

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2021
Pages: 104-114

DOCTRINAL AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH AND THE FAITHFUL: Magisterium of the Church and the Partaking of the Faithful in its Exercise

Joseph Ettolil♦
Changanacherry, Kerala

Abstract

The Roman Pontiff, Episcopal conferences and individual bishops have the faculty to teach with authority in matters of faith and morals. This authority comes from the authority of Jesus, who during His earthly ministry, taught with the authority of the Father. This authority was passed to St Peter and to other apostles and continues to be exercised through the apostolic succession. The magisterial activity has ordinary and extra-ordinary modes of exercise. The Roman Pontiff is protected with the gift of infallibility when he exercises his supreme teaching authority as the head of the universal Church and the successor of Peter. The faithful is not entirely devoid of participation in the teaching authority of the Church. They partake in the doctrinal authority through *infallibilitas in credendo* and *sensus fidei fidelium*. Therefore, the doctrinal authority in the Church is not exclusively limited to the Hierarchical Church but is open to the Church as a whole.

Keywords: *Ex Cathedra*; Faith and Morals; infallibility; Ordinary and Extra-ordinary Magisterium; Teaching Authority

♦Fr Joseph Ettolil is a priest in the Archdiocese of Changanacherry, Kerala. He did his philosophical studies at Pontifical Institute of Theology and Philosophy, Alwaye and his theological studies at Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum, Roma. He has obtained a Licentiate in Dogmatic Theology and Master's in Science-Religion dialogue from Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum, Roma. He has already published scientific articles in different journals and has presented papers at various symposiums. He was ordained priest in 2020. Currently, he is the Director of the Ecumenical activities of the Archdiocese of Changanacherry and serves as Assistant Parish Priest at Lourdes Matha Church, Mammood. Email: ettoliljoseph@gmail.com

Introduction

The modern world is marked by the prevalence of individualism and freedom. People of this era do not like anyone speak with authority to them. Many have a general disbelief of the official spokesperson of any group. A widespread prejudice to whatever is official and distrust to whatever is religious seems to be so common nowadays. Many people give high esteem for free thinking and independent mindedness. Freedom of speech and expression are also characteristic traits of the contemporary society. It is impossible for people of this outlook to understand and comprehend the concept of doctrinal authority.

When this attitude is applied to the Church, they see her as something which is only about power, control, manipulation, etc. Our society which is can be said to follow meritocracy, which only gives respect to those with professional competence, raises questions about the competence of the Church to teach with proper authority. In this situation, the teaching authority of the Church—Magisterium—is put under examination. When we speak of the doctrinal authority of the Church, we usually use the word ‘magisterium,’ identified with the official teaching office of the Church as exercised by the bishops. This article studies the nature of the teaching authority of the Church and its relationship with the different forms of teachings in the Church.

1. Origins of the Teaching Authority of the Church

1.1. Jesus Taught with Authority

One of the titles given to Jesus by the authors of the NT is ‘teacher.’ NT uses the term ‘teacher’ 42 times to refer to Jesus. There are four instances in the NT where the terms ‘teaching’ and ‘authority’ come together. They all refer to Jesus. Mark says, “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mk 1:22). There are three other such instances in the New Testament—Mk 1:27; Lk 4:32; and Mt 21:23. Jn 14:26 indicates to the sharing of this authority through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

1.2. Apostles Taking Part in the Teaching Authority of Jesus

From the gospels, it is clear that the apostles took part in the teaching authority of Jesus during his public ministry. Mark indicates that one of the purposes of selecting apostles was to commission them to teach with authority. “And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mk 3:14-15). Mark also shows that the apostles carried out this mission which was

entrusted to them. “The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught” (Mk 6:30). This mission to teach with authority was given as a ‘Commandment to Preach’ at the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, shortly before his ascension. Matthew says, “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:18–20). From these passages it is clear that the teaching authority was handed over to the apostles by Jesus Christ Himself. In the Acts of the Apostles, there are numerous passages in which we see the apostle fulfil the entrusted mission with zeal and commitment. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

1.3. Teaching Authority was Handed over to those who were not of the Twelve

There are also scriptural evidences from the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of Paul to the fact that St Paul shared this authority with the apostles. In the pastoral letters of St Paul, there are clear exhortations to Timothy and Titus to take up this mission to teach with authority. St Paul says,

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully (2 Tim 2:2).

Timothy and Titus are urged to appoint others as well to this ministry. St Paul adds, “and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well” (2 Tim 2:2). This exhortation is very important in the modern context in which we are concerned about the role of the laity in the exercise of the authority in the Church.

