

By Whose Authority?

The Foundations, Exercise of and Response to Authority in the Church

I. Introduction

- A. We're living at a time where everybody — possibly except anarchists — admits that there's a crisis of authority.
 1. There exists a growing cynicism toward political leaders that began at the time of the Vietnam War and has never really abated.
 2. There exists a media culture that is becoming more and more tabloid, focused on the falls of those with influence, whether it be scandals of political leaders, sports heroes, or Hollywood celebrities.
 3. Parents are teaming up with their kids, whenever the kids have a problem, to blame their teachers for student behavioral issues or academic problems.
 4. Burgeoning rates of broken families, messy divorces, the stresses of step-parents or live-in lovers have harmed many kids' ability to respect the authority of their progenitors.
 5. A legal system in which the application of the rule of law seems arbitrary, varying from one judge or court to another, when many believe many judges and courts legislate rather than interpret the law, has decreased their authority.
 6. A few celebrated police corruption probes has caused, at least in some major cities, a decrease in respect for the integrity and authority of law enforcement.
 7. And the various scandals that have plagued religious figures, beginning with the hypocrisy of some famous televangelists, and then dwarfed by the double scandal of priest-abusers and bishops who didn't permanently remove them from positions to harm again, have dramatically undermined the authority of religious leaders.
 8. All of these problems, and others, have led many to have a general suspicion of authority as those in authority have either failed to live up to expectations or been perceived to fail.
- B. Exacerbating the problem, there has also been the deeper cause flowing from some of the movements in intellectual history over the course of the last century.
 1. Relativism has taught that there is "truth" per se. There may be "your" truth and "my truth" but there's no "the truth." If there's no truth, then there really are no "authorities" in terms of the bigger questions of life. Gandhi has his opinion, but that's all it remains, because relativism prevents someone's opinion from being right or wrong, especially when we're talking about ideas about the most important questions of life that cannot be viewed with empirical lenses.
 2. Coupled with relativism, modern emotivism has made the world revolve around feelings and many arguments are made not at rational levels but based on people's feelings being wounded. In a circumstance like this, people who don't like those in authority or what they say or do feel an added "moral" justification to oppose them.
 3. Finally, there's a progressivism flowing from the enlightenment that believes that, basically, we as a people are always getting smarter, better, more capable. This has made people suspicious of tradition itself and to the authority of tradition. It doesn't matter that people have never done something before in the history of civilization — like same-sex "marriages" — that just manifests that others were moral Neanderthals compared to us, who are much more enlightened.
- C. So when we begin to talk about the problem of authority in the Church, we need to keep all of this in mind. Catholics are influenced by the culture and there are strong cultural forces that form people to be suspicious of, and sometimes downright hostile to, authority. There's always, as well, the perennial temptation that was faced by Adam and Eve at the beginning and is faced by every person in every sin: the desire to "be like God," to be in control, not to be under authority, but become the actor, the

authority, the one calling the shots. Respect for authority is an acquired, not an inborn, skill. In the past, people were formed with a respect for authority. Today the culture makes them suspect.

- D. The title of this talk is “By whose authority? The Foundations, Exercise of and Response to Authority in the Church.” The organizers asked me to address specifically the dynamic of authority in the Church and how it interacts with the conscience of believers. If I were giving this talk for a bunch of atheists, I would need to tackle the question about God’s existence, about his intervention in world history, about the authority of what he has revealed, etc. But I’m going to prune those subject matters tonight by making some of what I’d call basic Catholic presumptions:
1. That people believe in God and that God, the author of the world, has authority.
 2. That we believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God and came to reveal to us both who God is, who we are, and how we’re called to grow as his image and likeness.
 3. That, because we believe in Jesus, we believe in what he said and did. Jesus’ words and actions are and ought to be authoritative not just in the Church but in the lives of Catholics.
 4. Finally, that we do not believe that we’re God. We’re not the final authority on things and need to be docile.
- E. I’d like to structure this talk in the following way:
1. A focus on the exercise and reception of Jesus’ authority in the Gospels.
 2. The transmission of this authority to his mystical body the Church according to a basic structure he himself made.
 3. Recognition and teaching of the New Testament on authority.
 4. How the authority of the Church is understood doctrinally, exercised and is meant to be received in terms of the Church’s three “munera,” her teaching, sanctifying and shepherding offices.
 5. A focus on the virtue of obedience in the Church.
 6. A discussion of the proper understanding of conscience
 7. Finally, I’d be happy to tackle whatever questions you’d have — and I hope you’ll have many, because this is a topic that is bound to provoke many.

