

# **Ministering to Catholics**

## **The Issue of Authoritative Teaching**

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July 9, 2017

The Roman Catholic Church views itself as the Mother Church. It calls Protestants to “return” to Church. This is rooted not just in its age and history but the belief that it is God’s ecclesiastical authority on earth.

Catholicism has labeled this authority the “magisterium,” which is the teaching authority of the Church. Derived from the Latin word magister, meaning teacher, the magisterium alleges to speak the infallible truth over faith and morals.

While most Catholics are unaware of the magisterium, this claim by the Catholic Church is nevertheless central to our discussions with Catholics. This is a fundamental issue of where does spiritual truth reside and how can we know it.

In order to understand the importance of this claim of having authority in teaching and to evaluate it properly, we first must understand what is meant by the magisterium.

### **1. The explanation of the magisterium**

#### **a. Apostolic succession**

The concept of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church is rooted in the concept of “apostolic succession,” or that authentic witness of the Christian faith has been transmitted down to today through the bishops. The belief is that the apostles gave their authority to their disciples (such as Paul to Timothy) and they passed it along to their disciples. According to the Second Vatican Council, “Bishops have succeeded the apostles, not only because they come after them, but also because they have inherited apostolic power.”

This authority is understood as not simply a leadership authority but is a teaching authority, protecting the spiritual truth throughout time. Once again, from the Second Vatican Council, “In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church, the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching authority.”

In practice, with over 5,000 bishops in the world we find that some bishops are more significant than other bishops, which is why there are titles of archbishop, cardinal and pope. The pope, as the bishop of Rome, is necessarily the central figure in this magisterium.

b. Authority over the Scripture

The bishops aren't just entrusted with teaching authority, they are the only teaching authority. Once again, from the Second Vatican Council, "the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."

Notice that the Word of God is considered to be not only the Scripture but is also in the form of Tradition. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his Catechism of the Catholic Church, "As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, 'does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.'" Therefore, spiritual truth is not only derived from the Catholic interpretation of the Bible, it is also derived from the Catholic interpretation of Tradition.

If the Catholic Church is the authoritative interpreter of the Scripture, it becomes the authority over the Scripture. Because it gets to determine the meaning of the text, it supplants the Bible in the lives of its followers. The Bible does not stand on its own but is to be read through the lens of the Catholic teaching authority.

c. Arguments for support

1) The problems in Protestantism

Catholic apologists point particularly to the disunity of Protestantism to prove the need for the Church to be the infallible authority on faith and morals. While there is no doubt that a great many Protestants are guilty of teaching what is opposed to the Scripture, this does not support the idea that the Catholic Church is infallible. The disagreements among Protestants are actually disagreements regarding the Scripture, which is the unifying authority through the Holy Spirit.

2) Peter as the first pope

Catholics believe that Peter was the foundation of the church (Matthew 16:16-20) and since Peter went to Rome, he was the first bishop of Rome and the bishops of Rome are the successors of Peter and are designated as the pope. The assumption is that Peter's apostolic authority has been handed down to each succeeding bishop of Rome.

However, the early church was led by a plurality of men and founded upon the apostles, not only Peter (Ephesians 2:20). The Scripture makes no mention of Peter in Rome and there is no hint of the idea of a succession of apostolic authority. The apostles appointed elders, not bishops, and Peter himself warned those elders about asserting authority through lording it over those allotted to their care (1 Peter 5:1-3).

### 3) The proof of the papacy

Catholicism publishes a list of the popes in order of succession after Peter. While this can look official, church historian Philip Schaff notes, “The oldest links in this chain are veiled in impenetrable darkness.” Indeed, this list has undergone many revisions, as recently as in 1947.

