

# A SORELY NEEDED THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE TRUTH OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH

Cardinal Gerhard Müller's book *The Power of Truth* addresses the challenges to Catholic doctrines and morals today—not only by the culture at large, but also by elements within the Church.

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**Cardinal Gerhard Muller, then-prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is pictured before Pope Francis' general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in this Nov. 19, 2014, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)**

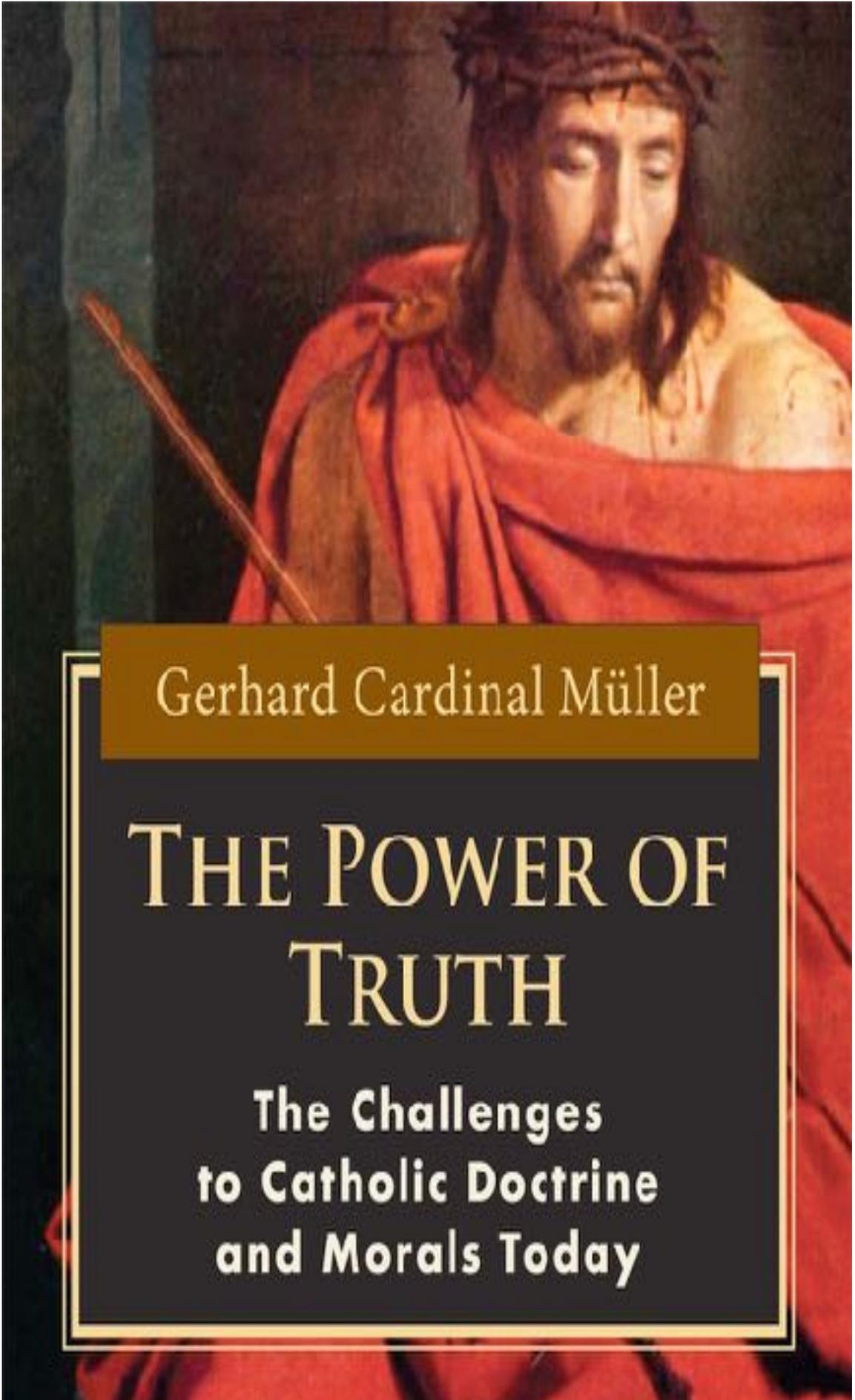
Cardinal Gerhard Müller's book *The Power of Truth: The Challenges to Catholic Doctrine and Morals Today* consists of several essays on a variety of teachings that are currently in the limelight of the Church's crisis

—doctrinal, moral, and ecclesial in nature—presenting challenges to Catholic doctrine and morals today. The cardinal aims at clarifying the Church’s teaching on Catholic sacramentology, particularly marriage and confession (46-82), the scope and limits of papal magisterial authority (13-22), doctrinal development, and the corresponding manner for distinguishing between development and corruption (23-35), the nature of faith (36-45), Christian anthropology and sexual ethics (83-95), the denial of God and the loss of reality’s intelligibility (96-113), the opposition between the doctrinal and the pastoral (114-135), and, last but not least, faith, reason, and public life (136-150).

