

## **THEOLOGY: MAGISTERIUM**

**First of a series**

# **CRISIS OF FAITH IN THE MAGISTERIUM**

**By**

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### **Introduction**

When speaking of the "Prophetic Function of the Church", one is immediately reminded of the two other elements of the triad: namely, the priestly and kingly functions of the Church. This triad, in turn, brings to mind the three messianic functions of Christ: i.e. as priest, as king and as prophet, of which *lumen Gentium* speaks about.

At the mention of this Vatican II document, you will almost naturally recall the theological principle upon which the attribution of the three functions to the Church is based. The Church serves to continue the very same mission of Christ, i.e. to mediate the saving Word to all men. But in sharing in the same mission with Christ, the Church necessarily shares in the same functions or offices of Christ, namely, as priest, king and prophet.

For this reason we speak of the priestly or sanctifying office, the kingly or ruling office, and of the prophetic or teaching office of the Church.

And then our trouble begins.

The expression 'the teaching office of the Church' is a 'hard' saying for many people. The very word 'office' arouses in many people unpleasant associations with authoritarian regimes, with the 'establishment', the 'organization'. As part of our entire contemporary consciousness we are at the moment experiencing a feeling of critical reserve towards what is called the 'official Church', the 'institutional' Church. The particular form of this office as 'teaching office' sharpens the uneasiness that is felt: people fear it could lead to the suppression of discussion needed for clarification and of freedom of teaching and research, that it could lead to modern forms of the Inquisition.

**Manifestations of this crisis**

Cursory readings of articles and news on ecclesiastical matters these past years unmistakably reveal the existence of a crisis of faith in the teaching authority of the Church.

How else should we understand the fact that, especially during these past twenty years or so, most emphatic and most discussed pronouncements of the Popes have been on the magisterium of the doctrinal authority of the Church? From the "Humani Generis" of 1950, the discourse of the Pope to the Faculty Members and Student Body of the Gregorian University in 1953, the "Si Diligis" address to the Episcopate of May 31, 1954, the October 1, 1965 address to the theologians attending the International Congress on the Theology of the Second Vatican Council, the resounding profession of faith of the Credo of the People of God, the 'Humanae Vitae, the *Mysterium Ecclesiae* of June 24, 1973, all the way up to the most recent declarations on the doctrine of faith — the emphasis has always been "by the will of Jesus Christ, the immediate and universal norm of this unfailing truth — revelation can be found solely in the authentic magisterium of the Church whose task is to safeguard faithfully and to explain infallibly the deposit of faith." (I Vat. Council, sess. III, ch. 4; D-B 1796).

Some Christians who remain attached to the faith of their childhood cannot today help experiencing a feeling of discomfort. They no longer have that serenity which they thought was tied to their faith and which sometimes they claimed as something owed to them. The faith seemed to them like a set of dogmas which were as unalterable in their form as in their content. And so it is that to them this structure seems to be unsteady. No longer do they experience its solidity. Many Catholics retain the desire to believe, but they no longer know precisely whether it is this or that they should believe. They expect the Church to tell them what it is to which their adherence should remain doggedly loyal.

Not all were as gentle with the Magisterium, unfortunately. The reception accorded to *Humanae* in 1968 brought to the surface a very clear fact: there are elements in the Catholic Church capable of publicly criticizing and rejecting the authentic teaching delivered by the highest teaching organs in the Church.

The teaching office, or the magisterium no longer enjoys the implicit and unquestioning confidence of all catholic priests and faithful. Even bishops, differ among themselves regarding the binding force of papal encyclicals. Sophisticated Catholics today have other criteria of truth by which they sometimes judge even the teaching of the hierarchy.

In the realm of dogma, all that was a certainty of faith is being questioned by some: the signification of the sacraments, baptism, penance, eucharist, ministerial priesthood; the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, of the Resurrection, of Redemption; the place of the Virgin Mary in Christian life; and the precise sense of the mystery. Even the sense of the transcendent God, who wills to reshape man's history by Israel and by the Church, is affected. In the name of a very poorly elucidated psychoanalysis the profound reality of traditional spiritual life is under attack. One does not learn to pray from the Saints any more. The beatitude of poverty is sometimes gravely disfigured, and others, like purity and suffering, are forgotten. A significant fact; some spontaneously revert to Feuerbach and August Comte again, and become the disciples of Karl Marx, or of Freud. For them, Christianity does not tell any longer of the mystery of the living God acting in history, but only of the depths of human consciousness and of the drama of man at grips with his destiny.