In this way, the teaching authority passed from Jesus to Apostles and from Apostles this authority was passed to their successors. It is in this way that the teaching authority reached the Church. The

bishops, as legitimate successors of Apostles hold the teaching authority in the Church. It is also to be noted that Bishops do not hold the whole teaching power in the Church. There are other teachers including charismatics, scholars and theologians. The documents of the Second Vatican Council give an organically diversified view of the Church. This is well evident from LG 12, LG 31, GS 43, GS 62, etc.

The handing down of the teaching authority is closely associated with the evangelizing mission of the Church. The participation of the lay faithful in the teaching authority of the Church is the need of the new evangelization to which the Church is very much dedicated in this time.¹

2. The Forms of Exercise of Church's Teaching Authority

2.1. Ordinary and Extra-Ordinary Forms of Magisterium

In Classical Latin, the word Magisterium means the role and authority of someone who is a master of any craft or trade. From the very outset, the word magisterium is related to authority, in the sense of someone having knowledge, wisdom or competence. In the Middle Ages, magisterium signified in the first place the role and authority of the university professor, and the symbol of the magisterial authority was the chair—*cathedra*. St Thomas makes a distinction between two types of teaching offices. *Magisterium cathedrae pastoralis*—teaching authority of the hierarchy, and *Magisterium cathedrae magistralis*—teaching authority of the university professors. In modern Catholic usage, the word 'magisterium' has come to be associated exclusively with the teaching authority of the hierarchy, but the word is often used in three different senses which are distinct yet interrelated—the function of teaching, the persons who exercise this function, the teaching itself, and the documents that contain the teaching.²

The Exercise of Magisterium is divided into Ordinary and extra-ordinary exercise of magisterium. Definition of a doctrine and the Pope or the Council speaking *ex cathedra* are examples for the extra-ordinary exercise of magisterium. Everything else falls under ordinary exercise of the magisterium. These authorities shall be exercised at three levels—by all the individual bishops, by the episcopal conferences, by the Roman Pontiff. about the Roman Pontiff, *Lumen Gentium* teaches as follows:

¹Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium*, 119-120.

²Cf. David S. Koonce, *Steadfast in Faith. Select Themes in Fundamental Theology*, Roma: Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, 2013, 269-288.

This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking (LG 25).

LG 25 and CIC 375 and CIC 386 speaks of the teaching authority of the individual bishops. *Christus Dominus* gave the guidelines for the collaboration of bishops in a given country and this collaboration is to be visible even in the function of teaching. The establishment of Episcopal Conferences by Pope Paul VI gives it the faculty to teach with authority. It has ever been a theological question if the authority of the conference derives from the individual bishops who form part of the conference or by itself. This article doesn't have the scope to explore much into the theological nuances of such an enquiry.

2.2. Infallible and Non-Infallible Teachings

Infallibility is a property of the Church. CCC says,

In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility. By a "supernatural sense of faith" the People of God, under the guidance of the Church's living Magisterium, "unfailingly adheres to this faith" (889).

This clearly affirms the gift of infallibility given to the Church. It also adds that "Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles, teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and, in a particular way, to the bishop of Rome, pastor of the whole Church, when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a "definitive manner," they propose in the exercise of the ordinary Magisterium a teaching that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals. To this ordinary teaching the faithful "are to adhere to it with religious assent" which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it." This statement makes it clear that the individual bishops also take part in the gift of infallibility entrusted to the Church (CCC 892).

2.2.1. *Infallibilitas in Credendo* and *Infallibilitas in Docendo*

Infallibility, as a quality, can be applied to what the Church believes and what the Church teaches. Infallibility in belief is presented by the Second Vatican Council as follows:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth (LG 12).

As the faith of the individual believer participates in the faith of the Church as a believing subject, so the *sensus fidei* cannot be separated from the *sensus ecclesiae* of the Church herself, endowed and sustained by the Holy Spirit.³ Theologians like Melchior Cano, Johann Adam Mohler, Giovanni Perrone, etc. were aware and asserted the *infallibilitas in credendo* of the whole Church.⁴

Infallibility in teaching is the doctrinal authority of the Church. *Pastor Aeternis* defines this as follows:

It is a divinely revealed dogma that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*—that is, when in the exercise of his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians he defines, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the whole church is—by reason of the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, possessed of that infallibility with which the divine redeemer wished His Church to be endowed in defining doctrines of faith and morals; and consequently that such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of their own nature (*ex esse*) and not by reason of the Church's consent.⁵

2.2.2. Conditions of Infallibility

Lumen Gentium gives clear indications as to the conditions for attaining infallibility in teaching.

Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly whenever, maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter, and authentically teaching matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement on one position as definitively to be held. And this is the infallibility which the Roman Pontiff, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith, by a definitive act he proclaims a doctrine of faith or morals (LG 25).

The Latin Canon Law gives clear pronouncement on who all can teach with infallible authority. The Code of Canon Law first speaks

³Cf. Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions, The Biblical, Historical, and Theological Evidence for Catholic Teaching on Tradition*, Basilica Press, 1998, 81–131.

⁴John J. Burkhard, *The Sensus Fidelium. Old Questions, New Challenges*, in CTSA Proceedings 70/2015, 28.

⁵Pope Pio IX, Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, Citta' del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1870, ch. 4; also in DS 3074.

about the Pope's authority to teach. It says, "By virtue of his office, the Supreme Pontiff possesses infallibility in teaching when the supreme pastor and teacher of all the Christian faithful, who strengthens his brothers and sisters in the faith, he proclaims by definitive act that a doctrine of faith or morals is to be held" (CIC 749 §1).

Having established the teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, the Code of Canon Law then speaks about the teaching authority of the college of bishops. "The college of bishops also possesses infallibility in teaching when the bishops gathered together in an ecumenical council exercise the magisterium as teachers and judges of faith and morals who declare for the universal church that a doctrine of faith or morals is to be held definitively..." (CIC 749 §2).

A further note in the Code of Canon Law itself speaks of the necessity to evidently manifest the pronouncement of a doctrine as infallible. "No doctrine is understood as defined infallibly unless this is manifestly evident" (CIC 749 §3).

2.3. Further Notes on the Magisterial Authority to Teach

In the previous section we discussed the magisterial doctrinal authority of the Pope and his gift of infallibility in matters of faith and morals. However, it is to be noted that what is attributed to the Pope is merely infallibility, neither impeccability nor inspiration. The infallibility claimed for the Pope is the same in its nature, scope and extent as that which the Church as a whole possesses. Consequently, his *ex cathedra* teaching does not have to be ratified in order to be infallible. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches on the gift of infallibility to the Roman Pontiff as follows:

The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful—who confirms his brethren in the faith—he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals... When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine "for belief as being divinely revealed," and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions "must be adhered to with the obedience of faith." This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself (CCC 891).

Infallibility is not attributed to every doctrinal act of the Pope, but only to his *ex cathedra* teaching. The conditions required for *ex cathedra* teaching are given in various documents of the Church. The Roman Pontiff must teach in his capacity as pastor and doctor of all Christians, not merely in his private capacity as a theologian, preacher or speaker, nor in his capacity as a world leader, or merely as the Bishop of Rome insofar as he is the Ordinary of the diocese. It

must be clear that he speaks as spiritual head of the universal Church. Then it is only when, in this capacity, he teaches some doctrine of faith or morals that it is infallible. Further, it must be sufficiently evident that he intends to teach with all the fullness and finality of his supreme Apostolic authority. In other words, he wishes to determine some point of doctrine in an absolutely final and irrevocable way, or to define it in the technical sense. These are well recognized formulas by means of which the defining intention may be manifested. Finally, for an *ex cathedra* decision it must be clear that the Pope intends to bind the whole Church and to demand internal assent from all the faithful.

3. Is the Doctrinal Authority limited to the Hierarchy?

Doctrinal authority is often considered limited to the Hierarchy of the Church. But that is not entirely right. The distinction that we made between *infallibilitas in credendo* and *infallibilitas in docendo* point to the fact that the faithful also participate in the doctrinal authority. After the French revolution, especially in the twentieth century, democracy has been a hot subject of debate in the Church. Cardinal Newman always criticized those who wanted to keep the laity at an arm's length. In 1859, he even published a book entitled *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*.

The Second Vatican Council addressed this issue and promulgated certain documents which reflect on the participation of the laity in the doctrinal authority. *Lumen Gentium* says,

These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world (LG 31).