The book concludes with a “Manifesto of Faith” (151-158), a creedal statement that Cardinal Müller holds is needed because of the growing confusion in the Church on the doctrine of the Catholic faith. In this article review, I will show that these themes theologically hang together in Cardinal Müller’s reflections, attempting to justify the truth of the Catholic faith.

### **Truth and reason’s truth-attaining capacity**

Significantly, Cardinal Müller argues that at the root of this multifaceted crisis is the denial of the sense of objective truth, not only of its ground in reality, in the nature of things, but also knowable in rational human thought. In short, the denial here pertains to both the “existence and recognizability of truth” (110), founded in God, the Creator of the world (7). Müller is a realist not only about truth’s nature, such that a proposition is true if and only what it asserts is in fact the case about objective reality, being the truth about reality (7, 110)—but also that truth is knowable, constitutive of human reason’s truth-attaining capacity. God, the Creator of the world, explains how the mind of man is fit to grasp the reality of things as they really are. Cardinal Müller might well have cited the then Pope Benedict XVI, “The gospel message perceives a rationality inherent in creation and considers man as a creature participating in, and capable of attaining to, an understanding of this rationality.” He adds, “The objective structure of the universe and the intellectual structure of the human being coincide; the subjective reason and the objectified reason in nature are identical. In the end it is ‘one’ reason that links both and invites us to look to a unique creative Intelligence.” The ultimate theological root of this mutual correlation of subject and object, knowing and being, reason and reality, is the *Logos*.



Gerhard Cardinal Müller

# THE POWER OF TRUTH

**The Challenges  
to Catholic Doctrine  
and Morals Today**

This realist understanding of truth is not just an abstract theory. Consider the denial of objective truth in thinking about marriage. Is marriage a two-in-one-flesh union between a man and a woman because the Church says so, positing or postulating its existence and nature according to its own judgment, that is, church law? If so, then, one accepts ecclesial positivism. Indeed, Catholics, such as Johan Bonny, the Bishop of Antwerp, Belgium, may be regarded as an ecclesial positivist because he gives as the only reason for rejecting same-sex marriage the fact that “Church law” says otherwise. This positivism is similar to one thinking that human beings have rights because the state or society says so.

Alternatively, does the Church judge that marriage is a two-in-one-flesh union between a man and woman because that judgment is true to an objective reality, according to the order of creation? If so, one is a Christian realist: marriage is grounded in the order of creation, of an independently existing reality, indeed, of natural law, and therefore has an objective structure judged by the Church to be the case or the way things really are. In this connection, we can understand why the nature of marriage as a two-in-one-flesh union between a man and a woman is a natural truth accessible to human reason (see “Faith’s Political Witness,” 136-150).

Thus, in light of the denial of the sense of objective truth we can appreciate the importance of Cardinal Müller’s address, “The Question of God Today.” He argues there that scientism (the conviction that science gives us the whole and ultimate truth about reality) and materialism with its naturalistic worldview have followed from the claim regarding the obsolescence of philosophical and theological approaches to God in which human reason can make true statements about God. This has led to a truncated human reason bound to the horizon of human experience, to metaphysical skepticism and, yes, moral relativism. We have been left with our culture’s “estrangement from God, in its whole spectrum, beginning with the depersonalization of God in pantheism and deism to resignational agnosticism and aggressive neo-atheism, declaring all religion harmful and to be fought against” (100).

Chiefly, the intellectual, moral, and existential challenge of the denial of God is such that “When God is forgotten, however, the creature itself grows unintelligible” (*Gaudium et spes* 36).

