Some Magisterial Views on the Processes of Magisterial Moral Authority
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Pope John XXIII, from his 1962 Opening Address of Vatican II:

Often errors vanish as quickly as they rise, like fog before the sun. The church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations.

Pope Paul VI stating why he was not ready (in 1966) to make his final statement in regards to artificial contraception (AAS 58 [1966]: 219).

The magisterium of the Church, cannot propose moral norms until it is certain of interpreting the will of God. And to reach this certainty the Church is not dispensed from research and from examining the many questions proposed for her consideration from every part of the world. This is at times a long and not an easy task.


Opposition is not inconsistent with solidarity. The one who voices his opposition to the general or particular rules or regulations of the community does not thereby reject his membership; he does not withdraw his readiness to act and to work for the common good.


Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there still stands one’s own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, necessary even again the requirements of ecclesiastical authority. This emphasis on the individual, whose conscience confronts him with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official Church, also establishes a principle in opposition to increasing totalitarianism.

Criticism of papal declarations will be possible and necessary to the degree that they do not correspond with Scripture and the Creed, that is, with the belief of the Church. Where there is neither unanimity in the Church nor clear testimony of the sources, then no binding decision is possible; if one is formally made, then its preconditions are lacking, and therefore the question of its legitimacy must be raised.

Nijmegan Declaration 1968 (co-signed by Joseph Ratzinger):

"Any form of inquisition, however subtle, not only harms the development of sound theology, it causes irreparable damage to the credibility of the church as a community in the modern world."


In the process of assimilating what is really rational and rejecting what only seems to be rational, the whole Church has to play a part. This process cannot be carried out in every detail by an isolated Magisterium, with oracular infallibility. The life and suffering of Christians who profess their faith in the midst of their times has just as important a part to play as the thinking and questioning of the learned, which would have a very hollow ring without the backing of Christian existence, which learns to discern spirits in the travail of everyday life.

Bishop Theodore Bacani (Philippines) Column in Today 18 July 2002

For, in fact, the Second Vatican Council and the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines declared that the secular realm is the specific responsibility of laypeople. Although the pastors (bishops) are the authority on moral principles, they are not necessarily the best authority when it comes to assessing concrete political situations and prescribing courses of action. Assessing concrete political situations falls under the competence of the lay faithful. And quite often too, choosing a course of action based on Catholic moral principles will fall under their field of competence.


[The specific role of the theologians] calls them to explore the implications of Church teach, to investigate it, to refine it, to probe it, to push back its horizons. If not all Church teaching is guaranteed to be infallible, then some of it could be fallible, reformable, conceivably even incorrect. It is part of the theologian's responsibility to speak to Church teaching which he or she conscientiously believes to be inexact or erroneous.
Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B. (Milwaukee) in his talk during the meeting of the U.S. Bishops with John Paul II in Los Angeles on 9/16/87 [Quoted in National Catholic Reporter, 25 September 1987]:

The faithful are more inclined to look at the intrinsic worth of an argument proposed by the teachers in the church than to accept it on the basis of the authority itself. Since so often that teaching touches areas where many of the faithful have professional competency (from medical-moral issues to complex economic ones, for example), they wish to be able to contribute through their own professional skills to solving the issues. This demands a new kind of collaboration and a wider range of consultation on the part of the teaching office of the church. Before their peers, Catholic intellectuals are also more sensitive to the credibility of the church if such competency is not maintained. ... An authoritarian style is counterproductive, and such authority for the most part then becomes ignored. ... There are no words to explain so much pain on the part of so many competent women today who feel they are second-class citizens in a church they love. That pain turns easily to anger and is often shared and transmitted to the younger generation of men and women. Women do not want to be treated as stereotypes of sexual inferiority, but want to be seen as necessary to the full life of a church that teaches and shows by example the co-discipleship of the sexes as instruments of God's kingdom. They seek a church where the gifts of women are equally accepted and appreciated. Many of them do not yet see the church imaging such a co-discipleship, but fear that it is still one of male superiority and dominance.

Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. from his Survival of Dogma (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971)

[The theologian’s] task is not simply to repeat what the official magisterium has already said, or even to expound and defend what has already become official teaching, but even more importantly, to discover what has not been taught.

“The Church, since the New Testament times (inclusively), has been an organization of weak and sinful men. At no time in history have Christians been free from fear, anxiety, resentment. Those in authority are naturally inclined to govern in a way that increases the docility of the faithful, even in this means suppressing certain facts that might raise embarrassing questions. Often the faithful themselves like to attribute magical powers to their leaders, partly in order to stimulate their corporate pride in the organization and partly to relieve themselves of responsibility for their own religious positions.” p. 181.

“The divine truth is not taught by the Church in divine form, but in a human form, and thus it always difficult to draw the line between what is a matter of Christian faith and what is to be set aside as a human perversion. The more precious the truth, and the more esteemed it is in the community, the more the heirs of the tradition are tempted to indulge in pride, fanaticism, and calumny.” pp. 181-182.

“I would also like to say that the Pope is not an oracle, he is infallible on the rarest of occasions…”