

From Magisterium to Magisteria: Recent Theologies of the Learning and Teaching Functions of the Church

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Peter C. Phan

Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

Abstract

In the aftermath of Vatican II, questions have been raised about the exercise of magisterium in the church. This study first examines the teaching authority of the episcopal conference, the doctrinal committee of episcopal conference, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the Synod of Bishops. Next it examines the primary and secondary objects of episcopal magisterium, with special attention to the non-defined dogma and the “definitive doctrine” taught by the ordinary universal magisterium. Lastly it suggests ways forward in the understanding and exercise of the teaching function of the church, especially the priority of *learning* as the sine qua non condition for effective teaching, the shift from *magisterium* (in the singular) to *magisteria* (in the plural), and new *modes* of teaching appropriate for our digital age.

Keywords

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, digital age, degrees of teaching, doctrine, ecclesiology, episcopal conferences, learning church, magisteria, magisterium, teaching church

Corresponding author:

Peter C. Phan, Georgetown University, 5160 California Lane, Washington, DC, USA

Email: Peter.C.Phan@georgetown.edu

Among the many theological themes that have received extensive attention from the papacy and the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and at the same time have been subjected to a close scrutiny by theologians in the post-Vatican II era, arguably, what is referred to as the *magisterium* obtains pride of place. One of the reasons for its prominence in recent theological discourse is, as Richard Gaillardetz puts it tersely, “a pronounced magisterial activism, beginning for the most part with the pontificate of John Paul II and continuing under Pope Benedict XVI,” as the unprecedented number of “interventions” by the magisterium against theologians and their writings worldwide in the last fifty years readily testifies.¹

Another reason for this intense and widespread discussion of the magisterium is the controversial nature of the theological developments advocated by both the magisterium itself and theologians in the subject matter. The areas in which these developments occur include, to quote Gaillardetz’s lucid summary,

(1) the subject of magisterial authority (e.g., the authority of the Roman Curia, the synod of bishops, and episcopal conferences); (2) the object of magisterial teaching (e.g., the disputed status of “definitive doctrine”); the exercise of magisterial authority (e.g., the exercise of the ordinary papal magisterium to “confirm” teachings of the ordinary universal magisterium); and (4) the reception of magisterial teaching (e.g., the permissibility of legitimate dissent from authoritative but nondefinitive teaching).²

Note that in the preceding paragraphs “magisterium” is used in the singular and refers exclusively to the teaching authority of the pope and the bishops. However, recent literature on the magisterium shows that there have been two momentous departures from this common usage of the term. The first is intimated by the title of this essay, “From Magisterium to Magisteria,” marking a shift from the singular to the plural, hinting at an enlargement of the list of the subjects or possessors of magisterial authority. In addition to the teaching authority of the pope and bishops, there are, both inside and outside the church, other authoritative teachers of “faith and morals,” including but not limited to theologians. In the course of this article I will identify who these other subjects of the magisterium are in this enlarged sense and discuss their roles and teaching authority.

The second shift is indicated by the subtitle, “The Learning and Teaching Functions of the Church.” This expression highlights the necessity of both learning and teaching, with learning as the *sine qua non* condition for a proper execution of the teaching task. The best teachers are the best learners and vice versa. Note further that the learning and teaching functions are said to be the task of the whole church and not only of some special and exclusive groups. Of major concern is the process and mechanism by which the various subjects of the magisterium can learn from one another, especially the hitherto marginalized or even suppressed voices both inside and outside the church,

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1. Richard Gaillardetz, “Introduction,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today Church*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012), vii.
 2. Gaillardetz, “Introduction,” xiv.

so that the resulting teaching will represent a consensus in the faith of the church or the “supernatural instinct of faith” of the people of God (*sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium*).

With regard to “recent” in the phrase “recent theologies” in the subtitle, the period of time under consideration spans not only the years under the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI but also the current pontificate of Francis, whose modes of teaching arguably best exemplify the two shifts in the understanding and exercise of the magisterium mentioned above.

This bibliographical survey begins with a summary of the teachings of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on the subjects of the magisterium. The second part reviews the theological literature on the subject matter of the episcopal magisterium. The third and last part suggests some of the ways to overcome the limitations of the current theology and practice of the episcopal magisterium by emphasizing the priority of learning over teaching, the multiplicity of the subjects of the teaching office beyond the episcopal magisterium, and new modes of exercising the teaching function in the digital age.

The Subjects of the Episcopal Magisterium

If ecclesiology is the dominant theological theme of the post-Vatican II era, the magisterium not only claims the lion’s share of public attention, both ecclesial and secular, but also is a widely controverted topic of this treatise. Indeed, the magisterium cannot be properly understood except in the context of a specific ecclesiology since there is a strict correlation between one’s theology of the church and one’s understanding of the nature and exercise of the magisterium.³ As hinted above, in the fifty years since the end of Vatican II (1965–2015) there has been a plethora—“avalanche” would not be the wrong word—of books on the church. In addition, a massive number of documents of various types have been issued by popes, the Roman Curia, and episcopal conferences, collectively designated henceforth as “episcopal magisterium,” dealing with various aspects of the teaching function of the church understood exclusively as that of the pope and bishops. Needless to say, certain aspects of the papacy such as infallibility and primacy are intimately connected with papal magisterium and have been objects of prolonged and intense studies, especially in

3. Indeed, most post-Vatican II ecclesialogists have written extensively on the magisterium. To the ecclesialogists given by Gaillardetz (*When the Magisterium Intervenes*, vii–viii)—Roger Aubert, John P. Boyle, Yves Congar, Christian Duquoc, Avery Dulles, John Ford, Josef Fuchs, Patrick Granfield, Hubert Jedin, Joseph Komonchak, Richard McCormick, Harry McSorley, André Naud, Francis Oakley, John O’Malley, Ladislav Orsy, Hermann Pottmeyer, Karl Rahner, Max Seckler, Bernard Sesboué, Francis Sullivan, Gustave Thils, Brian Terney, Jean-Marie Tillard—I would add Walter Kasper, Giuseppe Alberigo, Hans Küng, Gerhard Lohfink, Richard McBrien, James Coriden, Jared Wicks, Gilles Routhier, Thomas Rausch, Roger Haight, Leonardo Boff, and Aloysius Pieris. Among the cohort of notable younger ecclesialogists with expertise on the magisterium I would include Richard Gaillardetz, Bradford Hinze, Ormond Rush, Gerald Arbuckle, Gerard Mannion, Paul Lakeland, Massimo Faggioli, Alberto Melloni, Peter De Mey, Catherine Clifford, Dennis M. Doyle, Richard Lennan, and Agbonkhianmeghe Orabator. It is not possible to refer to the works of all these theologians in this study; fortunately, information on their writings is readily available on the Internet.

