

The Red-Pilled Church

Religious submission of mind and will also applies to the hierarchy, and part of the submission must be the full acceptance of obedience to the moral and spiritual demands of proper episcopal oversight.

August 1, 2025 Larry Chapp



In the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, a dark and dystopian vision of the future is presented in which humanity is trapped within a virtual simulation concocted by intelligent computers. The movie, which has become a cult classic, is also famous for its invention of the terms “red pill” and “blue pill”. Anyone who takes the red pill can see beyond the simulation and recognize the ugly truth of reality and of humanity’s enslavement. Those who take the blue

pill stay within the world of illusions, blissfully unaware of the truth of reality.

In common parlance, the term “red pill” has come to mean anyone who believes they have finally seen beyond the façade of the carefully constructed narratives presented to us by those in authority, and to see the real “man behind the curtain” pulling the strings.

The blue pill illusion and crisis

I contend that this phenomenon aptly describes as well the rise of a newly awakened laity in the Church who, in the wake of the priest sex abuse crisis and its various episcopal coverups, have been red-pillled into the clear-eyed realization that the Catholicism they had been taught and formed within was a blue pill illusion.

The “establishment Catholicism” of the past centuries fomented the notion that our episcopal shepherds were almost always conscientious stewards who had the best interests of the laity at heart and who, despite inevitable human mistakes here and there, were truly committed to the Gospel and its moral and spiritual truths. However, as it turns out, this “Bing Crosby Catholicism” of the “father knows best” variety was in many ways a simulated fantasy having little bearing on reality.

To be sure, there were then, as there are now, many fine episcopal shepherds in the Church. I know several, and so I do not want to exaggerate here. But that is, I think, irrelevant to the fact that there was a deep rot within the Church that was carefully hidden away until it exploded in 2002 like a Coldplay kiss cam.

The laity were never the same after that. Only a super-pious few could continue to cling to the blue pill illusion that the vast majority of our Church leaders were worthy of a presumptive level of trust. And this is no mere overreaction of a sensitive laity led by the nose by anti-Catholic media propaganda. That is an insult and implies an ongoing infantilization of the laity as just so many

untutored rubes in matters of the faith. The crisis was a real one and was a direct result of episcopal malfeasance, the sin of covering up the molestation of our children by some of our priests and bishops, and thus enabling those clerics to do it again and again and again.

Religious submission in covenantal context

The spell of the simulation of establishment Catholicism was thus broken, and a red-pilled laity demanded accountability. But more than that, it opened up the question of just how far the laity can go in criticizing the Church's bishops and even of the pope himself. For one fact is now indisputable. **To wit, even if the Holy Spirit does indeed guide the hierarchy and especially the pope in their prudential decisions (and I think it does), there is no guarantee that the bishops and/or the pope will listen to and cooperate with this guidance.**

Anyone with even a passing knowledge of Church history knows that popes and bishops have made many egregious mistakes in their prudential decisions. They have also taught some questionable things. Therefore, we should finally put to rest the sentimentalist nonsense that wraps the hierarchy (including the pope) in the glowing orb of infallibility when it comes to their prudential decisions and their low-level magisterial teachings. This is a pious mythology that harms the Church since it implies that somehow the charism of apostolic leadership is mechanically automatic in a magical way and not something grounded in the covenant theology of Revelation, wherein the Spirit guides but does not force cooperation.

In other words, it is not Catholic doctrine that bishops and popes cannot make mistakes. Or even teach something confusing and ambiguous. And that would include even big mistakes and critical ambiguities. The

ancient prophets of Israel rose up to criticize their divinely appointed and anointed kings on the grounds that those monarchs had failed to cooperate with God's loving *Hesed* and had replaced the covenant and its law with chariots, concubines, and mammon. God, through his prophets, thus pronounced judgment upon Israel, which usually involved a period of testing and persecution, followed by repentance and restoration.

