

Church authority – “What is Truth?”

by

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The fourth and final of these talks on Hot Topics is perhaps the most controversial of them all because it's about that most thorny of topics – Church authority and the meaning of truth. We all like to think for ourselves and make our own decisions, and none of us – if we're honest – likes to be told what to do, especially if we don't like what we're told. Yet, as Catholics, we belong to a church that's constantly telling us what to do, what not to do, what to think, and what not to think. Naturally we have a tendency to rebel against this, and in today's Church it can seem at times that no one really listens to what the Pope says anymore. After all, how can one religion, or one church, possess that thing called 'Truth'? Isn't truth a relative thing, anyway? Why should the Pope in Rome have a monopoly on truth, and isn't following our conscience more important than following edicts from the Vatican?

In this talk I'd like to address some of these points, and hopefully explain a little about what I believe it means to belong to a Church that claims to base itself on revealed truth. I want to talk a bit about truth itself, how the Church teaches and safeguards truth and what our reaction to all of it should be. Now this is a difficult subject partly because truth and authority are so much at odds with the spirit of this age, which influences all of us to some extent. We're all educated people, after all, and not sheep. We do have minds of our own!

However, our religion was founded by a man who claimed to be the Way, the Truth and the Life. These are astounding claims. Let's remember that episode in the Bible when Jesus is standing in front of Pontius Pilate. Looking Jesus in the eye, Pilate quips, “Truth, what is that?” This immortal line must surely count as the most ironic rhetorical question in history. One thing is for sure – Pilate had no idea that the answer to his question stood there directly in front of him. Jesus was himself Truth – with a capital ‘T’.

Here, then, is the answer to the question in the title of this talk, 'What is Truth?' Christ is truth. This is to say that truth comes from God – truth is what God is. Therefore, St Thomas Aquinas could say that "Truth is the identification of the intellect with reality". Truth is reality, that is to say what is real to God, who is the basis of all reality.

Many different philosophical definitions of what truth is have been suggested over the centuries, but for Christians, truth is fundamentally one thing and not other things. It is real and objective. It has become popular these days to talk about truth in relativist terms, as if there are different versions of the truth. Many people say we all have our own truth, or that something that is true for me may not be true for you. This cannot be the case, though. An analogy about this concerns paying our taxes. We might believe that we have paid our taxes. That might be our truth. However, to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, it doesn't matter whether we believe we've paid, or what our own truth is – all that matters is whether we have actually paid – yes or no. So it is with truth. Truth is independent of belief – it is objective. You either have or you haven't paid

your taxes. Or, to put it another way, Jesus either did or did not rise from the dead; Mary either was immaculately conceived or she wasn't. Truth is how it is, not necessarily how we'd like it to be – even if we'd like it to be one way or another very much indeed.

Yet when Pilate asked his question, "What is truth," I believe he was echoing a sentiment that is arguably the defining characteristic of our present age. There is in our modern society what might be called a crisis of truth. We all want to play God and act as our own arbiters of what is 'true' for us.

Today, more than at any time in history, anyone who claims to possess the absolute truth risks derision, or worse. This is because anyone who claims to have *absolute* truth, or the *only* truth, would be implying that his truth has implications for others who might not share it. This is termed 'fundamentalism', and look where fundamentalists have got us. According to this line of thought, claiming to 'possess truth' is simply dangerous, and leads only to war, hatred and terrorism.

In 2002, the then Cardinal Ratzinger parodied this argument. “Isn’t it arrogant,” he said, tongue in cheek, “to speak of truth in matters of religion to the point of affirming that truth, the only truth, has been found in one’s own religion?... They cannot be taken seriously, because truth is not ‘possessed’ by anyone. We can only be *in search of truth*.” Then, turning the tables, the future Pope continued, “However, against this affirmation one can object: What search is this about, if one can never arrive at the goal?” The search for truth cannot be the end in itself. In order to search for truth, surely we must accept that truth can be found.

