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THE COLLECTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF TEACHING AUTHORITY: MAGISTERIUM AND PARTICIPATION TODAY

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Abstract

Pope Francis has called for the wider participation of the laity in helping the church both overcome current crises and in shaping its way forward for the future, not only lamenting the clericalism that he has linked to many of the church's most pressing problems, but also for lay leadership to impact every level of the church. This essay suggests that such will require a sea-change in ecclesial culture and, above all else, it will require a recognition that the laity can and indeed do, exercise ecclesial authority – which entails aspects of both church governance but also teaching authority – i.e. magisterium. In order for this to become ever more ecclesial reality, some fundamental cultural shifts will need to take place in the church. This article considers some of those necessary in order for that fundamental ecclesial transformation – the widening of participation toward greater and genuine co-

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responsibility in the church – to come about. It seeks to help revise certain narrow definitions and also misunderstandings of what magisterium is, what it entails and who can and should practice it. It argues that a clearer understanding of what magisterium is and what it is concerned with, is essential in order to be able to have constructive discussions today in relation to who can and should practice it. The essay concludes that magisterium primarily refers to the function, the activity of teaching with authority and not to those who carry such a function or activity (i.e. the functionaries or actors). Others throughout the whole church, including theologians and indeed the entire laity, the collective of the People of God, have very important roles to play in shaping, informing *and* exercising magisterium as well. Pope Francis is encouraging such an ecclesial cultural shift.

Keywords: Co-Responsibility, Ecclesial Renewal and Reform, Laity, Lay Leadership, Magisterium, Participation, Teaching Authority, Pope Francis, *Sensus Fidelium*

In late August 2018, the head of the United States' bishops' conference appealed to the Vatican for external assistance in conducting a blanket investigation into the continued blight of the clerical abuse crisis across the US – termed a 'visitation.' "We already know that one root cause is the failure of episcopal leadership," Cardinal Daniel DiNardo stated. "The result was that scores of beloved children of God were abandoned to face an abuse of power alone. This is a moral catastrophe."¹ While he was right about the catastrophe, his then proposed solution did not go far enough and could actually have proved counter-productive. The reason for this is because there are deep seated problems and fault-lines in the ecclesial culture throughout the church that need urgent reform. Many, if not most, of these fault-lines are linked to issues of authority, governance and participation. Any such 'visitation,' if composed entirely of episcopal leadership and clerical participation (following previous such visitations elsewhere) would risk kicking the proverbial can further and further down the road and indeed risk ingraining the problematic ecclesial culture still further. It is a culture that has, in many significant instances, proved morally and ecclesially corrosive and has helped perpetuate cover-ups and secrecy, allowing abusive priests and religious to go unpunished for far too long, just as bishops complicit in hiding their crimes have remained unaccountable, also.

¹Cardinal Di Nardo's full statement of August 16th, 2018, can be found at <http://www.usccb.org/news/2018/18-139.cfm>.

It was welcome, nonetheless, that both Cardinal DiNardo and then Pope Francis both publicly recognized that something is seriously wrong with the present ecclesial culture and that both called for the involvement of the laity in helping the church to tackle and eradicate that culture as far as possible. Pope Francis, in his “Letter to the People of God,”² in response to the August 2018 clerical abuse revelations and the failings of church leadership in further and continued cover-ups, said that “every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does.” He Continued,

It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People. Indeed, whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives.³

Pope Francis then went on to make clear that this also, indeed especially, applies to structures of ecclesial authority, where a corrosive culture of clericalism had clearly held the church back from moving forwards,

This is clearly seen in a peculiar way of understanding the Church’s authority, one common in many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred. Such is the case with clericalism, an approach that ‘not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people.’⁴ Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say “no” to abuse is to say an emphatic “no” to all forms of clericalism... the only way that we have to respond to this evil that has darkened so many lives is to experience it as a task regarding all of us as the People of God. This awareness of being part of a people and a shared history will enable us to acknowledge our past sins and mistakes with a penitential openness that can allow us to be renewed from within.⁵

² Pope Francis, “Letter to the People of God” (August 20th, 2018), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html, §2.

³ Pope Francis, “Letter to the People of God,” §2.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Chile* (31 May 2018).

⁵ Pope Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Chile*, §2.

In denouncing clericalism as a deep-rooted problem that goes to the very root of the abuse crisis, what Pope Francis states here, as elsewhere, can only entail one thing: the wider participation of the laity in the arenas where the church makes its most significant decisions.⁶ Indeed, Pope Francis was calling for the wider participation of the laity in helping the church both overcome current crises and in shaping its way forward for the future. Certainly that is how his comments were taken around the world. In the United States, the USSCB's National Review Board followed on from both DiNardo and Francis in their critique of clericalism specifically calling not just for lay involvement in handling the latest phase of the crisis, but for lay *leadership* in doing so.⁷

It has taken some time for some parts of the church worldwide to hear what it has been evident Pope Francis has been calling for throughout the majority of his pontificate – namely, for lay leadership to impact every level of the church. This was the message of his “Letter,” as in so many other places. But while the dangers of clericalism and the need for great lay involvement in decision making in the church were topics that concerned many of the debates at the special summit of global bishops concerning the abuse crisis in February 2019, Francis’ subsequent letter issued *motu proprio* following the summit actually dealt primarily with protocols for reporting offences and legal pathways to be followed.⁸

So, the church still awaits concrete proposals and actual steps toward creating that more participatory form of ecclesial structure and authority that would empower lay voices and lay leadership.

