

# Who does the Teaching in the Church?

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The semi-official answer to this question, 'Who does the teaching in the Church?', the answer that would be given by the average official of the Roman Curia, or the average Catholic bishop, would probably be that it done by a rather mysterious entity called 'the Magisterium' (or, with more formal emphasis, 'the sacred Magisterium'). By this is meant, in theory/practice, 'the pope and the bishops', and in practice/practice, the Holy See.

The notion that the teaching of doctrine is the exclusive preserve, privilege and duty of the pope and bishops is bizarre, surely. I mean, I doubt if the pope or any of the bishops were themselves taught their catechism, before they reached their present exalted office, by popes or bishops *in illo tempore*—or that the catechisms they were taught from were actually compiled by any pope or bishop.

This distortion of reality arises from the application of the word 'magisterium' (which means 'mastery' or 'the status and function of a master') to the traditional and authentic Catholic doctrine that final authority in matters of doctrine, the final judgment where there is controversy, is the responsibility and right of the pope and the bishops. The use, or rather misuse, of the word 'magisterium' in this sense is very recent in the history of theology. Its first and comparatively innocuous employment in an official document is to be found in Gregory XVI's brief *Dum acerbissimas*, of 1835, condemning the errors of George Hermes. Its far from innocuous apogee was attained in Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* of 1950, in which it appears at least eleven times.

It is far from innocuous because it confuses the simple act of making a judgment, of deciding and declaring whether a doctrine, an opinion, is true or false, with the highly complex activity of teaching, which involves all sorts of vital subsidiary acts like research, enquiry, argument, discussion, learning, wondering, making and withdrawing and qualifying tentative judgments, as well as useful acts of one might call lubrication (not readily observable in papal encyclicals or episcopal pastorals), such as entertaining, shocking, stimulating, amusing, cajoling, encouraging and illuminating those taught.

Not usually found in papal encyclicals: but I must confess I was deeply shocked to find the following passage in Benedict XV's encyclical of 1914 *Ad beatissimi Apostolorum*, which vividly illustrates at once the

unreality and to my mind the enormity of the misuse of ‘magisterium’:

All know to whom the *magisterium* of the Church has been given by God; to this one therefore belongs the complete right to speak as he thinks fit, when he will; the duty of the rest is religiously to comply with the speaker and to be hearers of what is said.

Yves Congar says that the word was introduced into ecclesiological discourse by German canonists about 1800. It is clearly a handy weapon in the armoury of the ultramontane school. It is important, therefore, that those Catholics who find the opinions of this school to be in fact somewhat less than authentically Catholic, and who have misgivings about the domination of theology by canon law, should be alive to the impropriety, the unrealism, of using the word ‘magisterium’ in this way.

Who, then, in reality, actually do the teaching of Christian doctrine in the Catholic Church? But before we try to answer, perhaps we should try to be as clear as possible about what is meant by Christian doctrine. Some, I suppose, would define it as the exposition of the creeds and the commandments, having varying degrees of authoritativeness: *de fide*, certain, common teaching of theologians, probable, legitimate opinion. These degrees of authoritativeness would be seen as corresponding to the contrary degrees of censure of unsound opinions as being heretical, erroneous, offensive to pious ears, etc. Something like that, perhaps, would be a canonical definition, or at least a description of Christian doctrine. And it is presumably with such a concept of it in mind that the semi-official school would confine the teaching of it to pope and bishops, described for this purpose as ‘the Magisterium’.

But, while not exactly false, this is surely an utterly inadequate concept of Christian doctrine. Jesus taught as one having authority, and not like the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 7:29)—and he did not teach catechism or doctrine in that narrow sense, while the scribes and Pharisees very probably did, teaching the casuistry of the law of Moses. So what *did* Jesus teach? He taught about the kingdom of God and its qualifications, he taught discipleship; according to Augustine, in this being basically true to the Johannine theology, Jesus taught himself; that is, what he taught was himself. Commenting on the text ‘My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me’ (Jn 7:16), Augustine wonders how we can excuse Jesus from self-contradiction in five words, ‘My doctrine is not mine’. Either it is yours or it is not; if it is not yours, you cannot call it yours; if it is yours, you cannot say it is not. From this tangle Augustine extricates Jesus by asking the objector, ‘What is so much your own as yourself? And what is so much not your own as yourself?’ Jesus, the Word, is his doctrine—because he is not his own, but is the Word, the doctrine of the Father who sent him.