ecumenical national and international, bilateral and multilateral, commissions.⁴ However, in the interest of focusing on the learning and teaching functions of the church as such, papal primacy and papal infallibility will not be discussed here.⁵

With his trademark meticulousness and clarity Francis A. Sullivan, a distinguished Jesuit ecclesialogist and an eminent authority on the magisterium, traces the developments in the understanding of the magisterium since Vatican II. He divides his account according to three topics: subjects of the magisterium (who can issue authoritative teaching), its object (what is the proper subject matter of magisterial teaching), and its exercise (how the teaching function is done).⁶

Episcopal Conferences

One issue that has been hotly debated is whether the *episcopal conference* is a proper subject of episcopal magisterium. In its various documents, especially the Constitution on the Liturgy (nos. 22, 36, and 39), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (no. 23), and the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops (no. 38), Vatican II states that one of the ways to implement episcopal collegiality is through the episcopal conference with its threefold ministry, especially the teaching office. However, while the pope and individual bishops are said to possess the teaching authority, it was not clear whether the national episcopal conference as such does so. The controversy concerning the

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4. Arguably the best analysis of national and international ecumenical dialogues on ecclesiology, 1965–2007, their major moments, verifiable gains, and unfinished agendas is Michael A. Fahey, “Shifts in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Ecclesiology from 1965 to 2016,” *Ecclesiology* 4 (2008): 134–47, <https://doi.org/10.1163/174413608X308582>. The article appends a list of major studies in ecclesiology, 1965–2007 and a list of major ecumenical documents on the Church, 1965–2007. To the latter list I would add three other major documents: The US Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue, *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church* (1978); Groupe des Dombes, *Un Seul Maître: L’Autorité doctrinale dans l’Église* (Paris: Bayard, 2005); ed. and trans. Catherine E. Clifford, *One Teacher: Doctrinal Authority in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); and World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: GPS, 2013).
 5. Official documents on papal primacy and infallibility, especially in ecumenical dialogue, as well as historical, theological, and canonical studies on these two themes are legion. A collection of rich and informative essays is the two-volume work edited by John Chyssavgis, *Primacy in the Church: The Office of Primate and the Authority of Councils* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 2016). Steven Edward Harris attempts an ecumenical theology of the magisterium in his paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Boston, MA, Nov 18–21, 2017, entitled, “Christ the One Teacher of All: Toward an Ecumenical Theology of the Magisterium.” One very useful website that collects all major ecumenical texts is: http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/e_dialogues.html/. I am grateful to Dr. John Borelli for his suggestions on ecumenical statements on the teaching authority in the Church.
 6. See Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, “Developments in Teaching Authority since Vatican II,” in *50 Years On: Probing the Riches of Vatican II*, ed. David G. Schultenover (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2015), 115–36. For a magisterial exposition on magisterium, see Michael Fahey, “Magisterium,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), 528–39.

teaching role of the episcopal conference was prompted by the American National Conference of Catholic Bishops' drafting of its pastoral letter on peace in 1983.⁷ Given the controversial nature of the issue of war and nuclear weapons, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then-prefect of the CDF, gathered the NCCB and six other European episcopal conferences for an informal consultation in Rome.

Among the five theses submitted for discussion at the consultation, the first reads, "A bishops' conference as such does not have a *mandatum docendi*. This belongs only to the individual bishops or to the college of bishops with the pope."⁸ The issue was taken up again for debate at the Extraordinary Synod of 1983, which called for further study. In 1988, Cardinal Bernard Gantin, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, sent to the bishops a working paper (*instrumentum laboris*) entitled "Theological and Canonical Status of Episcopal Conferences," and solicited their input before the end of the year. A statement of the document echoes Ratzinger's view: "The episcopal conferences do not, as such, properly speaking possess the *munus magisterii*."⁹ The working paper received severe criticism from episcopal conferences, theologians, and canonists. In 1998, Pope John Paul II settled the issue in his *motu proprio*, the apostolic letter *Apostolos Suos*.¹⁰ The pope lays down two conditions for authoritative teachings by episcopal conferences: "They must be unanimously approved by the bishops who are members, or receive the *recognitio* of the Apostolic See if approved in plenary assembly by at least two-thirds of the bishops belonging to the conference and having a deliberative vote."¹¹

After giving a brief history of the controversy regarding the teaching authority of episcopal conferences and a lucid and careful analysis of the main arguments for and against Pope John Paul II's two conditions for authoritative teaching of episcopal conferences, Francis Sullivan expresses an opinion that can be taken as *sententia comunis* among contemporary Catholic theologians:

Rather than locating the source of the authority of teaching statements of episcopal conferences either in total unanimity or in Roman *recognitio*, one should locate it in the reasons that the faithful have for recognizing statements on which their bishops have reached consensus after broad consultation and serious deliberation, as guided by the Spirit and hence worthy of their trust and acceptance.¹²

What is said of national episcopal conferences of course applies *mutatis mutandis* to regional and continental federations of episcopal conferences. In the aftermath of Vatican

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7. On July 1, 2001, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) was merged with the US Catholic Conference to become the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).
 8. "Rome Consultation on Peace and Disarmament: A Vatican Synthesis," *Origins* 12 (1983): 691–95 at 692.
 9. "Draft Statement on Episcopal Conferences," *Origins* 17 (1988): 731–37. Sullivan translates *munus magisterii* as "office of teaching authority."
 10. See *Apostolos Suos* (May 21, 1998), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_22071998_apostolos-suos.html
 11. "Apostolos Suos," 4, art. 1.
 12. Francis A. Sullivan, "The Teaching Authority of Episcopal Conferences," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 472–93 at 493, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390206300302>.

II, several of these, irrespective of whether they enjoy a theological and canonical *mandatum docendi*, have de facto exercised a vast and profound influence on the church as a whole, far beyond their geographical boundaries and perhaps even with a pastoral impact superior to the episcopal magisterium of the pope and individual bishops. Of these, first and foremost is the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM, founded in 1955) which has issued theologically path-breaking documents at, notably, Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992), and Aparecida (2007).¹³ Next in importance is the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC, founded in 1972), whose plenary assemblies and committees have made enormous contributions to the understanding of the church's mission of integral human development, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue.¹⁴ This discrepancy between possessing de iure a *mandatum docendi* and exercising a de facto effective and influential teaching function points to, as will be shown below, a major problem in the current theology of the magisterium.¹⁵

Committees of Episcopal Conferences

Another possible subject of magisterial authority is the role of various committees of the episcopal conference, in particular the Committee on Doctrine. In articles 2 and 3 of the "Complementary Norms" in *Apostolos Suos*, Pope John Paul II specifies the conditions and limits of their teaching authority:

Article 2. No body of the episcopal conference outside of the plenary assembly has the power to carry out acts of authentic magisterium. The episcopal conference cannot grant such power to its commissions or other bodies set up by it.

