

Donum Veritatis:
**The Contribution of the Congregation for the
Doctrine of the Faith to the Theological Enterprise¹**

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AS THE PREFECT of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I have the honor of serving the Church in an important position that is perhaps equally misunderstood by clergy and laity alike. And media characterizations of my office are nearly universally negative, which seems to indicate that contemporary society cannot conceive of a role such as that occupied by the Congregation. And yet I wonder if the media's negative presentation of the Congregation's work might not be balanced by a second look at its role and function in our own day.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is a department of the Roman Curia which assists the Pope in his universal mission to the point that the documents issued by the Congregation expressly approved by the Pope participate in the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Saint Peter (cf. *Donum Veritatis*, §18). According to the 1990 Instruction *Donum Veritatis*, the Magisterium, which is the authoritative teaching ministry in the Church, “authentically teaches the doctrine of the Apostles.” This is an “ecclesial service” that includes “refuting objections to and distortions of the faith, [while] promoting, with the authority received from Jesus Christ, new and deeper comprehension, clarification, and application of revealed doctrine.”² This worthy objective describes the particular focus of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

¹ A version of this presentation was given as a lecture at The Catholic University of America on November 3, 2014.

² *Donum Veritatis*, §21.

We might want to look at this more closely in the light of recent statements by Pope Francis. The Holy Father has recently clarified, speaking of the missionary mandate of the Church in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary.³

In order to preserve this “pastoral goal and missionary style” it would be important to preserve “what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary” from distortions or dislocations. From time to time, it is necessary to discern whether a distortion is being taught instead of the truth, rendering what is most necessary less beautiful, less grand and ultimately less appealing. It is true, that objections have been raised to our process of examining those theological positions that would seem to require more thorough discernment before they can be accepted without qualification, or even accepted at all. But “the fact that these processes can be improved,” as *Donum Veritatis* notes, does not mean that their objective is less necessary or less of a genuine service.⁴ Our procedures are available at our website—yes, even the CDF has a website!—and if, after studying them, you have suggestions for improvement, the Prefect would be glad to receive them.

Returning to the objective however, I would like to give this ecclesial service a second look. In 1990, *Donum Veritatis* spoke of the “respect for truth” out of which all theologians should do their work,⁵ and certainly we can all agree. But Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* uses an expression that is even more forceful and characteristically beautiful, and that is of the “reverence for truth” which every preacher of the Word should have. He says,

The first step, after calling upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, is to give our entire attention to the biblical text, which needs to be the basis of our preaching. Whenever we stop and attempt to understand the message of a particular text, we are practicing “reverence

³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §35.

⁴ *Donum Veritatis*, §37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, §37.

for the truth.” This is the humility of heart which recognizes that the word is always beyond us, that “we are neither its masters or owners, but its guardians, heralds and servants. This attitude of humble and awe-filled veneration of the word is expressed by taking the time to study it with the greatest care and a holy fear lest we distort it.”⁶

Pope Francis takes this expression, “reverence for truth,” from Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which stated, “Every evangelizer is expected to have a reverence for truth, especially since the truth that he studies and communicates is none other than revealed truth and hence, more than any other, a sharing in the first truth which is God Himself.”⁷

This, Blessed Paul VI goes on to say, is “a truth which liberates” (cf. Jn 8:32). It is “the truth about God, about man and his mysterious destiny, about the world; the difficult truth that we seek in the Word of God and of which we are neither the masters nor the owners, but the depositaries, the heralds and the servants.” Finally, Pope Paul VI says that reverence for the truth means that “The God of truth expects us to be the vigilant defenders and devoted preachers of truth.”⁸

Here, even at this starting point, we have a fundamental attitude which can be refreshing not only to all in the Church but to many outside of the Church in the cultures in which she exists. For example, one commonly hears, as educational objectives for students, the cultivation of “thinking critically” before accepting conclusions or opinions, which generally means the cultivation of “innovation” and “creativity” or challenging established textual notions or social patterns. These goals are certainly valuable, but a balancing goal that would give the benefit of the doubt to the received tradition is often lacking. Perhaps “reverence for truth” also legitimately includes the skill of learning how to receive traditional wisdom, so that the first reflex is not always “challenging” or “critiquing,” but “receiving,” “understanding” and “interpreting” so as to “conserve” and “hand on”—the very idea of “tradition.” Perhaps these are also worthy educational goals, especially at a Catholic school.

Further, in many academic cultures, the dominance of post-modern meta-discourses regarding “truth” have essentially dismantled the notion of any kind of objective truth. They propose instead an irreducible variety of truths, in the plural, ideologies for the vested interests that created

⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §146.