Some thirty popes claiming to succeed Peter are considered to be false claimants by the Church. A prime example of this problem began with Urban VI who was elected by the cardinals in 1378 and then soon removed five months later. The appointed successor, Clement VII, was supported by the French cardinals and later moved the papal residence to Avignon, France. Urban appointed a new set of cardinals who would be loyal to him. After decades of rival popes, an attempt at reconciliation was made with cardinals from both factions electing Alexander V as pope, which only served to create three competing popes. Not until Emperor Sigismund called the Council of Constance (1414-1418) to solve this matter with Martin V elected Pope in 1417. In a real sense, the Catholic list of popes is revisionist history.

## 2. The establishment of the magisterium

Surprisingly, the doctrine of the magisterium was itself not officially established until the First Vatican Council (1869-70), which decreed, “we teach and define as divinely revealed dogma that when the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning morals.”

## 3. The evolution of the magisterium

The early church fathers understood the biblical meaning of the teaching of tradition as that which comes directly from the apostolic teaching. 2 Thessalonians 2:15 refers to tradition when Paul writes, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, whether by our spoken word or by our letter.” Just as the New Testament defines the authority of tradition as equal to the direct teaching of the apostles, so did the early church.

Irenaeus wrote in *Against Heresies* in around 180 A.D., “We have learned from none others the plea of our salvation, than from those through whom the gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.” Not only did Irenaeus specifically state that the Scripture is our authority once the apostles passed on, he did so in the context of opposition to Gnostics who taught that they knew additional revelation passed down to them from the apostles.

Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386 A.D.) echoed Irenaeus two centuries later when he wrote, “we ought not to deliver even the most casual remark with the Holy Scriptures; nor be drawn aside by mere probabilities and the artifices of argument. Do not believe me because I tell you these things, unless you receive them from the Holy Scriptures the proof of what is set forth; for this salvation, which is ours by faith, is not by ingenious reasoning, but by proof from the Holy Scriptures.” The early church had traditions but these were church customs, not church doctrine.

The earliest beginnings of the idea that there are traditions of practices beyond the Scripture that carries authority comes from Basil’s *On The Holy Spirit* (c. 364). Yet these traditions were still under the final authority of the Scripture as he wrote, “It remains for me...to show that it is in harmony with the Scripture. Therefore, let the God-inspired Scripture decide between us, and to whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the Word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth.”

As the church moved into the middle ages, tradition became associated with the teaching of the Scripture. Not teaching that was outside the Scripture as handed down supposedly from the apostles but rather the interpretation of the Scripture itself. The accepted understanding of the Scripture was considered to be the meaning of the Scripture, leading to the Church itself being the authority regarding the interpretation of the Word of God. Of course, this view certainly did not eliminate all disagreement (thus the Great Schism between Eastern and Western in 1054, producing Roman Catholicism).

By the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Council of Trent officially solidified the perspective that “no one relying on his own judgment shall, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, distorting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions, presume to interpret them contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, has held and holds, or even though such interpretations should never at any time be published.”

The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) reaffirmed this view: “As the things which the holy Synod of Trent decreed for the good of souls concerning the interpretation of Divine Scripture, in order to curb rebellious spirits, have been wrongly explained by some, we, renewing the said decree, declare this to be their sense, that, in matters of faith and morals. Appertaining to the building up of Christian doctrine, that is to be held as the true sense of Holy Scripture, which our holy Mother Church has held and holds, to whom it belongs to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scripture; and therefore that it is permitted to no one to interpret the Sacred Scripture contrary to this sense, nor, likewise, contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.”

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) added this regarding the pope, “This loyal submission must be given in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra* in such wise, indeed, that his supreme teaching authority be acknowledged with respect, and that one sincerely adhere to decisions made by him.”

#### 4. The exercise of the magisterium

It is one thing to say that the bishops have “by divine institution taken the place of apostles in the Church and whoever listens to them is listening to Christ” (Second Vatican Council), but what exactly is to be listened to? Not everything said by a bishop, even in regard to faith and morals, is authoritative.

Roman Catholicism teaches that the bishops are infallible in their teaching collectively, not as individuals. Those beliefs they hold in common with each other and in harmony with the Pope represent the authentic and inerrant Catholic faith, according to the Second Vatican Council. But how can a person discern what they hold in common?