II. The exercise and reception of Jesus’ authority

- A. Problems with authority in the Church are not new! Jesus himself encountered both great praise for his authority as well as much resistance.
- B. First, Praise
1. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, we read that “the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Mt 7:28-29). Not only did he teach beautifully, but taught with an authority that went beyond Moses:
 - a. Matt. 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.”
 - b. Matt. 5:27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”
 - c. Matt. 5:31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”
 - d. Matt. 5:33 “Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

- e. Matt. 5:38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; 40 and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; 41 and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.”
 - f. Matt. 5:43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
2. In his hometown synagogue in Nazareth,
 - a. Luke 4:16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; 17 and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” 20 **And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” 22 And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth;**
 - b. They soon turned on him, however, and tried to throw him over the precipice on which Nazareth had been built.
 3. In the Capernaum synagogue, his authority was doubly praised:
 - a. Mark 1:21 And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 **And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.** 23 And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; 24 and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 **And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”** 28 And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.
 4. Capernaum was the site of a dialogue with the Centurion about authority that Jesus used as a real model of faith.
 - a. Matt. 8:5 As he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, beseeching him 6 and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress.” 7 And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” 8 But the centurion answered him, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 **For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”** 10 **When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.** 11 I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.” 13 And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; be it done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

5. In St. John's Gospel, Jesus gives an extended explanation of his authority.
 - a. He said first that he was exercising the authority that God had given him.
 - i. John 5:25 "Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. **26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, 27 and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man.**"
 - ii. John 5:30 "**I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.**"
 - iii. John 14:10 "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? **The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority;** but the Father who dwells in me does his works."
 - b. He insisted that he wasn't speaking on his own authority.
 - i. John 7:17 "If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or **whether I am speaking on my own authority. 18 He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory;** but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood."
 - ii. John 8:28 So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that **I do nothing on my own authority** but speak thus as the Father taught me.
 - iii. John 12:49 **For I have not spoken on my own authority;** the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak."
- C. Jesus gave those words in St. John's Gospel in order to defend his authority against the scribes and Pharisees who were challenging him. But we find that resistance in other places as well. It was constant.
 1. See the famous scene of the healing of the paralytic.
 - a. Matt. 9:1 And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. 2 And behold, they brought to him a paralytic, lying on his bed; and when Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." 3 And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." 4 But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk? 6 **But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins**" — he then said to the paralytic — "Rise, take up your bed and go home." 7 And he rose and went home. 8 **When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.**
 2. The challenge of his authority in the Temple on Palm Sunday, after he had cleansed the temple.
 - a. Matt. 21:23 And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you a question; and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven or from men?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From men,' we are afraid of the multitude; for all hold that John was a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.
- D. Catechism summary
 1. CCC 581 The Jewish people and their spiritual leaders viewed Jesus as a rabbi. He often argued within the framework of rabbinical interpretation of the Law. **Yet Jesus could not help but offend the teachers of the Law, for he was not content to propose his interpretation alongside theirs but taught the people "as one who had authority, and not as their scribes".** In Jesus, the same Word of God that had resounded on Mount Sinai to give the written Law to Moses, made itself heard anew on the Mount of the Beatitudes. **Jesus did not abolish the Law but fulfilled it by giving its ultimate interpretation in a divine way:** "You have heard that it was said to the men of old... But I

say to you..." With this same divine authority, he disavowed certain human traditions of the Pharisees that were "making void the word of God."

- E. Jesus' authority was confirmed not merely by his "works," his miracles but by his resurrection:
1. CCC 651 "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." **The Resurrection above all constitutes the confirmation of all Christ's works and teachings.** All truths, even those most inaccessible to human reason, find their justification in Christ by his Resurrection has given **the definitive proof of his divine authority, which he had promised.**

III. Jesus' transmission of authority to the Church according to a basic structure

- A. We see it at their initial commissioning of the twelve
1. Matt. 10:1 ¶ And he called to him his twelve disciples and **gave them authority** over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.
 2. Mark 6:7 ¶ And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out **two by two**, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.
- B. Jesus also gave this authority to the seventy
1. Luke 10:17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" 18 And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. 19 **Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you.** 20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."
- C. He gave the Church as a whole a general authority
1. Matt. 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ... 15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 **Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.**"
- D. He also gave them authority to teach
1. Luke 10:16 "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me."
- E. He gave them authority over the sacraments, like the sacrament of confession
1. John 20:19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
- F. He gave specific authority to St. Peter to bind and loose.
1. Matt. 16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 **And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. 19 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." 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

2. CCC 553

- a. Jesus entrusted **a specific authority to Peter**: "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."
- b. **The "power of the keys" designates authority to govern the house of God, which is the Church. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, confirmed this mandate after his Resurrection: "Feed my sheep."**
- c. **The power to "bind and loose" connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church.**
- d. Jesus entrusted this authority to the Church through the ministry of the apostles and in particular through the ministry of Peter, the only one to whom he specifically entrusted the keys of the kingdom.

G. He spoke to the apostles about how to exercise authority in the Church.

1. Matt. 20:20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him, with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." 24 And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. **25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; 28 even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

2. This was the way he exercised his own authority.

H. Christ assigned them his kingdom and promises that their leadership will continue eschatologically.

1. Luke 22:28 "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; 29 and **I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom**, 30 that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and **sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel**.

