

Church Teachings on Controversial Topics

When communicating with fellow Catholics I have become increasingly aware of the general lack of knowledge, interest and fidelity given to the Church's stance on moral, spiritual, and disciplinary teachings. Indeed, it is all too common to find confusion about Church teachings even among the ranks of regular mass-attending "cradle Catholics". Many reasons can be given for this widespread confusion and dissension. It maybe that catechesis and religious education is poor in many areas, or it could be that religious interest is at low ebb, or that people falsely believe the second Vatican Council changed the Church's teachings. Most likely, the reason behind growing dissension in the Church is that many Catholics believe the teaching authority of the Catholic Church is irrelevant in today's modern world. Regardless of the reason, Catholics who fail to understand the Church's teaching through ignorance need to be informed. For this reason I have written this article to set the record straight. So that no one may accuse this author of voicing his own personal opinions and politics, I have provided references to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (abbreviated "CCC" in this document) and various church documents promulgated by Rome.

Before I address the Church's teaching on matter of faith and morals I'd like to explain the role of dogma in the Catholic faith. For anyone who professes to be Catholic, their faith requires them to believe certain teachings with "divine and Catholic faith". No amount of personal opinion, "conscientious objection", or personal desires can excuse them from acting contrary to a defined dogma of the Catholic Church. Certain dogmas such as Christ's resurrection, the Trinity of God, redemption of sin, belief in heaven and hell and other such dogmas are regarded as pillars of the faith. These teachings cannot be abandoned without simultaneously abandoning the Catholic faith. The church exists to teach men the truth and aid them in attaining salvation through the graces given by Christ's death and resurrection. Dogmatic teachings are absolutely *needed* by the faithful so that they can attain salvation. The need for dogmatic teachings is necessary because without them the faithful do not know what is required to gain everlasting life. That is why the Church has the right and the duty to define what we are required to believe in matters of faith and morals. In fact, faith is defined as "the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe in all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself (CCC 1814)." When faith is united with the gifts of hope and charity wrought by the redemption of Christ, faith enlivens our soul and gives us spiritual life. Make no mistake, Catholics "do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch

(CCC 170).” “Salvation comes from God alone; but because we receive the life of faith through the Church, she is our mother (CCC 168).” As our mother, we ought to respect and obey the Church.

There is one more fundamental point on Church teachings that confuse many Catholics. Many Catholics believe that some traditions such as the celibacy of the priesthood, use of liturgical vestments, Lenten requirements, and other disciplines are dogmas of the Church that cannot be changed. Such things are not dogmas but disciplines that can be changed by the Church to suit the needs of the faithful. Changing these things will not compromise the Faith because they are not of the faith by necessity. If the Catholic Church wanted, she could allow priests to marry (which *does* occur in the Eastern rite of the Church) or wear common clothes while saying mass or even eliminate the season of Lent. The fact that the Church rarely alters her disciplinary traditions shows us that these traditions are beneficial and have been proven to be proper and pious by the test of time. So how do we distinguish dogmas from disciplinary teachings? Dogmas and definitions of faith and morals are explicitly promulgated by a Church Ecumenical Council convened or endorsed by the pope (such as the Council of Trent, First Vatican Council, and Vatican Council II) or by a pope in an encyclical letter. Yet, not all statements given by a council or a pope are considered dogmatic decrees. Only those statements which fulfil the following three conditions:

- 1) The decree is intended for belief by all the Church’s faithful
- 2) The decree is related to a matter of faith and morals
- 3) The decree comes from the pope when exercising his teaching authority as head of the Church or by a general Church council endorsed by the pope

Dogmas are not new teachings added to the beliefs of the Church; rather they are refinements and clarifications of Church Traditions taught by Christ and the twelve apostles. Dogmas, Traditional teachings, and Sacred Scripture form the Deposit of Faith and constitute the faith of the Church. Explicit doctrines from the Deposit of Faith can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

With a proper understanding of the role of Church teachings and practices, we can now properly address the Church’s stance on various matters of faith and morals.

The Death Penalty and Capital Punishment

Interestingly, this is probably the one Church teaching that is the most confusing to Catholics. This is perhaps due to Pope John Paul II's seeming request for an end to capital punishment. However, it has always been the teaching of the Church that the death penalty can be used in matters of grave circumstances by a legitimate public authority:

"Preserving the common good of society requires rendering the aggressor unable to inflict harm. For this reason the traditional teaching of the Church has acknowledged as well-founded the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty... (CCC 2266)."

