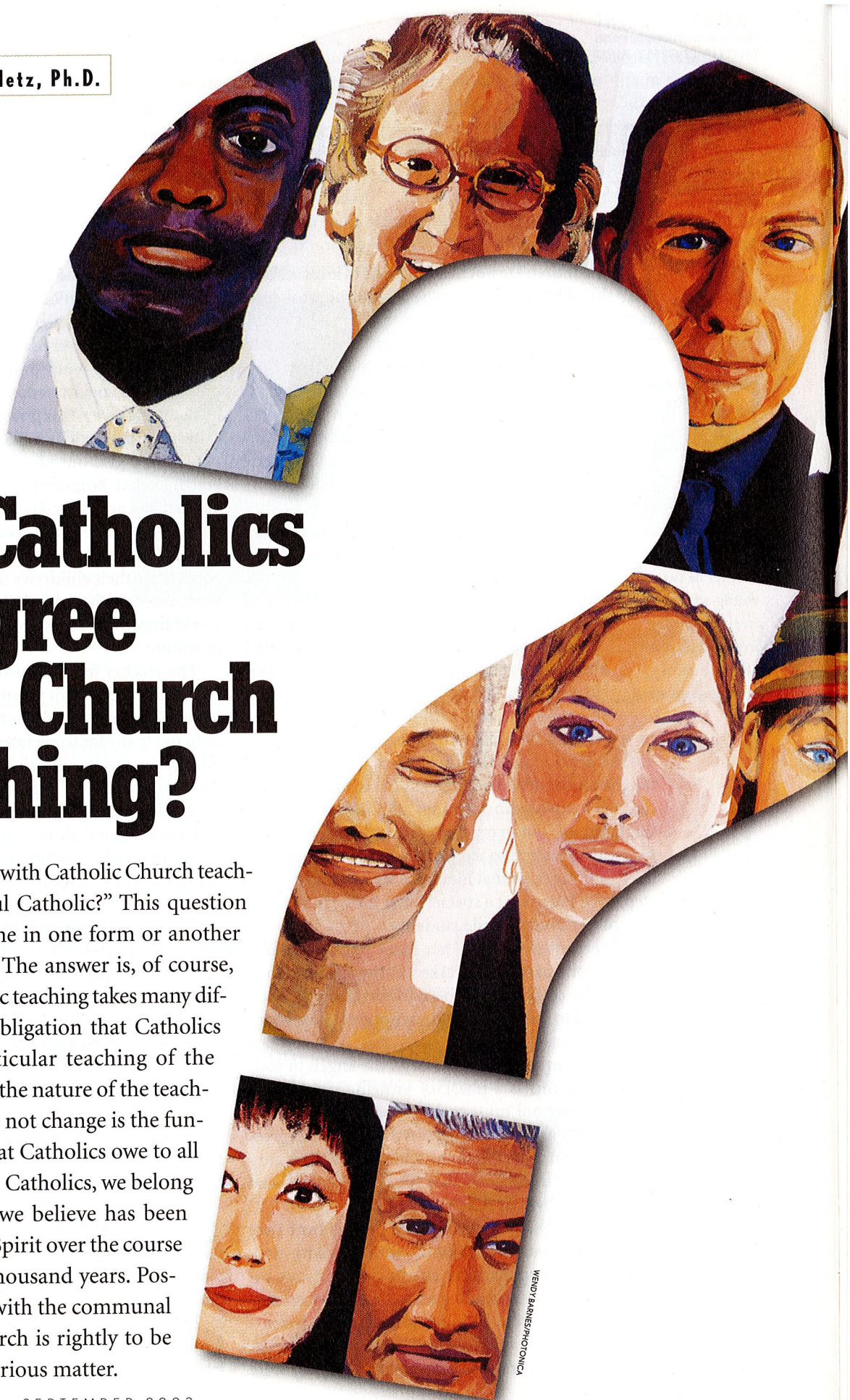


# Can Catholics Disagree With Church Teaching?

"Must I always agree with Catholic Church teaching if I am a faithful Catholic?" This question has been posed to me in one form or another innumerable times. The answer is, of course, "It depends." Catholic teaching takes many different forms. The obligation that Catholics have toward a particular teaching of the Church depends on the nature of the teaching itself. What does not change is the fundamental respect that Catholics owe to all Church teaching. As Catholics, we belong to a tradition that we believe has been guided by the Holy Spirit over the course of more than two thousand years. Possible disagreement with the communal wisdom of the Church is rightly to be considered a very serious matter.