Gaudium et Spes says, "let it be recognized that all the faithful, whether clerics or laity, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought and of expressing their mind with humility and fortitude in those matters on which they enjoy competence" (GS 62). Theologians like Michael Seybold see this authority as extended to the laity and interprets *Sensus Fidei* as the active participation of the faithful in the Church's pursuit of the interpretation of revelation.⁶ Yves Congar promoted *Sensus Fidei* as the participation of the laity in the prophetic function of the Church. He sees this as a gift given both to the hierarchy of the Church as well the body of Christ as a whole

⁶As given in John J. Burkhard, "Sensus Fidei. Recent Theological Reflection (1990-2001)," *Heythrop Journal* 46 (2005) 451-452.

and distinguishes between the objective reality of faith and the subjective part of faith – the grace of faith.⁷

3.1. *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*

International Theological Commission (ITC) defines *Sensus Fidei* as “that supernatural instinct, intrinsically linked to the gift of faith received in the communion of the Church, and it enables Christians to fulfil their prophetic calling.⁸ *Sensus fidei fidelium* is that through which the faithful take part in the doctrinal authority of the Church. The notion of *Sensus fidei fidelium* has two different aspects. *Sensus fidei* is a quality of the believing subject, to whom the grace of theological faith, love and the gifts of the Holy Spirit confer a special capacity for perceiving the truth of the faith and for discerning whatever is contrary to faith. *Sensus fidelium* refers to what we can capture objectively from what the faithful believe and profess. This was the basis for the expression *infallibilitas in credendo* which was widely used before the Second Vatican Council. Though this term does not appear in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the idea is present. This is what the document means when it says, the entire people of God *in credendo falli nequi*.

This kind of infallibility in belief is verified when four conditions are satisfied.

1. Expresses a universal consent
2. Concerns a revealed truth
3. It is a work of the Holy Spirit
4. It is recognized by the magisterium

For an example, the dogma of Immaculate Conception was part of the belief of the faithful, even before it was officially proclaimed as a dogma by the Roman Pontiff. It is in this context that we should understand the words of Pope Francis that popular piety has a missionary power.⁹ Universal consent does not mean that the decisions in the Church are taken by majority votes,¹⁰ but a theological investigation is to be done on the expressions of the *sensus fidei*.¹¹

⁷Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, Westminster: Newman Press, 1958, 288.

⁸ITC, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 2014, no. 2.

⁹Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium*, 126.

¹⁰Cf. ITC, *Sensus Fidei in the life of the Church*, no. 113-119.

¹¹Cf. ITC, *Theology Today*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012, no. 35.

Lumen Gentium says that the mission to teach with authority is not limited to the hierarchy of the Church.

He [Christ] does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses and to whom He gave understanding of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life (LG 35).

But it should also be noted that not all the public opinions and common beliefs are part of *sensus fidei*. *Donum Veritatis* says, "Actually, the opinions of the faithful cannot be purely and simply identified with the '*sensus fidei*'... Consequently, what the believer believes is what the Church believes. The '*sensus fidei*' implies then by its nature a profound agreement of spirit and heart with the Church, '*sentire cum Ecclesia*.'"¹² This document also adds that there could even be erroneous beliefs among the faithful which need correction from the magisterium. People who are influenced by the mass media could easily be misdirected in their beliefs and hence magisterial guidance is of great importance. *Donum Veritatis* says,

Although theological faith as such then cannot err, the believer can still have erroneous opinions since all his thoughts do not spring from faith... Not without reason did the Second Vatican Council emphasize the indissoluble bond between the "*sensus fidei*" and the guidance of God's People by the magisterium of the Pastors. These two realities cannot be separated. Magisterial interventions serve to guarantee the Church's unity in the truth of the Lord.¹³

Conclusion

Authority in the Church has many times been put under examination and criticism. The doctrinal authority of the Church also has been suspected many times during the course of time. This article, with the scope of enumerating the features and characteristics of the doctrinal authority of the Church has examined the authority of the Roman Pontiff, episcopal conferences, individual bishops, and the faithful. It is very evident that the doctrinal authority of the Church proceeds from the authority of Jesus. Jesus taught with authority during his public ministry and he conferred this authority to His apostles. This authority continues to be passed from one generation to the other through apostolic succession. Roman Pontiff and the bishops in communion with the bishop of Rome enjoy the

¹²Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Donum Veritatis. On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, 35.

¹³Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Donum Veritatis*, 35.

gift of infallibility when they teach on subjects of faith and morals. Just as there is a gift of infallibility *in docendo*, there is also an infallibility *in credendo*.

The faithful in the Church partake in the doctrinal authority of the Church through *infallibilitas in credendo* and *senses fidei fidelium*. This kind of doctrinal authority of the faithful is expounded in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Lumen Gentium*, etc. That is, the faithful are not devoid of doctrinal authority in the Church. They also enjoy a certain authority of believing and teaching the true doctrine.