

Reasons for Believing

8

**The Church:
Christ's Voice
to the World**

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⊕ faith pamphlets

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
<i>Man does not live on Bread alone.....</i>	<i>4</i>
We long to know the Truth.....	5
<i>The Truth will set you free.....</i>	<i>6</i>
God reveals himself in History	6
Jesus teaches with Authority.....	7
Jesus confers his Authority on his Church.....	8
<i>The Vocation of the Apostles.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>The Role of Peter.....</i>	<i>9</i>
The Church continues the Teaching of Jesus.....	10
<i>The Apostles appoint Successors.....</i>	<i>10</i>
Christ's Teaching is alive and active today	11
<i>The Scope of the Magisterium: Faith and Morals.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Infallibility: a Mark of the Church.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>The Church and the Unity-Law.....</i>	<i>13</i>
Holy Scripture: the Word of God.....	13
<i>Where does the Bible come from?.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>What does the Bible mean?.....</i>	<i>14</i>
Tradition: handing on divine Revelation	15
<i>Old Disputes and new Questions</i>	<i>16</i>
Exercising the Ministry of Teaching	17
Loving Obedience to the Teaching of Christ.....	18
Truth at the Service of Love	19

REASONS FOR BELIEVING (8)

The Church: Christ's Voice to the World

Introduction

We want God, we want God, we want God in the family, we want God in the schools, we want God in books, we want God, we want God ...

When Pope John Paul II returned to Poland on 2nd June 1979 for the first time after his election as Pope, he celebrated Mass in the Victory Square in Warsaw. His sermon was repeatedly interrupted by a 300,000 strong crowd in the square and a further 750,000 overflowing into the surrounding streets chanting these words. Catholic Poland had been saddled with an atheistic Communist government for nearly 45 years. Officially the practice of religion had been tolerated, but the reality had been one of unremitting obstruction and persecution. According to Marxism there would no longer be a role for religion once the state had organised society to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The Pope spoke of the Holy Spirit driving the apostles outwards from the Upper Room to proclaim the works of God throughout the world. He added, "Therefore Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe ... The exclusion of Christ from the

history of man is an act against man.” And the people’s response seemed unanimous: “We want God, we want God, we want God.”

Man does not live on Bread alone

This series of pamphlets tries to explain why man is naturally religious; why, from the depths of our being, we desire and need to hear the voice of God. To begin with, the sheer intelligible unity of the universe proclaims the existence of a supreme Mind which orders all things.¹ We human beings share in the freedom of this supreme Mind. Through the natural and human sciences we are able to ‘think the thoughts of God’ about the works of his hands. But more than that, we discern a restlessness in our hearts for meaningful contact with the living God. Because of our spiritual souls we need God more than anything else.² One million Polish Catholics confirmed the truth of the words of Jesus, that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4; cf. Deut 8:3).

But can we be sure that the human yearning for God is not just wishful thinking or a delusion arising from human fears and ignorance? Is the human search for absolute truth and love just a craving for the infinite that can never be satisfied? These pamphlets aim to show that the human search for meaning, purpose and fulfilment is met, truly and uniquely, in Jesus Christ, who is God’s Word made flesh. He is the answer to our questioning about ourselves and our universe.³ He is the way, the truth and the life for us (cf. John 14:6). He lived, died and rose from the dead 2000 years ago, but he is still with us today in and through the Church which he founded. Through the sacraments of the Church he is our Bread of Life. He heals us of the damage of sin and nourishes us with the grace that we need to reach our fulfilment in God.⁴ But if Christ is truly with us always until the end of time (cf. Matt 28:20), how does he still teach us in the world today? How can we be sure of the way the Good Shepherd wishes to mark out for us each day of our life

¹ See the first pamphlet in this series: *Can we be sure God exists?*

² See the second pamphlet in this series: *What makes Man Unique?*

³ See the fifth and sixth pamphlets in this series: *Jesus Christ our Saviour* and *Jesus Christ our Redeemer*.

