

Fr. Perozich comments —

God is the source of all authority because He is the author of Creation, the author of Salvation, the source of Sanctification.

He shares His authority through Revelation which he gives in His personal visits to the patriarchs and the prophets recorded in the Holy Bible, and now to all baptized Christians through the Holy Spirit given first in baptism..

God shares His authority with each baptized Christian teaching the Christian the divine and natural law so that the Christian live it and share it.

God shares His authority with the apostles, who are the bishops over the centuries, so that they proclaim His truth, not their own ideas, not things counter to the Holy Bible which is the inspired recorded record of God's relationship with man and the infallible Tradition of the Church.

That authority is exercised by me and my fellow priests in communion with the Holy Catholic Church.

God taught in the old testament that the proof of the prophet speaking in God's name was that the prophecy would come true.

At the same time, he cautioned that some prophets do not speak in His name. Deut 13:2ff **"If there arises in your midst a prophet or a dreamer who promises you a sign or wonder, saying, "Let us go after other gods," whom you have not known, "and let us serve them," and the sign or wonder foretold to you comes to pass, do not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer; for the LORD, your God, is testing you to know whether you really love the LORD, your God, with all your heart and soul."**

At the same time, he warned that occasionally prophets speak rashly, not in His name. Deut 18:22: **"If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the word does not come true, it is a word the LORD did not speak. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not fear him."**

In addition, God taught that woe be to the one who speaks falsely using God's name and authority. Deut 18:20 **"But if a prophet presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded, or speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die."**

It seems to me that so many people are speaking so many novel things in the church today, that this article on authority is necessary to assist the Christian to listen to the true authority from God to guide the Christian's life in a time of chaos.

*“John urges his audience to ‘Test the spirits, whether they are from God.’ (1 John 4:1) Much of today’s prophecy is not prediction but exhortation, and can be judged according to what God has already spoken in our canonical Bible. As for predictions, one must be careful to name God as the one who has spoken them, lest one be proved false.” – Tom Hobson*

# **Pope Francis, contraception, and the problem of ecclesial authority**

A short course in understanding ecclesial authority, especially as it bears upon Catholic moral teaching.

[August 4, 2022 E. Christian Brugger](#)

Print



***Statue of Saint Peter at the Vatican. (Mateus Campos Felipe/  
Unsplash.com)***

It's been reported (see [here](#) and [here](#)) that the recent text from the Pontifical Academy for Life (PAL), *Etica Teologica della Vita* (*Theological Ethics of Life*, Vatican Publishing, 2022), advocates among other things the disregarding of the central moral norm taught in *Humanae Vitae* (no. 14), a norm that, as I will argue below, has the status of infallible teaching of the ordinary magisterium.

During an interview on the pope's recent return flight from Canada, Francis **referred** to this text: "On the issue of contraception, I know there is a publication out on this and other marital issues." He said the publication was one of the "acts" of an international gathering of theologians under the auspices of the PAL (he called it a "congress"). "In a congress", he said, "there are hypotheses, then they discuss among themselves and make proposals." He went on: "We have to be clear: those who participated in this congress did their duty, because they have sought to move forward in doctrine, but in an ecclesial sense".

So posing or proposing hypotheses that throw into question definitive moral doctrines is doing one's professional "duty" and "moving forward in doctrine".

Testing the pope's open-mindedness, a religion journalist then **raised the question**: "Are you open ... to a reevaluation [of your predecessor's total ban on contraceptives]? ... Does the possibility exist for a couple to consider contraceptives?" The pope replied: "This [question] is something very timely. But know that dogma,

morality, is always on a path of development, but always developing in the same direction.”

These papal statements, as well as other actions and words of the pope, have led to speculation that he intends to use his strategic method for creating ambiguity, as found throughout *Amoris Laetitia*, to free Catholics – as if he could! – from the obligation to avoid under pain of mortal sin all contraceptive acts

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**During the pontificate of John Paul II, Catholics had confidence that what was taught by the pope was sound. An unintended side effect was that some became overly dependent on papal statements to know what to think and what to value.**

Devout Church watchers today face a different situation. Given the pope’s ambiguous and confusing statements, it is essential that Catholics learn their faith and know their tradition so they can reasonably assess the value of statements and actions that issue from the Vatican.

