

The temptation of dissent: the ‘leaven of infidelity to the Holy Spirit’

Last month we looked at the third level of Church teaching, the ‘authentic Magisterium’, and in particular the ordinary Magisterium of the Pope. These teachings require our sincere adherence, religious submission of will and intellect, which ‘though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 892)

When, on the one hand, we give the assent of divine faith, or when we hold teachings definitively (the first two levels), that is an adherence of absolute certainty. Recognising that a doctrine has been taught infallibly, we rule out in our minds the least possibility of that teaching being wrong. We rule out the option of ever withdrawing our assent to it. On the other hand, with the religious submission of will and intellect that we give to third-level teachings, our assent does not have this absolute quality. We still do not have the right to *refuse* assent to such teachings; yet we are aware of the theoretical possibility of this or that teaching being modified in future.

In actual fact, even among these teachings changes are very rare. Even within the tiny proportion of teachings sometimes claimed as being ‘reversals’ of earlier doctrine, very often it is a case of a topic being approached with a new emphasis or new angle, a complementary perspective – so not a genuine contradiction that would force us to simply reject the previous teaching.

So with trust in the general guidance of the Holy Spirit over Church teaching, we hold even to non-infallible doctrines with the same strong confidence that we have in the normal certainties of everyday life. A somewhat parallel example: we confidently eat food that we buy. It is theoretically possible that it could be poisoned – we do not have absolute certainty. But we do not live our lives worried about this theoretical possibility. It is a bit similar with these third-level magisterial teachings.

And the higher the authority with which they are taught, the greater our confidence. So papal teaching gives greater certainty than the teaching of a local bishop to his flock; and within papal teaching itself, there are different degrees of authority that a Pope intends to exercise. Vatican II explains that his intention ‘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.’ (*Lumen Gentium* 25, DS 4149) For example, the teaching of an encyclical has greater certainty than the teaching contained in a formal papal speech (though even the latter is still found to be indicated as magisterial by other Church documents).

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. The Church has spelt out the very limited conditions for this in most detail in the 1990 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis [DV]*, subtitled ‘On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian’. The document was especially concerned with the widespread problem of theologians *illegitimately dissenting* from Church teaching, even publicly challenging the Church. (cf. *DV* 32-41) But the document first looked at the conditions for when withholding assent might possibly be *legitimate*. (cf. *DV* 24-31)

Even though we are not theologians ourselves, it is helpful to look at these conditions, to realise just how limited this freedom to withhold assent really is. (Often people appeal to it to the extent of giving themselves a virtual free hand to reject non-infallible Church teachings.)

First, *Donum Veritatis* is speaking about the liberty that the Church gives to qualified *theologians*. It makes no mention of the general faithful in this regard. Even common sense tells us that most people have nowhere near the expertise required to pass judgement on what are often subtle and difficult points. (In truth, even objections one reads from this or that theologian against some Magisterial teaching are frequently quite shallow and simplistic.)

Second, people claiming the right to dissent as they please from *non-infallible* teachings often make little effort in the first place to investigate whether the teaching from which they wish to dissent may in fact have been taught *infallibly*. As we have seen in our reflections in recent times, there are actually many infallible teachings; and some of the most commonly rejected doctrines of the present day (such as on controversial moral questions, or on women's priestly ordination) have been taught infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, leaving no room even for theologians to withhold or limit their assent.

But turning to the conditions under which a theologian may *legitimately* withhold assent – *Donum Veritatis* says this: ‘The willingness to submit loyally to the teaching of the Magisterium on matters *per se* not irreformable must be the rule. It can happen, however, that a theologian may, according to the case, raise questions regarding the timeliness, the form, or even the contents of magisterial interventions.’ (24) ‘Even if the doctrine of the faith is not in question, the theologian will not present his own opinions or divergent hypotheses as though they were non-arguable conclusions. Respect for the truth as well as for the People of God requires this discretion. For the same reasons, the theologian will refrain from giving untimely public expression to them.’ (27)

‘The preceding considerations have a particular application to the case of the theologian who might have serious difficulties, for reasons which appear to him well-founded, in accepting a non-irreformable magisterial teaching. Such a disagreement could not be justified if it were based solely upon the fact that the validity of the given teaching is not evident or upon the opinion that the opposite position would be the more probable.’ (28)

‘It can also happen that at the conclusion of a serious study, undertaken with the desire to heed the Magisterium's teaching without hesitation, the theologian's difficulty remains because the arguments to the contrary seem more persuasive to him. Faced with a proposition to which he feels he cannot give his intellectual assent, the theologian nevertheless has the duty to remain open to a deeper examination of the question.’ (31)

This respectful attitude is far from that of various Catholics, theologians or not, rejecting all sorts of teachings at a moment's notice – with no prayer, no long and careful study and reflection. A new papal document is published, and immediately, purportedly faithful Catholics are searching out and declaring its supposed errors.

As *Donum Veritatis* warns, ‘To succumb to the temptation of dissent...is to allow the “leaven of infidelity to the Holy Spirit” to start to work.’ (40) With the humble attitude of Mary, the supreme example of faith, (42) we serenely accept all the teachings of the Church in accordance with their different levels of authority, with the certainty that thereby, we are led by the Holy Spirit into the fullness of truth, (*Jn* 16:13) as Our Lord promised.