

The truth that sets us free and makes us one

Previously we looked at Vatican II's teaching that by Christ's will only the Church he established, the Catholic Church, is gifted with the fullness of the means of salvation, including infallibility in teaching on faith and morals. Today we look at how this resonates with key Gospel values of freedom and unity, and with truly being a humble and servant Church.

Jesus tells us: 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' (*Jn* 8:32) People sometimes resist Church teachings because they set *freedom* and *truth* in opposition: they fear they will be 'boxed in' by having to accept Catholic dogmas. Now, if the claims of the Catholic Church to divine guidance were false, then any of her teachings that were false would indeed be a limitation on human beings. But since (as faith assures us and reason confirms) her claims are in fact valid, then her dogmas, being infallibly true, no more restrict our freedom than do (for example) established truths of science.

When we know the truth about reality, we're walking in the light and are free to travel safely where we will, with the vista before us. In particular, knowing the truth about the moral law helps free us from the slavery of sin, free to be the people that God created us to be. But without the truth we're stumbling in the dark, and our supposed 'freedom' might lead us over a cliff.

Truth is also a primary force for *unity*. To the extent that we know divine truth we're brought into deeper harmony with God and with reality itself – and thus also with other people, precisely insofar as they too have entered that unity, by believing the same truth. So *in itself*, proclaiming genuine divine truth can never be considered as 'divisive'.

Even so, things like our manner or choice of words can sometimes be counterproductive. To have its full unifying effect, God's truth should be presented in the most loving and attractive way possible, so as actually to be accepted by the hearer. Also, there is a right time for everything. For example, when we first share our faith with someone, normally we don't lead with the most confronting teachings but start with points of agreement and engagement. The soil needs to be tilled before it can fruitfully accept the seed. False assumptions can distort the way the hearer perceives the message, so these might need to be gradually cleared away.

But when we do make genuine connection with the other person we truly build unity. Central to God's purpose in planting his Church in the world was to plant the seed of the reunion of humanity, divided by sin. So it is of the Church's essence to be visibly one and unique. If God had established several different 'true religions', each with their own partial truths, we would not be reunited in one family of faith. To believe then that God has established 'one true Church', the one Body of the one Christ, is in no way arrogant. It is his doing, not ours, and goes hand in hand with the human race being one family, amidst all its diversity.

The accusation of 'arrogance' is sometimes made specifically against the Church's claim of *infallibility*. True, if infallibility was presumed to derive from the human wisdom of this or that pope or bishop, that would be arrogance - perhaps a manifestation of the vice of clericalism, with clerics putting their own thoughts *in place of* Christ rather than *at his service*, transparent to him and his holy Bride, the Church.

In reality, no merely human wisdom can claim infallibility or demand our faith. (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 150) The infallibility of Church teachings depends entirely on the promises of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So no arrogance is involved – real arrogance would be to reject those divinely-guaranteed teachings in the name of our own supposed ‘insights’, or to place the divinely-revealed religion on the same level as the human strivings towards the divine, which are found in man-made religions.

Our full acceptance of the truth that God gives us through his Church’s infallible teachings, far from implying any arrogance, is actually a basic manifestation of gospel humility. As the First Vatican Council taught: ‘Since man is wholly dependent on God as his Creator and Lord, and since created reason is completely subject to uncreated truth, we are bound by faith to give full obedience of intellect and will to God who reveals.’ (Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* (DS 3008))

All this relates also to the truth that the Church must, like Christ, be *Servant*. Vatican II, in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, both reaffirmed the full traditional teaching on the authority of the divinely-instituted hierarchy, yet first laid down the broader context of the Church as People of God. In Christ’s plan, the hierarchy is both essential to the Church, yet entirely *at the service of the holiness of God’s People*. This is what is meant by the St John Paul II’s affirmation that the Marian aspect of the Church – her vocation to holiness in the image of Our Lady – is prior to the Petrine aspect, the hierarchical authority founded on Peter. (Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women *Mulieris Dignitatem* fn. 55)

So while we must all be fully subject to the due authority of Pope and Bishops, that very authority in all its divine power is directed towards the sanctification of all the baptised. Thus we have the Pope’s traditional title, ‘Servant of the servants of God.’ And, when members of the hierarchy fail to teach Christ’s liberating message in clarity and fullness, or to guide the faithful to holiness by firm governance, they also fail in their call to truly serve God’s People.

Thus St Paul VI taught that ‘it is an outstanding manifestation of charity toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ.’ (*Humanae Vitae* 29) And Pope Francis gives this caution: ‘Each period of history can find this or that point of faith easier or harder to accept: hence the need for vigilance in ensuring that the deposit of faith is passed on in its entirety and that all aspects of the profession of faith are duly emphasised.’ (*Lumen Fidei* 48)

A Church that was not gifted with doctrinal infallibility would be crippled in her ability to be a *Servant Church*, since her teachers would be offering their fallible personal opinions about what God’s truth was, and seeking a following for these – ultimately, a following for themselves as gurus. Rather, the truly humble and servant Church offers to all, by her Spirit-guided teachings, the confident certainty of Christ’s truth, that sets us free and makes us one.