



Who's Your Teacher?

by Leon Suprenant



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Every year during Holy Week, my family puts out an Easter display, which, like the more familiar Nativity scenes, provides a tangible image of the events of the particular liturgical season. After the Easter Vigil, we roll the rock away from the opening of the tomb and remove the resurrected Jesus.

This past Easter morning, I asked my four-year-old son, Samuel, whether he had checked out Jesus' tomb. He ran downstairs to investigate, much like Peter and John did on the first Easter morning. I was so pleased; everything was going as planned.

However, Samuel soon came back and reported, "He wasn't in there, so I put Him back in." (Pause for chuckling.) "Where did you find Jesus?" I asked, to which he innocently replied, "Over by the television."

Obviously, my wife and I have much more work to do with Samuel and our other children to ensure that they understand the central mysteries of our faith. Like Samuel with the Easter scene, not every lesson is a smashing success, but we realize that we cannot lose heart, because teaching our children the ABCs of the faith is a crucially important responsibility. The Church tells us, after all, that because we are parents, we necessarily are teachers.

Going to the Source

"Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ" (Mt. 23:10). This is from the same

discourse in which Jesus says, "Call no man on earth your father" (Mt. 23:9). Does Jesus really mean that we should avoid using these titles? Of course not. After all, these terms continued to be used by Christ's followers in the New Testament after this discourse, and they have been continuously used throughout the history of the Church.

One incident in St. John's Gospel sheds particular light on the nature of Christ's teaching. On this occasion, the Jews marveled at Our Lord's teaching and asked, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" Jesus responded by saying, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (Jn. 7:15–16). Jesus' religious teaching was authentic because it came from His Father. It was a question of divine authority, not mere human learning or ingenuity, no matter how clever or insightful.

That same principle applies to all of us. We're authentic teachers (or, more technically, "catechists") to the extent we communicate the person and teachings of Christ rather than our own opinions or agendas. While we rightly adjust the way we communicate the teaching depending on age, culture, and other variables, Christ is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8), and His teachings are true in every age. Christ commissioned the Apostles—and all of us—to pass on His teachings (see Mt. 28:19–20).

“Magisterium” Is Not a Dirty Word

The perennial mission of CUF is “to support, defend, and advance the efforts of the teaching Church.” By “teaching Church” there certainly is some reference to the Church’s mission to “go and make disciples,” in which all the faithful participate. And surely a particular hallmark of the CUF apostolate is our unswerving fidelity to the Holy Father, who is Christ the Teacher’s vicar on earth for the entire Church (Mt. 16:18–20). We can’t be of service to the teaching Church if we are not one in mind and heart with the successor of St. Peter.

Yet there is a third sense of “teaching Church,” namely, the Church’s magisterium or official teaching office, which alone has “the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10). This refers to the special gift of the Holy Spirit given to the Apostles and their successors to ensure that no “break” occurs in the teaching chain. In other words, Jesus entrusts what He received from the Father to the Church, so that when the Church teaches, God Himself is teaching (cf. Lk. 10:16).

At times this can be a tricky proposition, because the Holy Spirit does not preserve Church leaders from sin or mistakes in judgment, nor does He prevent individual Church leaders (other than the Pope himself) from teaching error. While we must take personal responsibility for our own faith commitment, plainly the “efforts of the teaching Church” on the local level are to a large extent dependent—for good and for ill—on the fidelity of our pastors.

But there’s another, more subtle challenge we face today when it comes to serving the “teaching Church.” “Magisterium” comes from the Latin word “*magister*,” which simply means “teacher.” However, for many people the term has negative, perhaps very negative, connotations. If one looks up “magisterial” in the dictionary, one finds secondary meanings such as “dictatorial,” “imposing one’s will,” “overbearing,” and “pompous,” among others. These negative connotations sometimes carry over into the life of the Church.

As we know, the magisterium is hardly a dictatorship. In fact, Vatican II reminds us that the magisterium “is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10). But let’s face it: In today’s “dictatorship of relativism,” as Pope Benedict

has described the present climate, the assertion of objective, revealed truth as represented by the magisterium is an affront and a stumbling block. We are taught to choose and create our own truth, particularly in moral areas in which our inclinations and desires might clash with “magisterial” teaching.

For ourselves, we accept the teachings of the magisterium with joyful docility. In doing so, we are not acting out of compulsion or fear or mindless credulity. Rather, faithful Catholics from one generation to the next must make their own the confession of faith of St. Peter, who said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life” (Jn. 6:68). Thanks be to God, these words are spoken to each one of us through the ministry of the Church.

Doctors in the House

Through the centuries, the Church has identified “doctors” of the Church—saints who have especially distinguished themselves as outstanding teachers of the faith. This issue of *Lay Witness* is devoted to the 33 men and women who have received this special recognition.

Each Doctor of the Church, from St. Thomas Aquinas to St. Thérèse, put his or her unique gifts at the service of the Church, in keeping with the particular needs of their time. The unifying feature of these diverse saints was their clear sense that their teaching was not their own (cf. Jn. 7:16). Rather, they relentlessly helped their contemporaries to mine the depths of our Christian faith. Unlike the perennial heresy of the gnostics, with their secret, esoteric knowledge available only to a few, the Doctors of the Church belong to all of us, helping all men and women come to the fullness of Christ.

During this time of renewal, of the “new evangelization,” we need a renewed commitment to the teaching Church’s catechetical mission. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes, “Periods of renewal in the Church are also intense moments of catechesis. . . . St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, and many other Fathers wrote catechetical works that remain models for us” (no. 8). Not surprisingly, all four of the great catechists mentioned by name in this quote are Doctors of the Church.

With hearts open to the words of everlasting life, and with the Doctors of the Church as sure guides, may we redouble our commitment “to support, defend, and advance the efforts of the teaching Church.”

FROM OUR FOUNDER

It’s very hard—it requires a rare degree of tact and humility—to offer correction with justice and sweetness, that is, in such a way as to be effective. It needed only Simon Peter, with a little sword, to cut off the ear of Malchus; it needed the power of God to restore it.



H. Lyman Stebbins

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