



Committee on Doctrine

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BISHOPS AS TEACHERS

A Resource for Bishops

Dear Brother Bishop,

On behalf of the Committee on Doctrine, I am pleased to be able to offer you this pastoral resource concerning the Committee's recent statement on Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

Within the Catholic Church the bishops have a very clear and defined role as the authentic teachers of the faith. In a recent statement, the leadership of the Catholic Theological Society of America seems to misread the legitimate and apostolic role of bishops in addressing the right relationship of theologians and bishops. As a further service to you in your solicitude for the teaching of the faith, the members of the Committee on Doctrine want to provide this resource should any questions arise concerning the ancient and long recognized episcopal "munus docendi." Such clarity is also necessary before addressing procedural issues such as how to nurture dialogue and what processes best serve the overriding need for a clear and faithful proclamation of the faith.

This resource speaks to the teaching office and the NCCB document *Doctrinal Responsibilities*.

Apostolic Tradition: Handing on Revelation

In the New Testament, the followers of Jesus marveled that, unlike other teachers, he taught with authority (e.g. Mt 7:29). Saint John's Gospel relates the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate, during which Pilate asks Jesus, "Then you are a king?" and Jesus responds, "You say I am a king. For this reason I was born and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the

truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (Jn 18:37). Christ earlier declares himself to be “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). In his being, his deeds, and his words, Christ is the perfect revelation of the Father. In him, we have received our greatest knowledge of the living and true God; through him, we have learned how we should live.

In order for this revelation to be known, however, it must first be heard, which immediately implies the necessity of a structured teaching organism to proclaim it. As Saint Paul tells the Romans, “How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?” (Rom 10:14-15). Christ himself taught his disciples to preach the good news while he was still among them in the flesh, sending them out two by two to the towns that he would visit (Lk 10:1). After his resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost, they continued that ministry of preaching the gospel at the cost of their very lives, and appointed others to continue, in turn, their own ministry of preaching the word after they had gone.

It is only through this uninterrupted tradition, stretching back to the time of the apostles and continued by their successors, the bishops, that we can be sure of the integrity and validity of the Christian faith. The Church is called “apostolic” precisely because she alone can trace her origins to the deposit of faith entrusted to the apostles, the Twelve chosen by Jesus and charged, together with their successors, with the responsibility of teaching the true faith, making sure that it is presented clearly, and applying it to the problems and needs of every age. In this way, we have a guarantee that what is taught today is what Jesus actually taught and intended as guidance for his followers, that nothing is forgotten, misunderstood, or lost from century to century, from generation to generation, from person to person.

The Bishop as Teacher

The privilege of handing on the faith, of course, is not limited to bishops. The joy and excitement of the New Evangelization is in no small part found in the efforts of every disciple to share the good news of Jesus, his Resurrection, his gospel, and life in his Church. All the faithful are called to participate in the evangelization and sanctification of the temporal order. It is not enough to rely on the hierarchy alone to address serious social and moral problems in our society. The voice and the engagement of the laity will ultimately determine the direction of our society. Bishops have the responsibility to teach but it falls to the laity to apply that teaching.

Nevertheless, it is the specific competence and responsibility of bishops to teach the faith in its entirety. On the 25th anniversary of his election as bishop of Rome and chief shepherd of the universal Church, Venerable John Paul II wrote in the apostolic exhortation *Pastores Gregis* that bishops are to exercise the ministry of leading the Church “as pastors and true fathers.” In doing so, he wrote, “we have the task of gathering together the family of the faithful and in fostering charity and brotherly communion.” That unity is fostered by handing on the faith authentically. As Saint Paul reminds Timothy, “[P]reach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).

In addition to teaching directly, however, bishops also teach indirectly by their oversight of what is presented as authentic Catholic teaching. The Committee on Doctrine in *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop* (1992) observes that Catholic bishops, in addition to communicating knowledge of revelation and exhortation in virtue, “are to determine authoritatively the correct interpretation of the Scripture and tradition committed to the Church...and they are to judge for the Church the accuracy of the presentation of this revelation by others.” If “the common faith of the Church is to survive from one generation to the next,” the document notes, “the Church must possess the internal resources to distinguish for the entire

community what is true from what is false in these translations and developments of the gospel message...It is a necessary condition that the word of God be continued in its authentic meaning into every culture and into every century.” The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) in *Doctrinal Responsibilities* likewise affirms, “Theologians also acknowledge that it is the role of bishops as authoritative teachers in the Church to make pastoral judgments about the soundness of theological teaching so that the integrity of Catholic doctrine and the unity of the faith community may be preserved.”