I. Finally he gave the great commission, the great handing on of his authority.

1. Matt. 28:18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

IV. Recognition and teaching of authority in the early Church

A. There was still a problem of authority in the early Church. Multiple witnesses:

1. 2Pet. 2:10 ...and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and **despise authority**. ¶ Bold and willful, they are not afraid to revile the glorious ones,
2. 3John 9 ¶ I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, **does not acknowledge my authority**.
3. Jude 8 ¶ Yet in like manner these men in their dreamings defile the flesh, **reject authority**, and revile the glorious ones.

B. St. Paul also faced challenges. He never ceased to remind others that he had received authority from the Lord for his work

1. 2Cor. 10:8 For even if I boast a little too much of **our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you**, I shall not be put to shame.

2. 2Cor. 13:10 I write this while I am away from you, in order that when I come I may not have to be severe in my **use of the authority which the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.**
- C. St. Paul advised other apostles and bishops to exercise their authority
1. To Titus, he wrote: Titus 2:15 ¶ **Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.**
- D. He also advised the early Christians to respect authority in general
1. Rom. 13:1 ¶ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.
 2. This understanding of St. Paul was obviously shared by Jesus:
 - a. Jn 19:10 Pilate therefore said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” 11 Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin.”
- V. **How the authority of the Church is understood doctrinally, exercised and is meant to be received** in terms of the Church’s three “munera,” her teaching, sanctifying and shepherding offices.
- A. The two sources I will use will be Lumen Gentium, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I will highlight several points:
- B. Authority is a gift of the Holy Spirit
1. LG 7: There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives his different gifts for the welfare of the Church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-11). **Among these gifts the primacy belongs to the grace of the apostles to whose authority the Spirit himself subjects even those who are endowed with charisms** (cf. 1 Cor. 14).
- C. It affects the Church’s teaching and its reception. First the authority of the Church as a whole:
1. LG 12. The holy People of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office: it spreads abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips praising his name (cf. Heb. 13:15). **The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20 and 27) 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 faithful"[8] they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, **guided by the sacred teaching authority (magisterium), and obeying it, receives not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God (cf. 1 Th. 2:13),** the faith once for all delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3). The People unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life.
- D. Second, the authority of the bishops and the successor of St. Peter:
1. 22. The college or body of bishops has for all **that no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head, whose primatial authority, let it be added, over all, whether pastors or faithful, remains in its integrity.** For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, namely, and as pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered. The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in their role as teachers and pastors, and in it the apostolic college is perpetuated. **Together with their head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme and full authority over the universal Church;**[27] **but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff. The Lord made Peter alone the rock-foundation and the holder of the keys of the Church (cf. Mt. 16:18-19), and constituted him shepherd of his whole flock (cf. Jn. 21:15 ff.). It is clear, however, that the office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter (Mt. 16:19), was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head (Mt. 18:18; 28:16-20).**[28] This college, in so far as it is

composed of many members, is the expression of the multifariousness and universality of the People of God; and of the unity of the flock of Christ, in so far as it is assembled under one head. **In it the bishops, whilst loyally respecting the primacy and pre-eminence of their head, exercise their own proper authority for the good of their faithful**, indeed even for the good of the whole Church, the organic structure and harmony of which are strengthened by the continued influence of the Holy Spirit. **The supreme authority over the whole Church, which this college possesses, is exercised in a solemn way in an ecumenical council.** There never is an ecumenical council which is not confirmed or at least recognized as such by Peter's successor.

- E. In terms of the teaching, there are different forms with different specific authority. For ordinary teaching, they teach with Christ's authority, which needs to be received with ready and respectful allegiance of mind, a loyal submission of the will and intellect, and respect and sincere assent.
1. LG 25. Among the more important duties of bishops that of preaching the Gospel has pride of place. For the **bishops** are heralds of the faith, who draw new disciples to Christ; **they are authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ**, who preach the faith to the people assigned to them, the faith which is destined to inform their thinking and direct their conduct; and under the light of the Holy Spirit they make that faith shine forth, drawing from the storehouse of revelation new things and old (cf. Mt. 13:52); they make it bear fruit and with watchfulness they ward off whatever errors threaten their flock (cf. 2 Tim. 4-14). **Bishops who teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff are to be revered by all as witnesses of divine and Catholic truth; the faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops' decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind.**
 2. LG 25. This **loyal submission of the will and intellect** must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the **Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak ex cathedra in such wise, indeed, that his supreme teaching authority be acknowledged with respect, and sincere assent be given to decisions made by him**, conformably with his manifest mind and intention, which is made known principally either by the character of the documents in question, or by the frequency with which a certain doctrine is proposed, or by the manner in which the doctrine is formulated.
- F. With regard to infallible teaching, there is a loyal and obedient assent of faith that is required.
1. Overview: The magisterium can propose matters infallibly in two different ways.
 - a. First, a matter of faith or morals can be solemnly *defined* by an ecumenical council or by the Roman Pontiff when, "as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, he . . . proclaims by a definitive act some doctrine of faith or morals" (Vatican I, DS 3074).
 - b. Secondly, and this is most important to recognize, the magisterium can propose matters of faith or morals *infallibly* in the ordinary, day-to-day exercise of its authority when specific conditions are fulfilled. This teaching of Vatican II on the infallible character of authoritative magisterial teaching in the day-to-day or ordinary exercise of its authority was by no means a novel teaching of Vatican II. It had been set forth in the 1917 *Codex Iuris Canonici* (c. 1323, #2), a canon repeated as canon 74, #2 in the new *Codex Iuris Canonici* promulgated in 1983, and drawn almost word for word from Vatican I's solemn teaching on the same matter (cf. DS 3011). Canon 749, #2 in the new *Codex* reads as follows: "The College of Bishops also possesses infallibility in its teaching . . . when the Bishops, dispersed throughout the world but maintaining the bond of union among themselves and with the successor of Peter, together with the same Roman Pontiff authentically (or authoritatively) teach matters of faith or morals, and are agreed that a particular teaching is definitively to be held."
 2. LG 25. Although the bishops, taken individually, do not enjoy the privilege of infallibility, **they do, however, proclaim infallibly the doctrine of Christ on the following conditions:** namely, when, even though dispersed throughout the world but preserving for all that amongst themselves and with Peter's successor the bond of communion, in their authoritative teaching concerning matters of faith

