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Magisterium faces theologians' fire

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The current position of the church's magisterium that all its teaching is to be accepted as definitive, authentic and binding and is not subject to disagreement is experiencing growing rejection by established Catholic theologians. Some telling samples of their views are presented in a chapter of the new book *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*.

Gerard Mannion, a senior fellow at the Catholic University of Leuven (in Belgium) argues that the very notion of magisterium must undergo a severe updating:

"I would suggest that any effective ... exercise of magisterium must free itself from and pretense of omniscience for, in reality, the character of its exercise in recent times would on occasion appear to hold more in common with the 'view from nowhere genre.' In other words, far from being grounded in fundamental and universally agreed upon traditions, pronouncements have ... appeared to claim an authority that transcends context, culture and history alike. And yet ecclesial authority is inescapably rooted and shaped by each of these factors."

What is needed, Mannion says, is "a truly dialogical and conversational commitment on the part of ecclesial authorities." This could come about, he writes, if "the life-giving principles of the Catholic social tradition" -- subsidiarity, co-responsibility and participation -- were to become "a fundamental part of discourse concerning magisterium."

Joseph Selling, a German author also associated with the University of Leuven, contends that official pronouncements, especially those dealing with morality, cannot form the sole basis of teaching; rather, the lived experiences of the faithful of God must be allowed to inform magisterium itself.

"The authority to teach in the area of morality within the context of the believing community," Selling writes, "is intimately tied to the matter of being taught." That is to say, authentic teaching comes from authentic listening.

Joseph Kavenagh, a Dominican based in Dublin, Ireland, decries "the kind of laziness when answers are sought simply through the formula of the law as though the lawmaker's role is simply to provide solutions and dispense the community and individual from wrestling with the complexities of their world." Kavenagh calls for "the restoration of critical memory," as an antidote to the declarations of legislators who claim exclusive ownership of the right to interpret law.

The legitimacy of respectful dissent is gaining the attention of a range of Catholic theologians cited in the book, including Linda Hogan, a professor of ethics at Trinity College in Dublin; Nicholas Lash, the British author and frequent contributor to *The Tablet*, and Kevin Kelly, a moral theologian at Liverpool Hope University in London.

They believe that the word "dissent," with its implication of disobedience and bad faith, needs to be resisted and dismantled, along with all the usual language associated with official teaching and its power to automatically demand internal and external assent.

Kelly sees the term as misrepresenting the very positive critical position that theologians are often obliged to take in relating to teaching authority: "The term *dissent* has no feel for all that is positive in such a position -- respect for tradition, shared responsibility for the church's mission in the world. It does not express the respect for teaching authority ... which motivates someone taking this kind of stance," Kelly writes.

The theologians discussed in the book, all Europeans, seem to echo some of the views of Charles Curran, who was punished for dissent regarding Pope Paul VI's condemnation of artificial contraception and banned by the Vatican from teaching theology at Catholic institutions in 1986. Yet I could find no evidence that any of these theologians have been similarly chastised. Recent actions taken against American theologians like Elizabeth Johnson suggest the Vatican is more likely to take offense about what goes on this side of the Atlantic, and high church officials are more likely to reaffirm when necessary the operative position on magisterial teachings.

That point was made clear by Chicago's Cardinal Francis George, who wrote on the archdiocesan website Feb. 14 concerning the current church-and-state controversy: "What isn't always understood is that the Bishops of the Church make no attempt to speak for all Catholics; they never have. The Bishops speak for the Catholic and apostolic faith, and those who hold that faith gather around them. Others disperse."

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