

Fallible Teachings and the Assistance of the Holy Spirit Reflections on the Ordinary Magisterium in Connection with the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian**

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From the Missionary Command to the Magisterium of the Church

MATTHEW CONCLUDES his Gospel with the missionary mandate of the Risen Jesus to the Eleven: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . [and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:19–20). During his earthly life, Jesus directed his public ministry, and particularly his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, to all men. However, at the same time he gave special attention to a group of disciples, the Twelve. Mark narrates the call of the Twelve in the following way: “And he went up on the mountain, and called to him those whom he desired. . . . And he appointed twelve, to be with him and to be sent out to preach” (Mk 3:13–14).

The Acts of the Apostles recognizes a teaching authority belonging to the Apostles and to those whom the Apostles gradually associated with themselves in the work of founding and guiding Christian communities. It is because of this that Acts refers to the gospel by which these communities

* Translation by Ivo Coelho, SDB, of “Insegnamenti ‘fallibili’ e assistenza dello Spirito Santo. Riflessioni sul Magistero ordinario in connessione con l’Istruzione su ‘la vocazione ecclesiale del teologo,’” *Rassegna di Teologia* 34 (1993): 516–543; also published in *Kontroverse Theologie* (Festschrift in Honor of Giovanni Sala, SJ), eds. Ulrich Lehner and Ronald K. Tacelli (Bonn: Nova et Vetera, 2005), 237–58.

were living, not vaguely as the teaching of the community, but rather as the “doctrine of the Apostles” (Acts 2:42). The council of Jerusalem is a further testimony that the early Church recognized in the Apostles the authority for resolving questions of doctrine and of discipline (Acts 15).

The second and third centuries have left us numerous testimonies that the “apostolic succession” was considered a criterion for establishing the true doctrine of Christ. The pride that many churches took in their lists of bishops going back in an unbroken line to the apostles is a proof that the early Church recognized an essential connection between those “sent” and the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the process of development and clarification that the hierarchical constitution of the Church underwent, there is discernible from the very beginning a ministry of teaching, regarded as the official and normative proclamation of Revelation, and distinct from other forms of teaching, exhortation, and admonition, as for example the prophetic charisms about which St. Paul speaks to the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:5).

Theological reflection on such an authoritative proclamation of the Gospel has given rise to the doctrine of the ecclesial magisterium—a magisterium linked to the ordination of successors to the apostles, one which therefore participates in the sacramental character of the Church. This is not the place to present a detailed exposition of the theology of the magisterium. The First and Second Vatican Councils have given an authoritative formulation to this theological doctrine. In this essay I wish rather to draw attention to that perspective under which the magisterium is often seen in the current debate and to the conception of the magisterium that derives from such a perspective. In my opinion an adequate understanding of the problem demands that we begin from the magisterium as a constitutive element of the Church, having the function of guiding and conserving it in the truth. From this it will then be possible to establish the significance of the well-known distinction between ordinary and extraordinary magisterium.

Ordinary and Extraordinary Magisterium

The Church, which the pastoral letters refer to as “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tm 3:15), is the place of saving truth, and this not in the sense of a fossilized conservation of the preaching of Jesus but rather in the sense of a living presence of this preaching. Such a living presence and the corresponding actualization of Revelation is the work of the Holy Spirit who is the soul of the Church. Now in the course of history, tensions arise within the Church regarding the teaching of Jesus, caused by the emergence of new questions, formulated with conceptual and

linguistic tools derived from diverse and changing cultures. Because of their content and implications, these tensions can become such as to call for definitive doctrinal decision, a binding “Yes” or “No” in response to a precise question. The first ecumenical council held at Nicea in A.D. 325, which discussed the question, “Who is he whom the New Testament calls the Son?” is a classic example of a situation that involved the very survival of the Christian faith. The council resolved this situation by defining Jesus as being “consubstantial with the Father.”

Subsequent theological reflection has seen in this response the first dogma in the strict sense, and the first case of the exercise of that teaching office of the Church that came to be called the extraordinary magisterium. This magisterium is the supreme and, in a certain sense, timely exercise of a magisterial mission that touches the entire Church in its life in the truth. This extraordinary exercise of the magisterium does not embrace the whole life of the Church in the truth, nor does it exhaust the service to the truth proper to the successors of the apostles. Rather, it exercises a hermeneutical function that is supplementary to the ordinary and permanent mission entrusted to the pope and bishops of guiding the Church into the unity of truth. It represents the frontline of the journey toward the truth in which the Church is continually engaged. In order to indicate the specific character of this exercise of the magisterium, theology speaks of an “infallible” magisterium. A dogmatic definition issued by an ecumenical council, or an *ex cathedra* decision of the supreme pontiff, are actualizations of the promise of Christ to preserve his Church in the truth, and to lead her to the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13) by means of a charism of infallibility in which the Church places her complete confidence and which, in decisive moments of her history, she has always experienced anew, without however being able to manage it and dispose of it according to merely human calculations.

Seen from the perspective of saving truth, which is a constitutive element of the Church, the adjective “extraordinary” is not completely appropriate. What is extraordinary instead is the modality of the proposition enunciated with the intention of deciding in a definitive manner some point of Christian doctrine, with the purpose of preserving the Church indefectibly in the revealed truth. The extraordinary magisterium represents, therefore, the supreme expression, exceptional insofar as dependent on particular historical circumstances, of a finality to which the whole of the magisterium constantly addresses itself.

At any rate, the term “extraordinary” suggests the existence of an “ordinary” magisterium. In reality the ordinary magisterium represents the usual means through which the Good News is announced and

received in the Church. At the basis of this magisterium is the promise of the Lord to his apostles to assist them “always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20). John intends precisely this assistance when in the farewell discourse he speaks of the “Paraclete” (the advocate, the one who helps; Jn 16:7), and of the “Spirit of truth” (Jn 16:13) who will teach the disciples everything and will bring to their remembrance what Jesus had said to them (Jn 14:16 and 26; 15:26).

In recent years the discussion regarding the ordinary magisterium has intensified, practically replacing that of the seventies regarding the extraordinary and infallible magisterium, which had been occasioned partly by the centenary of the Vatican definition. The new discussion has its own very precise ecclesial context, which we can establish broadly by a double reference. First, there is the profound crisis that has affected the Church in the decades after Vatican II; second (and this is really part of the same crisis) there is the questioning of the moral norms traditionally taught by the Church and of the competence of the magisterium in moral matters. We must note, of course, that it is not solely in the sphere of morals that the magisterium is being challenged, though in this area, which affects every believer in a more immediate and existential manner, the polemic has been given massive publicity by the media.