13. For a collection of the documents of CELAM, see http://www.celam.org/mision/documentos/docu504e5209938a8_10092012_348pm.pdf.
14. For a collection of the key documents of FABC and its various Offices, see *For All Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1970 to 1991*, vol. 1 ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996*, vol. 2 ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1997); *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1997 to 2001*, vol. 3 ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2002); *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 2002 to 2006*, vol. 4 ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2007); and *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 2007 to 2012*, vol. 5 ed. Vimal Tirimanna (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 2013).
15. Important literature on the episcopal conference includes: *The Nature and Future of Episcopal Conferences*, ed. Hervé-M. Legrand, Julio Manzanares, and Antonio García y García (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1988); *Die Bischofskonferenz: Theologischer und juristischer Status*, ed. Hubert Müller and Hermann J. Pottmeyer (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1989); Francis A. Sullivan, "The Teaching Authority of the Episcopal Conferences," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 472–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390206300302>; Thomas Reese, *Episcopal Conferences: Historical, Canonical, and Theological Studies* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1989); and Achim Buckenmaier, *Lehramt der Bischofskonferenzen? Anregung für eine Revision* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2016).

Article 3. For statements of a different kind, different from those mentioned in Article 2, the doctrinal commission [the Committee on Doctrine] of the conference of bishops must be authorized explicitly by the permanent council of the conference.¹⁶

That the Committee on Doctrine lacks the power to issue an authoritative [“authentic”] teaching and that, as stipulated in article 2, the episcopal conference cannot grant it such a permanent power, are canonically important, since in recent years most interventions of the episcopal magisterium against theologians have been outsourced from the CDF to the national episcopal conference, and this seems to be the prevalent trend under Pope Francis.¹⁷

For practical purposes, this means that the task of censuring theologians devolves onto the Committee on Doctrine, composed of bishop members, bishop consultants, and consultants.¹⁸ However, the day-to-day work of the Committee on Doctrine is carried out mainly by the Secretariat of Doctrine and Canonical Affairs, and more precisely, its Executive Director. It is the standard practice of the Committee on Doctrine to make use of the work of the Executive Director of the Secretariat of Doctrine and Canonical Affairs; its statements are composed by the Executive Director and routinely signed off on by its bishop members. As is stipulated in article 2 cited above, the statement of the Committee on Doctrine is not an act of authoritative magisterium unless it is “authorized explicitly by the permanent council of the conference,” that is, by its Administrative Committee. Given the fact that most if not all the bishop members of the Committee on Doctrine, at least of the USCCB, are not professional theologians, it is highly unlikely that they possess the qualifications to study with care and fully understand the rather complex theological issues broached by the theological writings they condemn by appending their names to the statement of the Committee on Doctrine against such works. This is an awkward question to raise, but it is necessary to do so, since it brings to light the problematic mode of the exercise of episcopal magisterium when authoritative teaching is pronounced by teachers who do not possess the requisite knowledge of the subject matter on which they claim to teach authoritatively.¹⁹

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

The third subject of magisterial authority is the CDF. In 1965, Pope Paul VI assigned it a twofold task, namely, safeguarding the faith from errors and promoting sound

16. “*Apostolos Suos*,” 4.

17. For further information on this point, see the section on interventions of the episcopal magisterium against theologians and their writings below.

18. For a statement of the key responsibilities and relationships of the Committee on Doctrine, see <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/index.cfm>.

19. When her book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* was condemned by the USCCB Committee on Doctrine in 2011, Elizabeth Johnson gently lets the cat out of the bag when she asks, “Did each of the nine bishop members or their theologians read the book and draw up notes? Did they discuss the points to be made and debate them *pro* and *con*?” (*When the Magisterium Intervenes*, 248). The issue here is not simply about the nine bishops who signed off on the statement but about the process of exercising the episcopal magisterium itself.

doctrine, a mandate reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II in 1988 in his Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*.²⁰ Contrary to the teaching authority of the episcopal conference, that of the CDF has never been in doubt. The CDF itself states that the pope exercises his universal mission with the help of the various bodies of the Roman Curia, especially the CDF, when teaching in matters of faith and morals. It further adds that “consequently, the documents issued by this Congregation expressly approved by the Pope participate in the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Peter.”²¹ This “participation” is enhanced when an article of the documents issued by the CDF is approved by the pope *in forma specifica*, by which it is to be regarded as the pope’s teaching itself.

The Synod of Bishops

The fourth possible holder of the episcopal magisterium is the Synod of Bishops.²² Established in 1965 by Pope Paul VI, the Synod of Bishops is a permanent advisory body for the pope, even when not in session. According to canon 342 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, it is

a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals and in the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline and to consider questions pertaining to the activity of the Church in the world.

The Synod, which the pope convokes as often as it seems opportune to him and for which he designates both the venue and the theme, can meet in ordinary general assembly, extraordinary general assembly (for topics that demand immediate attention), and special assembly (limited to certain geographical regions). As of 2018 there have been fifteen ordinary general assemblies, three extraordinary general assemblies, and ten special assemblies.

Judging from the themes that the Synod of Bishops has dealt with in its many assemblies it is reasonable to assume that for the good of the church it should possess an authoritative teaching function.²³ In fact, however, the Synod of Bishops, which is,

20. See *Pastor Bonus* (June 28, 1988), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19880628_pastor-bonus.html.

21. *Donum Veritatis*, (May 24, 1990), 18, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html (hereafter cited as *Donum*).

22. For an official description of the Synod of Bishops, see *The Synod of Bishops and The Order of Synod of Bishops [Ordo Synodi Episcoporum]*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_20050309_documentation-profile_en.html. *The Order of the Synod of Bishops* was first issued in 1965 and revised in 1969, 1971, and 2006. See also François Dupré La Tour, *Le Synode des évêques et la collégialité* (Malesherbes: Parole et Silence, 2004) and Luis Antonio Tagle, *Episcopal Collegiality and Vatican II: The Influence of Pope Paul VI* (Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 2004).

