

THEOLOGY: MAGISTERIUM
Second of a series

WHAT IS THE MAGISTERIUM?

By

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Introduction

During the previous lecture we described the various signs and causes of the existing crisis of faith in the Magisterium. The scenario we painted was rather grim.

But at the same time, we stated that the Church has never been in its history problem-free. From its very beginnings, the Church through a succession of ages has undergone a severity of trials, endured a fury of internal discorders and survived violent oppression and persecution. The Church, ever beset, ever ailing, ever exhausted and expiring, continues to survive and increase in vigour and in numbers. History bears eloquent witness to this irrefutable reality and provides evidence that the life and power of the Church come not from men to whom it was entrusted, but from God who founded the Church twenty centuries ago, and remains its guiding force through all the trials.

The proper way of viewing the problems which beset the Magisterium today therefore is to view it within the context of the history of the Church on earth.

From its very beginnings, the Church has been troubled by tensions between faith and theology, and between obedience and authority.

1) St. Paul cautioned Timothy to stay clear of men who make a pretense of religion but mitigate its power, and who are "always learning but never able to reach a knowledge of truth" (II Tim. 3:5-7).

He also predicted that the "time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but following their own desires, will surround themselves with teachers who tickle their ears. They will stop listening to the truth and will wander off to fables" (II Tim. 4:3-4).

- 2) God has not failed in his promise to be with his Church:
- a) In the 4th century, he raised Athanasius and Hilary to defend the authentic faith against the bishops dominated by Arian emperors.
 - b) When a secularized clergy was betraying its mission in the 13th century, Gregory the Great and Peter Damian restored discipline within the Church.
 - c) In the 16th century, when the clergy was helpless in the face of a crisis in medieval society, Charles Borromeo and Francis de Sales reformed the clergy and restored the Church to missionary vitality.

All throughout her life, the consistent picture of the Church has been a divinely founded and divinely guided community of human beings — of sinners, and heir to the frailties of such nature. Through her imperfections, we are permitted to catch a glimpse of her divine beauty and the unfailing guidance and providence of her founder and Spirit.

What is the Magisterium?

What is this magisterium? Today's lecture focusses on the answer to this question. Is there in the Catholic Church an authority which ultimately by its authority alone obliges a Catholic to accept a teaching which, logically or psychologically, he doesn't want to accept?

In thus formulating the question, we limit its scope to the nature and properties of the Magisterium. We are also excluding, for the moment, any discussion on the functions, manner of exercising, objects, subjects and expected assents to the magisterial acts. We hope, God willing, to talk about them more extensively in the succeeding lectures.

Threefold Powers of the Hierarchy

Christ's mission is unique, but on analysis we can easily distinguish three aspects in it: prophetic, kingly and priestly aspects. The same aspects appear in the NT as the apostles preach the gospel, consecrate the Eucharist, perform the sanctifying gestures instituted by Christ, form communities and administer them. It is to these three aspects of the one mission of Christ that theologians attach the three powers of the hierarchy: **Magisterium, Order, Governance.**

COMPARATIVE TABLE BETWEEN THE THREE POWERS OF THE HIERARCHY

Powers	In relation to the Messianic functions of Christ	Basic Nature	Immediate Objects	Manner of Conferment	Permanence	Subjects
Orders	Instrument of Christ the: Priest	Instrumental or ministerial	Worship in the strict sense	consecration	indelible	Practical Intellect
Magisterium	Prophet	Principal Agent Addressed to the Intellect Motivation: certain that the Church teaches the Divine truth — Christ the Truth	Adherence to truth (revealed)	Canonical mission, designation, mandate	temporary i.e. can be revoked	Practical Intellect
Jurisdiction	King	Principal Agent Addressed to the Will Motivation: because the Church is divinely responsible for leading me to the common good — precept of the Superior	Adherence to the good	Canonical mission	temporary i.e. can be revoked	Will

The power of serving as instrument of Christ the Priest to perpetuate the redemptive sacrifice in the Mass and to communicate the fullness of Christian grace through the sacraments, is the power of order.

While the power of serving as instrument of Christ the King, so as to continue under His action to rule His mystical Body, is the power of jurisdiction.

And finally, the power of serving as instrument of Christ the Teacher or Prophet, to preach the fullness of Christian truth to the world, is the power of magisterium.

