

The Catholic Faith: The Limits and Scope of Pastoral Ministry

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Several years ago in *America* magazine, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels argued that the recent polarization of both the left and right within the Catholic church was doing great harm to the church as a whole. One group of Catholics frequently caught in the crossfire between extremists from both wings are the professional pastoral ministers. Pastoral ministers (ordained and non-ordained) must carefully negotiate a veritable minefield of contentious issues and viewpoints, but must do so under the special pressures and obligations incumbent upon them in their particular ecclesial role.

Not infrequently, these ministers are called upon to respond to members of the church and other inquirers into the Catholic faith who, for one reason or another, are struggling with a particular church teaching. As *public* ministers, they are conscious of their responsibility to present faithfully church doctrine as visible and formal representatives of the Catholic church. Their role is not identical with that of the professional theologian whose work is often more speculative and exploratory in its methodology and tentative in its conclusions. As *pastoral* ministers, they want to honor the real struggles of those to whom they minister. They know well that they are ministering to adults who are often highly educated and accustomed to forming their own views--views which they expect to be taken seriously. I believe that successful navigation of this minefield is possible only after considering very carefully the specific responsibilities of the public minister within the Roman Catholic church. With this in mind, I

would like to propose four basic responsibilities incumbent upon every public minister in the presentation of official church teaching.

I. The Responsibility to Present the Official Teaching of the Church Comprehensively and Sympathetically

Every public minister has the responsibility to present the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church. This should be so obvious as to require no further comment. However, I am convinced that there is a great deal of misunderstanding regarding what this responsibility actually entails.

No public minister within the church has the authority to offer an expurgated version of the Catholic faith. There is often the temptation to ignore those teachings of the church which may presents difficulties either for the minister or for those whom the minister is addressing. This temptation is understandable. There are many faithful public ministers who are not equally comfortable with every teaching of the church. In this situation, there is a tendency to avoid the topic altogether for fear of being in the position of 1) questioning church teaching in public, 2) defending church teaching without conviction, or 3) presenting church teaching in a superficial or haphazard fashion. For example, I recently had a conversation with a priest ordained almost thirty years who said, with obvious pride, that he had never publically addressed the issue of contraception in his priestly ministry. It was obvious from his comments that he had serious difficulties with the church's position on this question. He is certainly not alone. However, is there not a latent paternalism here which assumes that the minister knows better than the one being ministered to which official positions of the church are correct and which are not? The minister must remember that not everyone will share his/her personal difficulties, and that everyone has a right to a clear, comprehensive and sympathetic presentation of church teaching.

For any minister to edit the church's teaching because of personal difficulties is to let their own judgment replace that of those they are teaching.

Besides this latent paternalism, there are other factors which I believe contribute to a selective presentation of the Catholic faith. One important factor is the poor theological formation of church ministers, including many clergy. Too often a minister will struggle with an official teaching of the church because of inadequate theological formation. Teachings on Mary, eschatology, original sin, eucharistic real presence, sexual morality etc., are often ignored because the minister finds popular/traditional treatments (which is to say the kind of treatment one might find in pre-conciliar catechisms or seminary manuals) of the subject less than persuasive. Proper theological formation and ongoing education for ministry is absolutely essential for the minister to be able to present adequately the teaching of the church in language and concepts intelligible to the modern educated Catholic.

The responsibility to present the teaching of the church *comprehensively* risks being misunderstood if it is conceived as simply going through a checklist of doctrinal propositions and moral norms. We should recall Pope John XXIII's injunction at the opening of Vatican II that the church must penetrate to the heart of its teaching. Rote memorization and repetition of formal doctrinal propositions is not catechesis. Doctrinal statements and specific moral norms are summary statements, "bottom line" summations of a rich theological tradition. The church's ministers require formal theological training precisely so that they can go beyond the mere repetition of doctrinal propositions and moral norms. For example, contemporary models of catechesis in the catechumenate rightly begin, not with doctrinal propositions but with the liturgy, liturgical calendar, creeds and lectionary. This leads us to the second responsibility of the public minister.

II. The Responsibility to be Mindful of the Hierarchy of Truths

The Second Vatican Council recognized a certain gradation among church doctrine in its teaching on the “hierarchy of truths” in the Decree on Ecumenism:

Furthermore, in ecumenical dialogue, when Catholic theologians join with other Christians in common study of the divine mysteries, while standing fast by the teaching of the church, they should pursue the work with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. When comparing doctrines with one another, they [theologians] should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their connection with the foundation of the Christian faith. Thus the way will be open for this kind of friendly emulation to incite all to a deeper awareness and a clearer manifestation of the unfathomable riches of Christ (# 11).