In this context may be placed the fact that in recent years the pastors of the Church, and in particular the Holy Father, have repeatedly raised their voices in defense of the ordinary magisterium as an element essential to the Church, and which therefore is not under the dominion of any human authority in the Church. The *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (*Donum veritatis*) issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the feast of the Ascension 1990, is also to be situated in the same context.¹

In the pages that follow I do not intend to give a detailed commentary on the text of the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*. I would rather like to examine its relevance with regard to the debate on the ordinary magisterium. The *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* discusses this issue at length, with the aim of clarifying the proper task of the pastors of the Church as teachers of the faith, the way in which this task differs from the teaching of the theologian, and the relationship between the theologian and the successors of the Twelve. More particularly I wish to examine the sense in which Catholic doctrine, as reconfirmed by the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*,

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (1990).

recognizes an assistance of the Holy Spirit proper to the bishops in the ordinary exercise of their mission as teachers of the faith. This does not, of course, constitute the whole of Catholic doctrine regarding the ordinary magisterium; it is however a key element, such that an erroneous or insufficient understanding of it leads inevitably to an erroneous or insufficient conception of the magisterium itself.

The Magisterium and the Assistance of the Holy Spirit

As a point of reference for my inquiry I take an article published by a theologian from Munich insofar as it takes up directly the question of an alleged particular assistance of the Holy Spirit to the magisterium of the Church.²

The author approaches the question whether and in what measure the ordinary magisterium enjoys a particular assistance of the Holy Spirit, by beginning from the extraordinary magisterium. This approach is in itself legitimate; in point of fact, however, it easily leads to a distortion of the proper tasks of the magisterium of the Church, insofar as it tends to identify the magisterium tout court with infallibility, and to thus eliminate the ordinary magisterium on the grounds of its not being infallible.

Catholic doctrine holds that the magisterium of the Church enjoys a special assistance of the Holy Spirit. This is verified without a doubt, according to Weger, every time an ecumenical council or the pope in his role as head of the apostolic college infallibly defines a doctrine,³ in the

² K. H. Weger, "Wie weit reicht der Schutz des Heiligen Geistes? Einige Fragen zur Unfehlbarkeit in der katholischen Kirche," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (July 28, 1990: 8). The article has been included, together with thirteen others, in *Streitgespräch um Theologie und Lehramt: Die Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen in der Diskussion*, ed. P. Hünermann and D. Mieth (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht-Verlag, 1991), 108–17 (in the course of my reflections I will refer to the pages of this publication). The articles differ among themselves in content and viewpoint; the balance, however, is in favor of those that are strongly negative, and many of these make use of a language that is manipulative and journalistic. Thus, for example, Christian Duquoc, observes that the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* addresses itself to "party intellectuals" (179) with the intention of "resurrecting procedures which seemed to have disappeared with the states of the Eastern bloc" (182). Such expressions are certainly efficacious in discrediting the document in the eyes of a public not specialized in theological matters, but they do not offer elements for a serious theological dialogue. Accordingly I will not concern myself with such arguments.

³ Weger speaks of *infallible doctrines* ("Wie weit reicht der Schutz," 109). This terminology, which is not found in the theological tradition and does not correspond to that used by Vatican I, may be traced to one of the confusions that Hans Küng introduced in his book *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (Zürich: Benziger, 1970), and

case therefore of the so-called extraordinary or infallible magisterium. From here the theologians who argue in the manner just outlined continue in this way: What must be said about the assistance of the Holy Spirit when the bishops or the pope propose teachings that are of themselves not infallible, nor claim to be such, but are rather fallible in principle and therefore capable of being objectively erroneous? Once the question has been formulated in this way, it seems easy to pass to the conclusion that in this type of pronouncement the magisterium does not enjoy a proper assistance of the Holy Spirit. As evidence for such a conclusion that the ordinary magisterium lacks a proper assistance of the Holy Spirit (that is, an assistance that goes beyond that promised by Jesus to the Church as a whole), Weger points to the incontestable fact that the magisterium has repeatedly fallen into error in the exercise of its office. Surely, he concludes, no one would attribute such errors to the Holy Spirit (“Wie weit reicht der Schutz,” 110).

Let us examine more closely this argument, which is typical of theologians who want to distance themselves from the (ordinary) magisterium of the Church.

1. Jesus has promised the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the Church as a whole. The most explicit magisterial text in this connection is found in the constitution *Lumen gentium* of Vatican II, in the discussion regarding the “people of God.” The council affirms that

the whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One [cf. Jn 2:20 and 27] cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, “from the bish-

which was then taken up by other theologians. If we wish to express ourselves more exactly, however, it is not propositions that are infallible or fallible, but rather the act by which some particular subject makes an affirmation; “infallible” or “fallible” designates therefore a property of the subject who affirms or defines. A proposition or doctrine in itself is either true or false. The tendency that underlies the terminology of Küng is that of conceiving infallibility as a sort of increase in truth. Now this is nonsensical insofar as truth is already of itself absolute, an exclusion of the contradictory proposition on the basis of the principle of excluded middle. As we will see in what follows, the truth of a proposition is not connected necessarily with infallibility, and therefore does not in every case call for a subject who is infallible. However this is not the decisive point in the question under discussion. One could speak, for the sake of brevity, of infallible propositions, provided one means the proposition in its subjective aspect as the intentional act of an affirming subject.

ops to the last of the faithful” they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. (no. 12)

2. This assistance of the Holy Spirit, insofar as it is promised to the whole Church, evidently holds good also for those members of the faithful who form part of the magisterium. The passage from St. Augustine cited by the council explicitly mentions the bishops. But the text of the council has more to say:

By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (magisterium), and obeying it, receives not the mere word of man, but truly the Word of God [cf. 1 Thes 2:13], the faith once for all delivered to the saints [cf. Jude 3]. (no. 12)

The magisterium, concretely the pope and the bishops, are introduced here not merely as members of the people of God and for that reason enjoying the assistance of the Holy Spirit; rather they are recognized as having, in addition, a special function as guides with the task of conserving the whole Church in the truth. Such a task entrusted to the magisterium implies a charism of truth proper to it: a special assistance of the Holy Spirit. There exists therefore an inseparable connection between the *sensus fidei* of the people of God and the guidance of this people by the magisterium of the Church (cf. *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, no. 35).

