

God's Point of View:
Apostolicity and the Magisterium
A Lecture Delivered to the St. Anselm Institute
at the University of Virginia

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I AM VERY GRATEFUL to Professor Wilken for the invitation to be with you at this gathering sponsored by the St. Anselm Institute here at the University of Virginia. The importance of these institutes lies in their being on secular campuses. The *saeculum*, in the Augustinian sense, the area where the distinction between the profane and the sacred is played out, is the theater for two very important conversations. The first conversation, between faith and culture, is important because both faith and culture are ethically normative systems and, if the norms of the faith are too divergent from the norms of the culture, then believers live in great tension and the culture is less open than it should be to realities beyond itself. The second very important conversation that takes place in the *saeculum* is that between faith and reason, because faith gives us revealed truths and reason also tells us what is true and helps us to discover further truths.

If there is tension between the truths of faith and the truths that are in the canon of reason at any particular cultural moment, then, again, believers live in great tension and they and others are tempted to a kind of skepticism that closes in on itself and is unworthy of human reason. Institutes that foster conversation between faith and culture and between faith and reason are extraordinarily important for culture, for faith, and for the people shaped by both. I am grateful for the St. Anselm Institute's being the locus for these conversations at the University of Virginia.

The title of this presentation has undergone several changes. When I was first invited, I understood I was to give a theological discourse on apostolicity and the Magisterium. The relationship between apostolicity, which is one of the four classical marks of the Church, and the teaching Magisterium of the bishops begins with the recognition that both are carriers of the tradition that links us to Christ. But then the title was changed to "Tradition in a Non-Traditional Society," placing both apostolicity and teaching Magisterium in relation to a society that doesn't regard the past as normative. Then this relation was further specified in the suggestion that the talk discuss "Being Catholic in a Post-Protestant Culture."

Being Catholic means accepting Tradition as a source of religious truth; post-Protestant means coming out of a religious stance that does not accept communal tradition as a normative source of knowledge about God. Protestantism is the determinate form of religiosity in this country. It has helped to create a general culture that rejects "tradition" as normative even for personal actions or for institutions. "We've always done it this way" is not a convincing or a determining argument in our form of culture. It is just an invitation: "Well, if you've never done it, let's try it and see if it works." The rejection of tradition in favor of personal judgment does not necessarily entail ethical or epistemological individualism. There is another popular argument, "Everybody's doing it," which remains often convincing. A culture can be non-traditional and yet also tribal.

During these days in the fourth week of the season of Lent, the Church is reading from the Gospel according to St. John. We watch and hear Jesus moving from his preaching and his performing of miracles, healing the sick, walking on water, changing water into wine, to a more explicit claim to an identity with God, whom he calls his Father: The Father and I are one; God and I act together. This Father is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one who, when Moses asked him in the Book of Exodus before a burning bush, "Tell me who you are so that I can tell Egyptians and my own people who sent me," replied, "I AM who am." There are many explanations of that enigmatic phrase. Some say he was telling Moses to mind his own business. You can't know my name because then you could call me or control me. Others have, with St. Thomas, gone into a philosophical exposition of *Ipsium esse subsistens*, God is pure existence. Whatever the many layers of explanation of the phrase, Jesus' use of "I AM" language in the Gospel according to St. John is a clear claim to divinity and even understood as such: "before Abraham came to be, I AM." The God of Abraham, whom we worship as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, is someone for whom everything is contemporary. Everything is always present to God. There is in God's

inner life no present, past, or future. He is eternal. We, by contrast, live in time, because we are finite and limited. We are also, we believe, made in God's image and likeness, so there is a yearning for something beyond our own limitations, a desire for the eternal in the midst of time, for the divine perspective on things that pass. How can we now make the past present and normative for the future, so that past, present, and future come together in a way analogous to the way that God is eternal?

In a traditional society, the past is still vital; it shapes thought and behavior in the present. But what is past can shape lives now only if it transcends its own time. We distinguish a "classic" work from a period piece when we speak about the canon in literature and in other fields. This is a contested notion, but it recognizes that there are works of art and literature and great scientific experiments that are of permanent importance because they say something that is true beyond the experience in which they were born and formed. In a popularly non-traditionalist society, however, where "history is bunk," people often feel it is not important to know history in order to understand the present or to prepare for the future. In a non-traditional society, the past is to be left behind.

In a society that lives by the myth of progress, it is not the past that determines meanings and norms in the present; it is the future. Planning is a crucially important enterprise in a non-traditionalist society. Planning is a way of bringing the future into the present so that it can shape us and change us now. We plan not according to the norms of the past but, rather, from what we believe the future is calling us toward or what it should be. Planning can also be a "traditional" enterprise if it attempts to control the future so that it simply reflects the present; but planning usually means preparing us now to meet new demands in the future.

The challenge of planning is to think outside the box of the present so that the future might be open to us and help us to progress. If the future loses its importance and one rejects the past, only the present can be normative and it exhausts human possibilities. Normative directives then come from emotivism or pleasure. When I first taught in a secular university in the midst of the Vietnam war, I asked the college juniors, "How is it that you decide what is right and what is wrong?" They all said, "If it feels good." There is a field of philosophy that justifies that response, but my class was designed to bring them into other fields of ethical and normative discourse.

Individualism in American ethics is not unrelated to the Protestant rejection of tradition as normative. Catholicism claims that faith brings us into God's perspective, God's vision of things, which is always *sub specie eternitatis*. St. Paul claimed to have "the mind of Christ" long after Christ

was crucified. The claim that we have the mind of Christ just as Christ himself had it is possible only if Jesus of Nazareth was not captured by his own time and his own influence didn't cease with his death. What does that mean? For people of faith it means that Christ has risen from the dead and therefore escapes his own time and space. It means that Jesus is Lord, which is the first of the Church's professions of faith. Faith is given as a gift in baptism, where there is an encounter with the Risen Christ who then gives us his life, which we call grace.

Christianity is, first of all a way of life, an encounter not with an idea but with a person, with the person who made the claim, "I AM"—"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." After the sacramental encounter with the Risen Christ in baptism and the reception of his life through grace, it is necessary to have access to the truths of God's self-revelation in the living Jesus. How can we have access to the events in which God has revealed himself so that they are present to us and remain normative for the future? The apostolicity of the Church, the community founded upon faith in Christ's Resurrection, assures us of this access.

Theology of Apostolicity and the Church

St. Irenaeus, a second-century bishop of Lyons in what is now France, explained to both Catholics and heretics of his day what apostolicity means in terms that are classic. He says, "Anyone who wishes to discern the truth may see in every church in the whole world the apostolic tradition clear and manifest. This apostolic tradition has been brought down to us by a succession of bishops in the greatest, most ancient, well known Church, founded by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul at Rome. . . . For with this Church, because of its more effective leadership, all Churches must agree, that is to say, the faithful of all places, because in it, the apostolic tradition has always been preserved."¹

"Always" wasn't a particularly long time in the second century. Irenaeus was two generations removed from the apostles. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John, at least that is what popular tradition tells us. He was born between a.d. 140 and 160, and was a witness to the martyrdom of his friend and mentor, Polycarp of Smyrna. Jesus Christ as the Word of Life was not an abstraction for St. Irenaeus, nor can he be for those who know him in the faith-filled worship of the Church and in the communion of her life.

I want now to make four points about the theology of apostolicity. The first is that the apostle is a disciple. The very office of an apostle is defined

¹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III, 3, 1 and 3.

by the initial call, "Follow me," that Jesus addressed to those who first were curious about him. This initial "Follow me" applies as well to all the successors of the apostles, since the same Lord promised, "and behold, I will be with you always until the end of the world."²

Professor Joseph Ratzinger expressed this interpersonal character of apostolic succession and tradition well: "'Tradition' is never a simple, anonymous passing on of doctrine but is personal, is the living word, concretely realized in the faith. And 'succession' is not a taking over of official powers, which then are at the disposal of their possessor, but is rather a dedication to the Word, an office of bearing witness to the treasure with which one has been entrusted. The office is superior to its holder, so that he is entirely overshadowed by that which he has received; he is, as it were—to adopt the image of Isaiah and John the Baptist—only a voice that renders the Word articulate in the world."³ So an apostle is a disciple first of all. It means he is self-involved with someone who calls him and whom he comes to recognize as Lord.

The second point about apostolicity is that the apostle therefore has an office of bearing witness to the treasure of the truth with which he has been entrusted. This form of witness is different from the witness of all the baptized, who can speak authentically from their own personal experience of grace about who Christ is for them. The importance of the apostolic office, however, is that successors of the apostles must speak about who Christ is for everyone, who Christ is beyond the personal experience of the disciple who is called to be an apostle. The apostle bears witness to who Christ is for the whole Church. The office of receiving through an encounter with the living Word of God Incarnate, now risen from the dead, and through the witness borne to the truths that are revealed in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is superior always to its holder.

Speaking to the type of witnessing that transcends a sharing of personal experience, Joseph Ratzinger wrote: "[I]f true apostolic succession is bound up with the Word, it cannot be bound up merely with a book, but must, as the succession of the Word, be a succession of preachers, which in turn cannot exist without a 'mission,' i.e. a personal continuity reaching back to the apostles. . . . Apostolic succession [in the Church] is the living presence of the Word in the person of witnesses.

² Mt 4:19, 9:9, 28:20; cf. Mk 1:17, 2:14; Lk 5:27, 24:48; Jn 1:43, 17:18–21.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, "Primacy, Episcopate and Apostolic Succession" in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Episcopate and the Primacy* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1962), 37–63; the quotation is from 46–47.

The unbroken continuity of witnesses follows from the nature of the Word as *auctoritas* and *viva vox*.”⁴

But this living Word both in the hearer and in the proclaimer requires faith to be recognized and to be received or to be spoken. A theology of apostolicity and its relationship to the Magisterium is possible only if faith enlightens reason. If the light of faith is dimmed or extinguished or systematically excluded, then all that is left are texts, classic texts perhaps, normative in some sense for some peculiar reason, but so many dead letters whose real truth is never grasped.

Appeals to the texts that we recognize as sacred because they are texts written in faith by faithful people for the faith community fail if the texts themselves are severed from this living apostolic tradition of the Church’s faith and worship of her Risen Lord. This severing results often from exclusive reliance on a form of historical scholarship that has its origins in Benedict de Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*. This is the third point I would like to make about understanding the apostolic office. Since an apostle must witness not just to his own experience but to the fullness of truth that has been revealed in the Resurrection of Christ, any textual scholarship that is divorced from the faith community that gives us the text’s full meaning necessarily breaks historical continuity and severs the traditional sources of understanding God’s perspective from their own identity.

Spinoza, in his classical treatise, identifies the voluntarist power of God with the power of nature. God and nature are the same, and Spinoza asserts that the proper method for interpreting holy Scripture is the same as the method used to interpret nature.⁵ As with natural studies, the first methodic step is to reject any notion of the Bible or any book thereof as a whole; rather, the Bible is to be analyzed by breaking it up into discrete parts and verses where the meaning of one verse can only be determined by another verse, much as a laboratory breaks up nature into distinct elemental parts. Only those meanings are to be accepted that anyone, including an unbeliever, could accept on purely empirical grounds.

The second methodic step is to reject the “truth question.” The verses of the Bible are not to be accepted as true when they refer to realities not perceptible to common human sense experience or to rational deduction. Just as Newton’s mechanics sought only three-dimensional perceptible motions, so Spinoza’s canons of interpretation recognize only those textual

⁴ Ibid., 53–54.

⁵ Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 45 and 99. On the importance of Spinoza for the Enlightenment, cf. Jonathan Israel, *The Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity (1650–1750)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

meanings found in the Scriptures as a perceptible book. Faith is not a light enlightening the mind; it became for Spinoza a blind act of piety and obedience. Any theology founded on a blind obedience to a revelation has no power ever to oppose reason. Naturalist and secularist reason definitely dethrones fideist theology in Spinoza's Enlightenment, and his disciples clearly moved from empirical scholarship to the ideology of power: True religion is natural and rational, "revealed religion is merely a fraud and a political tool in the hands of Jewish, Catholic or Protestant authorities."⁶

Today, there is a great responsibility on Catholic higher education to recover and cultivate the wisdom traditions of philosophy and theology that are fundamental to Catholic intellectual life. Recent popes have emphasized that this cultivation is for the sake of both the Church and the global cultures in need of moral and religious direction. The question of truth in matters moral and religious has to be raised within the context of the quest for wisdom, goodness, holiness. Truth cannot be consigned, as it has been from the European Enlightenment onward, as if it were an instrument of social or state dominative power. Both nature and history are ordered to ends inscribed in their very existence by their Creator and Redeemer. Both metaphysics and theology have suffered from the eclipse of wisdom in modern and postmodern cultures.

Imagine a historian who would attempt to write a history of mathematics without acquiring a knowledge of the foundations and sciences operative in mathematics. Such a historian might well be able to do a passable job at comparing various mathematical texts, at dating and placing them more or less precisely, at working out certain social and/or cultural processes that were going on at the time the mathematical texts were being produced. He could deduce who used which text to get what advantage in this or that situation, how such a text was used in the production of weapons, what the weapons did, and the like. Undoubtedly, such a history would be very readable for those who are not interested in knowing the history of mathematics so much as in knowing what else was going on when such and such a mathematical process was being worked out. But no one would claim that such a history would merit the name of a genuinely critical history of mathematics.