⁴ See the seventh pamphlet in this series: *The Church: Christ with us Always*.

with all its many moral and spiritual decisions? How can we hear the voice of Christ *today*?

We long to know the Truth

To be human means to desire to know the truth. Even a liar doesn't like to be lied to. In so many areas of human experience and behaviour we presume our ability to discover the truth. For example, science is what we call the truth about the relationships between the physical elements that make up the universe; history is what we call the truth about past human behaviour and relationships and how they brought about the present. Most of all, however, we desire to know the truth about ourselves and the truth about God.

God is pure spirit. He totally transcends the world; that is, he exists above and quite independently of the world, which is his creation. Nevertheless, the sheer intelligible complexity of the world points unambiguously to the truth of his existence. Since the world we study through science is intelligible, it cannot be the result of random processes or chaos. On the contrary, 'behind' or 'above' it there must be a principle of ordering intelligence, a *Logos*.⁵ To state the existence of God is therefore to state a logical requirement of science. For the laws of science explain how the universe works, but only God can explain the existence of science in the first place.

However, since God utterly transcends his creation, we cannot learn the whole truth about him simply by studying the world. Instead, we look to God to *reveal* himself and his mind to us. This means that human beings are naturally and spontaneously religious: we expect God to speak to us, we hope that God will act on our behalf, and we try to communicate with God through prayer.

This mutual communication between ourselves and God is vital to our personal fulfilment, because communication lies at the heart of love. To know and love God is the only thing that will ultimately satisfy us. As St Augustine so clearly understood, "You made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."⁶ And, of course, this insight

⁵ The Greek word *logos* means 'word', 'thought' or 'reason'. It is the root of the English word logic. St John calls Jesus the *Logos* or Word at the beginning of his Gospel.

⁶ St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, book 1, chapter 1.

reflects the teaching of the Lord himself: "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

The Truth will set you free

There is another reason too why we need God to reveal his truth to us. We know only too well that we are not perfect. In fact, we are all damaged by original sin and our own personal sins.⁷ One of the most insidious effects of original sin is that the truth of God and his will for us is no longer obvious to us. Our intellects and our consciences are somehow clouded. It is now all too easy for us to make mistakes about the existence of God, of our souls and of life after death, and we often fail to judge correctly what is right and wrong. It is only through God's revelation that we can attain to the certainty in these matters that we and our society yearn for and so desperately need. Again, this is only to state the teaching of Jesus himself: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

God reveals himself in History

From the first moment of our creation God has revealed himself to humanity, communicating his truth and his will and entering into a communion of love. The book of Genesis poignantly speaks of God walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening and calling to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:8-9). Before the Fall this walking with God would surely have been an experience of joy-filled communication in deep friendship. Tragically we only hear about it after Adam and Eve have sinned, and they are afraid and hide from God.

Due to the impact of sin in us, our relationship with God is damaged, and many people now do not know God. Yet our fundamental orientation to God has not been totally destroyed by sin. So people have invented false religions in an attempt to recreate the God they have lost sight of.

However, the one true God did not abandon humanity to this ultimately futile search. He continually reached out to humanity, revealing himself in a gradual but ever-developing way to the People of Israel.⁸ Thus a coherent line of truth and goodness was built up through patriarchs, priests and

⁷ See the third pamphlet in this series: *The Disaster of Sin*.

⁸ See the fourth pamphlet in this series: *The Promise of the Messiah*.

prophets. Through this revelation God spoke of his love and mercy for his people. He invited them into a Covenant relationship of life and love. They would live out this Covenant by following the Law God had given and by entering into spiritual relationship with him through prayer and ritual.

