

“BUT DO I HAVE TO...?” MY ‘TWO CENTS’ FOR CLARITY

Even though I could not argue with the logic of the advice, it seemed like a cop out. My siblings counseled me that when I arrived at the final portion of my Driver’s License Exam (the parallel Parking)—“Just turn the car off and place the keys on the dashboard. Sure, they’ll deduct six points, but you will avoid the ‘accident,’ which equals an automatic failure. All that matters is that you pass.” I rejected the advice, avoided the cones, and proudly walked away with my first ticket to freedom! “All that matters is that you pass.” Hmmn, let’s break down that logic. “Do I have to believe that?” “I only have to skip meat during Lent, right?” “Do I fast an hour before Mass, or an hour before Communion?” Yes, in theory I understand all these questions, but as we grow in our faith, less and less do we desire the **bare minimum**. We want the fullness of the Catholic experience. Why would we settle for “just getting by” in life?

The role of theologians in the Church is to penetrate the faith more fully, analyzing it from all angles. They help us go beyond the *bare minimum*, truly expounding more fully the mysteries of faith. They study it completely with a requisite freedom consistent with their role and put forward their findings. A faithful Catholic theologian does so fully mindful of the proper role of the theologian vis-à-vis the Magisterium, a role that does not preclude critical reflection and even critique of doctrine. But this reflection is always subject to the final judgment of the Church and must never be employed as a parallel Magisterium. Even a brilliant theologian such as **Bl. John Henry Newman** expressed his serious reservations about the advisability of issuing a definition of papal infallibility; but after the Council Fathers at Vatican I spoke, he gave his full assent. As the famed theologian Avery Dulles, S.J. wrote of Newman: “When the dogma was defined in 1870, he initially hesitated as to whether it was binding on Catholics. Soon, however, he overcame his doubts and became a leading apologist for the definition.” Cardinal Newman never stopped learning about the faith.

Perhaps because the prevalence of dissent appeared to be growing, in 1998 **Pope John Paul II** issued a document entitled *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (“To Protect the Faith”), in which specific levels of teaching were more clearly delineated. It included corresponding additions to Canon Law containing appropriate canonical sanctions where necessary. Of more interest perhaps to faithful laity was the accompanying Commentary on the expanded norms of Canon Law issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Here one could see specific examples that would apply to each of the new norms. I recall my own seminary days, thinking that while it is fine and good to speak of varying levels of Church teaching, it always appeared to me to lack specificity—or maybe I was too dull to figure it out! This document was extremely helpful in this regard. In a future column I’ll give examples in hopes of bringing greater clarity with respect to some key issues about which people ask.

Some members of the Christian faithful who exercise public roles in the Church are asked to make a profession of Faith. This includes all priests who exercise pastoral ministry and all theologians who teach theology in a Catholic Seminary. I found this Profession to be a profound exercise of my priesthood, a powerful reminder that each priest teaches, not in his own name, but in the name of the Church. The profession clearly contains the declaration of assent to the teachings of the Church in their varying levels. It is best to think of the levels, not as “more” or “less” important, but rather as concentric circles identifying those teachings closest to the core of the Catholic Faith, acknowledging that some are more central than others.

The first level includes (1) truths that require *the assent of theological faith* (usually called dogmas), meaning they must be believed with divine and Catholic faith. Then there are (2) truths to which it is required to give *firm and definitive assent*. This refers to doctrines that are necessarily connected to divine revelation, even if not divinely revealed themselves. Finally, we can speak of (3) truths that require *religious submission of will and intellect*. These refer to ordinary teachings on faith and morals. Though not definitive, nevertheless they represent the Church’s teaching. With respect to the first two types of teaching, there is no difference with respect to the full character of the assent owed to the teachings. Instead, the first calls upon the supernatural virtue of Faith, relying on the authority of the Word of God itself, while the second requires an assent based upon faith in the Holy Spirit’s assistance to the Magisterium and on our belief that the Church can indeed make infallible declarations.

Do you recall the once prevalent bumper stickers– “Question Authority?” How often I wanted to drive up in the next lane, roll down my window while gently tooting my horn to gain their attention and ask– “Says who?” “Who are you to say that I should question authority?” In truth, issues of authority are hardly reserved for teenagers and their parents arguing over curfew times. It is part and parcel of our lives in many respects, and we ought to look carefully at our attitudes towards authority, even in the Church. I think most people prefer clarity where possible. Why settle for the bare minimum? It is not about what we **must** believe, but rather seeking to know and love Jesus more fully, authentically and completely.

- The moment when the **Atlanta Falcons** scored to go ahead of **New England Patriots** 28-3, I thought to myself– “Turn off the television, say your prayers and go to bed early. It was a long weekend.” I always listen to that voice inside– this time, I probably should have ignored it! Congratulations to the Patriots!
- “Do not let yourself be upset by those who seem to be very reliable and yet put forward strange teachings...Stand your guard, like an anvil under the hammer. The mark of a good athlete is to win despite taking blows. Accept trials of all kinds for God’s sake and we will be accepted by Him. Be even more diligent than you are now.” **St. Ignatius of Antioch**, Letter to Polycarp 3,1
- Today, we will learn about the important ministries supported through your generosity towards the **Catholic Services Appeal**. I am so proud of our parish’s support! I sense a renewed spirit in our Archdiocese and I encourage you to join me again in actively supporting this annual collection.
- There are 226 Living Cardinals, 119 of whom are eligible to vote in a conclave. Given the fact that Cardinals remain “electors” until their 80th birthday, it is a bit surprising that 48% of all living Cardinals are **over 80** years of age. What’s in the *vino* that they are drinking?
- Not quite so fast...President Trump’s plan to rescind a provision in the U.S. Tax Code since 1954 (“Johnson Amendment”) would ostensibly provide relief to those concerned about government interference in churches right to speak freely as non-profits. But I’m not sold. Do you really want to see a bishop endorsing a specific candidate on television? We must always teach the fullness of truth about key moral issues that touch upon the public square, while encouraging you to exercise your civic duty.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector