

# Church Teaching

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Rev Kevin McGovern:  
Professional Development on Sexuality and Gender  
at Brigidine Ministry Centre, Albert Park  
on 6 June 2017.





# 1. Three Levels of Authority



# 1. Infallible Teaching

## REFERENCES:

- Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, #12, 25.
- *1983 Code of Canon Law*, #749–751.
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #888-891.
  - e.g. Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Jesus Christ is True God and True Man, Trinity, the efficacy of the Sacraments with regard to grace, the Real Presence of Christ in the consecrated Bread and Wine, the immortality of the soul, etc.
  - The Catholic's response to infallible teaching must be **assent**.

## 2. Definitive Teaching



- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Profession of Faith and Oath of Fidelity* (1989).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (Donum Veritatis)* (1990).
- John Paul II's *To Protect the Faith (Ad Tuendam Fidem)* (1998).
- Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's *Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the 'Profession of Faith'* (1998):
  - Examples of definitive teaching include “the doctrine on the illicitness of euthanasia,” “the teaching of the illicitness of prostitution and of fornication,” “canonization of saints,” “the declaration of Pope Leo XIII in the Apostolic Letter *Apostolicae Curae* on the invalidity of Anglican ordinations,” “the doctrine that priestly ordination is reserved only to men.” (#11)
  - The Catholic's response to definitive teaching should be **assent**.

# 3. Authoritative or Non-Infallible Teaching



## REFERENCES:

- Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, #12, 25.
- *1983 Code of Canon Law*, #752–754.
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #892.
  - e.g. most if not all teaching about matters of morality, including teaching about social justice and sexual ethics
  - The Catholic's response to authoritative or non-infallible teaching should be **obsequium**.

# *Obsequium*



- “Submission” is too strong.
- “Respect” is too weak.
- “religious docility of the will and intellect”
- “respectful hearing and prayerful consideration”  
(Archbishop Sir Guilford Young, archbishop of Hobart  
from 1955 to 1988)

# *Obsequium* (cont'd)



- i. When we form our own views, we do not ignore authoritative teaching.
- ii. We are open to this teaching. If we are inclined to a different view, we are ready to consider that the authoritative teaching might be right – and that we might be wrong.
- iii. We persevere with this teaching longer than we would with any other source of wisdom.
- iv. Finally, we must decide. Provided we have followed this process of honest engagement, we are ultimately free either to agree or to respectfully disagree with authoritative or non-infallible teaching.

# Canadian Bishops



- “It is a fact that a certain number of Catholics... find it either extremely difficult or even impossible to make their own all elements of this doctrine... (#17) Since they are not denying any point of divine and Catholic faith nor rejecting the teaching authority of the Church, these Catholics should not be considered, or consider themselves, shut off from the body of the faithful... (#25)... (I)f these persons have tried sincerely but without success to pursue a line of conduct in keeping with the given directives, they may be safely assured that whoever honestly conducts that course which seems right to him [or her] does so in good conscience.” (#26)



# Scandinavian Bishops



- “It is a fact that a certain number of Catholics... find it either extremely difficult or even impossible to make their own all elements of this doctrine... (#17) Since they are not denying any point of divine and Catholic faith nor rejecting the teaching authority of the Church, these Catholics should not be considered, or consider themselves, shut off from the body of the faithful... (#25)... (I)f these persons have tried sincerely but without success to pursue a line of conduct in keeping with the given directives, they may be safely assured that whoever honestly conducts that course which seems right to him [or her] does so in good conscience.” (#26)

# German bishops (22 September 1967)



- The ordinary, non-infallible teaching of the Church “can, and on occasion actually does, fall into errors.”

# Do Catholics know about this?



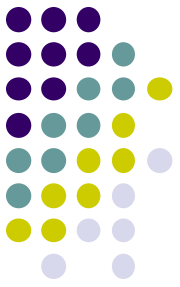
- In the Church, we rarely if ever teach about the levels of authority within Church teaching, and the various responses which a loyal Catholic should make to this teaching.
- Even so, many Catholics do have some sense of this:
  - After they have thought about it, they may disagree with some authoritative, non-infallible teaching.
  - They may also feel a bit uncomfortable or even guilty about this.

