The Role of the Magisterium in Christian Moral Life

In his recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* Pope John Paul II has well summarized the Church’s own self-understanding—as expressed at Vatican II—of the role of the Magisterium in Christian moral life. Thus here I will first set forth John Paul II’s presentation of this matter (also clearly explained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2030-2051). I will then briefly discuss the relationship between the moral teaching proposed by the Magisterium and the conscience of the Catholic. In conclusion, I will take up the assent due to magisterial moral teachings and the question of their infallibility.

**John Paul II on the More-than-Human Moral Authority of the Magisterium**

John Paul II reminds us of this more-than-human authority in *Veritatis Splendor*. That authority of this kind has been entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and their successors is, the Pope says, "evident from the living Tradition, whereby—as the Second Vatican Council teaches—the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that she is and all that she believes. This Tradition, which comes from the Apostles, progresses within the Church under the assistance of the Holy Spirit" (*Vatican II, Dei Verbum*, n. 89) (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 27).

Continuing, John Paul II goes on to say, "in particular, as the Council affirms, 'the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether in its written form or in that of Tradition, has been entrusted only to those charged with the Church’s living Magisterium, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ' (*Dei Verbum*, n. 10). The Church, in her life and teaching, is thus revealed as 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Tim 3:15), including the truth regarding moral action" (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 27). Moreover, he insists, there is an intimate and inseparable unity between faith and morality inasmuch as the Christian faith "possesses a moral content," giving rise to a "consistent life commitment," requiring those who bear the name Christian to bear "witness" before God and man by a living faith that bears fruit in works, "above all those of charity manifested and lived in the gift of self, even to the total gift of self, like that of Jesus" (nn. 88, 89). Therefore, "no damage must be done to the harmony between faith and life: the unity of the Church is damaged not only by Christians who reject or distort the truths of faith but also by those who disregard the moral obligations to which they are called by the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 5:9-13)" (n. 26).

**The Moral Teaching of the Magisterium and the Conscience of a Catholic**

Conscience, in its most precise sense, is a practical judgment that a person makes about what he must do or not do, or one which assesses something he has already done. Indeed, the Catholic tradition has always recognized in the personal judgment of conscience the "proximate norm of personal morality," a truth that John Paul II highlights in *Veritatis Splendor* (n. 60). Its dignity consists in its capacity to disclose the truth about moral good or evil in the light of God's eternal law, the universal and objective norm of morality (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, nn. 60, 63; cf. *Vatican II, Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 2; *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 2).

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judgments will, of course, do all they can, in forming their consciences, to do so well. They will search for the truth and seek to find it from sources where it is most likely to be found.

Thus a Catholic, aware that the Church, speaking through the more-than-human authority vested in the Magisterium, is the 'pillar and bulwark of truth' (1 Tim 3:15), will be ready to accept the moral teachings of the Magisterium. "In forming their consciences," Vatican II says, "the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself" (Dignitatis Humanae, n. 14; emphasis added).

John Paul II, after citing this passage from Vatican II, goes on to make the following very significant point: "It follows that the authority of the Church, when she pronounces on moral questions, in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. This is so not only because freedom of conscience is never freedom 'from' the truth but always and only freedom 'in' the truth, but also because the Church does not bring to the Christian conscience truths which are extraneous to it; rather it brings to light the truths which it ought already to possess, developing them from the starting point of the primordial act of faith" (Veritatis Splendor, n. 64; emphasis added). In short, for Catholics the moral teaching of the Church is not an imposition from the outside, but a help for them to make true moral judgments and good moral choices that will enable them to become more fully who they really are: children of God, called to cooperate with Jesus in his redemptive work.

The Assent Due Magisterial Moral Teachings

The Magisterium can propose truths of faith and of morals in two ways: infallibly and irreformably, or authoritatively but not irreformably. Truths infallibly proposed by the Magisterium require the assent of faith, whereas truths authoritatively but not irreformably required a "ready and respectful allegiance of mind" and the "loyal submission of the will and intellect" (cf. Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, n. 25).

The Magisterium can propose teachings infallibly in two distinct ways. The first is by an extraordinary exercise of its authority through the solemn definitions of ecumenical Councils and ex cathedra pronouncements of the Pontiff. The second is through the ordinary, day-to-day exercise of the Magisterium when certain conditions are verified. Vatican II clearly articulated these conditions when it affirmed the following: "Although the bishops, taken individually, do not enjoy the privilege of infallibility, they do, however, proclaim the doctrine of Christ infallibly on the following conditions: namely, when, even though dispersed throughout the entire world but preserving for all that among themselves and with Peter's successor the bond of communion, in their authoritative teaching concerning matters of faith or morals, they are in agreement that a particular teaching is to be held definitively and absolutely, This is still more clearly the case when, assembled in ecumenical council, they are, for the universal Church, teachers of and judges in matters of faith and morals, whose judgment must be adhered to with the loyal and obedient assent of faith" (Lumen Gentium, n. 25; emphasis added; cf. Vatican I, Dei Filius, DS 3011).

