

Fr. Perozich comments —

Being a priest does not exempt me from feeling unmoored and confused when I hear or read something from church authorities that is different from what was taught decades and centuries ago.

This article from Josué Hernández offers a way to discern what must be held and believed, and what must be given respect when it conflicts with previous teaching.

The church is called Mater et Magistra, mother and teacher.

Magisterium means a teaching of the church. Teachings are meant to form the minds, hearts, and wills of the faithful.

The teachings have different levels of obligation.

A doctrine DEFINED by the pope alone or the pope with the bishops such as in an ecumenical council, must be held by the faithful and such teaching is infallible.

A doctrine AGREED upon by the pope and all the bishops of the world regarding faith and morals is infallible, and is to be definitively held by all the faithful.

All other teachings from the hierarchy are not infallible, yet command respect even if they seem confusing.

When teachings from the magisterium appear to contradict other teachings, the faithful need to give authority to the DEFINED or AGREED doctrines over non infallible statements.

Josué Hernández guides the reader through this process of remaining faithful to the pope and bishops when statements made by them arouse doubt and confusion in us, the faithful.

Doctrinal Confusion & the Magisterium: a Concise Guide for Catholics



Josué Luis Hernández
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“And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” — *John 1:5*

Amidst this dead of night within the Church — wherein all seems obscured by a disorienting darkness; by mists and shadows; by strange and unfamiliar shapes and sounds that unsettle our senses, challenge our confidence and shake the very foundations of our faith — I want to affirm that **the Church’s Magisterium, nevertheless, remains a stalwart and immovable guide. The Magisterium of the Church is and always will be a light in the darkness. It remains now, as ever, an infallible means of dispelling falsehood, confusion and error and of bringing forth the clarity of truth. But in order to see this we must understand the Magisterium properly.**

What the Magisterium Teaches Us About the Magisterium

To begin with, I would like to give a brief summary of the three levels of magisterial authority:

1. The Extraordinary (or Solemn) Magisterium: This category of magisterial teaching is **infallible** and is the easiest to identify as being such because of its explicit and definitive nature. **It is exercised by either the pope alone** (e.g., the papal definitions of the *Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*), **or by the whole college of bishops, with the pope as their head** — as, for example,

when specific doctrines are defined in an ecumenical council (e.g., the Council of Florence on the necessity of the Church for salvation, Vatican I on papal infallibility, etc.).

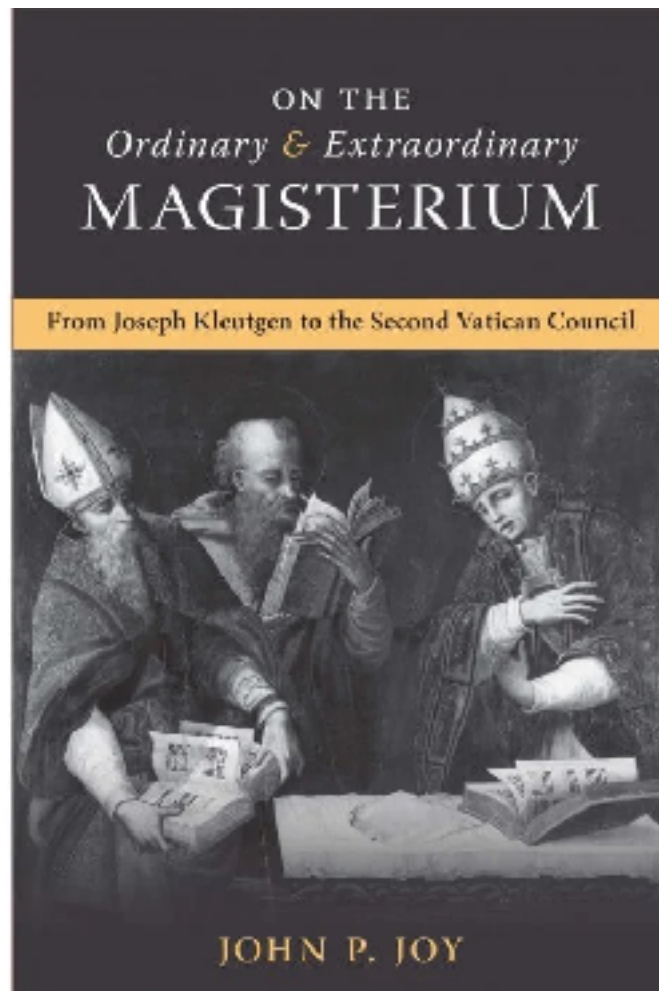
2. The Ordinary and Universal Magisterium: This category, like the first, is also **infallible** but lacks the explicit character of the former. **It is expressed when the entire episcopacy of the universal Church, under the headship of the pope, agree that a doctrine concerning faith or morals is to be definitively held by all the faithful.**

3. The Ordinary Magisterium: Referred to, at times, as the Authentic Magisterium, this level of magisterial authority, exercised by the pope and bishops, consists of all other magisterial acts that fall outside of the first two categories. Unlike the Extraordinary Magisterium or the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium, **it is not infallible.** Its teachings, nevertheless — according to Canon 752 of the Code of Canon Law — are to be received with a “religious submission of the intellect and will”. Lacking the safeguard of infallibility, teachings emanating from the Ordinary Magisterium, could, in theory, be erroneous. The benefit of the doubt should, however, still be offered to the pope and bishops who exercise it.

To go deeper, see OnePeterFive contributing editor John Joy’s PhD dissertation recently published in its 2nd edition by Arouca Press.