Being Catholic means a lot more than simply subscribing to a set of beliefs. Our identity as Catholic Christians is shaped by many things. It is shaped by the biblical stories of those who first gave witness to the God of Love and by the inspiring testimony of great saints whose teachings and lives have demonstrated what identifying oneself as a disciple of Christ might mean. It is shaped by the regular celebration of Eucharist and the other distinctive practices of the Catholic tradition, such as fasting and feasting, almsgiving, visiting the sick, keeping the Sabbath, speaking out against injustice. We must remember that the central teachings of the Catholic Church themselves emerged from the distinctive practices and faith life of the community. When popes and councils gave official form to various Catholic beliefs, they did so by reflecting on the apostolic faith as it was manifested in the faith, life, and worship of the whole people of God.

Still, we must acknowledge that adherence to Church teaching is an indispensable element in maintaining a faithful Catholic identity. How we, as Catholics, are called to respond to the teaching of the Church is a more complicated matter than it might first appear.

In discerning the appropriate response to Church teaching, we must take care to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, we need to avoid the kind of "cafeteria Catholicism" which imagines that it's okay simply to choose to believe what one wishes and ignore the rest. On the other hand, we must also avoid what is sometimes called "creeping infallibility." This attitude assumes that all Church teaching has been taught with the charism of infallibility, is immune from error, and requires the same response from believers. Neither approach is adequate.

The response that Catholics are to give to Church teaching varies with the degree of authority of the teachings themselves. Think of the way parents exercise authority; their dictates, decrees, rules, and guidelines differ in significant ways. In my own household, for example, some rules are absolutely inviolable (we *never* use violence to solve disagreements), others are important but admit of exceptions (you must practice piano and do your homework before you go play), and still others take the form of parental counsel ("I think you should call your friend Ben and talk about the argument the two of you had yesterday").

In like manner, Catholic Church teaching takes many different forms, and not all Church teachings are equally authoritative. Church doctrine can be divided into four different categories: dogma, definitive doctrine, authoritative doctrine, and prudential admonitions and Church discipline. In the following paragraphs I will consider these categories and the appropriate response to each in more detail.

## **1 Church dogma**

This category includes the most authoritative of Church teachings for the simple reason that what dogmas communicate is divinely revealed. Examples of Church dogma include the teaching on the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Since dogmas belong to divine revelation and make known to us God's saving plan, the only appropriate response of a believer to dogma is what the Second Vatican Council called an "assent of faith" ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 25). Faith is our fundamental response to God's revelation to us.

So how do we address a situation in which a Catholic Christian finds that he or she is unable to offer an assent of faith to a particular dogma? The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally held that due to the importance of Church dogma, membership in the Church would be called into question by the obstinate denial of a dogma. This kind of formal rejection is called

heresy. However, formal heresy is, I believe, fairly rare. The actual stance of most Roman Catholics to at least some dogmatic teachings of the Church falls somewhere between explicit affirmation and explicit rejection.

Most of the Church's central dogmatic teachings are found in the creeds or are embedded in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. Beyond these central teachings, however, a student of the history of dogma might offer other dogmatic pronouncements defined by popes or councils to deal with historical threats to the integrity of the Faith. At one time these dogmatic statements were vital to the Church's life, though many have now faded from view—not because they are not true but because they address questions that nobody is asking today.

Many Catholic Christians, secure in their fundamental profession of faith in Jesus Christ, will never find reason to consider some of these teachings (for example, the ancient teaching that Christ possessed two wills, one human and the other divine, or the condemnation of iconoclasm). In this situation, the stance of the believer can hardly be characterized as obstinate rejection. In other situations a believer may find that he or she is experiencing doubts of one kind or another regarding a particular dogma. Such experiences are not altogether unusual in the life of faith. As long as the individual continues to pray for openness and does not obstinately deny a given teaching, that person's status in the communion of faith remains secure.

It is still necessary to affirm that within the Roman Catholic tradition, Church dogma has a special claim on the faith of its members. Explicit and obstinate rejection of a dogma of the Catholic Church would not necessarily place one outside the sphere of God's saving grace, but such a denial would place one outside the Roman Catholic communion.

## **2 Definitive doctrine**

The second category of Church teaching, definitive doctrine, includes teachings that are not themselves divinely



revealed but are necessary to safeguard and expound revelation (for example, the Council of Trent's declaration of what books make up the Bible). It is generally agreed—though it has never been formally defined as such—that due to the vital role these teachings play in protecting divine revelation, they (along with Church dogma) are taught infallibly.

Official Church documents teach that the believer is bound to “firmly accept and hold as true” those teachings proposed as definitive doctrines.