23. These themes include: justice in the world, the new evangelization, catechesis, the Christian family, penance and reconciliation, the vocation and mission of the laity, the formation of the priest, the consecrated life, the office of bishop, the Eucharist, and the Word of God in the life and mission of the church.

in the words of John Paul II, “a particularly fruitful expression and instrument of the collegiality of bishops,”²⁴ has only a consultative voice. At the end of the assembly, the General Secretary prepares a report describing the theme of the assembly and its conclusions. This report is submitted to the pope, who on the basis of this report will then promulgate an apostolic exhortation which is an act of the authoritative papal magisterium. Thus, the Synod can be regarded as a subject of episcopal magisterium only to the extent that its conclusions are adopted by the pope’s apostolic exhortation.²⁵

I have noted above that here “magisterium” is used in the singular and is taken to refer exclusively to the episcopal magisterium, and hence the subjects or holders of the magisterium are limited to the four subjects described above. Later I will show how in contemporary theology there has been a move from “magisterium” to “magisteria” to argue for the necessity of many subjects of the magisterium other than that of the pope and the bishops.

Proper Subject Matter of Infallible and Non-Infallible Episcopal Magisterium

According to the definition of the First Vatican Council,²⁶ which is reiterated and expanded by the Second Vatican Council,²⁷ it is a “divinely revealed dogma” that in virtue of the infallibility with which God has endowed the church, the three subjects of episcopal magisterium exercising an infallible teaching function are (1) the Roman Pontiff when teaching *ex cathedra* (“papal infallibility”), (2) the college of bishops when gathered in an ecumenical council and intending to teach a doctrine infallibly

24. *The Synod of Bishops*, introduction.

25. The teaching authority of the Synod of Bishops is characterized as follows by *The Synod of Bishops*: “Through the Holy Father’s acceptance of the advice or the decisions of a given Assembly, the episcopate exercises a collegial activity which approaches but does not equal that manifested at an Ecumenical Council” (introduction).

26. See the Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, ch. iv. Vatican I proclaims as dogma the infallibility of the papal magisterium under very specific conditions: “The Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine concerning faith and morals to be held by the universal Church, possesses through the divine assistance promised to him in the person of Blessed Peter, the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining the doctrine concerning faith and morals.” See *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 1982), 234.

27. See the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 25, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*). Vatican II integrates the dogma of papal infallibility into the infallible supernatural sense of the faith of the entire church, the infallibility of ecumenical councils, and the infallibility of the ordinary universal magisterium. Furthermore the council subordinates the entire magisterium of the church to the Word of God. The Code of Canon Law sets down an interpretative rule: “No doctrine is understood to be infallible unless it is clearly (*manifesto*) established as such” (canon 749.3).

(the “extraordinary magisterium”), and (3) the college of bishops when, while dispersed throughout the world, deciding that a teaching is to be held definitively (the “ordinary universal magisterium”). In addition to these three cases of infallible episcopal magisterium, there is the “ordinary magisterium,” which is exercised by the pope, an individual bishop, or a group of bishops, and their teaching is said to be non-infallible but authoritative (“authentic magisterium”).

The Primary Object of Episcopal Magisterium

With regard to *what* the episcopal magisterium can teach, both infallibly (in papal *ex cathedra* definitions, in the extraordinary magisterium of ecumenical councils, and in the ordinary universal magisterium) and non-infallibly, it has been taught since Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Pastor Aeternus*, 1870) that this subject matter is strictly limited to “doctrines concerning faith and morals” (*de fide et moribus*), that is, to matters concerning what to believe (*de fide*) and what to do or not do (*de moribus*).²⁸

While there have been in the aftermath of Vatican II sporadic attempts at questioning the truth of papal infallibility, the most celebrated of which is that by Hans Küng,²⁹ in general the infallibility of the church as a whole and of the three modes of exercising episcopal magisterium infallibly as described above is largely accepted by Roman Catholic theologians. However, two issues have been subjected to an extensive debate, namely, the ordinary universal magisterium and the so-called “secondary object” of infallibility. Before moving on to a discussion of the ordinary universal magisterium, its proper object, and the binding authority of its teachings, it is helpful to list in schematic fashion the four kinds of teachings that may result from the episcopal magisterium and the required responses to them:

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28. The expression “faith and morals” goes back to the Council of Trent's description of the gospel as “*fontem omnis salutaris veritatis et morum disciplinae*” (the source of all salvific truths and the teaching on moral behavior). While the distinction between “faith” and “morals” is *prima facie* clear, in practice the possibility of teaching on these two matters differs considerably. See *Readings in Moral Theology No. 3: The Magisterium and Morality*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1982). The best short treatment of this topic is by Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 136–52.
29. See Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).
30. There has been extensive debate over the meaning and the proper English translation of *obsequium*, and *adhaerere* in the phrases “*religiosum voluntatis et intellectus obsequium*” and “*sincere adhaereatur*” (LG 25). Does *obsequium* mean simply “due respect,” “docility,” or does it mean “submission”? Does *adhaerere* mean simply “agree,” “adhere,” “accept,” or rather “assent”? For further discussion, see Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 158–73 and Richard Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997), 255–73. Intimately connected with the themes of submission and assent are those of “reception” and theological dissent, about which there is abundant literature.

- (1) *Defined dogma*, when a doctrine is infallibly declared to be *divinely revealed* either by the Pope's solemn *ex cathedra* definition or by the extraordinary magisterium of an ecumenical council, to which the due response is irrevocable assent by divine and catholic faith;
- (2) *Non-defined dogma*, when a doctrine is infallibly declared to be *divinely revealed* by the ordinary universal magisterium, to which the due response is irrevocable assent by divine and catholic faith;
- (3) *Definitive doctrine*, when a doctrine, though *not divinely revealed* or part of the "deposit of faith," is infallibly declared by the ordinary universal magisterium to be required for the religious preservation and faithful explanation of the same deposit of the faith (for another official justification, see below). The due response to the definitive doctrine is not irrevocable assent by divine and catholic faith (*credenda*) but definitive acceptance and firm holding (*definitive tenenda*);
- (4) *Authoritative teaching*, when a doctrine is not infallibly taught by the pope, an individual bishop, or a group of bishops, to which the due response is "religious submission [*obsequium*] of intellect and will."

