

Fr. Perozich comments —

Enough people have expressed their frustration at comments from bishops and lower clergy and on so many statements coming from the Vatican, that are characterized by slogans, euphemisms, ambiguity, sophistry, ideologies, corporate language, lack of scriptural truth, and teeming with personal opinions from the mind of the speaker rather than from the mind of Christ

*1Cor:16 For “who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to counsel him?” But we have the mind of Christ.*

*Rom 12:2 Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.*

Edward Fesser is a philosopher. He proposes that the *MAGISTERIUM*, the teaching office of the church, is suspended when the truth of the faith from the bible and the apostles is not transmitted, rather a substitution for it of human ideologies is taught by bishops who are charged to teach the truth. The teaching authority remains, even when it is not exercised.

Jesus, the bible and the fathers of the church say **this**, but I say **that** and you must believe me because of the church office that I hold.

Could they be in error? Fesser says yes, and cites Cardinal Newman’s reference to the Arian crisis wherein the majority of bishops believed the heresy of Arius.

*“Those who upheld the notion that Christ was co-eternal and con-substantial with the Father were led by the young archdeacon Athanasius. Those who instead insisted that the Son of God came after God the Father in time and substance, were led by Arius the presbyter.” [Wikipedia]*

Athanasius’ expression of the truth is found in the Nicene creed which Catholics recite every Sunday. After many decades, Arius’ heresy faded.

Within that time it is said that 2/3 of the bishops sided with Arius view, not teaching the truth handed on from the apostles.

From this, Newman speaks of a **suspended magisterium**, a time when the teaching office of the church, while existing in theory, did not exist in practice. A personal and new teaching is given from the mind of man rather than from the mind of God.

Fesser cites this theory to explain why the lay faithful who hold to the timeless truth of God and have the right sense of faith, are teaching the truth while higher clerics have suspended their teaching office in proffering their own opinions.

*This article was sent to me from a faithful priest with comments from other faithful priests. So, to those who have expressed to me your frustrations, know that you are not alone in your fight for the truth to come from church leaders.*

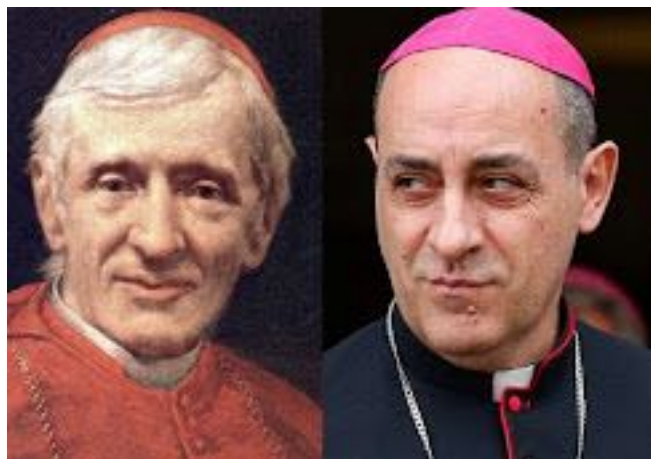
*I pray that soon the teaching will be clear from all bishops as it was from bishop Fulton J. Sheen and from the many faithful bishops who teach and who have taught as Sheen did.*

## **THE “SUSPENDED MAGISTERIUM” THESIS**

**FRIDAY, JULY 14, 2023**

**Cardinal Newman, Archbishop Fernandez, and the “suspended Magisterium” thesis**

*by Edward Fesser*



St. John Henry Newman famously [noted that](#) during the Arian crisis, “the governing body of the Church came short” in fighting the heresy, and orthodoxy was preserved primarily by the laity. “The Catholic people,” he says, “were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not.” Even Pope Liberius temporarily caved in to pressure to accept an ambiguous formula and to condemn St. Athanasius, the great champion of orthodoxy. **Newman wrote:**

*The body of the Episcopate was unfaithful to its commission, while the body of the laity was faithful to its baptism... at one time the pope, at*