and morals, they are in agreement that a particular teaching is to be held definitively and absolutely.[40] This is still more clearly the case when, assembled in an ecumenical council, they are, for the universal Church, teachers of and judges in matters of faith and morals, whose decisions must be adhered to with the **loyal and obedient assent of faith**. [41] This infallibility, however, with which the divine redeemer wished to endow his Church in defining doctrine pertaining to faith and morals, is **co-extensive with the deposit of revelation, which must be religiously guarded and loyally and courageously expounded.**

3. The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful--who confirms his brethren in the faith (cf. Lk. 22:32)--**he proclaims in an absolute decision a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals.**[42] For that reason his definitions are rightly said to be irreformable by their very nature and not by reason of the assent of the Church, in as much as they were made with the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised to him in the person of blessed Peter himself; and as a consequence they are in no way in need of the approval of others, and do not admit of appeal to any other tribunal. **For in such a case the Roman Pontiff does not utter a pronouncement as a private person, but rather does he expound and defend the teaching of the Catholic faith as the supreme teacher of the universal Church, in whom the Church's charism of infallibility is present in a singular way.**[43] **The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter's successor, they exercise the supreme teaching office.**
4. **Now, the assent of the Church can never be lacking** to such definitions on account of the same **Holy Spirit's influence**, through which Christ's whole flock is maintained in the unity of the faith and makes progress in it.[44] Furthermore, when the Roman Pontiff, or the body of bishops together with him, define a **doctrine**, they make the definition in conformity with revelation itself, **to which all are bound to adhere and to which they are obliged to submit**; and this revelation is transmitted integrally either in written form or in oral tradition through the legitimate succession of bishops and above all through the watchful concern of the Roman Pontiff himself- and through the light of the Spirit of truth it is scrupulously preserved in the Church and unerringly explained. The Roman Pontiff and the bishops, by reason of their office and the seriousness of the matter, apply themselves with zeal to the work of inquiring by every suitable means into this revelation and of giving apt expression to its contents; they do not, however, admit any new public revelation as pertaining to the divine deposit of faith.
5. (May): At times the magisterium proposes matters of faith and morals infallibly, i.e., with the assurance that what is proposed is absolutely irreformable and a matter to be held definitively by the faithful. At other times the magisterium proposes matters of faith and morals *authoritatively* and as *true*, but not in such wise that the matter proposed is to be held definitively and absolutely. But still the matter proposed is to be *held* by the faithful and to be held as true. Note that the proper way to speak of teachings proposed in this way is to say that they are *authoritatively* taught; it is not proper to say that they are *fallibly* taught.
6. Religious obsequium and dissent (May)
 - a. It is interesting to note that the term "dissent" did not appear in theological literature prior to the end of Vatican Council II. The "approved" manuals to which the three bishops, who wanted *Lumen gentium* 25 to say something about the nature of the *obsequium religiosum* required for teaching authoritatively but not infallibly proposed, were referred did not speak of legitimate theological dissent from such teaching. [8] Rather, they recognized that a theologian (or other well-informed Catholic) might not in conscience be able to give internal assent to some teachings. They thus spoke of "withholding assent" and raising questions, but this is a far cry from "dissent."
 - b. The *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has addressed this matter. It recognized that theologians (and others) might question not only the form but even the substantive content of some authoritatively proposed

magisterial teachings. It held that it is permissible in such instances to withhold assent, to raise questions (and present them to the magisterium), to discuss the issues with other theologians (and be humble enough to accept criticism of one's own views by them). Theologians (and others) can propose their views as hypotheses to be considered and tested by other theologians and *ultimately to be judged by those who have, within the Church, the solemn obligation of settling disputes and speaking the mind of Christ.*

