The Art of Magisterium: a New Way of Making Sense of the Faith

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The Social Construction of Ecclesial Reality

- Our ways of perceiving and understanding social entities give rise to practices and wider worldviews that can come to dominate the actual life of that social entity and the people in it. The Church can be the negative side of this story. The theological explanations of the Church we choose to emphasize and privilege, it is also subordinated to a wider culture.

- Yet, again, there have been especially influential ways of understanding and practicing magisterium that have caused discord and division, which have also contributed to obstacles being placed in the way of the furtherance of the gospel mission and, judged on the whole, have not served the life of the church in those times well.

- Differing ways of understanding magisterium impact ecclesial being in differing ways and to differing degrees. In recent decades, the church went through a period of its long story where the understanding and exercise of magisterium was a veritable battleground. In the present pontificate, with reform and pastoral priorities, as well as social justice coming to the fore of pastoral priorities, and with the church finally being told to practice what it preaches both from within and without, this is an important moment to explore how we might look at magisterium in a very different way.

The Conversion of Magisterium: New Horizons for the Church

- Change the social imaginary and we change the church.
- It begins when we look at things differently – microwaves – and we perceive magisterium in a different way.
- A way more resonant with earlier times in the church.
- More resonant with the witness and example offered by the gospel itself.
- Truly authoritative teaching is that which is existentially liberating and empowering.
- A call to return to being a ‘teaching church that learns’.
- A church that learns especially from its own failings and mistakes.

Part I: The Magisterial Climate of Post-Vatican II Times - Discerning a problem....

- Time, Space and Magisterium:
  - Pope Francis tells us that ‘Memory is a dimension of our faith...’. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, §13.
  - We need a Long-Range Perspective on Teaching with Authority
  - Magisterium has History

- If there are things which should not be questioned, there are also things that must be questioned:('-...-...-
  - Yves Congar, Theologian, the Faithful and the Faith, Doctrine and Life 31 (1981), 588-64 el 591

Three important keys to understanding church authority:

- Rather than a collective noun, Magisterium, like tradition itself, should be understood more as a process, a good habit, a virtuous undertaking: ‘an art form’.....
- Lose the definite article: ‘before the nineteenth century it never meant precisely what we call the magisterium’ - Yves Congar
- A process that must, by necessity, involve the wider church as opposed to a restricted group of officeholders in particular positions of authority.
- Such authority itself only comes from the wider church and is held by such officeholders in trust

Clarifications... A Question of What not Whom

- The subject of magisterium is the ‘who’, the object of magisterium being the ‘what’, and the art of magisterium the ‘how’.
- This involves a multitude of actors, including all the People of God – sensus fidelium

- A working definition...

- Magisterium is first and foremost about that process of trying to discern, make sense of, explain anew for differing times and contexts and to work out the most appropriate responses to (again in differing times and places) the gracious revelation of the God of love.

Lessons for Ecclesiology from the Catholic Social Tradition

- The Art of Magisterium: Principles for Discerning an Alternative Understanding and Exercise of Magisterium for Our Times
- These times call for magisterium to move in the direction of a virtuous as opposed to a vicious (literally ‘vice-like’) circle.
- Drawing on resources of Catholic tradition in the areas of social teaching, moral theology, and canon law.
- Teaching authority emerges out of that tradition and stands in direct relation to it.
- Collective Witness: Embracing Ecclesial Pluralism in Magisteria – Need for Ecumenical Discernment and Practice in Magisterium
- Rapturism is recognized as valid across Christian churches;
- Sharing in Christ’s threelfold office comes about through baptism: it follows that such a sharing equally has ecclesial implications.
- Internal Roman Catholic debates on magisterium therefore have further ecclesial implications and vice-versa – ecclesial discourse and practice in relation to doctrinal teaching authority can offer much to internal divisions and disputes within Roman Catholicism.

- Principles of...
- Collegiality
- Co-responsibility
- Subsidiarity
- Participation

- The Virtue of Disent
- What is often termed dissent might be simply the litmus test of the true authoritative status of popular teaching interpretations
- “Loyal dissent” is an ecclesial virtue that steers between two extremes
- Recognizing the provisionality of much church teaching because of the need to engage in various processes of dialogue and discernment and to understand that the shared journey toward the truth.
- Disent can be a necessary, positive, and, indeed, loyal stance to adopt in relation to certain church authorities and teachings. It is, then, part of tradition itself.
- Reception must remain a fundamental part of the process of magisterium.

- Charles E. Curran:
  - Catholic social teaching offers important lessons and models for Catholic ecclesiology
  - Subordination of authority to justice and truth

Who or What is Magisterium? The Subject-Object Debate

- The Church’s moral and social teaching cannot be understood apart from its processual nature and processes of authority and canon law
- The story and teachings of the church from the New Covenant onward make it clear that the values, virtues and principles by which Christians live and form communities must relate to every aspect of how they live and shape and constitute these communities

- Normative understanding and exercise of magisterium prevalent across much of church in recent decades has been one that...overreaches: it forces people to align themselves at the respective opposite ends of the ecclesial spectrum on a whole range of issues

- Yet...the modern and contemporary conceptions of magisterium are, in themselves, ways of making the church’s social teaching hypocritical.
- They are, albeit limited and problematic.
- Groundwork for a Moral Theological Analysis of Magisterium
  - Systemic Issues for Moral Analysis: Institutional morality
  - Ethical analysis of authority, governance and accountability
  - Exploring Ecclesial Vices and Ecclesial Virtues

- John L. McKenzie SJ: “The Catholic Church is never further from Christian doctrine and the gospel than when it exercises its magisterium”