From the earliest times, these priests and prophets pointed beyond themselves to One who was to come,⁹ One in whom God would speak to us directly about himself and about mankind—One who was the Word or *Logos* of God in person (cf. John 1:1,14). He would possess the very Spirit of God and would bring Good News to all humanity. Only one person in history has ever made a serious claim to fulfil this promise to be the Teacher of the Nations, and that is Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus teaches with Authority

At his trial Jesus told his judge, Pontius Pilate, the reason for his mission: “For this I was born, for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice” (John 18:37). What was the “truth” which Jesus taught? In essence it was the single truth about his own person: Jesus proclaimed *himself* as the definitive revelation of God. He did this through all his words and actions, particularly in the years of his public ministry. In his teaching he revealed to the people both the truth about God and the truth about themselves. Furthermore, he revealed to them his desire to share his very divine life with them through astounding and moving teachings, such as, “I am the bread of life”, “I am the good shepherd”, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 6:35, 10:11, 11:25).

However, these “I am” sayings show us much more than just Jesus’ desire to be the fulfilment of our life; they constitute an unambiguous claim to be God in person. For Jesus is using the name which God revealed to Moses at the burning bush:

Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel ... and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex 3:13-14).

⁹ See, for example, Deut 18:15-18, 2 Sam 7:11-16, Is 9:6-7, Is 11:1-5, Ezek 34:15,23-24, Dan 7:13-14.

Jesus' hearers understood quite clearly the meaning of his sayings: those who did not believe in him thought it was blasphemy and responded accordingly: "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.' So they took up stones to throw at him" (John 8:58-59).

In fact, Jesus' claim to teach with divine authority—because he is God in person—is found time and again in the Gospels. He placed himself higher than Moses, the great teacher of the people of Israel, by claiming authority to reinterpret the laws on marriage, fasting and the Sabbath (e.g. Mark 10:2-12, 2:18-20, 2:23-28). Indeed he claimed that he had actually come to complete the Law (Matt 5:17), and in a series of sayings he taught the full meaning of the Old Law; and he taught it on his *own* authority: "You have heard that it was said ... But *I say* to you ..." (cf. Matt 5:21-48). Thus Jesus claimed a personal authority which none of the prophets ever dared to assume. They always made it perfectly clear that their teaching was *not* their own; they were only messengers who cried, "Thus says the Lord ...". Again, by Jesus' use of the expression "Amen, I say to you ..." (often translated "Truly, I say to you" or "I tell you solemnly") he was presenting his teaching as *the* Truth and therefore claiming divine authority.

Jesus' extraordinary claims had a mixed impact on those who listened. Some found his teaching and his claims hard to accept. After his teaching on the Eucharist, "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66). However, the positive impression Jesus made in his teaching is also frequently noted in the Gospels. Mark records that in the earliest days of his ministry Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum: "And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22). A little later the people remarked with delight, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27).

Jesus confers his Authority on his Church

The Vocation of the Apostles

Right at the beginning of his public ministry Jesus called his first disciples. And from among this large group of disciples, he chose the twelve, whom he called apostles (Luke 6:13). These enjoyed a special intimacy with Jesus and he taught them in a special way (e.g. Mark 4:34, 8:31, 9:30-31), for they were "to be with him, and to be sent out to preach" (Mark 3:14).

Luke tells us that Jesus expressly gave them power and authority over demons, to cure and to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-2). The authority Christ conferred on his apostles was a share in his own *divine* authority. In his long discourse at the Last Supper, recorded by John, Jesus explained how this would come about. He promised that he would send them the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth”, as their Counsellor. The Holy Spirit would remind them of all Jesus had said and would guide them into all truth (cf. John 14:16-17, 14:26, 15:26, 16:13-15). After his Resurrection Jesus made it completely clear that the mission of the apostles was to be a continuation of the mission he himself had received from his Father:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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 (Matt 28:18-20; cf. John 20:21-22).