However, as we shall see in the concluding section of this essay, Pope Francis, himself, has already said and done much which should help encourage and facilitate the reforms necessary to bring about greater participation. And it is certainly possible and hints emerging from Rome suggest in some ways likely that further welcome changes here may come about as a result of the wide-reaching

⁶Just as Francis has made repeated calls for the participation of women in such decision making forums, see Gerard Mannion, “Changing the (Magisterial) Subject: Women Teaching-with-Authority – from Vatican II To Tomorrow,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 81, 1 (Spring, 2016) 3-33.

⁷Statement from the National Review Board (August 28, 2018) <http://www.usccb.org/news/2018/18-144.cfm>.

⁸Pope Francis, “Apostolic Letter on the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons” (26 March 2019), https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190326_latutela-deiminori.html. Thus far the letter has not been officially translated into any languages other than Italian and Portuguese.

reforms of the Roman Curia expected in Summer 2019 (the anticipated Apostolic Constitution is rumoured to be entitled *Praedicate evangelium*).

Yet all of this will require a sea-change in ecclesial culture and, above all else, it will require a recognition that the laity can and indeed do, must exercise ecclesial authority – which entails aspects of both church governance but also teaching authority – i.e. magisterium. Therefore, in order for this to become ever more ecclesial reality, multiple and fundamental cultural shifts will need to take place in the church. This article considers some of those most necessary in order for that fundamental ecclesial transformation – the widening of participation toward greater and genuine co-responsibility in the church to come about. This essay deals with the nature and scope of magisterium in general, in the main, as opposed to specific issues of governance because a sea-change in ecclesial attitudes with regard to magisterium is the key to both transforming teaching authority for today's church and tomorrow's, as well as transforming ecclesial governance. Indeed, the complex relations between these two aspects of ecclesial authority demands that the very notion and understanding of magisterium is revisited.

Who, What, How? Acknowledging Magisterium's Evolving Meanings

This article, and the wider series of projects it emerges out of, seeks to help challenge certain narrow definitions of the term and also misunderstandings of what magisterium is, what it entails and who can and should practice it. Underlying its analysis is the contention that the scope of understanding in relation to what magisterium is and who may practice it need to be widened much further still.

One can point to evolving distinctions between notions such as teaching authority, the teaching office (of the church) and its teaching function. Magisterium has been employed to refer to each of these and in differing ways. Particularly since the nineteenth century, there have been differences of opinion, interpretation and also confusion surrounding the meaning of the term. Some of these changes have significantly impacted the understanding and exercise of magisterium (and therefore impacted the church itself) in a negative fashion. These include, in particular, the confusion between act and actors i.e. – what magisterium is and who practices it – or to put this another way, between the function and functionaries, as well as the related collapsing of teaching authority into governance, because, as we shall further discuss, below, the two are not one and the same thing.

This has all, in turn, impacted *participation* in the practice of making sense of and bearing witness to the faith throughout the church in multiple ways. We cannot avoid the fact that all too many of the debates and, indeed, much of the tradition in the church's story that pertains to authority, focus in the main upon people in Christian communities occupying particular positions, roles or offices connected in one or more ways with hierarchical authority. One of the most significant focal points of all, of course, is the role of bishop. Indeed, so much modern and recent discourse has focused in the main and often exclusively on episcopal magisterium. To understand the implications of this better, let us consider some of the issues that arise with such a narrowly-focused conception of church teaching authority.

Francis Sullivan, in his now classic study, stated that, in modern times, the term magisterium "is hardly used at all except to refer to the teaching office of the hierarchy" and that, in an even more recent development, "the term magisterium has come to mean not only the teaching function of the hierarchy, but also the hierarchy itself as the bearer of this office."⁹ So, as Sullivan summarizes the outcome of this process of evolution, development and change, the term 'magisterium' has primarily been employed (in an ecclesiastical sense) to refer to the (pastoral) teaching function (office or authority) of the bishops (i.e. hierarchy) of the church, as well as to refer to the bishops as a collective, themselves.¹⁰ Thus the confusion between act and actors, function and functionaries.

Furthermore, in the modern era, when church documents speak of the 'authentic' magisterium, they mean 'authoritative.'¹¹ By this they entail that teaching that comes from those exercising the legitimate authority to teach on matters of faith and (for some interpretations), on morals.¹² In other words, the 'authentic' – read 'legitimate' – practice of magisterium has increasingly come to be understood as that exercised primarily or even solely by the church's bishops, the pope and, in some respects, by the Vatican's curial departments.