Scholars whose studies are influenced by the Reformation break with Catholic continuity have, moreover, not come to any empirically verifiable consensus. As B. H. Streeter remarked:

However great their reverence for scientific truth and historic fact, they have at least *hoped* that the result of their investigations would be to

⁶ Cf. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 654.

vindicate apostolic authority for the type of Church Order to which they themselves were attached. The Episcopalian has sought to find episcopacy, the Presbyterian presbyterianism, and the Independent a system of independency, to be the form of Church Order in New Testament times.⁷

The fourth point in elaborating this theology of apostolicity is the connection between the apostolic office, the mission that Christ gave the apostles, and the celebration of the Eucharist in the Church. Drawing especially on St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas situates apostolicity in the carrying forward in history of the visible and invisible missions of the Word Incarnate and the Holy Spirit. In question 43 of the first part of the *Summa theologiae*, on the divine missions, Aquinas remarks on the mission of the Holy Spirit for the founding of the Church. He writes, "In a special sense, a mission of the Holy Spirit was directed to Christ, to the apostles, and to some of the early saints on whom the Church was in a way founded. . . . To the apostles the mission was directed in the form of breathing to show forth the power of their ministry in the dispensation of the sacraments; and hence it was said, 'Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven' (John 20:23); and again under the sign of fiery tongues to show forth the office of teaching; whence it is said that, 'they began to speak with divers tongues' " (Acts 2:4).⁸

Later, especially in his lectures on the Gospel according to St. John, Aquinas comments on the appearance of the Risen Christ to the apostles. Jesus showed them the marks of his Passion because the body that was crucified is truly risen but in a transformed state. Then he charges or lays upon them their office. This office or ministry is not something the apostles choose; it is laid upon them ("*iniungit officium*"). It is from God, not from their own will or choosing. "As the Father sent me, even so I send you," Jesus says. This is an office and mission laid upon them by Christ sending them into the world to continue his own mission from his heavenly Father.

St. Thomas comments:

This shows that Christ is the mediator between God and man: "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Tim 2:5). This was to console the disciples; acknowledging the authority of Christ, they knew he was sending them by divine authority. They were

⁷ Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Primitive Church* (London: Macmillan, 1929), viii. See Carlos A. Steger, *Apostolic Succession In the Writings of Yves Congar and Oscar Cullmann* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995), 42–57.

⁸ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 43, a. 7, ad 6.

consoled that they own dignity, namely that they had the proper office (officium) of apostles, for an apostle is one who has been sent.⁹

Being sent as an apostle is hardly a dominative power position. It reflects the wisdom and power of the cross. Aquinas envisages the Lord saying,

As the Father loving me sent me into the world to suffer for the salvation of the faithful—"For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him." (3:17)—so I, loving you, send you to undergo suffering in my name—"I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves." (Mt 10:16).¹⁰

This apostolic participation in the salvific suffering of the Son is given when our Lord breathes upon the apostles as a visible sign of his sending the Holy Spirit. To be configured to the crucified Christ, the apostles must be born again in the Holy Spirit. Aquinas talks about similarity between the handing on of the Spirit of the apostles at the beginning of the Church and the breathing of life into man's nostrils in the Book of Genesis. "Jesus makes them fit for the [apostolic] office by giving them the Holy Spirit, God enables us to be ministers of the New Testament [given] not in letters but in the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:6). In this giving of the Spirit, he first gives them a sign of this gift, that is, 'he breathed on them.' There is something similar in Genesis (2:7) when God 'breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life,' when the first man corrupted his natural life, but Christ has repaired this by giving the Holy Spirit."¹¹ The Lord's breathing is a visible sign of the invisible sending of the Holy Spirit. The Risen Lord signifies by this breathing the extending of the Holy Spirit to the apostles for the sacramental mission of forgiveness and sanctification. Later, at Pentecost, the tongues of fire signify the Holy Spirit's mission for teaching and preaching. Bishops and priests are only instruments of Christ who gives eternal life and who teaches eternal truth.¹²

Our Lord founded the Church on the twelve apostles, who are the foundation stones of the New Israel, by sending them and by continuing to send their successors until he returns.¹³ So St. Thomas says, "The apostles and their successors are God's vicars in governing the Church that is built on faith and the sacraments of faith. Wherefore, just as they may not institute

⁹ *Lectura super Evangelium S. Ioannis* (Rome: Marietti, 1952), XX, iv, §2537.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., §2538.

¹² Ibid., §2543, also §§2538–2544.

¹³ On the succession of the apostles and the Petrine ministry, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. IV; *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. VII; *Paul Wrestles*

another Church, so neither may they deliver another faith, nor institute other sacraments: on the contrary, the Church is said to be built up with the sacraments 'which flowed from the side of Christ while hanging on the Cross.'"¹⁴

For Aquinas, neither the apostolic succession nor the sacraments can be understood apart from the mission received by the apostles from the Risen Lord. It is wrong to imagine that Aquinas's confidence in the ongoing apostolic tradition in the Church results from a lack of historical-critical scholarship. While this scholarship may give us a more detailed knowledge of manuscript and other textual details, the truth of the reality referenced by the texts can only be properly understood and known by the signs of faith.¹⁵ The Church as a living presence of the Divine Word mediated by apostolic succession and carried forward in history again depends upon the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit and is sacramentally embodied in the Eucharist. The Church confects the Eucharist and the Eucharist creates the Church, and in the Eucharistic action the apostolic nature of the Church is truly made visible.

