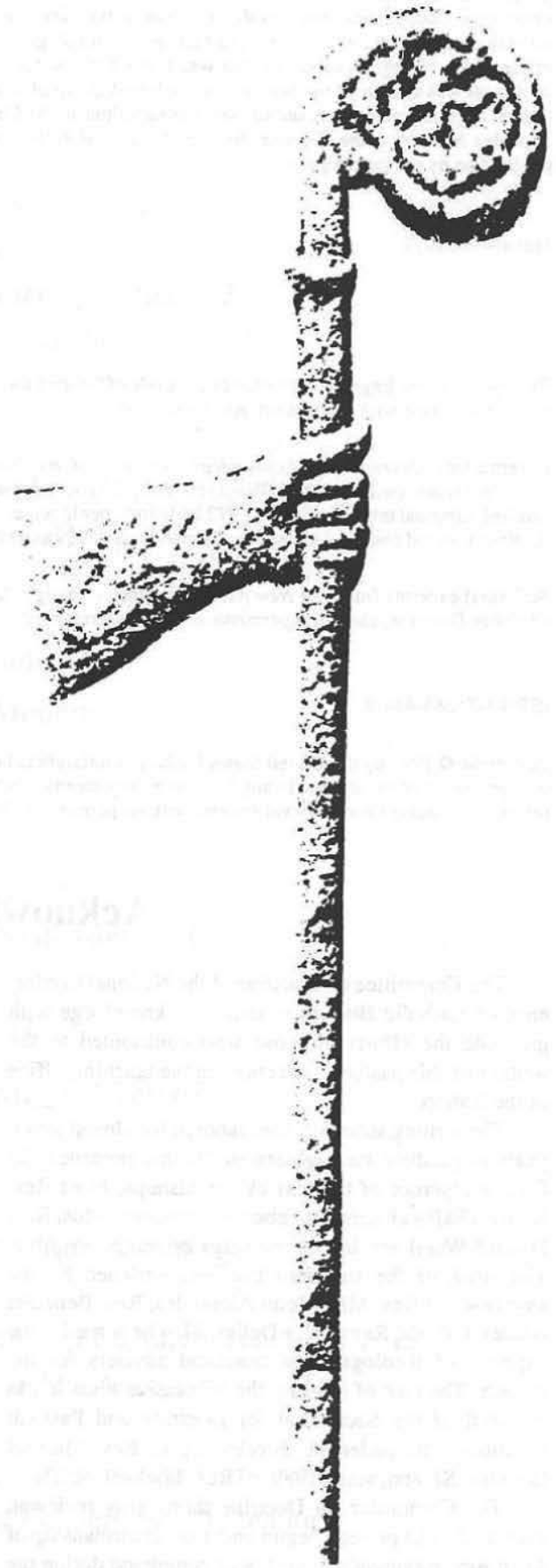

THE TEACHING MINISTRY OF THE DIOCESAN BISHOP

A Pastoral Reflection



National Conference of Catholic Bishops

In 1985, the Committee on Doctrine of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops began work on a document that would address a number of the issues facing the bishops of the United States in the exercise of their teaching office. At the 1988 general meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, during the discussion of the document *Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings between Bishops and Theologians*, it was suggested that additional reflections on the relationship between bishops and theologians become part of the Committee on Doctrine's work on the teaching office of the bishop. A subcommittee was formed to consider the issues and to draft the document. In May 1991, a draft of the document was sent to all the bishops, to a selected group of theologians, and to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In light of the many comments and suggestions submitted to the Committee on Doctrine, the text was revised into its present form. *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop: A Pastoral Reflection*, the fruition of that consultative process, is hereby authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Monsignor Robert N. Lynch
General Secretary
NCCB/USCC

January 13, 1992

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The Committee on Doctrine of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the efforts of those who contributed to the writing of this pastoral reflection on the teaching office of the bishop.

The writing subcommittee labored for almost seven years to produce the eighteen drafts that preceded the final acceptance of the text by the bishops. Most Rev. Richard Sklba chaired the subcommittee, with Most Rev. Donald Wuerl serving as the other episcopal member. The work of the subcommittee was enriched by the assistance of Rev. Msgr. John Alesandro; Rev. Benedict Ashley, OP; and Rev. Avery Dulles, SJ, who served in the capacity of theological or canonical advisers for the project. The task of drafting the successive texts fell to the staff of the Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices, first under the directorship of Rev. Michael Buckley, SJ, and, since 1989, of Rev. Michael Walsh.

The Committee on Doctrine thoroughly reviewed each draft. The project, begun under the chairmanship of Most Rev. Raymond Lessard, was completed during the tenure of Most Rev. Oscar Lipscomb as chairman of the

Committee on Doctrine. The other episcopal members of the Committee on Doctrine were Most Rev. William Levada; Most Rev. Daniel Buechlein; Most Rev. Alfred Hughes; Most Rev. Michael Murphy; and Most Rev. Donald Trautman, in addition to Bishop Lessard, Bishop Sklba, and Bishop Wuerl. The guidance, direction, and contribution of each of the members of the Committee on Doctrine deserve a special word of appreciation.

The committee twice consulted the bishops of the United States during the drafting of this text and wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the efforts of so many bishops to submit comments and suggestions that contributed greatly to the text, particularly in its final drafting stages.

Likewise, the theologians who were so generous with their time in reviewing the text and submitting helpful comments deserve a special word of thanks. One of the issues addressed in this reflection is the collaboration between bishops and theologians. Those who commented on the drafts of this text provided an example of that relationship working at its best in the service of the Church.

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Preface

In 1985, in response to requests received from bishops, the Committee on Doctrine began work on a document that would address a number of issues facing the bishops of the United States in the exercise of their teaching office. Among others, concerns included the understanding of the teaching office, some of its canonical dimensions, the difficulties confronting bishops as authoritative teachers in the United States today, and the response of bishops to difficulties posed by dissent to Church teaching. In 1988, during the NCCB discussion of our earlier document *Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings between Bishops and Theologians*, some bishops requested that additional reflections on the relationship between bishops and theologians become part of the Committee's work on the teaching office of the bishops.

While all these issues are related to the teaching office of the bishop, each of them presents a different kind of doctrinal or pastoral challenge to the bishop as teacher. To treat them together, in the judgment of the Committee, would require a document of some length. A subcommittee was formed to consider the issues and to draft the document. Its work was regularly reviewed by the Committee on Doctrine.

In May 1991, a draft of the document was sent to all the bishops and to a selected group of theologians for comment. Comments were also sought from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In light of the many suggestions and comments submitted to the Committee on Doctrine, the text was revised into its present form.

The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop: A Pastoral Reflection is the result of that process. It is presented as a self-reflection by bishops on their teaching office within the context of the Church in the United States today. It is conceived of as first and foremost a document by bishops for bishops. In its two chapters, the document invites bishops to reflect anew on the theological and ecclesial significance of their teaching office and offers some insights on the pastoral context within which bishops are called to exercise that office today. In addressing some of the issues facing bishops, the document

makes certain pastoral suggestions, which the Committee on Doctrine believes will be of assistance to the bishops.

To the extent that the issues engaged in this document are also of interest or concern to other members of the Church, the text offers ample food for reflection. Certainly, all who are engaged in preaching or teaching the gospel will find within the document doctrinal and pastoral orientations for fulfilling their responsibilities within the Church. In particular, priests, deacons, catechists, and theologians will find set forth here an understanding of the bishop's teaching office that directly touches upon their own service to the truth of the gospel.

Chapter one presents the teaching of the Church on the teaching office of the bishops, both as a college with and under the pope, and as authoritative teachers in the particular churches entrusted to their pastoral care. The basis of these doctrinal reflections is Sacred Scripture and tradition, with special emphasis on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)* (hereafter = DV) and *Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)* (hereafter = LG). Chapter two offers reflections, principally of a pastoral nature, on the cultural and ecclesial context within which bishops in the United States must exercise their teaching ministry today. It includes a presentation of the various levels of church teaching, the response appropriate to each level, and the bishop's responsibility in instances of deficient reception of that teaching. It concludes with some reflections on characteristics of episcopal teaching that seem particularly appropriate at the present moment.

It has been the conviction of the Committee on Doctrine throughout the process of writing this document that the best response to insufficient, defective, or erroneous teaching is the positive, effective, consistent, and forthright teaching of the doctrine of the Church by bishops. It is the hope of the Committee that these reflections will help and encourage bishops in the fulfillment of their teaching ministry. It is also our hope that they will be taken to heart by all members of the Church, for in various ways they participate in its teaching mission.

The Episcopal Teaching Office

Part A: Teaching and the College of Bishops

1. The Teaching Office within the Church

The eternal Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ, sent his Holy Spirit from the Father in order to reveal to us the Father's will to draw all men and women to himself (cf. DV 2). By this revelation, God gives us himself in love and invites us to a relationship of love and friendship with him.

Beyond the revelation of his presence in created things, God has spoken to human beings in words and deeds from the first moments of human existence. Even after the fall of our first parents, God continued to reveal his love by the care he lavished upon the human race. With the call of Abraham, God chose a people for himself, to be the means by which he would disclose his true nature as the One God. Through Moses and the prophets, he continued to instruct Israel in the way of truth and planted within them the seed of hope for the fullness of redemption (cf. DV 3).

Finally, "in these last days [God] spoke to us through a son . . ." (Heb 1:2). In Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father has brought to completion the revelation of himself. Jesus is God's final Word to us and God's ultimate deed of salvation. In the words and deeds of Jesus, in his signs and miracles, and, above all, in his death and resurrection and the sending of his Spirit, the Father has disclosed the fullness of his love and shown us the way to eternal life. For this reason, Christians believe that in Jesus Christ revelation has received its definitive form and that no new public revelation will occur until the Lord Jesus is manifested in glory (cf. DV 4).

The truth about God and his plan of salvation for the human race revealed in Jesus Christ is valid for all time. That is why we call it the gospel, *the Good News*. Precisely because the gospel has this definitive character, God has also provided for its preservation and its transmission to all succeeding human generations by entrusting this gospel to the apostles. By the command of Christ (cf. Mt 28:20), the apostles handed on what they had received from Christ himself. In their preaching, by the example of their own lives, and in the dispositions they made for the nascent Church, the apostles imparted the saving truth of Jesus Christ to others. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this message of salvation in Christ was faithfully preserved as a living tradition in the teaching, life, and worship of the Church and committed to writing in the books of the New Testament (cf. DV 8). The Spirit guides the Church's progress in understanding what the apostles handed on "through contemplation and study by

believers, through . . . the spiritual things which they experience, and through the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of the bishop, receive the sure charism of truth" (DV 8).

For just as the apostles received an authoritative teaching office from Christ himself, they, in turn, appointed others, the bishops, to succeed them, in order that the gospel might forever be preserved in its entirety and might be lived in all its integrity in the Church.

As the New Testament bears witness to the unfolding of the teaching mission of the Church, it is clear that the apostles understood themselves to be acting in the name and by the authority of Christ himself. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostles, with Peter as their head, received from Jesus and carried out the task of proclamation in a pre-eminent and normative way. It was to their teaching that the newly baptized devoted themselves (cf. Acts 2:42). This was the group that "[w]ith great power . . . bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33). The fulfillment of their responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel was so primary for the Twelve that they knew it was not right for them to give up preaching the word of God even to serve the physical needs of those around them (cf. Acts 6:2).

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Further, it was the apostles, acting as a collegial body, who exercised normative oversight of teaching. Thus, we see the Twelve, together with James and the elders in Jerusalem, considering and confirming the validity of the gospel preached to the Gentiles by Paul and Barnabas (cf. Acts 15; Gal 2:1-10). Paul, whose apostolic ministry was reflected in a variety of ways in the New Testament, nevertheless saw his own apostolic calling as involving both normative teaching and judgment. He could summarize his apostolic care for the original tradition with: "so we preach and so you believed" (1 Cor 15:11). He could also judge the alternative doctrine preached in Galatia as a perversion of the gospel of Christ and, as such, condemn it (cf. Gal 1:6-9).

