

# CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

## *INSTRUCTION*

### **DONUM VERITATIS**

### ***ON THE ECCLESIAL VOCATION OF THE THEOLOGIAN***

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1. The truth which sets us free is a gift of Jesus Christ (cf. *Jn* 8:32). Man's nature calls him to seek the truth while ignorance keeps him in a condition of servitude. Indeed, man could not be truly free were no light shed upon the central questions of his existence including, in particular, where he comes from and where he is going. When God gives Himself to man as a friend, man becomes free, in accordance with the Lord's word: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (*Jn* 15:15). Man's deliverance from the alienation of sin and death comes about when Christ, the Truth, becomes the "way" for him (cf. *Jn* 14:6).

In the Christian faith, knowledge and life, truth and existence are intrinsically connected. Assuredly, the truth given in God's revelation exceeds the capacity of human knowledge, but it is not opposed to human reason. Revelation in fact penetrates human reason, elevates it, and calls it to give an account of itself (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15). For this reason, from the very beginning of the Church, the "standard of teaching" (cf. *Rom* 6:17) has been linked with baptism to entrance into the mystery of Christ. The service of doctrine, implying as it does the believer's search for an understanding of the faith, i.e., theology, is therefore something indispensable for the Church.

Theology has importance for the Church in every age so that it can respond to the plan of God "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (*1 Tim* 2:4). In times of great spiritual and cultural change, theology is all the more important. Yet it also is exposed to risks since it must strive to "abide" in the truth (cf. *Jn* 8:31), while at the same time taking into account the new problems which confront the human spirit. In our century, in particular, during the periods of preparation for and implementation of the Second Vatican Council, theology contributed much to a deeper "understanding of the realities and the words handed on" (1). But it also experienced and continues to experience moments of crisis and tension.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith deems it opportune then to

address to the Bishops of the Catholic Church, and through them her theologians, the present Instruction which seeks to shed light on the mission of theology in the Church. After having considered truth as God's gift to His people (I), the instruction will describe the role of theologians (II), ponder the particular mission of the Church's Pastors (III), and finally, propose some points on the proper relationship between theologians and pastors (IV). In this way, it aims to serve the growth in understanding of the truth (cf. *Col* 1:10) which ushers us into that freedom which Christ died and rose to win for us (cf. *Gal* 5:1).

## **THE TRUTH GOD'S GIFT TO HIS PEOPLE**

2. Out of His infinite love, God desired to draw near to man, as he seeks his own proper identity, and walk with him ( cf. *Lk* 24:15 ). He also wanted to free him from the snares of the "father of lies" (cf. *Jn* 8:44) and to open the way to intimacy with Himself so that man could find there, superabundantly, full truth and authentic freedom. This plan of love, conceived by "the Father of lights" (*Jas* 1:17; cf. *I Pet* 2:9; *1 Jn* 1:5) and realized by the Son victorious over death (cf. *Jn* 8:36), is continually made present by the Spirit who leads "to all truth" (*Jn* 16:13) .

3. The truth possesses in itself a unifying force. It frees men from isolation and the oppositions in which they have been trapped by ignorance of the truth. And as it opens the way to God, it, at the same time, unites them to each other. Christ destroyed the wall of separation which had kept them strangers to God's promise and to the fellowship of the covenant (cf. *Eph* 2:12-14). Into the hearts of the faithful He sends His Spirit through whom we become nothing less than "one" in Him (cf. *Rom* 5:5; *6 Gal* 3:28). Thus thanks to the new birth and the anointing of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Jn* 3:5; *1 Jn* 2:20. 27), we become the one, new People of God whose mission it is, with our different vocations and charisms, to preserve and hand on the gift of truth. Indeed, the whole Church, as the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (cf. *Mt* 5:13 f.), must bear witness to the truth of Christ which sets us free.

4. The People of God respond to this calling "above all by means of the life of faith and charity, and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise". More specifically, as far as the "life of faith" is concerned, the Second Vatican Council makes it clear that "the whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. *1 Jn* 2:20. 27) cannot err in matters of belief". And "this characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith of the whole people, when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals".(2)

5. In order to exercise the prophetic function in the world, the People of God must continually reawaken or "rekindle" its own life of faith (cf. *2 Tim* 1:6). It does this particularly by contemplating ever more deeply, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the contents of the faith itself and by dutifully presenting the reasonableness of the faith to those who ask for an account of it (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15). For the sake of this mission, the Spirit of truth

distributes among the faithful of every rank special graces "for the common good" (1 *Cor* 12:7-11).

## II THE VOCATION OF THE THEOLOGIAN

6. Among the vocations awakened in this way by the Spirit in the Church is that of the theologian. His role is to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church. He does this in communion with the Magisterium which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the deposit of faith.

By its nature, faith appeals to reason because it reveals to man the truth of his destiny and the way to attain it. Revealed truth, to be sure, surpasses our telling. All our concepts fall short of its ultimately unfathomable grandeur (cf. *Eph* 3:19). Nonetheless, revealed truth beckons reason - God's gift fashioned for the assimilation of truth - to enter into its light and thereby come to understand in a certain measure what it has believed. Theological science responds to the invitation of truth as it seeks to understand the faith. It thereby aids the People of God in fulfilling the Apostle's command (cf. 1 *Pet* 3:15) to give an accounting for their hope to those who ask it.