The prophetic mission of the College of Bishops cannot be grasped, though, exclusively as a pragmatic need for internal organization and theological coherence. Ultimately it can be understood only in the context of revelation itself, when revealed truth is perceived as salvific and the reliable transmission of that truth as a precious gift from the Lord entrusted to the Church. Only the Holy Spirit, dwelling within the Church, can make possible the teaching ministry of the bishop. As the Committee on Doctrine states in *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop*, “Only within the command of Christ to preach the gospel--with all the continual challenge to interpretation and application inherent in that command--can the ministry of the bishops be understood. The bishops are called to embody and to effect the Church’s consistent witness to Christ in their care for orthodoxy. The magisterium is to continue and to serve the presence of the teaching Christ.” In continuing the mission of Christ the Teacher, the bishops in union with the Pope are therefore ministers of a free and wonderful gift of God, the assurance that we adhere to the true faith. It is the source of our conviction that what we hold by faith is authentic, a conviction that so grasps the believer that he or she would be willing to die rather than deny it.

The Theologian as Teacher

Our understanding of the faith, however, is not limited to the explicit teaching and preaching of the bishop. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* enumerates two other ways that “the heritage of faith is able to grow in the life of the Church” (CCC 94). One such way is through the spiritual experience of believers, particularly through their exposure to Sacred Scriptures and their interior life of prayer. Another is through “the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts” and in particular “theological research which deepens knowledge of revealed truth” (ibid.).

It is the privilege of theologians to delve more profoundly and systematically into the meaning of the faith, according to the ancient adage, *fides quaerens intellectum*. Since this faith is handed on by the Church through the ministry of the magisterium, the bishop and the theologian have a special relationship that can and should be reciprocally enriching. “The Church cannot exist without the teaching office of the bishop,” *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop* states, “nor thrive without the sound scholarship of the theologian. Bishops and theologians are in a collaborative relationship. Bishops benefit from the work of theologians, while theologians gain a deeper understanding of revelation under the guidance of the magisterium. The ministry of bishops and the service rendered by theologians entail a mutual respect and support.”

As in every academic discipline, theologians enjoy a legitimate autonomy defined by the standards of their field and the boundaries of what constitutes spurious or fruitless investigation. There is a broad field for theological exploration and critique, for instance, from the “underlying assumptions and explicit formulations of doctrine...to questions about their meaning or their doctrinal and pastoral implications, to comparison with other doctrines, to the study of their historical and ecclesial context, to translations into diverse cultural categories, and to correlation

with knowledge from other branches of human and scientific inquiry” (*The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop*). These investigations are not made in isolation from the received faith of the Church, though, but are made presuming that faith, and in light of that faith.

By taking the truth of revelation as a starting point, it should be pointed out that theological inquiry is not diminished but in fact enhanced, since it is only--as in every other discipline--by building on what is confidently known that deeper and fuller investigation can be pursued. Prior to his election as Pope, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in *The Nature and Mission of Theology* that natural science “has achieved its great successes thanks, not to a free-floating creativity, but to the strictest adhesion to its object. Naturally, it must constantly probe the object on all sides with anticipatory hypotheses and seek new methods of penetrating it with questions which will elicit answers. Once given, however, none of the answers can simply be cleared away. On the contrary, the more they increase in number, the more possibilities of inquiry are disclosed and the more concrete space is won for real creativity. I mean the sort of creativity which does not forge ahead into the void but connects the already existing paths in order to open up new ones. It is not otherwise in theology.”

It is essential for the health and progress of theology, then, that it take place within the context of a clearly articulated community of faith, that its creativity be channeled and maximized by boundaries delineated by the received revelation. Identifying these boundaries of the authentic faith constitutes the bishop’s contribution to the flourishing of the theological sciences. Saint Paul often uses examples from the realm of sports, and perhaps one would serve us well here. In any sporting match, football, tennis, baseball, there are referees and umpires. The game can only proceed with the supervision of a referee. In a tennis match, it is not the player who calls the ball “out of bounds” but the referee. The player may object that it was not

his or her intention to hit the ball out of bounds. He or she may even question whether the ball is out of bounds. But it is the referee who must make the call. Otherwise, there can be no coherent game, no enjoyment of the match, no sense of progress in learning the sport: in short, the “tennis game” would devolve into a fruitless exchange of individuals hitting the ball at will.