Last 1969, Frank Sheed wrote in the *National Catholic Reporter*:

And now in the Catholic Church, unity's last stronghold we have a crisis of faith among adults, a vast evaporation of faith among the young, discord among the clergy — with no doctrine or practice of the faith I have not heard denied by a priest.

This could well be said of 1978, only clearer and deeper.

In the same year — 1969 — Fr. Richard McCormick, S.J., told the annual convention of theologians:

I believe it is safe to say that the hierarchical magisterium is in deep trouble. For many of the educated faithful it has ceased to be truly credible. (The Teaching Role of the Magisterium and of Theologians," Proc. Cath. Theol. Society of America, June, 1969).

This too is as valid today as it was in 1969, only clearer and more pervasive.

### **Causes of this crisis**

There are many causes which explain more or less this phenomenon. Some of the principal causes, to my mind, are the following:

1. One cause is inherent in the nature of the object of our faith. We are thoroughly familiar with the idea that there is a development in the understanding and assimilation of revelation, that there is indeed a development of dogma. Furthermore we are at the moment living in an age of a kind, that has very rarely

been experienced in the history of the Church. Everywhere new questions arise in the form in which they are posed but not occasioned by Vatican II. We need only think of the understanding of Holy Scripture, the declaration on original sin, many questions on the Eucharistic doctrine and of marriage morality, the much more positive assessment of the non-catholic Churches and communities, and even of the non-Christian religions.

Compared with the past, many statements of the teaching office show important changes and new perspectives during the Second Vatican Council. Now, this ought not to disturb us if only we recall that God's reality has not been disclosed to us bluntly for our immediate and conclusive comprehension. Rather can we only approach it in perspective, and from every new viewpoints, it discloses new perspectives.

But for many who are unable to perceive more deeply and to differentiate in their judgments, the teaching office of the Church seems to be contradicting itself, and thus abandoning itself. On the other hand, if the question is seen from the point of view of one who shares in the teaching office, one must be able to wait patiently so as not prematurely interrupt and bring to a halt an indispensable process of theological development. So for one person, the teaching authority seems to be intervening too quickly; while in the opinion of another, it is neglecting its duty.

2. Another major cause is the dominance of the scientific method. The scientific method has gradually gained hegemony as the only acceptable way of knowing reality. What cannot be verified through the application of the scientific method is rather commonly thought to be unworthy or anything more than private opinion and speculation. This frame of mind, of course, excludes most forms of philosophical knowledge, and more so it excludes divine revelation and theology as valid avenues of true knowledge. This in turn has led to the present dichotomy between orthodoxy and orthopraxis which regards questions of truth as inconsequential and is exclusively concerned with practicalities.

3. The third major factor making up the wider background of the problem is the cultural phenomenon of the new emphasis on human dignity, freedom and rights, the new personalism which so cherishes self-determination and self-fulfillment and tends to reject what would influence thought or opinion from outside or above.

I mention these factors not to reject them outright, since it is obvious that there is a place for the scientific method as well as for a wholesome personalism. Yet these two factors, the second and the

third, when carried beyond their proper sphere do have destructive and reprehensible features and both have some bearing on the present crisis of faith in the magisterium.

4. A fourth cause — more in the level of prudence or lack of prudence — is the unwise and hasty communication of investigations which are legitimate in themselves but which are inaccessible to most people, since they presuppose a level of theological and philosophical education which forces their critical examination to be reserved to specialists.

5. There is a certain habit of as if it were passively receiving the teaching of the hierarchy and retaining its formulation as if it were a lesson well learned, without an attempt at personal assimilation and reflection.

### Results of a non-credible Magisterium

Several results necessarily follow when the magisterium ceases to be credible to a large portion of the Church.

1. Theology tends to become irrelevant for all but skilled theologians. For, with many of the major teachings of the Church seemingly a matter of dispute, many Catholics will tend to view theology as a hopeless confusion, irrelevant to daily living.

2. Secondly, a decline in the stature of magisterium will inevitably tend to erode the faith of many Catholics. What we believe is usually grounded on scripture, tradition, and theological reason. But few of our theological proofs are able to carry real conviction to the majority of the clergy and laity, apart from the fact that a particular doctrine is taught infallibly, or at least authentically, by the magisterium.

How many of us can prove apodictically from scripture the real presence, the existence of seven sacraments, or even the inspiration of scripture? Thus the content of our faith depends for most of us on the clear teaching of the magisterium, and, in particular, in proportion as the magisterium ceases to be credible, our faith will necessarily become vague and uncertain.