7. The theologian's work thus responds to a dynamism found in the faith itself. Truth, by its nature, seeks to be communicated since man was created for the perception of truth and from the depths of his being desires knowledge of it so that he can discover himself in the truth and find there his salvation (cf. 1 *Tim* 2:4). For this reason, the Lord sent forth His apostles to make "disciples" of all nations and teach them (cf. *Mt* 28:19 f. ). Theology, which seeks the "reasons of faith" and offers these reasons as a response to those seeking them, thus constitutes an integral part of obedience to the command of Christ, for men cannot become disciples if the truth found in the word of faith is not presented to them (cf. *Rom* 10:14 f.).

Theology therefore offers its contribution so that the faith might be communicated. Appealing to the understanding of those who do not yet know Christ, it helps them to seek and find faith. Obedient to the impulse of truth which seeks to be communicated, theology also arises from love and love's dynamism. In the act of faith, man knows God's goodness and begins to love Him. Love, however, is ever desirous of a better knowledge of the beloved.(3) From this double origin of theology, inscribed upon the interior life of the People of God and its missionary vocation, derives the method with which it ought to be pursued in order to satisfy the requirements of its nature.

8. Since the object of theology is the Truth which is the living God and His plan for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ, the theologian is called to deepen his own life of faith and continuously unite his scientific research with prayer.(4) In this way, he will become more open to the "supernatural sense of faith" upon which he depends, and it will appear to him as a sure rule for guiding his reflections and helping him assess the correctness of his conclusions.

9. Through the course of centuries, theology has progressively developed into a true and proper science. The theologian must therefore be attentive to the epistemological requirements of his discipline, to the demands of rigorous critical standards, and thus to a rational verification of each stage of his research. The obligation to be critical, however, should not be identified with the critical spirit which is born of feeling or prejudice. The theologian must discern in himself the origin of and motivation for his critical attitude and allow his gaze to be purified by faith. The commitment to theology requires a spiritual effort to grow in virtue and holiness.

10. Even though it transcends human reason, revealed truth is in profound harmony with it. It presumes that reason by its nature is ordered to the truth in such a way that, illumined by faith, it can penetrate to the meaning of Revelation. Despite the assertions of many philosophical currents, but in conformity with a correct way of thinking which finds confirmation in Scripture, human reason's ability to attain truth must be recognized as well as its metaphysical capacity to come to a knowledge of God from creation.  
(5)

Theology's proper task is to understand the meaning of revelation and this, therefore, requires the utilization of philosophical concepts which provide "a solid and correct understanding of man, the world, and God" (6) and can be employed in a reflection upon revealed doctrine. The historical disciplines are likewise necessary for the theologian's investigations. This is due chiefly to the historical character of revelation itself which has been communicated to us in "salvation history". Finally, a consultation of the "human sciences" is also necessary to understand better the revealed truth about man and the moral norms for his conduct, setting these in relation to the sound findings of such sciences.

It is the theologian's task in this perspective to draw from the surrounding culture those elements which will allow him better to illumine one or other aspect of the mysteries of faith. This is certainly an arduous task that has its risks, but it is legitimate in itself and should be encouraged.

Here it is important to emphasize that when theology employs the elements and conceptual tools of philosophy or other disciplines, discernment is needed. The ultimate normative principle for such discernment is revealed doctrine which itself must furnish the criteria for the evaluation of these elements and conceptual tools and not *vice versa*.

11. Never forgetting that he is also a member of the People of God, the theologian must foster respect for them and be committed to offering them a teaching which in no way does harm to the doctrine of the faith.

The freedom proper to theological research is exercised within the Church's faith. Thus while the theologian might often feel the urge to be daring in his work, this will not bear fruit or "edify" unless it is accompanied by that patience which permits maturation to occur. New proposals advanced for understanding the faith "are but an offering made to the whole Church. Many corrections and broadening of perspectives within the context of fraternal dialogue may be needed before the moment comes when the

whole Church can accept them" . Consequently, "this very disinterested service to the community of the faithful", which theology is, "entails in essence an objective discussion, a fraternal dialogue, an openness and willingness to modify one's own opinions".(7)

12. Freedom of research, which the academic community rightly holds most precious, means an openness to accepting the truth that emerges at the end of an investigation in which no element has intruded that is foreign to the methodology corresponding to the object under study.

In theology this freedom of inquiry is the hallmark of a rational discipline whose object is given by Revelation, handed on and interpreted in the Church under the authority of the Magisterium, and received by faith. These givens have the force of principles. To eliminate them would mean to cease doing theology. In order to set forth precisely the ways in which the theologian relates to the Church's teaching authority, it is appropriate now to reflect upon the role of the Magisterium in the Church.

