

No.15

3rd December 2020

Dear Friends,

This week we turn to the subject of the Church and its Authority to teach. I am very grateful to Fr Tristan for this week's summary. We need to have confidence in the Catholic Church's right to teach in the name of Our Blessed Lord - otherwise it has no more authority than any other group or organisation.

Our Sunday Sermon from Bishop Robert Barron is from the First Sunday of Advent and helps us understand how we can prepare for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. Above all else, we need to recognise that we need him as our Saviour - why else would he come into our world? This points to the fact that Advent is very much a penitential season in the Church's year (rather like Lent). Until we appreciate this deep need to be saved we cannot feel the joy of our Saviour coming to save us!

This will be our last RCIA Newsletter for a while. We take a break for Christmas. Next Thursday - 10th December - we plan to have our Service of Light for Advent in the church at OLR at 7.30pm. I hope you are all able to come. We should be back to arrangements as they were before the second Lock-down - so please come to the Parish Centre first and we can move into the church when ready.

What happens in the New Year is still in the balance - depending on circumstances. Hopefully, we will be able to resume normal RCIA Thursday sessions. Watch this space!

God bless

John de Waal.

The teaching authority of the Church by Fr Tristan.

“And immediately on the sabbath, he entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority...” (Mk 1: 21-22)

"Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16: 15) said Jesus to His disciples. *To teach* all people is one of the three special missions that Jesus has to all people. The other two are *to sanctify* (to destroy sin and fill us with the Holy Spirit), *to teach, and to govern* (to gather together and rule a community, the visible shape of the Kingdom to come in God). Really, all three of these missions are aspects of the same thing – each one cannot be done without the others. And Jesus has not kept this mission for Himself – He called into being the Church to be His instrument to carry it out, from the day of Pentecost, until the end of the world.

Why does the Church need to *teach* in order to sanctify, and to gather the Kingdom? Who in the Church performs this role? And how do we know what she teaches really comes from Jesus, and isn't just made up on the part by her weak and sinful members? These are the questions we will try and look at today.

Why must the Church teach?

Pope Benedict gave a speech with a very good summary of this question, (speaking in particular to priests). I've highlighted the most important points.

“Today, in the midst of the educational emergency, the *munus docendi* [Latin for “teaching ministry”] of the Church, exercised concretely through the ministry of each priest, is particularly important. We are very confused about the fundamental choices in our life and question what the world is, where it comes from, where we are going, what we must do in order to do good, how we should live and what the truly pertinent values are. Regarding all this, there are numerous contrasting philosophies that come into being and disappear, creating confusion about the fundamental decisions on how to live; because **collectively we no longer know from what and for what we have been made and where we are going**. In this context the words of the Lord who took pity on the throng because the people were like sheep without a shepherd came true (cf. Mk 6: 34). The Lord had noticed this when he saw the thousands of people following him in the desert because, in the diversity of the currents of that time, they no longer knew what the true meaning of Scripture was, what God was saying. **The Lord, moved by compassion, interpreted God's word, he himself is the Word of God, and thus provided an orientation. This is the function *in persona Christi* of the priest: making present, in the confusion and bewilderment of our times, the light of God's Word, the light that is Christ himself in this our world. Therefore**

the priest does not teach his own ideas, a philosophy that he himself has invented, that he has discovered or likes; the priest does not speak of himself, he does not speak for himself, to attract admirers, perhaps, or create a party of his own; he does not say his own thing, his own inventions but, in the medley of all the philosophies, the priest teaches in the name of Christ present, he proposes the truth that is Christ himself, his word and his way of living and of moving ahead. **What Christ said of himself applies to the priest: "My teaching is not mine" (Jn 7: 16)**; Christ, that is, does not propose himself but, as the Son he is the voice, the Word of the Father. The priest too must always speak and act in this way: "My teaching is not mine, I do not spread my own ideas or what I like, but I am the mouthpiece and heart of Christ and I make present this one, shared teaching that has created the universal Church and creates eternal life".

Without receiving a body of teaching that is passed down from generation to generation, going right back to Jesus Himself and the Apostles, the world would be doomed to flounder – the Church would not know clearly who Jesus was or God's plan for mankind; her children could not then enter into a personal relationship with their Saviour, nor know how to worship ‘in spirit and in truth’, nor how to act following Jesus’s own example. The Church does not invent teachings – she has no authority to do this – but can only “hand on” what Jesus has taught her, as He himself “handed on” the mind of the Father to his disciples. The technical word for this “handing on” is *tradition*, and it involves both the written Word of God: The Holy Scriptures and all they contain, and the beliefs, morals and practises of the community who wrote those Scriptures – the Church Herself. All that the Church believes, that is handed down, taken as a whole is called the *deposit of faith* – an image that makes us think of a great treasure house which is kept safe and polished over time. The Church’s special authority to teach and safeguard this deposit is called her *Magisterium*, more of which below.