**To do this, they must (among other things) understand *what Church teaching authority is and what it is not.***

My purpose here is to give a short course in understanding ecclesial authority, especially as it bears upon Catholic moral teaching. Who has the authority to teach? From where does the authority derive? What can rightly be taught? What are the degrees of authoritativeness? What kind of assent do the differing

degrees command from the faithful? And must I assent to problematic assertions made by the pope or bishops?

## **I. Authority to Teach Divine Revelation: Truths of Faith and Morals**

The following propositions establish the basis for understanding ecclesial authority (see Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, nos. 7-10).

- The contents of God’s divine communication were committed to the apostles for the sake of faith, holiness and salvation; they are called divine revelation, sometimes referred to as the *deposit of faith*.
- Divine revelation—handed on in “the apostolic preaching”— includes the contents of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition that teach matters of both faith and morals.
- Jesus charged his apostles and so the Church to preserve and transmit—defend & teach—the message of divine revelation.
- The Church’s *authority* to teach—called *magisterium* —is not of merely human origin but is Christ’s own authority given by the Holy Spirit.
- This authority was committed not only to the twelve apostles but to their proper successors until the end of time and among them in a unique way to the Successor of Peter.
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Thus, the pope and bishops' authority of Christ to teach "extends as far as is necessary for the preservation and faithful exposition of revelation" (*Lumen Gentium*, 25), and no farther.

We know, for at least two reasons, this authority includes the contents of the natural moral law; first because its existence and its general principles—and many concrete precepts derived from them—are explicitly or implicitly affirmed in Sacred Scripture and so constitute a part of divine revelation; and because the magisterium's authority to teach extends to all things "required for the holy keeping and faithful exposition of the deposit of faith" (*Ad Tuendam Fidem*, no. 4A, **Canon 750**, § 2), which includes all those truths "necessarily connected to divine revelation" (*Ad Tuendam Fidem*, no. 3).

It is a revealed truth, affirmed most plainly in *Romans* 2:14-16 and by implication throughout the New Testament, that all the precepts of the natural moral law are contained in the moral precepts of the parts of the Mosaic Law reaffirmed by Christ. Many of the precepts are plainly identified in the New Testament; others are implicit in the sense that any sound explanation of why those plainly identified precepts are morally sound will show that these other precepts cannot be denied without falsifying that explanation and thus preventing the faithful transmission and preservation of the precepts plainly revealed,

Now we know that popes make speech acts other than formal teaching acts on matters of faith and morals, for example, during interviews on airplanes, ceremonies with

non-Catholics, or speeches before the UN. But since these are not teaching acts, they possess no authority and command no obedience from the faithful. Why? Because he only enjoys the assistance of the Holy Spirit to teach when he is formally teaching.

Of course, if what he says is already a settled Catholic doctrine, then Catholics are bound to accept the doctrine. But—and this is important—they are not required in virtue of it having been said in those extra-magisterial teaching acts, but in virtue of the fact that it was already authoritatively taught by the Church.

Moreover, whenever popes offer their views on matters other than faith and morals, for example, on scientific issues such as whether the earth is round or whether human behavior is the principal cause of climate change, their assertions, even if found in formal ecclesiastical documents, possess no authority and command no obedience. Why? Because even if what they say is true, the Church and so the pope has no authority to teach on scientific questions. God hasn't promised the Church protection in resolving the quandaries of the natural world, only in understanding his divine communications for the sake of fulfilling his will, living holy lives and getting to heaven.

Finally, if popes assert anything contrary to divine revelation or good morals, even with the intention of formally teaching it or implicitly affirming it as true, the assertion enjoys no guidance by the Holy Spirit and so possesses no authority over the consciences of Catholics.

In fact, Catholics are bound when they discover the error to reject such teaching.

In summary, for their assertions to be assisted by the Holy Spirit and so bind the consciences of Catholics, they must be in the context of formal acts of teaching and must concern the truths of faith and morals taught in divine revelation.