### **Human sexuality’s unintelligibility**

One particular site of unintelligibility is human sexuality, especially the ontological basis of sexual difference. The result of denying objective truth is clearly described by Cardinal Müller. “If truth is merely subjective

and finds its criterion only in individual advantage and pleasure, then we have not arrived in the kingdom of freedom, but are stranded in the ‘dictatorship of relativism’” (7). In his chapter on “*Humanae Vitae* and the Revolution of Love,” he briefly analyzes the impact that this denial has on the cultural crisis called the “sexual revolution.” This revolution is galvanized by the practice of contraception. Contraception changed our understanding of the sex act by separating sex and babies. Consequently, human sexuality is reduced to a mere source of pleasure:

When the link between sexuality and procreation is broken, sexuality is not liberated but rather abandoned to the mere search for pleasure and self-satisfaction. The couple closes in on itself. In the end, even the sense of being a couple is lost, and the two are left as isolated individuals who, while doing something together, nonetheless remain alone. (84)

It is not that human sexuality is separated from moral norms as such. Some supporters of the sexual revolution have argued that a general ethics governing inter-personal relationships also holds for engaging in sexual acts. These moral norms prohibit lying, deception, and exploitation. Rather, the crux of the problem is that there is no *distinctive sexual* ethics ordering sexual bodily acts to real human goods—the natural meanings and ends of man’s sexual powers: union and procreation. The latter are intrinsic aspects of the well-being and fulfillment of human persons.

Furthermore, one of the central reasons why a distinctive sexual ethics is denied by many is that there is no room, on their view, for a moral law, grounded in the one human nature, willed by God, and known as the natural law. At the root of this cultural crisis is a faulty anthropology that denies the truth that the human person is bodily, a differentiated embodied person, male or female. Rather, a dualistic view of the human person is accepted in which the body—indeed, sexual difference—remains extrinsic to personhood. Says Cardinal Müller, “By ‘liberating’ sexuality from [distinctively sexual] moral norms, the sexual revolution did not arrive at a deeper anthropological appreciation of human sexuality” (84). Rather, he adds, “by separating sexuality from fruitfulness, the sexual revolution disintegrates *sexus*, *eros*, and *agape*, the unity of which is grounded in the substantial unity of soul and body” (83).

The cardinal urges a recovery of “the basic anthropological fact” that “human nature consists of the substantial unity of body and soul in its

historically and socially conditioned existence” (86). This recovery will happen by responding to the challenges of the sexual revolution with Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* that “declares a revolution of life and love” (85).

### *Humanae Vitae*’s **core doctrine**

At its core, *Humanae Vitae* affirms “the inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings of the marital *act*” and not merely their moral inseparability in “marital *life*.” The distinction here is crucial for understanding the morality of the sexual act. Overlooking marital acts in particular, and attending exclusively to marital life in general, when considering the question of the morality of contraceptive sex “ultimately spiritualizes marriage, robbing it of its concreteness as expressed in bodily acts” (88). It would render the “contraceptive choice, which Paul VI called intrinsically immoral, into something morally licit, at times even morally required” (88). By contrast, *Humanae Vitae*’s integral view of the human person, affirming the substantial unity of body and soul, and hence the sexually differentiated person, safeguards human dignity and renders each and every sexual act open to self-giving love. Hence, Cardinal Müller concludes, “In the fullness of all its dimensions, conjugal morality must be developed in the context of a Christian personalism that avoids the extremes of spiritualism and materialism” (86). This conclusion highlights the key to Catholic sexual ethics: the truth that the human person is bodily. Most significant, it avoids situation ethics that is a false ethical theory opposed to the Catholic faith (31, 89).

In this connection, Cardinal Müller raises the particular question regarding the status of the Church’s authoritative teaching about the inseparability of loving union and procreation in the marital act (88-92). However, he also raises the general question about the relation of “the pope’s Magisterium and the Tradition of the Church.” Müller adds, “When he interprets the words of Jesus, must the pope be in continuity with the Tradition and the Previous Magisterium, including that of the most recent popes?” Some theologians suggest otherwise, namely, “the Church’s Tradition . . . has to be reinterpreted in the light of the pope’s new words.” Müller concludes with the important question, “What if there are contradictions?” (13) Let’s look briefly at his answers to these questions.

## Theological notes

What kind of authority, theological note, qualifies the core moral statement of *Humanae Vitae*? From its very beginning, the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* has had its opponents, in particular those who claim that its teaching is reversible, non-definitive. Müller rejects this claim. Is the object of this teaching a solemnly defined act of the papal magisterium such that the teaching regarding the immorality of contraceptive choice is infallible? Well, it is infallible teaching, says Müller, although it is not the object of a solemn infallible definition made by the pope teaching from the Chair of Peter (*ex cathedra*). Nevertheless, the teaching is infallible by virtue of the authority of the ordinary and universal Magisterium of the pope and bishops. “One can make a convincing case that the Church’s teaching against contraception pertains precisely to this ordinary and universal Magisterium” (90).