Beyond proclamation and normative judgment, the New Testament witnesses to a prophetic dimension to the apostolic teaching office. The working out of the implications of the gospel for Christian life in the world, as well as its applications to new situations, are also essen-

tial components of caring for the gospel. Paul's advice on marriage (see 1 Cor 7:1-7) and his teaching on virginity (see 1 Cor 7:25-35) are examples of this concern that the gospel and its values inform the lived experience of believers. The later books of the New Testament give evidence of the adaptation of the gospel message, by apostolic authority, to the situation in which the expectation of the Parousia had largely receded.

While the New Testament picture may be complex, it is clear that the apostles, and, within that wider group, the Twelve, obviously exercised from the beginning the ministry of normative teaching which was established by Christ. While there were others who were not apostles but who enjoyed a particular charism of teaching, the apostolic office included from the beginning the essential task of authoritative teacher in the Church.

In the ministry of normatively teaching, judging, and applying the gospel, the College of Bishops is successor to the college of the apostles. The Church believes that the College of Bishops is destined to perdure precisely because the gospel must be proclaimed as the saving truth until the end of time. The teaching authority and ministry, to which the contemporary Church applies the term "magisterium,"¹ takes its origin and its purpose from this mission of announcing the gospel and caring for its truth. This ministry

... will continue to the end of the world (see Mt 28:20), since the gospel which is to be handed on by them is for all time the principle of all life for the church. For this reason the apostles, within this hierarchically structured society, took care to arrange for the appointment of successors" (LG 20).

However one reconstructs the early decades and the evolution of the episcopate, the body of those charged by office with the governance and teaching of the Church succeeds to the teaching position held by the apostolic college, which Cyprian in the third century called "the college of their fellow bishops."² There are some elements in the original apostolic charism — such as being eyewitnesses to the risen Lord — that episcopal consecration cannot transmit. But the College of Bishops inherits the teaching office that the apostolic college once carried. Thus, the Second Vatican Council repeatedly taught:

However, the order of bishops, which succeeds the college of the apostles in teaching authority and pastoral government, and indeed in which the apostolic body continues to exist without interruption, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal church, provided it remains united with its head, the Roman pontiff, and never without its head" (LG 22).

Bishops as such, in union with the Roman Pontiff, have the duty both to see that God's self-revelation in Christ is given voice in every culture and to safeguard the authenticity of any representation of this revelation. In this ministry, they summon the Christian community to respond in living faith, the graced and appropriate response to this proclamation.

Revealed truth is grasped precisely as revealed only when its content is seen as salvific. So one can never understand the teaching of the Church about the episcopal office unless this teaching is perceived as saving knowledge. The pragmatic reduction of the bishops to necessary functionaries, to characteristic figures in the Church over its history — some good, some bad, some mediocre, but of proven necessity for good government — may allow Catholics to accept this ministry as a variation of the common human need for organization and authority. It will never allow them to understand its distinctively Christian dimensions or its salvific import within the Body of Christ. Such a reduction would admit that the episcopate is useful without perceiving why it is actually part of the saving work of God in history.

The primary question for any Catholic teaching always involves salvation. How, then, does the doctrine of the Church on the episcopate touch upon eternal life? What salvific difference does it make?

2. The Character and Necessity of the Teaching Office

The proclamation of the gospel over centuries and within diverse cultures has continually demanded its transposition into diverse languages and conceptual structures. The introduction of Hellenistic philosophical terms, for example, enabled the Church to deepen and expand its understanding of the gospel and to evangelize the Greco-Roman world. The Nicene Creed does not read like the New Testament nor should it be expected to. The critical question for the Church was not whether a creed literally repeated the New Testament, but whether it was true to the New Testament. The teaching of Vatican I on the relationship between faith and reason, *Dei Filius*, does not read like the Epistle to the Romans, but the concern of the Church in the nineteenth century was to safeguard the doctrine asserted by Romans

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that God can be known from created reality. Nor does Vatican II speak the same language as Sacred Scripture or Vatican I. If the Church did not ceaselessly transpose the gospel into contemporary idiom, it could not teach. The inculturation of the gospel demands its translation into new languages, new images or concepts, and new modes of living and worship. Faith, the acceptance of

God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ as absolute, is not a static reality. This acceptance, made possible by the transforming Spirit and the Church's preaching of the gospel, bears all the marks of a living reality. Faith can develop, but it can also decline.

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There is no contact with the past that does not inevitably involve some transposition. Even the literal and fundamentalistic repetition of scriptural words cannot shelter a first-century document from a twentieth-century translation and transposition. To repeat "justice" from Romans can be misleading in a culture in which this word is given a very different meaning. Of course, there will be classic texts and privileged formulae in which the faith of the Church is perennially expressed and handed on to a new generation. These constitute an indispensable part of the historical continuity of the Church, but even these normative texts need continual explanation as they are read or repeated in later centuries.³

Every effort to evangelize another culture will, then, inescapably introduce the message of the gospel into another way of understanding and articulation. But the development of doctrine is not an effect simply of inculturation. Within a single culture, new questions arise for the whole Church, further implications are perceived, and new applications demanded. All of these necessitate a growth in the understanding of what has been handed down. As the social and cultural situation of believers changes, so is it necessary to situate this timeless revelation within the modes of a new civilization. As questions, implications, and applications arise, it is necessary to understand revelation at a deeper level. But in doing this, Christian individuals and groups risk being exposed to partial or false articulations of the faith. Absolute claims of truth and of the obedience of faith for such false or partial articulations lie at the very core of heterodoxy and sectarianism. How, then, may one discriminate between authentic Christian doctrine and error?

If the common faith of the Church is to survive from one generation to the next, the Church must possess the internal resources to distinguish for the entire community what is true from what is false in these translations and developments of the gospel message. The Church must be able to formulate a judgment in such a way that authentic faith can be continuously offered in a contemporary idiom. This judgment is part of the teaching ministry of the College of Bishops. It is a necessary condition

that the word of God be continued in its authentic meaning into every culture and into every century.

Such a ministry entails a twofold responsibility before God: In the name of Christ and the Church, the magisterium must declare authoritatively the faith of the Church; it must also judge whether what is presented as the content of faith is accurate.

These two responsibilities, intrinsic to episcopal teaching, distinguish such "teaching" from the more ordinary American use of this term. Like teachers all over the world, the bishops are entrusted with the communication of knowledge and the evoking of virtues. Thus, they foster "the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8) and those habits of Christian life by which this revelation can be grasped and realized in daily living. But in addition to this knowledge and these virtues, there are two other dimensions to "teacher" when predicated of the College of Bishops: The bishops are to determine authoritatively the correct interpretation of the Scripture and tradition committed to the Church, as no other teachers do about the subject matter committed to them; and they are to judge for the Church the accuracy of the presentation of this revelation by others.

These basic responsibilities of their teaching ministry engage the bishops in five interrelated functions. By the mandate and in the name of Christ, the bishops are charged with (1) the proclamation of the gospel to the world; (2) the fostering of the gospel within the habits and life of the Christian community; (3) the prophetic application of the gospel to new issues; (4) the normative interpretation of the meaning of the gospel; and (5) the authoritative judgment of the interpretations advanced by others.

To teach well, the bishops themselves must know the Scriptures and be knowledgeable in Catholic theology. There is an inescapable element of study and scholarship demanded by episcopal ministry.

At the heart of all of the normative teaching of the Church is the indwelling Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can make possible a ministry to the world that asks for faith and offers genuine hope. Only the indwelling Holy Spirit, then, can make the ministry of the College of Bishops possible. Without this ministry empowered by the Spirit, the Church could not ask human beings to respond in faith to the word of salvation.

The pope and the bishops are empowered to teach not by their personal gifts, but by the Holy Spirit given in ordination. Only within the command of Christ to preach the gospel — with all of the continual challenge to interpre-

tation and application inherent in that command—can this ministry of the bishops be understood. The bishops are called to embody and to effect the Church's consistent witness to Christ in their care for orthodoxy. The magisterium is to continue and to serve the presence of the teaching Christ. Although the bishops must use the disciplines of theology and philosophy as well as personal religious insights in their teaching, they are to teach finally not theology, not philosophy, and not their personal religious insights, but the unchanging faith of the Church as it is to be understood and lived today.

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To articulate effectively the faith of the Church, the pope and the bishops must be personally well-informed about this life in faith of the People of God. It is not enough for bishops of the Church to examine their consciences, to pray, to consult advisors, and to recall what was once learned in early theological studies—though all of these are obviously essential. To teach well, the bishops themselves must know the Scriptures and be knowledgeable in Catholic theology. There is an inescapable element of study and scholarship demanded by episcopal ministry.

Bishops also need to know the faith of the Christian community: how believers throughout the ages, graced by the Holy Spirit, have understood and appropriated the truth that has been handed on, the *sensus fidelium*. Episcopal ordination does not of itself confer the knowledge that can be gained only by close contact with the life of faith of the Christian community. The personal study of the bishops and their fidelity to the Catholic tradition permit them to fulfill this official responsibility of speaking authoritatively to the Church for the Church.

At ecumenical councils, from Nicea through Vatican II, the bishops have usually drawn on the specialized knowledge of scholars and have taken into account the sense of the faithful. So likewise popes, before issuing dogmatic definitions such as those of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950), have consulted their fellow bishops and have sought out the opinions of theologians and the corporate beliefs of the People of God. In ascertaining the *sensus fidelium*, the beliefs of God's people throughout the history of the Church until the present time must be taken into account. These practices are based on the conviction that, when the pastors and the faithful are of one mind concerning the content of revelation, "the universal body of the faithful, who have received the anointing of the Holy One

(cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), cannot be mistaken in belief" (LG 12).

On another level, in several recent pastoral letters that present the social doctrine of the Church with prudential applications to contemporary issues, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has made fruitful use of official teaching documents, theological research, and the counsel of knowledgeable lay persons. Because of the particular nature of those documents, dealing as they do with contingent social issues, it seemed appropriate to publish successive drafts and revise them in the light of additional insights.

Generally speaking, then, individual bishops and groups of bishops, in teaching the faith and in applying it to concrete situations, draw on the resources of the Holy See, confer with their fellow bishops, consult theological experts, and seek out the sense of the faithful. In the last analysis, however, the authority of the teaching does not stem from prior consultation. By virtue of his ordination, and on condition that he remains in hierarchical communion with the college and its head, the Bishop of Rome, the diocesan bishop teaches with personal authority. His relationship of communion with the pope and the other bishops gives assurance that his teaching is consonant with the "faith that comes from the apostles" (*Eucharistic Prayer No. 1*).

3. The Teaching Ministry as Grace and Vocation

The teaching office of the bishops is part of God's gracious gift to the Church so that this community of human beings may continue in radical fidelity to the teaching Christ. This fidelity makes possible the meaning and witness of the whole Church, and the preservation and proclamation of this meaning weigh upon the bishops as a profound responsibility.

There are bishops because God cares for what is taught in the Church; there is a Church with its teaching ministry because Christ's presence and mission continue in our own time in the community formed by the Holy Spirit. There is a mission of the Son of God and of the Holy Spirit to all human life because God wills to be with us both in our historical, tangible lives and in the depths of human subjectivity. In short, there are bishops, called into this service to the Church, so that the triune God may be with the People of God and be continually manifested to the world through the Church. The teaching ministry of the bishops derives its existence and its meaning only as the servant of the self-communication and the self-revelation of the Father in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

Accordingly, Ignatius of Antioch could write to the Ephesians in the first decade of the second century:

I am taking this opportunity to exhort you to live in harmony with the mind of God. Surely, Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, for his part is the mind of the Father, just as the bishops, though appointed throughout this vast wide earth, represent for their part the mind of Jesus Christ. Hence it is proper for you to act in

agreement with the mind of the bishop.⁴

The authoritative teaching ministry of the bishops is charged with this sacred responsibility: that the Church keep faith until the end of time with the gospel, for example, with what the Father through the Spirit has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ. The care of the bishops is that the Church remain faithful to the truth of Christ. "To this mystery we owe our faith," wrote Ignatius of Antioch to the Magnesians, "and because of it we submit to sufferings to prove ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ, our only Teacher."⁵

Confronting both the massive demands of the sacred responsibility that is his and the problematic situation in which he is called upon to exercise this ministry, the bishop must bear in mind that he engages in this service to the Church because of the call of Christ and by the consecration of the Holy Spirit: "The bishops, accordingly, through the holy Spirit who has been given to them, have been made true and authentic (*authentici*) teachers of the faith, pontiffs and pastors" (*Christus Dominus* [= CD] 2). This ministry to the Church and to the world is religious, not simply because its subject is religious, but because the call to this service is the call of God. God wills the grace of divine revelation and its indefectible word to be given to the world over the centuries. And from the beginning, the call of Christ is to ordinary human beings for a mission that is beyond their powers.

