

‘You have said it and Your word is true.’ (*Act of Faith*)

Over several months we’ve been looking at some of the reasons that support our belief in the authority of the Catholic Church. In the words of Vatican II: ‘We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men.’ ‘It is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained.’ ‘They could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.’ (*Dignitatis Humanae* 1; *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3; *Lumen Gentium* 14)

So we now consider: specifically, what are the beliefs we must hold as Catholics? An obvious step in finding authentic Catholic teaching is to go to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, authorised by the Successor of Peter. St John Paul II, promulgating the *Catechism*, said this: ‘I declare it to be a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion.’ And Pope Francis describes the *Catechism* as: ‘a fundamental aid for that unitary act with which the Church communicates the entire content of her faith: “all that she herself is, and all that she believes”.’ (*Lumen Fidei* 46)

The *Catechism* gathers together doctrines of different levels of authority – some taught infallibly, others non-infallibly yet authoritatively. Often we don’t especially need to know, ‘Is this or that teaching infallible?’ Vatican II taught that we’re obliged to ‘sincerely adhere’ to even non-infallible teachings with ‘religious submission of will and intellect’ (*Lumen Gentium* 25). Yet sometimes we do specifically want to know if something *has* been taught infallibly – that we consequently know is unchangeable, and binding with no possible exceptions.

A theologian might assess this by examining Church statements over history. But even without that, we still have recent Church guidance in the matter that gives all of us sure confidence, and the mind of the Holy See. In 1998, in conjunction with John Paul II’s *Motu Proprio Ad tuendam fidem* (‘To Protect the Faith’), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under then-Cardinal Ratzinger published its *Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the Profession of Faith*. When a man is to be ordained, or appointed parish priest, or when someone takes up various other Church roles (for example, participation in the Plenary Council), there is a prescribed Profession of Faith they must make (cf. Canon 833), and the intention of the *Doctrinal Commentary* is to specify what someone commits to in making this Profession.

It names three categories of doctrines. First, those the Church infallibly **teaches to be divinely revealed**: whether by Pope or Ecumenical Council defining it; or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium (the Pope and Bishops around the world united in their ordinary teaching) proposing it as divinely revealed. In Pope Francis’ words, ‘All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith...’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 36)

The second category: **teachings set forth definitively**, though not formally proclaimed *as divinely revealed*. These too can be solemnly defined by Pope or Ecumenical Council, or taught as definitive by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. ‘Every believer...is required to give firm and definitive assent to these truths, based on faith in the Holy Spirit’s assistance to the Church’s Magisterium, and on the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the Magisterium in these matters.’ (*Commentary* 6) The *Commentary* emphasises that there is no difference in the absolute ‘irrevocable’ adherence we owe to teachings in the first and second categories. (8)

Then, the third category: **doctrines taught authoritatively even though not definitively**. We adhere to these non-infallible teachings with submission of will and intellect (10) (even though there could in principle be errors here and there among them, so in exceptional cases a theologian may for sufficient reasons respectfully withhold assent from this or that one).

The *Commentary*, ‘without any intention of completeness’, gives a few instances from the first two categories. First, teachings proposed as divinely revealed: these, it says, must be absolutely believed; to obstinately doubt or deny even one of them is heresy (incurring, it notes, automatic excommunication (Canon 1364) – unless there are mitigating factors, such as ignorance). (5)

It gives as examples: ‘the articles of faith of the Creed, the various Christological dogmas and Marian dogmas; the doctrine of the institution of the sacraments by Christ and their efficacy with regard to grace; the doctrine of the real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic celebration; the foundation of the Church by the will of Christ; the doctrine on the primacy and infallibility of the Roman Pontiff; the doctrine on the existence of original sin; the doctrine on the immortality of the spiritual soul and on the immediate recompense after death; the absence of error in the inspired sacred texts; the doctrine on the grave immorality of direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being.’ (11)

Then it mentions some teachings from the second category: things not proclaimed (or not yet proclaimed) as having been divinely revealed, but still taught definitively. The *Commentary* warns that if we deny one of these teachings we would ‘no longer be in full communion with the Catholic Church’. (6) It gives the example of the doctrine that priestly ordination is reserved to men. This ‘is to be held definitively’ as John Paul II reaffirmed, because ‘it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium’. (11)

Next come three examples of *moral* doctrines taught as definitive by the ordinary and universal Magisterium: the illicitness of euthanasia, prostitution and fornication. There aren’t solemn *definitions* on these three things, but the Popes and Bishops are united (the *Commentary* is saying) in setting them forth as definitive in their ordinary teaching. The examples seem chosen as though at random, perhaps to suggest that from similar reasoning, over the centuries the generality of the Church’s basic moral teachings have been taught definitively in this same way.

The Holy See’s *Commentary* finally mentions truths to be held definitively that are connected to revelation ‘by historical necessity’. So: ‘the legitimacy of the election of the Supreme Pontiff or of the celebration of an Ecumenical Council, the canonisations of saints’ (these things are called ‘dogmatic facts’); Pope Leo XIII’s declaration on the invalidity of Anglican ordinations. (11) Obviously, such things aren’t part of the public revelation that ended with the death of the last Apostle, handed on in Scripture and Tradition. But although they’re not *themselves* divinely revealed, the Church still has the power of teaching historical realities like these definitively, so as to faithfully *safeguard and expound* the deposit of faith.

As discussed last year, all these teachings don’t *restrict* us: the truth sets us free and makes us one; whereas if we dilute the teachings we’re ultimately serving non-freedom and division. So, the Church humbly serves humanity by sharing the whole truth entrusted to her. In the coming time we’ll look more closely at these various examples, to strengthen us in these beliefs that are not merely provisional, but definitive and unchangeable.