## **II. Modes of Authoritative Teaching**

The Church rightly teaches on matters of faith and morals in three distinct modes each of which has conditions for its fulfillment (see *Lumen Gentium*, no. 25)

1. infallible teachings of the extraordinary magisterium
2. non-infallible teachings of the ordinary magisterium
3. infallible teachings of the ordinary magisterium

### **A.**

The first, infallible teachings of the extraordinary magisterium, refers to teachings in which the acts are guarded from all error by the Holy Spirit. This guarding or protection from error is given to the successors of Peter and to the successors of the apostles, the bishops, in union with Peter (e.g., when they gather together in a general Council), when they definitively teach the contents of divine revelation, to quote Vatican I, when they “religiously guard and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles” (Vatican I, *Pastor Aeternus*, ch. 4, no. 6).

This extraordinary type of teaching is exercised in one or other of two ways: by a pope when he “defines” a proposition of faith or morals “ex cathedra” (from the Chair of Peter), that is, when “he proclaims in a definitive act a doctrine on faith or morals”; and by “the body of bishops in union with the pope” (i.e. a universal Council) when “it exercises the supreme teaching office” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 25).

This mode of authority, in either of its forms, is exercised only very rarely. Neither the teachings of Vatican II, nor any teaching acts of Popes John XXIII, Paul VI or John Paul I or II were exercises of the infallible extraordinary magisterium. The last time the Church exercised its infallible teaching prerogative was when Pius XII **defined** the dogma of the Assumption of Mary in 1950.

Whether by the pope or a council, infallible teaching acts are carefully planned, conscientiously carried out, and widely publicized. The Church makes it clear when she invokes extraordinary infallibility that she intends to do so. You don’t have to say to yourself: “I wonder if what the pope said yesterday, or what he taught in document X is infallible?” You’ll know. Even the *New York Times* will announce it, **as it did with the news** of Pius XII’s proclamation.

Truths infallibly taught are said to be “irreformable” (*Lumen Gentium*, 25); they can’t be changed, contradicted or their teachings abrogated. The certainty of their truth ranks with the certainty of the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. From the faithful, they command an assent

of “divine and Catholic faith”. Catholics must believe these truths if they wish to remain in full communion with the Church.

## B.

The second type of authoritative teaching is called non-infallible teachings of the ordinary magisterium. This includes teachings that help us to understand divine revelation more deeply, recall conformity of some teaching with the truths of divine revelation, and warn against dangerous opinions or ideas incompatible with divinely revealed truth (see Ratzinger, “**Doctrinal Commentary** on the Concluding formula of the *Professio Fidei*”). The vast corpus of Vatican II, or of John Paul II’s writings, were ordinary teaching. (Again, if these were handed on an already irreformable teaching, it continued to possess this status, but it did not acquire the status in virtue of being taught by the pope or council.)

Catholics do not assent to ordinary teaching with divine and Catholic faith but rather with a “religious **submission of will and intellect**” (*Lumen Gentium*, 25). **This means we give the teachings a presumption of truth;** we begin with a mind and will disposed to accepting them as true; we receive them with humility, and **endeavor with docility to understand them as true.**

Having said this, the acts by which they are taught are not guarded by the charism of infallibility. They are “*per se* not irreformable” (*Dei Verbum*, 24). **This means popes**

**and bishops can err in their ordinary teaching.** If after careful consideration we come to judge that an ordinary teaching conflicts with a truth of divine revelation, or with definitive teaching of the Church, then we are justified in withholding assent from it. For example, *Amoris Laetitia*, part of the corpus of ordinary teaching of Pope Francis, teaches in such a way as to give the impression that divorced and civilly remarried Catholics are morally free to return to the sacraments and so full communion with the Church while choosing to remain in sexually active relationships with their new partners while their valid spouses still live. Since this implies that adultery is sometimes legitimate to engage in, Catholics should not only withhold assent from the teaching, they should reject it.