Sometimes people ask me, "Where do you most feel a bishop?" I think all bishops would say that we come to understand who we are in the apostolic tradition of the Church, and what is the nature of our office, when we celebrate in our cathedral surrounded by the priests of our diocese, with the religious men and women who are witness to radical discipleship through their consecration, and with the lay men and women for whom the Church exists in order to make them holy so they can make the world holy in their time. Particularly in preaching within the context of Eucharistic celebration, the bishop comes to understand what apostolic office is all about. Only within this sacramental worship and the unity of the whole body—members and head present through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Orders—can apostolicity be understood as fulfilling the Word Incarnate's promise to be with the Church until the end of time. Holy Scripture is read in the liturgy because the Church is a community of faith. The Church at worship is the context for interpreting the text of Scripture. It is the living community of faith that gives the texts their proper understanding by relating them to the realities of faith through the tradition that binds us to Christ. This tradi-

with His Community. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Primacy, Episcopate and Apostolic Succession," 37–63.

¹⁴ ST III, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3.

¹⁵ Avery Dulles, S.J., *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 68–146; also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969).

tion is made visible in the governance of bishops in union with the Bishop of Rome, having power from Christ to sanctify and teach the truth of Christ's Gospel. The act of faith doesn't end in the statements of the creed and Church dogmas; it attains the sacred realities themselves.¹⁶ We don't worship and pray to concepts, symbols, and propositions; we worship and pray and believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A genuine theology of the Church's Magisterium therefore places it in the service of the truths revealed by the triune God, who created the entire universe and has redeemed mankind through the mission of the Word Incarnate and the Holy Spirit.

Theology of Magisterium in the Church

Apostolicity means that the Church conserves and transmits, through the office of bishop, the truths of divine revelation, the content of our faith. The Magisterium, as it relates to that conservation, is the guarantor. If one makes truth claims, why and how can one give a guarantee for those truth claims? Cardinal Newman, writing in his essay on the development of doctrine, puts it this way:

Surely, either an objective revelation has not been given, or it has been provided with means for impressing its objectiveness on the world. If Christianity be a social religion, as it certainly is, and if it be based on certain ideas acknowledged as divine, or a creed (which shall here be assumed) and if these ideas have various aspects, and make distinct impressions on different minds, and issue in consequence in a multiplicity of developments, true, false or mixed, as it has been shown, what power will suffice to meet and to do justice to these conflicting conditions but a supreme authority ruling and reconciling individual judgments by a divine right and a recognized wisdom? There can be no combination (of various dogmas) on the basis of truth without an organ of truth.¹⁷

If apostolicity is the conserver of truth, there must be some organ that guarantees that the apostolic office teaches the truth in every age.

Newman goes on to speak of the way in which doctrinal accountability guarantees the truth that comes to us in apostolic tradition. In a less ecumenically sensitive age, he wrote: "By the Church of England a hollow uniformity is preferred to an infallible chair; and by the sects of England

¹⁶ Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2: "Actus autem credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem; non enim formamus enuntiabilia nisi per ea de rebus cognitionem habeamus, sicut in sciential, ita et in fide." Also *ST* I, q. 14, a. 14, c.

¹⁷ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), in *Conscience, Consensus and the Development of Doctrine*, ed. James Gaffney (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 111-12.

an interminable division. Germany and Geneva began with persecution and have ended in skepticism. The doctrine of infallibility is a less violent hypothesis than this sacrifice either of faith or charity. It secures the object while it gives definiteness and force to the matter of Revelation.”¹⁸ So the Magisterium, the organ of the bishops’ teaching office, is at the service of the truth that is transmitted and preserved by apostolicity.

I would like to make ten short points about the Magisterium to create the basis for understanding it theologically. The theological basis can be found in two exchanges in holy Scripture. The first Gospel passage that one should reflect on when one hears the word Magisterium is the dialogue between Jesus and the apostles at Caesarea Philippi. In that dialogue, Jesus was teaching, preaching, and working miracles, and people were saying many things about him. Jesus turned to the twelve and said, “Who do people say that I am?” They responded with the terms that their culture gave them. “You are John the Baptist.” They knew John the Baptist. “You are Elijah.” They knew Elijah. They were within the box of their own culture and their own experience. Then Jesus said, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter spoke up and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Then Jesus responded, “You’re right, but you didn’t know this from your own experience. You know because the Father has revealed it to you, and so now I’ll tell you, Simon, who you are. You are Peter.” That exchange, along with the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John when, after the miracle of the loaves and fishes and the Lord’s proclaiming that he is the Bread of Life, and when so many of the disciples turned away, gives the basis for understanding the Magisterium. Jesus asked the twelve, “Will you also go away?” They said, “To whom shall we go? You have the words of Eternal Life.” These two discourses of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi and on the shore of the lake of Capharnum are the theological texts that help us best understand the service of the Magisterium to the apostolicity of the Church.

