

Catholic

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YOUR CONSCIENCE AND CHURCH TEACHING HOW DO THEY FIT TOGETHER?

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Many Catholics get dizzy when they see disagreement in the Church over such moral issues as birth control, divorce, the role of women, or immigration. How are we supposed to deal with the confusing relationship between personal conscience and official Church teaching?

Public disagreement with Church teaching on contraception, for example, is disturbing to many Catholics. Further disturbance arises when theologians publicly disagree with official Church teaching and, in general, urge greater freedom of conscience.

Why should there be ambiguity and confusion? How do we cope with it or live with it—or even come to understand it? How can all of us in the Church—whether individual Catholics, pastors or preachers, theologians, bishops, or pope—work together to understand and apply gospel values to our decisions? I hope to answer these questions and shed some light on the complex link between our personal consciences and Church teaching.

A DIFFERENCE IN APPROACH

In the beginning, we must realize that there is an important difference between gospel values themselves (the *content* of Church teaching) and the way they are proclaimed (the *method* of Church teaching). A major reason for confusion today is that we are in a transitional period, caught in a



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clash between two competing *methods* of arriving at moral principles: the “classical” and the “personal.” These two methods are not contradictory, but they are very different, and each has something to teach us. They are based on different ways of looking at reality.

1. The classical method. The goal of the classical method is to capture what is universally true—for all people, all times, all circumstances. From the concrete and complex circumstances of everyday life, it deliberately abstracts—or draws forth, to use a less philosophical term—the *nature* or *essence* of the matter.

In the area of truthfulness, for example, this method would consider primarily the truth or falsity of statements. To a captured soldier trying to protect his comrades while undergoing questioning, it would say he could remain silent or rely on double-meaning statements. In the classical approach, he could not deliberately give false information; that would be telling a lie, which by its nature is always evil. Similarly, the classical method comes up with basic, unchangeable principles of sexual morality by carefully pondering the sexual nature of man and woman and the obvious relationship between the genital organs and reproduction.

The strength of this method is that it gives us valid insights into human nature expressed in logical, clear, precise terms. Its formulations can be addressed to all cultures in all times. It clearly avoids any danger of subjectivism.

The weakness of the classical method is that it too readily states in absolute terms the evils of certain concrete behaviors without considering the persons involved, their situation, the changing aspects of history. It tends to underplay personal growth, relationships, and the impact of cultural, social, economic, and psychological factors. It can give the

impression that official teachers always have absolute answers even when the questions are new and complex (such as bioethical issues of medical procedures undreamed of a few generations ago) and do not need to consult the expertise of laypersons or theologians.

Today, only those trained in scholastic philosophy and theology (which now excludes many priests) fully appreciate this method; the vast majority of Catholics do not understand the classical approach. Catholics can get all tripped up in flatly rejecting such a *method* because, in doing so, they may reject the *content* of Church teaching as well. (For example, they may wrongly see the Church as having nothing worthwhile to say about sexuality.) In the long run, this is disastrous.

2. The personal approach. The personal or historical approach starts by examining the experience of individuals. It traces the development of an idea or teaching through the years instead of focusing on human nature in the abstract. Its moral judgments consider the unique qualities and total personality of each individual as well as how a person relates to others and to the community. From the practice of Christians down through the centuries and from reflection, analysis, and broad consultation, the personal approach seeks to formulate values and disvalues into universal laws.

The personal approach would thus say the captured soldier could give false information to the enemy because the value of truthfulness is outweighed by the value of saving other lives. In the matter of sexuality, this method would consider the total persons involved, the meaning of love, and the experience of conscientious married couples. The relationship of the personal approach to personal human experience makes its positions seem reasonable—a stronger appeal in an age of democratic ideals than an insistence on authority, but it can lead to mere subjectivity (“It’s right because I think so”) if it is improperly used.

THE INFALLIBLE IMPRESSION

A second reason for today’s confusion is what I call the “infallible impression”—the tendency to assume noninfallible teaching is beyond disagreement.

The Church defines doctrine only on rare occasions: when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* or when an ecumenical council defines something as a matter of faith. The Church also teaches infallibly when all its bishops, even though dispersed throughout the world, agree that a particular teaching is to be held definitively.

But Church authority (pope and bishops) also teaches in noninfallible ways—through encyclicals, pastoral statements, and the documents of national bishops’ conferences, for instance.

Such teaching is presumed to be true and is to be accepted with loyalty and reverence. Yet, in the course of history, many such teachings were changed. It is misleading to leave the

impression that such teaching is infallible and that no one may, in good faith, withhold from it the assent of faith.

THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

A third reason for present-day confusion is a tendency to oversimplify the activity of the Holy Spirit. We trust the promise that the Spirit will guide the Church, but we cannot overlook the fact that divine assistance does not dispense with human effort.

The Holy Spirit assists the teaching authority of the Church *in and through the human*, not apart from it or in spite of it. As Catholics, we assume the Spirit is present and active in official Church teachers as they carry out their role. But we also believe the same Spirit is present and active in the hearts of *all* the faithful.

Therefore, just as members of the Church cannot readily assume they are right and Church teaching wrong, so official teachers cannot rule out the possibility that they may be wrong and ordinary believers right when there is real difficulty with a particular teaching. So, while rightly relying on the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the pope and bishops must do their human homework. They must seek the facts thoroughly; they must rigorously examine and assess all data. Only then can they formulate and communicate official teaching.

Theologians are one source the pope and bishops use to help them collect and analyze data and understand historical development. To carry out their responsibility to the teaching Church, theologians must be in close and open communication with the pope and bishops.

