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## The Holy Spirit and The Catholic Church

*by: Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.*



The Old Testament contains over forty books, chock full of teaching. Included are not only the Ten Commandments but abundant instruction on applying them to everyday life. But there was a crucial limitation inherent in this wonderful but provisional gift of God.

The problem was that none appeared able to transfer the Mosaic Law from stone tablets to human hearts. Every person who has ever tried to live God's law can relate to Paul's frustration: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do . . . Wretched man that I am!

Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Ro 7:19, 24).

If Jesus had come simply to download more instruction, the Gospel would not be Good News. It would just make us more frustrated. No his teaching, culminating with the non-verbal communication of the cross, was intended to become part of us, to be engraved in our minds and hearts. It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that makes this possible. The Spirit makes each of us His temple, teaching and empowering us from within.

In reflecting on the seven gifts of the Spirit (Is 11:2-3), St. Thomas Aquinas notes that the Christian life entails an exciting relationship with the Spirit. In this relationship, we are brought beyond the limitations of our human nature and enabled to think and act in ways that are nothing short of supernatural. A life of intimate union with God, full of surprises of the Holy Spirit, is not just for the select few, the canonized saints and mystics, but is the inheritance of all the baptized. Trying to understand the Trinity without the indwelling Spirit would be like a dog trying to grasp Einstein's theory of relativity. But with the Spirit's gift of understanding, the mysteries of God can be known from within, though never perfectly and exhaustively. We can truly begin to "taste and see the goodness of the Lord" (Ps. 34:8). This means that uneducated people like Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, and Therese, the Little Flower, can achieve brilliant insight into the truth about God. Even more importantly, they can come to live it. So can we!



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So if each of us can be instructed and empowered by the light of the Holy Spirit, we don't need the authority of the Church, right?



Wrong. Unfortunately, the light of the Holy Spirit is not the only influence upon our thinking. The world constantly barrages us with its propaganda through the educational system, the entertainment industry and the news media. What Paul calls "the flesh," the lingering wounds of original sin, introduces some distortion and distraction into our thinking. And then there is the Deceiver who whispers clever lies in our ears as he did to Eve. So we can mistake one of these voices for the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The term "Magisterium" is simply the Latin word we use to refer to the official Teaching Office exercised in every age by the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Catholic Church, together with the Pope, the successor of Peter. In their ordination, a charism of headship is given them by the Spirit to lead and teach the People of God.

In Acts 15, we learn of a very serious disagreement among leading Christians about what was necessary to be saved. Every person did not follow their own judgment as to what the Spirit was saying. No, the leaders of the Church met with Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem for what historians reckon as the first Church council. As they listened to each other and prayed, they came to consensus. Notice how they proclaimed their decision: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too. . ." (Acts 15:28). Their decision was not just a bureaucratic judgment; it was an authoritative, apostolic discernment of what the Spirit was saying to the Church. And all were bound to accept it. This is the way peace and unity was preserved and the Body of Christ was allowed to grow and thrive.



Not all judgments of the Magisterium are equally solemn and binding. But the principle is the important thing. The Spirit can indeed guide each Christian on a daily basis. But the Holy Spirit also guides us through the teaching authority of the Church. The Spirit does not contradict Himself. So if our opinions grind against authoritative church teaching, humility tells us that it's our opinion that needs a bit of adjustment.

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