The first point I would like to make in reflecting on these conversations is that the Lord begins the conversation. He is the one who puts the questions, “Who do you say that I am?” “Will you also leave me?” The authority of the apostles is not self-started. It doesn’t take the initiative; it is always elicited by Jesus raising the question. It is the Lord who first questions his Church, sometimes indirectly through the arrangements of his providence, and all deliverances or statements of the Magisterium answer to this prior and foundational elicitation of witness that Christ himself calls for.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In both Gospel texts, the authority of the teaching office is granted in the address of Jesus himself. Whenever any one of us questions an interlocutor in a genuine dialogue, we empower him to answer. In our questioning, we help to make him capable of speaking an answering word. The question that Jesus posed to the apostles presupposes they can answer, although in this case the basis of that testimony to the truth about who Jesus is, is not something purely and entirely human.

But we have to go farther, and that is the second point. The Lord starts the dialogue, and the Lord gives the power to respond, to teach the truth about who he is, to say to the world who he is. Because of who Jesus is, the apostles must answer. The Lord's question is not an invitation to answer but rather a demand to tell him who they think he is and then to tell the world. The Lord's question in Matthew 16 lays on the apostles the requirement to proclaim the Christological faith that Peter articulates. Similarly, in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, when Jesus asks, "Will you also leave me?" he is asking, "Will you, who are keeping my company, also keep faith as I deliver myself in the Eucharist to the Church, by which acts I include in my identity as the Christ, all Christians, making them members of my Body by giving them my flesh and blood?" In both cases, there is anticipated the urgency of St. Paul's saying, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." The sixth chapter of St. John is the completion of the passage in Matthew. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, who is also truly present in the Eucharist under the species of bread and wine; we become Christ's body not just in our profession of faith but in our reception of the sacraments.

The third point to be clarified in the theology of Magisterium is that the Gospel demands a magisterial witness that is Christological in the fullest sense. Christ is the anointed, and in his office and included in his person are all who are baptized in water and the Spirit. The Eucharistic confession in John 6 is not an addition to the confession of Matthew 16. "You are the Son of God" is fulfilled in the Eucharistic celebration of Christ's disciples. There is a co-inherence of Christological and Eucharistic doctrine.

Just as the identity of Jesus was made known to the disciples on the road to Emmaus after his Resurrection in the breaking of the bread, so St. Irenaeus would argue to the Catholic doctrine of Incarnation on the basis of the Eucharistic practice of the Catholic Church. St. Irenaeus writes, "When, therefore, the mingled cup and the bread made by hands receives the Word of God, and the Eucharist of the Blood and the Body of Christ is made, from which the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can anyone affirm that the flesh is incapable of receiving

the gift of God, which is life eternal . . . even as St. Paul declares in his Epistle to the Ephesians (5:30), that ‘we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones.’ ”¹⁹

This reflection from St. Irenaeus indicates at the same time both the scope and the limits of magisterial teaching. When it is a question of Christ and his identity, then the Magisterium is engaged. When it is not, the Magisterium is silent. There is a limit to the magisterial office in the Church. Pope John Paul II took great care to display the Christological foundation of Catholic moral teaching—a foundation that has become obscure for many contemporary Christians, as if the profession of faith about who Jesus is is entirely separate from our understanding of the demands of Christian discipleship in the Church’s moral teaching. The precepts of the natural law, which is a distinct form of using non-biblical language to explain moral imperatives, in recent years have been recaptured in the contemplation of Christ in his virtues. This is a pastoral dimension of natural law teaching presupposing a rational, philosophical argument but transforming it in the light of faith.

The fourth element that I would like to bring to the fore in talking about the Magisterium concerns the scriptural character of the magisterial teaching. It is always Christological and it is always scriptural. Peter answers, “You are the Christ,” in the words and categories of Scripture. The recognition of Jesus as the Bread of Life depends on the teaching in Exodus 16 and in the Book of Proverbs.

This tethering of the Magisterium to sacred Scripture is expressed more completely by the Lord himself when, in Luke 24, he explains to his disciples on the road to Emmaus and to the apostles waiting in Jerusalem everything that concerns him in the law and the prophets and the psalms. “It was ordained that the Christ should suffer,” and it took the very Word of God Incarnate to break open for them this written witnessing from the Scriptures they thought they understood.