3. It is not possible here to examine the important doctrine of the *sensus fidelium*.⁴ This doctrine of the council, under different names, has a long history behind it. This is not surprising because it is really an expression of that abiding in the truth of which the Church has had a clear consciousness from the very beginning. But the ecclesial situation of today calls for a delicate clarification. Already before the council Yves Congar had noted that, notwithstanding the great importance of the *sensus fidelium* in the life of the Church, too much must not be attributed to it as far as its concrete realization and expression is concerned.⁵ It is quite possible that the *sensus fidelium* does not always correspond to the form and determination willed it

⁴ Cf. The excellent study of L. Scheffczyk, “Sensus fidelium—Zeugnis in der Kraft der Gemeinschaft,” in *Internationale Zeitschrift “Communio”* 16 (1987): 420–33.

⁵ Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church. A Study for a Theology of Laity* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1965), 288.

by God. This makes it necessary to distinguish in the clearest possible way between the work of the Spirit in the faithful and erroneous developments in the life of the members of the Church. The *sensus fidei* is not to be identified with “public opinion,” which today, in the age of the mass media, can undergo distortions not only in civil society but also within the Church; it is not the result of majority decisions, nor can it be determined through opinion polls. It is the result rather of the promise of Christ to his Church; it is the capacity of judgment and of witness of believers, of those who live without compromise in the community of the Church, which is the place of the presence of the Spirit. Such an idea is not the fruit of an elitist attitude (such an attitude has no place in the realm of grace), but rather of an objective appraisal of the essence of the faith.

In 1969 Karl Rahner had observed:

[T]he present-day situation of the Church is one in which we are faced with the phenomenon of individuals only partially identifying with her, and so too of varying very greatly in the degree in which they do so identify themselves with the Church. Now in this situation there is a very real danger that under cover of the watchword of democracy many individuals will be carried away from the Church into positions which are un-Christian and un-Catholic.⁶

In its turn the declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith had observed that

although the magisterium profits from the contemplation, life, and study of the faithful, *its task cannot be reduced to one of ratifying the consensus at which these have already arrived*; rather, in the interpretation and explanation of the Word of God, whether written or handed down, it can anticipate and demand such a consensus. [no. 2, emphasis added]

In the confusion, uncertainties, and divisions of a Church without consensus, the magisterium has the power and the obligation to propose the word of God, which both demands and grounds the consensus of all the faithful.

4. Not only in its discussion on the participation of the people of God in the prophetic office of Christ, but repeatedly also elsewhere, the constitution *Lumen gentium* recognizes a particular assistance of the

⁶ K. Rahner, “Das kirchliche Lehramt in der heutigen Autoritätskrise,” in *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 9 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1970), 356.

Holy Spirit to the magisterium. In the words of the constitution *Dei Verbum*, “the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, *has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone*. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ” (no. 10, emphasis added). In number 25, dedicated to the magisterium, *Lumen gentium* affirms that the work of the magisterium, whether ordinary or extraordinary, takes place “in the light of the Holy Spirit,” “under the assistance of the Holy Spirit.” With respect to the ordinary magisterium in particular, it is the doctrine of the council that

the faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops’ decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. This loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman pontiff, *even when he does not speak ex cathedra*. [emphasis added]

It is therefore Catholic doctrine, proposed once again by Vatican II, that the magisterium of the Church in its entirety—including the ordinary magisterium—enjoys a special assistance of the Holy Spirit. It is this teaching that, in my opinion, leads to a more adequate understanding of Catholic teaching on the magisterium, rather than the doctrine of the extraordinary magisterium, the exercise of which remains in a certain sense exceptional.

The “Fallible” Teachings of the Magisterium

We have seen that for the theologians who deny that the ordinary magisterium enjoys a special assistance of the Holy Spirit, the *medium probationis* lies in the non-infallible character of what the pope and the bishops ordinarily teach. The point to be clarified is whether there really is such a connection between non-infallibility (= fallibility) of the acts of the ordinary magisterium and the absence of a special assistance of the Holy Spirit. An example may help obtain a better grasp of the question, keeping in mind the precautions necessary for any argument that begins from natural realities (and such a procedure is inevitable for us human beings!) to arrive at some understanding of what we profess in faith.

The example is this: It is as inadequate and misleading to define the ordinary magisterium as a “fallible” magisterium (that is, through a negative definition) as to define human knowing in terms of its fallibility. Human knowing is the achievement of an intelligent and rational intentionality oriented by its very nature to being and therefore to truth. In its

concrete functioning this intentionality may well miss its objective, but this fact does not justify a methodical and universal doubt, which far from providing a more adequate access to truth, leads rather to an emptying of the mind of all knowledge—untrue as well as true. The case of the magisterium is analogous. If the magisterium is, within the hierarchical constitution of the Church, the means used by the Lord for maintaining his Church in the truth, then we must admit that it is by its nature oriented toward the truth. But since this is not realized by means of a scientific knowledge given to the successors of the apostles, which would make them superior to the faithful from a human point of view, it must be said that their ability to teach the truth in matters of faith is founded ultimately on a particular grace of state, granted them in conformity with the general principle in the order of salvation according to which there is a proper grace corresponding to every mission—a grace of state, which in this case may conveniently be called a “charism of truth.”⁷

What is the meaning of the “fallible” teaching on which some theologians insist, which results in the elimination of the ordinary magisterium? Taken in itself this term does not say anything about the effective status of the truth of the proposition in question: This may be either true or false. It is a question of a neutral qualification, which says only that the proposition originates from a subject who in every case, or at least in the specific realm of knowledge to which this proposition belongs, does not possess a criterion of infallibility. An “infallible” subject on the contrary would be one who in some particular realm of knowledge, or else in all realms, could not but make true judgments, that is, judgments therefore that are necessarily true. Now the criterion of infallibility⁸ is not the only criterion of truth. It is quite possible to possess a criterion of truth without being infallible. Such is the case for us human beings in all the concrete judgments of fact through which we arrive at knowledge of reality.⁹ For example, the judgment, “The Gulf war lasted six weeks,” is a

⁷ Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4, 26.2: “Qui cum episcopatus successione charisma veritatis certum . . . acceperunt.” The expression is used also by Vatican I (*DS*, no. 3071), and is taken up by Vatican II in the constitution *Dei Verbum*, no. 8, without an indication however of the source.

⁸ It is not necessary to explain here exactly what constitutes this criterion of infallibility and which are the subjects for whom it is valid.

⁹ By a “concrete judgment of fact” I mean a judgment that is the term of a process of knowing that begins from data of experience, whether external or internal; a judgment therefore that is not based on mere hypothesis or convention, as in the case of hypothetico-deductive systems. Cf. B. Lonergan, *Insight. A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1957), 281–83; also G. Sala, “Intentionalität contra Intuition,” in *Theologie und Philosophie* 59 (1984): 259–63.

judgment that is in fact true, and insofar as it is true, it absolutely excludes its opposite. This judgment is the result of an exercise of my intentionality that is in fact correct. But I could also have made use of my intentionality in a way that did not conform to its immanent laws, resulting thus in an erroneous judgment. Now all my judgments, insofar as they do not arise from an infallible subject, may possibly be false, and are therefore “fallible.” But this says nothing about the truth of the particular judgments that I have made. They may be true or false; and I am completely certain that at least some of them are true.