Bishops are sacramentally ordained to care for this mission to which the Church has been summoned, "the never-ending work of Christ, the eternal pastor" (CD 2). Whatever be the difficulties the bishop must encounter or the sense of profound inadequacy he must carry to the accomplishment of his task, the source of his strength and the definition of his office lie with God.

The episcopate, then, must be seen as both a grace and a vocation. The episcopate is essentially a *religious* vocation, a call within the Church, rather than a role or a career whose meaning would be intelligible outside of this context. It is also a grace, a gift of God, one realization of that outpouring of the Spirit to a world that Christ would not leave orphan.⁶

4. Collegiality and Communion

The individual bishop has a unique and authoritative role in teaching the faith of the Catholic Church in the particular church that is given to his care. The teaching office of the bishop is a constitutive element of each of the particular churches that make up the universal Church. Even as he fulfills his irreplaceable function as teacher for the local church, however, the bishop embodies that special dynamic of ecclesial communion which finds its expression in the College of Bishops.

As the bishops draw upon the faith of the Church, so they draw upon one another for the verification of their teaching. In our age of almost instant communication, the unity of the bishops' teaching can be greatly enhanced.

Individual bishops have greater and more rapid access to their brother bishops as well as to the Holy See in the process of discernment and discussion. The unity of teaching can be thus greatly enriched by the capacities for communication in our own age. This development, however, can be harmful if it leads bishops to abdicate their own inherent teaching authority in a concession toward an excessive centralization or to defer to the statements of a regional body without personal commitment or assent. If teaching is done only at the regional or universal level, the Church may be weakened by its loss of the varied contributions of individual bishops and the churches they serve.

"To this mystery we owe our faith . . . and because of it we submit to sufferings to prove ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ, our only Teacher."

— Ignatius of Antioch

The College of Bishops should be of immense support to the teaching of the individual bishop. A manifest continuity in Catholic teaching results when the position of one bishop is confirmed by the teaching of his brother bishops. Moral unity in teaching has been normally a sign of its authority.

The primary realization of the College of Bishops is, of course, the entire episcopate of the world together with the successor of Peter, whether that fullness of collegiality be expressed through an ecumenical council or "dispersed throughout the world, but maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter" (LG 25; cf. *Code of Canon Law* [= CIC], c. 749.2). Throughout the long history of the Church, other manifestations of joint episcopal teaching have arisen. One of its earliest and principal expressions was soon defined by regional circumstances:

various churches, founded in various places by the apostles and by their successors, have in the course of time become joined together into several groups, organically united . . . (LG 23).

New questions were raised as the Church became established in diverse regions of the world, when it came into contact with new civilizations and cultures. Differences about critical issues of faith arose within the believing community, either about the common meaning that held the community together or about a mode of expression by which this would be communicated. It fell to the bishops in synods and particular councils not only to decide what was and is the content of the true faith, but also what verbal expression might best preserve this truth and serve its communication within the community.

In the course of time, the Church came to recognize that

... bishops in communion with the head and members of the college, whether as individuals or gathered in conferences of bishops or in particular councils, are authentic teachers and instructors of the faith for the faithful entrusted to their care ... (CIC, c. 753).

The ancient canons of Nicea and of Chalcedon had dictated that the bishops of a region meet twice a year for the discussion of doctrinal and pastoral issues (see Nicea, c. 5; Chalcedon, c. 19). The Second Vatican Council noted that modern episcopal conferences were brought into being by that divine providence, which from the origin of the Church had led particular churches to join together in a multiplicity of associations. Just as this providence lay at the origin and character of the ancient patriarchates, so "in a similar way episcopal conferences can today make a manifold and fruitful contribution to the concrete application of the spirit of collegiality" (LG 23). The Council defined these episcopal conferences as

... a kind of assembly in which the bishops of some nation or region discharge their pastoral office in collaboration, the better to promote the good which the church offers to people, and especially through forms and methods of apostolate carefully designed to meet contemporary conditions" (CD 38.1).

This collegial spirit, whether in its fullest form of the entire College of Bishops with the pope as its head or in one of its partial forms of particular councils or national conferences, inspires structures within which the individual bishop carries out the mandate of his office.⁷

Part B: The Diocesan Bishop as Teacher

Section One: Teaching Role of the Individual Diocesan Bishop

1. Context of the Teaching of the Diocesan Bishop

In the light of the teaching obligations of the Church and the service given to this responsibility by the College of Bishops, the role and function of the individual bishop can be seen more clearly. A bishop's teaching and his individual witness are authoritative only when he teaches in communion with the College of Bishops under the primacy of the pope.

In the ministry of the bishop, continuity is absolutely essential both to credible witness and to teaching. The individual diocesan bishop finds continuity with the gospel message in his unity with the pope and the College of Bishops throughout the ages. Paul himself thought such communion essential to make sure that the course he was pursuing was not in vain (cf. Gal 2:2). Unlike Paul, however, the teaching of the individual bishop does not

result from a personal revelation. It issues from his relationship with the whole Church whose faith he articulates. When he maintains this relationship of communion, it in turn gives the individual bishop the assurance he

The episcopate, then, must be seen as both a grace and a vocation.

needs to proclaim authoritatively the truth of salvation in ways appropriate to his times. In this sense, the teaching of each bishop takes on its particular importance: He teaches as the authoritative voice of the local church in which the universal Church is rendered present in a particular place. Thus, the bishop's voice echoes the teaching of the entire Church.

Thus, the diocesan bishop shares in the protection of the Spirit that accompanies the ordinary magisterium of the Church. His teaching makes it possible for the faithful to hear the truth of Christ and to maintain a single communion with their brothers and sisters both with the Church of their own times and with prior generations back to the Apostolic Church. He does this in his personal teaching and preaching, in his encouragement of the teaching of others, and in his care for the accuracy with which the content of Catholic faith is represented.

2. Preaching the Faith

Repeatedly and solemnly, the Church has insisted that the teaching of the bishop finds its most significant expression in his preaching of the gospel.⁸ In this ministry, the bishops realize the nature of their teaching office in its purest form as the public voice for the faith (*fidei praecones*). As bishops, they share in the authority of Christ (*doctores authentici seu auctoritate Christi praediti*). In this ministry, they invite others into the community of disciples. They also offer to those persons committed to their pastoral care a growing understanding of the faith that should be believed and lived. Such an increase in the understanding of faith will inevitably lead to a richer spirituality for which the bishop also is a teacher and guide in his diocese. The teaching of the bishop, in whatever form it takes, draws from "... the treasury of revelation things new and old (see Mt 13:52), they make it bear fruit and they vigilantly ward off errors that are threatening their flock (see 2 Tm 4:1-4)" (LG 25). The bishop, then, is charged with fostering the truth of the revelation of Christ, either directly or through those commissioned to work with him in this ministry. His primary concern is that the Church's faith remain true to what God has done in Christ, that it not be distorted in its rearticulations and explanations. He must also be concerned that the faith not be abstract. Doctrinal principles concerning social affairs or moral conduct, for example, must be applied to the concrete circumstances of his diocese (cf. *Directory on the*

Pastoral Ministry of Bishops [= *Directory*], 56). The bishop must show this concern for teaching primarily in his own ministry to the Word, especially in his preaching.

3. Encouragement and Supervision of the Trustworthy Presentation of the Faith

The original term for the bishop, *episkopos*, is literally translated “overseer,” and in the Pauline letters, this supervisory task was given great emphasis. Every bishop coming out of the tradition of the primitive Christian community must accept as his own the final charge given to Timothy: “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you” (1 Tm 6:20). This same care for the supervision of authentic doctrine permeated the early Church of the Fathers. “Be watchful,” wrote Ignatius of Antioch to Polycarp, “because you have received a spirit that does not slumber” (1.3). Just as the Church’s faith had been the original impetus behind both preaching and theology,

A bishop’s teaching and his individual witness are authoritative only when he teaches in communion with the College of Bishops under the primacy of the pope.

so its fidelity demanded that it evaluate the accuracy of new developments and understandings. For this reason, it is the duty of the bishop “to supervise the entire ministry of the word in regard to the flock committed to his care” (*Directory*, 65; CIC, cc. 386.1, 756.2). He does this both by seeing that those who preach the gospel are well prepared for this ministry and by correcting those who preach false doctrine. In this way, the bishop aids the Church to realize the promise of Christ: “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31-32).

As indicated previously, these judgments about the authenticity of doctrine are not made by the individual bishop in isolation. He is a teacher of the faith, but the verification of his teaching stems from his communion with the pope and his fellow bishops and with the faith of the whole Church. In this union, each bishop has the duty to teach the faith in his diocese, conscious that his doctrine is not simply his own (cf. Jn 7:16). In this union, each bishop has the responsibility to supervise the proclamation of the faith in his diocese, conscious that, to render judgment, he must be in communion with the college so as to secure its collective wisdom and support. Obviously, it is important for him to invite the assistance of theologians (cf. *Directory*, 63).

Supervision should not carry an overtone that is

predominantly negative. Even when correction is necessary, it can be constructive. The Letters to Timothy were meant to encourage his teaching: “[P]roclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching” (2 Tm 4:2). This encouragement given to Timothy is akin to the more general encouragement given in the early decades of the Church to those possessing *charismata* within the Church: “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation . . .” (Rom 12:6-8). The diocesan bishop is similarly charged to encourage and support these gifts of teaching, exhortation, service, and prophecy, as well as the various theological disciplines—all of which, in their turn, surround and support his teaching in the name of Christ and the Church.

The teaching ministry of the diocesan bishop, then, serves the revelation of God, either directly in his own activity or in the encouragement he gives for its accurate presentation by others “so that the whole of Christian doctrine is imparted to all” (CIC, c. 386.1). His ministry shares in the Church’s prophetic ministry to the gospel, a service for which the Holy Spirit empowers the bishop to fulfill this enormous responsibility. The life and future of the Church to no small extent depend upon his care for this mission.

Section Two: The Diocesan Bishop as Moderator of the Ministry of the Word

For the sake of the community, the Church chooses and ordains those who will carry out this ministry of teaching in its name. Bishops, who have the fullness of the sacrament of order, have the responsibility to teach not only as witnesses of the faith of the community, but by the authority that comes to them from Christ himself. This charge the bishops cannot morally evade, but they can share it with others. In fact, the nature of the Church and of the task itself necessitates that it be shared widely.

1. Priests and Deacons of the Diocese

First among those who assist the bishops in their ministry of teaching are those ordained for this very purpose, the priests. Both religious and diocesan priests are designated by the Church to cooperate with the bishop and, in this way, to speak in the name of the Church (cf. CD 28-30, 34, 35). Like the bishop, the priest is so configured to Christ through ordination that he is able to “act in the person of Christ, the Head” (see *Presbyterorum Ordinis* [= PO], 2; LG 28). As pastors and teachers officially sent by the bishop, they preach the gospel.

In the individual local congregations of the faithful in a certain sense they make the bishop present and they are united with him in a spirit of trust and generosity; and

in accordance with their position they undertake his duties and his concern and carry these out with daily dedication" (LG 28; see also PO 4, especially footnote 4).

As is true for the bishops, the principal task and embodiment of the teaching ministry of priests lies in their preaching of the gospel (see PO 4). The priest must share the bishop's concern for the authentic teaching of the faith and morals. He is called to exhibit that concern by his manner of preaching, teaching, and counselling. He needs to ensure that those entrusted to his care receive sound teaching and moral guidance in parish religious education programs and other forms of pastoral ministry.

The restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Latin Church, and its reemphasis in the Eastern Churches, has renewed an order of sacramental ministers. They along with transitional deacons, assist the teaching office of the bishops by proclaiming the word to the faithful, instructing and exhorting the people (cf. LG 29).

2. Shared Teaching Ministries

Also joined with the bishop in his ministry are those religious and laity who are appointed to be teachers of the faith. By the call of the bishop, these Christians share his responsibility and cooperate in his teaching office. This ministry includes school teachers of religion and catechists who actively serve the Word not only by virtue of their baptism and confirmation, but also in the name of the Church because of their designation by the bishop (cf. CIC, c. 759).