Fifthly, magisterial teaching shares the sacramental structure of the apostolic office as a whole. In other words, the Magisterium makes present something that is much more than the teaching or the words in which the teaching is given. In giving to the apostles the authority to teach, Jesus gives them a share in his own self-dispossession. Jesus doesn’t speak in his own name. “The teaching is not my own—it is from the one who sent me.” He tells the apostles, “I cannot do anything on my own” (John 5:19). He is a sacrament of God and of God’s will for the salvation of the world. Everything he has to say is from the Father, so Christ in his

¹⁹ *Adversus Haereses* V, 2.

own self-dispossession is transparent in such a way that through him the Father himself is present. In that selflessness, Christ's supreme authority is seen. The apostles, in turn, have only what is given them; like Jesus, they have nothing of their own.

Jesus gives the apostles a participation in his power and the authority to speak in his name (Mt 9:8, 10:1; Mt 16:19; Mk 6:7; Lk 9:1, 10:19, 22:19; John 20:23). He confers on them an office that parallels the shape of his own mission. This is the sixth point. There is a parallelism between the mission of Christ and the mission of the apostles. "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me," (Mt 10:40; John 13:20). In all this, it is clear that the words of human beings are *capax verbum domini*, the words of human beings are capable of expressing the Word of the Lord. I say that because, if we don't believe that the Word of the Lord really can get into our words and be repeated back in praise of and confession to the Lord in his Church, then what we are saying is that neither the Church, nor holy Scripture, nor the apostolic office itself can be an adequate vehicle of divine truth. In the light of faith, there is no separation of an unfulfilled and unfulfillable dogmatic intention from an always inadequate and culturally contingent conceptual expression, as if an apostle can only aim at the reality he speaks of but cannot declare the truth of it. To say that dogmatic formulae "adequately express" the divine reality they bear, one does not mean that everything that can be said is in them. It does mean, however, that what has been said is truly said and really tells us about divine reality and not just our relationship to it.²⁰ Truly, the full and public confession of Jesus as the Christ of God awaits what modification this title undergoes at the passion and death of Jesus; it awaits being conjoined with the notion of the Servant. So also we will not know what the Bread of Life is until the full display of the Paschal mystery. Even so, once the Lord himself has taken up the prior words spoken by Moses and the prophets, and once he has reshaped them on the anvil of his passion and death, they really are adequate vehicles of his truth.

The seventh point I want to make goes back to the apostles' participation in the Lord's own life, in his passion, death, and resurrection. The Lord said that if you are going to tell the world who I am, you must share in my passion. That is the promise. Magisterial teaching is always Paschal. Matthew 16 and 18 are fulfilled in John 20: "Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven." John shows this commissioning of Peter and the apostles occurs only once the Spirit is given, the

²⁰ See on this point the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium ecclesiae* (24 June 1973), and Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei* (3 Sept. 1965), §§24 and 25.

Spirit who will recall for them all the things Jesus has said (c.14) and who will guide them into all truth (c. 16).

The eighth point is that the apostles' ability to confess Jesus as Lord is strictly a function of their own redemption by the grace of Christ and their sharing in the Spirit with which he is anointed. That the Spirit is an interior condition of the possibility of magisterial authority is indicated already at both Caesarea Philippi and Capharnum. For it is not flesh and blood that has revealed to the apostles that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, but the Father. And no one believes in Christ, according to the same sixth chapter of John, unless the Father draws him (6:46 and 6:65). It is because the apostles are so illumined and so drawn interiorly by the Holy Spirit that they know who Jesus is and do not depart, knowing also that Jesus alone has the words of everlasting life.

The ninth point reminds us that, at Caesarea Philippi and Capharnum, it is Peter who gives voice to the apostolic group. Peter's role as spokesman is enabled by the requirement that he give blood witness to Christ's own shedding of his blood. This is signified at Caesarea Philippi by the transformation of his name; it is indicated by contrast to his denial that he ever knew Jesus; and it is promised in John at his commissioning to feed the sheep when, at the same time, the Lord indicates "by what death he was about to die."

The interpersonal character of magisterial authority is evident in Peter's relation to Christ and to all the apostles together. This is something of a disputed point in the theology of the Magisterium, where one meets two subjects of magisterial authority inadequately distinguished: Peter in his personal charism and Peter and the other apostles together. What is always true is that Peter cannot be understood apart from his being in the center of his fellow apostles; but neither do the apostles form the group they do without Peter. He can speak for them and they can speak through him. This is clearest in Ecumenical Councils, but the collegial relationships are found also in synods and episcopal conferences.