⁹Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Roman Catholic Church*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1985, 25-26. He cites *Dei Verbum* §10 as the best example of such a usage of the term.

¹⁰Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 25-6.

¹¹Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 1985, 27. C.f., also Michael Fahey, "Magisterium," in Gerard Mannion and Lewis Mudge, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, 524-535 at 524.

¹²N.B. 'morals,' here originally had a much wider meaning (from the Latin *mores*) and applied to the wider Christian life as a whole rather than simply to matters of ethical concern.

Further helping to illustrate some of these common confusions surrounding the word well, Avery Dulles, in his later years, appeared to accentuate the ambiguous twofold meaning whereby magisterium refers both to function and functionaries at one and the same time. He deemed that the term magisterium,

designates the Church's function of teaching. More precisely, it means the authoritative teaching of those who are commissioned to speak to the community in the name of Christ, clarifying the faith that the community professes. The term "Magisterium" designates not only the function of official teaching but also the body of persons from the less authoritative teaching of individuals in the Church, the word "Magisterium" is sometimes qualified by adjectives such as "hierarchical" or "pastoral."¹³

And yet, even the very subtitle of Dulles' 2008 study – 'Teacher and Guardian of the Faith' – made clear that by that stage of his career he was laying greater emphasis upon the term as referring to the collective body of official magisterial actors as opposed to their actions. So Dulles' work provides a good illustration of how, in recent times, indeed to this day, in the main, more Roman Catholic commentators than not follow recent convention in the wake of developments pertaining to the understanding of magisterium in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and use the term magisterium as an abbreviation for the 'Official Magisterium' (or, as we have seen some term it the 'hierarchical' or 'pastoral' magisterium). That is to say, for the teaching authority of the college of the Bishops and of the Pope.¹⁴ The later Dulles offered a typically hierarchical list of the 'Organs of the Magisterium,' comprising, the 'College of Bishops,' the 'Pope as Head,' 'Dicasteries of the Holy See,' 'Bishops in Groups' and 'Individual Bishops.'¹⁵ And yet the earlier Dulles went to great lengths to emphasize that and how there were other practitioners of magisterium.

In fact, what was actually a historically novel shift in the understanding (and so also practice) of magisterium came to be presented in various quarters in recent times as both 'traditional' and normative.

Ladislas Örsy has also offered a helpful account of the primary meanings of the term magisterium as understood in the 'official' and

¹³Avery Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith*, Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007, 2-3.

¹⁴See, for example, Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority*, Colegeville, Mn.: Michael Glazier, 1997, 160.

¹⁵Dulles, *Magisterium*, 47-58. Although Dulles did qualify his explication with the note that he was describing the notion 'in current Catholic usage.'

normative sense (and so of common usage) in recent decades. But it is important that he unpacks these meanings *in relation to the exercise of magisterium or the outcome of its exercise*, as opposed to assuming the term refers simply to who is exercising it. He acknowledges the fact that there are multiple and not always compatible meanings to the term. And here he was writing at the height of ecclesial tensions over the very clashes within the church concerning the understanding and exercise of magisterium. It is beneficial to cite him at length,

Since in truth (not always adverted to) the term has many meanings, its use in a univocal sense can be heavily misleading. It might be useful to list the widely different realities behind the same word: (1) infallible teaching by the pope (rare, its core not subject to revision); (2) noninfallible pronouncements by the pope (can be the proclamation of truth, can be an evolving theological opinion); (3) declaration by an official of the Roman See, approved by the pope specially (as his own); then the above distinctions may apply; (4) declaration by an office, with routine approval by which the pope does not lend his authority to the core of the teaching (hence critical assessment is warranted); (5) the great variety of pronouncements that may come from Episcopal synods, conferences, or individual bishops; all to be weighed and measured according to their contents and circumstances. *This classification clearly refers only to the hierarchical magisterium.*¹⁶

As the final sentence again makes clear, even this long list does not exhaust the meanings of the term. Difficulties enter the fray when people in the church act and behave as if these are the only senses in which magisterium can be understood and practiced. All of these forms of magisterium outlined by Örsy are actually simply subsections of that one prevailing official understanding that has been privileged as normative in recent times, and which emerged in the modern period as a distinctive, yes historically and contextually influenced conception of magisterium.

In fact, with such a list we merely begin to touch the surface of debates from recent decades – even in relation to the ‘official magisterium’ alone. Furthermore, (as Örsy’s wider study also makes clear), such a narrow understanding is problematic, indeed a further symptom of the malaises affecting the church in recent decades since Vatican II because there is much more to magisterium than these aspects alone convey.

¹⁶Ladislaus Örsy, “Magisterium: Assent and Dissent,” *Theological Studies* 48 (1987) 473-97, at 480, n.14 (my italics). Repeated in somewhat modified form in Ladislav Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching: Magisterium, Assent, Dissent, Academic Freedom*, Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987, 53.