- c. But it taught that one is not giving a true *obsequium religiosum* if one dissents from magisterial teaching and proposes one's own position as a position that the faithful are at liberty to follow, substituting it for the teaching of the magisterium. But this is precisely what has been occurring. Dissent of this kind is not compatible with the *obsequium religiosum*. In fact, those who dissent in this way really usurp the teaching office of bishops and popes. Theologians, insofar as they are theologians, are not pastors in the Church. When they instruct the faithful that the teachings of those who are pastors in the Church (the pope and bishops) are false and that the faithful can put those teachings aside and put in their place their own theological opinions, they are harming the Church and arrogantly assuming for themselves the pastoral role of pope and bishops. Dissent, understood in this sense, is thus completely incompatible with the *obsequium religiosum* required for teachings authoritatively but not infallibly proposed.

G. Governance

1. Lumen Gentium focuses on the *munus regendi*, the shepherding task of bishops.
 - a. LG 27. The **bishops**, as vicars and legates of Christ, **govern** the particular Churches assigned to them by their counsels, exhortations and example, **but over and above that also by the authority and sacred power which indeed they exercise exclusively for the spiritual development of their flock in truth and holiness, keeping in mind that he who is greater should become as the lesser, and he who is the leader as the servant (cf. Lk. 22:26-27). This power, which they exercise personally in the name of Christ, is proper, ordinary and immediate, although its exercise is ultimately controlled by the supreme authority of the Church and can be confined within certain limits should the usefulness of the Church and the faithful require that.**
 - b. In virtue of this power bishops have a **sacred right and a duty before the Lord of legislating for and of passing judgment on their subjects, as well as of regulating everything that concerns the good order of divine worship and of the apostolate.** The pastoral charge, that is, the permanent and daily care of their sheep, **is entrusted to them fully; nor are they to be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiff; for they exercise the power which they possess in their own right and are called in the truest sense of the term prelates of the people whom they govern.[59] Consequently their authority, far from being damaged by the supreme and universal power, is much rather defended, upheld and strengthened by it,[60] since the Holy Spirit preserves unflinchingly that form of government which was set up by Christ the Lord in his Church.**
 - c. **Sent as he is by the Father to govern his family**, a bishop should keep before his eyes the **example of the Good Shepherd**, who came not to be waited upon but to serve (cf. Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45) and to lay down his life for his sheep (cf. Jn. 10:11). Taken from among men and **oppressed by the weakness that surrounds him**, he can **compassionate** those who are ignorant and erring (cf. Heb. 5:1-2). He should not refuse to listen to his subjects whose welfare he promotes as of his very own children and whom he urges to collaborate readily with him. **Destined to render an account for their souls to God** (cf. Heb. 13:17), by prayer, preaching and all good works of charity he should be solicitous both for their welfare and for that too of those who do not belong to the unique flock, but whom he should regard as entrusted to him in the Lord. Since, like St Paul, he is in duty bound to everyone, he should be eager to preach the Gospel to all (cf. Rom. 1:14-15), and to spur his faithful on to apostolic and missionary activity. As to the faithful, they should be closely attached to the bishop as the Church is to Jesus Christ,

and as Jesus Christ is to the Father, so that all things may conspire towards harmonious unity,[61] and bring forth abundant fruit unto the glory of God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:15).

2. The Catechism brings up some other points about authority that we haven't tackled up above.
 - a. Christ is the source of authority in the Church
 - i. CCC 669 As Lord, Christ is also head of the Church, which is his Body. Taken up to heaven and glorified after he had thus fully accomplished his mission, Christ dwells on earth in his Church. **The redemption is the source of the authority that Christ, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, exercises over the Church.** "The kingdom of Christ [is] already present in mystery", "on earth, the seed and the beginning of the kingdom".
 - ii. CCC 874 **Christ is himself the source of ministry in the Church.** He instituted the Church. He gave her authority and mission, orientation and goal: In order to shepherd the People of God and to increase its numbers without cease, **Christ the Lord set up in his Church a variety of offices which aim at the good of the whole body.** The holders of office, who are invested with a sacred power, are, in fact, dedicated to promoting the interests of their brethren, so that all who belong to the People of God ... may attain to salvation.
 - iii. CCC 875 "How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?" No one - no individual and no community - can proclaim the Gospel to himself: "Faith comes from what is heard." No one can give himself the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel. **The one sent by the Lord does not speak and act on his own authority, but by virtue of Christ's authority; not as a member of the community, but speaking to it in the name of Christ.** No one can bestow grace on himself; it must be given and offered. This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorized and empowered by Christ. From him, they receive the mission and faculty ("the sacred power") to act in persona Christi Capitis. The ministry in which Christ's emissaries do and give by God's grace what they cannot do and give by their own powers, is called a "sacrament" by the Church's tradition. Indeed, the ministry of the Church is conferred by a special sacrament.
 - b. The priest's sacramental authority also comes from Christ.
 - i. CCC 1444 In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the **Lord also gives them the authority** to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ's solemn words to Simon Peter: "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." "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head.
 - ii. CCC 1548 In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts in persona Christi Capitis: It is the same priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and **possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself** (virtute ac persona ipsius Christi).
 - c. Authority is to serve.
 - i. For Christ, to reign is to serve. For Mary, to reign is to serve. For the apostle, to exercise authority appropriately it must be to serve.
 - ii. CCC 876 Intrinsically linked to the sacramental nature of ecclesial ministry is its character as service. **Entirely dependent on Christ who gives mission and authority, ministers are truly "slaves of Christ,"** in the image of him who freely took "the form of a slave" for us.