Who, then, continue to teach Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God, and true discipleship of Christ in the Church? Who continue to have both the right and the duty to teach this ‘doctrine’ in the wide as well as the

narrow sense?

1. First and foremost, the answer—again according to Augustine—is: Christ himself. From his early dialogue *De Magistro* (On the Teacher), composed during the months after his conversion while waiting for baptism, until the end of his life, Augustine would maintain that all that our fellow human beings, i.e. external teachers, can do in teaching us, whether by writing or talking—or if necessary, beating—is draw our attention to the truth of anything. They cannot convince us of the truth, cannot *make* us see it, from outside. Only the truth inside our minds can do that. And this truth inside us is Christ, the divine Word, Christ who said ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:16).

This view presupposes, philosophically speaking, a very platonist, even socratic, theory of knowledge. But even if you do not wish to tie yourself to such a philosophy, as a Christian you will, I think (and hope), spontaneously agree that the believer as such has some immediate personal contact with Jesus Christ—with God. Your official catechist (authorised by ‘the Magisterium’) will have taught you that faith, the theological virtue, is a supernatural gift of God. John will extend the principle beyond the formal believer to every human being: ‘That is the true light which enlightens every man coming into the world’ (Jn 1:9); and he is referring to the Word, and, what is more, to the Word incarnate, to Jesus Christ.

2. Secondly—or perhaps it is an alternative way of saying firstly—we are taught, all of us by the Holy Spirit. Again, the references are chiefly Johannine (Jn 14:26, 15:26, 16:13—15; 1 Jn 1:20—21). But there is also Peter’s comment on the Pentecost event, seeing it as the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh’ (Acts 2:16); no longer, therefore, on select persons like the prophets, or on select officers of the community of believers. The important point to bear in mind is that these texts promise the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to all believers, not just to a few chosen prophets among them as in the time of the old covenant; certainly not exclusively to the constitutionally appointed officers of their communities.

3. Thirdly, since our knowledge and understanding, even of the faith, cannot be simply the effect of interior spiritual illuminations, creatures of flesh and blood and five senses that we are, we, the faithful, teach other. And we do this according to the distribution of the Holy Spirit, different members of Christ’s body having different gifts: to one a word of wisdom, to another a word of knowledge, to another faith in the same Spirit (1 Cor 12:8—9); and God has placed in the Church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers ... (ibid. 28). And whom does he mean by teachers, *didaskaloí*? Almost certainly not bishops or presbyters, of whose existence in the church of Corinth at the time he wrote there is no evidence

and little likelihood. The churches of the next century, when they all had their bishops, also had their *didaskaloi*, men like Justin in Rome, Clement and Origen in Alexandria, none of them, in all probability ordained presbyters—certainly none of them bishops. Origen, it is true, was ordained presbyter later on, but long after he had become famous throughout the Christian world as a *didaskalos*.

So the modern equivalent of the ancient *didaskalos* would be the theologian; and few theologians are bishops (nor are all, or even most, bishops theologians); and to be a theologian you do not have to be in holy orders.

But the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge and faith in the same Spirit can be, and we must hope are, gifts available to any Christian, to be found in any fervent Christian community together with other charisms of the Holy Spirit; to be not infrequently, let us also hope, in the classrooms of Catholic schools (and other schools too—why not?), where teaching Christian doctrine is still basically a matter of expounding the creed and the *commandments*.

4. Fourthly, whoever is doing the formal teaching, we have to say that teaching is also done by those being taught, by the learners. As suggested at the beginning of this article, and it is a point that is ignored by the simple 'Magisterium' theory, teaching is a highly complex activity, from infancy and infant school right up to university, seminary and post-graduate studies. There is no simple division between teacher and taught. That old distinction between *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* is totally unreal; replace *discens* (learning) by *docta* (taught), and you will see just how unreal, because *docta* also means 'learned', and you cannot be learned unless you are learning; and if you are learned, you are also qualified to be teaching. Teaching is not a matter of the teacher pumping in knowledge or truth, and the learner being taught just receiving it, like water in a tank. That is the 'Magisterium' model (see the quotation above from Benedict XV's encyclical), and wherever it is taken literally, as it too often is in authoritarian establishments, it creates deplorably anti-intellectual prejudices among those in authority and those under it.