The Role of Peter

From among the twelve Jesus singled out Peter for a particular teaching and unifying role among his followers. Having confessed his faith in Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”, Jesus told Peter that he had not made this profession on the strength of his own human insight but through a direct revelation by the Father. Then Jesus revealed his future role in the Church:

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matt 16:16-19).

This commission clearly applies to Peter alone, and not to all the apostles with Peter just acting as their representative, since the pronouns in the original Greek text are singular.¹⁰ Likewise it was only Peter’s name that was changed. This recalls the changing of Abram’s name to Abraham (Gen 17:5;

¹⁰ A little later on Jesus does extend the authority to bind and loose to all the apostles (Matt 18:18); nevertheless, here the power is given individually and specifically to Peter. And anyway, the role as rock and key-bearer is unique to Peter.

cf. Is 51:1-2, where Abraham is referred to as a rock). As Abraham was the leader of the Old Israel, so Peter is to be the leader of the New Israel, the Church. There is also a powerful significance to Peter's new name—or rather not so much a name as a nickname—meaning rock. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is Christ himself who is portrayed as the foundation-rock of the Church (e.g. 1 Cor 3:11; cf. 1 Cor 10:4). Clearly, by calling Peter the rock on which he would build his Church, Jesus was entrusting him with a divine mission of care for the Church.

Even as Jesus foretold Peter's denials, he reaffirmed that his mission, once he had repented, was to "strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32). By the Sea of Galilee Peter was able to undo his threefold denial with a threefold profession of love, and Jesus once again confirmed him in his mission to feed and tend the Lord's sheep (John 21:15-17). It is clear from this that Peter's office in the Church did not depend on his own personal abilities or even holiness but was rooted in a divine guarantee that his faith would not fail.

The Church continues the Teaching of Jesus

The Acts of the Apostles, the letters of St Paul and the other New Testament writings and indeed secular history all bear witness to the fact that after Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles went out into the world and proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and that this Jesus was still alive and active in his Church. On the very day of Pentecost, in response to the apostles' preaching, some 3000 people were converted and baptised (Acts 2:41). Paul's letters testify to his own extraordinary missionary journeys, which took him as far as Rome, and the Christians of southern India are in no doubt that the faith was brought to them by the apostle Thomas in 53 AD, although no documentary evidence for this survives.

The Apostles appoint Successors

The term *apostle* means one sent as a messenger. But it was not just the twelve whom Jesus wished to be his authoritative messengers. After all, before he ascended into heaven he commanded his apostles to preach the Gospel to the whole of creation and to make disciples of all nations, and he promised that he would be with them to the end of time (Matt 28:16-20;

Mark 16:15). Clearly the apostles themselves would not be around to the end of time, nor could they reach all nations within their lifetime. Evidently, therefore, Jesus intended that they should transmit the authority he had given them to others who would succeed them in their ministry. And in fact the New Testament describes this appointment or ordaining of successors, handing on the Lord's authority. It took place after prayer and fasting through a ritual laying on of hands (1 Tim 4:14, 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6; cf. Acts 6:6). The men thus appointed, like Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus, were to exercise oversight in the Churches.

In one of the earliest Christian writings, the first letter of Clement (95-97 AD), we learn that the apostles "appointed their first converts—after testing them by the Spirit—to be bishops and deacons for the believers of the future" (1 Clem 42.4). There is also evidence for the continuation of a teaching and sanctifying office in succession to that of the apostles in writings by Ignatius (d. 107), Papias (d. 130), Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202) and Cyprian (d. 258) to mention but a few. Of particular interest is Tertullian (d. 225), who contrasts the authority of the apostolic Churches with the lack of authority of the heretics.¹¹ With regard to the continuance of the Petrine ministry in the Church, it is noteworthy that St Irenaeus lists the first 12 successors of St Peter, up to Eleutherius who was the current bishop of Rome.¹² We can say therefore that the Church of the first centuries of the Christian era believed that it spoke with the authority of the apostles, who had been charged by Christ himself to be his voice in the world.