In fact, the Church’s moral teaching on the immorality of adultery, fornication, masturbation, abortion, stealing, and cheating are also infallible teachings of the ordinary and universal Magisterium; in short, they have never been solemnly defined. Overestimating the authoritative value of solemn definitions results from wrongly thinking that only teaching that is solemnly defined is infallible. Thus, concludes Müller, “A proliferation of solemn definitions in the area of morality would have had to follow, with the result that the authoritative value of solemn definitions would decline in proportion to their frequency, and the authority of the ordinary magisterium would be lost entirely” (9).

However, Cardinal Müller leaves unconsidered not only the meaning of infallibility but also its justification. Infallibility pertains to the exercise of the Church’s teaching authority when she ascribes the highest degree of certainty to a dogmatic or moral truth. Infallibility extends not only to revealed truths that are solemnly defined in the exercise of the Church extraordinary magisterium but also to those truths that are infallibly proposed by the ordinary and universal magisterium of the Church. Hence, not only what is solemnly defined is infallibly taught. Furthermore, we need to distinguish between the truth of a dogma and its being an infallible teaching. Declaring a dogma infallible does not make it true, but rather the highest degree of certainty is ascribed to this teaching that is already known to be true. Dogmas are either solemnly defined or are a declaration of *confirmation or reaffirmation*, a formal attestation, of a truth already possessed and infallibly transmitted by the ordinary and universal magisterium of the Church.

Also left unaddressed by Cardinal Müller is whether the moral teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is a primary or secondary object of infallibility, that is, a dogma or a doctrine. If a dogma, it is a divinely revealed truth contained in the Word of God, written or handed down, either (a) formally defined by a pope or Council; or (b) taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium. If it is a doctrine, then it too is infallibly and irreformably taught to be a truth; it is not revealed per se but is materially belongs to Catholic faith. Doctrines that are infallibly taught as inseparably connected with revelation, concerning matters required to support the faith, and called secondary objects of infallibility. These truths are necessarily connected with revelation by virtue of either an *historical relationship*, or a *logical connection*, expressing a stage in the development of the understanding of revelation. These truths are (a) formally defined by a pope or Council; or (b) taught infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium of the Church as a *sententia definitiva tenenda* (a judgment to be held definitively). Both primary and secondary objects of infallibility are such that they are at one and the same time not only fundamentally irreversible, or irreformable, and hence can never be contradicted, but also may need to be clarified over time, with their possible correction, modification, and complementary formulations.

### **Truth and its formulations**

In this connection, Cardinal Müller rightly explains, “this formulation merely gives a clearer expression of a truth that is already known. . . . Development of doctrine in this sense refers to the process by which the Church, in her consciousness of the faith, comes to an ever deeper conceptual and intellectual understanding of God’s self-revelation” (27). What this means is the magisterium, indeed, the papal magisterium “cannot add anything to the revelation given to us in Scripture and Tradition, nor can he change the content of previous dogmatic definitions” (17-18). In sum, the “Church’s Magisterium does not invent or compose the truths of our faith. Its task rather is to witness to these truths continuously and unanimously, defending them against challenges that put them into doubt” (94). This teaching reflects the Church’s understanding of revelation as expressed by *Dei Verbum* 2 that the economy of special revelation consists of a pattern of deeds of God in history and words, of divine actions and divinely given interpretations of those actions, that are inextricably bound together in that revelation. God’s redemptive revelation of himself is accomplished through historical events as well as through written words.

Thus, jointly constitutive of God's special revelation are its inseparably connected words (verbal revelation) and deeds, intrinsically bound to each other because neither is complete without the other; the historical realities of redemption are inseparably connected to God's verbal communication of truth, of propositions asserted to be the case about objective reality, which is "an understanding of revelation as information, as the communication of propositions" (94). This is how we should understand *Dei Verbum* 11:

Therefore, since everything *asserted* by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be *asserted* by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation." (emphasis added)

Given, then, the central importance of assertions, of revealed truths – and hence propositional revelation – in Sacred Scripture, I think we can say – along with John Henry Neman – that revealed truths have been "irrevocably committed to human language." This propositional revelation in verbalized form, or what Newman called the "dogmatical principle" is at once *true* though not *exhaustive*, "imperfect because it is human," adds Newman, "but definitive and necessary because given from above."

