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*Theologians who have contrary old and new views
on certain moral questions will be seen
to have contrary views of the Church's magisterium*

Two views of the Church's Magisterium

By Germain Grisez

■ The word “magisterium” has not always been used with the sense it has in recent Catholic teaching. But the word isn't important. For one can define the reality in New Testament language. Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus addressing the eleven:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Matt. 28:18-20)

Thus, Jesus gave the Church the mission to teach his way. No doubt, every member of the Church has a role to play in fulfilling this mission. But the New Testament makes it clear that the eleven and other apostolic men, such as Paul, exercised leadership in all aspects of the Church's life. In particular, the Church's

leaders decisively answered questions and settled arguments about Jesus' way. This decisive leadership role in respect to Church teaching, exercised by apostolic men in the early Church, today is claimed by John Paul II and bishops in communion with him. They use the word “magisterium” to refer to this role.

As everyone knows, since Vatican II Catholics have been arguing about what Jesus' way requires with respect to sexual behavior and killing the innocent. According to the old view, genital sexual activity can be good only within marriage and only if it is noncontraceptive, and choices to kill the innocent are always bad. According to the new view, one may sometimes choose to kill the unborn (and perhaps others whose quality of life is poor), engage in sexual intercourse outside or before one's marriage, and (if so oriented) engage in homosexual behavior; also, on this view,

masturbation has little moral significance, and contraception for responsible parenthood is morally justified.

Theologians who hold the old and the new views on these moral questions also implicitly have different views of the magisterium, which become explicit as they argue for their opposed positions.

Opposing views become explicit

The new view on the moral questions is not based by those who hold it on anything in Scripture, the writings of Church fathers and doctors, the teachings of Church councils, popes, or bodies of bishops. Those who hold the new view do deal with such sources to try to show that, appearances notwithstanding, the sources somehow leave room for the new positions. Yet they do not claim that revelation and Church teaching recommend contraception, condone homosexual behavior, justify certain choices to kill the innocent, or positively support any of the other new moral positions.

Proponents of the new view sometimes deploy a philosophical ethical theory—that in conflict situations the right choice is the one which probably will bring about good results and minimize harms. (A more restricted version of this theory is that one may make exceptions to moral absolutes when doing so is considered “better service” to the human value at stake.) But they do not adequately defend this theory against well known philosophical objections to it, nor do they develop detailed arguments that choices approved by the new view and rejected by the old one really will serve values, have good results, and minimize harms. Proponents of the new view forgo such sustained philosophical effort because they really want to do theology, and think they have adequate theo-



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logical ground for their positions.

The theological ground offered for the new positions is that these are based on contemporary Christian experience and reflect the sense of the faithful. Public opinion polls often are cited to show that a great many Catholic respondents disagree with the old positions. Admittedly the old positions are still “official Church teaching.” However, proponents of the new positions argue that the Holy Spirit is not possessed exclusively by the pope and other bishops, but enlightens and supports all the Church's members in their reception of faith and effort to follow Jesus' way.

The implication is that the Holy Spirit has enlightened some Catholics to see that the new positions are acceptable and is strengthening them not to experience guilt when they masturbate or contracept, work out the most stable and mutually satisfying sexual arrangements they can, choose to kill if that seems for the best, and so on. Although the old positions are still official Church teaching, theologians who endorse the new positions are confident that they discern what the Spirit is telling the Church today.

New theologians demand approval

This confidence is bolstered by the number of theologians who agree with the new positions. They consider their view to be the theological mainstream, and claim that it represents the consensus of competent theologians. They deny that the pope and bishops who agree with him can justifiably reject this theological consensus. Therefore, they assert that the Church's teaching must change, and that the new positions should be officially approved. Such theologians think that the pope and the bishops who agree with him are seriously abusing their authority when they insist upon the old positions—for example, by judging that someone who holds the new ones cannot really be a Catholic theologian.

