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OSV Magisterium Feature Part 4: Attitude Towards Teaching of the Magisterium

by: Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio



Infallible? Yes, Catholics believe that certain teachings of the Magisterium are infallible due to the guidance of the Holy Spirit given to the successors of Peter and the apostles.

The response due by Catholics to such teaching varies based on the nature of this teaching. Sometimes the Magisterium engages the fullness of its authority to define a dogma. That means it declares that a teaching is part of the deposit of the faith. The Council of Nicaea, for example, declared that Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, is true God, equal to the Father. Since the

Magisterium infallibly guarantees that such a belief is revealed by God, our response must be an assent of “divine and Catholic faith”. In other words, we are to believe it with the same unquestioning confidence that we place in God himself (CCC 891).

There are other magisterial statements that don't define a dogma to be believed, but instead are definitive judgments about a matter closely related to revelation. For example, the Council of Trent made an infallible judgment regarding the list of the books to be regarded as sacred Scripture (the biblical canon). The names of the book to be included in the Bible were not revealed by God. Yet it is clearly of the utmost importance for the Church to know which books are inspired and contain revealed truth. An authoritative judgment like this is to be “firmly held” by the faithful. Such decisions are not “fair game” for theological disputations. When the Magisterium speaks in this way, the case is closed. End of discussion.



If other more ordinary teachings of the Magisterium are not technically guaranteed to be infallible, are they simply up for grabs? Not in the least. The assistance of the Spirit is not limited to infallible statements. The ordinary doctrinal teaching of the Church, expressed in day to day teaching and numerous documents of the pope and bishops, must always be given the utmost respect by all--laity, clergy, even professional theologians. The proper response to such teaching is what the Second Vatican Council

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calls “the religious submission of intellect and will” (CCC 892) This means that we have an obligation to do more than pay lip service to such teaching. Rather we are bound to approach such pronouncements with docility, seeking to understand their teaching, and letting that teaching shape our opinions and actions. If a theologian should have concerns about deficiencies in the wording of a certain document, his obligation is privately and respectfully to make his concerns known to the appropriate ecclesiastical authority. It is never appropriate for laity, clergy, or theologians to organize any sort of public dissent from a statement of the Magisterium, using the worldly tactic of pressure politics and media hype to influence Church teaching.



But what of directives from the Magisterium that do not bear upon faith and morals, but rather touch upon matters of discipline—liturgical regulations, the ordinary requirement of priestly celibacy for Latin-Rite priests, etc? Here there is the duty of exterior and respectful compliance with Church law. There is still no right to contentious, public dissent. But should a Catholic have a personal opinion that prevailing practice ought to be changed, it does not mean that he or she is not a loyal Catholic. Some believe we should kneel more during the Mass—some think we should kneel less. Dialogue about such issues is appropriate, as long as it is conducted in respect and charity for all and faithful compliance to the law as it stands until such time as Church authority should change it.

So while there are different sorts of Magisterial teaching with differing degrees of authority, the willingness to submit loyally to the Magisterium must be the rule, even if that teaching is not per se infallible. For the Church is no mere human institution. Birthed by the Spirit, it was endowed with the Spirit with certain gifts. One of the greatest of those gifts is the charism of truth given to the apostles successors that guarantees that the Church will remain a pillar and bulwark of the truth (I Tim. 3:15) till the end of time.



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