⁷ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §78.

⁸ *Ibid.*

them. It is certainly salutary to use the hermeneutic of suspicion with regard to the productions of any power structure. The idea that there does not exist anything meaningful called “truth” that can transcend cultural and ideological differences has come to be accepted wisdom. Perhaps academic culture in many universities has become so “suspicious” that a “hermeneutic of reverence,” and specifically “reverence for truth,” has become almost unintelligible. Intellectual habits cultivated in these environments almost instinctively resist a service that is borne out of “reverence for truth,” and be inclined towards suspicion of anything such a service might produce, pronounce, or undertake.

But if we turn this the other way? It seems that the witness of the Church, of receiving truth as a gift and revelation that liberates, a truth of which “we are neither ... masters or owners, but ... guardians, heralds and servants,” and which requires and deserves an “attitude of humble and awe-filled veneration ... expressed by taking the time to study it with the greatest care and a holy fear lest we distort it” offers a beneficial counter-witness. Suspicion, with no counterbalancing movement of “reverence,” must eventually exhaust itself in ever-widening circles of distrust. What are the bonds of human community that would remain? Pope Francis notes, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, that “Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless.”⁹ This nihilism is unavoidable if there is no truth. The Magisterium, out of reverence for the truth it serves, refutes “objections to and distortions of the faith, and [promotes], with the authority received from Jesus Christ, new and deeper comprehension, clarification, and application of revealed doctrine.”¹⁰ This offers a disciplined witness which can serve as an invitation to consider such a starting point more seriously in learned cultures where it has come to be routinely accepted that “truth” is an illusion of power. In such cultures, this would be an evangelizing moment.

It follows the truth for which one would have “reverence” would be one demanding wholehearted commitment without reservation, in an act of trust, not suspicion. With regard to any specific spiritual movement, one must, of course, always “test the spirits,” but if suspicion is not to end in an ever greater spiral of critique and distrust, then there must be a core—what is most beautiful, most persuasive, most grand—to which one can give oneself. Pope Francis, a little further in *Evangelii*

⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §53.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Gaudium, specifies what this is in mentioning a “basic core” of revealed truths that are “more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel.” He says, “In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.”¹¹ He also mentions the idea, from Vatican II, of a hierarchy of truths in which the “basic core” would be found. Later on he summarizes “the fundamental message” in a way suitable for evangelizing in simple conversation, as proclaiming “the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship.”¹² And later, “On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.’”¹³

Pope Paul VI, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, also reflects upon this core, emphasizing “the essential content, . . . which cannot be modified or ignored without seriously diluting the nature of evangelization itself.” He offers a summary: “To evangelize is first of all to bear witness . . . to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to bear witness that in His Son God has loved the world—that in His Incarnate Word He has given being to all things . . . manifesting the fact that for man the Creator is not an anonymous and remote power. He is the Father, *that we should be called children of God* . . . (1 Jn 3:1; cf. Rom 8:14–17). And thus we are one another’s brothers and sisters in God.” Here, the basic Christian proclamation, the “essential content,” provides the basis for authentic human communion. The truth worthy of “reverence” is the truth beyond the boundaries of thoroughgoing suspicion. It is not simply an intellectual matter, but rather the basis for true human communion precisely is the opportunity it affords to offer oneself unreservedly to that truth in a trust that persists when suspicion has exhausted itself.¹⁴

Pope Paul VI builds on this foundation to talk about the love that every evangelist should have for those he or she is evangelizing. He talks about “signs” of this love. Among others, we find, “the concern to give the truth and to bring people into unity.” The person proclaiming the truth has as his or her object not simply something intellectual, but human communion. That means that the truth must be transmitted in a

¹¹ Ibid., §36.

¹² Ibid., §128.

¹³ Ibid., §164.

¹⁴ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §25–26.

way that offers the opportunity for people to give themselves unreservedly (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §79).