In reality teaching/learning (the two are two sides of one coin), to be effective, requires of the learners genuine intellectual judgments which the teachers can neither make for them nor pump into them. The most that teachers can do is attempt to demonstrate the necessity, or probability, of such judgments. Such judgments cannot be made without reflection, enquiry, research, doubt, argument on the part of the learners; without discussion, therefore, between teachers and learners; without sometimes a reversal of roles, so that learners teach teachers and teachers learn from learners.

Now such a reversal of roles, if the gospels are anything to go by, is of the essence of Christian discipleship; 'Whoever would be great among you

must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all' (Mk 10:43–44); 'Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Lk 18:3); and especially, 'Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me; for he who is least among you all is the one who is great' (Lk 9:48), because the only valid way to interpret 'receive' in this and parallel texts is as meaning 'learn from'.

What it boils down to—and it is what one would expect, given the nature of Christian faith and of the Christian community as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit—is that all the faithful in principle and at least potentially, from the tiny tots in nursery schools and their parents, to sisters teaching catechism, school teachers and theologians, to bishops and curial monsignori and cardinals and the pope, are involved in the process of teaching/learning Christian doctrine, Christian discipleship, Christ.

And what is more, all the faithful, from the tiny tots right up to the pope, engage in this teaching/learning process with *authority*, of some degree or other. If they do not, then the notion of *consensus fidelium* is totally vacuous, and so too is the doctrine of Vatican II that *all* the people of God share in Christ's prophetic role (*Lumen Gentium* 12, 32 and 33).

5. If then, as I propose, we are going to eliminate the word 'magisterium', meaning teaching authority or mastery, from our ecclesiological vocabulary—or at any rate disperse it through all the serried ranks of the people of God, and not confine it to the top brass—what specific and exclusive role in the teaching/learning process do we acknowledge the top brass, bishops and pope, to have? I suggest two.

First, the role that is properly theirs as *episkopoi*, the duty of supervising the whole work. In the last resort it is *their* responsibility to ensure that the work goes on; it is on their desks that the Truman card has its place: 'the buck stops here'; they have to take the rap, because they are ultimately to blame if the work is done badly, or not at all.

A very onerous responsibility. The task of *episkopē*, of supervision, can be seen simply as a task of control, of regulation, of setting strict limits to what may be taught and ensuring that nothing erroneous or dangerous or unacceptable is taught; a task necessarily involving strict censorship. This narrow notion of it unfortunately has a long history in the Catholic Church. It was supremely dominant after Vatican I during the undisputed sway of the ultramontane party, not only in Rome but throughout the Latin Church; especially so while the anti-modernist hysteria (or should I say paranoia?) was whistling like a deadly draught through the corridors of ecclesiastical power from the turn of the century right up to Vatican II. Its legacy is among other horrid symptoms, that anti-intellectual bias that still disfigures so much Catholic life in so many Catholic churches and institutions. This still seems to be the concept of doctrinal or magisterial *episkopē* that is taken

for granted by the Congregation for Christian Education, headed by Cardinal Baum.

But supervision, and ultimate responsibility, do not have to be envisaged in this way. They can and should be, and I am sure in many local churches are, envisaged as a responsibility to promote and encourage Christian education in freedom; the responsibility to encourage rather than stifle initiatives from below, even if at times they seem a little eccentric. The duty and prerogative of supervision must also and always be seen to include the right and duty of *learning*, sometimes, from the supervised.