At the root of the argument, which from the affirmation of “fallible teachings” concludes to the absence of an assistance of the Holy Spirit, lies the surreptitious passage from “fallible” teachings, in the sense explained to “false” teachings. And false teachings certainly cannot be the fruit of an illumination of the Holy Spirit! Once fallible teachings (and such are *all* the teachings of the ordinary magisterium!) are in fact made equivalent to erroneous teachings, the general thesis that the ordinary magisterium does not involve a special assistance of the Holy Spirit becomes altogether plausible. This sophism reveals the import of the misleading definition that takes “fallible” propositions as the defining characteristic of the ordinary magisterium: In the course of the argument, such propositions are taken as actually “false.” Such an equivocation is favored also by the erroneous epistemological conception of which we spoke above, which attributes infallibility and fallibility to the judgment rather than to the subject. Now nobody can deny that a fallible subject may be able to express judgments, which are true.

Where then lies the difference between the natural orientation to truth that all men have and the orientation toward supernatural truth that belongs to the (ordinary) magisterium of the Church? The difference lies in the assistance of the Holy Spirit and therefore in a supernatural “illumination.” If one admits the existence of an ordinary magisterium—and this is *doctrina communis*—and therefore the existence of a special magisterial mission entrusted to some in the Church (otherwise we would not have a specific ministry), I do not see how this can be understood if not as a service to the truth in virtue of a special assistance of the Holy Spirit. In other words: We can speak of a teaching ministry in the strict sense only if this belongs exclusively to some in the Church, and if its exercise occurs in virtue of a specific assistance of the Spirit of truth.

In sum, we can fix the salient points of Weger’s argument in the following manner: The ordinary magisterium is a fallible authority—the authority of fallible teachings is equivalent to the authority of erroneous teachings—erroneous teachings cannot be attributed to the Holy Spirit—

the ordinary magisterium does not enjoy a particular assistance of the Holy Spirit—there does not exist an ordinary magisterium.

For the theologians who from “fallible” teachings conclude to a negation of the assistance of the Holy Spirit with regard to such teachings, there remains only the so-called extraordinary magisterium of the few popes and ecumenical councils that have either defined or will define a dogma. Consequently it becomes impossible for them to understand why, according to Catholic doctrine and in particular according to *Lumen gentium*, no. 25, the faithful ought to adhere to the teaching of the magisterium with a “loyal submission of the will and intellect” (*religioso animi obsequio*). This is an assent founded on theological faith, an “obedience of faith” in the words of St. Paul to the Romans (1:5, 16:26). Evidently, such obedience is not possible to those who see in the ordinary magisterium a fallible authority rather than a service to the truth founded on a supernatural illumination. If one separates the ordinary teaching of the bishops from the work of the Holy Spirit, then this teaching has as much weight as the rational arguments put forward in its favor. “Now to evaluate such arguments is the sacred right of every Christian! On this basis, religious assent can mean only that the documents of the Church must be studied with respect. But, whatever the pope says, the discussion must go on!”¹⁰

It is useful to mention also another consequence of this reduction of the magisterium to a scientific authority on the same level, as a matter of principle, as other such authorities. Given such an understanding, the service of guiding the Church entrusted to the successors of the apostles becomes separated from the truth—it becomes a guidance of the Church that is purely pragmatic.

Authentic Magisterium and Theological Argumentation

The denial of a special divine assistance proper to the magisterium raises the question regarding the specific role of the pope and bishops, and therefore also the question regarding the difference between the teaching of the bishops and that of theologians. The logic of the theological position under consideration suggests the following reply: The pope and the bishops may speak in the Church on the strength of the rational arguments that they are able to put forward in support of their teachings. This implies that there is no real difference between theology as a science and an authentic magisterium; in fact, there really does not exist any such authentic magisterium, or a hierarchical authority endowed with a supernatural power proper to

¹⁰ A. Laun, “Das Urteil des Gewissens—Richtige und falsche Subjektivität,” in *Ethos und Menschenbild. Zur Überwindung der Krise der Moral*, ed. M. Rhonheimer et al. (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1989), 16 ff.

it. There would exist only a reasoning that is rational as to its cognitive principle and theological as to its content¹¹—a reasoning that is, in principle, open equally to all men. In the Church, as in any human enterprise, the decisive factor would be competence. And when the specialists are not in agreement, the only way out would be recourse to the decisions of the majority. A. Laun has described the role of such a magisterium in the following way, with particular reference to moral teaching:

All the same the Church may intervene in the discussion regarding concrete norms of behavior, not however with its specific authority founded on the Holy Spirit, but only with its arguments as a partner with the same rights as the others. One could say: the pope may return to the University, but only if he first takes off his papal miter.¹²

The case of the teaching of Paul VI in the encyclical *Humanae vitae* is emblematic for the Catholic doctrine of an authentic magisterium. It shows in a dramatic manner what it means for the pope to take a doctrinal decision with full consciousness both of the authority given to Peter and to his successors and of his personal responsibility before Jesus Christ. The task which the Lord assigns to each of his disciples has a strictly personal character, such that the one concerned can be substituted neither by an anonymous commission of experts nor by a majority decision. This does not of course deny the opportuneness and even the moral necessity, in conformity with the historical and cultural situation, of having recourse to all available means for discovering the truth. It is not a relic of ancient times that in the Eucharistic prayer the celebrant explicitly mentions “our pope [name], our bishop [name],” just as the Gospels have left us the names of those to whom Jesus entrusted the mission of carrying his message to the ends of the earth.

The proper nature of the teaching ministry of the bishops is linked in an essential manner to the sacramental character of the episcopate and therefore to the principle of the “apostolic succession,” which is really the uninterrupted succession in the sacrament of ordination. We have seen in the first section that the early Church used to consider as true the doctrines taught by those Churches in possession of a list of bishops going back without interruption to one of the apostles. This is not a purely historical question. The principle of the apostolic succession reflects the consciousness that the Church possesses a sacramental nature

¹¹ Whether on the basis of these ecclesiological premises we can still speak of a Catholic theology, that is, of an *intellectus fidei*, is another question!