### III

#### THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH'S PASTORS

13. "God graciously arranged that the things he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generations"(8) He bestowed upon His Church, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, a participation in His own infallibility. (9) Thanks to the "supernatural sense of Faith", the People of God enjoys this privilege under the guidance of the Church's living Magisterium, which is the sole authentic interpreter of the Word of God, written or handed down, by virtue of the authority which it exercises in the name of Christ. (10)

14. As successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church "receive from the Lord, to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth, the mission of teaching all peoples, and of preaching the Gospel to every creature, so that all men may attain to salvation...".(11) They have been entrusted then with the task of preserving, explaining, and spreading the Word of God of which they are servants.(12)

It is the mission of the Magisterium to affirm the definitive character of the Covenant established by God through Christ with His People in a way which is consistent with the "eschatological" nature of the event of Jesus Christ. It must protect God's People from the danger of deviations and confusion, guaranteeing them the objective possibility of professing the authentic faith free from error, at all times and in diverse situations. It follows that the sense and the weight of the Magisterium's authority are only intelligible in relation to the truth of Christian doctrine and the preaching of the true Word. The function of the Magisterium is not, then, something extrinsic to Christian truth nor is it set above the faith. It arises directly from the economy of the faith itself, inasmuch as the Magisterium is, in its service to the Word of God, an institution positively willed by Christ as a constitutive element of His Church. The service to Christian truth which the Magisterium renders is thus for the benefit of the whole People of God called to enter the liberty of the truth revealed by God in

Christ.

15. Jesus Christ promised the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the Church's Pastors so that they could fulfill their assigned task of teaching the Gospel and authentically interpreting Revelation. In particular, He bestowed on them the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals. This charism is manifested when the Pastors propose a doctrine as contained in Revelation and can be exercised in various ways. Thus it is exercised particularly when the bishops in union with their visible head proclaim a doctrine by a collegial act, as is the case in an ecumenical council, or when the Roman Pontiff, fulfilling his mission as supreme Pastor and Teacher of all Christians, proclaims a doctrine "ex cathedra". (13)

16. By its nature, the task of religiously guarding and loyally expounding the deposit of divine Revelation (in all its integrity and purity), implies that the Magisterium can make a pronouncement "in a definitive way" (14) on propositions which, even if not contained among the truths of faith, are nonetheless intimately connected with them, in such a way, that the definitive character of such affirmations derives in the final analysis from revelation itself.(15).

What concerns morality can also be the object of the authentic Magisterium because the Gospel, being the Word of Life, inspires and guides the whole sphere of human behavior. The Magisterium, therefore, has the task of discerning, by means of judgments normative for the consciences of believers, those acts which in themselves conform to the demands of faith and foster their expression in life and those which, on the contrary, because intrinsically evil, are incompatible with such demands. By reason of the connection between the orders of creation and redemption and by reason of the necessity, in view of salvation, of knowing and observing the whole moral law, the competence of the Magisterium also extends to that which concerns the natural law.(16)

Revelation also contains moral teachings which *per se* could be known by natural reason. Access to them, however, is made difficult by man's sinful condition. It is a doctrine of faith that these moral norms can be infallibly taught by the Magisterium (17).

17. Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and in a particular way, to the Roman Pontiff as Pastor of the whole Church, when exercising their ordinary Magisterium, even should this not issue in an infallible definition or in a "definitive" pronouncement but in the proposal of some teaching which leads to a better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals and to moral directives derived from such teaching.

One must therefore take into account the proper character of every exercise of the Magisterium, considering the extent to which its authority is engaged. It is also to be borne in mind that all acts of the Magisterium derive from the same source, that is, from Christ who desires that His People walk in the entire truth. For this same reason, magisterial decisions in matters of discipline, even if they are not guaranteed by the charism of

infallibility, are not without divine assistance and call for the adherence of the faithful.

18. The Roman Pontiff fulfills his universal mission with the help of the various bodies of the Roman Curia and in particular with that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in matters of doctrine and morals. Consequently, the documents issued by this Congregation expressly approved by the Pope participate in the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Peter.(18)

19. Within the particular Churches, it is the bishop's responsibility to guard and interpret the Word of God and to make authoritative judgments as to what is or is not in conformity with it. The teaching of each bishop, taken individually, is exercised in communion with the Roman Pontiff, Pastor of the universal Church, and with the other bishops dispersed throughout the world or gathered in an ecumenical council. Such communion is a condition for its authenticity.

Member of the Episcopal College by virtue of his sacramental ordination and hierarchical communion, the bishop represents his Church just as all the bishops, in union with the Pope, represent the Church universal in the bonds of peace, love, unity, and truth. As they come together in unity, the local Churches, with their own proper patrimonies, manifest the Church's catholicity. The episcopal conferences for their part contribute to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit ("affectus").(19)

20. The pastoral task of the Magisterium is one of vigilance. It seeks to ensure that the People of God remain in the truth which sets free. It is therefore a complex and diversified reality. The theologian, to be faithful to his role of service to the truth, must take into account the proper mission of the Magisterium and collaborate with it. How should this collaboration be understood? How is it put into practice and what are the obstacles it may face? These questions should now be examined more closely.