Although some theologians today claim that the Magisterium cannot infallibly propose specific moral norms (e.g., one ought never intentionally to kill innocent human beings; one ought never to have sex outside of marriage), this claim is repudiated by the Magisterium itself (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, n. 16, with a reference to Vatican I, Dei Filius, DS 3005), and the reasons alleged to support this claim have been shown by competent theologians to be utterly specious (cf., e.g., Germain Grisez, The Way of the Lord Jesus: Christian Moral Principles [Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983], ch. 36).

Moreover, it was the common understanding of all Catholic theologians prior to Vatican II that the core of Catholic moral teaching, as set forth in its understanding of the precepts of the Decalogue, had been infallibly taught by the Magisterium in its ordinary, day-to-day teaching and therefore required from the faithful the assent of faith (cf., e.g., Karl Rahner, Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church [London: Sheed & Ward, 1963], pp. 51-52). Nothing taught by Vatican II provides any ground for repudiating this common understanding but rather, as the citation already given about the infallibility of the bishops unified with the Pope in their everyday teaching under certain conditions testifies, confirms it.

Although John Paul II does not explicitly claim, in Veritatis Splendor, that he is infallibly proposing the truth that there are intrinsically evil acts and, corresponding to them, moral absolutes, he nonetheless explicitly affirms that his teaching on this matter—which simply reaffirms the constant Tradition of the Church—is the teaching of the Scriptures (cf. nn. 78-83) and part of divine revelation. It follows that his teaching in this encyclical on intrinsically evil acts and moral absolutes is a truth demanding from every Catholic the assent of faith. What well instructed Catholic can ever think that intentionally killing the innocent, having sex outside of marriage, or perjuring oneself on the witness stand could possibly be compatible with life in Christ and with a commitment to participate in his redemptive work?

Moral teaching proposed authoritatively but not...
irreformably by the Magisterium requires from all Catholics, including popes, bishops, theologians, and the ordinary man and woman, a loyal submission of will and intellect. While it may be permissible, under specific conditions, to raise questions about these teachings and to suspend intellectual assent from them—and the Magisterium itself explicitly acknowledges that this can be legitimate (cf. Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, nn. 24-31)—it is never right for a Catholic to dissent from these teachings, to declare that they are erroneous and that

a Catholic is at liberty to set them aside and act contrary to them. This is to damage the unity of the Church and arrogantly to usurp the authority given by Christ to the Magisterium.

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The Role of the Magisterium: Sacred Scripture

An essential point of departure for any discussion of the relationship of Sacred Scripture to the teaching office of the Church must be the precious words in 2 Tim 3:15-16: "...you have known the sacred scriptures (hiera grammata) which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All scripture is inspired by God (theopneustos) and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction and for training in righteousness..." Vatican II in Dei Verbum made almost the identical point when it stated: "...we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth (veritatem) which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures" (par.11). The Council also emphasized that Sacred Scripture cannot be understood in isolation from Tradition and the Magisterium. Tradition and Scripture "form one thing and move toward the same goal" (par.9).

The clearest statement of this intrinsic unity comes at the close of par.10: "...in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls."

Scripture and the Church

With all that in mind, our purpose here is to shed some light, however briefly, on the connection between the Scriptures and the Magisterium. To do that, we need to examine how the Scriptures are connected to the Church, one of whose offices is that of a Teacher. Clear as that relationship may turn out to be, it should at the same time be remembered that the Catholic Church in particular has been criticized (unfairly, as Catholics see it) for not utilizing and preaching the Scriptures as she should have.

But the Church first of all wrote the Scriptures. They are and remain her literature because she, through her members, the authors, composed them. Only by already being members of the community of faith could the sacred authors have written what they wrote.

Second, the Church, the broad spectrum of believers, is clearly the addressee of the Scriptures. They speak to the Church about matters which are of vital importance, perhaps not to everyone, but certainly to those who profess the faith. 2 Tim already told us that these Scriptures give us "wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Only the person of faith, by definition a member of the Church, will comprehend what the Scriptures are saying. Since the Scriptures were written primarily with believers in mind, the Church was already really present in the Scriptures at their very composition, and hence will always be a constitutive element of them, and they of her.

Third, the Scriptures speak about the Church. In a profound and often mysterious way, they teach her who and what she is and ought to be. If there is but "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5) and if Jesus prays "that they may be one" (Jn 17:11) on the night before his death, then the Church who reads and reflects on what the Scriptures teach learns more and more about herself in the process. Thus the Church is fundamentally linked to the Scriptures since they directly address the question of what it means to be the Church in the first place.

Fourth, the Church assembled the seventy-two individual works of the Bible into the canon. This perhaps forgotten fact permeates the entire question of relating the Scriptures to the Church's teaching office since, without her, there would be no Bible. Those who are allergic to any assertion of the Scriptures' dependence on the Church have to take care to avoid the historical question of how the Biblical literature was collected into a single privileged book identified as having been composed under the influence of divine inspiration. The fact is that no single individual was responsible for this decision (now universally accepted by every branch of Christianity) but it is the Church herself which, having collected the

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