Many Catholics who oppose the death penalty labor under the false assumption that the Church has absolutely condemned capital punishment. This is technically false, however Pope John Paul II has taught that in modern times the use of the death penalty is often motivated by the victim's (and societies) desire for revenge. The death penalty should be considered viable in only the most extreme circumstances because it removes or limits the offender's chance for conversion and penitence. Only when the public good is at immediate risk should the offender be removed entirely from society. The pope explains in *Evangelium Vitae*:

Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm - without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself - the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically non-existent (EV 56).

The Church's teaching has not changed, but rather modern society and technology has rendered the use of capital punishment an extremely rare measure.

Human Cloning

Human cloning is an example of a teaching that is not explicitly defined by either Church Tradition (teachings of Christ and the Apostles) or Holy

Scripture. Rather, the current teachings are a matter of interpretation of Scripture's portrayal of humans as dignified sons and daughters of God. There is not yet an explicit *ex cathedra* declaration from the Church regarding the issue of cloning. However, that does not mean that Catholics are free to decide their moral position on the matter without consideration of the Church's statements and encyclicals.

The ancient teaching of the Church regarding sex is that it has two primary purposes that cannot be separated without incurring grave sin. Sex is ordered for the *procreation of children between two married spouses* and it is also intended to *unify husband and wife in matrimonial love* (CCC 2360 and *Humane Vitae*, 12). Cloning violates the marriage act by separating procreation of children from the unifying act of love between husband and wife. Additionally, cloning often involves the creation and subsequent destruction of large amounts of fertilized eggs. This is contrary to the dignity of the human person. Humans are not tools for science or a means to an end no matter how well intentioned the action (such as cloning people to create an organ donor of "spare parts"). The Church states in the encyclical letter *Donum Vitae*:

Medical research must refrain from operations on live embryos, unless there is a moral certainty of not causing harm to the life or integrity of the unborn child and the mother, and on condition that the parents have given their free and informed consent to the procedure. It follows that all research, even when limited to the simple observation of the embryo, would become illicit were it to involve risk to the embryo's physical integrity or life by reason of the methods used or the effects induced (DV 1:4).

It is probable that the Church will issue an encyclical directly addressing the morality of human cloning if the current public debate continues to rage.

Celibate Priesthood

The celibate priesthood has drawn fire from many modern non-Catholics because they feel it trammels on the human need for sexuality and reproduction. Nothing in the human psyche seems more deep-seated (especially among men) than the urge to copulate. Contrary to the world, the Church teaches that the human urge for sexuality is incredibly disproportionate to the good of the goal (reproduction of the human race, and unifying love between spouses). Lust for sex is a result of original sin and the fall of mankind, as such the Church believes that all men and women are called to lives of chastity and must use human reason and will to restrain their weakness of the flesh. In short, all people are called to live chaste lives. Sex is to be reserved only for married couples who wish to express their love for each other by procreation.

Celibacy needs to be viewed in the light of chastity; *priests freely choose celibacy so that they can concentrate all their efforts on the salvation of their parishioners rather than on the immediate needs and wants of a wife and children.* St. Paul recognized the value of a celibate life when he wrote, “he who is unmarried is concerned with God’s claim, asking how he is to please God; whereas the married man is concerned with the world’s claim, asking how he is to please his wife (1Cor 7:32-33). Since a priest chooses duty to God and his parishioners over duty to a wife and children, it follows that in the light of chastity a priest must be celibate.

Celibacy is not for all people. Christ said, “some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it (Matthew 19:12).” Thus, some are called to the vocations of marriage, others for the single life, and some for the celibate religious life. The Church teaches:

All the ordained ministers of the Latin Church, with the exception of permanent deacons, are normally chosen from among men of faith who live a celibate life and who intend to remain celibate “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to the “affairs of the Lord,” they give themselves entirely to God and to men. Celibacy is a sign of this new life to the service of which the Church’s minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God (CCC 1579).

Celibacy is not a dogma or doctrinal teaching of the Church; rather it is a disciplinary teaching that can be changed if the Church’s leadership feels it is necessary. Members of the Eastern rite of the Catholic Church are permitted to receive both the sacrament of Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony in accordance with their rite’s long and ancient history of married priests.

Conclusion

These are the teachings of the Catholic Church which we ought to believe because she is the “pillar and foundation of truth (1 Timothy 3:15).” St. Paul has warned us that, “the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4).” Heed the words of the Church! And may no one plead ignorance before God.