

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE AUTHORITY OF CHURCH TEACHINGS

A recently released documentary included a clip of Pope Francis where he spoke approvingly of same sex civil unions. The provenance and context of the clip raised some questions, as it was recorded years ago, but only recently aired. A similar amount of fanfare arose in 2016 when Pope Francis spoke on the potential use of condoms during a Zika virus outbreak while he was being interviewed on an airplane. Both instances highlight a confusion about the authoritative nature of a Pope's words, or of a bishop's, and the impact those words have on official church teaching.



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Two recent texts, *Fratelli Tutti* by Pope Francis and *Samaritanus Bonus* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, are more formal statements of church teaching. Beyond the different subject matters of these two texts, there is also a distinction in authority. As a hierarchical church that believes in the teaching power of its religious leaders, it is useful for the faithful to know when a statement is to be respected and when a statement is simply a remark. We can explore different levels of church teaching and what they mean to the broader faith community.

PROFESSIONS OF FAITH

Definitions and levels of authority come to us from many sources of church teaching. Under the papacy of Pope St. John Paul II, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote "Doctrinal Commentary on concluding formula of 'Professio fidei'." The document explains distinctions between the "order of truths to which the believer adheres." The document reiterates that the pope and the College of Bishops in communion with him, are the only people "qualified to fulfill the office of teaching with binding authority..."¹ As a single bishop oversees his own diocese, the College of Bishops is the collection of all bishops who oversee the entire church. The

Magisterium refers to the teaching authority of the church. The term comes from "magister," the Latin word for teacher.

The first level are those doctrines "contained in the Word of God, written or handed down, and defined with a solemn judgment as divinely revealed truths either by the Roman Pontiff when he speaks '*ex cathedra*,' or by the College of Bishops gathered in council, or infallibly proposed for belief by the ordinary and universal Magisterium."² A pope who speaks *ex cathedra* is doing so in his role as the successor of St. Peter, exercising the official teaching authority inherent in the shepherd of the church.

These doctrines require the assent of the faithful. Anyone who places them in doubt or who denies them can be censured with heresy. Examples of this level of authority include the Scriptures, the Nicene Creed, Mary's Assumption into Heaven, and the real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

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The second level of authority, according to the *Professio fidei* "includes all those teachings belonging to the dogmatic or moral area, which are necessary for faithfully keeping and expound-

ing the deposit of faith, even if they have not been proposed by the Magisterium of the Church as formally revealed.”³ These include truths that are historically connected with formal revelation or have a logical connection that “expresses a stage in the maturation of the understanding of revelation...”⁴

Examples of this category include papal infallibility, the canonization of saints and the illicitness of euthanasia.

One must believe in the teachings found within these two levels. However, our assent comes from two different sources. In the first level of teaching, assent stems from one’s faith in the authority of the Word of God. In the second, it is based on faith in the Holy Spirit’s role of assisting the Magisterium.

The third level of teaching authority is defined for the believer in this way: “Moreover, I adhere with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act.”⁵ These texts often are used to explain a teaching, to dispel opposing ideas to accepted teachings, or to connect the teachings amongst one another. These teachings demand our belief from a “religious submission of will and intellect” rather than the virtue of faith. We use these teachings as tools to help form our consciences and function more as a roadmap than a final destination. While some will be difficult to understand or believe, it is through grace and continued formation that we move along the path of faith and understanding. Examples could include homilies, texts from national bishop conferences and individual bishop’s letters.

RECENT EXAMPLES

From these definitions we can begin to categorize the two recent texts. *Fratelli Tutti* is an encyclical promulgated by Pope Francis. Within the document are various teachings, some from Scripture, some from a logical connection to revelation, and some that explain more fully teachings that have already been put forth. Therefore, one cannot label the entire document under one category but would need to differentiate among the various lessons within the text. However, because of the nature of the document — a papal encyclical — we would certainly rank this high among formal

church teachings.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith document *Samaritanus Bonus* comes to us by way of a congregation within the Holy See. The text

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primarily reiterates established teaching, gives clarity on ethical applications, and dispels contrary thinking. Like the encyclical, this is a text related to the first two categories mentioned above, however, I would see it as falling primarily in the third category of teaching.

CONCLUSION

One of the primary functions of the Catholic Church is to help the faithful understand revelation and the way it should guide our lives. The Magisterium has been given that role. It is important to recognize which teachings are fundamental to our faith. The comments by Pope Francis mentioned in the beginning of this article have been misinterpreted as having more authority than they actually possess. To properly differentiate between official teaching and passing remarks is crucial to maintaining the continuity and authority of the tenets of our faith. While this article only scratches the surface of this topic, I hope that it gives a bit of clarity about the role of the teachers and the faithful. We are called to follow Christ, let us pray for those who help lead the way.

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NOTES

1. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Commentary on concluding formula of ‘*Professio fidei*’” (Vatican City, 1998) #4.
2. “Commentary,” #5.
3. “Commentary,” #6.
4. “Commentary,” #7.
5. “Commentary,” #10.

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