In the past fifty years, while there have been theological disputes about the nature of the "religious submission of intellect and will" (*religiosum voluntatis et intellectus obsequium*) and the exact English translation of *obsequium*,³⁰ the most heated debate centered on the second and third categories of teaching, both of which are issued by the ordinary universal magisterium. With regard to the ordinary universal magisterium, Vatican II declares,

Although individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they do, however, proclaim infallibly the doctrine of Christ when, even though dispersed throughout the world but maintaining among themselves and with Peter's successor the bond of communion, in authoritatively teaching matters to do with faith and morals, they are in agreement that a particular teaching is to be held definitively (*tamquam definitive tenendam*). (LG 25)³¹

As currently understood, the ordinary universal magisterium raises a number of questions: (1) how to ascertain whether there is in fact an "agreement" in the worldwide episcopate about a particular teaching in matters of faith and morals; (2) how to decide what the extent of this agreement must be; and (3) how to determine whether the agreement includes the intention of the whole episcopate to affirm that this particular teaching must be held definitively by the faithful.³²

31. English translation from *Vatican Council II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 2007), 35.

32. For an examination of unresolved questions with regard to the ordinary universal magisterium, see Richard Gaillardetz, "The Ordinary Universal Magisterium: Unresolved Questions," *Theological Studies* 63 (2007): 447–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390206300301>. Despite the uncertain status of its authority, this ordinary universal magisterium was invoked with increasing frequency in the post-Vatican era, especially during the pontificate of John Paul II, so much so that there is talk of "creeping infallibility."

With regard to the first question, it is true that

in the Church the purpose of any collegial body, whether consultative or deliberative, is always the search for truth or the good of the Church. When it is therefore a question involving the faith itself, the *consensus ecclesiae* is not determined by the tallying of votes, but is the outcome of the working of the Spirit, the soul of the one Church of Christ.³³

Nevertheless, there is no way to determine whether there is an agreement concerning a doctrine of faith and morals except through some kind of “tallying of votes.” If such a “poll” is to be conducted, how extensive must it be? Is it necessary that each and every bishop, or at least two-thirds of all the bishops, at any one time, be asked to vote on whether they agree on a particular teaching? What is the percentage of the responses required and how do we evaluate the quality of their responses? The above questions do not intend to deny the working of the Holy Spirit in the church’s exercise of its teaching function but only seek to determine whether and to what extent the Holy Spirit is actually working in shaping the church’s belief in and teaching of a particular doctrine.

Second, regarding the required extent of the agreement, should the following rule, which is applied in the deliberation of the Synod of Bishops, be followed: “To arrive at the majority of votes, if the vote for the approval of some item, two-thirds of the votes of the Members casting ballots is required; if for the rejection of some item, the absolute majority of the same Members is necessary?”³⁴

Third, and most important, in order to determine whether a certain teaching is infallible, it is necessary to ascertain that the bishops who agree on a particular teaching intend it to be “held definitively.” This determination is absolutely essential since the infallibility of the ordinary universal magisterium hinges on this intention. There is a strong and not infrequent possibility that the bishops who agree on a particular doctrine do so more or less consciously as something that pertains to faith and morals to be accepted by the faithful but do not intend it to be held definitively. To take a highly controversial issue of woman’s ordination as an example, it is safe to assume that a majority of current bishops would agree that the teaching that only males are eligible for priestly ordination is a traditional doctrine and that this restriction has been a constant practice in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and hence must not be changed without serious reasons. But it is extremely rash to assume that a majority of current and future bishops maintain this doctrine “to be held definitively,” especially if no poll has been taken on this precise point and if the experiences of churches that practice women’s ordination are taken into account.

Clearly, then, although the existence of an infallible ordinary universal magisterium is generally accepted by Catholics, in practice it is an extremely complicated affair to determine which particular teaching is infallibly taught in this way. Given the near-impossibility of this enterprise, some theologians have suggested other indirect ways

33. *The Order of the Synod of Bishops*, preface.

34. *The Order of the Synod of Bishops*, 8, art. 26 §1.

to achieve the same goal. One possibility is for the pope, or even the CDF, to declare by an act of non-infallible ordinary magisterium which teaching of faith and morals has been taught infallibly by the ordinary universal magisterium.³⁵ But then one is facing the logical and theological conundrum that a non-infallible teaching can determine the infallibility of another teaching, a new form of papal “fallibly infallible” teaching, as Hermann Pottmeyer puts it.³⁶ Another suggestion, made by Peter Hünermann, is to conceive the role of the pope as a kind of “notary public” officially confirming the existence of an infallible teaching by the ordinary universal magisterium.³⁷ The problem with this suggestion is that a notary public can only certify that which is indeed a fact, a matter that precisely needs to be verified beforehand. A third proposal, made by Francis Sullivan, is to examine not so much whether there is an agreement of the worldwide episcopate on the binding nature of a particular doctrine—which is not excluded—but whether there has been a universal and constant consensus among Catholic theologians concerning this doctrine and whether there has been a reception of it by the faithful.³⁸ But here there is the issue of how to ascertain that there is a universal constant consensus among Catholic theologians and a reception by the faithful.³⁹ Thus the problem of verification remains unresolved.

Secondary Object of Episcopal Magisterium

So far we have examined mainly what has been called the “primary object” of the episcopal magisterium, that is, matters of faith and morals that have been divinely revealed. The issue of the secondary object of episcopal infallible magisterium is no less complicated. Vatican II declares, “This infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining a doctrine pertaining to faith

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35. For instance, Brian E. Ferme has suggested that the pope as the Head of the Episcopal College may declare by an act of non-infallible magisterium which doctrine has been taught infallibly by the ordinary universal magisterium. See his “The Response [28 October 1995] of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to the *Dubium* concerning the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* [22 May 1994]: Authority and Significance,” *Periodica de re canonica* 85 (1996): 689–727; and “*Ad tuendam fidem*: Some Reflections,” *Periodica de re canonica* 88 (1999): 579–606.
36. Hermann Pottmeyer, “Auf fehlbare Weise unfehlbar? Zu einer neueren Form päpstlichen Lehrens,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 217 (1999): 233–42. See also Norbert Lüdecke, *Die Grundnormen des katholischen Lehrrechts in den päpstlichen Gesetzbüchern und neueren Äusserungen in päpstlicher Autorität* (Würzburg: Echter, 1997).
37. See Peter Hünermann, “Die Herausbildung der Lehre von den definitive zu haltenden Wahrheiten seit dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil: Ein historischer Bericht und eine systematische Reflexion,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 21 (2000): 71–101.
38. Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity*, 101–108.
39. The most extensive study of the sense of the faithful and reception is Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2009), with an abundant bibliography at 299–321.

and morals, extends just as far as the deposit of divine revelation, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded” (*LG* 25). Francis Sullivan persuasively argues that this somewhat ambiguous statement teaches that the subject matter of infallible episcopal magisterium is composed of two kinds: (1) the phrase “the deposit of divine revelation” refers to what is termed “the primary object” of the infallible magisterium and (2) the phrase “which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded” refers to the truths that are required so that the deposit of faith can be “religiously guarded and faithfully expounded” and which are termed “the secondary object” of the infallible magisterium. The former object, according to Sullivan, is constituted by “whatever has been revealed for the sake of our salvation, whether explicitly or implicitly, whether written or handed on, is the primary object of the teaching of the magisterium.”⁴⁰ Only this primary object can be taught as a “dogma of faith.”