#### **IV THE MAGISTERIUM AND THEOLOGY**

##### **A. Collaborative Relations**

21. The living Magisterium of the Church and theology, while having different gifts and functions, ultimately have the same goal: preserving the People of God in the truth which sets free and thereby making them "a light to the nations". This service to the ecclesial community brings the theologian and the Magisterium into a reciprocal relationship. The latter authentically teaches the doctrine of the Apostles. And, benefiting from the work of theologians, it refutes objections to and distortions of the faith and promotes, with the authority received from Jesus Christ, new and deeper comprehension, clarification, and application of revealed doctrine. Theology, for its part, gains, by way of reflection, an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the Scripture and handed on faithfully by the Church's living Tradition under the guidance of the Magisterium. Theology strives to clarify the teaching of Revelation with

regard to reason and gives it finally an organic and systematic form.(20)

22. Collaboration between the theologian and the Magisterium occurs in a special way when the theologian receives the canonical mission or the mandate to teach. In a certain sense, such collaboration becomes a participation in the work of the Magisterium, linked, as it then is, by a juridic bond. The theologian's code of conduct, which obviously has its origin in the service of the Word of God, is here reinforced by the commitment the theologian assumes in accepting his office, making the profession of faith, and taking the oath of fidelity.(21)

From this moment on, the theologian is officially charged with the task of presenting and illustrating the doctrine of the faith in its integrity and with full accuracy.

23. When the Magisterium of the Church makes an infallible pronouncement and solemnly declares that a teaching is found in Revelation, the assent called for is that of theological faith. This kind of adherence is to be given even to the teaching of the ordinary and universal Magisterium when it proposes for belief a teaching of faith as divinely revealed.

When the Magisterium proposes "in a definitive way" truths concerning faith and morals, which, even if not divinely revealed, are nevertheless strictly and intimately connected with Revelation, these must be firmly accepted and held.(22)

When the Magisterium, not intending to act "definitively", teaches a doctrine to aid a better understanding of Revelation and make explicit its contents, or to recall how some teaching is in conformity with the truths of faith, or finally to guard against ideas that are incompatible with these truths, the response called for is that of the religious submission of will and intellect.(23) This kind of response cannot be simply exterior or disciplinary but must be understood within the logic of faith and under the impulse of obedience to the faith.

24. Finally, in order to serve the People of God as well as possible, in particular, by warning them of dangerous opinions which could lead to error, the Magisterium can intervene in questions under discussion which involve, in addition to solid principles, certain contingent and conjectural elements. It often only becomes possible with the passage of time to distinguish between what is necessary and what is contingent.

The willingness to submit loyally to the teaching of the Magisterium on matters *per se* not irreformable must be the rule. It can happen, however, that a theologian may, according to the case, raise questions regarding the timeliness, the form, or even the contents of magisterial interventions. Here the theologian will need, first of all, to assess accurately the authoritativeness of the interventions which becomes clear from the nature of the documents, the insistence with which a teaching is repeated, and the very way in which it is expressed.(24)



When it comes to the question of interventions in the prudential order, it could happen that some Magisterial documents might not be free from all deficiencies. Bishops and their advisors have not always taken into immediate consideration every aspect or the entire complexity of a question. But it would be contrary to the truth, if, proceeding from some particular cases, one were to conclude that the Church's Magisterium can be habitually mistaken in its prudential judgments, or that it does not enjoy divine assistance in the integral exercise of its mission. In fact, the theologian, who cannot pursue his discipline well without a certain competence in history, is aware of the filtering which occurs with the passage of time. This is not to be understood in the sense of a relativization of the tenets of the faith. The theologian knows that some judgments of the Magisterium could be justified at the time in which they were made, because while the pronouncements contained true assertions and others which were not sure, both types were inextricably connected. Only time has permitted discernment and, after deeper study, the attainment of true doctrinal progress.

25. Even when collaboration takes place under the best conditions, the possibility cannot be excluded that tensions may arise between the theologian and the Magisterium. The meaning attributed to such tensions and the spirit with which they are faced are not matters of indifference. If tensions do not spring from hostile and contrary feelings, they can become a dynamic factor, a stimulus to both the Magisterium and theologians to fulfill their respective roles while practicing dialogue.

26. In the dialogue, a two-fold rule should prevail. When there is a question of the communion of faith, the principle of the "unity of truth" (*unitas veritatis*) applies. When it is a question of differences which do not jeopardize this communion, the "unity of charity" (*unitas caritatis*) should be safeguarded.

27. Even if the doctrine of the faith is not in question, the theologian will not present his own opinions or divergent hypotheses as though they were non-arguable conclusions. Respect for the truth as well as for the People of God requires this discretion (cf. *Rom* 14:1-15; *1 Cor* 8; 10: 23-33) . For the same reasons, the theologian will refrain from giving untimely public expression to them.

28. The preceding considerations have a particular application to the case of the theologian who might have serious difficulties, for reasons which appear to him wellfounded, in accepting a non-irreformable magisterial teaching.

Such a disagreement could not be justified if it were based solely upon the fact that the validity of the given teaching is not evident or upon the opinion that the opposite position would be the more probable. Nor, furthermore, would the judgment of the subjective conscience of the theologian justify it because conscience does not constitute an autonomous and exclusive authority for deciding the truth of a doctrine.