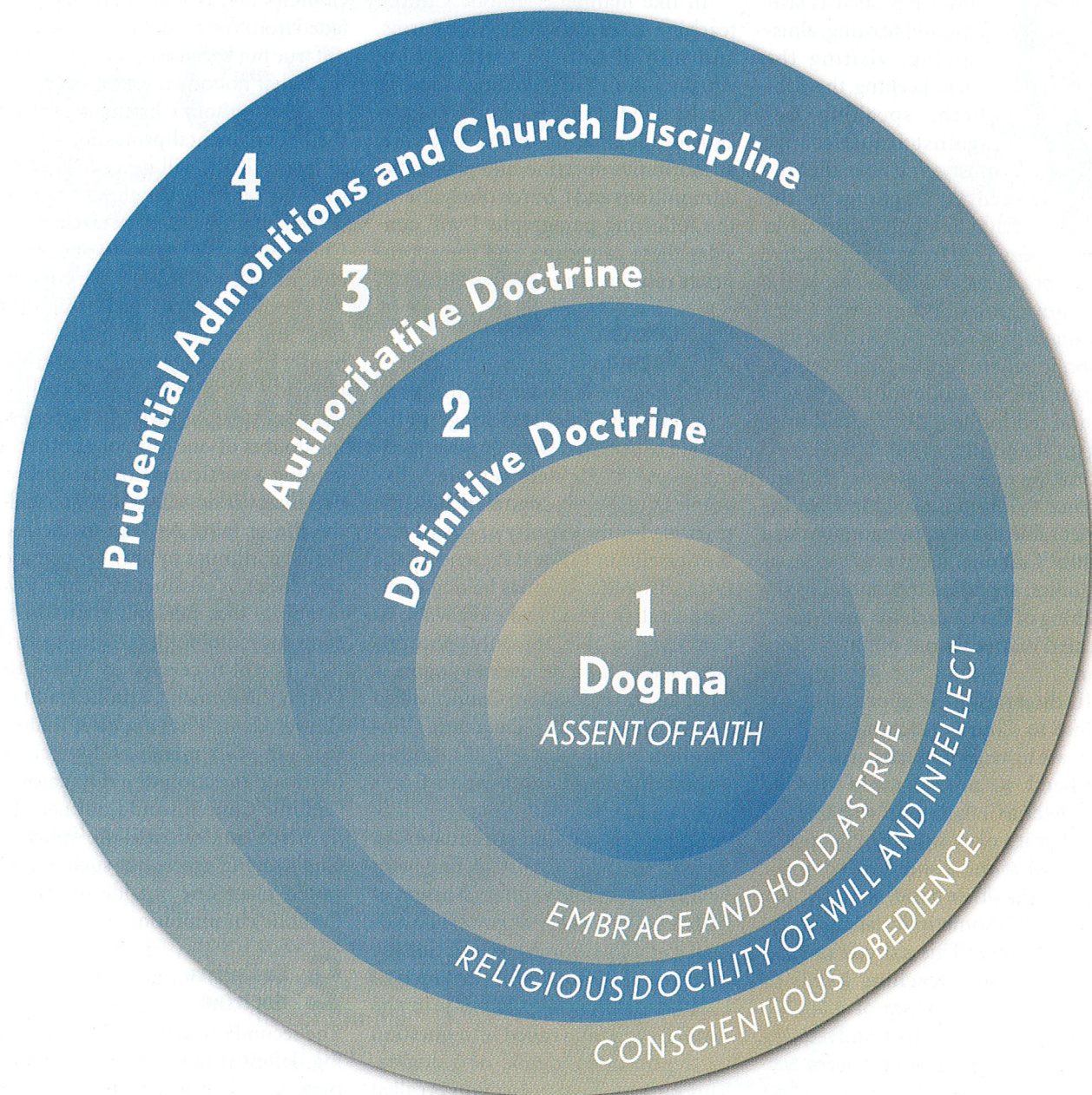
Since this category of Church teaching is relatively new in our tradition, however, some questions remain among theologians regarding what happens if someone rejects a definitive doctrine of the Church. I find no evidence in tradition that the denial of definitive doctrine has ever been viewed as heresy in the modern sense of the word. Consequently, disagreement with a definitive doctrine does not seem to demand the same consequences as the denial of a Church dogma. Provided that one's disagreement is well in-

formed and in keeping with a firm desire to be united with the Church, the withholding of an internal assent from such a teaching, although potentially a serious error against the teaching of the Church, will not place one outside the Roman Catholic communion.

### 3 Authoritative doctrine

Many of the Church's teachings, although important to the life of the Church, have not been taught with the charism of infallibility. Authoritative

## GRADATIONS OF CHURCH TEACHING AND THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSES



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doctrine includes teachings that the magisterium proposes authoritatively but not infallibly to guide the faith of believers. This third category of Church teaching is drawn from the wisdom of the Church derived from communal reflection on Scripture and tradition. Included in this category of authoritative doctrine are many specific moral teachings, such as the Church's teaching on the conditions that must be met for a war to be considered "just" or the prohibition of artificial birth control. Yet even as these teachings are proposed authoritatively, the Church's teaching office is not ready to commit itself irrevocably to them. Practically speaking, this means that, however remote, there is a possibility of error with respect to these teachings.

