

An FAQ on the Pope's authority for baffled Catholics and softly snickering Protestants

January 23, 2017 (TheStream) -- Pope Francis warned us that he wanted to “make a mess” in the church, and at the moment, he seems to be making good on that promise. In still-fresh 2017, we have seen:

The pope's close advisor, Rev. Antonio Spadaro, who edits the quasi-official Vatican journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, defend Pope Francis's apparent defiance of the infallible Council of Trent on divorce and remarriage, by explaining that in theology, “2+2=5.” No one knows quite what that means, but perhaps that's the point.

The bishops of Malta have published a set of guidelines for Holy Communion based on Pope Francis's ambiguous document *Amoris Laetitia*,

which openly depart from Catholic teaching and practice of 2,000 years. The Vatican's response? To publish those guidelines, without criticism, in the Vatican's *L'Osservatore Romano*.

The Vatican's science congregation, led by Argentine Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, has summoned a conference on biodiversity, and invited as a speaker Paul Ehrlich — a discredited “overpopulation” crank who favors coercive population control and abortion.

As Professor Michael Pakaluk of the Catholic University of America revealed, papal ghostwriter, Argentine Archbishop Victor Fernandez, committed plagiarism in the text of *Amoris Laetitia* — lifting paragraphs almost whole from Fernandez's own, wacky theological speculations. Some of the most troubling parts of that document which the pope made his own are snipped and tucked from an article where Fernandez asserts that absolutely every human being is saved. At least Fernandez didn't (so far as we know) include any passages from his 1995 book: *Heal Me with Your Mouth: The Art of Kissing*.

And we still have 50 more weeks to go!

In light of all this dumpster fire smoke, it seems useful to examine the very narrow limits within which papal authority is circumscribed by the Church's perennial teaching. Otherwise, well-meaning people might very well get the idea that the Catholic Church is morphing before our eyes into a mainline Protestant denomination. Plus bingo.

Talking Real Catholicism with an Imaginary Protestant

Q: As I remember, you Roman Catholics used to take the occasional jab at Protestants for the moral chaos that erupts when you don't have a central authority — you know, a trustworthy figure whom you're certain will keep the church's doctrine the same as it always has been, since the apostles.

A: Yes, some of us did.

Q: So... how's that working out for you?

A: Very funny. I'd bring up Benny Hinn right now, but I frankly don't have the heart.

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Q: So has Pope Francis's behavior led you to re-evaluate papal authority?

A: Absolutely. It's forcing us to hunker down and realize exactly what it was that Christ promised us, and what He didn't. Thanks to Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, we Catholics got good and spoiled. Both men were well-educated, highly intelligent, deeply benevolent, and devoted to the historic teachings of the church. It was easy to assume that every pope would have to have all those attributes — though of course a reading of Renaissance history (for instance) would have told us something different. A pope really can have none of those attributes, and still hold the throne of Peter. At such times, it's only the Holy Spirit that protects us against our shepherd.

Q: Fair enough. Without getting into all sorts of Catholic inside foosball, explain to me how you can still be Catholic and reject what the pope is saying and doing on crucial areas of faith and morals. And how can he apparently contradict what previous popes and councils have solemnly taught on those issues?

Can a Catholic Reject What the Pope is Saying?

A: Okay. The whole idea of church authority which Catholics and Eastern Orthodox hold, and which virtually every Christian on earth accepted until 1517 — I'd like to remind you — is this: Jesus taught the apostles many things, not all of which got literally transcribed in the documents which decades later were written, and were compiled by bishops into the New Testament. Those truths which Christ taught them, which they preached to the first Christian communities and then from the pulpits of churches, were key criteria which the church used when it discerned which "gospels" were authentic and divinely inspired, and which ones were pious fictions. Did this "gospel" match what the bishops had learned from their predecessors, who learned them from Jesus?

For instance, it is possible to read the New Testament and be confused about whether Jesus is co-equal with the Father. Millions of Christians (called "Arians") got that wrong. It took the bishops of the Church gathered in councils to clear up such misunderstandings ("heresies"). That body of teachings which bishops passed down for three hundred years before the Canon of scripture was "closed" has a name: We call it sacred (big-T) Tradition. It is not the traditions of men, but the handing-on (*traditio*) of what Jesus taught the apostles. Combine those truths with the truths of scripture, and you've got the whole *megila*, which we call the Deposit of Faith. It's the job of the bishops and the pope to hand on that Deposit of Faith, unchanged and untarnished by human inventions, from one generation to the next. Think of it as a relay race.