In the light of just how entrenched in ecclesial discourse and consciousness this problem has become, it is little wonder that throughout those decades and to this day frequent confusion is made between the *object* of magisterium, i.e. what its purpose, its function is, what it addresses and seeks to discern, make sense of and communicate and the *subject* of magisterium – who can and should practice it. That the subject of magisterium is frequently spoken of in studies and official discourse in the singular (*'the magisterium,'* although in fact this is effectively a collective noun) illustrates this problem rather than elucidates it.

All in all, it is evident that much confusion and disagreement remains today in relation to who the magisterial actors are in the church. The gospels tell us that Jesus offered a radically new model of authority – one of service, rather than of 'lording it' over people.¹⁷ The greatest must be as the least. But throughout Christian history and all too evidently to this day, many in the church, whether through confusion, error or ambition, place all too much emphasis upon the 'who' of authority and not enough emphasis upon the 'what.' In particular some focus only on a narrow conception of that 'who,' as if magisterium is the sole preserve of a very exclusive and private club.¹⁸

Widening the Focus away from a Narrow Field of Privileged Practitioners of Magisterium

What and indeed who might be missing from this picture? While in some of his earlier writings on magisterium Yves Congar acknowledged specific roles for the hierarchy in the practice of magisterium, his overarching vision of teaching authority was grounded in history. The story of the church conclusively demonstrated that

All Christians are collectively responsible for Christianity, just as, collectively, they all form a holy priesthood and spiritual fabric (cf. I Pet 2:5-10). They carry and transmit Christianity and the Gospel from generation to generation... Collectively and organically the faithful *and* hierarchy form the subject of tradition.¹⁹

¹⁷Eg., c.f. Mk 10:42-45 and Mt 20:26.

¹⁸See also, the discussion of the shifts in the focus and meaning of magisterium in Le Groupe des Dombes, *"Un Seul Maître": L'autorité doctrinale dans L'Église*, Paris: Bayard, 2005, translated by Catherine Clifford as *One Teacher: Doctrinal Authority in the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010.

¹⁹Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, 62-63, (my italics).

There are profound implications to such an understanding of tradition and, therefore, of magisterium.

In various writings on magisterium, Congar even referred to many of those marginalized, radical and prophetic voices, both individual and collectives, who swam against the prevailing ecclesial tide in helping to bring new truths and transformative practices and modes of being church to the fore for the wider Christian community. His meaning is clear – sometimes explicitly communicated, sometimes more implicitly: these, also, are practitioners of magisterium.

The role and importance of others responsible for teaching in the church has also varied and fluctuated across historical periods and geographical contexts but this in itself only further demonstrates that what today is called magisterium was never the sole preserve of the episcopacy alone.²⁰

Magisterium requires many actors from different parts of the church in addition to those who presently hold formal episcopal office. Like Congar, Örsy offers further grounds to expand the definition and entitlement to the right to practice magisterium further still: “side by side with the hierarchical magisterium, there has been continually another kind of magisterium in the church,”²¹ the long-standing recognition of which he rightly roots in the fact that the deposit of revelation is, of course, entrusted to the church entire. Vatican I affirms such²² as does Vatican II (cf. LG, 12).²³ The church does not and should not be taken to be a shorthand for ‘the hierarchy.’²⁴ Nor, then, we might add, should magisterium.

Rather, “once it is clear and accepted that revelation is in the possession of the whole church, it becomes obvious that all believers have access to it; all can perceive it, witness the truth, have insights into its depths.”²⁵ He concludes, “So, there has always been a genuine and recognized magisterium by others than popes and bishops: the magisterium of graced, learned and wise men and

²⁰See, for example, the collection mined from patristic and ancient pagan texts in Robert B. Eno, *Teaching Authority in the Early Church*, Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1984.

²¹Örsy, *The Church*, 63.

²²DS 3074.

²³Örsy, *The Church*, 64-65; cf. John Thiel, *Senses of Tradition*, Oxford, OUP, 2000, Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009.

²⁴Örsy, *The Church*, 64.

²⁵Örsy, *The Church*, 65 and also 67.

women to whom it was given to have new insights into the old truths."²⁶

The work of Dulles across his whole career further illustrates this transformation in the meaning of the term magisterium from a plurality of interpretations as well as of practitioners to a privileged and normative understanding of magisterium very well. His own perspective moved from a historically-conscious and critical engagement with the realities of how the sense and exercise of magisterium has changed, to one whereby an 'official' understanding is accepted as both desirable and normative. We have already seen this with the citation from his final work given above. But contrast the understanding of magisterium there, for example, with his statement from some years previous that,

...the Catholic doctrine of the magisterium as it developed from the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth represents a progressive alienation from the modern world. In proportion as the thinking of secular society became self-critical, relativist, and future-oriented, the magisterium became more authoritarian, absolutist, abstractionist, and backward-looking.²⁷

Furthermore, in that earlier study he went on to express a preference for how the church should seek to understand and transform magisterium for those late twentieth-century times,