Their respective characteristics

The power of order is merely instrumental or ministerial. The reason is because God alone can produce grace as its principal, efficient cause. In this case, the official personnel of the Church have no proper or native power. They act merely as God's instruments, or, since they are rational beings, as His ministers. Consequently, they impart grace only by performing the rites instituted by Christ. There is after all a distinction between minister and sacraments. The former (minister) is a living person taking the place of the living God, precisely applying his knowledge of the will of God, directing those who should follow it by means of formulas and actions. While the latter (sacraments), are actions and gestures which are applied or acted upon, as conveyors in meaning; and efficacy of a divine power institutionally attached to it by God and applied to the subject by the power of God.

The powers of jurisdiction and magisterium however are secondary principal causes. For although the rulers of the Church may have set forth the teaching and the precepts of Christ, they enjoy also their own personal power of teaching and ruling. In teaching, for example, they do not merely declare what has been revealed but make use of their own prudence in deciding the proper time and the precise manner in which they should make any declaration. They decide on their own what is in harmony with revealed truths, and what is directly or indirectly opposed to them, and on their own authority they prescribe that revealed truths be accepted as certainly true. So with ruling, they do not only declare what divine law enjoins, but on their own authority they enforce these precepts and decide when and how they are to be observed.

The power of Order being a sacramental power, it is normally conferred by way of consecration received through baptism, confirmation and orders. Being a moral power, jurisdiction and

magisterium are normally conferred by way of designation, of commission or mandate (ST, II II, a.39, a.3).

The power of order being a physico-spiritual power, is **indelible**, while jurisdiction and magisterium are lost by a simple act of **revocation**.

The act of teaching, in the sense of either revealing or transmitting revelation, is fundamentally different from ruling or ordering. In the first place, the object of teaching is adherence to **truth**, while ruling is concerned with adherence to the **good**. When I teach I appeal to an act of the intelligence, but when I order, it is to an act of the will. The motivation is distinct in both also. I bow before the magisterium because I am certain that the Church teaches the revealed truth, and that it is sure of what it teaches. I bow before its pastoral power because the Church is divinely responsible for leading me to the common good.

Even from the point of view of the **subject**, the power of jurisdiction is distinct from magisterium. St. Thomas says that in the act of faith the intelligence is not sufficiently actuated by its proper object. The assent must come to it from elsewhere, that is to say from the will which actuates all the faculties. From this aspect, faith is a kind of obedience. But the act performed under the movement of the will remains essentially an act of the intelligence. The necessary intervention of the will does not go so far as changing the object. (Chenu, *L'amour dans la foi*, BT, 1931-1933). While the act of faith which corresponds to the pastoral power is quite different. Adhesion to the directives and orders of the pastoral power is formally an act of the will, an act of obedience in the formal sense of the word. (ST, II-II a.4. a.7, ad 3 um). In other words, while the proper motive of obedience is the precept of the superior, the proper motive of the act of faith is the First Truth which is the attribute of God.

That is why, when I adhere to a revealed truth through the pronouncement of the Church, the real master of my act of faith is Christ. But when I obey the power of jurisdiction, there is nothing similar to this immediate action of Christ on my soul. I pursue a good cause because the Church tells me so. That is no small thing; the Church is after all entrusted with leading me to salvation and it is assured of the assistance of the Holy Spirit in the very special form of the charism of infallibility. But it is, nevertheless, an inferior motive which reveals by contrast the greatness that belongs to the teaching mission of the Church putting forward the articles of faith.

While there are three distinct powers, there is only one hierarchy. This is because the sovereign priesthood, the supreme kingship and prophetic office are inseparable in Christ who is the Head and in whom there is unity of love, action and knowledge. In the same manner the threefold derivatives — jurisdiction, order and magisterium, should be strictly united in order to act on the Church which is His body. They constitute, according to St. Paul's image, the system of joints and ligaments by which the increase of charity and truth and, in a word, the unity of one life, descends from the head to the body. It would therefore be an error to think of three hierarchies, one each of order and magisterium and jurisdiction. There is one hierarchy with three distinct but interdependent powers.

Magisterium — Master

It has been said quite often that the first problem of the magisterium is not doctrinal, but psychological; that the principal difficulty regarding magisterium is not the difficulty of understanding it, but the difficulty of psychologically accepting it.

And one root of this psychological difficulty, it seems, is the word "magisterium".

"Magisterium" is a latin word, which come from *magister*. But in our American English, *magister* means *Master*. But a *Master*, is one who dominates. In an age when all authority is challenged, the idea of *master* — connotating dominance understandably repels.

But there is a prior meaning in the word *Master*, lost perhaps in the American English, but still retained in the British English — and that is, *teacher*. *Magisterium* therefore is a teaching given by the authority of a *Teacher*. It is not just an ordinary teaching. In the case *Ecclesiastical Magisterium*, the authority does not come from the *person* but from the *office* and the *doctrine*. It must be a teaching in the name of Christ.