Therefore, the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* 25 that the laity are to render to the bishops and the pope a "religious submission of will and intellect" needs to be placed within this context of covenant fidelity/infidelity as well. The Latin term often translated, misleadingly, as "submission" (*obsequium*) is better translated as "respectful deference to" the *Magisterium*. The Latin is subtle to be sure, and "submission" is one possible interpretation, but the English word submission conjures up images of a master/slave relationship that is out of sync with the rest of *Lumen Gentium* and its teachings on the empowerment of the laity in the universal call to holiness.

I hasten to offer the caveat that **this does not in any way countenance dissent from authoritative magisterial doctrines in faith and morals.** What I am saying is that the orientation of our minds and wills to a posture of deep faithfulness to the teachings of the Church **does not mean that we are to remain silent in the face of episcopal error and sin.** It implies the opposite. Just as with the ancient prophets of Israel, so too here. It was faithfulness to the covenant that impelled the prophets to commit to a critique of leadership, and not some half-baked anti-authority populism.

Papal teaching and respectful critique

For what then is the alternative? *Lumen Gentium* is certainly not arguing here for a reinfantilized laity that keeps its mouth

shut and never criticizes a papal decision or document. This would imply the kind of “infallibility bloat” described by Msgr. Thomas Guarino in his book [The Disputed Teachings of Vatican II](#). And please do not tell me that this is not a reality and that, therefore, the idea that all papal teachings are now immune from any kind of criticism should give us no worries. Because that would not be a Church of covenant fidelity but a Church instead of cult-like and magical notions of authority.

Further, the claim that the pope can teach non-infallibly means that he can potentially teach something that is false. **We must still respect the authority of non-infallible teachings since the presumption of truth must always come first.** Especially since such errors are rare and often the result of misunderstandings. But it highlights the fact that since a pope can teach fallibly, **such teachings should be open to respectful scrutiny.** To say otherwise is to imply that there is no possibility of a pope teaching an error, which is tantamount to saying that every papal teaching is infallible.

And how could that possibly be healthy for the Church? To treat the pope’s teachings as completely immune from respectful critique is to treat him as an “Oracle on the Tiber” rather than the **servant and guarantor of the Church’s doctrinal patrimony.** And the irony, of course, is that such a view of the pope would be heretical.

This notion of respectful critique as something healthy for the Church (and an actual act of respectful fidelity to her magisterial doctrines) becomes especially acute when a pope introduces a new teaching that seems novel. **Nobody wants to see the kind of massive theological dissent from long-settled doctrines of the Church, repeated by many popes and reinforced by councils, that is born of a spirit of faithless accommodation to the Zeitgeist.** That is the kind of dissent we saw immediately after *Humanae Vitae* was issued,

with some exceptions, since some of the critiques were respectful and sought further clarification.

But when a pope teaches something that is novel and appears, by any reasonable measure, to be out of sync with what has come before, then the notion that even here no critique is possible seems to be a recipe for a papal positivism that knows no limits. And once again, a papal primacy that is immune from criticism of any kind is not an orthodox understanding of the papacy.

Clarity and confusion

In this regard, we must place the current debates about such things in their concrete context. Is it true that all dissent from papal teachings is the same? For example, is dissent from *Humanae Vitae* the same as dissent from *Traditionis Custodes* or *Fiducia Supplicans*? Is this a one-size-fits-all game?

In the case of *Humanae Vitae*, you have a papal teaching that is simply reiterating a long-established teaching of the Church, and it had the high authority of an encyclical. By contrast, *Traditionis* is a mere *motu proprio* and is largely a prudential pastoral document about certain problems with some liturgical communities and the need to regulate their access to a certain liturgy. *Fiducia Supplicans* is a document of the DDF that offers a fairly standard theology of blessings, but then controversially applies that theology to blessing same-sex couples, not their union as a couple. Or something like that.

Amoris Laetitia, an apostolic exhortation that has magisterial weight (I disagree with Cardinal Burke here), is a beautiful meditation on the nature of marriage and gives us some of Pope Francis's best. But it then goes on in an obscure footnote to apparently change long-standing Church teaching on the admissibility to communion for some divorced-and-remarried Catholics. Some prelates and theologians rightly asked,

respectfully, for clarification on this matter, but were given no answer beyond pointing to a statement from the Argentinian episcopal conference, which did not clarify matters at all.