In my opinion there are aspects of this post-Tridentine development²⁸ that should not be accepted. The times call for an "epochal" reinterpretation of the very notion of "magisterium." Unless the style of the magisterium is reshaped to meet the demands of our time as effectively as it has met the demands of other times, we may expect the loss of [the church's] credibility to intensify. Modernization would not be a mere concession to the requirements of the times but, more positively, a way of taking advantage of the new ecclesiological possibilities that our age affords. Contemporary techniques of government, teaching, and communications would seem to harmonize

²⁶Örsy, *The Church*, 67. Örsy then cites a fascinating passage from Gratian's *Decretum Magistriani Gratiani*, ed. Aemilius Friedberg, Graz: Akademie Verlaganstalt, 1959, col. 65 about the respective competencies of the 'interpreters of scripture' vis-a-vis the 'pontiffs.'

²⁷Dulles, "The Magisterium in a Time of Change," in his *The Survival of Dogma: Faith, Authority, and Dogma in a Changing World*, New York, Crossroad, 1982, 109-124, at 114. [The original version of the latter was published in 1971]. Dulles also outlined a more pluralistic understanding of magisterium that was not limited primarily to the hierarchy in "The Magisterium in History: A Theological Reflection," *Chicago Studies* 17 (Summer 1978) 264-281. See, also, Avery Dulles, "What is Magisterium?," *Origins* 6 (1976) 81-7.

²⁸[I.e., the transformed sense of magisterium].

at least as well with the demands of the gospel as do the feudal and absolutist patterns of the past.²⁹

Throughout much of the 1970s and into the 1980s, Dulles would expand upon and enter into further historically sensitive and critically hermeneutical engagements with the meaning, nature and practice of magisterium. Others would do the same.

In contrast, the *later* Dulles appeared to lament the type of critique his younger self encouraged, “In the atmosphere of contemporary liberal democratic societies, the very idea of an authoritative Magisterium provokes misgivings. People tend to think that they have both the right and idea to make up their own minds about what to believe in matters of religion.” He adds that while the faithful may be willing to listen to professionally qualified theologians and biblical scholars, “they balk at the idea that some body of pastors without specialized academic training should presume to tell them what they must believe.”³⁰ Illustrating a still more remarkable departure from the perspectives of his earlier self, he goes on to state that, “In establishing the Magisterium, Christ responded to a real human need. People cannot discover the contents of revelation by their unaided powers of reason and observation. *They have to be told by people who have received it from on high.*”³¹

There can be few better illustrations of the quandaries, divisions and confusions over magisterium in the past five decades. Nor of the marked changes in how magisterium came to be perceived and understood during the same period. If one and the same person can enunciate such markedly different perceptions of what magisterium is and what its practice entails far less than three decades apart,³² then little wonder there has been so much confusion and disagreement concerning this single word in the church of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The microcosmic story of the shifting perceptions of this noted Jesuit theologian point toward the macrocosm of a church in which disagreement concerning

²⁹Dulles, *Survival of Dogma*, 114.

³⁰Dulles, *Magisterium*, 3-4.

³¹Dulles, *Magisterium*, 4 (my italics).

³²Dulles based the 2007 book on an earlier article from 1988 but, crucially, revised this in 2000 and no doubt did so again up to the completion of the manuscript in 2006 (he died in 2008). Of course, during this period Dulles moved from being a member of those practitioners of magisterium called theologians, to also being a member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, itself, as he received the red hat of a cardinal in 2001.

magisterium had come to a head and wherein the central ecclesial 'authorities' had sought to reach closure by imposing a normative model and interpretation throughout the universal Catholic community. And now, in the present pontificate we see much change with regard to the understanding and practice of magisterium once more.

The dilemma that follows if one privileges the more recent and limiting understanding of the term is summed up well by Otto Hermann Pesch,

the "*magisterium*" is fundamentally not an authority with an address in Rome which can be given out, nor is it the official duty of someone in office or a group of those in office, but an 'office' of the whole church. The church as a whole owes the *world* a binding testimony of its belief in the gospel: that is its teaching office.³³

Given these considerations, I would suggest that the most constructive way forward for the church today is for the focus to return, first, to the object of magisterium, the '*what*' of magisterium *in order that* we may widen the sense of the participatory nature of magisterium and therefore also widen the range of its subjects – i.e. widen the scope of who can, do and should serve the '*what*' of magisterium through their witness and service to the church. In other words, until you have a clear understanding of what magisterium is and what it is concerned with, you cannot have a proper sense of who can and should practice it. We turn to consider such debates in a little more detail.

Delving Deeper into the Subject-Object Debates

To summarize, what we here term the subject-object debate in assessing magisterium comes down to the fact that, particularly in the modern period and contemporary era, there is a frequent confusion made between the *object* of magisterium, i.e. what its purpose, its function is, what it addresses and seeks to discern, make sense of and communicate (in short, the gospel, the gracious and loving self-communication of God and all the implications of this for our world or, if one prefers shorthand theological parlance, revelation, the Word of God) and the *subject* or subjects of magisterium – i.e. the actors or functionaries, those who seek to fulfil this function or purpose in the church (including when referred to as a collective body or 'authority'). As we have considered earlier, the two are not identical.