So it is in academic, theological investigation. If it is to be directed towards a fruitful deepening of our understanding, then it cannot be an exchange of individuals hitting the ball randomly. Once ideas are written and published by a theologian, they must stand on their own; it is the bishops who are entrusted with the office of referee, who must call the play. To be sure, as in other disciplines the most effective check on fruitless investigation is the vigorous exercise of peer review, critique, and dialogue, as once was a strong tradition in the theological disciplines. When that peer review is absent or ineffective, however, it is the responsibility of the bishop to make the call and to declare, if necessary, certain notions out of bounds, the bounds of Christian revelation.

Dialogue between Bishops and Theologians

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the “Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith” (CCC 86). As shepherds of God’s flock, bishops have the responsibility to teach the faith and to preserve it as it has been received and passed on. Theirs is the duty to see that the noble enterprise of theology is integrated into the overall mission of the Church to transmit the good news. Both bishop and theologian serve the Word of God and cooperate in building up the community of faith.

The legitimate academic freedom of Catholic theologians, then, is understood like any other freedom, with its own appropriate limits and its own ordering to human flourishing. At times it may seem to conflict with the pastoral freedom and, in fact, the pastoral obligation of the bishop to protect the authenticity of the faith and the spiritual good of the faithful. Nevertheless, when good will is present on both sides, when both are committed to the truth revealed in Jesus Christ, their relationship can be one of profound communion as together they seek to explore new implications of the deposit of faith.

The Church, therefore, encourages a respectful dialogue between and among theologians and bishops. Such a dialogue, however, can only thrive in the context of faith, since it is through faith that we know of the divine institution of the Church and the continuing guidance of the Church, including the magisterium, by the Holy Spirit. The personal faith of the theologian is thus an essential prerequisite of this important dialogue. In *The Nature and Mission of Theology* Cardinal Ratzinger observed that as “there is no theology without faith, there can be no theology without conversion...the opportunity for creative theology increases the more that faith becomes real, personal experience; the more that conversion acquires interior certainty thanks to a painful process of transformation; the more that it is recognized as the indispensable means of penetrating into the truth of one’s own being.” As a person of faith, the theologian understands and appreciates the charism of teaching entrusted to his or her bishop, and willingly submits personal theological ideas for the bishop’s evaluation.

One recognized starting point for this dialogue is the request for an *imprimatur*. Books that treat the sacred sciences and are intended to be used as the basis for instruction in Catholic institutions are required to have the *imprimatur* (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 827, §2). Even for texts that do not require the *imprimatur*, it is still recommended (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 827,

§3). It is a very helpful way for the theologian to initiate a process of dialogue through which theological ideas may be evaluated in light of the deposit of faith. Once a theological work is published, however, it is *ipso facto* open to response. It is like the ball that has been hit in a tennis match. It is already in play. If it is called out of bounds, it is not an adequate response to say that the referee did not enter into dialogue with the player beforehand. When a work is published and, particularly, if it is being used and accepted as authentic Catholic teaching, the bishop has an obligation to address it. Thus the initiation of dialogue by an author is not only welcome but recommended, before the work is published and the bishop may be constrained to make a public appraisal of it. The Committee on Doctrine's 2004 resource, *The Permission to Publish*, outlines the rights and responsibilities of diocesan bishops, and the many options presented to them in this regards under canon law.

Communion in the Church

The sense of communion with the Church and the awareness of what this means is at the very heart of a profound harmony between the bishops, the authoritative teachers of the faith, and theologians who have the task of investigating and penetrating more deeply the meaning of the faith. When this communion is appreciated and sought, theologians perceive the magisterium as intrinsic to their work. Natural scientists are grateful for the existence of physical laws since their work is only sound, only fruitful, when it respects the foundational truths of those concrete boundaries. In a similar way, the Church's teaching office, when grasped in the context of faith, is a great assistance to the scholarly research of theologians since its judgments are determinative of good theology.

The alternative is the principle of private judgment, which Blessed John Henry Newman labeled "a principle of disunion," conceived in opposition to the judgment of the magisterium.

When a theologian does not understand his or her role within the communion of the Church, the role of a servant--like that of the bishop--to the truth, he or she risks usurping the bishop's central role of leading people to salvation. Isolated from the community of faith, the theologian seriously endangers the faithful by proposing "a different gospel" (2 Cor 11:4) which is no longer salvific.