These sentiments are behind the statement in *Donum Veritatis* that says about the Magisterium: "It must protect God's People from the danger of deviations and confusion, guaranteeing them the objective possibility of professing the authentic faith free from error, at all times and in diverse situations." The point is not to give the faithful a kind of intellectual vaccine that preserves them from the questions, challenges and problems that come from everyday life in various times and diverse situations, but rather to enable them to continue to make the self-gift that professing the faith requires "as children of God who abandon themselves entirely into His arms and to the exigencies of love." One cannot live in the freedom of truth unless one has given oneself to the truth, and this is the point of the "service of Christian truth" rendered by the Magisterium: "The service to Christian truth which the Magisterium renders is thus for the benefit of the whole People of God called to enter the liberty of the truth revealed by God in Christ."¹⁵

If there is no truth that is beyond thoroughgoing suspicion, and no possibility for humans in this visible, temporal world to know of it, then there is no basis for human communion that transcends the merely pragmatic. If the Church is what *Lumen Gentium* says it is, namely, "like a sacrament, a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all human beings" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1; cited at *Donum Veritatis*, §40), then the unity of the Church cannot be a unity reducible to pragmatics, or to any human calculus, but rather to the love with which *God so loved the world that He sent His Only Begotten Son*. This requires a reverence for that central, core truth, including all of the ways in which that truth, over the centuries, has been the beneficiary of the work of "refutation of objections and distortions," and "new and deeper comprehension, clarification, and application" (*Donum Veritatis*, §21). The "service of Christian truth" is ultimately a service of the continuing possibility of unreserved self-gift to that truth, and communion in that self-gift, which, as we have seen, is not a self-offering to an abstraction, but to the arms of the Father-Creator and the exigencies of His love, which is the basis for communion.

We can also put it this way, using another expression from *Lumen Gentium*: If the Church as "People of God" is to be a light of the world because of its witness to the truth which sets us free (cf. *Donum Veritatis*,

¹⁵ *Donum Veritatis*, §14.

§21; Jn 8:32 is cited at §1), then the authoritative discernment of what that truth is precisely, when such discernment is required, is also part of keeping that “light” shining for that very *world* which *God so loved that He sent His Only Begotten Son* (Jn 3:16). The freedom of the people of God is not a function of pragmatics or of the power to work one’s will, but rather the freedom of the self-gift by which Christ “purchased” this people “with His blood” (*Lumen Gentium*, 9).

But who is Christ, exactly? Unless this “who” can be specified fully and without error as the centuries go by, we lose the significance of His “blood,” because we do not know whose it is, precisely. We will not have the confidence to preach and to believe that this blood is a gift beyond the reach of suspicion no matter how thoroughgoing. In a way, this blood *is* freedom, or the very condition of freedom in our world. If there is no service of Christian truth, then we can easily lose to distortion, or to lack of precise understanding, the sense of what this truth is, and therefore our own opportunity to offer an unreserved, generous and irreducibly trusting self-gift in return. With these thoughts in mind, we gain a new perspective: the Magisterium is not an extrinsic service, imposed from without and over and above the faith, but occurs within, and as a function of, the very structure of freedom that we have as our communion within this People of God. Here is the way *Donum Veritatis* put this idea:

It follows that the sense and the weight of the Magisterium’s authority are only intelligible in relation to the truth of Christian doctrine and the preaching of the true Word. The function of the Magisterium is not, then, something extrinsic to Christian truth nor is it set above the faith. It arises directly from the economy of the faith itself ... (§14).

The visible society of the Church is the place where this gift is mediated to us as members, and through our communion in this gift, to the world, as “sacrament of communion.”

If the world at large can legitimately expect us believers to provide a persuasive account of the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pet 3:15), and if that hope in fact brings salvation, then the more precise and accurate that account is, the more the Church can fulfill her saving mission to proclaim what is most grand, most beautiful and most persuasive to everyone, without exception or exclusion. There is a conviction and confidence proper to this mission, a conviction and confidence to which

Pope Francis has again and again exhorted us, “to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §23). The service of ecclesial truth that is the Magisterium is intrinsic to the demands of evangelization, for one could not be asked to risk one’s life unless the truth of that for which one is risking one’s life, the “standard of teaching” as Saint Paul puts it (Rom 6:17, cited at *Donum Veritatis*, §1), can be found and identified without error. Otherwise, we are left with a world devoid of anything ultimately worth sacrificing for.

A final element of the service of truth offered by the Magisterium could be given a “second look” perhaps by first considering yet another passage from Pope Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he is speaking of the intrinsic “newness” of evangelization. The New Testament is always and essentially “new” because the Gospel message is always and everywhere intrinsically “new” and renewing. The passage I am thinking of occurs at number 11:

Saint Irenaeus writes: “By his coming, Christ brought with him all newness.” With this newness he is always able to renew our lives and our communities, and even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness and ecclesial weakness, it will never grow old. Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always “new.”

