

## *Is There a Place for Disagreement in the Catholic Church?*

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“Must I always agree with Catholic church teaching if I am a faithful Catholic?” This question has been posed to me in one form or another innumerable times. The answer of course is, “it depends.” Catholic teaching takes many different forms. The obligation that a Catholic has toward a particular the teaching of the Church depends on the nature of the teaching itself. What does not change is the fundamental respect that Catholics owe to all church teaching. As Catholics we belong to a tradition that we believe has been guided by the Holy Spirit over the course of 2000 years. Possible disagreement with the communal wisdom of the church is rightly to be consider a very serious matter.

Being Catholic means a lot more than simply subscribing to a set of beliefs. Our identity as Catholic Christians is shaped by many things. It is shaped by the biblical stories of those who first gave witness to the God of Love and by the inspiring testimony of great saints who have not just taught but demonstrated with their lives what identifying oneself as a disciple of Christ might mean. It is shaped by regular celebration of the Eucharist and the other distinctive practices of the Catholic tradition: fasting and feasting, almsgiving, visiting the sick, keeping the Sabbath, speaking out against injustice. We must remember that the central teachings of the Catholic Church themselves emerged out of the distinctive practices and faith life of the community. When popes and councils gave official form to various Catholic beliefs, they did so by reflecting on the apostolic faith as it was manifested in the faith, life and worship of the whole

people of God. Still, we must acknowledge that adherence to church teaching is an indispensable element in maintaining a faithful Catholic identity. How, as Catholics, we are called to respond to the teaching of the church is a more complicated matter than it might first appear.

## **Discerning the Appropriate Response to Church Teaching**

We must take care to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, we need to avoid the kind of “cafeteria Catholicism” that imagines that it is okay to simply pick and choose what one wishes to believe, and ignore the rest. All Catholic teaching lays claim on us and we must attend respectfully to all church teaching. On the other hand we must also avoid what is sometimes called “creeping infallibility.” This attitude assumes that all church teaching has been taught with the charism of infallibility, is immune from error and requires the same response from believers. Neither approach is adequate.

The response that Catholics are to give to church teaching varies with the degree of authority of the teachings themselves. There is a common sense insight here. If you think of the way parents exercise authority, our dictates and decrees, rules and guidelines, differ in significant ways. In my own household there are some rules that are absolutely inviolable (e.g., we do not *ever* use violence to solve disagreements), there are others that are important but admit of exceptions (e.g., you must practice piano and do your homework before you go play) and there are still others that take the form of parental counsel (e.g., “I think you should call up your friend Ben, and talk about the argument the two of you had yesterday”). In like manner, Catholic church teaching takes many different forms, and not all church teachings are equally authoritative. Church doctrine can be divided up into four different categories represented by the concentric circles below. The top of each circle names the category of church teaching, and the

bottom names the response owed to that teaching. We will need to consider each category and the appropriate response in more detail.

## Gradations of Church Teaching



### The Appropriate Response to Church Dogma

Catholicism holds that *dogmas* are the most authoritative of church teachings for the simple reason that what they communicate is divinely revealed. Examples of church dogma include the teaching on the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of Eucharistic real presence. Since

dogmas belong to divine revelation, making known to us God's saving plan, the only appropriate response of a believer to dogma is what Vatican II called an "assent of faith." Faith is our fundamental response to God's revelation to us.

So how do we address the situation in which a Catholic Christian finds that they are unable to offer an assent of faith to a particular dogma? Roman Catholicism has traditionally held that, due to the importance of church dogma, membership in the Church would be called into question by the obstinate denial of a dogma. This kind of formal rejection is called *heresy*. However, formal heresy is, I believe, fairly rare. The actual stance of most Roman Catholics to at least some of the dogmatic teachings proposed by the Church falls somewhere between explicit affirmation and explicit rejection.

Most of the Church's central dogmatic teachings are found in the creeds or are embedded in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. However, beyond these central teachings a student of the history of dogma might offer other dogmatic pronouncements defined by popes or councils to deal with historical threats to the integrity of the Church's faith. At one point in history these dogmatic statements were vital to the Church's life, yet many have now faded from view, not because they are not true but rather because they are addressing questions that nobody is asking today.

Many Catholic Christians, secure in their fundamental profession of faith in Jesus Christ, will never find reason to consider some of these teachings (e.g., the ancient teaching that Christ possessed two wills, one human and the other divine, or the condemnation of iconoclasm). In this situation, the stance of the believer can hardly be characterized as obstinate rejection. There may also be situations in which a believer finds that they are experiencing doubts of one kind or another regarding a particular dogma. Such experiences are not altogether unusual in the life of

faith. As long as the individual continues to pray for openness and does not obstinately deny a given teaching their status in the communion of faith would remain secure.

It is still necessary to affirm that within the Roman Catholic tradition church dogma has a special claim on the faith of church members. Explicit and obstinate rejection of a dogma of the Catholic Church would not necessarily place one outside the sphere of God's saving grace, but at some point such a denial might place one outside the Roman Catholic communion.

### **The Appropriate Response to Definitive Doctrine**

A second category of church teaching, *definitive doctrine*, includes teachings that are not themselves divine revealed, but are teachings necessary to safeguard and expound revelation (e.g. the Council of Trent's declaration of the books to be included in the canon of the Bible). It is generally agreed (though it has never been formally defined as such) that because of the vital role these teachings play in protecting divine revelation, they, along with church dogma, are also taught infallibly.