³³Otto Hermann Pesch, "The Infallibility of the Papal *Magisterium*: Unresolved Problems and Future Perspectives," in Hans Küng: *New Horizons for Faith and Thought*, trans. John Bowden, London: SCM, 1993, 13-42 at 33.

The key questions relate first to what (and not “who”) *magisterium* is and only *then* can turn to consider who can and should exercise it.

Essentially, whereas for centuries the term had referred to the teaching *function* (variously exercised throughout the church), it now became used to refer to certain *functionaries* who performed the function of official teaching. The shift that therefore took place has been described as being analogous to the distinction between ‘government,’ used to refer to the function of ‘governance’ and ‘the government,’ meaning the institution which has primary responsibility for governance. Therefore, a fundamental shift in the understanding and official use of the term ‘magisterium’ took place in the 1800s, although the conditions for the possibility of these changes were put in place some time before as Jacques Gres-Gayer has argued, in a passage that captures the thrust of these quandaries well,

...the term “magisterium” denotes the exercise of teaching authority in the Catholic Church. The transfer of this teaching authority from those who had acquired knowledge to those who received power was a long, gradual, and complicated process, the history of which has only partially been written. Some significant elements of this history have been overlooked, impairing a full appreciation of one of the most significant semantic shifts in Catholic ecclesiology.³⁴

In fact, the subject-object debate has *always* been with the church. However, keeping the focus on the latter (what) as opposed to the former (who) has always been the most important concern for the church as it strives to fulfil its mission as faithfully as it might. One sees this from New Testament times onwards. George Tavard stated that “In principle, magisterium is no more than a special kind of ministerium: it is the service of teaching” but he laments how over time it somehow became placed on a par with scripture and tradition.³⁵ As we have already suggested, that service consists in bearing *witness* to the faith.

Magisterium is, indeed, often exercised in part by the same persons in the church who also have “the power of government” but Congar believes it equally wrong to therefore confuse magisterium as involving “simply ...an exercise of the power of jurisdiction,” as it is

³⁴Jacques M. Gres-Gayer, “The Magisterium of the Faculty of Theology of Paris in the Seventeenth Century,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 425-450 at 425.

³⁵George H. Tavard, *The Church, Community of Salvation*, Collegeville, Mn.: Liturgical Press, 1992, 164. On Congar’s understanding of magisterium as mission and service, see, also, Anthony Oelrich, *A Church Fully Engaged: Yves Congar’s Vision of Ecclesial Authority*, Collegeville, Mn.: Michael Glazier, 2011, 94-95.

to believe that a society such as the church would have no agreed and binding “decisive formulae of belief.”³⁶ This relates to the pressing issue of confusing the differing roles of church leaders and, indeed, the collapsing of teaching into governance, subordinating the role of teaching to that of jurisdiction and government, effectively to management.

The increasing tendency in late modern and recent times has been for bishops to be viewed (and to understand themselves) as more akin to ‘managers and administrators’ of the wider ‘workforce’ of priests (many of whom, especially in recent decades, have increasingly understood their own role less and less in terms of actual pastoral *service*). Lay people are often viewed as a mixture of school charges and consumers, both such perceptions lending themselves to an increasing assumption of docility on the part of the faithful. Tavard also directly acknowledged the increased blurring of distinction between ‘ecclesial magisterium’ and ‘ecclesial management,’ and this is a problem other Christian churches have increasingly grappled with in recent times, too.³⁷ This is why this essay has sought to emphasize how magisterium entails much more than ecclesial governance or management and it also must involve so many others in the church beyond the hierarchy if Pope Francis’ reforming agenda is to achieve its intended outcomes.³⁸

So in stressing that importance of focus on the object, it therefore becomes better appreciated how necessary it is to acknowledge and facilitate a role in the exercise of magisterium for the wider church and distinctive roles for particular groups and individuals within the church – with regard, that is, to the multiplicity of subjects of magisterium.

Indeed, the prevailing understanding of magisterium in the church of recent decades also appears to exhibit a further misunderstanding in relation to magisterium – it not only confuses the act of teaching with authority, magisterium, with a group of actors, to the exclusion of other actors alongside whom those actors are charged with carrying out such an action, but it also confuses the main product of such activity with the actual thing that the activity and its product are designed to serve and explicate, *viz.*, the Catholic faith. As John McKenzie stated back in the 1960s,

³⁶Yves Congar, “Magisterium, Theologians, the Faithful and the Faith,” *Doctrine and Life* 31 (1981) 548-64, at 549.

³⁷Tavard, *Church, Community of Salvation*, 157-160.

³⁸Congar, *Meaning of Tradition*, 71-72.

