

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*I hear so much nonsense from clergy of all ranks in the church. I never wish to be in that company promoting sophistry, ambiguity, using slogans, euphemisms, taking “texts out of context as a pretext” to promote who I think Jesus should be for you.*

*Yet not a few people in the pews claim to know way more than the scripture and tradition that I offer them. When they are NOT reassured by me in a homily, the emails and letters to the chancery begin to flow with a distortion of what I taught.*

*To help these confused anchorites become unmoored from their favored opinions to the truth of Jesus, I frequently admonish the assembly that, if anything they heard today does not ring well with their understandings, please search the Bible and the Catechism of the church (before it gets rewritten by those who do not like it.)*

*Dr. Peter Kwasnewski analyzes the state of teaching in the church today, and the difficulty of holding to the truth of Scripture and Tradition because of so many new pronouncements from clergy, many of which simply are not true.*

## Interpretation: What Is a Catholic to Do?

*How do we properly interpret Church texts when there are so many competing interpretations of them within Catholicism today?*

- [Peter Kwasnewski](#)



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Recently here at *Crisis Magazine*, Casey Chalk published “[The Protestant Doctrine That Gave Us Pro-Trans Churches](#),” detailing the impossible tangle that results from *sola scriptura* and offering a fine summary of the classic Catholic case for why there must be a God-appointed interpreter of the Bible, since it is not self-interpreting.

As a Roman Catholic traditionalist, I have often pondered certain epistemological dilemmas that confront us today, which bear a likeness to the *sola scriptura* phenomenon. These dilemmas have always been there, but they've usually taken milder forms and concerned only specialists. Today, they take on an acute and undeniable form, and, thanks to social media, everyone who is following Church news with any seriousness is aware of them. One of these dilemmas runs as follows.

No text interprets itself; every text requires an authoritative interpreter. However, the authoritative interpreter's interpretation is usually transmitted as a text. This text does not interpret itself but requires an authoritative interpretation; and that text requires another. Thus is created the specter of an infinite regress, in which no one can ever be certain that he possesses the correct meaning of a text.

"Surely that's an exaggeration," one might object. "The Magisterium speaks very clearly about all sorts of things: Nicaea on the divinity of Christ, for example. Or Trent on the transubstantiation of the bread and wine at Mass. Or Pius IX on the Immaculate Conception and Pius XII on the Assumption. Or the dogma of papal infallibility at Vatican I." In a way, that's all quite true: these dogmas are transmitted to us with considerable clarity, and some have found their way into undeniable liturgical expressions.

**But the waters can be muddied at times.** Let's take Vatican I. The meaning of the **dogma of papal infallibility** is notoriously controversial, and nowadays one can find extremely different, even incompatible interpretations of it, let alone of all its implications and corollaries—and one can find support for different views in papal documents and actions of the past 150 years. The views of Leo XIII or Pius X are not necessarily those of John Paul II or Benedict XVI. Compatible, perhaps; in continuity, arguably; but diverse.

Then there is the problem (the scandal, to speak more accurately) of hierarchs, from Pope Francis down the line of his creations (Cupich, McElroy, Roche, et al.), who selectively quote magisterial documents against what most people would call their “evident meaning.” Cardinal Cupich **recently cherry-picked** the Council of Trent and the encyclical *Mediator Dei* in support of the Novus Ordo and against the TLM. Absurd, yes; but he’s trying to build magisterial scaffolding to hold up his own point of view. *Amoris Laetitia* was another case where an instrument of the Magisterium was used as a blunt weapon to cancel out former magisterial teaching of a quite clear nature—clear, at least, on the level of a “natural reading” of texts.

So, it seems like the embarrassing Protestant pluralism to which Catholic apologetics triumphantly points as evidence of the inadequacy of *sola scriptura* and the need for a divinely-appointed guide comes back to haunt us in the form of *magisterial pluralism*—or better said, a mixture of Magisterium formally speaking (at all its varying levels) and of the pervasive **“official theology,”** which Thomas Pink has done us a great service in describing.