LISTENING TO CHRIST—TOGETHER

Pope, bishops, theologians, preachers, pastors, and individual Catholics should ideally work together to proclaim the good news. God loves sinners and works in and through Jesus to bring salvation to everyone. In the light of this good news, the Church seeks to proclaim gospel values—how we can live as Jesus lived, in faithful response to the Father's call and open to the Spirit's guidance.

This teaching mission has three phases, and each of us has a role in the process.

1. The role of official teachers. The pope and bishops are responsible for teaching gospel values to people of every country and culture. They draw on many sources: Scripture, above all, the Church's living tradition, and theologians. They need to be intimately in touch with the experience of the faithful, the thinking of philosophers, and all the developments of technology.

To ignore any of these sources would jeopardize the effectiveness of Church teaching. The Church exists in the world, not in a vacuum; its teaching is *historically conditioned*. It cannot ignore the rootedness in space and time that has, over the centuries, altered its understanding of such issues as slavery, war, interest on loans, and the role of women in society.

Adapting moral teaching to historical conditions does not mean watering down the gospel. The gospel is never easy to live. It always involves conversion, discipleship, the cross. It demands giving our lives for others, seeking the kingdom first, becoming poor, humble, simple, merciful. So the Church's teaching must ever be *challenging and prophetic*, calling us to change our minds, hearts, and lifestyles and struggle to grow.

Finally, the Church's teaching is necessarily *general and abstract* because it is addressed to the whole world—people of all countries and cultures, children and adults at different stages of faith development. Church teaching concentrates on what ought to be and how people ought to live, *all things being equal*.

2. The role of theologians and preachers. In flesh-and-blood reality, all things are often not equal. Thus the translation of Church teaching into the lived reality of people's lives is an important and necessary step that the teaching itself cannot accomplish. This is the task of theologians and preachers.

Theologians are concerned with the meaning of a particular teaching and its relationship to the gospel, to other Church teachings, to tradition, and to other human sciences. They examine a teaching's implication for daily life and its place on a scale of gospel values. Their loyalty to the Church demands that they use all their talents to promote and critique the teachings of the Church they love and cherish. The effectiveness and fruitfulness of Church teaching is at stake.

From preaching at Mass to leading retreats, from large-group lectures to small adult-education classes, *preachers* play a vital role in translating official teaching and helping people apply it to the circumstances of their lives.

A bishop depends, in large part, on those who preach and teach in his diocese to fulfill his official teaching function. Preachers must make every effort to understand official teaching and to communicate it realistically and effectively. They need to be in touch with the people to whom they



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preach and be aware how their own personal opinions and prejudices affect the way they preach and what they preach. These preachers have the power to inform, challenge, and encourage growth—or distort and deaden the good news.

3. The role of personal conscience. Official teaching is useless if it fails to influence people's lives. The best theology, the most effective preaching is empty if it does not help people live and choose in the light of gospel values. The third and most important phase of the Church's teaching mission is the individual believer's response to Church teaching.

We may be turned off by the classical method or its language; we may reject this way of stating moral teaching. But if we refuse to hear *what* the Church is saying just because we are upset by method or style, we risk missing the vital teaching help of the Church and suffering serious consequences in trying to respond to Christ's call.

Even when it requires reexamining our values, opinions, and conduct, each of us must seek to be “teachable”—open, willing, even eager to hear the teaching of the Church. Our duty in conscience is to *know* the official teaching of the Church. This means getting to the heart of the matter to discern the values being taught.

With this kind of attitude, we are “loyal” to the Church even when we are unable to agree with some aspect or method of Church teaching. Such an attitude keeps us sincerely concerned, respectful, and involved—ready to achieve a wedding of Church teaching and personal conscience that will become evident in our behavior.

To achieve that wedding—to assimilate Church teaching and translate it into action—is a big order. There is no automatic leap from *knowing* the Church's stance on moral matters to *living* it out. Indeed, there are two major steps we must take before this begins to happen.

First, we *personally* assimilate the Church's values so that they become *our* values. And values don't become ours until we go beyond just “knowing.”

What this “beyond knowing” is remains mostly a mystery to us. Somehow it involves openness, sharing, trust, and love between persons. It includes what we mean when we say that “actions speak louder than words” or refer to the power of personal example. Somehow it involves the whole question of religious education and formation of conscience. Somehow it involves finding people who embody values in an inspiring, personal way.

Secondly, as values become ours, we discover something of our potential and hear the call to grow; we are moved to seek concrete ways of embodying those values in our lives.

Most of the time, we have no difficulty moving through

these two steps. Most of the values the Church teaches are neither new to us nor foreign to our lives. Church teaching usually just challenges us to keep struggling, to do better.

Once in a while, the Church's teaching calls for radical change. The Second Vatican Council, for instance, called for changes in our attitude toward other faiths, more active participation in the Eucharist, a sense of the positive call to holiness (keeping the Commandments is not enough!). And sometimes the Church's teaching is so demanding that we try to ignore it. This has been the case, for instance, with the powerful and emphatic papal appeals for social justice.

THE SPIRIT IS OUR COMPASS

It is a serious mistake to confuse the three phases of the teaching process as expressed in the three distinct roles of (1) official teachers, (2) theologians and pastors, and (3) individual Catholics. It is a more serious mistake to allow charity to slip out of the process. Official teachers, whatever their human failings, are not hardhearted taskmasters trying to impose unreasonable burdens. Theologians are not rebellious, faithless seekers of notoriety and power. Individual Catholics are not just sheep to be told what to do and considered automatically guilty of sin if they do not do it.

We are all trying to follow the one Christ who promised to remain with us. We are all guided by the Spirit he promised to send so that we do not lose our way—even in times of confusion and change.

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