# Why this is important



1. Henry Broadbent, “Roots of violence,” *The Tablet* 271, no. 9199 (6 May 2017): 13
  - “[A]ll religions require a submissive disposition from adherents, e.g. obedience to religious texts, to religious traditions and/or religious teachers.”
  - “Some faiths require blind submission... other faiths encourage conscientious assent, i.e. submission consistent with the dictates of private conscience.”
  - Blind submission leads to fundamentalism, fanaticism, and ultimately terrorism.

# Why this is important (cont'd)



## 2. Faith and Reason

- John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* (1998), #1:
  - “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth...”
- Benedict XVI's *Address at Westminster Hall* (17 September 2010):
  - “The world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilisation.”

# Why this is important (cont'd)



## 2. Faith and Reason (cont'd)

- Benedict XVI's *General Audience* (16 June 2010):
  - “Faith consolidates, integrates and illumines the heritage of truth that human reason acquires.”
- Benedict XVI's *Address at Westminster Hall* (17 September 2010):
  - “Distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism, can be seen to create serious social problems.... [T]hese distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structure role of reason within religion.”
  - “It is a two-way process.”

# Why this is important (cont'd)



3. Removing an obstacle to Catholic Christian faith
  - Some people disagree with some aspects of the Catholic Church's sexual ethics.
  - It would be tragic if this disagreement led them to reject the religious truths of the Catholic Church.
  - We need to help people understand that a committed Catholic can hold to the religious truths of the Catholic Church while respectfully disagreeing with some of its authoritative but non-infallible teachings.

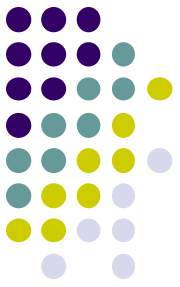
# It can be difficult...



- On 16 April 1999, I presented these insights at a public forum in Rockhampton QLD on ‘Formation of Conscience’: “What should Catholics do when their conscience seems in conflict with the teaching of the Church?”
- About 100 people attended.
- This included a small group of very conservative Catholics.
- Their view was that Catholics were obliged to obey all the teachings of the Church – particularly in the area of sexual ethics.
- They were very aggressive and disruptive.
- They were very angry.
- I was rattled by them. So were the other participants.



# Difficult but important...



- After the presentation, other participants told me that they appreciated what I had said.
- It was really what they already did – agreeing with the Church about many things, respectfully disagreeing about some things.
- They had always felt a bit uncomfortable about this.
- They were encouraged to know that a committed Catholic can respectfully disagree with the Church about some things.
- Some said that all this encouraged them as Catholics and in their Catholic faith.

# It can be difficult...

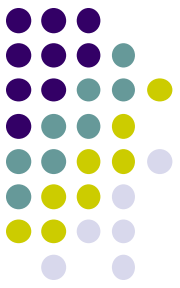


- The presentation had been recorded so it could be provided to others who were not able to attend that night.
- This group was in contact the next morning, asking for a copy of the recording.
- The organisers decided not to distribute the recording to anyone: “Unfortunately there is no recording available.”
- The group made a complaint to the Bishop of Rockhampton.
- He reviewed my notes, and concluded that I had been consistent with Church teaching.
- The group then contacted me, asking for a copy of my notes.
- I replied that I only had rough notes which I would not make available.

# It can be difficult...



- They then sent me notes which they had taken on the night. If I agreed that this was a correct record of what I said, I was to sign it and return it to them.
- There were some inaccuracies, so I replied that this was not an accurate record of what I had said.
- These exchanges went on for some time, and I was even more rattled.
- Then a Catholic parish in another town in Rockhampton diocese contacted me and asked me to give the same presentation there.
- I did not know what to do...



## It can be difficult...

- I phoned up my bishop, the then-Bishop of Rockhampton, Bishop Brian Heenan.
- He said, “I can’t tell you what to do. I think that would exceed my authority as a bishop. But I do hope that you give the presentation. If they silence you on this, Kevin, where does that end?”
- I gave the presentation in Bundaberg on 30 September 1999.
- I and the organisers had plans of what we would do if there were disruptions as there had been in Rockhampton.
- That night in Bundaberg, there were no disruptive Catholics, and there was much positive feedback about the presentation.

# Some questions for discussion



- How would our education in sexuality change if we put more emphasis on the authority of Church teaching? Try to be as specific as possible.
- How could we communicate that someone can be a committed Catholic while respectfully disagreeing with some authoritative but non-infallible teaching?
- What if anything attracts me about this?
- What if anything concerns me?
- If I have concerns, what if anything could be done to manage these concerns?

# Presenter



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