In the last General Audience before his untimely death in 1978, the much loved but rarely quoted Pope John Paul I acknowledged that it is difficult to accept some truths because, as he said, “the truths of faith are of two kinds: some pleasant, others unpalatable”. However, he went on to say: “Christ and the Church are only one thing. Christ is the Head, we, the Church, are his limbs. It is not possible to have faith and to say, ‘I believe in Jesus, I accept Jesus but I do not accept the Church.’ We must accept the Church, as she

is...When the poor Pope, when the bishops and the priests, propose a doctrine, they are merely helping Christ. It is not our doctrine, it is Christ’s: we must guard it and present it.”

If truth can be found and possessed, as I believe it can, there are some serious implications for all of us. Not only do we have to do our best to explore it and act on it, but we also have to share it. Truth is far too precious to keep to ourselves.

However, since Vatican II, how often have we heard statements like, “Oh, we don’t have to believe that anymore,” or, “All religions are the same really”? In part, this is due to a misunderstanding of what Vatican II really taught. Its readiness to recognise truth and value in other Christian denominations, and even in different religions, has been misconstrued by many people and taken to mean that no one church or religion can claim to possess the complete truth. Yet Vatican II also taught quite clearly that elements of sanctification and of truth found outside the visible confines of the one Catholic Church are gifts which properly belong to the Catholic Church

and are, therefore, “forces impelling towards catholic unity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

Now, from the earliest times, the Catholic Church has claimed to be the guardian of the Truth, revealed by Christ, and this is still true today. If we believe that God became incarnate and revealed the truths necessary for salvation once and for all, it would be illogical for God not to ensure the existence on earth of a body charged with protecting the purity of that original revelation and given the authority and promise of divine protection to develop it authentically. Only one body could be given this mission and this mandate – since truth cannot be divided – and as Catholics we believe that this one body is the Catholic Church, the original church founded as an institution by Christ who made St Peter the rock on which it would be built with a guarantee that the gates of hell would not prevail against it.

The manner and form of the Church’s teaching authority has changed over the centuries, but the fundamental mission of the Church to safeguard the authentic deposit of faith remains as true today as it did when the early Church assembled

in Jerusalem around the apostles to decide on the controversial issue of whether pagans needed to be circumcised.

Today, the Church’s teaching authority, as we know, is called the Magisterium. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, explains that: “In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility (889).

The Catechism goes on to explain: “It is this Magisterium’s task to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error... To fulfil this service, Christ endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.” (890)

Now, as soon as the word ‘infallibility’ is mentioned, confusion tends to reign! When does the Church claim to be infallible? We know that the Pope can teach with an infallible authority when he declares something ‘ex cathedra’ – that

is from his throne as Bishop of Rome, vicar of Christ and universal pastor. This was defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870 and applied retrospectively, although theologians are generally agreed that the strict conditions for an 'ex cathedra' declaration have only been met twice – when Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1856 and when Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption in 1950. What, then, of other teachings? If they are not taught infallibly, are they much more than a point of view capable of change and on which we can all make up our own minds?

This is actually a very prevalent view within the Church today. While few of us will take issue with the complex and frankly dumbfounding Christological definitions of the early Church councils, many of us do dissent, if only privately, with modern-day Church teaching on matters that actually affect our lives directly. There is a view, very widely held, that the Church can change its mind on its teachings because only those things taught 'ex cathedra' are infallible and unchangeable.

So it was a couple of years ago on Christmas morning in a parish down in Bedfordshire, where I used to live, that the parish priest dedicated his homily to encouraging the young people to consider becoming priests, including the girls because – as he told them – by the time they were old enough, they would be able to become priests too. To this priest, Catholic teaching was akin to the policies of a political party – which can change – rather than expressions of unchanging truths. And he's certainly not a lone voice – even some bishops think and say the same. But if that's the case, where are we left? How can we really believe anything the Church tells us, if it might change – if it's not to do with truth but policy? If teaching is a man-made thing, not heavenly?

I think it would be helpful here to say a bit about the different types of Church teaching. Are we only bound to believe so-called 'ex cathedra' statements? What is meant by the ordinary Magisterium, and what authority does it have?