The decree is not just referring to the distinction between church dogma and authoritative but non-definitive doctrine. Rather the council was primarily referring to a hierarchy which exists *among* the dogmatic teachings of the church. According to the council, all church dogmas must be interpreted and presented in the light of their relationship to “the foundation of Christian faith.” Since the foundation of the Christian faith determines the ordering of these dogmas, this phrase must refer to something more basic than a particular dogma or set of dogmas. References to “the divine mysteries” and “the unfathomable riches of Christ” suggest that the foundation of the faith lies in the economy of salvation, what God has done for us through Christ and in the Spirit. This was in fact the substance of the apostolic *kerygma* of the early church. It is reflected in the early creedal confessions and continues to be encountered most profoundly in the church’s liturgy. The obligation of the minister to present church teaching comprehensively means more than going through a shopping list of propositional statements drawn from Denzinger or even the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; it means faithfully presenting the ancient apostolic *kerygma* which was centered on God’s work of salvation on our behalf. All

dogmatic teachings must be placed in the context of this economy of salvation. It follows that a comprehensive presentation of the Catholic faith need not involve an exhaustive articulation of all the church's various dogmatic pronouncements. Avery Dulles writes:

Few if any believers explicitly know everything that the Church, through its magisterium, has taught and teaches as divinely revealed. For the ordinary believer, who is not an expert on the history of doctrine, it suffices to adhere explicitly to the central truths of Christianity. These are well known from familiar passages in Scripture, from Christian preaching and catechesis, from the creeds (which summarize the central articles of faith), and from the liturgy (which celebrates the great mysteries of faith in the annual cycle of feasts and seasons) [*The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 192].

We must remember that the church's motive in promulgating dogmatic definitions was rarely if ever catechetical. It was usually a formal response to specific, historically situated attacks on the apostolic faith. A comprehensive presentation of the Catholic faith should not be confused with a comprehensive presentation of every dogmatic statement ever promulgated by the church.

III. The Responsibility to Make Explicit, When Appropriate, the Binding Character of a Particular Teaching

Not every teaching of the church is equally binding on the consciences of the faithful. This is so because the church itself does not propose each teaching with the same degree of authority. The neo-scholastic manuals acknowledged this in their use of theological notes (e.g., *de fide definita*, *sententia fidei proxima*, *sententia theologice certa*) to specify the authoritative status of a church teaching. Unfortunately, these distinctions were often considered of mere academic value. Many insisted, (and many still do today) that the faithful need not be informed of the authoritative status of a teaching for fear of encouraging a "cafeteria Catholicism" where Catholics feel free to reject any doctrine which has not been proposed infallibly. Too often in

contemporary preaching and catechesis there is scant consideration of the important gradations of authoritative church teaching. André Naud has referred to the ecclesiastical reluctance to make these distinctions as *le mal catholique*, the Catholic malady (*Le magistère incertain*, 23-45). This attitude suggests a kind of ecclesiastical paternalism. Yet these distinctions have developed within the Catholic tradition out of the recognition that not everything the church teaches is divinely revealed. Consequently, with regard to the church's authoritative but non-defined teaching, there is at least a remote possibility of error. Where such a remote possibility exists the faithful cannot be asked to give an assent of faith. To ignore these distinctions in church teaching is to ignore the fundamental difference between an act of faith and the religious *obsequium* of intellect and will which Vatican II (*Lumen gentium* # 25) proposes as the appropriate response to non-definitive, authoritative doctrine.

How does the minister determine the theological note or authoritative status of a church teaching? In church tradition, the responsibility for assigning a theological note to a particular teaching generally fell on the community of theologians. Obviously, this meant theologians who were "in good standing" in the church. These theologians would assess the form in which a teaching had been proposed (for example, solemn definitions might introduce a dogmatic statement with "I/we solemnly define and declare..."), the authoritative status of the document within which a teaching was proposed (e.g., a constitution, encyclical, apostolic letter), the historical context out of which the teaching emerged, and the frequency with which it had been taught. The theologians would then offer their judgment regarding the authoritative status of that teaching, and that judgment would be included in theological manuals and catechisms. The fact that this practice is no longer as common as it once was does create special difficulties for the public minister.

Of course, the determination of the authoritative status of a teaching must always keep in mind canon 749.3, “No doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such.” I interpret this canon to mean that the burden of proof lies with the magisterium to clearly proclaim when a teaching is given the status of a dogma of the faith, and to clearly substantiate that claim. Failure to do so can result in the kind of ambiguity which I believe is still present regarding the church’s teaching on the ordination of women even with the CDF’s recent statement [I cannot consider the important but relatively technical questions which need to be addressed regarding the CDF’s recent *Responsum ad dubium*.].

