

Fr. Perozich comments —

Pope Francis appearances and statements are presented constantly: the airplane pressers, the Scalfari interviews, the semiotic subversions <http://richardperozich.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/semiotics.pdf> with those who reject the church's teaching on sexuality, the pachamama, abortionists, naming dissenters to positions in the church, photo with Imam that all religions are willed by God, and on, present a papacy, intended or not, of a man speaking his thoughts rather than expressing the authentic role of passing on the faith of Jesus and confirming his brethren in the faith.

What is a Catholic to believe?

Can one disagree with a pope?

Eric Sammons gives a history, and then offers clarifying statements which I have highlighted in bold and in color at the end of the article.

The Hyperinflation of the Papacy

The role of the papacy in the minds of too many Catholics has morphed from being the center of Church unity to the source of Church teaching.



[Eric Sammons](#)

If you read the Catechism of the Catholic Church from front to back, you'll note that at least 98% of the content has nothing to do with the papacy. Creation, Original Sin, the Incarnation, hypostatic union, the Resurrection, moral commands against killing and lying, the inspiration of Scripture, sacramental grace, the all-male priesthood: none reference the pope. In fact, the subject "pope" doesn't even get its own entry in the subject index; instead, it reads, "Pope: see Apostolic Succession; Church: structure: hierarchical constitution."

The absence of extensive references to the pope is also the case when you peruse Catholic liturgical texts and the myriad Catholic devotions: very few even mention the pope, and none are intrinsically connected to the papacy.

Likewise, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which was written in the 4th century as the fundamental synopsis of Catholic belief—and which is still recited every Sunday at every Catholic Mass—does not mention the pope. When it describes the Church, it calls it "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic"—no mention of "papal" (although of course the papacy is part of the "apostolic" mark of the Church, as the *Catechism* properly notes).

And yet, when debates occur related to Catholic belief and practice either online or in real life today, usually the pope and the papacy dominate the discussion: "the pope said," "Pius XII commanded," "according to John Paul II..."

This dichotomy is stark and reflects a variety of historical factors, including 19th century European political debates and the long run of good and effective pontiffs after the Council of Trent. The most important factor, however, is that we all live in a post-Reformation world, in which a large section of Christianity decided to chuck the papacy to the curb. Because of this, Catholics realized they needed to defend the pope and the papal office, for fear of falling into the same individualist errors of Protestantism.

Yet, as the contrast I highlighted above indicates, that laudable goal **has morphed into a papacy-dominated religion in the minds of most Catholics (and non-Catholics)**. Even though the vast majority of Catholicism is not directly connected to the papacy, many Catholics today reference the papacy in almost every aspect of Catholic life.

This is most apparent in the area of morality. Catholicism has a rich moral tradition, in which a multitude of virtues form a symphony of a saintly life. Fortitude, justice, prudence, and temperance are the hinges on which these virtues hang, and in concert with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, all the virtues work together for our salvation.

You wouldn't know it by listening to many debates about morality today, however. Now, **almost every moral issue is reduced to one virtue: obedience. And typically this single virtue is reduced even further to obedience to the pope.** That is the only

virtue that matters; the only thing required of the Catholic to live a moral life.

If the pope says that artificial contraception is wrong, then you need to avoid that practice out of obedience to the pope. Not because artificial contraception violates human sexuality in so many ways, and fundamentally undermines the purpose of marriage, the procreation and education of children. No, it's because the pope said so.

The problem with this distortion of Catholic teaching is that it places the entirety of morality on the shoulders of one man. If a pope rightly condemns artificial contraception, fine. But if a pope suggests (or even his advisors suggest) that perhaps there are “exceptions” to the moral law in this area, then a debate opens about what should be an undebatable topic—at least if you understand the reasoning behind the prohibition.

This problem of course isn't just hypothetical these days. Pope Francis's frequent condemnation of the death penalty (and his rewriting the *Catechism* to that effect) has led many modern Catholics to believe the death penalty is always immoral, in contradiction to thousands of years of Catholic teaching. **There is no discussion of the virtue of justice or the importance of protecting the common good. Instead, it's just “we have to obey the pope on this.”**

That's not conformity to Catholic moral teaching; that's cult-like obeisance.

And to be clear, this is not just true of Catholic progressives under Pope Francis. Excessive focus on the

papacy was also the case with conservatives under Pope John Paul II. In fact, such an unbalanced view goes back more than a century; since Vatican I the dominance of obedience to the pope as the *sine qua non* of Catholic morality has been pervasive.

The 20th century, in fact, could be called the Papal Century in Church history. While the papacy has always been an important aspect of Catholicism, and over time became the direct driving force in the Church, in the 20th century that reality reached an apex.

One reflection of papal dominance can be seen in the ***Credo of the People of God***, written by Pope Paul VI as a modern summary of our faith. First, the very fact that a new creed was created not by a council, but individually by a pope speaks volumes. And within the new creed we also see the papal focus. The role of the pope is mentioned three separate times, and in the very first line on the Church, it states, **“We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, built by Jesus Christ on that rock which is Peter.”** Now the papacy is front-and-center in the definition of the Church, not a corollary of her apostolic nature.

While there is nothing false in Pope Paul VI’s creed, and in fact it makes sense to at least once mention the papal role in modern, post-Reformation times, **the change in emphasis we see when it comes to the papacy reflects what has become an unhealthy distortion of authentic Catholic teaching.**

Simply put, the role of the papacy in the minds of too many Catholics has morphed from being the

center of Church unity to the source of Church teaching. He is seen as hand-picked by the Holy Spirit and guided every minute by that same Holy Spirit. Thus his opinions on various social and political matters are seen as quasi-revelations from God. It's as if God reveals things to us through the pope, and only the pope. To question the pope's views is to question God Himself.

The proper Catholic understanding, on the other hand, puts the pope at the end of the line of revelation, so to speak, not the beginning.

First, **God revealed truths about Himself and about this world both through natural revelation (reason) and divine revelation.** He did this particularly through His Chosen People, as we see throughout the Old Testament. From both natural and divine revelation, we come to know truths about God and about how we are to worship and live.

Then, in the fullness of time, **God sent His Son to reveal Himself fully. Everything we need to know for our salvation is complete in Jesus Christ: there is no need for any new revelation beyond Him.**

Jesus Christ shared this full revelation—the deposit of faith—with His apostles, both directly and after His Ascension through the Holy Spirit. **The apostles received this revelation and were charged with proclaiming it to the nations.**

After the death of the apostles, their successors the bishops were then given a different task. **While they are also charged with proclaiming the deposit of faith, they receive no new revelation, but instead must**

protect the deposit of faith handed on to them by the apostles. Further, they then hand it on to the next generation of bishops.

So far, there is no mention of the pope, which might seem odd to modern Catholics convinced that the papacy is the only office that matters. It is only in that last step—the role of the bishops—that the pope is involved.

First, he has the same task as the other bishops; after all, he himself is a bishop. He is to proclaim and protect the deposit of faith and faithfully hand it on to his successors.

Unlike the other bishops, the pope does have a second role. He is also to “strengthen the brethren” (Luke 22:32). When there is a dispute among the bishops, he is there to help resolve it. He is the final court which decides among debating bishops. This is the reason, in fact, for his gift of infallibility. It ensures that debates can end and doctrine be declared in a definitive way. This gift of infallibility is not an invitation to make

new declarations, or, heaven forbid, change existing teachings.

Note then how many Catholics today put the cart before the horse: rather than **the pope** manifesting his own revelation from God, he **is actually at the end of the process, receiving what has been given to him by his predecessors, protecting it, and, if necessary, settling disputes that arise among the episcopate. He is not creating new teachings or even charged with “developing” them.**

It might appear from what I’ve written thus far that I don’t think the papacy is important or vital to the life of the Church. That’s not true; if that were the case, I’d still be Protestant, or perhaps become Eastern Orthodox. **The papacy, properly understood, is vitally important. It’s the “fail-safe” in the system; it keeps the Church from diverging from the deposit of faith when the bishops as a whole fail to defend it properly.** As can be seen by the multitudinous and contradictory teachings of the Protestants and the failure of the Eastern Orthodox to

maintain certain orthodox teachings, the papacy is necessary.

But the most dangerous heresies are not those that reject the truth; they are the ones that *distort* the truth. By keeping some of the truth, they are more attractive. It's true that the papacy is important, even necessary, but it's not true that it is the most important aspect of Catholicism. It's true that the pope must protect the faith, but it's not true that he creates it. The pope should not dominate the faith, but should be its humble servant. Catholics then must thread the needle between a rejection of the papacy and a hyperinflation of it.