This concluding statement regarding revealed truth brings us to the question regarding the relationship between the papal Magisterium and the Tradition of the Church. Müller argues that the Church steers a course between the Scylla of thinking of the pope as "an absolute monarch whose thoughts and desires are law" (in the words of Benedict XVI) and the Charybdis of conciliarism or episcopalism, whereby the validity of the pope's judgment requires the consent of the whole Church. Regarding the former, the pope's judgments "are at the service of the whole Tradition, and not the other way around" (20).

Müller then adds, the pope's judgments regarding who may receive communion "are orthodox only if they agree with the words of Christ preserved in the deposit of faith. Similarly, when cardinals, bishops, priests, and laity ask the pope for clarity on these matters, what they request is not a clarification of the pope's opinion. What they seek is clarity regarding the continuity of the pope's teaching . . . with the rest of tradition" (34). In short, the pope is a servant of the Word of God (see *Dei Verbum* 10), bound to the authoritative sources of the faith, namely, Scripture and Tradition.

## The nature of faith

The Apostle Paul calls us to believe with one's heart and to confess what one believes (Rom 10:9). This is a twofold Christian imperative – the creedal and confessional imperative – that is at the root of creeds and confessions of faith. Faith involves both the *fides qua creditur* – the faith *with which* one believes – and the *fides quae creditur* – the faith *which* one believes. The crux of this understanding of the nature of faith is made clear by Müller in his reflections on the question, “Is there a Saving Truth?” His answer is definitive: “our eternal salvation depends on the concrete acceptance of the truths of faith” (42). Maximally, a biblical account of faith involves knowledge (*notitia*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*); indeed, these are three elements of a single act of faith involving the whole person who commits himself to God.

Minimally, however, faith involves belief, and to have a belief means that one is intellectually committed to the whole truth that God has revealed. Furthermore, faith involves holding certain beliefs to be true, explains Thomas Aquinas, because “belief is called assent, and it can only be about a proposition, in which truth or falsity is found.” Moreover, the *fides quae creditur* is the objective content of truth that has been unpacked and developed in the creeds and confessions of the Church, dogmas, doctrinal definitions, and canons.

Now, although propositional truth is an indispensable dimension of truth itself, how truth is authenticated—that is, lived out, practiced, carried out—cannot be reduced to it—to being merely believed, asserted, and claimed because the Christian faith is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent. Müller rightly states, “knowing God's *truth* and observing his commandments in one's *life* always go together” (41). In other words, “Truth and morality are interdependent. This is the radical novelty of Christianity. There must not be any contradiction between the faith that is confessed and the life that is lived according to God's commandments” (41).

This conclusion brings us to Müller's reflections on Catholic sacramentology, particularly marriage and penance (46-82). “[T]here cannot be a double truth in Catholic teaching. What is dogmatically wrong will have harmful effects on pastoral work to the extent that the latter will be guided by false principles, endangering the salvation of souls” (57; see also, “The Church in Dialogue,” 114-133). Here, too, regarding the relation between the sacraments and life there must not be any contradiction

between truth and its authentication in life, dogma and life. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§89):

There is an organic connection between our spiritual life and the dogmas. Dogmas are lights along the path of faith; they illuminate it and make it secure. Conversely, if our life is upright, our intellect and heart will be open to welcome the light shed by the dogmas of faith.

## **Catholic sacramentology**

Müller argues that we live in “an antidogmatic climate that has negative effects on the understanding of the sacraments” (56). This climate has created a dualism between dogma and life, mercy and truth. Müller rejects this dualism.

According to Catholic sacramentology, the sacraments are means of grace possessing a real, objective efficacy, wherein the visible sign is not only expressive but also effective in communicating grace. The sacraments are a “testimony to the power of grace” (66-82). The sacraments actually accomplish what they signify by conferring the grace that they signify (see 60). This notion of sacramental efficacy distinguishes Catholic sacramentology, according to the Council of Trent. “If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify, or that they do not confer that grace on those who place no obstacles in its way, . . . let him be anathema” (Session VII, Canon 6). The effective source and cause of grace is Christ himself, and hence the sacraments as such possess efficacy because, in the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “they are acts of Christ himself.” “[Sacraments] are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work; it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies. This is the meaning of the Church’s affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato*, that is, by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all” (§§1127-1128).