There are plenty of times when Catholics, in order to know what the truth is and not to be misled by error, must point to a Church document and say, perhaps to the head of the John Paul II Institute in Rome, or to prominent figures in the Synod on Synodality, or to Cardinal Roche: “Look, it is *really clear* from this *evident* text of *Veritatis Splendor* that you cannot say XYZ”; or “Look, Pius XII, in this passage of *Mediator Dei*, condemns the false antiquarianism that the Consilium relied on”; or “*Mediator Dei* proves that the laity do truly offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with the priest, but in an essentially different way than the priest offers it.” Examples of that sort can be easily multiplied.

In premodern times, the common folk learned a simple catechism modeled on creed and commandments, worshiped at a nearby church in a rite handed down since time immemorial, paid

their tithes, and died clutching a crucifix. We would like to think that such a childlike faith is still possible; and wherever tradition thrives it seems—at least in that world—to be possible. In a thriving traditional parish of today, one can sense the strength of the eternal truths that pulse through the old catechisms, the self-evident goodness of the Latin Mass, the generosity of believers who orient their lives to God, the common yearning to die in His grace and live with Him forever.

**This life of simple faith is still real**, as real as the Real Presence that calls it forth and sustains it. But it is under grave threat from factions in the Church—not the Church herself, the immaculate Bride of Christ, but those who dare to speak on her behalf—who despise the simple faith of “**the little ones**,” who vilify love of tradition as “backwardism,” adherence to dogma as “fundamentalism,” insistence on sound morality as “moralism,” and desire for coherence as “integralism.”

These factionalists do not want to leave **the Catholic shires** in peace; they make a lot of noise about “needs of modern man” and “development of doctrine” and “irreversible reform.” They practically force upon us, whether we’re interested or not, the necessity of discerning between authentic and inauthentic Catholic teaching. You may not be interested in the revolution, but the revolution is very interested in *you*.

At the end of the day, it seems that even Catholics who have the blessing of a “divinely-appointed teacher,” namely, the Catholic Church, will *still* need a principle or a set of principles for receiving, interpreting, and harmonizing what Church authorities say on her behalf. And this brings us back to the intelligence and conscience of the believer. There will always be some hermeneutical “filter” when I receive Church teaching; that’s unavoidable. I will at least implicitly ask myself: “Does this make sense given what I have *already received* from the Church? Does this contradict something that is *more fundamental*, or something I know with *greater certitude*? ”

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To hold, as some attempt to do, that one must simply fall in line with whatever the current pope says, regardless of whether it seems to clash openly with what the Church has taught in the past, is to my mind a complete nonstarter. For one thing, such hyperpapalism denies the first principle of all thought, which is the principle of non-contradiction (if the death penalty, in Scripture and throughout Christian history, is an expression of the moral virtue of justice, it will not do to say that it is “contrary to the Gospel and to human dignity”). For another, it offends the dignity of the person, a free and rational individual who should be treated as such—who is owed an account of the Faith that “holds water” and doesn’t make it a water-carrier for a political ideology or a partisan agenda.

Finally, the hyperpapist gravely harms the Church’s evangelizing mission by making her look, to outsiders, like a sect whose members change their minds depending on what their leader says is the latest message from above (or, in terms more familiar to us from the past decade, the latest intervention of the “God of surprises” as conveyed by his mouthpiece, the “pope of surprises”).

The grave harm done to the Church’s image *ad extra* by *Traditionis Custodes*, for example, is undeniable: How can it possibly make sense to non-Catholics, let alone to Catholics, that communities known for their high rate of practice, fidelity, and generosity would be shut down simply because they find it more fruitful to worship the way Catholics had done for most of their

religion's history? It's the purest possible example of scandal, about which Our Lord spoke some very precise words.