29. In any case there should never be a diminishment of that fundamental

openness loyally to accept the teaching of the Magisterium as is fitting for every believer by reason of the obedience of faith. The theologian will strive then to understand this teaching in its contents, arguments, and purposes. This will mean an intense and patient reflection on his part and a readiness, if need be, to revise his own opinions and examine the objections which his colleagues might offer him.

30. If, despite a loyal effort on the theologian's part, the difficulties persist, the theologian has the duty to make known to the Magisterial authorities the problems raised by the teaching in itself, in the arguments proposed to justify it, or even in the manner in which it is presented. He should do this in an evangelical spirit and with a profound desire to resolve the difficulties. His objections could then contribute to real progress and provide a stimulus to the Magisterium to propose the teaching of the Church in greater depth and with a clearer presentation of the arguments.

In cases like these, the theologian should avoid turning to the "mass media", but have recourse to the responsible authority, for it is not by seeking to exert the pressure of public opinion that one contributes to the clarification of doctrinal issues and renders servite to the truth.

31. It can also happen that at the conclusion of a serious study, undertaken with the desire to heed the Magisterium's teaching without hesitation, the theologian's difficulty remains because the arguments to the contrary seem more persuasive to him. Faced with a proposition to which he feels he cannot give his intellectual assent, the theologian nevertheless has the duty to remain open to a deeper examination of the question.

For a loyal spirit, animated by love for the Church, such a situation can certainly prove a difficult trial. It can be a call to suffer for the truth, in silence and prayer, but with the certainty, that if the truth really is at stake, it will ultimately prevail.

## **B. The problem of dissent**

32. The Magisterium has drawn attention several times to the serious harm done to the community of the Church by attitudes of general opposition to Church teaching which even come to expression in organized groups. In his apostolic exhortation *Paterna cum benevolentia*, Paul VI offered a diagnosis of this problem which is still apropos.<sup>(25)</sup> In particular, he addresses here that public opposition to the Magisterium of the Church also called "dissent", which must be distinguished from the situation of personal difficulties treated above. The phenomenon of dissent can have diverse forms. Its remote and proximate causes are multiple.

The ideology of philosophical liberalism, which permeates the thinking of our age, must be counted among the factors which may exercise their remote or indirect influence. Here arises the tendency to regard a judgment as having all the more validity to the extent that it proceeds from the individual relying upon his own powers. In such a way freedom of thought comes to oppose the authority of tradition which is considered a cause of servitude. A teaching handed on and generally received is *a priori* suspect

and its truth contested. Ultimately, freedom of judgment understood in this way is more important than the truth itself. We are dealing then here with something quite different from the legitimate demand for freedom in the sense of absence of constraint as a necessary condition for the loyal inquiry into truth. In virtue of this exigency, the Church has always held that "nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against his will" .(26)

The weight of public opinion when manipulated and its pressure to conform also have their influence. Often models of society promoted by the "mass media" tend to assume a normative value. The view is particularly promoted that the Church should only express her judgment on those issues which public opinion considers important and then only by way of agreeing with it. The Magisterium, for example, could intervene in economic or social questions but ought to leave matters of conjugal and family morality to individual judgment.

Finally, the plurality of cultures and languages, in itself a benefit, can indirectly bring on misunderstandings which occasion disagreements.

In this context, the theologian needs to make a critical, well-considered discernment, as well as have a true mastery of the issues, if he wants to fulfill his ecclesial mission and not lose, by conforming himself to this present world (cf. *Rom* 12:2; *Eph* 4:23), the independence of judgment which should be that of the disciples of Christ.

33. Dissent has different aspects. In its most radical form, it aims at changing the Church following a model of protest which takes its inspiration from political society. More frequently, it is asserted that the theologian is not bound to adhere to any Magisterial teaching unless it is infallible. Thus a Kind of theological positivism is adopted, according to which, doctrines proposed without exercise of the charism of infallibility are said to have no obligatory character about them, leaving the individual completely at liberty to adhere to them or not. The theologian would accordingly be totally free to raise doubts or reject the non-infallible teaching of the Magisterium particularly in the case of specific moral norms. With such critical opposition, he would even be making a contribution to the development of doctrine.

34. Dissent is generally defended by various arguments, two of which are more basic in character. The first lies in the order of hermeneutics. The documents of the Magisterium, it is said, reflect nothing more than a debatable theology. The second takes theological pluralism sometimes to the point of a relativism which calls the integrity of the faith into question. Here the interventions of the Magisterium would have their origin in one theology among many theologies, while no particular theology, however, could presume to claim universal normative status. In opposition to and in competition with the authentic magisterium, there thus arises a kind of "parallel magisterium" of theologians.(27)

Certainly, it is one of the theologian's tasks to give a correct interpretation to the texts of the Magisterium and to this end he employs various hermeneutical rules. Among these is the principle which affirms that

Magisterial teaching, by virtue of divine assistance, has a validity beyond its argumentation, which may derive at times from a particular theology. As far as theological pluralism is concerned, this is only legitimate to the extent that the unity of the faith in its objective meaning is not jeopardized. (28) Essential bonds link the distinct levels of unity of faith, unity-plurality of expressions of the faith, and plurality of theologies. The ultimate reason for plurality is found in the unfathomable mystery of Christ who transcends every objective systematization. This cannot mean that it is possible to accept conclusions contrary to that mystery and it certainly does not put into question the truth of those assertions by which the Magisterium has declared itself. (29) As to the "parallel magisterium", it can cause great spiritual harm by opposing itself to the Magisterium of the Pastors. Indeed, when dissent succeeds in extending its influence to the point of shaping; a common opinion, it tends to become the rule of conduct. This cannot but seriously trouble the People of God and lead to contempt for true authority. (30)

35. Dissent sometimes also appeals to a kind of sociological argumentation which holds that the opinion of a large number of Christians would be a direct and adequate expression of the "supernatural sense of the faith".