The last point returns to the connection between the Magisterium and eschatology. Magisterial witness in both places—Caesarea Philippi and Capharnum—is projected eschatologically. The apostles do not depart from their Lord at Capharnum in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John because, as Peter said, his words are the words of everlasting eschatological life. For his part, at Caesarea Philippi the Lord says that what Peter binds on earth is bound eschatologically in heaven. This means that the magisterial office and its acts have the enormous responsibility of guiding the growth of the pilgrim Church here through all the ages to her eternal destiny. In that sense, the apostolic office participates

in the contemporaneity of God's own perspective. Magisterial teaching and apostolic witness give us all hope that we will see the Lord face to face. In patria, we shall need no apostolic words because we will be in the presence of the Word made flesh. We shall need no sacraments because we will be seated at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Let me conclude this reflection on the theology of the Magisterium by quoting once again from St. Irenaeus:

The path of those belonging to the Church circumscribes the whole world, as possessing the sure Tradition from the apostles, and gives unto us to see that the faith of all is one and the same, since all receive one and the same God the Father, and believe in the same dispensation regarding the Incarnation of the Son of God, and are cognizant of the same gift of the Spirit, and are conversant with the same commandments, and preserve the same form of ecclesiastical constitution, and expect the same advent of the Lord, and await the same salvation of the complete man, that is, of the soul and body. And undoubtedly the preaching of the Church is true and steadfast, in which one and the same way of salvation is shown throughout the whole world, for to her is entrusted the light of God. (*Adversus Haereses* V, 20)

We have reviewed very quickly some distinguishing characteristics of the magisterial office that is entirely at the service of the apostolic tradition that unites us to Christ and guarantees the Church's mark of apostolicity. Let me talk more quickly to cultural problems we often have in receiving these gifts of apostolicity and its guarantor in the Magisterium of the Church.

First of all, right now at least, any truth claims in any religion are considered an invitation to violence and a threat to peace. After September 11, 2001, when our country was attacked in the name of the God of Abraham in an immoral, violent, and terrifying way, the op-ed pieces of the major carriers of our culture warned that our society cannot afford doctrinal religion. It does not matter what doctrine you're talking about. It is the certitude that one speaks truths that are more than human truths—that are divine truths—that leads to societal violence. There may still be a place for religion in our society, but it will be at best private comfort and public charity, not permitted to make public truth claims.

Religion can and has been a source of violence in the history of the world. The late Pope John Paul II responded to this history when he called the leaders of the world's faiths, of all faith communities, not to worship together, for that would be a violation of our respective consciences, but to pray in one another's presence so that religion could

be transformed into an instrument of peace and never again be used as an excuse for violence. Religion and the wars of religion in European history and elsewhere were responsible for great violence. But the wars that have inflicted violence on every generation of Americans have not been wars of religion. They have been wars of conquest on this continent and, elsewhere, wars fought to defend democracy or freedom. These are all good things, but none of them is explicitly religious, and in all of these more blood was spilled in the last two centuries than was ever shed previously in the name of Christ or Mohammed, Moses, or Buddha.

We live now with the societal conviction that truth claims in religion are inherently dangerous. We live also in fear that, if there is a Lord, we are in danger of losing our own autonomy. Personal autonomy is the primary characteristic and value of the human person in our individualistic culture. Religion is feared because it demands conversion, a change, the loss of our self-sufficiency to a relationship that is not of our making and whose terms we don't set. There are many attempts to deny that Christ is Lord, to whittle him down to size. He must have been married; that is the human condition if you are a man. He must have had children. He cannot have risen from the dead because, if he can call us to his own new life, we're no longer safe in the prisons of our own making. If there is no Lord, then the Church cannot be permitted to bear witness to him and cannot be permitted to tell people who Christ is and make claims in his name.

That is another fear also embodied in our culture today: the fear of the Church's claims about herself as well as her claims about the Lord, for her claims about Jesus and herself are universal. She claims that the mission the Spirit gives the Church when Christ calls her into the apostles' own mission comes from God's will that the whole world come to know who Jesus Christ is and come to love him and worship him in his body the Church. This claim disclaims religious pluralism as an ideal, and religious pluralism is necessary, we believe, for the protection of freedom and democracy. A claim that religious pluralism is not an ideal threatens our understanding of what is necessary to be free, and freedom is what we are most about. It is the purpose of our lives. There are powerful societal attitudes to explain why this theology of truth claims made by an apostolic Church and guaranteed by the Magisterium is not persuasive or even acceptable today.

What I have tried to explain is that the Magisterium is always at the service of apostolicity, and apostolicity is at the service of the truths given us by God in divine revelation, claims that make demands upon us. The importance of this statement in our culture comes with the recognition

that, far from objective truth being the enemy of human freedom, we can't be free if independent from the truth of things. "The truth shall make you free." It is beneath human dignity to live in falsehood, and it is dangerous to live in religious falsehood; therefore, those who want to be truly free go to the Church. That, of course, is perhaps the most culturally outrageous statement that can be made at this time; but it is true. The Church is where you go when you want to be free. **N-V**