##### a. The solemn declarations

Solemn declarations (or the extraordinary magisterium) occur “when the Roman Pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church” (First Vatican Council).

This concept of the infallible exercise by the Pope of his supreme apostolic authority in defining faith or morals has only been implemented twice in history:

- 1) The immaculate conception of Mary: Declared by Pope Pius IX in 1854 and grandfathered in as spoken *ex cathedra* by the First Vatican Council in 1870.
- 2) The bodily assumption of Mary: Declared by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

That we have only two examples of such papal authority, each regarding doctrine not found in the Bible, and each far removed from the time of the apostles, should serve notice to those who believe in papal infallibility.

The other way that solemn declarations have occurred is by the statements of various ecumenical councils with the approval of a pope. While there are seven original ecumenical councils (the final one in 787) that were recognized by Catholicism for centuries, an additional dozen were added during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. These, along with the First and Second Vatican council make up the total number (21) of these councils. It is noteworthy that the bishop of Rome did not attend any of the original seven councils and the Roman Emperor convened each of them.

##### b. Ordinary declarations

The ordinary magisterium occurs through the more common and frequent statements that are also considered to be infallible. These include papal bulls, papal encyclicals, papal briefs, apostolic exhortations, apostolic constitutions, apostolic letters, and *motu proprio*. The distinction between each of these isn't much beyond that they are authoritative instructions to the church that are not to be ignored.

## 5. The evaluation of the magisterium

The support for a continuing apostolic teaching authority beyond the Bible has no basis. Even if you accept the highly doubtful interpretation of Matthew 16:18 and suppose that Christ appointed Peter the foundation of the Church (contra Ephesians 2:20), there is still no biblical evidence that this appointment is passed down to anyone else with apostolic authority. Indeed, the biblical evidence shows that Peter did not function as a pope, either at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 or in the views of Paul (Galatians 2:6, 9).

Certainly, the New Testament does not view Rome as central to the church leadership and includes no evidence of Peter even being in Rome. When we look at the early history we find the earliest list of Catholic popes were not considered anything other than the bishop of Rome, equal with other bishops in large cities. As the bishop of Rome ascended in power over the other bishops by the sixth century this was met with opposition, particularly by the Eastern Church, leading the Great Schism in 1054, which served to prove the east did not view the bishop of Rome as having the authority that Roman Catholicism claims.

The final concept of the magisterium being found in the collective teaching of the bishops also fails the test of history since so much of Catholic doctrine was not the collective teaching of the early church bishops. For example, regarding the doctrine of the bodily assumption of Mary, no Bible passage refers to it, no Church council speaks of it, and only two of the 88 recognized Catholic Church fathers mention the bodily assumption and both were from the late seventh and early eighth century. Hardly a collective agreement in support of this belief!

Only the later councils supported the doctrinal errors of the Catholic Church. The church looks to support these errors by cherry-picking church fathers for agreement. The standard is whatever the Catholic Church decides in the present is the authoritative teaching, not the Scripture or even the consensus of the early church fathers.

The most glaring nail in the coffin of the magisterium is the life of so many of the popes themselves. Popes who supported the Inquisition were responsible for the deaths of thousands and the persecution of tens of thousands. Some of the more salacious activities by popes include the exhumation of a predecessor to put the body on trial (Stephen VI), torturing and executing cardinals (Urban VI), selling the position of pope (Benedict IX to Gregory VI), selling freedom from punishment in purgatory (Leo X), and a variety of sexually immoral behaviors (many).

The Roman Catholic concept of an infallible apostolic teaching authority beyond of the Scripture is not only wrong—it is dangerous. The result of this is the very thing for which Christ condemned the Pharisees—teaching as doctrines the precepts of men (Matthew 15:9).

## 6. The effect of the magisterium

The net impact of this concept of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church depends upon how much you know about it and how much you believe it.