Christ's Teaching is alive and active today

So far we have seen that God created us to find our true meaning and fulfilment in him, and therefore in the depths of our being we yearn to know God and his truth and love. Yet, because God is transcendent, we cannot find this truth all by ourselves; we need God to reveal himself to us. And this is exactly what he has done throughout human history, communicating himself and his truth step by step to the people of Israel, leading up to his total self-revelation in the person of Jesus, who is true God and true man.

In order that this great revelation should not become lost in history or corrupted by the accumulation of mistakes over the ages, Jesus called and

¹¹ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 32.

¹² Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.3.3.

commissioned twelve apostles to be his chosen witnesses. He gave to them, and to Peter in a particular and unique way, a share in his own divine authority to teach the truth with certainty. He did this by sending them the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In accordance with the will of Christ the apostles ordained successors, so that their ministry and authority could continue in the Church until the end of time. Thus the Pope and the bishops link us directly back to Christ himself, through the working of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit keeps the whole Church at every moment united to Jesus in heaven and continuously inspires the Church to remember the truth which Jesus revealed.

The Scope of the Magisterium: Faith and Morals

This special role or office of teaching in the Church is called the *Magisterium*. Since the Magisterium is a real continuation of the teaching authority of Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, it will have two essential characteristics. Firstly, it will extend over everything we need to know in order to follow Christ. That is, it will teach authoritatively about God and his works and our relationship with him, and also about how we should relate to one another. These two areas are usually summarised as *faith and morals*. They correspond in essence to Jesus' own summary of the Christian life: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ... You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31).

Infallibility: a Mark of the Church

Secondly, the Magisterium must be able to teach the truth with utter certainty. We have already seen that Jesus declared that he had come into the world to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37), and that he himself is the truth (John 14:6). This is an immediate consequence of Jesus' divinity, for God is infinite being and goodness and truth. The corollary of this is that the Church's supreme teaching will also be the guaranteed truth.

This is the meaning of the Catholic Church's claim to teach *infallibly*—that is, without error—when it exercises the supreme authority given to it by Christ. If we did not truly believe that Jesus is God, then this claim would be the most outrageous arrogance. But if Jesus is true God, then it is inconceivable that he should teach a lie himself, or that he should permit his teaching to be lost to the world through the mistakes of his followers. If Jesus is God, and if his message is essential to the world's salvation, then the

world needs to have somewhere it can turn to in order to hear what Jesus really said, what he really meant. This place, this guaranteed bearer of Christ's teaching, is the Church. This is why Christ's Church must be infallible. Indeed, the very fact that the Catholic Church makes this astonishing claim to infallibility witnesses both to the authenticity of the Church and also to the divinity of its Founder.

The Church and the Unity-Law

We can see, therefore, that the teaching Church has a central place in God's ongoing plan for his world. This plan—which is the underlying theme of all the pamphlets in this series—embraces everything from the first moment of creation to the second coming of Christ. It is always developmental: every work of God builds upon his previous works; nothing is ever taken back. It is governed by a *Unity-Law of Control and Direction*.¹³ It begins with the physical development of the cosmos, then the biological development or evolution of life. At the right time, when everything is ready, God infuses the spiritual soul into the highest of his creatures, and the result is mankind. The development now continues on a new plane: religious and spiritual. God reveals himself progressively to the people of Israel, preparing for the climax of the plan. Then at the right time, when all is ready, God himself enters his creation in the person of Jesus: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). However, God's plan does not come to an end or go backwards with Jesus' death, Resurrection and Ascension. Rather, with the sending of the Holy Spirit into the Church, the revelation of God is spread throughout the whole world and throughout history, and God guides his Church to understand this truth more fully and to apply it to every area of our life. And so the kingdom of God is built up in the world until Christ's glorious second coming, when God's plan will be truly complete and God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:28).

