

THE TEACHING AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

This leaflet defines and illustrates the importance of the Magisterium by a series of quotations taken from the various reference sources which are listed at the end.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Question: How are you to know what God has revealed? Answer: I am to know what God has revealed by the testimony, teaching and authority of the Catholic Church.

Q: Who gave the Catholic Church divine authority to teach? A: Jesus Christ gave the Catholic Church divine authority to teach when He said 'Go ye and teach all nations.' (Matt. 28.19).¹

Q: Who is the Head of the Catholic Church? A: The Head of the Catholic Church is Jesus Christ our Lord.²

Q: Has the Church a visible Head on earth? A: The Church has a visible Head on earth — the Bishop of Rome, who is the Vicar of Christ.²

Q: Why is the Bishop of Rome the visible Head of the Church? A: Because he is the successor of St Peter whom Christ appointed to be the Head of the Church.²

Q: How do you know that Christ appointed St Peter to be the Head of the Church? A: I know that Christ appointed St Peter to be the Head of the Church because Christ said to him: 'Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And to thee I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven.' (Matt. 16. 18-19)²

Q: Can the Church err in what she teaches? A: The Church cannot err in what she teaches as to faith or morals for she is our infallible guide in both.³

WHAT IS THE MAGISTERIUM?

The Magisterium is The Church's teaching authority, vested in the bishops, as successors of the Apostles, under the Roman Pontiff as successor of St Peter. Also vested in the Pope, as Vicar of Christ and visible head of the Catholic Church. There are four levels of the Magisterium:

(1) Magisterium, Extraordinary. The Church's teaching office exercised in a solemn way, as in formal declarations of the Pope or of ecumenical councils of bishops approved by the Pope. When the *extraordinary magisterium* takes the form of papal definitions or conciliar decisions binding on the conscience of all the faithful in matters of faith and morals *it is infallible*.

(2) Magisterium, Ordinary. The teaching office of the hierarchy under the Pope, exercised normally, that is, through the regular means of instructing the faithful. These means are all the usual channels of communication whether written, spoken or practical. When the *ordinary magisterium* is also *universal*, that is, collectively intended for all the faithful, *it is also infallible*. Non-infallible is a term coined by those who distinguish between defined doctrines, which they admit are infallible, and official doctrines not defined by the Church, which they claim are not infallible. Such use of the term is ambiguous and may be erroneous, since many doctrines of the Church in faith and morals e.g. that contraception is gravely sinful, are *infallible* from the *ordinary universal magisterium*. Moreover, even other doctrines, just because they are taught by the Church, are to be accepted in obedience to the hierarchical authority *established by Christ*.¹¹

(3) 'The *third level* of the *magisterium* is based on the Pope's teaching authority in a way that excludes further discussion, much less dissent. We commonly note this level in the *encyclicals*. Pope Pius XII pointed out that the Pope alone, because he can speak for the whole church, even when he is not making a definition can effect a universal papal teaching ... he can teach definitively in such a way that his doctrine is protected by the promise of Christ: 'He who hears you, hears Me.' Such a teaching clearly pertains to the faith.'¹²

(4) 'Religious submission of mind and of will must be shown in a special way to the *authentic magisterium* of the Roman Pontiff even when he is not defining, in such a way, namely that the judgements made by him are sincerely adhered to according to his manifested mind and will which is clear either from the nature of the documents or from the repeated presentation of the same doctrine, or from the manner of speaking' (Vatican Council II). This is the *fourth level* of the *magisterium*.¹²

VATICAN II SPEAKS

The Second Vatican Council defines the Church as 'hierarchical' not democratic. In matters of doctrine and morals, it demands obedience to the Pope who has 'full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church which he can always exercise unhindered' and to the bishops, who together share this power with the Pope - but 'never without him'.⁷

'The Second Vatican Council, in its document *Dei Verbum* on Divine Revelation, states that there are two founts, or sources, of revelation: the Scriptures, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the *magisterium* or teaching authority of the Church. The Church's teaching authority is essential: otherwise there would be as many interpretations of God's message in the Bible as there were readers of it.'⁸

'The Second Vatican Council assures us that 'the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed down, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church.' The *magisterium* is not above the divine word but serves it with a specific *carisma veritatis certum* which includes the charism of infallibility present, not only in the solemn definitions of the Roman Pontiff and of Ecumenical Councils, but also in the universal Ordinary Magisterium which can truly be considered as the usual expression of the Church's infallibility (Lumen Gentium, 25).⁹

'The Second Vatican Council addresses spouses thus: 'Married people should realise that in their behaviour they may not simply follow their own fancy but must be ruled by conscience — *and conscience ought to be conformed to the law of God in the light of the teaching authority of the Church*, which is the authentic interpreter of divine law in the light of the gospel'. (Gaudium et Spes). Doubts are provoked and confusion created by public challenges to constantly repeated teachings of the *magisterium*.¹⁰

THE ADVERSE REACTION

'After the (second Vatican) Council the vast majority of Catholics did not comprehend its significance for their lives. Theologians and journalists were willing to 'explain' what the Council meant but they often distorted its meaning in a more 'progressive' direction. Many Catholics... formed their understanding of the Council from the media's interpretations... (and) tried to develop a 'contemporary, relevant spirituality.' This often meant equating God's will with doing what one pleased.¹¹