Actually, the opinions of the faithful cannot be purely and simply identified with the "sensus fidei". (31) The sense of the faith is a property of theological faith; and, as God's gift which enables one to adhere personally to the Truth, it cannot err. This personal faith is also the faith of the Church since God has given guardianship of the Word to the Church. Consequently, what the believer believes is what the Church believes. The "sensus fidei" implies then by its nature a profound agreement of spirit and heart with the Church, "sentire cum Ecclesia".

Although theological faith as such then cannot err, the believer can still have erroneous opinions since all his thoughts do not spring from faith. (32) Not all the ideas which circulate among the People of God are compatible with the faith. This is all the more so given that people can be swayed by a public opinion influenced by modern communications media. Not without reason did the Second Vatican Council emphasize the indissoluble bond between the "sensus fidei" and the guidance of God's People by the magisterium of the Pastors. These two realities cannot be separated. (33) Magisterial interventions serve to guarantee the Church's unity in the truth of the Lord. They aid her to "abide in the truth" in face of the arbitrary character of changeable opinions and are an expression of obedience to the Word of God. (34) Even when it might seem that they limit the freedom of theologians, these actions, by their fidelity to the faith which has been handed on, establish a deeper freedom which can only come from unity in truth.

36. The freedom of the act of faith cannot justify a right to dissent. In fact this freedom does not indicate at all freedom with regard to the truth but signifies the free self-determination of the person in conformity with his moral obligation to accept the truth. The act of faith is a voluntary act because man, saved by Christ the Redeemer and called by Him to be an adopted son (cf. *Rom* 8:15; *Gal* 4:5; *Eph* 1:5; *Jn* 1:12), cannot adhere to

God unless, "drawn by the Father" (*Jn* 6:44), he offer God the rational homage of his faith (cf. *Rom* 12:1). As the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae* recalls,(35) no human authority may overstep the limits of its competence and claim the right to interfere with this choice by exerting pressure or constraint. Respect for religious liberty is the foundation of respect for all the rights of man.

One cannot then appeal to these rights of man in order to oppose the interventions of the Magisterium. Such behavior fails to recognize the nature and mission of the Church which has received from the Lord the task to proclaim the truth of salvation to all men. She fulfills this task by walking in Christ's footsteps, knowing that "truth can impose itself on the mind only by virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power".(36)

37. By virtue of the divine mandate given to it in the Church, the Magisterium has the mission to set forth the Gospel's teaching, guard its integrity, and thereby protect the Faith of the People of God. In order to fulfill this duty, it can at times be led to take serious measures as, for example, when it withdraws from a theologian, who departs from the doctrine of the faith, the canonical mission or the teaching mandate it had given him, or declares that some writings do not conform to this doctrine. When it acts in such ways, the Magisterium seeks to be faithful to its mission of defending the right of the People of God to receive the message of the Church in its purity and integrity and not be disturbed by a particular dangerous opinion.

The judgment expressed by the Magisterium in such circumstances is the result of a thorough investigation conducted according to established procedures which afford the interested party the opportunity to clear up possible misunderstandings of his thought. This judgment, however, does not concern the person of the theologian but the intellectual positions which he has publicly espoused. The fact that these procedures can be improved does not mean that they are contrary to justice and right. To speak in this instance of a violation of human rights is out of place for it indicates a failure to recognize the proper hierarchy of these rights as well as the nature of the ecclesial community and her common good. Moreover, the theologian who is not disposed to think with the Church ("sentire cum Ecclesia") contradicts the commitment he freely and knowingly accepted to teach in the name of the Church.(37)

38. Finally, argumentation appealing to the obligation to follow one's own conscience cannot legitimate dissent. This is true, first of all, because conscience illumines the practical judgment about a decision to make, while here we are concerned with the truth of a doctrinal pronouncement. This is furthermore the case because while the theologian, like every believer, must follow his conscience, he is also obliged to form it. Conscience is not an independent and infallible faculty. It is an act of moral judgement regarding a responsible choice. A right conscience is one duly illumined by faith and by the objective moral law and it presupposes, as well, the uprightness of the will in the pursuit of the true good.

The right conscience of the Catholic theologian presumes not only faith in the Word of God whose riches he must explore, but also love for the Church from whom he receives his mission, and respect for her divinely assisted Magisterium. Setting up a supreme magisterium of conscience in opposition to the magisterium of the Church means adopting a principle of free examination incompatible with the economy of Revelation and its transmission in the Church and thus also with a correct understanding of theology and the role of the theologian. The propositions of faith are not the product of mere individual research and free criticism of the Word of God but constitute an ecclesial heritage. If there occur a separation from the Bishops who watch over and keep the apostolic tradition alive, it is the bond with Christ which is irreparably compromised(38).