- Because the word and grace of which they are ministers are not their own, but are given to them by Christ for the sake of others, they must freely become the slaves of all.
- iii. CCC 1551 This priesthood is ministerial. "That office ... which the Lord committed to the pastors of his people, is in the strict sense of the term a service." **It is entirely related to Christ and to men.** It depends entirely on Christ and on his unique priesthood; it has been instituted for the good of men and the communion of the Church. The sacrament of Holy Orders communicates a "sacred power" which is none other than that of Christ. **The exercise of this authority must therefore be measured against the model of Christ, who by love made himself the least and the servant of all.** "The Lord said clearly that concern for his flock was proof of love for him."
 - iv. *2007 Ecumenical document between Catholics and Orthodox*: 13. Authority in the Church belongs to Jesus Christ himself, the one Head of the Church (cfr. Eph 1, 22; 5, 23). By his Holy Spirit, the Church as his Body shares in his authority (cfr. Jn 20, 22-23). **Authority in the Church has as its goal the gathering of the whole of humankind into Jesus Christ** (cfr. Eph 1,10; Jn 11, 52). The authority linked with the grace received in ordination is not the private possession of those who receive it nor something delegated from the community; **rather, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit destined for the service (*diakonia*) of the community and never exercised outside of it.** Its exercise includes the participation of the whole community, the bishop being in the Church and the Church in the bishop (cfr. St Cyprian, *Ep.* 66, 8).
 - v. *2007 Ecumenical document between Catholics and Orthodox*: 14. The exercise of authority accomplished in the Church, in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, must be, in all its forms and at all levels, a service (*diakonia*) of love, as was that of Christ (cfr. Mk 10, 45; Jn 13, 1-16). The authority of which we are speaking, since it expresses divine authority, cannot subsist in the Church except **in the love between the one who exercises it and those subject to it. It is, therefore, an authority without domination, without physical or moral coercion. Since it is a participation in the *exousia* of the crucified and exalted Lord, to whom has been given all authority in heaven and on earth** (cfr. Mt 28, 18), it can and must call for obedience. At the same time, because of the Incarnation and the Cross, it is radically different from that of leaders of nations and of the great of this world (cfr. Lk 22, 25-27). **While this authority is certainly entrusted to people who, because of weakness and sin, are often tempted to abuse it, nevertheless by its very nature the evangelical identification between authority and service constitutes a fundamental norm for the Church. For Christians, to rule is to serve. The exercise and spiritual efficacy of ecclesial authority are thereby assured through free consent and voluntary co-operation. At a personal level, this translates into obedience to the authority of the Church in order to follow Christ who was lovingly obedient to the Father even unto death and death on a Cross** (cfr. Phil 2, 8).
 - d. Bishops receive authority from the apostles through apostolic succession.
 - i. CCC 77 "In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching authority." [35] Indeed, "the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time."
 - ii. CCC 888 Bishops, with priests as co-workers, have as their first task "to preach the Gospel of God to all men," in keeping with the Lord's command. They are "heralds of faith, who draw new disciples to Christ; **they are authentic teachers" of the apostolic faith "endowed with the authority of Christ."**
 - iii. (Seen above in LG) CCC 895 "The power which they exercise personally in the name of Christ, is proper, ordinary, and immediate, although its exercise is ultimately controlled by the supreme authority of the Church." But the bishops should not be thought of as vicars of

