

Lay people too share in the teaching office of Christ

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Christian Tradition, the Bible and the Magisterium or teaching office of the Church, though necessarily linked with one another, vary greatly in terms of importance to Christian faith. To offset the danger of an undue emphasis on the third factor, a distortion of truth by no means unknown in our past, particularly in the field of morality, Vatican II made the point that 'the teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it' (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, n.10). This service to God's word has been exercised and understood in different ways down the history of the Church.

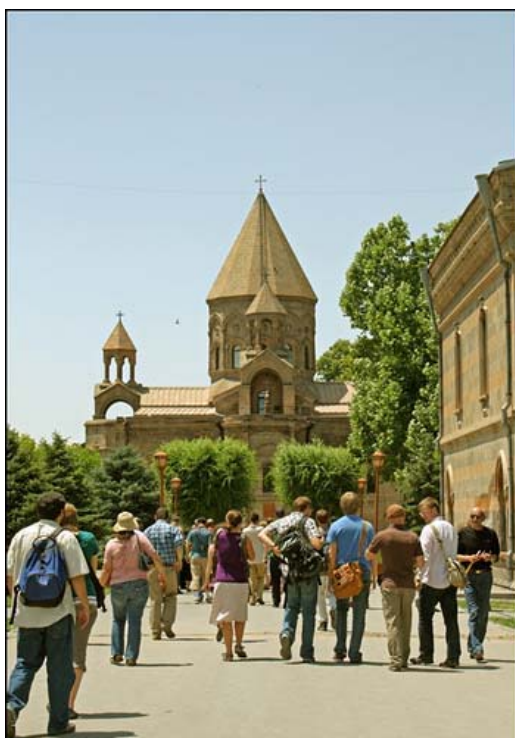


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The New Testament speaks of two kinds of teaching among believers: an *interior* teaching about everything, which comes from the anointing of the indwelling Spirit received by the believer (1John 2:27), and an *external* teaching role residing in certain members of the community (see the moral instructions of St. Paul in Romans and 1 Corinthians, and the final mission given by Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20).

This second emphasis on an external teaching role is the basis for subsequent Church practice. However, it is worth noting that in the early Church this teaching role meant catechesis, continuing instruction in the lived experience of faith. It was, as Pope Gregory the Great said, a "pastoral" office, a part of the bishop's total pastoral responsibility.

Much later on, the scientific study and teaching of the truths of faith and their realisation in moral living began to develop in the European Universities of Christendom. Thus, in the 13th century, St Thomas Aquinas was led to distinguish an *academic* magisterium, or teaching office, of the theologians from the *pastoral* magisterium of bishops of the Church.

The latter were by and large content to leave the great subtleties and intricacies of theology to the academic magisterium, except there was a threat that the ordinary faithful might be disturbed by them. Despite some friction at times between them, the two kinds of magisterium long managed a sort of peaceful co-existence.

However, after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century the power of the great European universities began to wane, until the majority of them were suppressed in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The academic magisterium was thus effectively brought to an end in the Catholic Church and its teaching role began to be absorbed by the hierarchical magisterium, particularly that of the Pope. From the 18th century onwards this led to the distinction arising between the *teaching* Church (the Pope and the bishops) and the *learning* Church, which came to be regarded as largely passive.

This distinction was taken up by the first Vatican Council (1869-70) and was given strong expression in its definition of papal infallibility in matters of faith and morals. A clear exercise of papal infallibility in the field of faith was the solemn definition by Pope Pius XII in 1950 of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven. However, contrary to the claim sometimes expressed in regard to the

teaching of Pope Paul VI about contraception in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, it is clear that the Vatican I definition has not led to any infallible papal statements on *moral* issues.

What it has resulted in is an increasing recourse by the papacy to teaching said to be an exercise of the Pope's *ordinary* or day-to-day magisterium, for example, papal statements in encyclical letters or the authoritative statements of a Vatican Congregation issued with the pope's approval. The emphasis on the authoritative nature of this ordinary magisterium of the Pope reached a climax in Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter *Humani Generis* in 1950. Any other kind of authoritative magisterium was ruled out and the danger resulted in a sort of "creeping infallibility" being attached to the papal exercise of the ordinary hierarchical magisterium.

As we know, Vatican II sought to redress the undue emphasis on the role of the papacy, initially by clarifying the functions of bishops in their dioceses and in relation to the whole Church, and then by focusing on the proper role of the laity in the Church. The resolution of many of the complex moral problems of today is no longer to be seen as the exclusive preserve of the hierarchy. Rather, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this pertains to the People of God as a whole, including of course pastors and theologians. The distinction between the teaching and learning Church was thus finally laid to rest and it was recognised that the laity, as well as the bishops, share in the priestly, ruling and prophetic (i.e., teaching) office of Christ, not only in the world but in the Church too (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, n.2). We thus return to the early Christian Tradition of the Spirit as internal teacher already mentioned.

None of this is intended as a denial of the hierarchical magisterium nor even as a claim that it may not have the final say on some issues. The point to be made is that there ought to be wider consultation of those competent in a particular sphere together with an openness and collaboration between bishops and laity on the one hand and bishops and theologians on the other.

Although the experience of much that has occurred in the Church since Vatican II might seem to indicate the contrary (the silencing of noted theologians who have endeavoured to express in contemporary terms the substance of faith and its implications for moral life are cases in point), we need to remind ourselves in this perspective of the Council's optimistic statement: 'All the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about matters in which they enjoy competence' (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.62).

In the light of this it would seem more truthful and certainly more fruitful to focus attention less on the adversarial claims of freedom as against authority and more, as Jack Mahoney says, on the question as to how prophecy, both critical and constructive, should be exercised in the Church as we listen to and profess the Word of God to the world as well as to ourselves and to each other. If we take up the challenge, disagreement within the Church will be accepted as not only inevitable but also necessary for the pilgrim People of God as they are led by God's Spirit towards "all truth" (John 16:13).