39. The Church, which has her origin in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, (39) is a mystery of communion. In accordance with the will of her founder, she is organized around a hierarchy established for the service of the Gospel and the People of God who live by it. After the pattern of the members of the first community, all the baptized with their own proper charisms are to strive with sincere hearts for a harmonious unity in doctrine, life, and worship (cf. *Acts* 2:42). This is a rule which flows from the very being of the Church. For this reason, standards of conduct, appropriate to civil society or the workings of a democracy, cannot be purely and simply applied to the Church. Even less can relationships within the Church be inspired by the mentality of the world around it (cf. *Rom* 12:2). Polling public opinion to determine the proper thing to think or do, opposing the Magisterium by exerting the pressure of public opinion, making the excuse of a "consensus" among theologians, maintaining that the theologian is the prophetic spokesman of a "base" or autonomous community which would be the source of all truth, all this indicates a grave loss of the sense of truth and of the sense of the Church.

40. The Church "is like a sacrament, a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men".(40) Consequently, to pursue concord and communion is to enhance the force of her witness and credibility. To succumb to the temptation of dissent, on the other hand, is to allow the "leaven of infidelity to the Holy Spirit" to start to work.(41)

To be sure, theology and the Magisterium are of diverse natures and missions and cannot be confused. Nonetheless they fulfill two vital roles in the Church which must interpenetrate and enrich each other for the service of the People of God.

It is the duty of the Pastors by virtue of the authority they have received from Christ Himself to guard this unity and to see that the tensions arising from life do not degenerate into divisions. Their authority, which transcends particular positions and oppositions, must unite all in the integrity of the Gospel which is the "word of reconciliation" (cf. *2 Cor* 5:18-20).

As for theologians, by virtue of their own proper charisms, they have the responsibility of participating in the building up of Christ's Body in unity and truth. Their contribution is needed more than ever, for evangelization on a world scale requires the efforts of the whole People of God.(42) If it

happens that they encounter difficulties due to the character of their research, they should seek their solution in trustful dialogue with the Pastors, in the spirit of truth and charity which is that of the communion of the Church.

41. Both Bishops and theologians will keep in mind that Christ is the definitive Word of the Father (cf. *Heb* 1:2 ) in whom, as St. John of the Cross observes: "God has told us everything all together and at one time". (43) As such, He is the Truth who sets us free (cf. *Jn* 8:36; 14:6). The acts of assent and submission to the Word entrusted to the Church under the guidance of the Magisterium are directed ultimately to Him and lead us into the realm of true freedom.

## CONCLUSION

42. The Virgin Mary is Mother and perfect Icon of the Church. From the very beginnings of the New Testament, she has been called blessed because of her immediate and unhesitating assent of faith to the Word of God (cf. *Lk* 1:38. 45) which she kept and pondered in her heart (cf. *Lk* 2:19. 51). Thus did she become a model and source of help for all of the People of God entrusted to her maternal care. She shows us the way to accept and serve the Word. At the same time, she points out the final goal, on which our sights should ever be set, the salvation won for the world by her Son Jesus Christ which we are to proclaim to all men.

At the close of this Instruction, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith earnestly invites Bishops to maintain and develop relations of trust with theologians in the fellowship of charity and in the realization that they share one spirit in their acceptance and service of the Word. In this context, they will more easily overcome some of the obstacles which are part of the human condition on earth. In this way, all can become ever better servants of the Word and of the People of God, so that the People of God, persevering in the doctrine of truth and freedom heard from the beginning, may abide also in the Son and the Father and obtain eternal life, the fulfillment of the Promise (cf. 1 *Jn* 2:24-25).

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Given at Rome, at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on May 24, 1990, the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord.

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- (1) Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 8.
- (2) Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 12.
- (3) Cf. St. Bonaventure, *Prooem. in I Sent.*, q. 2, ad 6: "Quando fides non assentit propter rationem, sed propter amorem eius cui assentit, desiderat habere rationes".
- (4) Cf. John Paul II, "Discorso in occasione della consegna del premio internazionale Paulo VI a Hans Urs von Balthasar", June 23, 1984: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*. VII, 1 (1984) 1911-1917.
- (5) Cf. Vatican Council. I, Dogmatic Constitution *De fide catholica, De revelatione*, can. I: DS 3026.
- (6) Decree *Optatam totius*, n. 15.
- (7) John Paul II, "Discorso ai teologi ad Altötting", November 18, 1980: AAS 73 (1981) 104; cf. also Paul VI, "Discorso ai membri della Commissione Teologica Internazionale", October 11, 1972: AAS 64 (1972) 682-683; John Paul II, "Discorso ai membri della Commissione Teologica Internazionale", October 26, 1979: AAS 71 (1979) 1428-1433.
- (8) Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 7.
- (9) Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Decl. *Mysterium Ecclesiae*. n. 2: AAS 65 (1973) 398 f.
- (10) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 10.
- (11) Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 24.
- (12) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 10.
- (13) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*. n. 25; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Decl. *Mysterium Ecclesiae*. n. 3: AAS 65 (1973) 400 f.
- (14) Cf. *Professio fidei et Iusiurandum fidelitatis*: AAS 81 (1989) 104 f.: "omnia et singula quae circa doctrinam de fide vel moribus ab eadem definitive proponuntur".
- (15) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 25; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Decl. *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, nn. 3-5: AAS 65 (1973) 400-404; *Professio fidei et Iusiurandum fidelitatis* AAS 81 (1989) 104 f.
- (16) Cf. Paul VI, Encycl. *Humanae Vitae*, n. 4: AAS 60 (1968), 483.
- (17) Cf. Vatican Council, I, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, ch. 2: DS 3005.
- (18) Cf. Code of Canon Law, cc. 360-361; Paul VI, Apost. Const. *Regimini*