IV. The Responsibility to Offer Guidance to Those Who Struggle with Church Teaching

The church's teaching is not simply one voice in the marketplace of ideas; for Catholics it has a formal authoritative or normative role. But ultimately, every person must actualize their conscience in concrete decisions for which they alone will be responsible before God. This understanding of the role of conscience was highlighted at the Second Vatican Council. In the Decree on Religious Liberty #4, the council taught that “the Christian faithful ought to *carefully attend to* the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.” A number of bishops proposed an amendment in which the phrase “...carefully attend to...” would be replaced by the passage “...ought to form their consciences according to....” The theological commission responded that “the proposed formula seems excessively restrictive. The obligation binding upon the faithful is sufficiently expressed in the text as it stands.” The public minister must be mindful of the fact that he or she is presenting the teaching of the church to responsible moral agents who alone will have to give or not give an assent to a particular teaching.

During the four centuries between the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council the teaching ministry of the church was conceived in largely juridical terms. In the sphere of church discipline an obedience of the will is demanded. This kind of obedience generally requires only an external assent in which a person can freely obey a law of the church as long as there is no conflict with some more vital moral obligation. To take a mundane example from civil society, when driving on the highway I may come across a 55 mph speed limit sign. I do not inquire after the “truth” of this law, but merely whether I can obey it without violating some other greater priority (e.g., bringing my wife, in the final stages of labor, to the hospital). In the post-Tridentine church, this juridical view of authority was extended beyond the sphere of canon law to apply as well to the church’s doctrinal teaching. This extension of the juridical view overlooked important differences between an authority which promulgates law and an authority which proclaims church doctrine. In the latter case the proper paradigm is no longer command/obedience but proclamation/response. The church *proclaims* the gospel of Jesus Christ and invites a *response* from the believer. This response involves more than just an act of the will; the believer must inquire after the *truthfulness* of this teaching as well. The character of church doctrine demands that one strive toward not just an external assent but a true internal assent. Belief cannot be commanded, one is invited to belief in response to the proclamation of the gospel. Pope John XXIII himself recognized this difficulty in his homily at the opening mass of Vatican II:

At the outset of the Second Vatican Council, it is evident, as always, that the truth of the Lord will remain forever. We see, in fact, as one age succeeds another, that the opinions of men (and women) follow one another and exclude each other. And often errors vanish as quickly as they arise, like fog before the sun.

The church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by *demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnation.*

In the post-Tridentine, juridical view of teaching authority, the role of the minister in the face of controversy and/or disagreement with church teaching was straightforward; he simply commanded obedience to all church teaching. However, as we recognize that the proclamation of church doctrine demands a true *internal* assent, the role of the public minister in the face of controversy and/or disagreement becomes more complicated. What are the obligations of the minister in this situation?

The first factor which the public minister must take into consideration concerns the pastoral setting. For example, I do not believe that the liturgical homily is the place to attend to specific controversial matters in church teaching. The homily is to be devoted to the proclamation of the word of God and its subject matter is dictated by both the lectionary and the liturgical calendar. The 8-12 minute framework of the average homily precludes any sophisticated treatment of controverted doctrinal issues. Even the treatment of controversial matters or challenges to church teaching in other public settings (e.g., during a catechetical presentation as part of the R.C.I.A. process or in some other adult education program) requires considerable pastoral sensitivity. In general, I believe that when a serious difficulty or challenge to a church teaching occurs, the minister should briefly 1) present the teaching of the church as clearly and sympathetically as possible, 2) acknowledge honestly when there is some theological disagreement on the matter, and 3) offer a clarification of the authoritative status of the teaching. However, participation by the public minister in serious, protracted debate over a church teaching is best avoided in this public setting. Where serious personal disagreements

emerge in a public forum of this kind, the diversity in people's personal faith journeys combined with often significant differences in theological background invite misunderstanding. One-on-one pastoral counseling offers an atmosphere much more appropriate for dealing with these serious personal difficulties.

In the context of pastoral counseling, the minister is better able to assume a stance not unlike that of the spiritual director. The task of the good spiritual director is to help the directee recognize the signposts in their particular journey of faith: it is not to chart their spiritual path for them. Where individuals come to a public minister of the church with questions or difficulties regarding a church teaching, it is the task of the minister to guide them in the process of achieving internal assent. This assistance or guidance must be clearly differentiated from the kind of paternalism reflected in the attitudes of many ministers on both extremes of the ideological spectrum.