The bishop's care for the selection of those who exercise this ministry as well as for their formation, training, and religious education is but one of the ways in which he both teaches and exercises pastoral supervision over the ministry of the word in his diocese. The *Code of Canon Law*, following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, places a particular emphasis on this responsibility of the diocesan bishop to supervise preaching (see cc. 386.1, 756.2), catechesis (see cc. 773, 775), religious instruction in schools (see cc. 804.2, 805), and the explanations of the faith through the social means of communication (see c. 823).

One important way in which the bishop exercises his supervisory function in these areas is through the approval of texts. Catechisms require the *imprimatur* for publication. Other catechetical materials or

... [b]ooks which treat questions of sacred scripture, theology, canon law, church history or which deal with religious or moral disciplines cannot be employed as the textbooks on which instruction is based in elementary, middle or higher schools unless they are published with the approval of the competent ecclesiastical authority or subsequently approved by it (c. 827.2).

Canon 827.3 recommends that books dealing with the above subject matter be submitted for judgment, even if they are not used as textbooks.

What is asked from all religious educators is the presentation of the faith of the Church to those who seek the truth of salvation from the Church. This fundamental concern is reflected in its legislation: "The mystery of Christ is to be expounded completely and faithfully in the ministry of the word, which ought to be based upon sacred scripture, tradition, liturgy, the magisterium, and the life of the Church" (c. 760). The *object* of all of these distinct activities is the mystery of Christ himself. The *purpose* of this ministry is that all may come to believe in him and to live lives that are a realization of his word. The *sources* from which this self-revelation of God is drawn are Scripture and the living tradition of the Church, especially as these have been articulated in the teaching of the magisterium. It is essential that what is taught be faithful to the reality of Christ as it is contained in these sources. Those who are called into such a pastoral ministry offer their efforts for the continuation into their own times of the apostolic tradition of the Church.

Not all teaching in the Church is by designation of the bishop. Much teaching in the Church comes out of the general mission given in baptism and confirmation and by the charismatic gifts of the Spirit (see LG 11, 12). Such teaching, for example, the instruction of children by parents as the primary educators in the faith,⁹ is neither a participation in the mission of the clergy nor a participation in the responsibility of the bishop, although like all teaching in the Church it is subject to his guidance. This kind of teaching in the Church — but not in the name of the Church — has been recognized and fostered from the earliest times because it is crucial to the life of the Church.

In exercising his teaching mission and office, the individual bishop is called upon to assess not only his own teaching but also that which is done in his name and with his authority. . . .

Because this document is dealing with the teaching mission of the diocesan bishop, its concentration would be dissipated by attempting to give an adequate description of the nature and diversity of other forms of teaching in the Church. Let it suffice to note here that these are both present and essential to the Church.

In exercising his teaching mission and office, the individual bishop is called upon to assess not only his own teaching but also that which is done in his name and with his authority — as well as any teaching that presents the doctrine of the Church. Thus, the bishop's supervision, both to encourage and to correct, extends in one form or another to all presentations of Catholic faith. His is an overarching responsibility to see that the Christian

faith is accurately presented to the faithful and to the world. In every case, the bishop is called to encourage and to evaluate the accurate presentation of Catholic doctrine. In all of the legislation of the Church that bears upon the bishops' supervision of doctrine, the care of the Church is that the mystery of Christ be presented in all of its fullness and in fidelity to the apostolic tradition of the Christian community.

Section Three: Bishops and Theologians

1. Collaboration between Bishops and Theologians

From its earliest centuries, the Church has experienced the need for that systematic reflection upon its faith that is called *theology*. The term itself has passed through a variety of related meanings. Only after the Church passed into its second millennium, did theology come to be understood as it is today, that is, as an intellectual discipline, a systematic investigation, an organized body of knowledge. As cultural matrices have changed, so have the structure and expectations of theology. Over various centuries, emphases have been placed upon different aspects of the general theological enterprise. A theme that runs through this diversity and provides a unity of purpose within its pluralism is the classic definition of Anselm: faith seeking understanding.¹⁰ Theology is neither preaching nor catechetics; it is a faith-inspired, disciplined reflection upon the realities that both preaching and catechetics present.

The effort of Catholic theology is multiple: to discover and express what is and has been believed in the life of the Christian community; to inquire into the events that constitute its grounding data; and to explore creatively the reality that faith presents to the reflecting Christian mind and its relationship to human culture in general.¹¹ Catholic theology is both the recovery of the inexhaustible tradition out of which it comes and the discovery of new meanings, new dimensions of truth, new realizations in its mediation between its foundational faith and culture. Catholic theology also purifies statements, howsoever true, from misunderstandings, misleading expressions, irrationality, and excessive dependence upon the metaphors and myths of a particular culture. A vital theology mediates between faith and culture in a dialogue, which brings out of both their inherent religious challenge, promise, and depth.

The Church encourages theology and theologians because "[t]he service of doctrine, implying as it does the believer's search for an understanding of the faith, i.e., theology, is . . . something indispensable for the Church" (*Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* [= *Instruction*], 1). Such understanding will always be inadequate and incomplete, but some understanding is ineluctably present even in the most rudimentary faith. *Theology*, in the usual, professional sense of that word, is

a continuation on a more scholarly and systematic level of the fundamental "obedience of faith," which initiates all Christian life. Faith functions as foundational experience for the reflections of theology, and theology has, in turn, enabled Christians to purify and deepen their understanding of the faith, "religion using theology and theology using religion."¹²

The Church cannot exist without the office of bishop nor thrive without the sound scholarship of the theologian. Bishops and theologians are in a collaborative relationship (cf. *Instruction*, 21ff). Bishops benefit from the work of theologians, while theologians gain a deeper understanding of revelation under the guidance of the magisterium. The ministry of bishops and the service rendered by theologians entail a mutual respect and support.

Both bishops and theologians teach, but they teach in different ways. Bishops teach as pastors in the name of Christ and the Church. Theologians can be designated to share in this ministry when they receive the canonical mandate to teach (see CIC, c. 812; *Instruction*, 22). But there is only one authoritative ecclesiastical magisterium that can call for the obedience of faith or religious assent of mind and will, and this pertains to the office of bishops. Their authority comes from Christ through sacramental ordination and hierarchical communion. The value of theologians' work stems from their adherence to the doctrine of the Church and from their scholarly competence. The responsibility of bishops, here as elsewhere, is to see that what is being presented as Catholic faith is accurately such. Both bishops and theologians serve the word of God with its salvific truth and the community of the Church, which adheres to it (cf. *Instruction*, 21).

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The bishop is to teach the faith of the Church, its basic understanding of the gospel of Christ; the theologian is to teach theology, the disciplined extension of this understanding through philosophic, scientific, and cultural concepts or methods. Faith and theology are never in fact separated. For theology is a reflection upon the faith the bishop proclaims, and much of the teaching of the faith by bishops derives its conceptual and linguistic forms from the work of theologians. Nevertheless, it is one thing to teach the faith and another to do theological inquiry and discussion. The bishop as a bishop, that is, precisely because of the commission he receives from Christ in episcopal ordination, is entitled to be heard as the authoritative teacher in the particular church of which he is pastor and as a member of the College of Bishops. The theologian gains credibility according to the importance of the issues he explores and the strength of his arguments.

“Even when collaboration takes place under the best conditions, the possibility cannot be excluded that tensions may arise between the theologian and the Magisterium” (*Instruction*, 25). A theologian’s fundamental commitments to the truth and to communion with the Church, to further scholarly inquiry and dialogue, and to openness to the possibility of correction or revision of an opinion are indispensable when such tensions do arise, for it is precisely these commitments that prevent tensions from becoming hostilities. The perspective presented by the

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in fact separated.***

Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (25-31), deserves particular emphasis in this regard. Theologians “who might have serious difficulties, for reasons which appear to [them] well-founded, in accepting a non-irreformable magisterial teaching” (*Instruction*, 28) deserve special pastoral attention from the bishop in view of the important service they render to the bishop in his teaching office. But they must also seek in peace and charity to be in harmony with the bishop, and they must recognize that all Catholic theology is done within the Church, not apart from it. It was for this reason, namely, that cooperation between bishops and theologians be fostered and that problems not become intractable nor disputes become dissent, that the bishops of the United States, in June 1989, approved *Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings between Bishops and Theologians*.¹³

2. Freedom of Theological Inquiry

“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 Pt 3:15) to give an accounting for their hope to those who ask it” (*Instruction*, 6). There is within the Church a lawful freedom of scholarly inquiry, debate, and speculation that ultimately serves the magisterium and the Church at large (see *Gaudium et Spes* [= GS] 10; 62; CIC, c. 218). Within the framework of acceptance of church teaching, there is broad freedom for exploration and critique. The underlying assumptions and explicit formulations of doctrine are subject to investigation, to questions about their meaning or their doctrinal and pastoral implications, to comparison with other doctrines, to the study of their historical and ecclesial context, to translation into diverse cultural categories, and to correlation with knowledge from other branches of human and scientific inquiry (see GS 44, 62; cf. *Instruction*, 10). Such critical analyses or probing for context and meaning or even persistent questioning of the presuppositions, assertions, and formulations of magisterial statements enable the Church to achieve greater clarity in its teaching; to apply it in an appropriate manner to Christian life; to

respond to new problems and possibilities as they arise; and to proclaim the essential truth of the gospel in a manner that is appropriately adapted to the requirements of a culture or to the needs of the times (cf. *Instruction*, 24). Scholars carry on this work as believing members of the Church, faithful to its magisterium. They are also bound by the methodological requirements of their particular theological discipline, and they are subject to the critique of their peers (cf. *Instruction*, 9, 11; *Doctrinal Responsibilities*, p. 5). The vitality of Catholic theology and its fidelity to Sacred Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium, are strengthened by the vigorous exercise of peer review, critique, and dialogue within the theological disciplines. These necessary functions in theological discourse cannot be suspended or eliminated without debilitating consequences for theology itself.

Acceptance of church teaching, far from limiting scholarly investigation, actually fosters it, for the acceptance itself establishes a fundamental conviction on the basis of which one can confidently address further questions a particular doctrine may pose.

3. Forums for Theological Discussion

The Church has in its long history attempted to preserve an arena for the discussions among theologians and for theological investigation that ranges freely over many subjects and even challenges through careful argument the teaching of the Church to achieve greater accuracy and depth. In such a discussion, prolonged perhaps over many years, the worth of a private theological opinion is tested. Such testing is a crucial function of theologians themselves as they review, analyze, and criticize one another’s ideas and writings. It is here, in the first instance, that an individual’s ideas and opinions ought to stand or fall. Theological faculties, Catholic universities, professional societies, learned journals, books, and monographs have been the customary setting for such discussion.

Given the collaborative relationship between the magisterium and theology, bishops themselves ought to foster dialogue between themselves and theologians. Whether this occurs on a diocesan or regional level, such dialogues ought to encourage theological discussion of the many issues facing the Church and its mission in today’s world. Such dialogues could provide a forum for discussion of issues that may be of particular importance for the life of the Church or of issues over which theologians may be in disagreement among themselves. Such dialogues could invite the participation of the distinct schools and perspectives in theology, thereby assuring a hearing for a variety of views. Such forums could also provide an opportunity for theologians to present to bishops persistent difficulties they may have with the content, argumentation, or presentation of the teaching of the magisterium (cf. *Instruction*, 30). Diocesan or regional dialogues between bishops and theologians give expression to their collaborative relationship in the service of the truth of the gospel, foster trust, and provide the bishops with an effective means of theological consultation.

Pastoral Observations on the Teaching Office of the Diocesan Bishop

Introduction

The bishop teaches the doctrine of the Church in response to the vocation and grace he has received from Christ, in whose name he summons the members of the Church to faith. He teaches in communion with the pope and the College of Bishops, a bond that authenticates his teaching in the name of Christ. Because the authority and authenticity of the bishop's teaching come from Christ, his teaching calls for acceptance on the part of the faithful. These are fundamental truths about episcopal office in the Church, valid for all time and in every particular church where there is a bishop in communion with the pope and his brother bishops.

The individual diocesan bishop, however, exercises his ministry also in a particular time and in a particular place, and the characteristics and contingent realities of a time and place determine in part the pastoral context within which he must fulfill his office of teaching. This chapter intends to address some of the realities of our present day that may have a profound impact on the effectiveness of episcopal teaching. Any attempt to describe a pastoral context as rich and divergent as that of the contemporary United States must be selective. The issues addressed in this chapter have been chosen because of their timeliness or because of requests received from bishops.

Section One: Observations on Cultural Factors Affecting the Teaching of the Bishop

While the Catholic Church in the United States is itself multiethnic, multicultural, and multiracial, the Church lives its life within the context of that culture that predominates in the nation. This culture presents many resources that support the teaching ministry of the bishop. Yet, these same dimensions of the culture may present significant challenges to that teaching.

From the time of de Tocqueville to the latest Gallup poll, American culture has displayed a persistent religious dimension. Historically, the colonization of North America was driven at least in part by religious factors such as the desire to spread the gospel or the desire for freedom from religious persecution. The explicit acknowledgment of God-given human rights in the founding documents of the United States, and particularly of the right of religious freedom, has had a profound impact on the life and culture of our nation. While this religious dimension may at times seem to be reduced to a kind of civil religion, there is a fundamental concern for religious belief and practice and for ethical norms for the conduct of public affairs. American culture

remains open to public dialogue of a religious and ethical nature.

This religious dimension of the culture is a great asset for the teaching ministry of the bishop. His ability to comment on public affairs, to testify about legislation or public policy, to reaffirm publicly basic beliefs about God and the dignity of the human person are but some of the ways in which this aspect of the culture provides a platform for the public presentation of the teaching of the Church.

The revolution in human communication brought about by the technological developments of our era enhances the bishop's ability to proclaim the gospel and to bring its light to bear upon issues of ecclesial and public

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life. The media provide the bishop with direct access to the members of the local church as well as to the entire population of an area. While the effect of direct and immediate communication with thousands of people may not be fully understood or may be difficult to evaluate, the ready access to these technologies in our society means that the bishop can reach people in unprecedented numbers and more frequently than ever before.

Further, American culture has consistently appealed to a core of stable values and ideals. Given the pragmatic character of the nation, these values and ideals are not so much the product of ideological commitments as they are the expression of the need to find common ground on which to build communities and a society out of the diverse nationalities that make up the American population. Some of these may seem to be almost contradictory. So, for example, a basic respect for the autonomy and privacy of individuals coexists with a spontaneous willingness to help others in need. A basic respect for laws, institutions, and authority coexists with a strong assertion of the right to question them, to demand accountability from them, and to be free to change them.

The cultural patterns of building community, of respecting the individuality of members of the community, and of responding cooperatively to leadership in the community have had a beneficial impact on the development of the Church in the United States, particularly on the parochial level. At the same time, the pragmatic nature of American community building and the expectation of the right to question authority within that community are elements in

the American culture that may obscure the spiritual nature of ecclesial communion. Consequently, when he teaches, the bishop may find a willingness to accept his teaching authority, and even the teaching itself, coexisting with the assertion of a right to question his teaching by many of the members of the local church.

As is true in any culture, the factors that support the teaching office of the bishop may also present it with significant challenges. The religious freedom and pluralism of American society may lead to a relativizing of religious commitments, particularly with regard to the doctrine of the Church. Church teaching may encounter a cultural attitude that sees church doctrine as a matter of private opinion only, to be accepted or rejected according to the dispositions or interests of individuals.

The practice within the communications media of juxtaposing differences of opinion without regard to their inherent value or of emphasizing situations of conflict or of characterizing and labelling issues internal to the life of the Church in much the same manner as political or social issues are characterized and labeled can have serious consequences for the faithful's ability to accept or to understand church teaching. Such methods may also foster the kind of religious indifference mentioned above.

Finally, the cultural factors of pragmatism and individualism may lead to a view that reduces authority within the Church to a set of practical arrangements necessary for any society or to a bias against all teaching

Belief in the Church includes the fundamental conviction that its teachings are a unique and reliable guide to life according to the gospel.

proposed in an authoritative way. The value attached to the right to question authority may become an attitude of antecedent suspicion toward every exercise of authority. This latter attitude may become visible particularly when the bishop may have to correct teaching that is erroneous or inaccurate.

The predominant culture of the United States provides an atmosphere of freedom and openness in which the bishop can exercise his teaching office straightforwardly. As a matter of fact, careful attention to the very cultural dynamics that sometimes create difficulties for the reception of church teaching may enable the bishop to find ways to teach church doctrine effectively.

Section Two: Observations on the Reception of Church Teaching

Church teaching is presented with varying degrees of magisterial authority. Corresponding to these differentiations are gradations in the kind of response which the

teaching calls forth from the faithful. Before considering this matter in detail, however, it seems appropriate to recall the ecclesial context within which such discussion takes place.

1. The Ecclesial Dimension of Teaching and Its Acceptance

In the creed, we affirm our belief in the Triune God and the salvific actions attributed to each of the Persons of the Trinity. Rooted in this faith, the believer also affirms *credo in ecclesiam*, that is, a living communion with and commitment to the Church, which is the creation of Christ and the Spirit. To "believe in the Church" means to believe that the Holy Spirit is so intimately united with and active in the Church that the living witness to the gospel of salvation is found there. There is, then, an ecclesial dimension essential to Christian faith and church teaching because the Church itself was founded by Christ to proclaim and to live the paschal mystery until he comes in glory.

The fidelity of the Church's living witness is more than a matter of human integrity or of discernible historical continuity. It comes about through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who was promised by Christ to the Church, which is "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tm 3:15). Thus, the dynamic presence of the Spirit stands behind the Church's fidelity to the teaching of Christ. The "Spirit of Truth" guides the Church to the full possession of the truth of the gospel (cf. Jn 14:17,26; 15:26; 16:13). It is this assistance of the Spirit that grounds the indefectibility of the Church, the apostolic authority of the teaching office, and the assent of individuals to magisterial teaching.

That guidance, therefore, is much broader than merely its guarantee of infallible statements. An unforeseen development after the definition of papal infallibility was the increasing persuasion, present even today, that the infallibility of a teaching is the sole reason or principal ground for its religious reception. An equally unforeseen effect of the Second Vatican Council's broader discussion of the teaching ministry of the Church, however, has been the reduction by some Catholics of all nondefinitive teaching of the magisterium to the level of one theological opinion among others. Both of these positions present a sadly truncated view of what the abiding presence of the Spirit of Truth means for the life of the Church.

Finally, in our present context, *credo in ecclesiam* embraces that aspect of the apostolicity of the Church, which is continually manifested in the College of Bishops under the leadership of the pope. Believers are called to devote themselves to the apostolic tradition that the bishops teach, just as the original communities devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles (see Acts 2:42). Authoritative teaching by the bishops is one of the principal exercises of apostolic office in the Church and, therefore, carries with it a claim of credibility and the expectation of acceptance on the part of the faithful.

The conviction expressed by *credo in ecclesiam* results in an attitude of fundamental trust. One trusts the Church in its search for the adequate expression, interpretation, and application of the truth of Christ. This trust is expressed in a determination to be one with the Church and “to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace . . .” (Eph 4:3). The conviction of faith and the bond of trust enable the believer to accept church teaching even when its expression seems limited or partial. Some may see in such limitations a reason to doubt the Church or to mistrust its authority, but the fact of the matter is that to expect the Church to move through history without significant limitations is to presume that it could exist apart from human life with its inadequacy and imperfection.

The reception that a bishop seeks from his hearers is not mere passive submission. He seeks a genuine response of faith in revealed truth. . . .

Belief in the Church includes the fundamental conviction that its teachings are a unique and reliable guide to life according to the gospel. It is the fidelity of the community gathered around the resurrected Christ and standing firm on the Rock upon which it was built (see Mt 7:24-29; 16:18) that bears witness to the presence of the Spirit, who sustains this community, keeps it faithful to the gospel, and continually urges it to draw out the essentials and implications of that gospel for its teaching and life.

The magisterium is able to ask for, and the Catholic faithful are able to give, true assent to the authoritative teaching of the Church not only because of the rationale presented in proposing doctrine, but — crucially — because of a reliance based in faith on the Spirit’s governance as well as the recognition that the doctrinal and moral guidance of the Church is ultimately guaranteed by God. The specific form of acceptance of individual doctrines varies with their source and authority; equally varied are the terms used to describe that acceptance.

The reception that a bishop seeks from his hearers is not mere passive submission. He seeks a genuine response of faith in revealed truth, and he looks to them to be faithful disciples in their response to other authoritative teachings. True reception results in faithful reflection on his teaching, personal assimilation by the hearer, and sincere application to life. “[B]lessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it” (Lk 11:28). The bishop hopes to stir up in his hearers the Holy Spirit, which is already in them from baptism, and he hopes by his teaching to bring the light of faith to their own experience as Christians. The appropriate response to his teaching, the teaching of the Church, is a living response that transforms the hearers’ minds, hearts, and lives.

2. Faith: Assent to Revealed Truth

The assent given to revealed truth definitively taught by the magisterium is, properly, the assent of faith. The acceptance of such infallible teaching of the Church is an act of faith in the strict sense because the self-revelation of God is expressed in that teaching.

In response to God’s revelation our duty is “the obedience of faith” (see Rom 16:26; compare Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6). By this, a human being makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering “the full submission (obsequium) of intellect and will to God as he reveals” (DS 3008), and willingly assenting to the revelation he gives (DV 5).

The Church, through its magisterium, has been entrusted with the task of authoritatively interpreting what is contained in revelation, so that “all that is proposed for belief, as being divinely revealed, is drawn from the one deposit of faith” (DV 10). In some cases, these doctrines have been explicitly defined; in others, they are universally considered to be an essential and irreformable element of the one Catholic faith.

Doctrine definitively taught by the Church as revealed can engage the response of faith precisely because of its intrinsic relationship to the word of God and its authoritative claim. The Church infallibly teaches doctrines of this kind as truths contained explicitly or implicitly in the word of God as attested by Scripture and apostolic tradition. The Second Vatican Council expressed church teaching about infallibility in this way:

This infallibility, however, with which the divine redeemer willed his church to be endowed in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals, extends as far as the deposit of divine revelation that is to be guarded and faithfully expounded (LG 25).¹⁴

3. Firm Assent: Acceptance of Definitive, Nonrevealed Truth

Besides the guarantee of infallibility for the Church’s teaching of what is contained in the deposit of faith, this gift of infallibility also extends to matters of faith and morals that, “even though not revealed in themselves, are required to safeguard the integrity of the deposit of faith, to explain it rightly, and to define it effectively.”¹⁵ When it proposes infallible teaching of this second order, the magisterium requires the acceptance of its teaching as true and the rejection of whatever is contrary to it as objectively false. Such teaching is to be accepted by the faithful, not indeed by an act of divine faith (which is due solely to the contents of revelation), but by firm assent. To hold the contrary of such teaching is error.¹⁶ Such assent is not merely an act of deference to the ecclesiastical authority but is, rather, the only personal response that is adequate to the truth expressed in this teaching.¹⁷

4. *Obsequium Religiosum*: Acceptance of Nondefinitive Teaching

The magisterium does not always teach definitively.

[Often] not intending to act definitively, [it] teaches a doctrine to aid a better understanding of Revelation and to 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.¹⁸

In such cases, the appropriate response is technically called *religiosum voluntatis et intellectus obsequium* (see LG 25; CIC, c. 752; *Instruction* 23).

This Latin expression is not easy to translate into English. Nevertheless, the reality intended is reasonably clear. The Latin phrase means “religious submission of the will and intellect.” Negatively, “the response cannot be simply exterior or disciplinary.”¹⁹ Positively, it involves a disposition of will and intellect to accept the teaching of the magisterium, a faith-inspired acceptance of teaching in virtue of the authority of the speaker and the connection of the content with truths of faith. It is a response “under the impulse of obedience to the faith.”²⁰ The specific form of acceptance may vary according to “the authoritativeness of the interventions which become clear from the nature of the documents, the insistence with which the teaching is repeated and the very way in which it is expressed.”²¹

Considered as an inner attitude or disposition, religious *obsequium* should result in acceptance of nondefinitive teaching. Such acceptance derives from a fundamental Christian desire to be one with the Church, both in its teaching and in its searching for the adequate translation, interpretation, and application of the truth of revelation to the modern world. It is a response that is grounded in the bond of communion and is a concrete expression of the Pauline exhortation to strive “to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). A response to church teaching that undermines the Church’s unity fails to qualify as *obsequium religiosum*.