With regard to the “secondary object” of the infallible magisterium, there has been a widespread debate in the post-Vatican II era. In its declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), the CDF states that “the infallibility of the Church’s Magisterium extends not only to the deposit of faith but also to those matters without which that deposit cannot be rightly preserved and expounded.”⁴¹ This statement is evidently in accord with the formula of *Lumen Gentium* 25 cited above. However, a later document of the CDF, *Donum Veritatis* (1990), gives a different reason for the infallibility of the secondary object of the episcopal magisterium, namely, “being intimately connected with them [revealed truths] in such a way that the definitive character of such affirmations derives in the final analysis from revelation itself.”⁴² In his 1998 apostolic letter *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, Pope John Paul II expands further the notion of “intimately connected” with the revealed truths and states that the secondary objects of the infallible magisterium are “truths that are necessarily connected to divine revelation. These truths ... illustrate the Divine Spirit’s particular inspiration for the Church’s deeper understanding of a truth concerning faith and morals, with which they are connected either for historical reasons or by a logical relationship.”⁴³ These secondary objects may be taught as non-defined but infallible “definite doctrines,” which the faithful are bound to “firmly accept and hold” (canon 750§2), and church members will be “punished with a just penalty” if they obstinately reject them (canon 1371§1).

Clearly, the justification offered by *Donum Veritatis* and *Ad Tuendam Fidem* perilously expands the list of “definitive doctrines” as it permits any truth to be shown, without much mental prestidigitation, to be connected with divine revelation (*ad fidei depositum pertinens*) “either for historical reasons or by a logical relationship.” In fact,

40. Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity*, 131.

41. Paul VI, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (June 24, 1973), 3, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html.

42. *Donum*, 16. In a later paragraph (no. 23), it is said that this secondary object of infallibility is “strictly and intimately connected with revelation.”

43. *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (May 18, 1988), 3, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_30061998_ad-tuendam-fidem.html.

this is what has happened, for example, when church teachings on artificial birth control, the impossibility of priestly ordination of women, the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent life, abortion, euthanasia, prostitution, fornication, the Anglican orders, and homosexual acts are declared to be “definitive doctrines” taught by the ordinary universal magisterium. It comes as no surprise that some Catholics welcome this expansive justification for “definitive doctrines” as an effective antidote to what they perceive as moral relativism, whereas others sound the alarm against what they consider as “creeping infallibility.”

In summary, with regard to the recent official developments concerning the ordinary universal magisterium, and especially the innovation of reasons for the necessity of “definitive doctrines” by *Donum Veritatis* and *Ad Fidem Tuendam*, it must be said that they depart from the classical understanding and practice of teaching the faith (magisterium) as an instrument of fostering ecclesial *communio*. Instead, “definitive doctrine,” as Gaillardetz has astutely observed, is being used as “a vehicle for addressing controversial matters” and in this way “a too far-ranging appeal to the infallibility of the ordinary universal magisterium may foreshorten the necessary discourse of the whole Christian community on questions being posed in significantly new contexts and therefore not susceptible to ‘definitive’ determinations.”⁴⁴

Learning before Teaching, Many Magisteria, and a New Mode of Teaching

Gaillardetz’s timely warning against foreshortening the necessary discourse of the whole Christian community leads naturally to the question of how to overcome the many problems in the current theology and practice of the teaching function of the church today. Here I will consider only three issues: the condition of possibility for effective teaching, the collaboration among many magisteria, and the need for a new mode of teaching in the digital age.

The Whole Church as Both Learner and Teacher, or Learner Prior to Being Teacher

One key expression in Gaillardetz’s statement cited above is “the whole Christian community.” Admittedly a major concern of contemporary theology of the magisterium is how to involve the whole Christian community in the task of both learning and teaching the faith. One way to achieve this is to insist on the necessity of the episcopal magisterium first to be a learner. At first sight, this seems to be obvious, since no one can teach what she or he does not know. Yet, it is interesting to note that neither Vatican I nor Vatican II, in speaking of the magisterium of the pope and bishops, ever once insisted on their duty to be *learners* first, except to say that the magisterium “is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on,

44. Richard Gaillardetz, “The Ordinary Universal Magisterium: Unresolved Questions,” 471.

listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully.”⁴⁵ There is a one-sided, almost exclusive, emphasis on the pope and bishops as “heralds of the faith ... authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ.”⁴⁶ There is no explicit affirmation that they cannot teach as “authentic teachers” of the faith unless they are first “authentic learners” of the other magisteria which, as will be identified below, lie both within and beyond the church.

There are several advantages to this inversion of the roles of learners and teachers and placing the priority of learning over teaching. For one thing, despite all the careful and painstaking fence-building between the *magisterium cathedrae pastoralis* and the *magisterium cathedrae magisterialis* to prevent conflicts between the teaching of bishops and that of theologians respectively, a sense of competition and turf war is always looming between these two, albeit unequal, *magisteria*. There would be much less conflict between bishops and theologians if the former learn from, and not merely “listen” to the latter, and the latter learn from the former, and not merely give them “the religious *obsequium* of will and intellect.”⁴⁷

Second, conjugating teaching with learning and prioritizing learning over teaching removes the harmful traditional distinction between the *ecclesia docens* (the teaching church) and the *ecclesia discens* (the learning church),⁴⁸ which obscures the fact the entire church must both learn and teach, better still, learn before teaching.⁴⁹ This is all the more obvious today when the *ecclesia discens*, traditionally referring to the laity, including women, are highly educated biblically and theologically and not rarely possessing higher degrees and greater academic competence than many members of the *ecclesia docens*. They form a magisterium of the faith, not only in *credendo* by cultivating the “supernatural sense of the faith [*sensus fidei*]”⁵⁰ but also in *docendo* by exercising a magisterium of their own, not least by teaching theology to (future) bishops. In view of this fact, Vatican II’s declaration that “they [the laity] are, by reason of their knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted

45. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), 10, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (hereafter cited as *DV*).

46. *LG* 25.

47. One of the debated themes in the post-Vatican II era is the relationship between the episcopal magisterium and the theologians, especially after the publication of the CDF’s Instruction *Donum Veritatis* (The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian). Related to this theme is that of the role of Catholic universities and academic freedom.