Holy Scripture: the Word of God

We must now consider how the Catholic Church exercises this sacred and precious teaching ministry. First of all, however, we need to ask whether, in fact, we *really* need the Magisterium at all. After all, the Church believes that the Bible, comprising the Old and New Testaments, is truly the word of

¹³ See especially the fifth pamphlet in this series: *Jesus Christ our Saviour*.

God. Should it not be enough therefore simply to read the Bible prayerfully to discover the voice of Christ for our lives and for the world? This is a key question posed to Catholics by Christians of the Protestant Reformation.

Where does the Bible come from?

The earliest New Testament writing is generally thought to be St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, which may date from as early as 50 AD. The first Gospel to be written is thought to be that of Mark dating from around 68 AD.¹⁴ However, Jesus Christ ascended into heaven and sent the Holy Spirit around 33 AD. Evidently the Church existed and flourished with the teaching of Jesus handed on in the form of oral tradition for nearly 20 years before the first letter of St Paul was written, and for around 35 years before the first Scriptural account of the life and ministry of Jesus was completed.

This raises the key question of how the New Testament came into existence and who decided which writings were to be included and which ones left out. This is the question of the *canon* of Scripture, the definitive and fixed list of the books of the Bible. In fact it took the Church some 300 years to fix the canon. It was decided by various councils of bishops, who made their decisions based on a number of criteria: firstly whether the books to be included were in conformity with the norms of doctrine handed on orally in the Church, then their established use in the liturgy, their age, and whether they claimed to be of apostolic origin. The essential point is that *even for the Bible to come into existence* in the first place required the prior existence in the Church of authentic Tradition and a Magisterium with God-given authority to make doctrinal decisions. It was members of the Church who wrote the Bible and it was the Church which put the books of the Bible together—all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had given to his Church. So it is the Church which 'guarantees' the Bible and not vice versa.

What does the Bible mean?

A further important point about the relationship between the Bible and the Magisterium has to be made. When we read anything, we need to ask what the intention of the author was: what meaning did he or she intend to

¹⁴ It must be admitted that scholars vary considerably in their attempts to date the various New Testament writings.

communicate? For example, if we read, “The clouds are racing across the sky”, should these words be taken literally or figuratively? Is the author implying that clouds have an intelligence and will of their own, or is a metaphor being employed? It may not always be obvious from the context alone what is intended. If we want to know the truth, we need to ask the author.

So, when we come to the Bible, how can we ask the Author of the word of God what exactly he intends by certain phrases and passages? Catholics believe that the Bible is the work of the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit who was given to the Church at Pentecost inspired the human authors of the books of the Bible, guided the bishops of the Church to fix the canon of Scripture, and still today guides the Church into the whole truth (cf. John 16:13). Thus the Bible should always be read within the faith of the Church. And if there is any doubt as to the meaning of a text, then the guidance of the Church’s teaching authority should be sought.

For example, St John records Jesus as saying, “the Father and I are one”, but a little later, during the Last Supper, he says, “the Father is greater than I” (John 10:30, 14:28). Not only is there apparently a possible contradiction here, but over the centuries sincere men and women like the followers of the monk Arius in the early 4th century and Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons in our own time have taken these words to mean that Jesus is not truly God. It took the bishops of the Church to show the authentic meaning of these texts by defining his divinity at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

Does all this make the Church’s Magisterium in fact superior to the word of God? The Magisterium itself firmly says no; it is rather its servant.

It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully.¹⁵

Tradition: handing on divine Revelation

We have seen that the Bible can only exist because of three things: (a) God’s self-revelation in the person of Jesus, (b) this revelation being handed on in the Church in the form of oral tradition, and (c) the Church’s Magisterium

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 10.

guided by the Holy Spirit to preserve the whole truth of Jesus Christ without error. Now we must look at the second of these issues: what is Tradition?