In this modern age, there are too few willing to learn. But a *Teacher* makes no sense, functionally and Philosophically, if there are no learners, there can be no *docentes* without *discentes*, no *teacher*, without learners.

If there are attitudes which create special problems to the *Magister*, they are conceit and presumption. We do not like to be sheep of Christ's and Peter's flock.

Viewed in the light of a teacher with authority, the classical definition of the *Magisterium* is: the right and duty of teaching

revealed truth authentically, and the obligation of the faithful to accept with submission of heart and mind the doctrine proposed.

For a proper theological understanding of this definition, it is important to look at the magisterium in its proper ecclesiological context. This ecclesiological context is nothing else but the eschatological nature of the Church. What does this mean? It means that the Church proclaims that the grace of God, hence also the grace of truth and faith, is not merely constantly offered anew, but that this grace of truth is always in the Church, in fact triumphant there, and that this triumph remains tangible and manifest in the historically concrete Church, and hence also in its confession of faith. But the Church would not be the eschatological community of salvation if it were not in "infallible" possession of the truth of Christ. It can only remain eschatologically triumphant and present in the world if it does not falter and fail in the confession of faith; for in faltering and failing in the confession of faith it would not be any more the Church of Christ; it would be quite another community.

This leads us to the consideration of a very important aspect of the magisterium. The magisterium is not strictly speaking the authority to teach abstract doctrines for their own sake. It is the guarantee that the salvific word of Christ will be really addressed to the concrete situation of a given age, in view of Christian life. It is the concrete form in which the guidance of the Spirit, as the Spirit of Christ, gives the Church the assurance of maintaining, at any historical period, historical continuity with Jesus Christ.

Divine Institution

Essential to the Magisterium is, therefore, the **divine institution**. Holy Scripture shows Christ giving the Apostles a power of teaching which is to last forever in His Church. In a generic way, He entrusts to them His own mission: "As the Father has sent me, I also send you" (Jn. 20:21; 17:18). He explicitly gives them the command "to teach all nations" (Mt. 28:18) and to "preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:16). He prays to the Father for the Apostles and "for those also who through their word are to believe in me" (Jn. 17:20). He considers contempt for their teaching as contempt for himself: "He who hears you, hears me; and he who rejects you, rejects me" (Lk. 10:16).

One cannot help but be astounded by this manifestation of divine generosity in giving men this awesome power over the minds of men. But divine logic is inescapable. "All power is given to

Me in heaven and on earth", and because God is the absolute Lord of all men, our destiny, as revealed to us, is to know Him and to love Him supernaturally. It becomes then our inescapable duty to completely surrender our mind and heart to him through the free acts of faith and love (D. 1793). The Church is ordained to effectively carry out the union of the complete man to God by elevating the complete man to divine sonship (Vat. I, session 3, c.3; D. 1797). But in order to carry out this mission, the Church, assisted by the Holy Spirit, must have the power over the minds of men, i.e. she must have a doctrinal authority, she must have the authority to oblige the intellect.

Herein lies the great division between the Catholic position and that of the Protestants, led especially by Barth and Cullman following the early Reformers on this particular matter. The basic foundation of Protestant difficulties vis-a-vis the Catholic position regarding the Magisterium is the fact that they assert the total sufficiency of Scripture both for the constitution and interpretation of Revelation. They hold that, at first Christ instituted a living Magisterium, which was oral. When the New Testament was composed, that Magisterium was only written. Individual Christians are illuminated by the Holy Spirit when reading it. The Bible, in this case, becomes sufficiently normative.

When Catholics then insist on the living Magisterium in the persons of human beings, they fault us with substituting the human word of interpretation in place of the divine word.

It is not easy to understand this position, because, even assuming that the Scripture is sufficient as an infallible norm of belief, the recognition of the New Testament has still to be resolved. Our contention is that this norm — Scripture — still requires previous recognition by the Magisterium of the second century as to which existing writings could be included in the Scripture as authentic and hence infallible doctrine of Christ.

A more positive answer is to note the fact that in the NT the act of faith is seen as something which is not merely human but is placed under the influence of grace. The horizontal dimension, and the Church, is joined with the vertical dimension, i.e., God's intervention through grace, in the act of faith. When man hears the word of God through the preaching of the Church, there God meets man and man responds to God. The historical transmission of revelation takes place through the Church and the Church has the obligation of making revelation present. Revelation is mediated only because of distance and time, but it is mediated in the Church through Christ. Christ puts revelation into human words.