3. A third and tragic result of the decreased influence of the magisterium within the Church is the polarization and divisions that have taken place in many religious communities and congregations. It is true that many of the present divisions in religion are ascribed to other factors, such as different approaches to the liturgy and diverse interpretations of obedience. But it seems clear that some of the deeper and most emotional disputes in religion today

come from fundamental theological differences, arising from diverse approaches to the magisterium. Dialogue and openness alone can not heal these divisions within communities, any more than dialogue alone can bring a consensus among Protestants and Catholic theologians.

4. A final result, at least indirectly, of the decrease of the magisterium in the Church, is the decrease in priestly and religious vocations. To attribute the vocation crisis wholly to magisterial problems would be clearly simplistic. But it scarcely seems an exaggeration to say that theological disputes within the Church have created a deep unrest among clergy and religious, an unrest easily perceived by youth. It is the interior happiness of priests and religious that attracts vocations, and this is often lacking today. This is partially due to theological contention and confusion.

### Recommendations

1. The responsibility of restoring a greater measure of respect for the magisterium is in some degree on all of us: bishops, priests, religious, laity. Every member of the Church has the opportunity of witnessing his faith in the Church and its teaching authority.

The theology upon which this assertion is founded is highly interesting as it is simple. In speaking about the teaching office of the Church — its prophetic function — we should not begin with the distinction between the 'teaching' and the 'learning' Church. The whole Church is **fundamentally** and **permanently** the learning Church and at the same time the teaching Church too.

Does this mean that there is no normative magisterium? No. The admission of a whole Church fundamentally a teaching Church does not exclude the acceptance that there is a normative magisterium. What is being emphasized here is that, in the midst of the Church and at the service of its faith is placed, as the highest form of this task which is common to all, the authentic teaching office; the office endowed with the authority of Christ (LG, n. 25). This normative office is assigned to the college of bishops, who exercise it for the whole Church and in the dioceses entrusted to them in association with and subordination to the Pope as the supreme teacher of the Church.

But both the general and normative teaching functions, i.e., the teaching office of the Church is not above the Word of God, but is at the service of that Word. The purpose of the prophetic func-

tion of the Church lies precisely in listening afresh to this word in every hour of the Church's history so as to proclaim it undiminished and unfalsified (DV, n. 10).

2. There is a need among those who hold the magisterial office to have the right attitude regarding their duties. They are enjoined to proclaim and to defend the Good News. Both are important, but the first should be the principal concern at a time like ours. The Council's decree on the office of the bishops, *Christus Dominus* says: "They should, in the power of the Spirit, summon men to faith or confirm them in a faith already living." (n. 12). And what is this faith? It is the faith of which the scripture speaks about so frequently: that personal, total assent to God revealing himself in Christ. But the one actual imperative of this responsibility is to be able to do it in a language that is understood by the man of today and in response to the questions that oppress him. This concern should take precedence over concern of ultimate precision and exactitude of statements of belief.

In this age of research and rapid changes, the pastors of the Church should look upon sincere attempts on the part of theologians to discover a language that is appropriate to the mystery and to its correct understanding. If it should happen that an unsatisfactory solution or even one that is false in its application should be confirmed in the case of a theologian who has been taking serious trouble over his work, then in no case ought this to be equivalent to discrimination. Let the authority of Christ be heard when such case comes, but always in atmosphere of love and of understanding.

3. For the members of the Church who do not enjoy the authentic normative magisterium, what is fundamental always and at any time is living faith within the Church. We have confidence in the assistance that is promised to the whole Church and thus to us also.

4. One must take into account the evolution of modern man, many conciliar texts, the Declaration on Religious Freedom in particular, have underlined the personal character that must increasingly typify christian life. But one must not ignore the danger of an individualism contrary to that fundamental aspect of Christianity, by which it is a people. This is what Christ willed to establish. Now, in order to insure its fundamental unity, any society maintains a

certain authority even on the naural level. If Christianity depended only upon individual inspiration it would not keep this character of a people and of a body. But one must go much deeper. What makes obedience important in the Church is that we are not just dealing here with the sort of obedience demanded in the organization of each and every society. There is, at the very foundation of the Church, an authority that is **absolute**. This norm is absolute because it is divine. Primarily, it is the very authority of God's word, as it is manifested in the Scripture, but also it is a divine authority that the Church holds because it flows from the assistance of the Holy Spirit. For a Catholic and the Council has repeated this, the Church's authority is not simply a human authority, but a participation in the very authority of God. This gives her the right, in the area of dogma, to rule infallibly on certain questions and, on the level of her government, to make binding decisions which are for the good of the people of God.

### **Conclusion**

At this very time, we pastors and teachers of the Church must ask for your appreciation of the particularly heavy task of the teaching office. In an age which a tendency to criticism, the Christians should show critical judgment but with patience.