease doing theology” (12). The principles of theology are derived from revelation, and constitute the discipline as such. In accepting them, the theologian is

simply being true to the nature of his subject, and to his vocation as a scholar in this field.

These elements of the Instruction's account of theology and its relation to the Magisterium are contested wherever what George Lindbeck somewhere termed the "individualistic foundational rationalism" of modernity holds sway. But, as the Instruction demonstrates, the Church has a solid, well-substantiated, and historically warranted rationale for its account of the nature of theology as an intellectual discipline of a particular sort, and of the inner connection between this discipline and magisterial teaching.

**I**t is central to the convictions of the Catholic Church, and indeed of the Christian tradition as such, to give priority to a theonomous rather than to an autonomous rationality. While it is true that the basis for this understanding is itself a properly theological one that is rooted in fundamental Christian convictions about the gift of truth and its reception in the ecclesial community, in the light certain postmodern intellectual trends, the Church's claims about the "situatedness" of theology are perfectly intelligible. The Instruction, in effect, constitutes an extended argument for the community- and tradition-dependent character of theology. Whatever other challenges it may pose, the present intellectual climate is, to a certain extent, more favorable to the defense of the principle of theonomous rationality that is crucial for the Catholic understanding of theology.

We may note that this conclusion is also supported by recent philosophical studies of the nature of authority. Although it is true that Catholic theology is notably dependent on the authority of the Magisterium, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the singularity of theology at this point. Authoritative criteria and professional bodies exist in almost all intellectual disciplines. Authorities function to maintain the quality and standards of many of these disciplines. According to a recent philosophical analysis of authority by Richard T. De George, "the acceptance of a certain degree of authority—which those subject to it regard as more or less legitimate, which they accept more or less easily, and which they challenge only exceptionally—is the normal state of affairs." In this sense, the Catholic understand-

ing of the relationship of theology to the Magisterium has formal parallels to other academic disciplines, in which authorities serve to foster rather than undermine intellectual and scholarly integrity.

Recent philosophical developments, as *Fides et Ratio* demonstrates, are not an unmixed blessing. Perhaps the most significant danger of postmodern intellectual trends is that, in stressing the cultural and social contexts of truth, they lead to relativism about truth itself. This is a real danger, but to deal with it thoroughly would require another paper. Here my objective has been to show that certain elements in the new philosophical situation are helpful in understanding and defending the Catholic vision of the relationship between the Magisterium and theology.

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I presented an earlier version of this brief paper in Rome in 2004 at a meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, which appeared in Italian in the journal of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, *PATH* 3 (2004) 57-68. It is a privilege to have been invited by the editors to adapt it for publication here in *Dominicana*, a journal on which I served as book-review editor when I was a Dominican student brother over forty years ago, and whose revival now fulfills a hope I have long cherished.