¹² A. Laun, “Das Urteil des Gewissens,” 38.

proper to it. Because of this sacramental nature, the imposition of hands (ordination) and the ministry of teaching (authoritative testimony) form an intrinsic unity. For this reason the Catholic Church and the other churches that have preserved the reality of the apostolic succession "consider the insertion into the ecclesial ministry, realized through the imposition of hands with the invocation of the Holy Spirit, as the indispensable form for the transmission of the apostolic succession, which alone allows the Church to preserve in doctrine and in communion."¹³

The sacramental character indicates the type of teaching proper to the magisterium: It is a teaching that does not originate in the preacher himself; it is neither a conquest of human intelligence, nor the expression of what some particular community thinks. Its origin is of a transcendent nature. It is not therefore the result of a merely extrinsic link that "the minister of the word [is] also the minister of the sacraments of faith, and first of all of the Eucharist."¹⁴ An obscuring of the sacramental nature of ministry in the Church leads to an obscuring as much of the nature of the truth by which the Church lives as of the nature of the magisterium itself: Revelation tends to be reduced to truth within the limits of reason alone, and the magisterium to a service that is exclusively scholarly.¹⁵

From what has been said up to now, it follows that the magisterium and theology are situated on different planes and operate in different ways in their service to revealed truth. This does not detract from the fact that as a priest the theologian participates in the sacramental character of the proclamation of the Good News,¹⁶ and that as a teacher he receives from the Church the "canonical mission," participating thus "in a certain sense . . . in the work of the magisterium to which he is linked by a juridical bond."¹⁷ The *Instruction* speaks therefore of "mutual collaboration" between the magisterium and theology (part IV, A): "The living magisterium of the Church and theology, while having different gifts and functions, ultimately have the same goal: preserving the People of God in the truth which sets free."¹⁸ It is a question of a reciprocal collaboration between different tasks:

¹³ International Theological Commission, "L'apostolicità della Chiesa e la successione apostolica," in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 125 (1974) III, sec. VI.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. V. Cf. Acts 2:47.

¹⁵ Regarding the sacramental nature of the magisterium, cf., besides the already mentioned document of the International Theological Commission, also the constitution *Lumen gentium*, no. 21.

¹⁶ This is true in the first place for the homily, which is an essential part of the liturgy. Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1984), canon 767, §1.

¹⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, no. 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 21.

The magisterium proposes the doctrine of the apostles in an authentic manner, that is, in virtue of an authority received from Christ, while theology elaborates the same doctrine in a rational and reflective manner.

The Brokenness of the Magisterium in the Pilgrim Church

Once the existence of the magisterium of the bishops in union with Peter's successor has been recognized, there arises once again the question about the errors into which this magisterium has fallen in the course of the centuries. This is precisely the reason why not a few theologians today hold a position that is in fact equivalent to a denial of the ordinary magisterium.¹⁹ Although strictly speaking history is not in a position to furnish any "demonstration" in favor of a theological doctrine, and much less of a dogma, a serious study of the history of the Church leads to the recognition

¹⁹ This is not the place to enter into a historico-theological examination of the errors attributed to the magisterium. It is striking however, as L. Scheffczyk has observed ("Die Freiheit des Glaubens bindet katholisches Forschen und Lehren. Zu einer Kritik an der römischen Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen," in *Deutsche Tagespost* [January 19, 1991], 5f), that in this field those who challenge the magisterium capitalize on everything, without bothering to make those distinctions and differentiations that are necessary if one wants to have recourse to history with the purpose of demonstrating not only the fallibility of the magisterium, but also concretely, when and in what measure it allegedly led the faithful into error. Often recourse is made to historical institutions and customs that have no direct bearing on the faith as such; in other cases, it is a question of decisions that are not strictly of a doctrinal nature, but rather prudential directives with respect to exegetical hypotheses or new methods of research, which were in need of further perfecting before being used without danger to the faith. One may think, for example, of the judgments of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in the first decades of our century; while recognizing their limits and provisional nature, it cannot be denied today that they contributed to preserving Catholic theology, and with it the faithful, from the one-sidedness and excesses of the historical-critical method. But there is more. It is striking that while the theologians are so resolute in denouncing the shortcomings of the ecclesial magisterium, they rarely mention the errors into which theology has fallen in the course of the centuries (none of the critiques of the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* gathered in Hünermann and Mieth, *Streitgespräch um Theologie und Lehramt* [see note 3 above] contain so much as an allusion to this). Truth and justice demand that such errors be not passed over in silence, especially by those theologians who try to so inflate the importance and the necessity of theology as to show that it (that is, *theology*) is called to prevent or correct the errors of the magisterium. The outcome of such a dosing of criticism against the Church and of lack of self-criticism is the reversal of the relationship between magisterium and theology, not only from the theological but also from the historical viewpoint. On this point see also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, no. 24.

of how positive and providential the work of the successors of the apostles has been down the centuries in preserving that saving truth by which the Church lives. With humility and gratitude, it is legitimate for the Catholic Christian to see in the innumerable divisions, reductions, deformations, and even negations of essential elements of Revelation in Christian communities outside the Catholic communion, a confirmation that the magisterium, both in its everyday exercise and in the “*kairoi*” of its extraordinary exercise, has functioned truly as an instrument through which Christ has maintained his Church in the truth and has allowed it, time and again, to actualize the one and enduring divine Revelation.

It remains true, all the same, that in this ordinary service to Revelation, the magisterium has proved to be a “treasure” that we, the Church, “carry in vessels of clay” (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). The indefectible truth of God has been entrusted to men who, despite the grace and light which the Lord gives, remain fallible and sinful. In point of fact we are dealing here not with a unique case, but rather with something that corresponds to the incarnate structure of the Church, to its transitory status as a pilgrim Church. The Church, the community of eschatological salvation that has taken the place of the synagogue, is, in the period until the second coming of the Lord, also the assembly of believers that fails repeatedly and so is always called to conversion “*in capite et in membris*.” The Christian knows, or better believes, that Jesus assists his servants in the ministry of leading and of teaching. Therefore his attitude toward them is one of an obedience of faith, remembering the word of the Lord: “He who hears you, hears me” (Lk 10:16). But he also knows that these authentic witnesses of the Gospel remain fallible servants to whom the appeal to conversion is addressed, and that they have constantly to be “confirmed” so that they might fulfill the mission entrusted to them (cf. Lk 22:32).