This is an area that has often confused me. There are so many different ways in which the

Church has taught and proposed teachings, from general councils through to encyclicals and the like. Helpfully, in 1998, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sought to provide some clarification on this contentions matter after Pope John Paul II issued his Apostolic Letter *Ad Tuendam Fidem* establishing penalties in canon law for failure to accept so-called “definitive teaching”.

Drawing on the text of the Profession of Faith which must be declared and signed by Catholics in positions of authority, the commentary divided Catholic teaching into three distinct levels. Firstly, there is teaching that is divinely revealed. This includes ‘ex cathedra’ statements by the Pope, the creeds and infallible statements of ecumenical councils. Now, there are lots of these, covering everything from the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist to Papal Infallibility itself.

Secondly, there are those teachings definitively taught by the Church and which are considered necessary for faithfully keeping and expounding the deposit of faith, even if they have not been proposed by the Magisterium as formally

revealed dogmas. Teachings in this category would include Pope John Paul II’s definitive declaration in 1994 that only men can be ordained priests, and his declaration in the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* on the illicitness of euthanasia.

The commentary explains that “the *nature* of the assent owed to the truths set forth by the Church as divinely revealed (the first category) or to be held definitively (the second category), is the same. Both are to be taken as having been taught infallibly.

The third category are those teachings which either the Pope or the college of bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic ordinary Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act. This includes all those teachings on faith and morals presented as true, even if they have not been defined with a solemn judgement or proposed as definitive by the infallible Ordinary and Universal Magisterium.

Teachings in this third category require religious submission of will and intellect. How is this different from the first two categories? Someone once explained the difference to me in this way. We must truly and genuinely believe in our hearts the truth of doctrines in the first two categories – that is, divinely revealed or definitively taught – but with the third category we must practise them, try to believe them and never publicly reject them, but it's okay if deep down we find them difficult and harbour secret doubts.

This is not to say that these teachings are not true, or may change, but that they may not be wholly free from error in the way in which they are presented. There may be scope, therefore, for future development of the teaching or clarification, but this is for the Magisterium to decide and not ourselves. The teachings are still true, and taught with the aid of the Holy Spirit, but they may not be complete. They may, to use one analogy, be buds of a doctrine still waiting to flower – although the flower will certainly be in continuity with the bud that came first. There is a strong presumption, however, that these teachings are complete and inerrant.

Now it's true that much of this is difficult for many people to accept. It's difficult to have faith that the teachings of the Church are those of Christ, as Pope John Paul I said in the quote I read. I myself used to work as a press officer for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and I can assure that I'm all too aware of the very human nature of the Church hierarchy and the deeply disappointing witness provided by many pastors and leaders in the Church who claim to speak for Christ. But we are not members of a human club or society, much less a political party. We are members of a religion, which claims to be *the* one true religion. This is not something to be ashamed about, or to reject, or to nuance, but something to celebrate. As the great Catholic writer G K Chesterton once observed, "The Catholic Church is the only thing which saves a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age."

Having said this, one very common way of getting round personal difficulties with Catholic teaching is to appeal to conscience. Surely we are okay if we are true to our consciences, and if we're true

to our conscience then we can't be blamed, can we? The Catholic Church has spoken about the primacy of conscience – and the principal proponent of this is often cited as the great English theologian John Henry Newman. This is perhaps one reason why he has been described by some as the patron of conscientious dissenters, and he was certainly regarded with suspicion by Catholics of a more conservative persuasion during his own lifetime.

But what did Newman mean when he spoke about the primacy of conscience? When he described conscience as the “aboriginal vicar of Christ”, did he mean that this aboriginal vicar was more important than the modern-day Vicar of Christ – namely the Pope in Rome?

The answer would be no. In fact, I would like to propose that when one really understands what Newman meant by conscience, one realises the extent to which Newman calls us to have faith in the truth of Catholic teaching.

In his 1855 novel *Callista*, Newman had this to say about conscience: “I feel ... God within my

heart. I feel myself in His presence. He says to me, ‘Do this: don’t do that.’ You may tell me that this dictate is a mere law of my nature... [but] I cannot understand this. No, it is the echo of a person speaking to me... My nature feels towards it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness – just like that which I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend.”