*Ecclesiae Universae*, August 15, 1967, nn. 29-40: AAS 59 (1967) 879-899; John Paul II, Apost. Const. *Pastor Bonus*, June 28, 1988: AAS 80 (1988) 873-874.

(19) Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, nn. 22-23. As it is known, following upon the Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, the Holy Father gave the Congregation for Bishops the task of exploring the "Theological-Juridical Status of Episcopal Conferences".

(20) Cf. Paul VI, "Discorso ai partecipanti al Congresso internazionale sulla Teologia del Concilio Vaticano II", October 1, 1966: *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*: AAS 58 (1966) 892 f.

(21) Cf. Code of Canon Law, can. 833; *Professio fidei et Iusiurandum fidelitatis*: AAS 81 (1989) 104 f.

(22) The text of the new Profession of Faith (cf. n. 15 ) makes explicit the kind of assent called for by these teachings in these terms: "Firmiter etiam amplector et retineo. ...".

(23) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 25; Code of Canon Law, can. 752.

(24) Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 25, Â§ 1.

(25) Cf. Paul VI, Apost. Exhort. *Paterna cum benevolentia*, December 8, 1974: AAS 67 (1975) 5-23. Cf. also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Decl. *Mysterium Ecclesiae*: AAS 65 (1973) 396-408.

(26) Decl. *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 10.

(27) The notion of a "parallel magisterium" of theologians in opposition to and in competition with the magisterium of the Pastors is sometimes supported by reference to some texts in which St. Thomas Aquinas makes a distinction between the "magisterium cathedrae pastoralis" and "magisterium cathedrae magisterialis" (*Contro impugnantes*, c. 2; Quodlib. III, q. 4, a.1 (9); *In IV.Sent.* 19, 2, 2, q.3 sol. 2 ad 4). Actually, these texts do not give any support to this position for St. Thomas was absolutely certain that the right to judge in matters of doctrine was the sole responsibility of the "officium praelationis".

(28) Paul VI, Apost. Exhort. *Paterna cum benevolentia*, n. 4: AAS 67 (1975) 14-15.

(29) Cf. Paul VI, "Discorso ai membri della Commissione Teologica Internazionale", October 11, 1973: AAS 65 (1973) 555-559.

(30) Cf. John Paul II, Encyc. *Redemptor hominis*, n. 19: AAS 71 (1979) 308; "Discorso ai fedeli di Managua", March 4, 1983, n. 7: AAS 75 (1983) 723; "Discorso ai religiosi a Guatemala", March 8, 1983, n. 3: AAS 75 (1983) 746; "Discorso ai vescovi a Lima", February 2, 1985, n. 5: AAS 77 (1985) 874; "Discorso alla Conferenza dei vescovi belgi a Malines", May

18, 1985, n. 5: Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, VIII, 1 (1985) 1481;  
"Discorso ad alcuni vescovi americani in visita ad limina", October 15,  
1988, n. 6: L'Osservatore Romano, October 16, 1988. p. 4.

(31) Cf. John Paul. II, Apost. Exhort. *Familiaris consortio*, n. 5: AAS 74  
(1982) 85-86.

(32) Cf, the formula of the Council of Trent, sess. VI, cap. 9: fides "cui non  
potest subesse falsum": DS 1534; cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa  
Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3: "Possibile est enim hominem fidelem ex  
coniectura humana falsum aliquid aestimare. Sed quod ex fide falsum  
aestimet, hoc est impossibile".

(33) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 12.

(34) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 10.

(35) Decl. *Dignitatis humanae*, nn. 9-10.

(36) Ibid. n. 1.

(37) Cf. John Paul II, Apost. Const. *Sapientia Christiana*, April 15, 1979, n.  
27, 1: AAS 71 (1979) 483; Code of Canon Law, can. 812.

(38) Cf. Paul VI, Apost. Exhort. *Paterna cum benevolentia*, n. 4: AAS 67  
(1975)15.

(39) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 4.

(40) Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1

(41) Cf. Paul VI, Apost. Exhort. *Paterna cum benevolentia*, nn. 2-3: AAS  
67 (1975) 10-11.

(42) Cf. John Paul II, Post-synodal Apost. Exhort. *Christifideles laici*, nn.  
32-35: AAS 81 (1989) 451-459.

(43) St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 22, 3.