Therefore, sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato* means the same as by the power of Christ and God, which brings out the Christological character of the sacramental grace offered. The failure to understand the Christological foundation of sacramental efficacy, and the corresponding distinction between principal and instrumental cause of grace, leads to ritualism, juridicism, cheap grace, and a deistic view of “*ex opere operato*,” that is, as if Catholics separated the sacraments from the source and principal cause of grace working in them, and looked upon them as working

of themselves. We cannot separate the sacraments from their Christological foundation of the “*ex opere operato*”; otherwise, we are left with “the headless corpse of sacramentalism” (in the words of Edward Schillebeeckx). As Müller puts it, “The nature, action, and effect of the sacraments are disclosed only in the light of the Incarnation and the real historical mediation of salvation in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, the incarnate Word of God” (57).

Furthermore, the reception of grace is not automatic. Yes, the sacrament is an objectively efficacious means of grace, but the benefits of that grace is only subjectively received “in those who are well disposed” and who “place no obstacles in its way” (56). There is a dogmatic rule here pertaining to the conditions for receiving the grace of the sacrament. Consider the essence of the sacrament of penance:

When the Council of Trent defines that there are three acts of the penitent that form part of the sacrament of penance (repentance with the resolve not to sin again, confession, and satisfaction), then the popes and bishops of subsequent ages, too, are bound by the declaration. They are not free to grant sacramental absolution for sins, or to authorize their priests to do so, when penitents do not actually show signs of repentance or when they explicitly reject the resolve not to sin again. No human being can undo the inner contradiction between the effect of the sacrament—that is, the new communion of life with Christ in faith, hope, and love—and the *penitent’s inadequate disposition*. (20; emphasis added)

One crucial aspect of that inadequate disposition is the failure “to make a firm resolution to live according to the way of life that Christ has taught us and that the Church witnesses to the world” (50). Thus, without that firm resolution not to sin again (59), the penitent finds himself in contradiction with the Christian form of life and hence sacramental absolution cannot be given.

We reach here the crux of the problem in contemporary pastoral care. For we hear it often said: “This may be dogmatically correct, but it does not work for pastoral care” (57). Müller poses the problem clearly: Many are suggesting today that sacramental absolution can be given to penitents who, on account of mitigating circumstances, can be said to be free of subjective culpability before God, despite the fact that they

continue living in an objective state of grave sin. The distinction between an objective state of sin and subjective culpability is generally acknowledged by the Catholic theological tradition. What is more controversial is its application to the sacramental order. Is it possible to use the probable absence of subjective culpability as a criterion for granting absolution? Would this not mean turning the sacraments into subjective realities, which is contrary to their very nature as effective, visible—and thus objective—signs of grace? (46)

Cardinal Müller affirms the distinction between an objective state of sin and subjective culpability. Perhaps the penitent is not culpable for his sins because he lacks the knowledge that the action itself is sinful, and hence his “freedom may be impaired due to ignorance” (49). But there still remains to ask whether ignorance is culpable or nonculpable. Is he vincibly or invincibly ignorant? Although discerning the difference here is important, it does not mean that a person may be absolved from sin and hence may receive communion. Says Müller,

Even if a confessor is able to find reasons that speak in favor of a penitent’s diminished responsibility, the confessor should not forget that these very reasons hinder the person from discerning his situation before God in the right way. In any event, to say, ‘I absolve you’, in these cases would amount to confirming the error in which the person lives, an error that is profoundly damaging to his capacity to live according to God’s loving plan.

Admissions to the sacraments, then, require that the “faithful do not find themselves in contradiction with the Christian form of life.” Adds Müller, “Saint Thomas says that to admit someone to the sacraments who continues to live in sin means to introduce ‘a falsehood into the sacramental signs’. Thus one could be without culpability before God because of invincible ignorance and still not be able to receive absolution” (50). Otherwise, Müller concludes, we “‘subjectivize’ the Church’s sacramental economy, making it a function of our invisible relationship with God. It would mean to *disincarnate* the sacraments from the visible flesh of Christ and from his Body, which is the Church” (50).

## **Conclusion**

This short but powerful work reaffirms the unity between the Church as Mother and the Church as Teacher. It addresses the challenges to Catholic doctrines and morals today, not only by the culture at large, but also by elements within the Church. He provides a theological justification of the truth of the Catholic faith that is sorely needed today.

*The Power of Truth: The Challenges to Catholic Doctrine and Morals Today*

By Gerhard Cardinal Müller

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