To Newman, conscience is literally the prompting of God deep within us, since each us is a temple of the Holy Spirit. So, does conscience trump fidelity to Church teaching, or in some sense free us from adherence to Church teaching if the two are in conflict? No, because if conscience is the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and the same Holy Spirit speaks through the teaching of the Church, then the two must be in agreement. Crucially, if conscience and the teaching of the Church are in conflict, it is not because the teaching is wrong but because the conscience is misinformed. To Newman, we all have a duty to inform our consciences by the teachings of the Church, and not to do so may render us culpably ignorant. After all, it's all too easy to persuade ourselves that

all manner of wrongs and sins are actually okay, because we really want them to be okay.

In his own life, Newman certainly practised what he preached. I have always been quite inspired by his reaction to the First Vatican Council's definition of Papal Infallibility in 1870. He had been a passionate opponent of this definition, in contrast to some within his own community who saw the Pope as infallible in almost everything he said.

When the Council did indeed define Papal Infallibility, Newman delayed his reaction, hoping that the Council would not be considered ratified, but when it became clear that it was accepted as a genuine Council, he assented despite his difficulties and became one of the foremost defenders and clarifiers of the doctrine. For Newman, we are bound to inform our conscience in conformity with the teachings of the Church. We might not like it sometimes, but we are not ourselves the final arbiter of what is true.

This, to me, really is the key to this whole issue. We cannot, as individuals, be the final arbiters of

what is true. People can really, deeply believe absolutely anything, but a belief, however deeply and genuinely held, can be right and it can be wrong. We need the Church to inform us; we need the authority of Church teaching to keep us on the right path. If we don't accept Church teaching – to borrow another phrase of Newman – we end up 'making for ourselves a religion'. In a sense, making ourselves the final arbiter of what is true, or what is right and wrong, is the original sin of Adam – making ourselves into gods. I'm not saying it's easy to avoid this sin – in fact, it's really hard and perhaps only Our Lady really managed it in this life – but the trouble is that if we knowingly and willingly make ourselves heretics even in one small way, we are in a sense making ourselves heretics in everything because we are setting ourselves up in the Church's place.

When the Jesuit theologian and convert from agnostic Presbyterianism Cardinal Avery Dulles was asked why he became a Catholic, he observed that many of the reasons people give for admiring the Catholic Church are not sufficient to justify membership in it. Instead, he said, the

fundamental question is truth. He was converted to Catholicism in 1940 when he discovered that, and I quote, “The more I examined, the more I was impressed with the consistency and sublimity of Catholic doctrine.”

Speaking personally, I used to be an Anglican before I was received into the Church just before I went to university. Certainly my own conversion story, such as it is, is not terribly interesting, but for me, too, the fundamental question was truth. I remember receiving a personal letter from the great Cardinal Basil Hume confirming my fear that Anglican consecrations were not valid, and then having to take part in a high-church Anglican Blessed Sacrament procession. So, here I was with my Anglican vicar and fellow parishioners telling me that the host in the monstrance was the body of Christ, but the Catholic Church saying that it wasn't. Who was right? Surely not both! The host was either consecrated or it wasn't, and I had to come down off the fence. I had to accept an authority, because I didn't have a hotline to God and I was being presented with different opinions. And that authority could only be found, I came to believe, in the one original apostolic

church – that today we know as the Roman Catholic Church.

I certainly did not become a Catholic, and I have not remained a Catholic, because of the Catholic Church's great liturgy, or the inspiring leadership of its bishops, or its great architecture. In fact, there is a lot about the Catholic Church, including its history, that isn't at all edifying. However, I firmly believe that despite all its shortcomings, the Catholic Church is true. It is where truth is to be found – the one truth that is Christ. That's the key.

This is why, despite the difficulties, I try to accept Church teaching. And it is also why I believe that, if we want to attract more young people to church, and persuade the lapsed that returning to the practice of their faith will be worth the effort, we need to reclaim our identity as Catholics. We need to celebrate our Church's truth claims, not feel embarrassed by them. People are not inspired by the wishy-washy or the bland, but the Catholic Faith when proclaimed with clarity is anything but. It is radical and even revolutionary. It is a clarion call to the modern world.

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