Ordinary teaching carries with it various levels of authoritativeness. The propositions of faith or morals asserted in a papal encyclical, for example, are more authoritative – i.e. more certainly true – than in an apostolic exhortation which are more authoritative than those in a pastoral letter. Each should be given a submission of mind and will in a manner proportionate to the teaching’s authority.

How is a document’s authority determined? Its status derives from the “manifest mind and will” of the author “which is communicated chiefly by the nature of the documents, by the frequent repetition of the same doctrine or by the style of verbal expression” (*Lumen Gentium*, 25).

Although popes could never invoke infallibility to teach falsehood—we must believe the Holy Spirit would

prevent this – we have seen that they can and sometimes do teach falsehood in their ordinary teaching.

### C.

Finally, there is infallible teaching of the ordinary magisterium (see *Lumen Gentium*, 25). This mode is currently rather poorly understood, and somewhat rarely acknowledged, but is and has always been of immense importance for understanding authoritative Catholic teaching. This type of ordinary authority is not exercised in single acts of teaching by a pope or ecumenical council, but rather through the manner in which ordinary teaching is proclaimed.

But if ordinary teaching is *per se* not irreformable, how can it sometimes be the vehicle for infallible teaching? If it fulfills the following four conditions taught by *Lumen Gentium*, the faithful can be certain that the teaching has been guarded from error by the Holy Spirit:

whenever the bishops, though dispersed throughout the world – but maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter – in teaching authentically matters concerning faith and morals, agree about a judgment as one that is to be definitively held” (*LG*, 25).

The four conditions are: that (a) the bishops *though dispersed* remain in union with the pope and one another;

(b) they teach *authentically* on a matter of *faith* or *morals*, i.e., teach *as* bishops some *proper object* of authoritative teaching; (c) they agree on a judgment; and (d) they teach that judgment *as to be definitively held* (“*definitive tenendam*”); note it does not say “teach the doctrine definitively”, which would mean teach it in an extraordinary manner; rather it says teach the doctrine as to be “*held*” definitively, that is, teach it in such a way that the faithful receive the doctrine as definitive, i.e., without ambiguity, as part of the faith of the Church, not subject to change.

**Truths considered proper objects of ordinary infallible teachings include all those of faith and morals taught in divine revelation and truths required for the holy keeping and faithful exposition of divine revelation** (see *Ad Tuendam Fidem* above). **This includes moral teachings not explicitly taught in Sacred Scripture but always held and taught to be true and necessary for living a Christian life, such as the wrongness of euthanasia** (see Ratzinger, *Doctrinal Commentary*, no. 11).

Since this mode of exercise, like its extraordinary counterparts, teaches irreformable doctrines, the corresponding truths ought to be held with “divine and Catholic faith” similar to truths taught by extraordinary means (See *Code of Canon Law*, **Can. 750**, § 1).

This category correlates to some of the Church’s most controversial teachings, teachings that are frequently dismissed as “non-infallible” by dissenting Catholics and

rejected. This includes the truths of the wrongness of every freely chosen contraceptive act, in vitro fertilization, and masturbation. Each of these, and many others like them, have indeed been infallibly taught by the Catholic Church and so are irreformable moral doctrines.

## **Conclusion**

If this pope or a future pope should attempt to teach contrary to his predecessors on contraception, he will run up against the irreformability of the traditional doctrine. This does not mean he will not try.

Should he try, every Catholic needs to know, whether he or she agrees with the Church's teaching or not, **that the pope has absolutely no authority to teach in this way.**

Nor had he any authority to teach that divorced and civilly remarried Catholics may go to Holy Communion without going to confession and resolving to live chastely.

Catholics have an obligation to reject such teachings. This obligation derives from the authority of divine revelation itself. Of course, **it firstly binds our Church's leaders to avoid – in their teaching, indeed in everything they state – any ambiguity about or contradiction of moral truths that have been taught by the Church's extraordinary or ordinary magisterium as to be definitively held (even, and especially, truths about which bishops have fallen into silence, denial or ambiguity).** Sadly, not all our bishops feel bound by this obligation.

Thus, lest we or those we love grow confused by the statements of various ecclesiastics, **we must get clear on who has the authority to say what, and how we should respond.**

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