Further, the response of *obsequium religiosum* acknowledges the Spirit’s assistance to the Church not just in moments of infallible teaching, but also in the day-to-day applications of the gospel and in the whole Church’s historical and developing understanding of that gospel. The Spirit is with the Church, both in its proclamation and in its search for further meaning of the truth. In the course of this search, the papal or episcopal magisterium, especially when treating complex new questions, for the sake of the good of the People of God may issue a statement that, though reflecting a prudent pastoral judgment at a particular stage of development, is not proposed as definitive teaching.

The ordinary, nondefinitive teaching of individual popes and bishops may contain assertions that fall short of the full truth of the gospel and may be in need of development and amplification. Interventions in the prudential order may even be in need of correction.²² Even

if such teaching contains limitations, the Catholic trusts that the Spirit will guide the Church in a process of discernment in its life, prayer, and theological reflection that will lead to a fuller understanding and improvement of the teaching. Over time, this process has revealed that defective teaching or even explicitly erroneous teaching by individual bishops has never had the signs of universality, continuity, and consistency with the gospel that mark the sound and lasting teaching of the Church.

In proposing ordinary, nondefinitive teaching, bishops rightly expect Catholics to give religious acceptance, that is, one that is morally certain, excluding a prudent doubt about what is taught. Moral certitude is sufficient basis for giving true intellectual assent to nondefinitive teaching. At times, however, professional theologians or other competent persons may conclude that the search has not been completed or that what has been asserted is still imperfect, and their acceptance will be qualified accordingly. Still “the willingness to submit loyally to the teaching of the magisterium on matters *per se* not irrefutable must be the rule.”²³

... the Catholic trusts that the Spirit will guide the Church in a process of discernment in its life, prayer, and theological reflection that will lead to a fuller understanding and improvement of the teaching.

This understanding of the nature and foundation of acceptance of nondefinitive teaching is particularly important when that doctrinal or moral guidance is perceived as a “hard teaching” (see Jn 6:60)—a matter that may cause personal difficulty or challenge accepted cultural patterns. There may be many factors at play creating this perception. But a reception that is colored by an overarching expectation that the teaching will in fact be reformed precisely because it is difficult, or in the name of keeping up with the times, does not recognize the Spirit’s directing the Church toward a clearer sense of the mystery of Christ and a greater consistency in and fidelity to the gospel’s demands on Christian life.

There is diversity and differentiation in the magisterial teaching of the Church. The Catholic, then, does not accept all the statements of the ordinary magisterium as if they were credal affirmations demanding the response of faith, nor as if they were simply particular theological opinions now in favor with those in authority.²⁴ The Catholic receives even the ordinary, nondefinitive teaching of the magisterium with that reverence, openness, and acceptance due the teaching authority of the Church in virtue of the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised it by Christ, that is, with *religiosum voluntatis et intellectus obsequium* (see LG 25).²⁵

Section Three: Observations on Deficient Reception of Church Teaching

The Church is animated by the Spirit, who elicits, purifies, and strengthens the free assent of its members. Whether this acceptance be the absolute commitment of faith or the firm assent to definitive teaching of non-revealed truth or the reverent submission (*obsequium*) to nondefinitive authoritative teaching, the assent of the People of God forms that consensus that lies at the heart of this community of faith and makes possible its collective ministry to the world. To deal with this subject, however, as well as to respond to current questions in the Church, the foregoing reflections on the acceptance of church teaching must be complemented by a consideration of its opposite: nonacceptance.

When he teaches, the bishop today, as in certain critical periods of the past, can meet with various kinds of resistance. Nonacceptance ought initially to stimulate the bishop to clarify church teaching, to respond to questions about it, and to be persuasive in his presentation of it. At the same time, those who find themselves in the position of not accepting church teaching also have an obligation to study, reflect, discuss, and pray over the matter and to avoid any weakening of the faith of another by challenging that teaching.

Nevertheless, persistent nonacceptance can indicate a serious problem that will need to be addressed. Any rejection of authoritative church teaching is a serious matter. Yet, even here, one must distinguish among fundamentally different kinds of rejection of church teaching. These distinctions will now be taken up in order to clarify their nature and to suggest pastoral responses on the part of the bishop.

1. Rejection of Definitive Teaching

a) Heresy

In answer to the mandate of the risen Lord, the Christian community has been concerned from its beginnings to proclaim to the world the gospel of Christ as the word of God (cf. 1 Thes 2:4,13). Such a mission demands not only that the gospel not be falsified, but that its proclamation not be fragmented into discordant voices. Contradictory positions would negate the truth of what this community proclaims and undermine the credibility of its call for faith.

The rejection of divisions that would discredit the gospel or scatter the community that bears witness to it runs like a leitmotif through the Pauline letters. It finds perhaps its strongest statement in the anathema pronounced in the Letter to the Galatians: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach [to you] a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed" (Gal 1:8). The pastoral letters reflect these same concerns within the growing Church and urge the

importance of unity and continuity in teaching. Repeatedly, Christians are warned against the alien instruction and influence of anyone who departs from the apostolic preaching, that is, "[w]hoever teaches something different and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the religious teaching . . ." (1 Tm 6:3; cf. 1:3-7).

These frequent warnings against altering or falsifying the gospel persisted in the early Fathers of the Church. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, wrote against those who held aloof from the Eucharist and from prayer "because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior, Jesus Christ" (Smyr 7.1). The *Didache* warns against "those who have changed and now teach another" doctrine (11). Polycarp censured Christians who

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deny the humanity of Jesus and who repudiate belief in the resurrection of the dead and a final judgment (see Phil 7). On the essentials of the gospel, the Church, to be itself, cannot compromise. For this is the meaning and the truth that are indispensable for the communion of faith. Whatever form this insistence has taken over the centuries, the undeviating determination of the Church is to preserve the revelation of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. This is the gospel of Christ, the good news.

The Church bears the same responsibility for the integrity of the gospel today that it has throughout the centuries since the time of Christ. It receives the gospel as once preached by the apostles, explored in its implications by the Fathers of the Church and theologians, realized in its promise by the holiness of countless saints and the worship of the community, and defined in its meaning over the centuries by the magisterium in ecumenical councils and solemn judgments of the Roman Pontiffs. The Church in our own time must be faithful to this teaching and continuous with this historical community.

Throughout its history, the Church has experienced successive contradictions of the gospel. The most destructive denial within the Christian community has been designated by a very specific term, *heresy*. According to canon law, heresy is "the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt about the same" (c. 751).²⁶ Hence, nonacceptance of magisterial teaching is heresy only if it is in regard to matters of faith in the strict sense, that is, revealed truths definitively taught by the Church as such, and it is formal only if it is an obstinate refusal by members of the Church to accept such teaching when adequately informed of its divine and catholic character.

The Church has been deliberately careful in its description of something so serious, so harmful to its identity. Unfortunately, in the context of intra-Church polemics, *heresy* is often used rather loosely to designate any form of nonacceptance of church teaching or any proposal of novel theological opinions or pastoral practices. To use the technical term *heresy* in such a broad way would be erroneous and unjust. The canonical determination whether a teaching is heresy or not must be reserved to the bishops or the Holy See.

When such heresy is determined to be present, the bishop must counteract it by defending the Catholic faith. He may wish to begin a conversation with those involved in the hope of persuading them to turn from their error. The bishop may have recourse to the medicinal use of additional sanctions provided for in law. Those who formally commit heresy knowingly place themselves outside the communion of the Church (see CIC, c. 1364.1).²⁷ If the matter becomes public, the bishop may also have to issue a public warning that the positions taken are heretical and incompatible with membership in the Catholic community.

b) Error: The Rejection of Definitively Taught Nonrevealed Truth

The rejection of definitive nonrevealed truth, or the holding of opinions contrary to such teaching, constitutes error. In practice, when this has occurred, the magisterium has responded by declaring that the proposed opinion is erroneous or false, with the expectation that such an opinion will be withdrawn. In some cases, the declaration may state the judgment that a particular position endangers definitively taught truth and may not be taught or held. In cases where Catholics continue to hold or teach such opinions, despite the authoritative judgment that the opinions are erroneous and despite being admonished by proper authority, they may be liable to administrative measures or penalties.²⁸

2. Nonacceptance of Nondefinitive Teaching

Apart from rejection of definitive teaching through heresy and error, there is a broad range of responses that, in one way or another, represents nonacceptance or rejection of the nondefinitive teaching of the magisterium. Such responses may occur for a variety of reasons and may be expressed in different ways. Some responses may be quite individual and private, while others may be public and even serve as the organizational focus of certain groups within the Church. Such nonacceptance can be harmful to the Church when it affects preaching, teaching, worship, and counselling—the ordinary means by which the Church’s teaching is communicated. Each of them presents a challenge and an opportunity for the diocesan bishop as teacher.

a) Withholding of Assent

Perhaps, a more common experience of nonacceptance in the Church today is the withholding of assent to what is identified as nondefinitive teaching. This lack of assent may take different forms. It may be a pastoral minister’s silence about various teachings or an individual’s ignoring of an authoritative teaching of the Church or the entertaining of persistent doubt about a particular teaching while taking no steps to resolve the doubt. It may involve the refusal to admit that a particular teaching applies to an individual’s life or even the reinterpretation of a teaching in opposition to its original significance. Assent may be withheld because a person chooses

These manifestations of the withholding of assent to church teaching should not be confused with acceptance of the teaching of the Church but failure to put it into practice.

to be guided more by individual subjective experience than by authoritative teaching. It may even occur in Catholics who allow a certain doctrinal imbalance to permeate their faith, placing an exaggerated emphasis on the importance of one particular area of teaching while, at the same time, diminishing the significance of other areas of Catholic doctrine.

These manifestations of the withholding of assent to church teaching should not be confused with acceptance of the teaching of the Church but failure to put it into practice. For example, the failure to conform in one’s individual actions with a moral norm taught by the Church may constitute sin. Such failure may even be habitual in some cases and disclose an attachment to wrongdoing over a period of time. A person may even experience or express a strong resistance to a call to conversion away from such a moral disorder. But this moral failure is not the same as the withholding of assent from church teaching, or even dissent, which is the subject of these reflections.

While these manifestations of nonacceptance may fall short of outright rejection, nevertheless they remain nonacceptance, the withholding of the *religiosum voluntatis et intellectus obsequium* due to the ordinary magisterium of the Church. They may occur for a number of reasons. Our culture frequently entertains a deep-seated suspicion of all forms of authority, particularly when authority attempts to give guidance about ultimate values. Perhaps, the inability to bring together the teaching of the Church and the ethos expressed in economic, political, and social life lies at the root of nonacceptance in particular instances. Ignorance or misunderstanding of the true meaning of a particular doctrine may also be at work in some cases.

b) *Private Dissent*

Quite distinct from the withholding of assent is the private, individual judgment that conclusively rejects the ordinary, nondefinitive teaching of the Church. Such a judgment constitutes private dissent and is not consistent with that *religiosum voluntatis et intellectus obsequium* due to church teaching. Even though dissent of this kind remains private, nevertheless it is unacceptable. It may have serious consequences for the individual Catholic's life of faith. To the extent that it affects a person's participation in the life and mission of the Church, it may also harm the Church.

Fortunately, in many instances of the withholding of assent or even of private dissent, the factors that lead to nonacceptance may be resolved by a variety of means that are at the disposal of the local church. Clarification, dialogue, education, pastoral counseling, and moral or spiritual formation are effective tools for countering these kinds of nonacceptance. Retreats, parish missions, marriage preparation and enrichment programs, the Catholic press, personal outreach on the part of clergy and laity, as well as the sacrament of penance offer opportunities to address many of these issues. The diocesan bishop can address effectively many occurrences of nonacceptance by his own preaching and teaching, as well as by encouraging those pastoral programs that facilitate patient, persistent, and understanding dialogue with individuals or groups.