There must be a clear distinction between faith and doctrine. Faith is the response to revelation; doctrine, the product of theology, is an understanding and an application of the faith... theology and doctrine... are the means by which the Church evolves with the world and with history. Faith never becomes antiquated; doctrine very easily does.³⁹

The prevailing understanding of the nature and reach of magisterium in much of the church in post-Vatican II decades, as well as its accompanying implied understanding of the role of the Catholic theologian as being merely to explicate and justify the official teachings of the church at any given time, do not sit well with the reality of the church's history and its tradition.

The Collective and Collaborative Nature of Teaching Authority

The existence and enduring importance of other authoritative roles in the church, perhaps especially with regard to teaching, cannot be denied. Revelation is given to the entire community. Making sense of it is their collective charge and right. The business of forming and explicating church teaching is a collective one. This is testified to by the clear fact that, even at the official level alone, teaching with authority is a collaborative and collective task. Consider the long history of church councils, and collective participatory meetings on a smaller scale, as well as the collaboration usually involved in producing papal pronouncements and documents issued by individual bishops or collective groups thereof and, particularly in more recent times, documents emanating from *different* departments of the Roman Curia.

Why have all of these components of the church's overall ability to teach been deemed to carry 'authority' when addressing matters relating to the 'faith' of the church and on matters of Christian life, including but not limited to ethical concerns? A common assumption that such authority comes automatically because certain officeholders are involved is actually mistaken. The primary source of authority for teaching judgments reached in such ways comes about as a result of the wide-reaching collective and collaborative nature of how such judgments were reached: they are believed to reflect the existential and fiduciary consensus of the broader church's faith.

There is a multitude of other contributors to the church's 'authentic teaching' beyond such privileged practitioners of magisterium. This testifies to the fact that Christianity has relied upon collaborative decision-making processes in relation to its most important teachings

³⁹John L. McKenzie SJ, *Authority in the Church*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966, 126.

from the very beginnings of the faith itself. So, in the church, the notion of authority becomes entwined with the art of teaching.⁴⁰ *What* the church teaches comes to carry particular significance for the lives of all believers. But who, then, actually does determine the content, nature and form of such teaching? We have already seen that the church entire is and must be involved here (hence the meaning and significance of the fundamental and related ecclesial concepts of the *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium* and *consensus fidelium*). Therefore, any interpretation that accentuates the rights and status only of certain practitioners of magisterium not only prove misleading but can actually prove detrimental to the life and mission of the church and the actual effectiveness of its teaching.

Therefore, and following from all this, perhaps *the* most important thing that must always be borne in mind when using the term magisterium is that it refers to an activity first and foremost and not to the person or persons who carry out that activity. Contrary to the argument that the term magisterium has now become so synonymous with the hierarchical office holders in the church that it saves confusion if that is now the only sense in which the term should be employed, I wish to suggest that the church should cease to employ the word magisterium *in this univocal sense* altogether.

But nor do I agree with those who suggest the church would be better off to jettison the very word magisterium from the ecclesial lexicon altogether. At least, not yet, because the church could gain much from revisiting and revising its official understanding and practice of magisterium. Rather the emphasis henceforth should be upon the sense of the activity, the art of teaching-with-authority and therefore this will point towards the actual object of magisterium more clearly and fruitfully. Indeed, it will help the church move towards the development of a more participatory and humane exercising of this art, a practice more in harmony with the gospel itself.

One day the church may well be able to consign the word to the margins or even cease to employ it altogether. But first, that activity to which it refers (and the understanding of it that prevails in the church) demands *aggiornamento*.

Looking at the concept of authority itself and in particular at its understanding and exercise in the New Testament and early Christian centuries, it is beyond question that what came to be understood as magisterium at a later date, what we today call in

⁴⁰Again, c.f. Eno, *Teaching Authority in the Early Church*.

English ‘teaching with authority’ was not simply an activity, but also a service,⁴¹ a ministry from the earliest times. The notion of such authority as service is a point that can even be found in the teachings of Jesus, himself. Focusing upon power, office and status are erroneous understandings of and uses of teaching authority (and obviously, also, of ecclesial governance). Focusing upon active service of the wider community is a more ‘authentic’ understanding and exercise of teaching authority in a number of important ways which will concern us as we seek to unpack the constructive possibilities for understanding and exercising magisterium in our times.

We have sought to underline a key truth about teaching in the church and the nature and purpose of what came to be called magisterium, which Ladislav Örsy here sums up very well,

the whole church is the trustee of the word of God. In the beginning it was given to the fledgling community of the disciples who heard it, treasured and proclaimed it. The understanding of its full meaning, however, was not given to them; by God’s will it was to unfold in the course of history.⁴²

It is clear Pope Francis agrees. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, speaking of the ‘Great Commission’ from Matthew’s gospel, he stated that “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples”⁴³ and of evangelization (and so therefore, here we would add, of magisterium). Furthermore, Francis made clear that each particular church “is the primary subject of evangelization, since it is the concrete manifestation of the one Church in one specific place, and in it “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative” (citing Vatican II’s *Christus Dominus*, §11).⁴⁴ More recently, Pope Francis, toward the end of his August 2018 *Letter to the People of God*, made clear that participation is the key issue and therefore challenge facing the church today, “Without the active participation of all the Church’s members, everything being done to uproot the culture of abuse in our communities will not be successful in generating the necessary dynamics for sound and realistic change.”⁴⁵

⁴¹In addition to Congar’s repeated affirmation of such an understanding, eg., “Magisterium, Theologians, the Faithful and the Faith,” 549, 553-554.