My claim is that **respectful dissent**, as we saw from the African bishops concerning *Fiducia Supplicans*, and from *Traditionis* and *Amoris* from some bishops and Cardinals (including the former head of the CDF, Cardinal Mueller), **legitimizes respectful questioning of some aspects of those documents from faithful theologians as well.**

In other words, and once again appealing to concrete context here, it is manifestly the case that the pontificate of Pope Francis represented a unique situation wherein a pope introduced doctrinal novelties which, though capable of orthodox construals, **introduced certain confusions that provoked critique. And it is those confusions that red-pilled many formerly conservative Catholics and sent them off into traditionalism.**

The Pope, who wanted the youth to “make a mess” had done so himself, and yet his defenders claim that any criticism of that mess constituted dissent and heresy. When Francis told the youth of Brazil to make a mess, he followed that up by saying that they should also be committed to helping clean up after the mess in solidarity with their neighbor. But Francis did not follow his own advice, and once the mess was made, he simply evaded all criticisms and refused to engage his interlocutors.

However, blue-pill Catholicism is over, and **his silence in the face of criticism just fueled the animosity and anger. There is no reservoir of trust from which to draw.** The commanded obedience of the laity (and lay theologians) to the hierarchy is an exaggerated and problematical assertion in direct proportion to the lack of **episcopal and papal commitment to their own vocational demands as servants of the people of God—servants who should rule with wisdom, transparency, holiness, patience, and humility.**

Blue-pill Catholicism is dead

Absent those qualities in the hierarchy and coupled with the various very real scandals of sexual abuse cover-up, it simply rings hollow to suddenly refer to Lumen Gentium 25 as a mandate for the laity alone to bow before authority and to keep their criticisms to themselves. **For religious submission of mind and will applies to the hierarchy as well, and part of the submission must be the full acceptance of their needed obedience to the moral and spiritual demands of proper episcopal oversight.**

An example of this kind of one-sided obedience that only reinforces a false notion of the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy can be seen in those professional theologians who sought to critique the pope respectfully but who were given the face palm, ignored, and shown the door. Pope Francis made a mess but wanted no part in taking ownership of it or to engage the theological interlocutors who had legitimate questions.

Pope Francis famously also called for a Church where all voices are heard. He called for a transparent and synodal church of open and honest conversation (parrhesia). Yet, the self-styled defenders of Pope Francis are out in force, accusing anyone who dares to criticize Francis of heresy and even schism. They quote Lumen Gentium 25 like a mantra meant to quash all criticisms with which they disagree. They have an enemies list of bishops, priests, and theologians whom they accuse of “dissent” from the Magisterium and of fomenting schism.

Indeed, these self-anointed gatekeepers of blue-pill Catholicism have recently gone so far as to accuse the [three respected theologians fired](#) by Archbishop Weisenburger of being heretics. But not even the Archbishop made that claim. Most likely, he just wants to move in a more liberal theological direction. But that has not stopped the “mini-me Torquemadas”

from making vicious and unsubstantiated claims of heresy simply because they have a flat-footed, and quite frankly bizarre, interpretation of Lumen Gentium 25 as condemning any and all theological criticisms of a papal document. Which is a claim so silly that it would make even Torquemada blush.

Fortunately for all the rest of us, these vocal inquisitors are not the Magisterium. And I have a lot of confidence in and respect for the wisdom and prudence of Pope Leo. And **it is precisely prudence and wisdom from Rome that are so sorely needed, and not the crude denunciations of good and faithful theologians who have asked legitimate questions and raised cogent criticisms.** We certainly do not want or need an infantilized laity who must continue to endure episcopal stonewalling on the issue of clerical sexual abuse, and whose legitimate desire for a transcendent and reverent liturgy is respected, be that the traditional Latin Mass or the Novus Ordo.

Blue-pill Catholicism is dead. And may it stay dead.

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