Even the issue of the moral character of the hierarch propounding a teaching is relevant to the consideration of how that teaching should be received, and this can be said without lapsing into some version of Donatism that equates Church membership or ruling authority with moral righteousness. If, for example, we have reasonably formed an opinion, by the usual ways in which we form opinions, that a particular pope or bishop is a liar, manipulator, hypocrite, gaslighter, abuser, protector of abusers, etc., then we will take what he teaches *cum grano salis*, and reasonably so; we will at least have a certain hesitation or suspension of judgment, since the immoral character of the propounder calls into question the motives and the content of what is being propounded.

None of this, to my mind, lands us in an inescapable subjectivism or relativism; but it demands of us a rigorous honesty in making the apologetic argument against Protestant subjectivism or relativism. We need to have the humility to admit that we ourselves have an analogous challenge *within* Catholicism that rests on the same basic law of hermeneutics; namely, that no text interprets itself—at least, not perfectly so, such that everyone will necessarily agree about its meaning, or even everyone of good will.

**So, far from casting us onto a desolate beach** of a remote island of skepticism from which there is no escape, this fact, to my mind, is among the strongest supports of Catholic traditionalism (by which I mean simply Catholicism—but we give it a special name owing to a peculiar circumstance of our age, namely, that modernism or progressivism has largely replaced Catholicism in many institutions and individuals). The root principle of traditionalism is this: we should hold fast, as much as we can, to the Catholic Faith as taught, described, depicted, and especially enacted in worship over the centuries and millennia.

The longer a practice has endured (think: the Rosary), the longer a formulation has remained (think: the Nicene Creed or the Eucharistic doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent), the longer a liturgy has been prayed (think: the **unbroken continuous development** of the Roman Rite of Mass until the 1950s/'60s), the more reliable it is to lean on it, to take it as true, good, holy, right, divinely approved. So much so that if a pope were, God forbid, to attempt to ban the Rosary, we would ignore that ban and continue praying the Rosary as before. There is a way out of the infinite regress. As Catholics, our default is to fall back on the cumulative and converging inheritance of tradition—yes, as mediated through the Magisterium but not as *reduced* or *reducible* to “**the Magisterium of the moment.**” This Magisterium includes the universal ordinary Magisterium of all the bishops as reflected in **traditional catechisms** and liturgical rites, as well as the (extraordinary) Magisterium of popes and councils, none of which can be in error.

Again, the philosophical problem I am focusing on is not “how do we know that Catholicism is true,” but “how do we know that we know, with a reasonable certitude, *what Catholicism is*” at a time when—let’s not beat around the bush—there are many competing “Catholicisms” on offer, and some of the most outlandish candidates are being pushed by high-ranking ecclesiastical authorities. Our certainty about the Faith is based on having a *sensus Catholicus*, a *sensus ecclesiae*, a *sensus fidelium* **nourished upon proven sources** known collectively to be sound and reliable in transmitting the dogmas and practices of the Faith.

In my opinion, this area of “intra-ecclesial apologetics” is a greater challenge for today’s apologists than refuting the Protestants, who, at the end of the day, and granting them plenty of good will, are rather blithering and bumbling opponents who have been refuted countless times, from the era of Cajetan, Bellarmine, and Francis de Sales; through the **Radio Replies** of

Frs. Rumble and Carty; down to **Thomas Howard**, Scott Hahn, and the innumerable apologists who populate our bookstores. We've driven a stake through the heart of the "five solas" so many times that it's a wonder they still squirm and kick.

Meanwhile, the need for intra-ecclesial apologetics seems to me either unacknowledged or brushed off with an airy (and lazy) hyperpapalism or with its Siamese twin, a brazen (and equally lazy) sedevacantism.

Such thought-stopping tactics do not solve anything. Instead, they occasion a crisis of conscience and temptations to apostasy among Catholics who cannot square what they have learned from any standard catechism or any historic liturgy with what they are seeing and hearing from the mouthpieces of the Church today.

Either we must intelligently vindicate the rights of tradition and the light of reason, or we must surrender to fideism, authoritarianism, positivism, and evolutionism. That terrain—a distinctively Catholic terrain—is where the great apologetic battles are yet to be fought.



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