48. This distinction between the “teaching church” and the “learning” or “taught” church was first made by the sixteenth-century Catholic theologian Thomas Stapleton (1535–98). His prolific writings, much appreciated by Pope Clement VIII, were later published in the four-volume *Opera Omnia* (Paris: 1620).

49. The classical formulation of this view is of course Cardinal Newman’s *On Consulting the Faithful on Matters of Doctrine*, first published in 1859. A recent insightful elaboration and expansion of this theology in view of religious pluralism is Paul Crowley, *In Ten Thousand Places: Dogma in a Pluralistic Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

50. *LG* 12.

and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the church”⁵¹ justly hailed some fifty years ago as enlightened and progressive, can sound patronizing and retrograde today. Many lay people are not only competent experts in “all types of temporal affairs”⁵² but are highly qualified teachers precisely in biblical and theological disciplines themselves.⁵³

The issues here do not concern merely pedagogy (e.g., how and what can one teach if one does not know?) but are properly theological. What would the theological and ecclesial implications be for our understanding of the teaching function of the faith (*magisterium*) if we view all teachers of the faith in the church as *learners* of the faith *precisely in their roles as teachers of the faith*? To put it more starkly, what are the doctrinal and ecclesiological consequences for saying that they can be teachers *only insofar as they are learners and must remain so for life*? How will this affect our theology of the teaching ministry (*munus docendi*) of the pope and bishops, what they teach, how they do so, and, how they should relate to other magisteria?⁵⁴

The One Magisterium and the Five Magisteria

In this context, many Catholic theologians propose that the subjects of the magisterium be expanded beyond the episcopal magisterium with its four modes of exercise as explicated above to include other *magisteria*.⁵⁵ Thus, instead of *magisterium* (in the singular) we should speak of *magisteria* (in the plural), and above all, avoid collapsing the “magisterium” into the episcopal magisterium, as is still routinely done in church documents and in popular theological usage.

To be precise, it is theologically more helpful to say that there is only *one* magisterium, that is, the prophetic function [*munus*] of the whole church which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit continues the prophetic ministry of Jesus as the revealed word of God.⁵⁶ This one teaching ministry is exercised by various magisteria such as

51. LG 37.

52. LG 31.

53. One of the most notable developments in the Catholic Church in the last fifty years is the access of the laity, especially women, to theological education at its highest levels. See the informative essay by Katarina Schuth, “Assessing the Education of Priests and Lay Ministers: Content and Consequences,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011), 317–47.

54. This stress on the need to learn before teaching is no idle concern. I am grateful to Susan Ross for sharing with me the comment made to her by Bishop Joseph Imesh of Joliet, IL, Chairman of the committee composing the Pastoral Letter on Women, that then-Prefect of the CDF Joseph Ratzinger had told him that the bishops’ task on the committee was not to learn but to teach.

55. See Peter C. Phan, *The Joy of Religious Pluralism: A Personal Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 32–45.

56. See Ormond Rush, “The Prophetic Office in the Church: Pneumatological Perspectives on the *Sensus Fidelium*—Theology—Magisterium Relationship,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz, 89–112. It is important not to identify the *sensus fidelium* with the faith of the laity. Rather it refers to the *sensus fidei* of the entire church, comprising the laity and the ordained.

“episcopal magisterium,” “theological magisterium,”⁵⁷ and “lay magisterium.”⁵⁸ In addition to these three magisteria,⁵⁹ some theologians, such as liberation theologians, have highlighted the privileged role of the “magisterium of the poor” who, given their experience of poverty and oppression, can more effectively and persuasively than others teach Christians authentic ways of following the Crucified Christ (*sequela Christi*), which is the essential task of the teaching function of the church.

In addition to these four “magistri” (teachers)—bishops, theologians, the laity, and the poor—some theologians such as those of religious pluralism, add a fifth, namely, the “magisterium of believers of other religions.” At first, this addition seems unjustified since the followers of other religions are by definition non-Christians. It is pointed out, however, that the Spirit of God is actively present as the agent of salvation in their sacred books, religious beliefs, moral teachings, spiritual practices, monastic

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57. The literature on the role of the theologians and their relationship to the episcopal magisterium is legion, especially in response to the CDF’s instruction *Donum Veritatis* and the requirement that all Catholics who teach theological disciplines in a Catholic university have a *mandatum* (canon 812). It has been mentioned above that the post-Vatican II period saw an unprecedented “pronounced magisterial activism” against theologians. See the informative account by Bradford E. Hinze, “A Decade of Disciplining Theologians,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz, 3–39. Hinze lists ten lamentations against such interventions: anonymous accusers and critics; the scourge of secrecy and torturous isolation; unfair interpretations; contested doctrine frozen in time; the same people are investigators, prosecutors, and judges; interrogation masked as dialogue; defamation of character; failure to trust the community of theologians and the faithful people of God as a whole; and creating a culture of surveillance, policing, control, and intimidation. On the canonical implications of magisterial interventions against theologians, see James A. Coriden, “Canonical Perspectives on the Ecclesiastical Processes for Investigating Theologians,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz, 40–62.
58. Beside the immense literature on the role of the laity in general, the learning and teaching function of the laity is discussed in the context of the reception of church teachings and the formation of the *sensus fidei/fidelium*. On this, see *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016). It has been suggested that the “consultation of the faithful” includes not only the faithful of the Catholic Church but also Christians of other churches and ecclesial communities, especially in cases of differences in beliefs and practices.
59. Ormond Rush speaks of the three magisteria within the primary source of the *sensus fidelium*: the *sensus laicorum*, the *sensus theologorum*, and the *sensus episcoporum*. See his *The Eyes of Faith*, 252–74. It is also important to note that the *fideles* in the *sensus fidelium* includes non-Catholic Christians, who in not a few teachings and practices of the faith have been more faithful than Catholics.
60. See, for instance, Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2013); Paul Knitter and Roger Haight, *Jesus & Buddha: Friends in Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015); Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014); Peter C. Phan, “*Sensus Fidelium, Dissensus Infidelium, Consensus Omnium*,” in *Learning from All the Faithful*, ed. Bradford Hinze and Peter C. Phan, 213–25; Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); and Ruben Habito, *Zen*

traditions, and so forth, from which Christians must also learn.⁶⁰ These non-Christians, *pace Dominus Iesus*, do not have simply “belief” but also “faith.” However, this faith is related to the Christian *sensus fidei*.

The crucial question is of course how to relate these five magisteria together in such a way that they contribute together to the discovery and communication of divine truths. One common method is to insist that “the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Christ.”⁶¹ In fact, this understanding of the magisterium has been constantly used to affirm the *unique* character of episcopal magisterium, now referred to simply as *the* magisterium, and to differentiate it from other ways of teaching in the church which are to subordinate themselves to it.