The word *tradition* often conjures up the idea of something old fashioned, quaint—and probably boring! But this is not at all what the Church means by this term. In origin the word *tradition* simply means ‘handing on’ the truth that we have been taught. It is what Jesus commissioned his apostles to do when he said, “Make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). It is what St Paul describes himself as doing for the Corinthians when he talks about the Eucharist and the Resurrection: “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you ...” (1 Cor 11:23; cf. 1 Cor 15:3). It is something that must be continued: “What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2). Tradition then is not something dead; it is a living process guided by Jesus himself.

As well as describing the process of handing on the Good News, tradition can also mean the News itself: “Stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess 2:15).

Old Disputes and new Questions

As in the case of Scripture, so also for Tradition, we need the Church’s Magisterium to guide us unerringly to recognise and safeguard what is authentic and to reject what is spurious. We also need the Magisterium to give sure guidance on the correct interpretation and application of Tradition and the avoidance of errors.

Changes in the world and society throw up challenges and questions in one age which were simply unknown in another. If the Church is truly the Body of Christ, then we must be able to turn to it in every age and ask for the truth that will lead to eternal life. The first major controversy to arise in the history of the Church was the question of whether non-Jewish converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised and to keep the whole Jewish Law. It was the Magisterium which resolved the issue at the Council of Jerusalem, an assembly of the apostles and elders described in chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles.

Nobody is asking today whether we need to observe all the practices of the Law of Moses, but there are many matters which are so important to

human living that the Church and the world need an answer which is as authoritative as if it came from the mouth of the Son of God. *What are our obligations to the poor in the new global village? What is the morality of nuclear armaments? Are new chemical and barrier methods of contraception morally acceptable? Now that women can be presidents and prime ministers, can they be priests too? What about in vitro fertilisation and human cloning? What about 'gay marriage' and homosexuality in general? In our modern scientific age, does it make any sense to talk about souls? Does the theory of evolution fit with the doctrine of creation?* The Church, with divine assistance, responds to these questions—and so many others—precisely in order that we might know the truth and enter into life. So the Magisterium of the Church develops its teaching through the ages, bringing forth treasures both old and new (cf. Matt 13:52).

Exercising the Ministry of Teaching

St Paul told Timothy that it was the Church which was “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). At the Second Vatican Council the bishops were keen to stress that those who exercise teaching authority in the Church do so on behalf of the Church as a whole. The reason for this is that the Holy Spirit’s gift of inerrancy in matters of faith and morals belongs ultimately to the whole Church.

The whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith [*sensus fidei*] of the whole people, when, from the bishops to the last of the lay faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals.¹⁶

This gift of the *sensus fidei* should not be misunderstood as granting people some sort of democratic right to question and even reject the Church’s teachings. It is rather a gift of the Holy Spirit that comes through being part of the Church and empowers the faithful to bear witness to the truths of Christ in the Church and the world.

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* 12.

Whilst this gift of infallibility does indeed belong to the whole Church, it was the will of Christ that it should be exercised on behalf of his people by his apostles, and Peter in a special way, and by their successors.

The college of bishops in communion with the Pope, and never without him, can teach infallibly (without error) on matters of faith and morals. They do so in two situations: firstly, when they define a doctrine when they are gathered together in an *Ecumenical Council* of all the bishops in the world; secondly, when dispersed throughout the world those in communion with the Pope unanimously teach that a doctrine should be held definitively.¹⁷

The Pope himself teaches infallibly when he teaches on a matter of faith or morals *ex cathedra*, that is, when speaking as supreme pastor he defines a doctrine to be held by the universal Church.¹⁸ He does not require the consent of any other bishops, or of any of the faithful, in order to teach infallibly in this way. Papal infallible statements do not have a specific form, although a solemn form was used for the definition of Mary's Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the Assumption of Mary in 1950—a form which is deeply expressive of the reality of Christ's power to teach the truth handed on and exercised in the Church:

By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we proclaim, declare and define as a dogma revealed by God ...¹⁹

Loving Obedience to the Teaching of Christ

How should we listen to the teaching Church? There are plenty of voices in our secular world and sadly even within the Church who encourage Catholics to adopt an attitude of questioning suspicion with regard even to the Church's most solemn teaching. For example, the debates following the publication of the notorious *The Da Vinci Code*²⁰ caused many to consider whether the Church really had been deceiving the faithful for 2000 years over matters like the perpetual virginity of Mary and whether Christ really married and had a family. Even those who rightly dismiss such ideas as pure

¹⁷ *Lumen Gentium* 25.