The concrete guidance of the minister certainly includes the sympathetic presentation of the official teaching of the church. This generally would include offering the theological arguments which have been proposed in support of this teaching. It may also be helpful to acknowledge opposing arguments while stressing that these arguments do not possess the same official or authoritative character. Second, the minister must clarify the authoritative status (or theological note, as the manualists referred to it) of the particular teaching. Are we dealing with a central dogma of the faith (e.g., the bodily resurrection of Jesus) or with a particular teaching of the church which, while authoritative, would have a significantly different status (e.g., the church's position on tubal ligation when a woman is medically unable to bring a pregnancy to term). Obviously, difficulties regarding the first example would be much more significant than those related to the second. Third, the minister can invite the individual to an examination of

conscience in order to ascertain whether the difficulties lie in a fear of the conversion which assent to a particular teaching (particularly in the area of morality) might demand. Finally, the minister can invite the individual to assess their attitude toward the authority of the ecclesiastical magisterium. In our society, particularly in this country, it is easy to fall prey to an attitude which sees any exercise of church authority as archaic or out of step with the times.

Having completed this process, the minister has fulfilled his or her responsibility to assist the individual in the proper formation and examination of conscience. The decision to give or withhold assent is placed where it rightly belongs, with the person who has the difficulties with the given teaching. It is possible that those with whom the minister is dealing will not want to assume their proper responsibility. They may want the minister to give them permission to reject a certain teaching. Let me say quite bluntly: this permission is not the minister's to give. On the other hand, neither is it the place of the minister to pronounce judgment on the ultimate spiritual consequences of a failure to arrive at internal assent (e.g., "if you do not agree with the church on this matter you stand in peril of your salvation"). No minister of the church, from the pope to the parish catechist is empowered *to command* assent to church teaching nor *to dispense* from that assent, and no minister is empowered to pass formal judgment on the ultimate spiritual consequences of a particular stance toward church teaching. Of course, one must distinguish between the ultimate *spiritual* consequences of an inability to arrive at internal assent and the *ecclesial/canonical* consequences. There are clear church guidelines that dictate that a public and obstinate rejection of a central dogmatic teaching of the church (generally those which we profess in the creeds) may separate someone from the Roman Catholic communion. On the other hand, where the failure to arrive at internal assent is concerned with an authoritative but non-definitive doctrine of the church (e.g., the church's prohibition of artificial

contraception) a failure to arrive at internal assent, if this follows from a properly formed conscience, would not necessarily separate one from the Roman Catholic communion. Indeed, this withholding of assent, sometimes called legitimate dissent, must be viewed as a valid exercise of the fundamental obligation of all believers to seek after truth and to accept the consequences of that search.

Finally, the permissibility of withholding assent, in these carefully defined circumstances, must not be viewed by the minister as a mere act of condescension to human weakness and error. Because the magisterium itself grants the possibility of error in the proclamation of authoritative doctrine, the dissent of believers, if it follows from the process outlined above and from a spirit of respect for the authority of the church, may positively assist the church in recognizing its error and moving forward in pursuit of the “plenitude of truth.” This possibility cannot, in principle, be denied to the “ordinary believer.” The great 19th century theologian and cardinal, John Henry Newman, was fond of citing the early Arianist controversy as an example of the laity, often at odds with the views of their bishops, helping to preserve the orthodox faith. Though without the professional credentials of the theologian, every baptized believer possesses a supernatural instinct of the faith (cf. *Lumen gentium* # 12) and therefore has a vital contribution to make to the church’s corporate discernment of God’s Word. In other words, we must acknowledge the real possibility that legitimate dissent itself, whether by the professional theologian or the “ordinary believer,” may be a manifestation of the Spirit bringing the whole church to truth. Clearly there are instances of dissent which are ill-considered and public expressions of dissent which reflect a divisive, confrontational spirit. However, the tendency of some to view *all* forms of dissent as acts of disobedience or disloyalty is the unfortunate consequence of the polarized ecclesiastical climate of today.

In the end, the ultimate responsibility of the public minister within the Catholic church is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it finds expression in the Roman Catholic tradition. The minister proclaims church teaching comprehensively, sympathetically, and in a pastorally sensitive manner. At the same time the minister must always remember that responsibility for responding to that teaching lies with another. Every minister prays that they might be an instrument of the Holy Spirit. But that same Spirit works through those who seek to make the teaching of the church their own, and *their* struggles, their often courageous attempts to grapple with the demands of church teaching, also constitute a valuable contribution to the life of the church.