



Living a Catholic Life No. 10 *Moral Authority*

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between Knights of Columbus councils, parishes, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

In *Veritatis splendor* (VS), Pope St. John Paul II summarizes the Church’s self-understanding of the role of the Magisterium in Christian moral life, in particular, the assent due to magisterial moral teachings and the question of their infallibility. The Pope reminds us that it is “evident from the *living Tradition*” that this more-than-human authority to interpret the word of God has been entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and their successors: “The Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that she is and all that she believes. This Tradition, which comes from the Apostles, progresses within the Church under the assistance of the Holy Spirit” (VS, n. 27, citing Vatican II, *Dei verbum*, n. 89, emphasis original).

Moreover, he insists, there is an intimate and inseparable unity between faith and morality inasmuch as the Christian faith gives rise to a “consistent life commitment.” Therefore, “no damage must be done to the *harmony between faith and life*: the unity of the Church is damaged not only by Christians who reject or distort the truths of faith but also by those who disregard the moral obligations to which they are called by the Gospel” (VS, n. 26, emphasis original).

The Catholic tradition has always recognized in the personal judgment of conscience the “proximate norm of personal morality” (VS, n. 60). Its dignity consists in its capacity to disclose the *truth* about moral good or evil in the light of God’s eternal law, the universal and objective norm of morality. Persons eager to make true moral judgments will, of course, do all they can to form their consciences well. They will search for the truth and seek to find it from sources where it is most likely to be found. Thus, a Catholic, aware that the Church is the “pillar and bulwark of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), will be ready to accept the moral teachings of the Magisterium “in forming their consciences” (Vatican II, *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 14).

John Paul II adds the following very significant point: “It follows that the authority of the Church, when she pronounces on moral questions, in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. This is so not only because freedom of conscience is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom ‘in’ the truth, but also because *the Magisterium does not bring to the Christian conscience truths which are extraneous to it; rather it brings to light the truths which it ought already to possess, developing them from the starting point of the primordial act of faith*” (VS, n. 64, emphasis added).

The Magisterium can propose truths of faith *and* of morals in two ways: infallibly and irreformably, or authoritatively but not irreformably. Truths infallibly proposed by the Magisterium require the assent of faith, whereas truths authoritatively but not irreformably proposed require a “ready and respectful allegiance of mind” and the “loyal submission of the will and intellect” (see Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, n. 25).

The Magisterium can propose teachings *infallibly* in two distinct ways. The first is by an extraordinary exercise of its authority through the solemn definitions of ecumenical councils and *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the Roman Pontiff. The second is through the ordinary, day-to-day exercise of the Magisterium when certain conditions are verified: “Although the bishops, taken individually, do not enjoy the privilege of infallibility, they do, however, *proclaim the doctrine of Christ infallibly* on the following conditions: namely, when, even though dispersed throughout the entire world but preserving for all that among themselves and with Peter’s successor the bond of communion, in their authoritative teaching concerning matters of faith *or morals*, they are in agreement that a particular teaching is to be held definitively and absolutely. This is still more clearly the case when [they are] assembled in ecumenical council.” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 25, emphasis added).

Although some theologians today claim that the Magisterium *cannot infallibly* propose specific moral norms (e.g., one ought never intentionally to kill innocent human beings; one ought never to have sex outside of marriage), this claim is repudiated by the Magisterium itself. Moreover, it was the common understanding of all Catholic theologians prior to Vatican II that the core of Catholic moral teaching, as set forth in its understanding of the precepts of the Decalogue, had been infallibly taught by the Magisterium in its ordinary, day-to-day teaching. Vatican II confirmed this common understanding.

Moral teaching proposed authoritatively but not irreformably by the Magisterium requires from all Catholics a loyal submission of will and intellect. While it may be permissible, under specific conditions, to raise questions about these teachings and to *suspend* intellectual assent from them—and the Magisterium acknowledges this—it is never right for a Catholic to *dissent from* these teachings, to declare that they are erroneous and that a Catholic is at liberty to set them aside and act contrary to them. This is to damage the unity of the Church and arrogantly to usurp the authority given by Christ to the Magisterium.