When it becomes clear that a situation of this kind is prevalent or widespread in the local church, particularly if it concerns a particular teaching or area of Catholic life, the bishop may well decide to use the mass media or to issue a pastoral letter or other statement to present the teaching of the Church in an appropriate fashion. Teaching in this way can be even more effective if it acknowledges the doubts and difficulties that are present and casts the light of faith on them.

c) *Public Dissent*

Sometimes the nonacceptance of nondefinitive teaching passes beyond the nature of a "difficulty" and becomes a judgment that an authoritative teaching is false. This, of course, is quite different from a critical judgment about the adequacy of expression or the conceptual limitations of a particular teaching.²⁹ The *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* restricts the meaning of the word *dissent* to "public opposition to the magisterium of the Church, which must be distinguished from the situation of personal difficulties" (33). This should be noted because in American usage the term *dissent* is used more broadly to include even the private expression of rejection of reformable magisterial teaching. In that broader usage, the term has connotations of individual liberty and rights associated with the Enlightenment and American intellectual, political, and religious history, ideas that are very much a part of the culture and society of the United States with its long-standing admiration and defense of a

"right of dissent" covering both private and public disagreements. For our purposes, in the following, we will distinguish between private and public dissent. We understand *public dissent* in the same sense that the *Instruction* uses the word *dissent*, namely, public opposition to the magisterium of the Church.

Before offering our reflections on pastoral responses to such dissent, it may be useful to call attention to the meaning of the word *public* as it is used in this specific context. Obviously, "public opposition" does not encompass the private denial of teaching on the part of an individual.

More important, however, it does not seem appropriate to apply the term *public* to the professional discussions that occur among theologians within the confines of scholarly meetings and dialogues or to the scholarly publication of views. Such forums for the exchange of views among theologians are invaluable for the refinement of positions that comes through peer critique of

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evidence, methodology, and scholarship. They serve the advancement of truth itself. Even if the views expressed in such forums are critical of or in disagreement with the ordinary, nondefinitive teaching of the magisterium, the magisterium itself may benefit from an understanding of objections to its teaching and from the refinement and development of authoritative teaching that may result from such scholarly exchanges.³⁰ These considerations presume that theologians and scholars are willing to take the necessary steps to overcome their difficulties and abide by an authoritative intervention on the part of the magisterium should it consider one necessary.

When, however, a judgment rejecting magisterial teaching is widely disseminated in the public forum (*dissent* in the proper sense as formulated by the *Instruction*), such as may occur through popular religious journals or through books intended for mass distribution or through the press and electronic media, then a situation of public dissent is at hand.

Public dissent can take a number of forms. It may be expressed in words or in behavior. It may come from an individual Catholic as a private person or from a public figure in the arena of theology, business, politics, culture, or the arts. It is of particular concern when the person who publicly dissents is also involved in the public life of the Church through teaching, preaching, or writing. In its most extreme form, public dissent involves not merely the contradiction of the teaching of the Church, but the advocacy of an alternative position as the correct interpretation of beliefs or as reliable guidance for the lives of Catholics.

3. Doctrinal and Pastoral Responses of the Magisterium to Public Dissent

When any type of public dissent occurs, it places special demands and burdens on the bishop. It presents a situation that requires of the bishop a genuine act of discernment, grounded in prayer, reflection, counsel, and time.

First, the bishop must consider the issue at hand. If there is uncertainty whether a proposed position does, in fact, constitute dissent, the procedures for formal doctrinal dialogue, which were suggested in our document *Doctrinal Responsibilities*, may assist the bishop in clarifying the issue.³¹

Second, the bishop must consider the gravity of the teaching that is being rejected. The degree of theological certitude it enjoys; the emphasis, frequency, or constancy of its being taught; and the level of magisterium that is teaching it are all relevant considerations.

Third, the bishop must consider the context within which an individual or group may be rejecting a teaching. If the denial takes place within a much broader context of assent to church teaching, the bishop may wish to institute a dialogue with those dissenting to ascertain the basis and motives of their dissent. If the denial is part of a broader pattern of dissent from church teaching, possibly involving the public advocacy of alternative positions, then the issue of ecclesial allegiance and magisterial authority in general may be at stake and might require a different response from the bishop. "As bishops, we must be especially responsive to our role as authentic teachers of the faith when opinions at variance with the Church's teaching are proposed as a basis for pastoral practice."³²

Fourth, the bishop must consider the effect of this dissent on the Church at large. Dissent that is expressed in such a way that it disrupts ecclesial communion, or that leads to divisiveness and a partisan spirit, or that disregards the community's right to hear sound doctrine or its genuine religious sensibilities, or that affects moral values cannot be tolerated, especially if it is protracted.

Fifth, the bishop must consider the forum in which dissent has been expressed. It is one thing, for example, to write an article expressing dissent in a scholarly theological journal and subject oneself to criticism and correction from one's theological peers; it is quite another thing to use the mass media to express one's dissent from church teaching.

Sixth, the bishop must consider the public position in the Church of those who are expressing dissenting views. Preachers and catechists, as well as teachers of theology appointed by the competent authority to teach in the name of the Church, are bound to present faithfully what the Church teaches. As defined above, public dissent expressed by such persons, especially when it occurs in the course of performing the duties of their office, cannot be reconciled with the responsibilities that these positions entail.

Finally, the disposition toward the teaching authority of the bishop on the part of those who are dissenting must be taken into consideration. If an individual or group dissents, but retains the disposition to abide by a final judgment

of the magisterium on an issue, the possibility of *obsequium religiosum* remains. On the other hand, if dissent is expressed in absolute terms and there are no signs of docility toward the Church, that possibility may well be foreclosed. In that case, the bishop may initiate the process leading to the possible imposition of a canonical penalty (cf. c. 1371.1).

Bishops cannot be indifferent to the public denial or the contradiction of church teaching, especially by those whose position confers public influence. Public dissent, especially in the form of advocacy for alternative positions, seriously impairs the Church as a communion of faith and witness. In this regard, as noted by Pope John Paul II in his address to the American bishops in 1987, such dissent poses a very significant challenge to the teaching office of bishops.³³

Bishops must deal with dissent in an authoritative and candid manner. Dissent is never acceptable, but in some cases it may be accompanied by evidences of good faith and competence, namely, prayer, study, serious and objective grounds, consultation, fidelity, reverence for the Church and the Church's magisterium, the signs of the Spirit (see Gal 5:22-23), and the willingness to discuss the issues. Nevertheless, the leadership in the Church cannot evade an authoritative decision; the final pastoral judgment about individual cases of dissent, about teaching that contradicts that of the ordinary magisterium, lies with the bishops, whose office entails this responsibility.

Decisions about public dissent lie within the responsibility of the bishops.

In order to execute his responsibilities, the bishop has the duty to make such a judgment and may legitimately expect that his decision will be accepted in obedience or at least in reverential silence for the good of the Church. It may not be a matter directly of the content of faith, but it does involve that *obsequium*, which comes out of faith, namely, such confidence of the presence of God in the Church that one responds to the call for obedience or silence. One is not asked to make an act of faith in what is taught; one is asked to submit in obedience, with the internal sense that the mystery of God is present in this reception and that truth is great and it will prevail.

The bishop may be persuaded that such a demand for silence is not the best response to the situation and that his responsibilities can be fulfilled in some other ways. These might range from restating in a positive fashion the authoritative teaching of the Church, to insisting that a particular position be presented in such a way that its relationship to the teaching of the magisterium is clear or to issuing a doctrinal *monitum*—a clear warning of danger to the faith in what is being publicly taught to the contrary.³⁴

The truth proclaimed by the magisterium should normally engage the sense of the faith that is present among Catholics of good will. Yet, the reception of nondefinitive teaching may be significantly limited by ignorance, prejudice, and poor or no teaching, as well as by disagreement and contestation among the faithful. This may be a sign that the issue would benefit from clarification or from comprehensive restatement and persuasive teaching by the magisterium.

Decisions about public dissent lie within the responsibility of the bishops. In facing the often difficult and delicate situation posed by public dissent, the bishops recognize that they are called by God to foster both that unity of the Body of Christ and that progress in the systematic reflection upon the gospel, which mark the Church as a communion of love and wisdom.

4. Some Special Considerations

a) Public Presentation of the Teaching of the Church

What is true of the personal assent of every Catholic applies even more to one engaged in preaching or teaching. The Church can be seriously hurt by widespread and open contradiction of its teaching: "hard sayings" can be undermined; leadership weakened; factions encouraged; religious skepticism advanced; and responsible ecclesial discernment reduced to individual private opinions. The Church as a community loses something of its ability to speak to the world.

Even conscientious questioning does not excuse one from faithfully and effectively presenting the doctrine of the Church—especially when one is performing a ministry in its name. The People of God have a right to hear Catholic teaching, and no member of the Church has the right to ignore the existence of that doctrine because of personal opinions to the contrary. The faithful also have a right to communion in a united faith and witness, and this touches precisely on the ministry of the magisterium. The voice of the magisterium must not then be relegated to one opinion out of many. It speaks with an authority and a responsibility of office to the entire Church in a way that no theologian can. Even if one finds an alternative position compelling, one is still obliged in conscience to present the doctrine of the magisterium with the authority that it possesses, to probe it for the truth that it contains, and to safeguard official church teaching by the reverence and reluctance with which any disagreement is voiced.

b) Dissent and the Media

Our age is characterized both by popular interest in theological debate and by the realities of modern mass media. Serious and well-informed religious journalism serves to communicate information and perspective about theological and ecclesial issues to the general public. It is a commendable use of the means of communication in the service of society.

Yet, the media can also be used as a platform by those who dissent from church teaching. This can sometimes pose a genuine threat to scholarly interchange, can create pressures and difficulties that challenge the entire Church, and may require the intervention of the bishop. The creation of the impression of widespread conflict, its facile categorization in terms adopted from political discussion, and the implicit or explicit assumption that the dissenting view is of equal validity with the teaching of the magisterium are the unhappy consequences of carrying on theological discussions of great pastoral import in the mass media.³⁵ The ensuing pressures for instantaneous responses from church authorities usually serve only to strengthen the perception of conflict or to confirm prejudices about the repressive nature of ecclesial authority.

Theologians should be aware that discussions proper to their professional circles may often become known to a wider public through inaccurate or misleading reports in the media. When this occurs, they should take whatever steps may be available to them to correct any mistaken impressions. They should also underscore the difference between personal theological opinion and the authoritative teaching of the Church.

The appropriate ways in which theological discussion can profitably occur should continue to be the object of dialogue between bishops and theologians. But given the complexities of many theological issues, there is no warrant for publicizing dissenting theological views through the media, where scant attention will be paid to the nuance required by the issues themselves and by informed theological discussion.

Section Four: Observations on Characteristics of Effective Teaching

Throughout, this document has encouraged the positive presentation of Catholic doctrine by the bishops as the most effective way of countering difficulties presented by the culture. Effective teaching is also the best response to situations of theological dissent. The truth of the doctrine of the Church, taught in a manner that is accommodated to the needs of the faithful, bears within itself a claim on their assent. But to be effective, a bishop's teaching must have certain characteristics. Among those that seem particularly important today are insightfulness, humility, courage, persuasiveness, and charity.

1. Insightfulness

If a bishop is to transmit the salvific truth of the mysteries of faith, he must first make that truth his own. Through pastoral experience, study, reflection, and judgment; through prayer, dialogue, and consultation, the bishop comes to a deeper personal appropriation of the meaning of the teaching of the Church. We call this insightfulness. The achievement of this true insight brings with it a liberation from distortion or partiality in his own understanding of the

faith. It enables the bishop to relate one truth of the faith to others and to judge correctly its place in the hierarchy of salvific truths.

Insightfulness gives the bishop's act of teaching an especially communicative power as he presents to others the faith of the Church. It makes possible faith's accommodation to the culture and mind-set of the people, while preserving the inner logic of the truth itself. When joined with the bishop's understanding of the historical moment in which he teaches and with his charism to discern the needs of the people, insight's grasp of essential meaning provides the bishop with a firm basis for deciding on appropriate courses of action in fulfilling his teaching ministry. Insight into the faith of the Church is crucial in assuring the correctness of the bishop's judgments about the orthodoxy of others who teach. The quality of insightful teaching reinforces the many suggestions this document has already made about the bishop's need to make time for study and reflection, to collaborate with other bishops, and to consult with experts.

2. Humility

The bishop teaches what he himself has received from the Church. His teaching is in service to the word of God and the tradition of the Church. His acts of teaching are an essential part of his ministry, his service to the People of God, modelled on the service of Jesus Christ. Episcopal teaching, then, precisely because it is in the service of God and of God's people, has that character of humility that ought to qualify all ministry in the Church.

Humility, as it applies to episcopal teaching, also means that the bishop is aware that the mystery of God and the teaching of the Church transcend even the most careful and sustained human effort to find expression in words. The bishop will be conscious of the limitations of his own words to convey the essential truth of the faith. In nondefinitive teaching, the bishop recognizes that he may be proclaiming and applying to the life of his particular church a teaching that may need to be more developed in the future, and that, nevertheless, he proposes as authoritative guidance for his people. In all his acts of teaching, the bishop understands himself as performing an act of service, modelled on the service of Jesus Christ, who invites his followers to "learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29).

3. Courage

Courageous and forthright proclamation of the saving truth of the gospel has been a characteristic of apostolic office from the very beginning (see Acts 4:29-31). The right and the power to speak openly and with boldness (*parrésia*) of the redemption accomplished in Christ is a gift of the Spirit to the Apostles and their successors. Episcopal ordination confers on the bishop the right — and its corresponding duty — to be the principal spokesman for the faith in the local church. Part of the grace of ordina-

tion is the power, the charism, to bear courageous witness to the faith (see 2 Tm 1:6-8; 4:1-4). This charism is manifest in the teaching of the bishop in a variety of ways. In confessing his faith before the community of faith, the bishop expresses the belief that unites the community and strengthens the individual members in their own witness. In speaking out on moral issues in society, the bishop may serve as its conscience, naming the evils and injustices that many would prefer to tolerate or ignore. In confronting those who would relegate the gospel to the private sphere or dismiss its message from significant areas of human life or relativize its values and demands, the bishop bears witness to the Truth that alone can redeem and set free. Courageous preaching and teaching may exact a price from the bishop in terms of stress, hostility, and ridicule. In every age, the Church has seen bishops pay the ultimate price of their lives for the bold proclamation of the gospel. Yet, the courage to teach in the name of Christ and the Church gives the bishop's teaching an eloquence beyond his words and skills and makes it effective.

4. Persuasiveness

The persuasiveness of the bishop's teaching arises from a number of factors. It is not only the bishop's communication skills but, above all, the constancy of his teaching itself that constitutes an ongoing call to faith and practice. The grounding of teaching in revelation and tradition; its convincing articulation; its visible functioning as a guiding principle for the internal life of the local church; its implementation in diocesan and parochial programs; its ability to grapple with and respond to the lived faith-experience of the faithful so as to elicit acceptance — these are but some of the elements that give the teaching office of the bishop a persuasive force. They are tangible expressions of the bishop's own faith and prayer life. They constitute his witness, in word and deed, to the apostolic faith of the Church and to the way of life that flows from it. Ultimately, it is the congruity of the bishop's teaching with revelation itself that enables the faithful to hear a call to faith in the teaching of the bishop.

5. Charity

Above all, the teaching of the bishop is characterized by charity. When the bishop instructs his local church, he carries out for his own people the exhortation of Paul to the Ephesians: "living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ . . ." (Eph 4:15). The proclamation of the faith has its purpose fulfilled when the hearer, accepting the salvific truth of the gospel, is united with God in love. This same love of God impels the Church and its members to share the light of faith with everyone. Charity must especially suffuse the response of the bishop, and indeed all of the faithful, when the teaching of the Church encounters resistance and rejection. While the truth must be forthrightly proclaimed, this should be done with charity and civility.

Conclusion

The broad range of these considerations—from reception to dissent, from collaboration to the witness that is a bishop's alone to give—is in itself an indication of how the complexity of modern life and of American society affects the teaching ministry of the bishop. Still, the bishop must teach, for that is his vocation and his grace. The care and concern to do so effectively may place many demands on the bishop's time and energy, even to the point of delegating other matters to his collaborators.

A bishop has a personal responsibility to teach the faith of the church. He himself therefore needs time to read, study and prayerfully assimilate the contents of the church's tradition and magisterium. . . . Administrative and social engagements, however unavoidable, must be harmonized with more basic tasks. Bishops also need to practice a subsidiarity which leaves ample room for the cooperation of priests and qualified lay persons in activities not strictly related to their pastoral office.³⁶

Collaboration, in all of its dimensions, is a key element in the effective exercise of the bishop's teaching ministry. To the extent that collaboration frees the bishop to spend adequate time on his teaching ministry, it contributes to his exercise of this office. To the extent that the bishop seeks the collaboration of qualified theological advisers, he will be able to teach more effectively. To the extent that the bishop in his teaching collaborates and consults with the members of the College of Bishops and its head, he will give clear expression to the apostolic faith of the Church.

The teaching ministry of the diocesan bishop is a unique responsibility in the Church. When it is done with care and with the assistance of all the means at his disposal, the articulation of the faith may be a responsibility whose fulfillment brings with it an experience of evangelical joy, both for the bishop himself and for the church entrusted to his service.

Notes

1. "By 'ecclesiastical magisterium' is meant the task of teaching that by Christ's institution is proper to the College of Bishops or to individual bishops linked in hierarchical communion with the Supreme Pontiff," (International Theological Commission, *Theses on the Relationship between the Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology*, Thesis 1). "Authentic" in the phrase "authentic magisterium" is a transliteration from the Latin and means "authoritative." "Extraordinary magisterium" means that teaching office when exercised solemnly to define doctrine, either by an ecumenical council or by the pope speaking *ex cathedra* to the universal Church. All other exercises of the magisterium are called "ordinary." When all of the bishops together with the pope in the ordinary exercise of their authority teach the same doctrine, one speaks of the "universal and ordinary magisterium." The conditions under which the universal and ordinary magisterium can teach infallibly have been indicated by *Lumen Gentium* 25.

2. Cyprian, *Letter 55.21*, to Antonianus of Numidia, Hartel III, ii, p. 639. Cyprian uses the same concept in *Letter 68.1*, to Pope Stephen, Hartel III, ii, p. 744.

3. Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* (September 3, 1965), AAS LVII, p. 758:

And so the rule of language which the Church has established through the long labor of centuries, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and which she has confirmed with the authority of the Councils, and which has more than once been the watchword and banner of orthodox faith, is to be religiously preserved, and no one may presume to change it at his own pleasure or under the pretext of new knowledge. Who would ever tolerate that the dogmatic formulas used by the ecumenical councils for the mysteries of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation be judged as no longer appropriate for men of our times, and let others be substituted for them? In the same way, it cannot be tolerated that any individual should on his own authority take something away from the formulas which were used by the Council of Trent to propose the Eucharistic Mystery for our belief. These formulas — like the others that the Church used to propose the dogmas of faith — express concepts that are not tied to a certain specific form of human culture, or to a certain level of scientific progress, or to one or another theological school. Instead they set forth what the human mind grasps of reality through necessary and universal experience and what it expresses in apt and exact words, whether it be in ordinary or more refined language. For this reason, these formulas are adapted to all men of all times and all places.

But see also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church against Some Present-Day Errors* (June 24, 1973), where the language used to express

Catholic doctrine is acknowledged as historically conditioned. The nature of such language must "be taken into account in order that these pronouncements may be properly interpreted" *Origins* 3:7 (July 19, 1973): 110. Additional observations on the interpretation of church teaching may be found in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis: Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, 10, 24, 30, and 34.

4. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, nos. 3-4, translated and edited by James A. Kleist; "The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch" in *Ancient Christian Writers*, edited by Quasten and Plumpe (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1946), p. 61. Cf. also *Epistle to the Trallians*, n. 2, p. 75; and *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, n. 2, pp. 85-86; n. 7, pp. 87-88; *et passim*.

5. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, n. 9, *ibid.*, p. 72.

6. What is said here about the teaching authority of diocesan bishops applies with necessary modifications to coadjutor, auxiliary, and retired bishops. They, too, are members of the episcopal college and share in its teaching office by reason of their ordination as bishops (see LG 20, 22; *Ad Gentes* 38). Although coadjutor and auxiliary bishops do not have charge of a diocese, they have been commissioned to assist the diocesan bishop in his teaching ministry.

7. Episcopal collegiality in reference to conferences of bishops is at present under study by the Holy See at the request of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops.

8. See Council of Trent, Session V. c. 2. n. 9, and Session XXIV, c. 4:

It is the desire of the council that the office of preaching, which particularly belongs to the bishop, be exercised as often as possible for the salvation of the people.

Second Vatican Council, CD 12:

In discharging their obligation to teach, they should proclaim to humanity the gospel of Christ. This stands out among the most important duties of bishops. With the courage imparted by the Spirit, they should call people to faith or strengthen them in living faith. To them they must expound the mystery of Christ in its entirety. This involves those truths ignorance of which is ignorance of Christ. They must likewise point out the way divinely revealed for giving glory to God and thereby attaining eternal happiness.

See also LG 25. For the Church's insistence upon this duty of the bishop, see *Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 55-64.

9. Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 51-53.

10. "Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam," Anselm, *Proslogion*, 1, PL 158:227c. See *Cur Deus Homo*, I.2. PL 158:364a.

11. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (May 24, 1990), 10.

12. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Part I, Chapter 5, edited with an introduction by I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 98.

13. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1989), Publication No. 284-5.

14. An example of revealed truth that calls for the assent of faith is the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

15. *Relatio* of Bishop Vincent Gasser, 84th General Congregation (July 11, 1870), First Vatican Council, in Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio* (Arnhem & Leipzig, 1927), 52:1226. Gasser was speaking on behalf of the *Deputatio de fide*.

16. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, AAS 65 (1973), p. 401; *Instruction*, 16, 23.

17. An example of definitive, nonrevealed truth that calls for firm assent is the natural immortality of the human soul.

18. *Instruction*, 23.

19. *Ibid.*, 23.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 24; cf. LG 25.

22. "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. . . . 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" *Instruction*, 24.

23. *Instruction*, 24.

24. Cf. *Instruction*, 33-34, where this attitude is addressed in detail.

25. An example of teaching that is nondefinitive and calls

for *obsequium religiosum* is the teaching of the Instruction *Donum Vitae* against such practices as artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, and *in vitro* fertilization.

26. Latin text: *Dicitur haeresis, pertinax, post receptum baptismum, alicuius veritatis fide divina et catholica credendae denegatio, aut de eadem pertinax dubitatio*. Cf. also DS 3011, and LG 25. While the canonical crime of heresy involves subjective guilt, *heresy* is not always understood only in this sense. *Material heresy* is also of great concern to the Church and the bishops. Church teachers are concerned not simply with the guilt of those who deny church teaching, but more so about the truth and goodness of the faith. Some may teach contrary to defined teachings of the Church without being aware of this. One may criticize such works as involving heresy without accusing the authors of being formal and deliberate heretics.

27. Canon 1364:

— 1. With due regard for can. 194.1, n. 2, an apostate from the faith, a heretic or a schismatic incurs automatic (*latae sententiae*) excommunication and if a cleric, he can also be punished by the penalties mentioned in can. 1336.1, nn. 1, 2 and 3.

— 2. If long lasting contumacy or the seriousness of scandal warrants it, other penalties can be added including dismissal from the clerical state.

28. Cf. Canon 1371: "The following are to be punished with a just penalty:

1° besides the situation mentioned in can. 1364.1, a person who teaches a doctrine condemned by the Roman Pontiff or by an ecumenical council or who pertinaciously rejects the doctrine mentioned in can. 752 and who does not make a retraction after having been admonished by the Apostolic See or by the ordinary.

29. Cf. section on "Forums for Theological Discussion," p. 11 of this document.

30. Cf. *Instruction*, 29-30.

31. *Doctrinal Responsibilities*, pp. 16-23.

32. John Paul II, "Address to the Bishops of the United States, September 16, 1987," in *Origins* 17:16 (October 1, 1987): 261.

33. Cf. *ibid.*

34. Cf. *Doctrinal Responsibilities*, pp. 22-23.

35. Cf. *Instruction*, esp. 32, 39.

36. John Paul II, "Ad Limina Address to Philippine Bishops, April 24, 1990," in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition) N. 18 (30 April 1990): 9-10.