- the Pope. His ordinary and immediate authority over the whole Church does not annul, but on the contrary confirms and defends that of the bishops. Their authority must be exercised in communion with the whole Church under the guidance of the Pope.
- iv. CCC 1575 **Christ himself chose the apostles and gave them a share in his mission and authority.** Raised to the Father's right hand, he has not forsaken his flock **but he keeps it under his constant protection through the apostles, and guides it still through these same pastors who continue his work today. Thus, it is Christ whose gift it is that some be apostles, others pastors. He continues to act through the bishops.**
 - e. Authority of the magisterium to interpret
 - i. CCC 85 "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. **Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.**" This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome. 86 "**Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is 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 devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith."
 - f. The Church is expected to exercise the authority given to us by Christ.
 - i. CCC 88 The Church's Magisterium **exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas**, that is, when it proposes truths contained in divine Revelation or having a necessary connection with them, in a form obliging the Christian people to an irrevocable adherence of faith.
 - g. The authority of the magisterium in teaching
 - i. CCC 2035 **The supreme degree of participation in the authority of Christ is ensured by the charism of infallibility.** This infallibility extends as far as does the deposit of divine Revelation; it also extends to all those elements of doctrine, including morals, without which the saving truths of the faith cannot be preserved, explained, or observed.
 - ii. CCC 2036 The authority of the Magisterium extends also to the specific precepts of the **natural law, because their observance, demanded by the Creator, is necessary for salvation.** In recalling the prescriptions of the natural law, the Magisterium of the Church exercises an essential part of its prophetic office of proclaiming to men what they truly are and reminding them of what they should be before God
 - h. Our response in faith to the magisterium is a response to God.
 - i. CCC 156 What moves us to believe is **not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason**: we believe "**because of the authority of God himself who reveals them**, who can neither deceive nor be deceived". So "that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of his Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit." Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability "are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all"; they are "**motives of credibility**" (**motiva credibilitatis**), **which show that the assent of faith is "by no means a blind impulse of the mind"**.
 - ii. STA: Catholic act of faith, belief in the fides quae because of the fides qua, belief on the basis of God who sent his Son who founded a Church who sent the Holy Spirit preventing it's erring once on something that we need definitively to believe or do to please God and enter into his life.
 - iii. CCC 2037 The law of God entrusted to the Church is taught to the faithful **as the way of life and truth.** The faithful therefore have the **right** to be instructed in the divine saving precepts that purify judgment and, with grace, heal wounded human reason. They have the **duty** of

observing the constitutions and decrees conveyed by the legitimate authority of the Church. **Even if they concern disciplinary matters, these determinations call for docility in charity.**

- i. Authority in general is important but must be exercised legitimately. These points would help to orient authority in the Church.
 - i. CCC 2199 **The fourth commandment** is addressed expressly to children in their relationship to their father and mother, because this relationship is the most universal. It likewise concerns the ties of kinship between members of the extended family. It requires honor, affection, and gratitude toward elders and ancestors. Finally, it extends to the duties of pupils to teachers, employees to employers, subordinates to leaders, citizens to their country, and to those who administer or govern it. This commandment includes and presupposes the duties of parents, instructors, teachers, leaders, magistrates, those who govern, all who **exercise authority** over others or over a community of persons.
 - ii. CCC 1897 "Human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous unless it has some people invested **with legitimate authority** to preserve its institutions and to devote themselves as far as is necessary to work and care for the good of all."
 - iii. CCC 1898 **Every human community needs an authority to govern it.** The foundation of such authority lies in human nature. It is necessary for the unity of the state. Its role is to ensure as far as possible the common good of the society.
 - iv. CCC 1899 **The authority required by the moral order derives from God:** "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."
 - v. CCC 1900 **The duty of obedience requires all to give due honor to authority** and to treat those who are charged to exercise it with respect, and, insofar as it is deserved, with gratitude and good-will.
 - vi. CCC 1902 **Authority does not derive its moral legitimacy from itself. It must not behave in a despotic manner, but must act for the common good as a "moral force based on freedom and a sense of responsibility"**
 - vii. CCC 1903 **Authority is exercised legitimately only when it seeks the common good of the group concerned and if it employs morally licit means to attain it.** If rulers were to enact unjust laws or take measures contrary to the moral order, such arrangements would not be binding in conscience. **In such a case, "authority breaks down completely and results in shameful abuse.**

VI. Obedience in the Church

- A. The great 20th century Christian apologist C.S. Lewis wrote that there are really only two types of people in the world, "those who say to God 'thy will be done' and those to whom God says '*thy* will be done.'" These are the two groups, he confidently asserted, who will end up on the opposite sides of the great eschatological divide. Those who wish to end up on Christ's eternal right need to follow Christ in trustingly and lovingly saying to the Father, "Not my will but thine be done" (Lk 22:42).
- B. The virtue of obedience, however, has for the past several decades been held in disrepute, even among many in the Church. While obedience has probably always been one of the most challenging of virtues — because it goes so much against one of the most prevalent and chronic vices, pride — what has changed in recent times is the recognition of the need for it. Past generations may have failed in obedience to God as often as those in our day, but for the most part, they recognized they should be obedient. It's one of the characteristics of our era that many reject even the need for it. Part of the reason is a false notion of freedom, which believes that real liberty is the ability to do whatever we please rather than to live according to the truth, to determine right and wrong rather than do good and avoid evil. Another part of the modern crisis of obedience flows from the error that obedience is an extrinsic

adherence to a set of rules rather than a loving adhesion to the God who loves us and wants what is best for us.

