

ANATHEMA SIT! WHY PRECISE LANGUAGE MATTERS

Did you hear about the quirky Canon Lawyer who named his puppy Anathema? He gleefully commanded him—“Anathema, sit!” (“Let him be cursed”), the Council of Trent’s Latin phrase declaring a heretic to be excommunicated. Scripture teaches that the gates of hell will not prevail, keeping the Church free from heresy. The Catholic Church **professes and teaches truth** based upon her establishment as the community of believers founded by Jesus Christ. This does not stop me, however, from worrying about the state of affairs in the Church, and in this, I suspect that I am not alone. I am however, extremely careful about the use of language, especially in reference to the teachings of others. There are **three terms** that I would like to discuss in more detail that are important for Catholics to understand: **heresy, schism and apostasy**. Trigger alert—they are not “nice” words, but they are as necessary as ever!

Too many well-intentioned and faithful Catholics throw around terms without fully understanding their meaning. If you say, “He’s a heretic!” this can be as dangerous as it is reckless. “Them is fightin’ words,” as Yosemite Sam used to say! By the same token, we need to do a better job at explaining these terms. Heresy is certainly a loaded term, but one that according to Canon Law, has a **precise** meaning. Yes, it is often misused, in particular for any teaching that sounds like an error. Heresy derives from a Greek word *prohairesis* meaning “choice.” Aristotle used it in his Ethics as the **distinguishing mark** of a morally virtuous person. In Church Law, it has a very precise definition: “Heresy is the obstinate denial or obstinate doubt, after the reception of baptism, of some truth which is to be believed by divine and Catholic faith.” (Code of Canon Law #751) There is also *formal* heresy and *material* heresy and the distinction matters. **Before** ecumenical councils definitively clarified doctrine, theologians were free to speculate—hey, that’s what they do!— about the formulation of the Faith.

Sometimes, they hypothesized incorrectly. Even St. Thomas Aquinas was wrong once in a blue moon. He certainly taught that the Blessed Virgin Mary **committed no actual sin** in her life. However, in formulating the teaching about the **Immaculate Conception**, Aquinas speculated that Mary was not entirely sanctified from the moment of her conception. It seemed to him that if Mary were conceived without sin, then she would not need a Redeemer. He taught wrongly in part due to the common belief at the time that the body was conceived *before* the soul, whereas we see the beginning of the human person as one act, body and soul. Aquinas taught that Mary was cleansed of sin *after* conception but *before* her birth. Materially what he taught was in error, but as it had not yet been dogmatically defined, his theory was “fair game” at the time. He was not formally denying a dogmatic teaching— not even close!

This is entirely different from denying a promulgated dogma. And therein lies the rub. **Obstinate** means the error must be not only known, but put forward stubbornly, connoting a **persistent** denial, presumably after being confronted by the proper authorities. Secondly, only Catholics can be guilty of the canonical crime of heresy and incur the penalties that follow upon it. Heresy is also a mortal sin, because it is directly **contrary to the theological virtue** of faith, but that’s for another column! Any good dogmatic theologian could “catch” me in a serious misstatement of Trinitarian doctrine due to its complexity. Heresy **presupposes** full knowledge and free will. We rightly reserve the canonical penalties for our own faithful who err.

The term heresy is reserved solely for dogmatic formulations, namely those that are divinely revealed and must be believed (*credenda*) with divine and Catholic faith. Other teachings surely are to be held (*tenenda*), even though not divinely revealed. Indeed, people teach error on a host of those issues too, and while reprehensible when intentional, it would not be termed heresy, strictly speaking. Heresy is reserved for those dogmatic (i.e. infallible) teachings, including but not limited to: the articles of faith in the Creed, the various Christological and Marian dogmas; the doctrine of the real presence in the Eucharist; the doctrine on the primacy and infallibility of the Roman Pontiff; the doctrine on the existence of original sin; the doctrine on the grave immorality of direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being.

I would vigorously argue that by virtue of its **specific and deliberate wording** signaling its immutable and definitive character, Pope John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae* is properly characterized as an **infallible** moral

teaching with respect to the sanctity of life in the womb. Recall, he wrote of “**unanimous agreement** concerning this doctrine,” which was “based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the **ordinary and universal** Magisterium.” (my emphasis added) As such, to obstinately celebrate following the signing of a late-term abortion law as did Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D-NY), arguably rises to the level of heresy. (Next week: Schism)

- Turkey's President Erdogan is actively considering “returning” **Hagia Sophia** to the status of a **mosque**. Built by **Emperor Justinian** in just under six years (532-537 A.D.), the Byzantine masterpiece has been a museum since 1935. I fully **support** the President's idea! Indeed, **revert** Hagia Sophia to its *original* use...as a **Christian** place of worship. It morphed into a mosque **only after** Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453 A.D. Boasting one of the four largest domes (102 feet across) in the world, on its dedication day, Justinian reportedly proclaimed– “Solomon, I have surpassed you.” Okay, so humility wasn't his greatest virtue, but he certainly got the job done!
- Go see *Unplanned*, the incredible story of **Abby Johnson's** conversion from Planned Parenthood employee to zealous pro-life advocate. The MPAA gave the film an “R” rating, ridiculous considering how many PG-13 films are much more violent and bloody. I'm suspicious, but Abby herself wrote a beautiful letter explaining the rating. (www.unplannedfilm.com). It's showing locally at the Eagan 16.
- Work continues on the restoration project in the **Shrines of the Nations**. One window each from the Irish and German chapels is being restored and they should reappear before Easter. I offer profound thanks to the donors and the Cathedral Heritage Foundation!
- It's the last Sunday in March and time for my **Minnesota Twins** prediction. Win totals last four seasons: 83, 59, 85, 78. I see improvement both from position players and starting pitchers. A new manager will bring some excitement. I know it is risky to hang one's hat on prospects, but if **Byron Buxton finally** breaks through, the talent in the field and at the plate is surely good enough for a **second-place** finish with **87 wins**. Sorry, Cleveland is just too good!
- Today's Laetare Sunday **Easter Flowers/Decorations** collection makes possible beautiful floral arrangements in the sanctuary and all ten chapels. Envelopes are in the pews. Thanks for your generosity!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector



Hagia Sophia-Dedicated on December 27, 537 AD, officially titled Shrine of the Holy Wisdom of God. Byzantine Emperor Justinian employed 10,000 workers to complete the massive structure, which includes magnificent mosaics. It was a Roman Catholic Cathedral briefly during the crusader period and served as a mosque from 1453-1935.