Not every teaching of the Church belongs to the same level of importance. The highest level of truth are those known as a *dogmas* – truths revealed directly by God and infallibly proposed by the Magisterium (for example, The Immaculate Conception of Our Lady), and *doctrines* – truths not directly revealed but which we can extrapolate as absolutely certain from our beliefs, again infallibly proposed by the Magisterium (i.e. that when we receive just the Host, and not the Precious Blood at Mass, we still receive the whole Christ). There are also many truths that, while not strictly dogmas or doctrines, are nonetheless certain because they relate to how revealed truths play out in history (i.e. Pope Francis is truly the pope, and “Pope Michael” – a guy who claims to be in the USA - is not) or arise from the natural law which the Church also proposes and defends (i.e. the immorality of using IVF).

All that the Church teaches as belonging to, or touching upon the *deposit of faith*, Catholics are bound to believe: we do not have a choice. It is a belief that can only come through the assent of that God-given gift of faith touching our hearts and minds. It is an act of trust in our Father who loves us and wants us to lead us to Him, and His Son, “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” We do not need to know everything single thing about Catholic teaching, but the gift of faith means that we are always open to learning new things about the God we love, and to be corrected if we have ever been mistaken. I remember an example from my own life: the existence of guardian angels! For some reason, I had always grown up thinking the guardian angels were just a symbol, or a bit of poetry...until as a young man living in London I went to Mass on their feast day! I realised that the Church would not have had a feast of the angels had she not believed in them and proposed them to us to believe too; so I changed my opinion, and I now often pray to my guardian angel to help me!

Dogmas and doctrines belonging to the deposit of the faith did not just pop into existence of course – they develop and grow and come to be realised more and more fully in the Church’s history. For example, the dogma of Christ’s two natures: divine and human – is clear from the very beginning as directly revealed through Christ’s words and actions, in Tradition and the Scripture, but it took centuries for the Church to understand better and better what exactly that entailed, and which ways of understand of this would be erroneous. St Vincent of Lerins (in the 5th Century) described this process as a *development of doctrine* – doctrines do not change, but they grow as a baby grows into an adult. Mostly they are they in embryo form, but they can be brought out more clearly by the Creeds written by the councils, the constant teaching of the popes and bishops and belief of the people, and the prayers of the saints.

Who teaches?

Every member of the Church has a special duty to hand on the Catholic faith and share it with others. However, it is the Bishops who, first and foremost, have been given the duty to teach as a particular mission by Christ Himself, as successors of Christ’s Apostles. The bishop wears a two-pronged hat, called a mitre, the two horns of which represent the authority of the Old and New Testament which he is to defend, and see off any challenges to it! The Bishop of Rome – also known as the Pope – has even more distinct role within the bishops: to gather the whole, and to be the final determination in any cases where the teaching of Christ, and how it applies to our age, is not clear.

The Church is not a democracy, but Christ’s Body, over which, He, the Head, rules as King. The Pope and Bishops are then not “policy makers” – they cannot change the teachings of Christ to suit their own agenda or public opinion. A good example of this from the media is the idea of ordaining women to the priesthood. The fact that this cannot be is testified by the Church’s two thousand year practice, the absence of such an idea in Scripture, the determinations of Jesus Himself – as such it belongs to the

Church's so-called *ordinary magisterium*: teachings that have been consistent always and everywhere. Indeed, using His role as guardian and teacher of the whole Church as pope, Pope St John Paul II clarified this by issuing a declaration that: "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." In other words, it does not matter what we think, or whether society is out of step with such an idea, or even if it seems like a practical and good idea – our job is to heed the voice of Christ who says "Follow me", not to make our own way.

However, we should not get the impression that this means that everything the pope says is automatically true, or must be believed by Catholics! In fact, as we will see below, only on certain occasions do the bishops and the pope speak with this authority.

The final group of people who have a specially recognised authority to teach are the *pastors* or priests of the Church, who are co-workers with the bishops, to hand on, warn, encourage and excite devotion in Christ's people, representing the bishop on a local level. The priest is a teacher in many ways, on so many different occasions on a daily basis in the parish, but the most recognisable and important form of this is the homily at Mass.

How does the Church teach?

When the Pope, or bishops, talk in their homilies, catechesis, on the radio, TV, or in interviews – they speak alone, as any priest does. They have a duty not to represent merely their own opinions, but hand on the deposit of faith in a way that is helpful and encouraging for their audience to help them be better disciples. But they can make mistakes. What they say should be taken seriously and with respect, but it is NOT Gospel – it is '*fallible*'.

However, *in certain conditions*, what the bishops and Pope says is guided and preserved from error by a special gift of the Holy Spirit. This is called 'infallibility' and is probably one of the most misunderstood dogmas of the Catholic faith!

When the bishops of the whole Church gather in a *council* to determine a disputed matter, what they teach is infallible, provided that:

1. That the bishops be in communion with one another and with the pope.
2. That they teach authoritatively on a matter of faith or morals.
3. That they agree in one judgment.
4. That they propose this as something to be held definitively by the faithful.

(Now, there may be many teachings of the Bishops that do not meet these criteria – these are non-infallible. **But Catholics still have to follow them!**)

The Pope enjoys a special gift of infallibility, when he makes a *solemn* declaration on a matter of faith and morals, intending to exercise this gift. This has only happened twice in history (the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1854) , and that of the doctrine of the Assumption (1950)).

Most of what the popes have said, is “non-infallible” – but we still have to listen to it and follow them. This is clearly not the case when the Pope speaks off-the-cuff, or in any way that seems outside deposit of the faith (as in these days of mass media, happens more and more) Any pope’s personal statements, even on these things, have no bearing on our beliefs.

The bottom line is that most of what we believe as Catholics is part of what is called the *ordinary magisterium* of the Church – the collective, coherent, unchanging, constantly teaching of Christ reframed and re-polished for each new generation – expressed especially in the teachings of the popes and councils taken as a whole, and the Tradition of the Church.

Faith and our reception of faith

It is such a comfort and a joy to know as a Catholic that my beliefs are part of an unchanging, pure line of teaching guaranteed by Christ and the Holy Spirit – as Pope Benedict, we frail human beings, need this certainty to guide us. Whenever a priest, (or a headteacher in a Catholic institution/university) takes up a new post, he/she is to make a public declaration that he/she will uphold the faith as taught by the Church, and be someone that can be relied on as a transmitter of that faith. Priests and deacons also make this Profession of Faith and Oath of Fidelity publicly before their ordination. It’s an inspiring text, with words that we should all be able to make our own, as a *disciples* of Christ, not forgetting that the word disciple means nothing but “*student*”.

I, N., with firm faith believe and profess each and everything that is contained in the Symbol of faith, namely:

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God,

born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seat-

ed at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

With firm faith, I also believe everything contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down in Tradition, which the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed.

I also firmly accept and hold each and everything definitively proposed by the Church regarding teaching on faith and morals.

Moreover, I adhere with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act.

OATH OF FIDELITY

I, N., in assuming the office of promise that in my words and in my actions I shall always preserve communion with the Catholic Church.

With great care and fidelity I shall carry out the duties incumbent on me toward the Church, both universal and particular, in which, according to the provisions of the law, I have been called to exercise my service.

In fulfilling the charge entrusted to me in the name of the Church, I shall hold fast to the deposit of faith in its entirety; I shall faithfully hand it on and explain it, and I shall avoid any teachings contrary to it.

I shall follow and foster the common discipline of the entire Church and I shall maintain the observance of all ecclesiastical laws, especially those contained in the Code of Canon Law.

With Christian obedience I shall follow what the Bishops, as authentic doctors and teachers of the faith, declare, or what they, as those who govern the Church, establish. I shall also faithfully assist the diocesan Bishops, so that the apostolic activity, exercised in the name and by mandate of the Church, may be carried out in communion with the Church.

So help me God, and God's Holy Gospels on which I place my hand.

Bishop Robert Barron's Sunday Sermon.

As a preparation to listen to this talk you should try to read : Isaiah 63 : 16-17; 64 : 1, 3-8.

<https://youtu.be/erjmVZApLW0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erjmVZApLW0>

Final Prayer - taken from Compline (the Night Prayer of the Church).

Antiphon. Save us, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep; that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him in peace.

Nunc Dimittis.

At last, all-powerful Master,
you give leave to your servant
to go in peace, according to your promise.

For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared for all nations, the light to enlighten the Gentiles
and give glory to Israel, your people.

Antiphon. Save us, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep; that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him in peace.

A short time for silent prayer.

Concluding prayer.

Lord our God,
restore us again by the respose of sleep after the fatigue of our daily work;
so that, continually renewed by your help, we may serve you in body and soul. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Blessing. Lord, grant us a quiet night and a perfect end. Amen.

A final thought.

“...Faith has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it ... so faith builds on reason.”

(St Thomas Aquinas).