*other times a patriarchal, metropolitan, or other great see, at other times general councils, **said what they should not have said, or did what obscured and compromised revealed truth**; while, on the other hand, it was the Christian people, who, under Providence, were the ecclesiastical strength of Athanasius, Hilary, Eusebius of Vercellae, and other great solitary confessors, who would have failed without them.*

**As Newman emphasized, this is perfectly consistent with the claim that the pope and bishops “might, in spite of this error, be infallible in their *ex cathedra* decisions.”** The problem is not that they made *ex cathedra* pronouncements and somehow erred anyway. **The problem is that there was an extended period during which, in their non-*ex cathedra* (and thus non-infallible) statements and actions, they persistently failed to do their duty.** In particular, Newman says:

*There was a temporary suspense of the functions of the ‘Ecclesia docens’ [teaching Church]. The body of Bishops failed in their confession of the faith. They spoke variously, one against another; there was nothing, after Nicaea, of firm, unvarying, consistent testimony, for nearly sixty years.*

Newman goes on to make it clear that **he is *not* saying that pope and bishops lost the power to teach**, and in a way that was protected from error when exercised in an *ex cathedra* fashion. **Rather, while they retained that power, they simply did not use it.**

In recent years, some have borrowed Newman’s language and suggested that with the pontificate of Pope Francis, we are once again in a period during which the exercise of the **Magisterium** or teaching authority of the Church has temporarily been **suspended**. Now, this **“suspended Magisterium”** thesis is not correct as a completely general description of Francis’s pontificate. For there clearly are cases where he has exercised his magisterial authority – such as when, acting under papal authorization, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under its current prefect Cardinal Ladaria [has issued various teaching documents](#).

To be sure, there may nevertheless be particular cases where the **“suspended Magisterium” characterization is plausible**. Consider the heated controversy that followed upon *Amoris Laetitia*, and in particular the *dubia* issued by four cardinals asking the pope to reaffirm

several points of irreformable doctrine that *Amoris* seems to conflict with. As Fr. John Hunwicke [has noted](#), **because Pope Francis has persistently refused to answer these *dubia*, he can plausibly be said at least *to that extent* to have **suspended the exercise of his Magisterium**. Again, this does not mean that he has lost his teaching authority. The point is rather that, insofar as he has refused to answer these five specific questions put to him, he has not, at least with respect to those particular questions, actually exercised that authority. As Fr. Hunwicke notes, he could do so at any time, so that **his teaching authority remains**.**

Again, though, it doesn't follow that the **"suspended Magisterium"** thesis is correct as a general description of Pope Francis's pontificate up to now. However, recently there has been a new development which, it seems to me, could make the thesis more plausible as a characterization of the remainder of Francis's pontificate. The pope has announced that Cardinal Ladaria will soon be replaced by Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández as Prefect of what is now called the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF).

Fernández is a controversial figure, in part because [he is widely thought to have ghostwritten \*Amoris\*](#). What is relevant to the present point, however, is what Pope Francis and the archbishop himself have said about the nature of his role as Prefect of DDF. In [a publicly-released letter to Fernández](#) describing his intentions, **the pope writes:**

*I entrust to you a task that I consider very valuable. Its central purpose is to guard the teaching that flows from the faith in order to "to give reasons for our hope, but not as an enemy who critiques and condemns."*

*The Dicastery over which you will preside in other times came to use immoral methods. Those were times when, rather than promoting theological knowledge, possible doctrinal errors were pursued. What I expect from you is certainly something very different...*

*You know that **the Church "grow[s] in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth" without this implying the imposition of a single way of expressing it.** For "Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology, and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow." This harmonious growth will preserve Christian doctrine more effectively than any control mechanism...*

*“The message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary.” You are well aware that there is a harmonious order among the truths of our message, and the greatest danger occurs when secondary issues end up overshadowing the central ones.*

There are several points to be noted here. First, the pope makes it clear that he wants the DDF under Archbishop Fernandez to operate in a “very different” way than it has in the past. Second, he indicates that part of what this entails is that **the DDF should focus on “essentials” and “central” issues rather than “secondary issues.”** Pope Francis doesn’t spell out precisely what this means, but the context indicates that he regards many of the issues the CDF has dealt with in the past to be “secondary.” Third, when the DDF does address an issue, it should not do so as a “control mechanism” that “pursue[s]... possible doctrinal errors” or “impos[es]... a single way of expressing” the Faith. Fourth, it should speak “not as an enemy who critiques and condemns.”