What attitude then should the believer have toward the vast body of teachings of the Church, which although binding are not properly speaking irreformable, insofar as they do not originate in a magisterial act that is formally infallible? To such a question there is no simple and univocal answer applicable like a recipe to all cases. But the indispensable presupposition in every case for finding the right response is an attitude of faith toward a magisterium willed by the Lord. From this attitude of faith, says the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, it follows that “the willingness to submit loyally to the teaching of the magisterium on matters per se not irreformable must be the rule” (no. 24). This willingness will lead to a search for the meaning and the reasons for the teaching itself. Such a search amounts to a retracing in faith of the way that the successors of the Apostles have earlier followed in virtue of the assis-

tance of the Holy Spirit. But the same attitude of faith, precisely because it is not an ideological choice, equally implies loyalty and co-responsibility toward the truth of God, and therefore requires that the believer, in a filial and trustful dialogue with the pastors, penetrate deeper into the truth taught, and thus help purify it from one-sidedness, narrowness, and defects, even to the point of bringing to light erroneous elements present in a non-irreformable doctrinal decision of the magisterium.

The obedience of faith that believers owe to those sent by the Lord does not imply the pretense of considering every word of the pope and bishops as absolutely guaranteed by the charism of infallibility. In this sense it is correct to speak of “fallible” teachings, teachings that could possibly turn out to be erroneous. In this same sense I spoke above of the incarnate and faulty character of the magisterium and of a Church journeying toward perfection. It is precisely this character that a part of contemporary theology refuses to recognize; instead, on the basis of a maximalist conception, it questions the magisterium in its non-infallible or ordinary exercise. As the article of Weger argues, “an illumination of the Holy Spirit should exclude *all* possible error.”²⁰

The power of error, during the time of the Church, is broken but not completely overcome. But the obedience of faith toward the representatives of Christ, imperfect as they are, is not in vain. The choice between doctrines that are defined, and therefore to be accepted in faith, and doctrines that are not defined, and therefore, being fallible, to be rejected en masse or else considered as opinions having no greater value than what the individual faithful can know by himself, is arbitrary and ultimately impossible. It is not through such a choice that the Christian is able to remain in the fullness of truth. A growing adherence to saving truth is instead possible through a filial trust in the Church in which and with which the Christian believes, and therefore through a magnanimous acceptance of all that the Church teaches. If this acceptance is the fruit of theological faith, it will be marked by a sincere and open attitude, ready to recognize that the Spirit of truth operates even without the mediation of the magisterium and also outside the visible Church, and therefore ready to assume its own responsibility in that search for the truth in which the whole Church is engaged. This is true for every Christian, and in a particular way for the theologian in his “disinterested service to the community of the faithful.”²¹

The assent of the believer who receives the truth of God incarnated and concealed beneath aspects of this world that are transitory and even

²⁰ Weger, “Wie weit reicht der Schutz,” 113.

²¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, no. 11.

false (cf. Gal 4:3–9) is of great religious significance. There is no need for a Catholic to claim absolute certitude for every word of his pastors, because he knows with St. Paul that “all things work for good with those who love God” (Rom 8:28).²² But precisely because this attitude of obedience arises not from a pathological need for security but out of respect for the truth, he is ready with intellectual honesty to bring his own contribution toward a fuller attainment of truth. The entire Church is also a learning Church, and the individual is called to participate in this movement of learning according to the post he occupies in the Church and in proportion to his personal gifts. The adequate basis for this service to a truth that is not a human achievement but rather a gift of God is precisely believing and “feeling with” the Church. And, adds the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* with reference to the proper task of the theologian, “a loyal spirit, animated by love for the Church” (no. 31).

If this spirit is present, the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* will not be accused of being Utopian²³ when it affirms that

²² A comparison may be helpful also here. The relationship between magisterium and faithful is, in some ways, analogous to the relationship between parents and children or teacher and pupils. Certainly it happens that with the passage of time one realizes that some knowledge communicated by one's parents and educators was not exact and that the values inculcated by them were not completely genuine (at least in the way they were transmitted). Does this give one the right to conclude that every influence of parents, educators, and teachers should be rejected, except those affirmations that enjoy a mathematical certitude? It is not difficult to see that this presumed elimination of every error and of every prejudice does not in fact open up a viable way to a better education and a more solid intellectual formation; rather it leads to an impoverishment in the area of knowledge and values, to an estrangement from the culture in which one lives, and this without providing a better alternative. It is difficult not to see here a parallel with the attitude of numerous Catholics today toward the teaching of the Church. Think, for example, of the “partial identification” with the Church that is so popular today, which leads to a faith that is the fruit of a subjective selection (*Auswahlglaube*), where the criterion of choice is, within the horizon of a culture that defines itself as post-Christian, what is still plausible and what can still be demanded from a moral point of view. Speaking of faith, St. Thomas notes that the one who accepts certain articles of faith and rejects others (“pertinaciter”—otherwise it would be a question of error and not formally of heresy) does not in fact have supernatural faith at all, insofar as the formal object of supernatural faith is adherence to God, the first truth, who manifests himself in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church. That is why, writes St. Thomas, the heretic “ea quae sunt fidei alio modo tenet quam per fidem.” And he goes on, “si de his quae Ecclesia docet quae vult tenet et quae vult non tenet, non iam inhaeret Ecclesiae doctrinae sicut infallibili regulae, sed propriae voluntati.” Such a faith, he concludes, is in reality an “opinio quaedam.” *ST* II–II, q. 5, a. 3.

²³ Weger, “Wie weit reicht der Schutz,” 116.

the theologian who finds difficulties in some teaching of the Church, must, rather than having recourse to the media, find some other way to deepen, clarify, and, if necessary, even correct that teaching. Ever since the media discovered the theologians, experience has shown that theological disputes, conducted in the media for the benefit of a public, which for the most part lacks the necessary scientific preparation, often make use of categories and conceptual tools that are wholly inadequate. The choice of issues and spokesmen, as also the way in which the issues are discussed, is largely governed by the need to create a sensation and to gain the favor of the public. Such criteria are not adequate to a truth that by its very nature surpasses the human mind and at whose center stands the cross of Christ. With such recourse to the media as a means of pressurizing the magisterium, St. Paul's words to Timothy have come true in a startling manner. Paul calls upon Timothy to proclaim the Word at every occasion, "in season and out of season," because "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (2 Tim 4:2–4).

An Unacceptable Dilemma: Either Define a Doctrine or Keep Silent

The questioning of the ordinary magisterium on the grounds of "fallible" propositions ends up by admitting only a miraculous assistance of the Holy Spirit, one that is not conditioned in any way by history and culture, and which would issue in "oracular" pronouncements on the part of the pope and the bishops. The theologians demand that these teachers of the faith make public the alleged special illumination on which they ground their teachings.²⁴ If they fail to do this, the theologians consider themselves authorized to make the limits of dogmatic decisions coincide with the beginning of the realm of free opinions. Where there are no propositions of faith in the strict sense, the teachings of the magisterium

²⁴ As regards the way in which the charism of the pastors operates in the realm of the proclamation of the truth, it is necessary to note two things. First, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, in virtue of which the successors of the apostles receive a particular understanding of the things of faith and morals, should be distinguished from the capacity to thematize this understanding on the level of scientific reflection. The former does not necessarily imply the latter. Secondly (and this is connected to the first), the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* recalls "the principle which affirms that magisterial teaching, by virtue of divine assistance, has a validity beyond its argumentation, which may derive at times from a particular theology" (no. 34). Pope Paul VI had already recalled this principle in his encyclical *Humanae vitae*, no. 28.

are to be considered in the same manner as opinions of some particular school of thought, in brief, as “fallible” teachings—no more.