On the other hand, when a theologian strives to serve the truth revealed by God, the truth that Jesus insisted upon during his interrogation by Pontius Pilate, the truth that he entrusted to the protection of his Church, the theologian becomes a vital member of the body of Christ, an agent of communion and of faith in an age hungering for both. Nineteen centuries ago, Saint Ignatius of Antioch praised the Church of Philadelphia in Asia as "a source of everlasting joy, especially when the members are at one with the bishop and his assistants, the presbyters and deacons, that have been appointed in accordance with the wish of Jesus Christ, and whom he has, by his own will, through the operation of His Holy Spirit, confirmed in loyalty." Theologians contribute powerfully to the rich teaching of our faith, and when they pursue their vocation to assist "faith seeking understanding" with honor and commitment, always in union with the Church and her teaching authority, they enrich the very communion that Saint Ignatius admired so many centuries ago. And that, perhaps, is their most important contribution of all.

The Process of Dialogue

The USCCB Committee on Doctrine's recent statement on the book by Sister Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, has to be seen in the light of the bishops' obligation to provide for the spiritual good of the faithful. Responding to this book presents new challenges in the light of the circumstances of our day.

The book in question is an already published work not primarily directed to professional theologians for theological speculation, but rather one used as a teaching instrument for undergraduate students, many of whom are looking for grounding in their Catholic faith. The background against which the bishops must exercise their teaching responsibility today is the generally recognized catechetical deficiencies of past decades beginning with the 1970s. The result is a generation or more of Catholics, including young adults today, who have little solid intellectual formation in their faith. It is in this context that books used in religious studies/theology courses at Catholic colleges and universities must be seen as *de facto* catechetical and formational texts. While the content of a book may be highly speculative and of interest for trained theologians, when it is used in a classroom with students often ill-prepared to deal with speculative theology the results can be spiritually harmful. The bishops are rightly concerned about the spiritual welfare of those students using this book who may be led to assume that its content is authentic Catholic teaching. The Committee on Doctrine expresses serious concern about the pastoral implications of the teaching in this book.

Moreover, the circumstances involving the teaching of theology within Catholic Universities and Colleges have significantly changed. Undergraduates are now offered a variety of texts within introductory theology/religion courses. While many of the texts can be quite helpful in presenting the faith and teaching of the Catholic Church, there are others that cause confusion and raise doubt among students. Some texts can even be understood as offering an alternative pastoral and spiritual guidance to students in contrast to the teaching magisterium. This is especially a concern given the current diminished level of catechetical preparation of so many young students. In the light of this changed academic situation special attention must now

be given as to how to address theological works that are aimed at students and yet do not meet criteria for authentic Catholic teaching.

Reference has been made to the 1989 NCCB document *Doctrinal Responsibilities* which was intended to promote cooperation in resolving misunderstandings between individual diocesan bishops and theologians. *Doctrinal Responsibilities* did not address the special responsibilities of the Committee on Doctrine of our national episcopal conference. In addition the document is presented for consideration as one way of proceeding but not as obligatory. Furthermore, the statement makes it clear that these suggested guidelines “can only serve if they are adapted to the particular conditions, of a diocese, its history and its special needs.”

In the past several years, some bishops within the Conference have requested that the Committee on Doctrine examine various writings and offer an assessment because of their theological and pastoral concerns. The Committee on Doctrine, as a service to individual bishops and to the Conference as a whole, and in keeping with the mandate entrusted to the Committee on Doctrine by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has tried to comply with such requests. It did so knowing that such requests were timely and important. Since the issues and books were in the public domain, the Doctrine Committee felt obliged in certain cases to issue public statements so as to address the urgent theological and pastoral needs of Bishops and for the wellbeing of all the faithful. It may even turn out that the desired dialogue is sometimes facilitated when the position of both parties is public. The Doctrine Committee does not wish to stifle legitimate theological reflection or to preclude further dialogue, but it does want to ensure that the authentic teaching of the Church, concerning doctrine and morals, is clearly stated and affirmed. While dialogue between theologians and bishops is very important it should work along side of the bishops’ primary teaching and sanctifying mission.

The Committee on Doctrine recognizes the legitimate vocations of the theologian as well as of the bishop. The Committee hopes that the discussion generated by its statement will help lead to a renewal and foster a proper and fruitful relationship between the bishops and the whole theological community.

Faithfully in Christ,

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