

## **“The New ‘E-Magisterium’”**

Richard R. Gaillardetz

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A common complaint heard from voices of the Catholic right holds that Catholic theologians are presenting themselves as a “competing magisterium” to that of the college of bishops. An extended and bitterly polemical exposition of this complaint can be found in Ralph McInerny’s new book, *What Went Wrong with Vatican II: The Catholic Crisis Explained*. There McInerny describes a post-conciliar church in the midst of a crisis brought about by the corrosive work of dissenting theologians. It is a caricature that gains credence more by its widespread repetition than by any objective analysis of the situation in the church today.

Unfortunately, the curial pressure put on the American bishops to add “juridical teeth” to their implementation of *Ex corde ecclesiae* suggests that some in the Vatican may have taken this caricature to heart. I cannot but wonder whether this vast expenditure of ecclesiastical time and energy has not been misspent. I personally know of no serious Catholic theologian who holds that they possess the same authority as that of the college of bishops. Indeed, in my experience the vast majority of Catholic theologians recognize the unique role that the bishops play in the life of the church. They acknowledge a legitimate accountability to the ecclesiastical magisterium even as they may disagree with the concrete manner in which ecclesiastical oversight, in particular instances, is exercised. This sense of respect is manifested in their frequent collaboration with the bishops as seminary professors, diocesan consultors, participants in episcopally sponsored ecumenical dialogues and theological task forces.

In short, the danger posed by “dissenting” theologians has been grossly exaggerated. Credentialed Catholic theologians are readily identified, and to the extent that they speak in public or publish their views, are easily held accountable for their fidelity to the great Tradition of the church. If a particular theologian proposes a position clearly at variance with the great Tradition, a bishop can make a straightforward statement to the effect that position *x* proposed by theologian *y* does not, at present, represent the accepted teaching of the church. Something of this approach was undertaken by Archbishop Weakland some years ago concerning the published positions of a Catholic theologian then teaching in his diocese.

No, I suspect the far more real threat of a new and competing magisterium may be, not the chimerical “magisterium of theologians,” but a new “e-magisterium” emerging on the internet. I have in mind here the proliferation of self-proclaimed “Catholic” websites that often dispense, in the name of orthodoxy, highly questionable theological materials. The materials downloaded from these websites are almost always presented as the “orthodox” exposition of the Catholic faith. This impression is strengthened by the fact that one can download from these sites ecclesiastical documents, the inclusion of which gives an often unwarranted veneer of ecclesiastical respectability. I know of no empirical study of the matter, but my suspicion is that in this age of the internet there are far more first-world Catholics influenced by views championed on these ecclesiastically unmonitored websites than have ever been “confused” by the writings of Tissa Balasuriya or Jacques Dupuis! The volume by Balasuriya that initially occasioned the investigation by the CDF had sold, at the time of his initial investigation,

approximately 750 copies. I suspect the EWTN website receives more “hits” in a single day!

The growing impact of this “e-magisterium” has been confirmed in university classrooms. I personally have received a growing number of papers from theology students that draw on sources obtained from the internet. Well meaning theology students, including those preparing for both ordained and non-ordained ministry in the church, increasingly look to these sources to ascertain the “authentic Catholic position” on a particular matter. As but one example I might mention a document downloaded from a “Catholic” website entitled, “A Short Catechism on the ‘New Theology’.” The document suggests that the theological perspectives of Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar, among others, remain incompatible with orthodox Catholic faith. As both theologians were later created cardinals without recanting earlier held positions (Balthasar died before actually receiving the “red hat”) this is a rather provocative claim!

So what response does this new “e-magisterium” warrant? I am certainly *not* advocating that the hosts of these websites petition for some new kind of *nihil obstat* from the hierarchy. Any such venture would be pastorally unworkable. Rather, my intention is simply to highlight a new pastoral reality. The proliferation of “Catholic” websites, bulletin boards and newsgroups is but the most recent and dramatic indication of the inexorable widening of contemporary theological conversation beyond the realm of clerics and theological specialists. This widening had already been taking place in the decades since the council, as many educated Catholics without professional theological training began reading journals like *America* or *Commonweal*. As this theological education and conversation broadens exponentially via internet technologies, the quality

of the exchange may often fall prey to rampant ideological interests as many hosts of these websites lack the balance and professional editorial instincts of those who run the aforementioned journals. The fact is that however much we might lament the quality of theological conversation being engaged, it is an exchange transpiring beyond ecclesiastical control. No church office could possibly oversee and credential or approve every website that emerges with the word “Catholic” in it. This new situation reveals the changing character of our contemporary ecclesial landscape and it calls for an altogether different model of the apostolic ministry of “oversight” (*episkope*).

In this new situation perhaps the ministry of “oversight” can be better viewed as the encouragement and facilitation of respectful ecclesial discourse. The bishops must continue to fulfill their apostolic office by identifying the parameters of faithful theological conversation; this goes to the heart of the teaching and preaching ministry of the bishop. However, it may well be that the unintended benefit of the proliferation of theological conversation in cyberspace is that it has exposed the difficulties inherent in the ultimately futile ecclesiastical strategy of controlling entrance into ecclesial conversation.

The outline of this shift in the character and exercise of episcopal ministry was already being sketched, if only haltingly, in the documents of Vatican II—a shift away from a view of the bishops as ecclesiastical administrators under Vatican direction who were to control the dissemination of “Catholic” information to that of pastors shepherding a flock and forming a people through liturgy, preaching and catechesis. In this regard, the bishops might wish to follow the lead of the fine new Roman document, *The General Directory for Catechesis*, by reasserting the primacy of adult catechesis in

parish catechetical ministry. After all, the pastoral challenge presented by the “e-magisterium” has come about because many Catholics rely more on the internet (and even the secular media!) than on their participation in their local parish community for catechetical formation. The failure to properly form an adult Catholic population is exactly what makes Catholics susceptible to the claims of the “e-magisterium” when it propagates the views of a reactionary few as the “orthodox Catholic faith.” Only a well informed Catholic population, a people nourished in the life of the local church by word and sacrament, will be capable of discerning the trustworthiness of the new sources of “Catholic” information now available to them. There is a “connaturality” in the exercise of a mature Christian faith that allows one to distinguish mean-spirited polemics from authentic presentations of the great Tradition of the church.

This new role for the bishops is in keeping with the teaching of Vatican II. By affirming the full dignity of the baptized, by privileging the value of the shared testimony of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*), by stressing the importance of the faithful’s access to vernacular biblical translations, by encouraging advanced scripture and theological study by all the faithful, by admitting the clear limits of clerical expertise and the necessity of the clergy listening to the wisdom of the faithful, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council established a new context for the exercise of the apostolic office of the bishop. The bishops were no longer to be viewed as the sole repository of the apostolic faith but rather the guardians of an apostolic heritage that is discerned, handed on and received in the life of the whole church. How ironic it would be if this shift were actually facilitated by the technological initiatives of those who seek to restore, by modern means, an antiquated view of church authority!