Official church documents teach that the believer is bound to "firmly accept and hold as true" those teachings proposed as definitive doctrines. This category of church teaching is relatively new in our tradition and so some questions remain among theologians regarding what happens if someone rejects a definitive doctrine of the church. I find no evidence in tradition that the denial of definitive doctrine has ever been viewed as heresy in the modern sense of the word. Consequently, disagreement with a definitive doctrine would not seem to demand the same consequences as the denial of a dogma of the Church. Provided that one's disagreement were well informed and in keeping with a firm desire to be united with the faith of the Church, the withholding of an internal assent from such a teaching, although potentially a serious error against the teaching of the Church, would not place one outside the Roman Catholic communion.

## **The Appropriate Response to Authoritative Doctrine**

Many of the Church's teachings, although important to the life of the Church, have not been taught with the charism of infallibility. *Authoritative doctrine* includes teachings that the magisterium proposes authoritatively, but not infallibly, to guide the faith of believers. This third category of church teaching is drawn from the wisdom of the Church drawn from communal reflection on Scripture and tradition. Included among authoritative doctrine are many specific moral teachings such as the church's teaching on the conditions that must be met for a war to be considered "just" or the prohibition of recourse to artificial birth control. Yet even as these teachings are proposed authoritatively, the Church's teaching office is not ready to commit itself irrevocably to them. Practically speaking, this means that, however remote, there is a possibility of error with respect to these teachings.

According to Vatican II, Catholics are expected to give "a religious docility of the will and intellect (LG # 25)" to authoritative doctrine. But what does this really mean? I contend that having "religious docility" toward an authoritative doctrine means that one must make a genuine effort to incorporate the given teaching into their personal religious convictions. In so doing, the believer is attempting to give an "internal assent" to the teaching. Generally we will do this readily and without difficulty. Most Catholic Christians assent to the teachings of the Church, even where infallibility is not invoked. Often they accept the teaching because they sense the intuitive "rightness" of the teaching or because they trust in the general authority of the Church's teaching office.

On occasion, however, a believer may face a particular teaching that, at least at first glance, seems problematic. Now what happens? In the language of Vatican II, what does "religious docility" demand in such a situation? I would propose three things.<sup>1</sup>

First, if I possess a religiously “docile” attitude to a difficult teaching I will be willing to engage in further study of the issue. Perhaps my questions are the consequence of poor or inadequate catechesis. Second, if the teaching in question regards matters of morality (e.g., cohabitation before marriage or recourse to artificial contraception) I ought to engage in an examination of conscience. This means asking myself some difficult questions. Am I struggling with this teaching because I cannot discover in it the will of God, or is it because this teaching, if true, would demand some real conversion? Perhaps some basic aspect of my present lifestyle would have to change (e.g., my girlfriend and I might have to stop living together). Third, I must consider whether my difficulties lie not with a particular teaching but with a general rejection of the very idea of a church teaching office. To be a faithful Catholic is to accept the authority of the Church’s teaching office, even if one may have some objections about how that office is structured and exercised in practice.

This is a fairly demanding regimen, as it ought to be if I am going to even consider departing from accepted church teaching. However, if I have difficulties with a particular authoritative doctrine but I have fulfilled these three steps and still cannot give an internal assent to that teaching, I have done all the Church can ask of me. My inability to give an internal assent to this teaching does not in any way separate me from the Roman Catholic communion.

### **The Appropriate Response to Concrete Applications of Church Teaching, Prudential Admonitions and Church Discipline**

Finally, a fourth category of church teaching would include any of a variety of teachings that, technically, would fall short of formal doctrine. A good example is found in Catholic moral teaching. The American bishops, in their pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, distinguished between binding moral principles and *concrete moral applications* about which Catholics could

disagree in good faith. For example, the criteria for determining a “just war” belongs to accepted church teaching. However, the determination of when these criteria have been met in a particular instance is a prudential judgment about which Catholics can differ. They must respect the prudential judgments of the pope and bishops on such matters but they may freely come to a different judgment regarding the application of a particular moral principle.

Also included in this fourth category would be particular instances of church discipline or law. For example, the requirement of celibacy for diocesan priests is a matter of church discipline, not church doctrine. Generally, we are called to accept the discipline of the Church as the “here and now” way in which the Church seeks to organize its concrete life. One can do so, moreover, even while questioning some of these disciplinary practices. To take an example from the civil order, I can think the speed limit for the streets in my neighborhood is too low, but still obey the law. In the life of the Church, I can disagree with some aspect of the laws of fasting and abstinence and still obey them. There are times, however, when matters are not quite so simple. First, we can never follow a law when doing so would lead us to sin. Second, we must remember that church law does not exist for its own sake. Sometimes one is called to exercise the virtue of *epikeia*, that virtue which seeks what might be called “the spirit of the law.” The practice of *epikeia* suggests that a law need not be obeyed if “its observance would be detrimental to the common good or the good of individuals.”<sup>2</sup> It is worth remembering that church law exists to maintain church order, assist individual members in the call to holiness and further the mission of the Church. When the application of the law in a given instance does not demonstrably further these goals, it may yield to alternative actions that do further these goals.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is always greater than the sum total of the individual propositions and teachings to which we can give an assent. It is natural that our individual convictions will vary in the intensity of our commitment. Even occasional struggle with the demands of the gospel and its formulation in church teaching is normal. Respectful disagreement with certain church teachings may be permissible, but it should always be accompanied by a sound knowledge of the substance and authority of church teaching, and, above all, a humble, prayerful spirit open to correction and growth. We live in challenging times, and only a mature, informed yet humble faith will be able to meet the challenges of our age.

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows I am adapting Francis Sullivan's helpful treatment of the dynamics of internal assent in *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 162-6.

<sup>2</sup> S.v., "Epikēia," *HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1995).