According to Vatican II, Catholics are expected to give "a religious docility of the will and intellect" ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 25) to authoritative doctrine. But what does this really mean? I contend that having "religious docility" toward an authoritative doctrine means that one must make a genuine effort to incorporate the given teaching into one's personal religious convictions. In so doing, the believer is attempting to give an internal assent to the teaching. Generally we will do this readily and without difficulty. Most Catholic Christians assent to the teachings of the Church, even where infallibility is not invoked. Often they accept a certain teaching because they sense its intuitive "rightness" or because they trust in the general authority of the Church's teaching office.

On occasion, however, a believer may face a particular teaching that, at least at first glance, seems problematic. Now what happens? In the language of Vatican II, what does "religious docility" demand in such a situation? I would propose three things, which are adapted from Francis Sullivan's helpful treatment of the dynamics of internal assent in *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Church*.

First, if an individual possesses a religiously "docile" attitude toward a difficult teaching, that person will be

**Some questions remain among theologians regarding what happens if someone rejects a definitive doctrine of the Church.**



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willing to engage in further study of the issue. Perhaps his or her questions are the consequence of poor or inadequate catechesis. Second, if the teaching in question regards matters of morality (for example, cohabitation before marriage or use of artificial contraception), the individual ought to engage in an examination of conscience. This means asking some difficult questions: *Am I struggling with this teaching because I cannot discover in it the will of God, or is it because this teaching, if true, would demand some real conversion?* Perhaps some basic aspect of the individual's present lifestyle would have to change (for example, a couple might have to stop living together). Third, the individual must consider whether his or her difficulties lie not with a particular teaching but with a general rejection of the very idea of a Church teaching office. To be a faithful Catholic is to accept the authority of the Church's teaching office, even if one may have some objections about how that office is structured and exercised in practice.

This is a fairly demanding regimen,

as it ought to be if one is even going to consider departing from accepted Church teaching. However, if a person has difficulties with a particular authoritative doctrine but has fulfilled these three steps and still cannot give an internal assent to that teaching, then that person has done all the Church can ask of him or her. That individual's inability to give an internal assent to this teaching does not in any way separate him or her from the Roman Catholic communion.

#### **4 Prudential admonitions and Church discipline**

The fourth and final category of Church teaching includes any teachings that, technically, fall short of formal doctrine. A good example is found in Catholic moral teaching. The American bishops, in their pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace," distinguished between binding moral principles and concrete moral applications, about which Catholics can disagree in good faith. For example, the criteria for *what determines* a "just war" belong to accepted Church teaching. However,



the determination of when these criteria *have been met* in a particular instance is a judgment about which Catholics can differ. They must respect the prudential judgments of the pope and bishops on such matters, but they may freely come to a different judgment regarding the application of a particular moral principle.

Particular instances of Church discipline or law are also included in this fourth category. For example, the requirement of celibacy for diocesan

priests is a matter of Church discipline, not Church doctrine. Generally, we are called to accept the discipline of the Church as the "here and now" way in which the Church seeks to organize its concrete life. One can do so, moreover, even while questioning some of these disciplinary practices. To take an example from the civil order, I can think the speed limit for the streets in my neighborhood is too low but still obey the law. In the life of the Church, I can disagree with some aspect of the laws

of fasting and abstinence but still obey them.

However, matters are not always so simple. We must remember that Church law exists not for its own sake but to maintain Church order, assist individual members in the call to holiness, and further the mission of the Church. When the application of the law in a given instance does not demonstrably further these goals, it may yield to alternative actions that do further these goals.

Sometimes one is called to exercise the virtue of *epikeia*, which seeks what might be called "the spirit of the law." According to *HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, the practice of *epikeia* suggests that a law need not be obeyed if "its observance would be detrimental to the common good or the good of individuals." Examples of such an instance might include attending Mass on a Sunday or holy day even though one is ill, thereby endangering the health and welfare of others, or fasting in a manner that endangers one's own health and welfare.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is always greater than the sum total of the individual propositions and teachings to which we can give an assent. It is natural that our individual convictions will vary in the intensity of our commitment. Even occasional struggle with the demands of the gospel and its formulation in Church teaching is normal. Respectful disagreement with certain Church teachings may be permissible, but it should always be accompanied by a sound knowledge of the substance and authority of Church teaching and, above all, a humble, prayerful spirit open to correction and growth. We live in challenging times, and only a mature, informed, yet humble faith will be able to meet the challenges of our age. ■

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