¹⁸ First Vatican Council, *Pastor Aeternus*; cf. *Lumen Gentium* 22, 25.

¹⁹ Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*.

²⁰ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, Bantam, 2003.

21st century fiction may be led to wonder whether the Church's teaching, whilst right about the 'big things', made many mistakes about 'little things'.

What should our attitude be to official documents of the Magisterium which are, however, not exercises of the supreme authority of the Church and are therefore not infallible?

When it comes to the question of interventions in the prudential order, it could happen that some Magisterial documents might not be free from all deficiencies ... But it would be contrary to the truth, if ... one were to conclude that the Church's Magisterium can be habitually mistaken in its prudential judgments, or that it does not enjoy divine assistance in the integral exercise of its mission.²¹

Clearly to adopt a minimalistic approach to listening to and obeying the Church even when it is not teaching at the highest level is to ignore the voice of Christ speaking quietly through an institution which, although made up of weak human beings, is still the Body of Christ—and more likely to be right than tabloid journalists! In fact the historical record of non-infallible papal teaching is impressive and something of which Catholics can be proud. There is, for example, the defence of the Jewish people in times of persecution from Pope Gregory I in 590 to Pius XI in 1936, and indeed the actions of Pius XII during the Second World War. Again, the only consistent condemnations of the African slave trade from its beginning in the late 15th century to its abolition in the 19th century came from the successors of St Peter. These correct and prophetic "prudential" interventions by Popes should be considered alongside less correct ones like the treatment of Galileo in the 17th century (for which the Church has made public apology).

Truth at the Service of Love

Mankind is on a quest to find the ultimate meaning or truth of existence. The fundamental claim of Christianity is that this truth, which humanity cannot reach by its own efforts, has made itself known in the world. The Truth which all people search for has come in search of us. The Truth is himself a person, Jesus Christ. He called himself "the way, the *truth* and the life" (John

²¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, *Donum Veritatis* 24.

14:6) and promised to remain with his disciples until the end of time. The worldwide community that he founded, the Catholic Church, claims to be the bearer of that truth for all time.

But Christ and his Church do not simply teach the truth as knowledge for knowledge's sake. When a lawyer asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment of the Law, Jesus replied that the greatest is love: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Jesus shows us that the end of truth is love. He both reveals this to us and makes it possible through his grace. Indeed the end of truth is not only love but *worship*, as St Paul teaches, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your rational²² worship" (Rom 12:1).

There are no short cuts to love. If we do not know the truth about God, about ourselves and about society, we will not love properly. Communism taught the opposite of this truth, and it was this lie that the people of Poland were beginning to reject when Pope John Paul II visited Warsaw in 1979. But it is not just atheistic Communism which seeks to reject or stifle the voice of Christ in his Church. The same lie is to be found in secular materialism. John Paul II also warned the affluent West, "Lose the truth about God and you will lose the truth about man"²³—as we surely have done in a society which decides for itself the value of life in the womb and the life of the elderly. To want God "in the family, in schools, in books" is a wise request. It is a desire which wells up from the depths of every human heart. It is nourished in the heart of the Church which Christ founded that his voice might be heard and his love might be received.

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love (Eph 4:15-16).

²² The original Greek word here is *logike*, which is linked to the word *logos* (see footnote 5 above): our rational, logical minds lead us to right worship.

²³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* 21.