The attitude to be assumed toward fallible teachings is that of the “hermeneutic of suspicion” proposed by philosophers like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. This hermeneutic presumes the falsity of what is affirmed, as long as the contrary has not yet been demonstrated with absolute evidence. But since no rational demonstration is infallible, the suspicion always remains. It is on the basis of such a hermeneutic that the passage is easily made from “fallible” propositions to false propositions. Within the horizon of such a hermeneutic the place of the obedience of faith is taken by the so-called “critical” believer.

On the practical plane, the challenge to the ordinary authentic magisterium is equivalent to constraining the sacred hierarchy, in its ministry of teaching the people of God, to choose between “issuing doctrinal decisions that are absolutely binding, or else simply keeping quiet and leaving everything to the opinion of the individual,” as the German bishops so appropriately expressed the problem already in 1967.²⁵ But, continue the bishops, just as concrete human living requires that we make decisions on the basis of a knowledge that is not completely certain, but which nevertheless must be regarded *hic et nunc* as a valid norm for thought and for action, so (in an analogous manner!) the Church, in order to defend efficaciously the substance of the faith and to apply it effectively to new situations, must propose teachings that are binding to a certain degree and which nevertheless are in a certain measure provisional and even open to the possibility of error.

The fact that the problem of the ordinary magisterium has become acute today is a direct consequence of this dilemma put before the magisterium: Either define a doctrine or else shut up.²⁶ To demand infallible doctrinal decisions in every case, in order to have binding doctrines, amounts to a distortion of the nature of the magisterium and results in its elimination. What remains of its ordinary exercise is something merely “scientific,” equivalent in principle to other such authorities: not only universities and scholarly circles, but also journalism and its like. Once the real and supernatural principle of the assistance of the Holy Spirit has been rejected, on what grounds can there be attributed a priority and

²⁵ Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz ed., *Schreiben der deutschen Bischöfe an alle, die von der Kirche mit der Glaubenserklärung beauftragt sind* (Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1967), no. 18.

²⁶ Not that the pope and bishops are prohibited from presenting their own opinions in the arena of diverse and contrasting opinions—but only *inter pares*!

normativity to the teachings of the pope and bishops in the life of faith? Which of the many and discordant opinions disseminated by the media is the non-theologian to follow? Only one answer seems realistic: to that opinion presented with greater persuasiveness. Now this will be without doubt that opinion which best corresponds to the “Zeitgeist.” The confusion and bewilderment in which large sectors of Catholics find themselves today is a dramatic reproof of this.

It is not therefore a question of an excessive insistence on the part of the Holy Father if, in recent years, he has repeatedly urged obedience toward the doctrine of the Church. We must not read here a hidden intention to put on the same plane the ordinary and the infallible magisterium; rather the pope wants to “save” the ordinary magisterium of the Church—if we may express ourselves thus in speaking of a tension that cannot be completely eliminated, being part of the mystery of the Church, between faith in God who guides his Church, and the personal responsibility of the successors of the apostles with regard to the same Church. The preoccupation of the Pastor of the Universal Church is about the needs of and the risks to so many faithful; the insistence on his right and duty to teach the Church is a tangible sign of his respect for the “simple,” that these may not be robbed of the treasure of the true faith.²⁷

The repeated and preoccupied interventions of the Holy Father and the Roman congregations who participate in his universal magisterium must be seen against the background of the attack in course against practically the whole of Catholic doctrine. An inability to see this would be an indication of total abstraction from reality. By way of example, I note some of the doctrines that in recent years have become objects of debate and rejection: the divinity of Jesus Christ, the founding of the Church by Jesus, the ministerial priesthood, the Eucharistic presence, the sacrament of penitence, original sin, the virginity of Mary Most Holy, the last things. As far as moral teaching in the area of sexuality is concerned, it is superfluous to say anything. In addition, there is the tactic of allowing certain fundamental truths of the faith to disappear merely by not speaking any more about them: such is the case with the doctrine of grace and sin.

In the third section above, “The Magisterium and the Assistance of the Holy Spirit,” I observed that, at least apparently, the theologians do not have any difficulty in admitting infallible definitions. Seen from the outside, the infallible magisterium has a formal logical structure: If the conditions laid down by the two Vatican councils are satisfied, it is evident

²⁷ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, nos. 37 and 27.

that, from the viewpoint of Catholic doctrine, we have an infallible teaching. But the assent to the dogmas of the Church, which at first does not seem to raise difficulties, may have motivations other than the theological virtue of faith. In fact many of these dogmas appear to us today as abstract formulas, extraneous to our lives and difficult to understand. The attitude of a Catholic toward these may well be one of practical indifference, leaving to the magisterium itself the task of seeing why they have been defined and what exactly they mean—granted that they mean something at all. But examined more closely, these infallible teachings appear as stray entities or as fruits of a tree from under which the ground has been removed. The disappearance also of these mythical remnants forms part of the logic of an attitude of spirit which regards autonomous reason as the ultimate criterion of truth. The spiritual and scientific itineraries of both well-known and lesser known Catholic theologians have already provided us with too many examples of such a logic.

Calling into doubt the validity of the ordinary magisterium implies questioning the effective presence and action of those to whom Jesus has entrusted the mission of teaching all nations. The teachings of the ordinary magisterium are as many and as varied as the circumstances of place, time, and culture in which the Gospel is proclaimed and lived. The binding character of these teachings also varies according to the persons for whom they are directly intended, the tenor of the expressions used, the frequency and insistence of the pastors in proposing them, and many other factors.²⁸ Only a life lived within and with the Church allows the believer to grasp the true meaning, significance, and degree of obligation of what the pastors say to the people of God. Now it is precisely this ordinary magisterium that touches the faithful in a close and sometimes painful way. For one who lives in communion with the Church, the magisterium becomes a constant point of reference, as concrete as everyday life itself. It is thus that the Christian realizes that life in the Church is not a vague ideological superstructure, but rather a way of life that envelops everything and that touches him personally.