Perhaps a passage such as this can seem to clash with the role of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which does at first glance seem much more invested in the “dull categories with which we would enclose” the Lord. Yet there is probably something we can learn here, if we look carefully enough. Surely it is the role of the evangelist to allow the original freshness of the Gospel to refresh our eloquence and our forms of expression so that the Word remains living and is not reduced to a museum exhibit or a dead artifact of history. In keeping with this spirit, Pope Francis last year exhorted the International Theological Commission that theologians, in particular, should be “pioneers,” even if, at the same time, they should be equally effective catechists

when the opportunity arises (Address to the International Theological Commission, Dec. 6, 2013. The comment regarding catechists was only in the Holy Father's oral presentation).

Theology arising out of the spirit of evangelization and in the desire to pioneer new understandings is always going to be on the frontier, if it is really contributing what the Church expects. This kind of spirit is actually expressed in *Donum Veritatis*: "The theologian's work ... responds to a dynamism found in the faith itself," and that dynamism comes from the "impulse of truth which seeks to be communicated." Since the truth that faith teaches us is the love of God revealed uniquely and grandly in Christ, "theology also arises from love and love's dynamism," since "Love ... is ever desirous of a better knowledge of the beloved" (*Donum Veritatis*, §7). The object of theology is not an artifact to be preserved in a museum, but rather the object is living, "the Truth which is the living God and His plan for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ" (*Donum Veritatis*, §8).

Of course, the creative promotion and evocation of anything truly "living," gives rise to the possibility of elements of discontinuity, inadvertently or sometimes even intentionally arising in the mix of new forms of expression. These may need sorting out. Still, if it is true of the creativity of evangelizers, it is especially true of theologians. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis exhorts theologians to remember that their mission finds its context precisely in the Church's mission to evangelize:

The Church, in her commitment to evangelization, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences. I call on theologians to carry out this service as part of the Church's saving mission. In doing so, however, they must always remember that the Church and theology exist to evangelize, and not be content with a desk-bound theology (§133).

Despite the fact that Pope Francis asks theologians not to be content with a desk-bound theology, he does understand the necessities of credible academic work. Where *Donum Veritatis* had noted that theology must be "attentive to the epistemological requirements of [the] discipline, to the demands of rigorous critical standards, and thus to a rational verification of each stage of ... research" (*Donum Veritatis*, §9), Pope Francis in turn notes that, "Proclaiming the Gospel message to different cultures also involves proclaiming it to professional, scientific

and academic circles.” He adds that, “this means an encounter between faith, reason and the sciences,” and then, strikingly, “When certain categories of reason and the sciences are taken up into the proclamation of the message, these categories then become tools of evangelization; water is changed into wine” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §132).

Precisely because of the unique position of theology as an ecclesial discipline, finally and primarily accountable to the Church’s mission of evangelization, but also, because of the need to be recognizably and credibly versed in the academic standards of learned culture, theology has a truly pioneering character and it therefore operates with legitimate but unique risks. The work of theology is very difficult! As in anything pioneering, some pathways may turn out to be blind alleys. Or, to use the terms set out by *Evangelii Gaudium*, it may happen that the water of scientific or philosophical categories is not “changed into wine” but remains water. Someone has to point this out when it occurs. It can be hard to recognize, just as difficult as the theological enterprise itself, and so there must be some kind of service that would attempt to discern and distinguish successful attempts from failed or partially failed attempts. It seems fair, given the stakes of a living tradition that is not a museum piece, that the burden of proof be on the “new expression” or pioneering new development. The Magisterium has a conserving function, or, as *Donum Veritatis* puts it, “one of vigilance” (§20). It is intrinsic to its reverence for truth that it proceed with caution. Thus is set up the possibility of a dynamic of give and take, a kind of straining ahead with pioneering creativity and a kind of vigilance that ensures the pioneers are blazing a path that is not a dead end.

Thus, “reverence” implies caution but it also implies a willingness to listen in a disciplined way and not to turn away opinions which may indeed at first sight seem to deviate from the standard of doctrine but which actually may represent a “new and deeper comprehension, clarification, [or] application of revealed doctrine” (*Donum Veritatis*, §21). If the theologian in question is truly operating within the “obedience of faith” that is proper to every believer (cf. *Donum Veritatis*, §29), and if the Magisterium is proceeding in the appropriate mode of conservation and vigilance but also in a way that is alert to genuine development, then there is the possibility of genuine development, which can occur in different ways. The theology which has been called into question can be modified based on the guidance of the Magisterium, but not rejected entirely. The theologian in this case “has the duty to remain open to a deeper examination of the question” even if it seems to him or her that

the question as he or she has formulated it is correct (cf. *Donum Veritatis*, §31). It can also happen that such a theologian, continuing, “in an evangelical spirit and with a profound desire to resolve the difficulties,” that his or her objections could “contribute to real progress and provide a stimulus to the Magisterium to propose the teaching of the Church in greater depth and with a clearer presentation of the arguments” (*Donum Veritatis*, §30), at least in the case of non-irreformable magisterial teaching (cf. *Donum Veritatis*, §28). There is the possibility of genuine development of doctrine as a result of a careful and painstaking process, one which must never become a spectacle to be carried out largely in full view of the media, which is rarely capable of mastering and reproducing the theological nuance necessary to understand the problems, let alone resolve them.

