

‘He who hears you, hears me’: Walking in the entire truth

The last category of Church teaching on which we’ll reflect is that of the *authentic* Magisterium – the third level of teachings explained in the 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*. Unlike higher-level teachings, these teachings are not proposed definitively, and so do not require either to be believed with the absolute assent of divine faith (1st Category) or to be held definitively (2nd category). Rather, we adhere to them with ‘religious submission of will and intellect’. (10)

Although as we’ve seen in our reflections in recent times, there does exist a considerable number of Catholic doctrines taught infallibly (of which we’ve only looked at a small sample), the number of teachings in this third level is much greater still, when we consider all the papal teaching documents (encyclicals, etc.) that are promulgated fairly frequently.

The most authoritative text explaining this category of teachings and the response due to them is Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964). Before setting forth the doctrine on the Church’s infallible Magisterium, it begins with the authentic Magisterium, and first simply that of Bishops, declaring: ‘Bishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. In matters of faith and morals, the Bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent [Latin: *obsequio*].’ (25, DS 4149) (The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explains in *Donum Veritatis* (‘The Gift of the Truth’ (1990)) [*DV*] that a Bishop’s teaching being ‘exercised in communion with the Roman Pontiff...and with the other Bishops’, is ‘a condition for its authenticity’. (19))

Lumen Gentium then expounds the ordinary Magisterium of the Pope: ‘This religious submission [Latin: *obsequium*] of the will and intellect must be shown in a special way to the authentic Magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme Magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, and that the judgements made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will, which is made known principally either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking.’ (25, DS 4149)

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, this religious submission, ‘though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it.’ (n. 892) *Lumen Gentium* details what it means by this submission: first, the acknowledgement ‘with reverence’ of the Pope’s supreme Magisterium; but second, sincere *adherence* [Latin: *adhaeretur*] to his specific doctrinal judgements. (25) A mere respect or supposed ‘reverence’ without actual adherence is not sufficient. Further, as *Donum Veritatis* states, ‘this kind of response cannot be simply exterior or disciplinary but must be understood within the logic of faith and under the impulse of obedience to the faith.’ (23) *Interior* adherence of mind and heart is thus called for.

Pope St Paul VI affirms this ‘sincere obedience [*obsequie*], inward as well as outward, which is due to the Magisterium of the Church. For...the pastors of the Church enjoy a special light of the Holy Spirit in teaching the truth. And this, rather than the arguments they put forward, is why you are bound to such obedience.’ (*Humanae Vitae* (1968) 28; cf. Pope St John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) 110) *Lumen Gentium* adds that our adherence must be according to the Pope’s ‘manifest mind and will’. ‘Sincere’ obedience obviously seeks his genuine meaning and intention, rather than looking for loopholes that we think will enable us to evade these.

Thus Pope St Pius X declared a century ago: ‘When we love the Pope, there are no discussions regarding what he orders or demands, or up to what point obedience must go, and in what things

he is to be obeyed... We do not say that he has not spoken clearly enough, almost as if he were forced to repeat to the ear of each one the will clearly expressed so many times... We do not place his orders in doubt, adding the facile pretext of those unwilling to obey – that it is not the Pope who commands, but those who surround him; we do not limit the field in which he might and must exercise his authority; we do not set above the authority of the Pope that of other persons, however learned, who dissent from the Pope, who, even though learned, are not holy, because whoever is holy cannot dissent from the Pope.’ (Allocution *Vi ringrazio* (1912))

Neither can we assume that denial of such teachings is not gravely sinful. The *Code of Canon Law* lays down that one who obstinately rejects a doctrine of the authentic Magisterium of the Pope or the College of Bishops and does not retract after a warning is to receive canonical penalties. (cf. Canon 1365, as revised by Pope Francis; Canon 752; Pope St Pius X *Praestantia Scripturae* (1907)) In canon law, one can only incur canonical punishment for an external violation of the law which is ‘gravely imputable’. (Canon 1321.2)

Pope Francis continues to affirm the necessity, not only of ‘obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard, but also to the Magisterium that guards it’. (*Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018) 173) As Pope Pius XII explained, ‘These matters are taught with the ordinary teaching authority, of which it is true to say [*in our Lord’s words*]: “He who hears you, hears me” (*Lk* 10:16).’ (*Humani Generis* (1950) 20 (DS 3885); cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) n. 87)

Beyond teachings of the Pope himself, *Donum Veritatis* explains that ‘the Roman Pontiff fulfils his universal mission with the help of the various bodies of the Roman Curia and in particular with that of the Congregation [*now ‘Dicastery’*] for the Doctrine of the Faith in matters of doctrine and morals. Consequently, the documents issued by this Congregation expressly approved by the Pope participate in the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Peter.’ (18)

‘All acts of the Magisterium derive from the same source, that is, from Christ who desires that His People walk in the entire truth. For this same reason, magisterial decisions in matters of discipline, even if they are not guaranteed by the charism of infallibility, are not without divine assistance and call for the adherence of the faithful.’ (*DV* 17; cf. *Catechism* n. 2037)

Is all this the exaggeration of so-called ‘ultramontanism’, where every casual word of the Pope is wrongly taken as infallible law? No, papal *intention* is crucial; and the Popes, outside their official acts, manifest no such intention of binding the faithful. This is illustrated in the words of Pope Benedict XVI about his book *Jesus of Nazareth*. He writes: ‘It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium... Everyone is free, then, to contradict me.’ (pp. xxiii-xxiv) Even with official teaching the Popes themselves allow for the possibility of a theologian in exceptional cases respectfully withholding assent from a non-irreformable teaching. (We will look later at the carefully limited conditions for this. (cf. *DV* 24-31))

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sums up: ‘One must...take into account the proper character of every exercise of the Magisterium, considering the extent to which its authority is engaged.’ (*DV* 17) The teachings of the Pope and the Bishops ‘require degrees of adherence differentiated according to the mind and the will manifested.’ (*Doctrinal Commentary* 11) ‘The faithful, who may not simply listen to them as experts in Catholic doctrine, must accept their teaching given in Christ’s name, with an assent that is proportionate to the authority that they possess and that they mean to exercise.’ (*Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973))

Really, our duty of religious submission is a simple consequence of the dogma of the Pope’s plenary authority over the whole Church, as defined by Vatican I. (DS 3064) This authority, the Council declared, is, in turn, ‘by the appointment of our Lord... This is the doctrine of Catholic truth, from which no one can deviate without loss of faith and of salvation.’ (DS 3060)