That is why we say that God certainly speaks to all the baptized, from bishops to the lowest lay faithful. After all, the Holy Spirit, who has taken abode in the revealed Word, is the interior principle of all relations of men with the heavenly Father who, through him, gives back to them life in Christ and continually renews the Church by the power of the Gospel. Nevertheless, this action of the Holy Spirit takes place within the framework of the divine constitution of the Church, which means that the Holy People must be guided by the Sacred Magisterium. For only in obedience to the latter can it remain faithful to the transmitted Revelation, penetrate it more deeply by accurate insights and apply it more thoroughly to Life (LG, arts, 4, 12).

The Magisterium separates the Church from other natural societies. Other natural societies can claim solely, the power of government with its triple function of legislation, judging and execution. And this is because society receives its members already basically complete with their innate aspiration to an ulterior social good and the capacity to obtain such good. What is needed is merely the coordination of their activities through the so-called social powers or authority. The power of government is merely to order and administer.

The ecclesiastical society is totally different. Before it can exercise the power of government, it should first constitute her members into a new being and should first dispose them proportionately to a supernatural dimension. Hence the members should first be regenerated into a new being through incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ through the sacrament of faith and grace, which is baptism. In order to effect this, the doctrinal power is necessary.

The Magisterium is not only unique, it is also supernatural. It is freely willed by Christ who gave Peter as head of the Apostolic College, the command to confirm his "brethren" in faith, and invited the other Apostles to preach the Gospel to all the people. That is why we believe that the hierarchical magisterium is a dogma of faith, which in essence means that Christ constituted the Pope and the Bishops united with the Pope as teachers of its faith, its guardians, its interpreters. And He promised them the special assistance of the Holy Spirit so that they do not fall into error when they propose for belief the truths contained in Revelation. This last remark underlines another interesting aspect of the magisterium: It is not above the Word of God, but is at the service of that Word. The Word of God is the origin and the foundation of the Church. In fact, it must be acknowledged to have "a force and power so great that it stands as the support and energy of

the Church, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life" (Del Verbum, n. 12). Nothing and no one can take its place. The hierarchical magisterium "is not above the word of God, but serves It, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed" (Ibidem, n. 10).

Precisely because it comes from God, because it is a divine charism, the Magisterium is not a scientific Magisterium, but a Magisterium of authority. Most of the criticism against "Humanae Vitae" seems to have lost sight of this property of the teaching authority of the Church. The critics expended too much effort analyzing the scientific justifying reasons for the decision taken by the Pope. Feeling dissatisfied with them, they concluded that therefore the decision is not binding at all.

But they do not constitute the essential consideration of the Encyclical, or of the teaching authority of the Pope for that matter. The essential thing is that the Pope in this particular encyclical is laying down a moral rule. The Pope, as the supreme doctor of faith, is authentically interpreting the divine law and teaching that its observance is binding "on all the faithful". In the light of the divine assistance which he possesses and which we believe in by faith, the Pope is declaring and teaching that this moral rule is true and good. It is binding, not by reason of the justifications that might be given to support it, but primarily by reason of the divine authority of the Vicar of Christ, who commands through him. "He who hears you, hears me." The justifying arguments certainly have their own meaning and role in the magisterium of authority; their value is to help shape the papal decisions and interventions. But, the real foundation and motive of our obedience will not be because we see and we are convinced of these reasons or arguments, but because it is an act of the Pope's supreme teaching authority backed up by the divine assistance of the Person whom he represents, Jesus Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body, the Church.

Conclusion

May I just conclude with the observation of Karl Rahner on the need by our contemporary period for the magisterium.

"In spite of the individualism of later days, which is still very much the prevailing temper of the West, a new understanding for the magisterium of the Church must surely

now be possible, in view of our knowledge of the man of today and tomorrow. Man cannot possess his truth as an isolated individual, since he is no such thing. The truth of man would be dissipated into the hazard of private opinions which the self-doubting man of today would not take particularly if in free and inevitable resolve he did not allow himself to be corrected by the truth which is not a priori his own but which comes to him as that of a socially instituted fellowship. Truth of its very nature has to do with fellowship, society and institution, even though the precise relationship of an individual and his truth to the truth of fellowship and society, differ essentially according to the nature of the society in question. But in a post-individualistic epoch new possibilities of understanding may be opened up, even for the understanding of the magisterium of the Church." (article "Magisterium" in *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. by Karl Rahner. The Seabury Press, N.Y. 1975.

A better understanding of the Church's magisterium is indeed imperative for many contemporary Catholics. Until that better understanding is reached, confusion will continue.