It is easy to underestimate this service of the Magisterium as a stimulus and agent of genuine doctrinal development. But if someone has truly not given up on truth as something which is not reducible to the investments of power structures but which transcends and is therefore able to critique them—then the value of this service can be seen. If, further, one is not resigned to differences in theological positions leading necessarily to fragmentation of the community into sects that are themselves subject to further fragmentation, then the value of this service is also fully evident. The benefit of discovering whether a creative new expression jeopardizes the communion of faith, or is a legitimate difference that does not jeopardize this communion, would seem evident too. In the former case, the principle of the unity of truth applies, and in the latter case, the principle of the unity of charity, a “two-fold rule” that should animate any discernment process initiated by the Magisterium (cf. *Donum Veritatis*, §26). The service of the Magisterium means we need not give up on either of these two kinds of unity, and it provides the community precisely with the conviction, as well, that we can find both.

I have one final consideration pertaining to this “second look” at the work of the Magisterium, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in particular, and that is the role of the media in the formation of public opinion on various issues, including the views of Catholics. The influence of the media, both traditional media and the new social media, is pervasive, especially among young people who seem to be learning from it to think in ever smaller units of text and in ways that are more and more swayed not by critical thinking but by opinions attached to prestigious persons and institutions. Almost every parent, I imagine, has noticed this.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis from time to time calls attention to negative effects of the media, on the public's perception of the Church's teaching (e.g. at §34, cf. also §70), and especially on the perception of the Church's moral teaching: "We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data—all treated as being of equal importance—and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment" thus leading to a "general sense of disorientation" among adolescents and a "moral relativism" in general (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §64). He also notes the negative effect that the secular media can have on pastoral workers: "At times our media culture and some intellectual circles convey a marked skepticism with regard to the Church's message, along with a certain cynicism. As a consequence, many pastoral workers, although they pray, develop a sort of inferiority complex which leads them to relativize or conceal their Christian identity and convictions" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §79).

Surely it is easy, in such situations, to form large masses of Catholic opinion according to secular values, with little reference to, or understanding of, Church teaching. When the Magisterium offers a resistance to this mass mentality, it in fact performs a service to the truth because this mass mentality is inimical to human dignity and in the end can be a reflection, on the popular level, of the will to power that creates a world in which value and truth are distinguished simply by power, money and the prestige attached to persons or institutions. This can also make it harder to distinguish the authentic "sensus fidei" from opinions that, while widely held, are at best ambiguously related to Church teaching because the media is likewise at best ambiguously related to Church teaching and authority. This is something mentioned in *Donum Veritatis* (§35). It may seem ironic to think that the Magisterium has a role to play in the preservation of democracy from devolving into a reflex of thoughtlessness. The laziness of unreflectively accepting viewpoints is destructive of democracy, and, ultimately, is the rejection of human free will.

I do not wish to dissipate or diffuse that sense of irony, but perhaps merely to sharpen it. Shouldn't a democracy function on the basis of a reverence for truth, speaking now even apart from specifically religious convictions? Or is it really the case that there is no truth apart from public opinion and the various powers and vested interests that jockey for public opinion, with more or less success? Is it healthy for a democracy even to forget how to speak the language of "truth" in the sense of something objective and in a sense that does not reduce

the word simply to scientific or political positivism? Pope Francis's reflections, noted above, on the influence of the media in forming ethical opinions, opinions about values and virtues, are especially relevant here. If our democracies are reduced to a vocabulary of truth which is exclusively pragmatic and positivist, then the service of truth, provided by the Magisterium must be seen—however ironic it may appear—as a reminder that this unreflective positivism is not the only way of thinking. Unreflective positivism is underwritten by its own (unreflective) premise, expressed well in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche and in the twentieth century by Heidegger and others: values and morals are fully reducible to the expressions of the will to power, and therefore perfectly compatible with totalitarian regimes of the most horrific sort.

Haven't we seen enough of these in the twentieth century to learn from the experience? I, for one, would hope we have. **N-V**