Secondly, the role that properly, and sometimes exclusively, belongs to the pope and bishops is that of *judgment*; judgment about the truth or falsehood of statements of Christian doctrine. It is precisely here, and surely nowhere else, that the infallibility of the Church, and hence of its authoritative representatives, is involved. Such judgments, which popes and bishops have been called upon to pronounce from the earliest times in the history of the Church, though related to 'teaching', are clearly something much more precise, limited and formal than teaching in its ordinary, wide sense; something clearly distinct, for example, from preaching or lecturing. That bishops and popes should preach and give lectures, more often perhaps than they do (well, than most *bishops*), is an excellent thing. But there is absolutely no question of such sermons and lectures being considered infallible.

If those German canonists who introduced the word 'magisterium' into the language of ecclesiology had instead contented themselves with the word 'judicium'—well, they would have saved us much confusion and muddying of the waters. And if the fourth chapter of *Pastor Eternus* defining papal infallibility had been headed *De Romani Pontificis infallibili iudicio* in stead of *De Romani Pontificis infallibili magisterio*, it would have been a more accurate statement of the contents.

Teaching, *magisterium*, is something that has to go on all the time, which perhaps accounts for the quite staggering amount of 'teaching' that has issued from the Holy See in the last 118 ultramontane years; and it is something that should take all the complex forms outlined above—which all these papal documents can hardly be said to have done. Formal judgment, on the other hand, *judicium*, is by its nature something much more occasional. It is a precise act of a distinct personage, delivered only after hearing argument and discussion and evidence by several other personages. It presupposes all those various teaching activities; it does not preclude or pre-empt them, in the way that 'magisterium' as presently exercised often tends to do.

Compare the amount of space allotted in Denzinger to the *judicia* of the Holy See from Trent to Vatican I, 1564 to 1870 (excluding the teaching and decrees of Trent itself), with that allotted to the *magisterialia* of the Holy See from Vatican I (excluding the decrees of the Council itself) to 1964, when the 33rd edition terminates, and you will have a good material illustration between *judicium* and *magisterium*, and of the advantages of the

former over the latter. For the 306 years from Trent to Vatican I Denzinger provides 164 pages (422—586) and 1,148 sections (1851—2999). For the 96 years from Vatican I to 1964, it provides 221 pages (601—822) and 899 sections (3100—3999). No texts of Vatican II are included. The only proper word for this is— inflation.

If the essence of what is now called ‘magisterium’ were really seen for what it is, namely *judicium*, judgment, another wholesome effect would follow. In the world of law there is a hierarchy of courts: lower courts, higher courts, courts of first instance, courts of appeal, supreme courts, courts of final resort. Now in the Catholic Church the final judgment from which there is no further appeal lies with the pope. And we have the guarantee that his final and formal *ex cathedra* judgment in matters of faith and morals is infallible—precisely because it is the final judgment of the Church, which he supremely represents and in whose infallibility in such circumstances he participates.

But since the Holy See is the final court of appeal in matters of doctrine as well as in cases of ecclesiastical law and discipline, on obvious principles of natural justice it ought never (or hardly) to step in with a judgment while an issue is still being argued at a lower level. That it has the right to do so, in virtue of the papal primacy and the pope’s immediate jurisdiction over the universal Church, is not to be denied. But this is a right that should only be exercised in the most exceptional circumstances, for instance when lower jurisdictions have simply collapsed in times of persecution. To exercise it constantly as a matter of course is nothing other than oppressive. and tends to be tyrannical.

That the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is, after all, a *tribunal*, a court of judgment, should step in whenever theologians anywhere in the world say something it thinks a bit *risqué*, is as contrary to the interests of truth and justice as would be the intervention in England of the House of Lords in a case which had not yet come before a judge, or judge and jury. But now that this Congregation considers itself to have a *magisterium*, a teaching office, not just a judicial office, it subjects us to a whole series of lengthy ‘instructions’, which are all too often exercises in third-rate theology, exhibiting a regrettable lack of mastery of the subject. I am thinking in particular of the first instruction on Liberation Theology, and of the most recent working paper on the status of episcopal conferences. If these are typical products of the supreme Roman Magisterium, then we can only say that the standard and quality of professional teaching in the Roman Church is not what it ought to be.

Such inflation and debasement of a venerable and necessary judicial authority into an ill-defined and all-pervasive ‘magisterium’ ultimately has the effect, regrettable but well deserved, of bringing even the highest authority into disrepute.