

THE INSTITUTIONAL CENTERED CHURCH OF JOHN PAUL II

Pope Francis' synodal model is a call to reform John Paul II's view of the institutional church and his understanding of the nature of the teaching authority in the church. Although this view of the church was developed during the papacy of John Paul II, it is also supported by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who was prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith under John Paul II and later became Benedict XVI. For the sake of simplicity, it will be referred to as John Paul II's view of the church. Understanding the difference between John Paul II's view of the church and that of Pope Francis is important for two reasons. First, one can only fully understand Pope Francis's view of the church and his mission of reform by viewing it in contrast to the papacies of the two popes who preceded him. Secondly, the source of the opposition within the church to Pope Francis' reform is rooted in the cardinals, bishops, priests, theologians, and laity who continue to support John Paul II's view of the church and are actively working to restore it by deliberately undermining the authenticity of Pope's Francis' papacy.

John Paul II's Notion of the Church

John Paul II proclaimed and fostered an ecclesiology that emphasizes the institutional church and the absolute authority of the pope and the magisterium of the church. He downplayed, to say the least, the themes of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and attempted to recreate a twentieth century version of the church of the First Vatican Council (1870). He viewed the institutional church as a hierarchical, monarchical, infallible society, a perfect society. This view of the church adopted a predominately intellectual model of revelation and the mission of the church. Revelation is defined as the manifestation of divine truths and the mission of the church is described as the preservation and the transmission of the gift of truth. (*Donum Veritatis*, 1990, *DV*, 2 and 3). The ultimate objective of revelation is said to

be achieved when all the faithful and bishops are in universal agreement on the church's teachings on faith and morals. (*DV*, 4). According to *Donum Veritatis* the authority of the magisterium is rooted in the gift of infallibility. The sole, and exclusive, interpreter of revelation is the magisterium, the pope and the Roman Curia, because it participates in the church's gift of infallibility by virtue of the authority it receives from Christ. (*DV*, 13).

The document does accept Vatican II's notion of the prophetic teaching role of the faithful, the *sensus fidei*, which states that "the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the holy one [the Holy Spirit], cannot err in matters of belief." (*LG, Lumen Gentium*, 12).

Although a distinct source of revelation, *Lumen Gentium* points out that this infallible teaching role of the laity is exercised under the guidance of the teaching authority of the church. (*LG*, 12).

Donum Veritatis interprets this relationship to church authority to mean that the *sensus fidei* is only authentically exercised when the faith of the people finds itself in total and absolute agreement with the institutional magisterium of the pope and the Roman Curia. (*DV*, 13 and 35). Such an interpretation dismisses and ignores the uniqueness and significance of this infallible source of the voice of the Holy Spirit for the deliberations of the institutional magisterium.

During the papacy of John Paul II this hierarchical authoritarian model of the institutional church was reinforced by the introduction of a new category of doctrinal truth, definitive truths. This added a third category of truths to the traditional twofold distinction between infallible and noninfallible teachings. So new was this category of definitive truths that it had no basis in canon law. To correct this, John Paul II, in his apostolic letter, *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (May 1, 1998) amended canon 750, in the western church, and canon 598, in the eastern church, to include the category of definitive truths. In order to ensure that the canonical punishments for rejecting church teaching applied to definitive truths, John Paul II amended canon 1371, in the western

church, and canon 1463, in the eastern church, to include canonical punishments for rejecting definitive truths. Although *Ad Tuendam Fidem* gave definitive truths a legal foundation, it did not clearly define the nature of definitive truths and their relationship to infallible and noninfallible teachings of the church.

The first official attempt to define definitive truths is found in the document, the *Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the "Professio fidei,"* (June 29, 1998). According to the *Commentary*, definitive truths include all those truths in the area of faith and morals that are necessary for "faithfully expounding the deposit of faith, even if they have not been proposed by the Magisterium of the Church as formally revealed." (*Commentary*, 6). This might lead one to suspect that definitive truths require a more binding assent, yet are still not infallible. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the *Commentary* continues its explanation of definitive truths, we find that there are two types of definitive truths, a "defining" definitive truth and a "non-defining" definitive truth, and that both are infallible. A "defining" definitive truth is one that has been "solemnly defined by an 'ex cathedra' pronouncement by the Roman Pontiff or by the action of an ecumenical council." (*Commentary*, 9). In reality, however, this type of definitive truth is exactly the same as the first category of truths listed in the *Commentary*, formally defined infallible teachings of the church. A "non-defining" definitive truth is one that has not been formally defined to be infallible, but is said to be taught infallibility through the ordinary magisterium. (*Commentary*, 9). What is clear here is that the *Commentary* intends to ascribe infallibility to all definitive truths. This observation is further supported by the fact that the *Commentary* identifies the assent owed to the definitive truths, the second category, with the assent owed to the first category, formally revealed truths. (*Commentary*, 8).

The *Commentary* does present a third category of truths, non-definitive truths, which includes all those teachings on faith and morals presented as true or at least sure, even if they have not been formally defined or proposed as definitive. (*Commentary*, 10). To teach something contrary to these teachings is described as “erroneous,” or “rash,” or “dangerous,” and therefore cannot be safely held. There is no mention that the truths in this category have traditionally been described as noninfallible teachings which, as such, can be changed and are open to legitimate theological dissent and reform. The *Commentary*’s intent to highlight the definitive nature of the teachings of the magisterium and diminish the significance of non-definitive truths is further demonstrated by that fact that there are no examples of truths given in the category.