Thus, the new view of the magisterium is that popes and other bishops, as leaders of the Church, have the role of recognizing, summing up, and giving official status to the consensus of theologians. According to the new view, this consensus reflects the sense of the faithful based on contemporary Christian experience, generated by the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Proponents of the old view on the disputed moral questions also offer some philosophical arguments. But generally they

forgo any sustained philosophical effort, because they really mean to speak with religious authority. They believe that God's people have permanently valid knowledge of the way they should walk, since God made that way known, provisionally in the Old Testament, but definitively in Jesus' life and teaching. The Church's mission, on this view, is to teach Jesus' way, and his followers' responsibility is to observe all that he commanded. The Holy Spirit's role is to continually instruct the Church and all her members, not by teaching anything new on his own authority, but by recalling and unfolding Jesus' teaching (cf. John 14:26; 16:12–13).

Thus, precisely because the old positions on the disputed moral questions have been held by the Church in the past and handed down to us, Paul VI and John Paul II have reaffirmed them. They, the bishops who agree with them, and the theologians who support them regularly appeal to Scripture, the writings of Church fathers and doctors, the teachings of Church councils, popes, and bodies of bishops. Sometimes these sources are cited in detail; often they are referred to generally by pointing out that the old positions belong to the Church's constant and very firm moral teaching, which no Catholic bishop or theologian contradicted until very recently.

The implication is that the Holy Spirit enlightened the Church through the centuries when the old positions on moral issues were developed and proposed as essential elements of Jesus' way. So, the same Spirit cannot now be enlightening Catholics that the new positions are acceptable. Rather, the Holy Spirit is enlightening the popes and those who agree with them—bishops, theologians, and faithful at large—in holding the old positions.

Underlying this line of argument is the assumption that the whole Catholic Church could not have been wrong about moral norms which were universally received,

held, and handed on — down through the centuries until our own day — as important requirements of Jesus' way. This assumption in turn implies that unlike various matters on which teachers in the Church have been mistaken, the disputed moral teachings somehow belong to God's revelation in Jesus, and so have been believed and infallibly taught by the Church, although never yet solemnly defined.

The corresponding view of the magisterium is that the pope and other bishops working with him, as leaders of the Church, can and must decisively answer questions and settle arguments about what truly belongs to and follows out Jesus' way. Having themselves first learned that way from the Church, whose members they were before they became her leaders, they exercise their leadership in Church teaching by bearing witness to the tradition they received, and judging disputed questions by the standard of that same tradition, even against a contrary consensus of some theologians, who base their opinion on the contemporary experience of some Catholics.

I think the old positions on the moral issues and the old view of the magisterium are sound.

If one sets aside the past century and considers the entire previous Jewish and Christian tradition, its massiveness and unity are impressive. Not only no Catholic but no other Christian and no Jew ever would have dared to say of choices to seek sexual satisfaction apart from marriage or to kill the innocent anything but: These choices are sinful; those who make and do not repent them can have no part in God's kingdom. Thus, to accept the new positions is to imply that until yesterday the whole people of God grossly misunderstood the way of life he commanded.

Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that in Jesus God did reveal how to live in a truly human and holy way. Thus, it does make sense to assent to a magister-



ium which tries to judge moral issues by the tradition which conveys that revelation. I see no good reasons to believe that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the Church today through the experience of Catholics whose way of life in the relevant respects precisely conforms to the standards of the contemporary nonbelieving world. Thus, it does not seem to me to make any sense to assent to the consensus of the group of theologians whose chief theological source is the experience of such Catholics.

Theologians holding the new positions on the moral issues and the new view of the magisterium often exaggerate the extent of consensus in their favor, and thus inadvertently admit their case's weakness. If they had grounds for their opinion other than its popularity and their own consensus in favor of it, they would not need to ignore and belittle, as they often do, the many competent theologians who think otherwise. And the remarkable fact about the *sensus fidelium* is that despite everything, so many Catholics still try to follow what the Church tells us truly is Jesus' way. ■