⁴²Cf. Örsy, *Church: Learning and Teaching*, 45.

⁴³Pope Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium*, §§113, 120. See, also, §§160, 162.

⁴⁴Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium*, §30.

⁴⁵Pope Francis, “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God” (20 August 2018), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html

The Jesuit biblical scholar, John McKenzie, writing in 1967, just two years after the Second Vatican Council completed its formal work and the church began the arduous task, still very much incomplete to this day, of implementing the conciliar teaching, stated that “Official teachers of the Church know that they too must exhibit the virtue which is basic for every good teacher; this virtue is the ability to learn from anyone.”⁴⁶ One of the key questions that should serve as a backdrop to how the church moves forward today is this: how willing have church leaders been to learn from other (ecclesial) voices teaching with authority?

Pope Francis also seems aware that this is a key challenge and litmus test for the church globally today and his reforms of the synod over several years, most especially those set out in the apostolic constitution, *Episcopalis communio*, shortly before the *Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*, in October 2018.⁴⁷ In that document, Pope Francis spoke of how the synod should become a vehicle for church leaders to function as a ‘listening church,’ to be able to take into account the views and voices of the wider Catholic faithful. Indeed, voting membership of the synod was thereby extended to those beyond the episcopacy and leadership of religious orders. Bishops should therefore strive to be at one and the same time both ‘a teacher and a disciple,’ being guided by the Holy Spirit but also seeking to hear what the Holy Spirit may be telling them through the voice of the lay faithful.

The synod, then, does not stand apart from and over and above the lay faithful, rather “it is an instrument suitable for giving voice to the whole people of God precisely through the bishops.”⁴⁸ This would allow the focus to be more on fulfilling the church’s mission. This would allow the focus to be more on fulfilling the church’s mission. Francis even states that the outcomes of such a more deliberative and lay-focused synod would thereby become automatically part of the ordinary (papal) magisterium – a participatory understanding of magisterium coming to the fore once more. What he said here builds further upon his call for the entire church to become more synodal at every level from 2015, in which he said “The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*,

⁴⁶McKenzie, SJ, *Authority in the Church*, 136.

⁴⁷ *Episcopalis communio* (15 September 2018), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html

⁴⁸*Episcopalis communio*, §6.

since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern [a 'nose for'] the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church."⁴⁹ Hence, Francis, went on, the reason why has asked that the people of God around the world be consulted in advance of the synod. A practice that has now become the norm.

Francis' statements about transforming ecclesial culture in his 2018 *Letter to the People of God*, is a call, in effect, to radically overhaul the church's centralized hierarchical system of governance and for the greater participation of all the faithful in transforming the church for the better. It is what so many people have been asking for across many decades now. That necessitates a wider participation in the practice of magisterium which, as this essay has sought to illustrate, primarily refers to the function, the activity of teaching with authority and not to those who carry such a function or activity (i.e. the functionaries or actors). As we have sought to illustrate here, it is a common error that when people refer to magisterium, they actually are speaking about certain officeholders in the church whose role and duty it is to perform magisterium. Others throughout the whole church, including theologians and indeed the entire laity, the collective of the People of God, have very important roles to play in shaping, informing *and* exercising magisterium as well.

If 2019 is to mark the year that wide-sweeping curial reforms are implemented that finally open the doors to wider participation throughout the arenas where the church makes its most important decisions, then an embracing of the necessity for the transformation of the understanding and practice of magisterium throughout the church will be absolutely essential. If *Praedicate evangelium* does indeed appear and acknowledges such a need then, perhaps for the first time in a long, long period of church history, curial reform will finally prove successful in a way that will transform the church and how it fulfils its mission so much for the better long into the future.

History tells us that participation and the related issues of co-responsibility and ecclesial equality were the norm in so much of the church's story in a wide variety of times and places throughout much of its history. Of course, such were also eroded and challenged at different turns, too, until they faded from the collective ecclesial memory and the church ended up with official understandings of

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, "Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops" (17th October, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

ecclesiology and magisterium alike that were premised upon the very opposite of participation, co-responsibility and equality. Participation in magisterium, then is fundamentally a *moral* issue – and far from the only one pertaining to magisterium. In fact, I suggest that most of the magisterial malaises that have befallen the church in modern times and especially in the past four decades are moral and social in character. Pope Francis understands this and his recent calls for reform can greatly help move the church toward becoming ever more truly a teaching church that learns.