In [a recent interview](#), Archbishop Fernandez has commented on his own understanding of his role as head of DDF, and his remarks echo and expand upon the pope’s. Fernandez says:

*So you can imagine that being named in this place is a painful experience. This dicastery that I am going to lead was the Holy Office, the Inquisition, which even investigated me...*

*There were great theologians at the time of the Second Vatican Council who were persecuted by this institution...*

*[The pope] told me: ‘Don't worry, I will send you a letter explaining that I want to give a different meaning to this dicastery, that is, to promote thought and theological reflection in dialogue with the world and science, that is, instead of persecutions and condemnations, to create spaces for dialogue.’...*

The archbishop went on to say that he wants the DDF to avoid:

*All forms of authoritarianism that seek to impose an ideological register; forms of populism that are also authoritarian; and unitary thinking. It is obvious that the history of the Inquisition is shameful because it is harsh, and that it is profoundly contrary to the Gospel and to Christian teaching itself. That is why it is so appalling...*

*But current phenomena must be judged with the criteria of today, and today everywhere there are still forms of authoritarianism and the imposition of a single way of thinking.*

Here too there are several points to be noted. First, like the pope, the archbishop indicates that he wants the DDF to move away from the sort of activity that occupied it in the past, but he is a bit more specific than the pope was. He cites, as examples, investigations of theologians at around the time of Vatican II, and the investigation the CDF made of his own views (which, as the interview goes on to make clear, had to do with some things he'd written on the topic of homosexuality). So, he doesn't have long-ago history in mind, but the *recent* activity of the CDF. Furthermore, he criticizes *even this sort of investigation* (and not merely the harsh methods associated with the Inquisition) as a kind of "persecution."

Second, the archbishop says that what the pope wants is for the DDF not only to avoid such "persecutions" of individuals, but also to refrain from "condemnations" of their views. In place of such persecutions and condemnations, he wants "dialogue." Third, he takes this to entail that **the DDF will refrain from "the imposition of a single way of thinking."**

**Taking all of Pope Francis's and Archbishop Fernandez's comments into account yields the following. The DDF, which has heretofore been the main magisterial organ of the Church:**

**(a) will in future focus on central and essential doctrinal matters and pay less attention to secondary ones;**

**(b) where it does address some such matter, will not approach it by way of ferreting out doctrinal errors or imposing a single view;**

**(c) will emphasize dialogue with individual thinkers rather than the investigation, critique, and condemnation of their views;**

**(d) should in all these respects be understood as playing a role very different from the one played by the CDF in recent decades.**

**In short, this main magisterial organ of the Church will largely no longer be exercising its magisterial function.** It will issue statements about central themes of the Faith, but it will no longer pay as much attention to secondary doctrinal matters, will no longer pursue the

identification and condemnation of errors, will no longer investigate wayward theologians or warn about their works, and will in general promote dialogue rather than impose a single view. Hence it will no longer do the sort of job it did under popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, let alone the job that Newman says the bishops failed to do during the Arian crisis. And notice that, followed out consistently, **this means that the teaching of Pope Francis himself (let alone the deposit of Faith it is his job to safeguard) is not something the DDF is in the business of imposing.** It too would simply amount to a further set of ideas to dialogue about.

The implications of these recent remarks are, accordingly, quite dramatic. And while it is possible that the remarks will be clarified and qualified after Archbishop Fernandez takes office, the trend of Francis's pontificate is precisely one of avoiding the clarification and qualification of theologically problematic statements. **But whereas, in the past, this avoidance pertained to a handful of specific issues, it now seems as if it is being raised to the level of general DDF policy.**

If so, let us hope that this “temporary suspense of the functions of the ‘Ecclesia docens’” [teaching] does not last sixty years, as the previous one did. St. John Henry Newman, *ora pro nobis*.



**Edward Feser**

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<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2023/07/cardinal-newman-archbishop-fernandez.html>