In the Church, the Christian experiences that Jesus Christ is not merely someone who said something two thousand years ago in a culture completely different from our own, but rather is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6) of every believer. Through his representatives, Jesus intervenes here and now in the life of the believer, both in what he does and in what he leaves aside, imposing a conduct of life that not infre-

²⁸ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 25; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, no. 24.

quently calls for the courage of non-conformism. Here lies the true existential problem of the ordinary magisterium today—a problem which has found its expression in the slogan: “Jesus yes, but not the Church.”

Theological Research and Personal Sanctification

In keeping with the faulty character of the magisterium of which I spoke above, the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, while recognizing the possibility of inadequate doctrinal decisions on the part of the magisterium, not only exhorts the theologian to place his expertise at the service of the teachings of the Church in order to deepen, perfect, complete, and even, where necessary, to correct them through the channels of scientific publications and dialogue with the pastors (no. 40), but also considers the case in which the truth makes its way in the Church through the suffering, silence, and prayer of the theologian (no. 31). This is something that cannot be completely eliminated from a divine Revelation that is incarnate. The shortcomings of the servants of the Church in the ministry of government and of teaching is not due to historical and cultural conditioning alone; it can also be the consequence of personal failure.

The saints, who were the ones who best understood Revelation, provide us with examples of situations in which the ways and times of God and of his truth do not coincide with our ways and our times. The reflections developed by the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* on this theme are not a way of circumventing the tasks proper to theology as science, nor do they exonerate the members of the magisterium from the obligation to make use of all available means for discovering the truth. They are rather a fraternal reminder of what ultimately counts in the Kingdom of God: charity, which in the time of the pilgrim Church can also be a charity that is called to suffering. Love for the Church, the mother of our faith, can also pass through the Cross. It is here that the science of the word of God, which cannot but be *intellectus fidei*, finds its confirmation. The effort of the theologian to give respect and obedience to a magisterium which he finds to be in error, together with the willingness to do whatever is possible so that the truth might prevail, in the firm hope that the Church, notwithstanding deviations and errors, will not be lacking in salvific truth, is a real service to Christian redemption. When the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* says: “The commitment to theology requires a spiritual effort to grow in virtue and holiness” (no. 9), it does not indulge in an empty phrase but rather touches the heart of the question and indicates the foundation on which alone the theologian can carry out his task within the mystical body of Christ. The history of theology confirms this: It is not merely coincidental that the great theologians have been saints.

In an allocution to the bishops of the United States of America on October 15, 1988, Pope John Paul II, after having recalled that “theology is an ecclesial science that constantly develops within the Church and is directed to the service of the Church,” went on to outline the spiritual figure of the theologian in the following terms:

The authentic faith of the theologians, nourished by prayer and constantly purified through conversion, is a great gift of God to his Church. On it depends the well-being of theology in our day. As I mentioned at the Catholic University of Washington: “It behooves the theologian to be free, but with the freedom that is openness to the truth and the light that comes from faith and from fidelity to the Church” (October 7, 1979).²⁹

The analysis made by the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* of the situation in which theology finds itself today, has pinpointed the root of the problem and, it must be frankly admitted, of the disarray in which theological research and teaching find themselves in a number of particular churches. The disappearance of the supernatural horizon of faith with a culture which is drawing the ultimate consequences of an anthropological turn understood in an immanentist sense, is reflected in the tendency on the part of certain contemporary theologians to relegate a magisterium founded on the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the realm of mythical conceptions or of ideological constructions of the past.

The indispensable condition for doing theology today is the existential recovery of the horizon of faith, within which alone the tools provided by modern culture can and must be used to mediate supernatural Revelation to the people of today. But the recovery of the horizon of faith is not a question of speculation or argumentation. Every argument is based ultimately upon premises that are not themselves the result of a demonstration. This is true not only for every human science but also, in its own way, for the science of faith. In the realm of natural knowledge the indemonstrable premise is the subjectivity of the scientist himself, his intelligence, rationality, and morality; it is the authentic human subject inasmuch as objectivity in human knowledge is the fruit of authentic subjectivity.³⁰ In the realm of supernatural knowledge, the ultimate premise is the subjectivity of the theologian in his authenticity

²⁹ Pope John Paul II, “The Universal Ordinary Magisterium Can Be Considered To Be the Usual Expression of the Church’s Infallibility,” ad limina address to the U.S. bishops of New York (October 15, 1988), *L’Osservatore Romano* (English), October 24, 1988, no. 7.

³⁰ This is a key idea in B. Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

as a Christian believer (in addition to his human authenticity on the level of intellect and will).

For this reason Lonergan, in his *Method in Theology*, places the foundation of the last three theological functional specialties (discerning the true Christian doctrines, elaborating their meaning, communicating them in a manner conducive to the building up of the Church) in religious conversion. Now religious conversion is not some particular doctrine, but rather a highly personal event; it is the life itself of the theologian as tending towards sanctity. To say that the personal commitment to sanctity establishes the horizon of pre-understanding within which the theologian can do theology in the strict sense, is to indicate the point of conjunction between Christian life and reflection on the Christian mystery, the point at which an authentically Christian life expresses itself in a theology adequate to its object. This is not an attempt to blur the distinctions between the two, nor does it amount to establishing an automatic passage from the first to the second. Cultural and speculative problems have their own laws and are to be resolved by means of proper scientific procedures. But scientific procedures are at the service of the human mind and yield no results independently of the horizon of truth and values constitutive of the concrete subject. Now when the Christian existence of the subject, the theologian, is undermined by inauthenticity, an adequate understanding of Revelation cannot be expected—indeed, not even the indirect and analogous understanding of theology. A regress in Christian living, in prayer, charity, self-denial, and obedience, inevitably works as a negative factor with regard to the supernatural truth communicated by God to his Church. The transcendence of Christian truth—its supernatural character—calls for the transcendence of Christian living; otherwise it becomes an ideological superstructure which is then used to give a Christian veneer to a conception of the world whose matrix is no longer the Gospel.

Revealed truth is an essential part of the Christian life. Reflection on this truth can therefore be done only by one who lives it, just as communication of that truth can be done only through a living testimony. Now there is no Christian life except in communion with the Church, the adequate subject of our faith. It is only within a communion with the Church and in a constant endeavor toward personal sanctification that a proper relationship is possible between the theologian and the living magisterium. To formulate the problem from the assumption that theology and magisterium are separate and opposing realities, is to miss the proper solution from the very start. It amounts to wanting to assure a space for theology, while forgetting that theology acquires its character as

a science only by entering into the realm of faith, which is always the faith of the ecclesial community. It is only in the realm of faith that the theologian finds that freedom of research and of teaching, which belong to him. Such a freedom is intrinsically linked to the mystery of the Church, from which the theologian receives his mission. **N·V**