Making Sense of the Magisterium When it Seems to Contradict the Magisterium

So, now we come to the relevant issue at hand — the dilemma. **If ever two seemingly opposed teachings**



pertaining to faith or morals were to come to us directly from the magisterium of the Church, and one is either ambiguous or both seem to be in contradiction with one another, and we, the faithful, are forced to make a judgment as to what to believe, then what are we as Catholics to do? Clearly, in this scenario we cannot simply make that judgment based on chronology. I can't just say I prefer what is said on Thursday to what was said on Wednesday because today happens to be Thursday. I may as well say I prefer what was said on Wednesday to what was said on Thursday precisely because today is Thursday and I'm surrounded by all its shameful mess! (Or, knowing myself, I may likely break into incoherent groans of attempted verse pining for the long lost glories of what

was said on Monday!) But, I digress. The point is that we won't be making a sound judgment if we are basing that judgement merely on a calendar or clock. It really doesn't matter whether a thing was said on Monday or if it was said on Tuesday, **what matters is whether the thing said was true.** If push comes to shove and we are forced to make a judgement, **we must make that judgement based,** not on chronology, but, rather, **on authority.**

If today something is being taught by what can be categorized as the ordinary or authentic magisterium (not infallible) then, yes, I have an obligation to give "religious submission of intellect and will" (to quote the magisterium). But at the same time I have an even greater duty and responsibility to give my full assent to what has already been clearly and infallibly defined by Holy Mother Church, either by her extraordinary magisterium or by her ordinary and universal magisterium, because these teachings and definitions are infallible and irrevocable. So, if we ever run into a situation where there seems to be, at the very least, a contradiction between what the Church is now teaching and what she has taught in the past then, again, **we must base our judgment** (a judgment being utterly inescapable) not on what happens to be more recent but rather **on what happens to have more authoritative weight.** We must proceed to look for the pronouncement which carries with it the most authority and, secondarily, the one which offers the most unambiguous clarity.

Whenever this kind of conflict occurs within the magisterium, we are always absolutely obligated to hold on to what has already been solemnly, authoritatively and clearly defined, even if it comes at the expense of having to temporarily set aside more recent teaching that falls under the category of non-infallible magisterium until further clarification on the

matter is provided by the Church. In other words, **when in doubt we are to go with the clearer, more authoritative, time-tested understanding of things.** It is this tried and true (i.e. traditional) understanding of faith and morals which must anchor our faith and be the lens through which we interpret and understand any less authoritative and more ambiguous teachings and pronouncements, more recent though they may be.

In the case of the ordinary / authentic magisterium (which lacks the character of infallibility), **when two statements on this level seem to contradict one another then it is helpful to remember that the longer something has been taught by the Church, the more it has been held in agreement by faithful theologians throughout the history of the Church, the more universally it has been taught by all the Bishops across space and time and the more the Popes have affirmed the particular teaching, then the more weight it will have and the more binding it will be on the consciences of the faithful.** In other words, at this level of magisterial authority, that is the ordinary/authentic magisterium — which is by definition not infallible — tradition always carries the upper hand over that of novelty.

What to do when the Magisterium Contradicts the Magisterium

To take a real-world example of how some of what I've been describing might play out: if we are, for example, "taught" by the members of the hierarchy that those living in a state of mortal sin, such as those who are living in adultery, may receive holy communion (which implies either that forgiveness of sin does not require purpose of amendment, or that one may receive Communion while living in a state of grave sin); or that the death penalty is morally impermissible; or that it is possible for women

to be ordained; or that God actively wills the existence of false religions (i.e. God is pleased by the errors and blasphemies that distinguish false religion from the true Faith); or that false religions can themselves be salvific; or any number of other erroneous teachings that we hear coming from the hierarchy today; then, we are not only under no obligation to accept such teachings but rather have the duty to outright reject them. By contrast, if we accept such falsehoods we would, in fact, be disobedient to the magisterium and disloyal sons and daughters of the Church, since what is being challenged is perennial Church teaching that has already been infallibly taught by, at the very least, the ordinary and universal magisterium and is thus binding on the faithful and hence commands our full submission of intellect and will.

The same holds true even when a Pope himself “teaches” such errors. **The Pope is the guardian of sacred tradition, that is, he is the protector of the divine deposit of faith given once and for all to the apostles and handed on to their successors who have been given the solemn charge of faithfully preserving it.** We do the Holy Father no favors in assisting him in the dereliction of his duty. The more faithful we are to the sacred Tradition, which he has been appointed to guard and defend, the more faithful we are to him. This holds true even if we should be persecuted for this by the very one whom we serve and honor with the title of Holy Father. This sort of injustice holds no sway on our loyalty. **Even if forced to resist, we remain ever his loyal subjects.**

We have the scriptural example of St. Paul publicly admonishing St. Peter and resisting him to the face when the prince of the apostles needed correction. **As laymen, we are subject to the Pope and Bishops and owe them our deference, our filial love, our submission and our obedience on matters pertaining to their jurisdiction. But we are, nevertheless, also instructed to hold fast to**

the traditions we have received and to reject any gospel preached to us besides the one handed down, under pain of anathema, as St. Paul warns us, whether it be preached by a successor of an apostle or an angel from heaven. As St. Thomas teaches and the tradition of the Church affirms, the public correction of a superior by his inferior becomes necessary whenever there is a danger to the faith (II-II q33 a4). When this unhappy situation befalls us we are, as faithful sons and daughters of Holy Mother Church, charged with defending Christ's spotless bride. This is our sacred duty and trust, and the salvation of our own soul, and that of our brother and neighbor, depends on it. If we are to remain worthy members of the Ecclesia Militans, we must contradict and publicly resist all deviations from our Holy Faith. We must confront and courageously combat those who attack the Church in her perennial teachings and disciplines, be they the crazed and hate-filled enemies outside her embrace or the treacherous Judases within who have been entrusted with her very protection and defense. Faith requires it, charity demands it, God wills it. ...Deus vult!

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