'The thought of a moral theology which wishes to stay in the context of the thought and understanding *common in society* finds itself by that very fact obliged to make compromises which push it toward disagreement with the *magisterium* of the Church ... The Church, insofar as she plays an important social role, finds herself thus confronting an alternative: either to reach agreement with the current values of the society she belongs to, or to remain faithful to her own values ... she has to choose between disagreement with the *magisterium* and disagreement with society.¹⁵

'Even if claimed in the essentials of doctrine, many find a claim to inerrancy intolerable. It is dismissed as impossible in the first place, and arrogant besides. This is more likely to be the reaction if, instead of the principle of *inerrancy* in doctrine, we write *infallibility* in doctrine. In this context of the nature and structure of the Church the two words mean the same thing, but the latter term arouses emotions which prevent any deep weighing of the issues involved. When men dismiss the infallibility of the Church as something beyond credence do they ever stop to ponder how very glib is their professed belief in Christ as 'true God from true God': do they not give their basic creed only a notional rather than a real assent and understanding?¹⁶

THE SAME: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND FOREVER

'Christ's teaching concerning true and false, good and evil, the pure and the unclean, was the *infallible truth* of God in Person. That mark of inerrancy, commonly called infallibility, does and must remain in His Church for ever. That is what we mean by the *magisterium* of the Church . . . Through the mission of the Holy Spirit within the Church we develop in the understanding of that fulness revealed in Christ. That fulness never contradicts itself, becomes irrelevant, or old-fashioned.¹³

'Conscience is like a growing child — it needs constant nourishment. This nourishment is a knowledge of God's law and the teaching of the Church. If what our conscience tells us differs from what the Church teaches in her *magisterium* we must presume the Church to be right. And justly so, given that the *magisterium* is Our Lord's voice.¹⁴

'The *sensus fidelium* is a grace common to all the faithful ('from the bishops to the last of the laity') so there can be no opposition between the laity's sense of the faith and the authentic *magisterium* of the Church as exercised by the Pope and the bishops in communion with him. The individual believer participates in the Church's *sensus fidei* only insofar as he is guided by, and faithfully obedient to, the *magisterium*. A layman who refuses to accept that guidance is manifesting not his God-given sense of faith but the unformed state of his conscience and the incompleteness of his submission to the Word of God.'¹⁵

'The Pope and the bishops do not impose their teaching on the baptized. Rather, the *magisterium* exercises its share in the prophetic office of Christ on behalf of the baptized and the entire human race ... Through their baptismal share in Christ's prophetic office the baptized are *empowered to accept* the teaching of the *magisterium*. '¹⁶

'To the Apostles Christ said: 'He who hears you, hears me' (Luke 10.16). By these words the teaching authority of the Church, which is called the *magisterium*, is vested in the successors of the Apostles in Communion with Peter, who are the Bishops of the world in communion with the Pope.'⁸

OUR COMMITMENT

'... for those of us who are Catholics a commitment to Christian truth means a commitment to its authentic expression, elaboration and defence in Christian history — tradition — and to the *official teaching authority of the Church* today in the area of faith and morals.'⁴

'It is the *duty* of every Catholic to give cheerful, unhesitating, unequivocal and wholehearted assent to every matter of faith or morals proclaimed by the Holy See and by the Bishops of the world in collegial communion with the Pope.'⁸

"Those of us who support the right and duty of the *magisterium* to define, teach and protect Christian truth are not 'blind' in our obedience. On the contrary it is with our eyes wide open that we freely choose to place ourselves under its authority as that of Christ and ... we are as free to withdraw our allegiance tomorrow if we wish.'⁷

NOTES

1. *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine* CTS 1985 Articles 11 & 12.
2. Ibid Art. 85-88.
3. Ibid Art. 100.
4. *A Crisis of Truth* Ralph Martin, Servant Books 1982 pp 51 & 171-173.
5. Cardinal Ratzinger *Christian Order* April 1989.
6. '*Christ and His Church - Why Infallible?*' Fr Edward Holloway, Faith Pamphlets 1974 p 3.
7. From Letters to the Editor, *The Times* 1st August 1989.
8. From an article by Christopher Monkton, *The Universe*.
9. Pope John Paul II addressing American bishops 15th October 1988.
10. Editorial article, *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition 27th February 1989.
11. *Modern Catholic Dictionary* (abridged edition) Fr John Hardon, Image Books 1985.
12. *Catholic Beliefs: The Bottom Line* Fr William Most. Prow Books/Franciscan Marytown Press 1988.
13. *Christian Formation*, Fr Edward Holloway, Faith Pamphlets 1976 p 25.
14. *Roman Catholic - Not Just a Label*, Fr Brendan MacCarthy, Faith Pamphlets 1976 p 8.
15. *The Theology of the Laity* John Seward, Crux Publications 1988 p 21.
16. *Faith for Today* Fr Hogan and Fr Le Voir, Doubleday 1988.