In addition to attributing infallibility to all definitive truths, the *Commentary* extends the pope’s gift of infallibility beyond the traditional view defined at the First Vatican Council. According to the *Commentary*, the pope, acting alone, without an ecumenical council, and without making an *ex cathedra* solemn declaration, can declare that a “non-defining” definitive truth is an infallible teaching of the ordinary and universal magisterium. (*Commentary*, 9). The *Commentary* also appears to extend the gift of infallibility to statements and documents of the Roman Curia by introducing what it refers to as the “doctrine of the infallibility of the magisterium”. In the traditional Catholic understanding the documents of the Roman Curia, including the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, have never been considered to be infallible statements. The members of the various Roman Congregations do not participate in the gift of infallibility, nor do the documents they publish.

In the documents of John Paul II and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith the term “definitive” is applied more and more to the various teachings of the church, and more and more it appears to carry the connotation of infallibility. *Donum Veritatis* maintains that all of the

teachings of the church are definitive even if they have not been divinely revealed. (*DV*, 16,17, and 23). The definitive character of the teachings of the church is also extended to matters of discipline (*DV*, 17), the documents issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (*DV*, 18), and the teachings of individual bishops in their own dioceses (*DV*, 19). Nowhere do we find the acceptance of the existence of noninfallible truths that can be in error and are open to the possibility of change and reform. Most of these truths appear to be definitive truths waiting to be infallibly defined. Everything seems to be settled.

In the context of this understanding of the nature of revealed truth and the infallible and exclusive teaching authority of the institutional magisterium, located in the pope and the Roman Curia, the act of faith is described as an intellectual assent to the truths of faith without any dissent. “The freedom of the act of faith cannot justify a right to dissent.” (*DV*, 36). Dissent to any of the teachings of the magisterium is totally unacceptable and incompatible with the act of faith. The act of faith is described as the fundamental openness to loyally accept all the teachings of the magisterium by reason of the obedience of faith. (*DV*, 29). The freedom of the act of faith does not permit one to dissent from a teaching of the church even on the basis of conscience. This is so because, according to *Donum Veritatis*, the proper formation of a right conscience in the act of faith can only be achieved through an unconditional and total acceptance of all the teachings of the magisterium without dissent. One cannot set up a “supreme magisterium of conscience” in opposition to the magisterium of the church. (*DV*, 38). As a result, the exercise of freedom in the act of faith is reduced to blindly obeying all of the teachings of the magisterium.

Faithful membership in the church of John Paul II demanded an absolute obedience to the infallible magisterium of the pope and the Roman Curia and an unquestioning loyalty to the pope and his view of the institutional structure of the church. It was an institutional church that

maintained that it had all the right answers on all the aspects of faith, whether it was the church's dogmatic teachings on the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the real presence in the Eucharist, the ordination of women, the celibacy of the priesthood, or the moral teachings of the church on human sexuality, abortion, birth control and homosexuality. The church provided everything a Catholic needed to know. There were no unanswered questions. The directives from the Holy See and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith provided all the correct answers to questions about the liturgy, episcopal conferences, the participation of the laity, the role of women in the church, the appointment of bishops, liberation theology, the teaching role of theologians. Juridical procedures were established for condemning, punishing, and even sometimes excommunicating theologians and other believers who dissented from any of the teachings and directives of this institutional view of the church. The impression was given that the institutional church had the answers to the sexual abuse crisis and had adequate procedures to manage it, which, of course, eventually proved not to be the case.

The institutional church of John Paul II was a church with absolutely fixed borders. You were either "all in" or "out." There was no room for believers on the boundaries, for those not in the center. There was no room for those on the peripheries. In this church there was little room for divorced and remarried Catholics and for Catholics who are homosexual, gay, lesbian, or transgender. Refugees and immigrants were not always readily welcomed and received with open arms in this European centered church. The concerns of the marginalized peoples of the global church, those mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, those discriminated against on the basis of sex, race, age, disability, or homelessness were not addressed in the official list of answers. There was no room for Catholics who did not share the political agendas adopted by this institutional church, its efforts to restore institutional European

Catholicism and the political cultural wars of the integralist U.S. bishops. Catholics who embraced the ecclesiology, the theology, and the message of renewal and reform of the Second Vatican Council found themselves isolated and their views rejected. Theologians who presented new ideas that challenged and critiqued the established theology of this view of the church found themselves isolated, rejected, and threatened with excommunication, and the loss of their positions. In this church the ministry and service to the needs of the victims of sexual abuse were subordinated to maintaining the institutional church and guaranteeing its survival. At first the victims were ignored, then disbelieved, then made to feel guilty for questioning the integrity of the hierarchy and the institutional church. Faithful Catholics who saw the hypocrisy and injustices in the church's effort to manage the sexual abuse crisis and the cover-up by the hierarchy became more and more alienated and uncomfortable living in this hierarchical institutional church. It was difficult to find God's love and service. How could faith be equated with loyalty to the view of the institutional church?

To sum up, John Paul II's view of the church turned the institutional church into an ideology. It absolutized the nature of the church's dogmatic teachings, extended infallibility beyond the limits set by the First Vatican Council, and identified revelation exclusively with an ultramontane interpretation of the magisterium and the teaching authority of the church. Its primary objective was its own survival. This is evident from those who continue to support this view the church in opposition to Pope Francis.