### a. Those who understand and embrace the magisterium

This fairly small percentage of Catholics is the truest supporters of the Church. Their agreement is beyond emotional and the most committed of them are willing to argue why the Church is correct and the only entity fully able to represent the teaching of the apostles beyond the Scripture. They are most likely to point to the disunity of Protestantism as proof of the need for the Catholic Church. They are familiar with Matthew 16:18 and have a fond support for the pope.

These Catholics are happy to talk about Catholicism. This is a great opportunity to discuss the Scripture and reason together in hopes that they may come to realize the weakness of the Catholic rhetoric. At the least, it is an opportunity to discuss your faith and develop in you ability to explain it clearly.

### b. Those who understand but reject the magisterium

Those who understand and reject the magisterium are mostly the ex-Catholics. There are a good number of people who actually know about the teaching authority of the Church and yet do not agree. Many of these have already come to true faith in Christ and have learned about Catholicism in retrospect. Some have learned of and rejected the magisterium without accepting Christ.

For those true believing ex-Catholics, the study of Catholicism is a great means to help believers today to avoid the errors of the past. For those unbelievers, the common ground of rejection of the authority of Catholicism may lead to discussions about the validity of the Scripture. Those who remain in the Catholic Church do so for other emotional or relational reasons and should be encouraged to consider the significance of this issue in light of their need for fellowship and teaching.

### c. Those who don't understand but still embrace the magisterium

This represents the vast majority of faithful traditional Catholics. They mistakenly assume there is biblical support for the Roman hierarchy since "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18) is one of the verses they are more likely to be familiar with. They leave the study of these words of Jesus to the priests, even though Christ commended the Ephesians who "put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false." (Revelation 2:2).

The best way to help this group is to encourage them to understand the Bible in light of the teaching of the Catholic Church. As they learn the Bible they will be in a better position to evaluate Catholicism. Also, through God's Spirit they might be moved to value God's Word and will oppose these doctrines that undermine its authority.

d. Those who don't understand and reject the magisterium

These are the cultural Catholics who do not follow Catholic teaching. Their rejection of some of the morals of Catholicism has led them to consider religion to be optional. This is not the way of Christ but they have been misled to think the Lord's word does not have full authority over them.

Our goal for these people is not to even address the issue of the teaching authority but rather simply focus on the gospel of Christ. They have no allegiance to any entity beyond themselves since they have neglected their Catholic faith. Once shown the truth of Jesus in the Scripture, the Holy Spirit may pierce their hearts with understanding and conviction.

## 7. The erosion of the magisterium

The concept of the infallible magisterium took its first step backward with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The openness to ecumenicalism allowed Catholics to work together with those whom the Council of Trent condemned in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This council was quite controversial among the most traditional Catholic leaders who foresaw the ultimate consequences of this erosion. Either the supposed infallible decrees of Trent were misguided or the Second Vatican Council was compromising Catholicism.

Conservative Catholics saw the spirit of Vatican II was founded in the cultural fashions of the 1960 that swept through the Church, resulting in declining attendance, declining numbers of priests and a diminished Catholic identity. They hoped for a return to the fullness of Catholicism under Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) but the Catholic sex scandals dampened this conservative movement.

The appointment of conservative Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013) gave the traditional Catholics even greater hope that the crisis of the Vatican scandals would be overcome by a Pope who vowed to "remove the filth" and restore Catholic teaching to its rightful place. However, his ineffectiveness in managing the Vatican, combined with his advanced age, resulted in an inability to create unity around traditional Catholicism. This led to the appointment of Pope Francis in 2013.

Pope Francis is not only less concerned about moral issues than his predecessor, he has begun to act to move the church in a more liberal direction. For example, he has replaced key conservative leaders within the Vatican and floated ideas that could change the church's stance regarding divorced Catholics, contraceptives, and the role of women to function as deacons in the church.

While Francis has yet to deviate from any official teaching, the Church is creeping that direction. It will be worth observing how the liberal drift in Catholicism affects those principled Catholics once they realize that the idea of the infallible teaching authority of the Catholic Church is truly a façade.