While not disputing this conciliar assertion, some contemporary Catholic theologians hasten to point out that “authentic” (better: authoritative) interpretation is not the only kind of interpretation possible, nor is it always the most important, and that “exclusive” does not entail that there are no other modes of interpretation and other subjects of the magisterium.⁶² It is pointed out that the manualist and even Vatican II’s approaches to the magisterium are heavily legalistic, in that they are concerned principally with determining (1) who are canonically qualified to teach (requirement of the *mandatum*), (2) the various degrees of authority attached to their teachings, namely, infallibly defined (“dogma”), infallibly non-defined (“definitive doctrines”), and non-infallible (“authentic teaching”), and (3) the kinds of assent appropriate to each of these three kinds of teaching (divine and catholic faith, definitive acceptance and firm holding, and religious *obsequium* of will and intellect, respectively).⁶³ In this context, many Catholic theologians emphasize the difference between “authority” and “authenticity,” the former referring to the power conferred upon an individual to speak and act on its behalf (a legal issue), and the latter to the effective and real impact that this word and deed have on the community. Teachers in the church must have both authority and authenticity. Without authority teachers lack legitimacy; without authenticity teachers are no more than mouthpieces of the institution.⁶⁴

and the Spiritual Exercises (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013). This view of the magisterium of non-Christians is implicit in the works of comparative theologians such as Francis Clooney, James Fredericks, and Leo Lefebure, to cite the most prominent ones.

61. *DV* 10.

62. For example, Richard Gaillardetz, Ormond Rush, and Gerard Mannion.

63. For a critique of the legalistic approach to the magisterium, see John P. Beal, “Something There Is That Doesn’t Love a Law,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley, 135–60. On the other hand, M. Cathleen Kaveny argues that there is a need for the traditional casuistic approach in teaching, provided it is critically retrieved and reframed. See M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Retrieving and Reframing Catholic Casuistry,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley, 225–58. Kaveny suggests that a critical retrieval of the casuistry method can be achieved by the creation of a common professional context, a more constructive approach to “dissent,” and a disciplined focus on particularity.

64. This distinction is reminiscent of Max Weber’s tripartite classification of authority, namely legal authority, traditional authority, and charismatic authority. On authority and leadership

A New Mode of Teaching for the Digital Age

Another severe limitation of the recent exercise of the episcopal magisterium is its almost exclusive reliance on the print media and propositional discourse, the most prominent genre being the encyclical. To enable the magisterium to function effectively in our time, in which both learning and teaching must go hand in hand, new social media must be pressed into service for the exercise of the magisterium. What is being proposed is rather simple: What is the most effective way for the magisterium, whose five *magistri* must work in tandem, to reach the largest audience possible? In our digital age it certainly is no longer print, much less encyclical-style documents. I am deeply aware of all the dangers that both Anthony Godzieba and Vincent Miller warn us against in the use of social media. In particular, the magisterium need to guard against what Godzieba calls “the digital immediacy” and the “catapulting the propaganda”⁶⁵ and what Miller terms “heterogenization” and “deterritorialization.”⁶⁶ These dangers can cause extreme damage to society, as we can witness in political discourse, but also to the church. When social media are used by church authorities in sound bites or in 280-character tweets to prevent serious and intelligent discussion of the issues by shortchanging the work of theologians or to enforce an official viewpoint, they destroy the church as *communio*. When social media are wisely used not only to convey succinctly and clearly the basics of the Christian faith but also to invite thoughtful questioning and discussion among Christians as well as non-Christians of vital issues such as ecological destruction and threats to family life, they can reach a global audience, a thing unimaginable to older generations.⁶⁷

Furthermore, in exercising its teaching function today the various subjects of the magisterium must be aware on the one hand of its social construction of ecclesial reality which conditions and shapes all aspects of church life and on the other hand of the social construction of the wider world by means of this construction of ecclesial reality. To put it simply, “church” and “world” are social constructions and together they form what can be called, to use an expression of Charles Taylor’s, a “social imaginary.” In our postmodern age, however, there is no *one* social imaginary but there coexist many, diverse, and conflictive ones, each with its own moral, political, cultural, and religious context. As Gerard Mannion has powerfully argued, “We can never

on the Catholic Church, see *Religious Leadership and Christian identity*, ed. Doris Nauer, Rein Nauta, and Henk Witte (Münster: LIT, 2004) and Gerard Mannion, “What Do We Mean by ‘Authority’,” in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church*, ed. Bernard Hoose, 19–36.

65. See Anthony J. Godzieba, “*Questio Disputata*: The Magisterium in an Age of Digital Reproduction,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz, 140–53.

66. See Vincent Miller, “When Mediating Structures Change: The Magisterium, the Media, and the Culture Wars,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz, 154–74.

67. Pope Francis warns us against the “mental pollution” caused by social media. Yet he frankly acknowledges that “today’s media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affection” (*Laudato Si’* 47).

really, in these times, live according to a single, uniform social imaginary, but rather we live in terms of a series of multiple-belongings and through a mosaic of differing social imaginaries—sometimes these prove complementary, sometimes they do not.”⁶⁸ Needless to say, teaching the faith in these social imaginaries requires a new mode of teaching, one that is marked by deep intellectual humility, a sincere acknowledgment of pluralism within the church itself, and a significant ability and willingness to live with ambiguity. At the same time, confident in the Spirit’s gift of truth, the church as a whole, especially the episcopal magisterium, must speak, without fear, truth to power, be that power ecclesiastical or political. The common good of society and the well-being of the church demand nothing less.

Author Biography

Peter C. Phan (ThD, Pontificia Universitas Salesiana, PhD and DD, University of London) holds the Ignacio Ellacuría Chair of Catholic Thought at Georgetown University. He has authored and edited thirty-one books and authored some 300 essays. His latest book is *Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice* (Orbis, 2018). He is currently researching migration and its impact on Christian theology and church life.

68. Gerard Mannion, “Magisterium as a Social Imaginary: Exploring an Old Problem in a new Way,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz, 113–39. Here 139. See also his “A Teaching Church That Learns? Discerning ‘Authentic’ Teaching in Our Times,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lace and Francis Oakley, 161–91. On the social imaginary of the magisterium, see Charles Taylor, “Magisterial Authority,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacy and Francis Oakley, 259–69. Taylor discusses the proper scope of the episcopal magisterium, the limits of its teaching authority, respect for what he calls the “enigmatic” of life, and respect for freedom of conscience.