How Can We Recognize Authentic Teaching?

Q: So how do you determine what's the authentic Deposit of Faith, perhaps rephrased or clarified, and what are human corruptions that a wicked or stupid bishop or pope has decided to slather on top of the baton?

A: The Church has a teaching authority, which we call the Magisterium. (We stole that name from the villains of a Philip Pullman novel.) It amounts to the bishops and the pope. On extraordinary occasions, the bishops will gather in a universal (“ecumenical”) council, and issue decrees that clear up disputed points. That happened at Nicaea when the bishops condemned the Arian heresy, which taught that Jesus was less than the Father. It happened again at Trent, when the bishops condemned divorce and remarriage. Every pope thereafter is bound by the results of such a council. On even rarer occasions, a pope will invoke his maximal authority, and issue a teaching that has the same weight as a council’s. This has happened at least twice, and at most probably eight times in history. These are the only exercises of the Church’s authority which we call “infallible.” We call them (sorry for the jargon) the “extraordinary Magisterium.”

Q: What’s the ordinary kind?

A: That refers to statements by bishops and popes that simply repeat, perhaps slightly rephrased, what the church has always taught since the age of the apostles on a given subject. These re-statements of previous church teachings don’t claim infallible authority, but Catholics are supposed to defer to them, on the assumption that bishops and popes probably know the Tradition better than we do. That’s usually a pretty good bet.

Q: What happens when a pope says something that isn’t grounded in Tradition, but is simply his own idea or interpretation? A: Then it’s not part of the Magisterium, and we have no duty to defer to it.

Q: What about when the Church has said one thing in one century, and another thing later on? For instance, after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome, bishops suddenly wanted the government involved in policing people’s religious faith. But at Vatican II, the church renounced that idea, and went back to its old call for religious freedom.

A: That didn’t go back to the Apostles, you’ll notice, so it could never have been part of the original Deposit of Faith. But the very fact that the church took two opposing positions at different times means that it was never part of the ordinary Magisterium. The same thing is true of lending money at interest and slavery, on which church authorities have expressed conflicting opinions. Most political and economic questions, except at the very highest level of general principle, cannot be settled by appealing to the Magisterium. So you can’t put together a Catholic ideology based on what popes have said over the centuries. It just doesn’t hold together. That’s not true of dogma and doctrine.

Q: Now the question of divorce and remarriage has been settled, infallibly as you say, by the Extraordinary Magisterium. So if Pope Francis were to say, “Yes, I am teaching something new on divorce, remarriage and Communion. ...” You wouldn’t be obliged to defer to it?

A: No, we’d have the duty to scream our heads off and reject it — as the laity rejected the Arian heresy, even when a pope got squishy under pressure from the emperor.

If the Catholic claim about papal infallibility is true, no pope would live long enough to sign an ex cathedra document that taught heresy.

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Q: So that wouldn't be part of the Magisterium?

A: Not at all — because it doesn't repeat previous teaching, but contradicts it. Now Jesus was able to come along and say things like, "Moses taught you X, but I say unto you Y." You know why He could do that? Because he was GOD. Okay? That's not a power which every pope, or any pope, is given. To say that really would be idolatry, treating popes as if they were God.

Q: But aren't Vatican officials and bishops claiming that the new teaching in Pope Francis' document, *Amoris Laetitia*, is part of the Magisterium? A: Yes. They are misrepresenting the truth — as Bishop Sorondo did when he claimed that Pope Francis' opinions on the scientific details of climate

change were Magisterial teaching.

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Q: What if Pope Francis decided to issue an infallible statement, insisting that the Maltese bishops' interpretation on divorce, marriage and communion are authentic Catholic teaching?

A: In such a situation, we believe the Holy Spirit would intervene. As Catholics, we believe that God would veto such a statement. Q: How would He do that?

A: Look back at scripture for examples. Noah's flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the fate of Onan. It's not for me to predict what means He'd decide to use. But if the Catholic claim is true, no pope would live long enough to sign such a document.

Q: And that's all that papal infallibility means? "Try to teach heresy ex cathedra, and get a heart attack?"

A: Yes, in effect. The pope is not an oracle, not a second Jesus, not the Supreme Court rewriting the Constitution as it goes along. He's like a Fedex guy, and it's his job to pass on a package. He's not empowered to open it, rifle through the contents, and replace them with something "better."

This article is reprinted with permission from The Stream. John Zmirak is author, most recently, of The Politically Incorrect Guide to Catholicism.