- C. This spiritual cancer has penetrated even those religious communities who receive the graces to live according to a vow of obedience. For that reason, on May 11, 2008, the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, published an instruction on the nature and need of obedience, which I think could be very helpful to us tonight. While some of the parts of the document refer to the specifics of life within religious communities, most of it contains a beautiful reflection intended to "offer help and encouragement to all those [like us who are] called to witness to the primacy of God through free obedience to his will, to live their yes to the Lord in joy."
- D. The title of the instruction — *Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*, the famous Latin expression of the Psalms, "Your face, O Lord, I seek" (Ps 27:8) — sums up its central point. Obedience is a loving search for God in the midst of all our choices. To have a proper understanding of obedience, therefore, begins with a proper understanding of God. The Lord is not a divine tyrant enacting arbitrary dictates to test our capacity for blind submission, but rather a benevolent Father who desires our true fulfillment.
- E. "First of all," the instruction says, "**obedience is an attitude of a son or daughter.** It is that particular kind of listening that only a son or daughter can do in listening to his or her parent, because it is enlightened by the certainty that the parent has only good things to say and give to him or her. This is a listening, full of the trust, that makes a son or daughter accept the parent's will, sure that it will be for his or her own good."
- F. Our personal fulfillment comes not from resisting the loving guidance of our Father but by following it. "**We reach our fullness,**" the Congregation reminds us, "**only to the extent that we place ourselves within the plan with which He has conceived us with a Father's love. Therefore, obedience is the only way human persons, intelligent and free beings, can have the disposition to fulfill themselves. As a matter of fact, when a human person says 'no' to God, that person compromises the divine plan, diminishing him or herself and condemning him or herself to failure.**"
- G. **No one shows us better how to obey the Father than Jesus his Son.** "We are guided by the example of Christ," the instruction continues, "who has freed us thanks to his obedience. **It is he who inspires our obedience in order that the divine plan of salvation be completed through us.** In him everything is a listening to and acceptance of the Father (cf. Jn 8:28-29) ... to the point of deciding to do nothing by himself (cf. Jn 8:28) but to do always what is pleasing to the Father. ... He also lived obedience when it presented a difficult chalice to drink (cf. Mt 26:39, 42; Lk 22:42), and he made himself 'obedient to the point of death, and death on a cross' (Phil 2:8). This is the dramatic aspect of the obedience of the Son wrapped in a mystery which we can never totally penetrate, but which for us is very relevant, because it uncovers for us even more the **filial nature of Christian obedience: only the child who senses himself loved by the Father and loves him with his whole self, can arrive at this type of radical obedience.**"
- H. **In calling us to be obedient, therefore, Jesus is not saying merely "Do what I say," but rather "Follow me."** Because of the centrality of obedience in the life of Jesus, it also needs to be central in the life of those who believe in him. "**The Christian, like Christ, is defined as an obedient being. The unquestionable primacy of love in Christian life cannot make us forget that such love has acquired a face and a name in Christ Jesus and has become Obedience. Therefore, obedience is not humiliation but the truth on which the fullness of human persons is built and realized. Hence, the believer so ardently desires to fulfill the will of the Father as to make of it his or her supreme aspiration. Like Jesus, he or she wants to live by this will.**"
- I. To want to live by the will of the Father is the essence of the Christian life. It is "the distinctive characteristic" of the New Covenant which Jesus himself established, and therefore must distinguish us who seek to live by that Covenant. It is the path of the exodus of personal liberation from self-idolatry.
- J. Just as with that first exodus when God made known his will through the human mediation of Moses, so in the New Covenant God makes it known through the human mediation of his Church, and in particular, through Peter and his successors. "**The task of following the Lord cannot be taken by solitary navigators,**" the instruction asserts, "**but is accomplished in the bark of Peter, which**

survives the storms.... Our obedience is a believing with the Church, a thinking and speaking with the Church, serving through her. What Jesus predicted to Peter also always applies: 'You will be taken where you do not want to go'. This letting oneself be guided where one does not want to be led is an essential element of our serving and precisely that which makes us free."

- K. This, of course, puts a great correlative burden on those in authority to show that "when they give a command, they are doing so only to obey God." St. Ignatius of Antioch's advice to a fellow bishop is ever relevant to all leaders in the Church, be they bishops, priests, religious superiors, principals, or parents: "Nothing is done without your agreement, but you do not do anything without God's agreement." True authority in the Church is not a power grab, but a higher and more demanding form of obedience to God.**

VII. The proper understanding of conscience

- A. One of the reasons why sometimes the question of authority in the Church is controversial is because of erroneous understandings of conscience.
- B. There are various causes for a false understanding of conscience:
1. Those who subscribe to relativism have a problem with conscience.
 - a. VS 32: Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to "exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values". This is the direction taken by doctrines that have lost the sense of the transcendent which are explicitly atheist. The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment that hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one's conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and "being at peace with oneself", so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment. As is immediately evident, "the crisis of truth" is not unconnected with this development. Once the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost, inevitably the notion of conscience also changes. Conscience is no longer considered in its primordial reality as an act of a person's intelligence, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation and thus to express a judgment about the right conduct to be chosen here and now. Instead, there is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly. Such an outlook is quite congenial to an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others. Taken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature. These different notions are at the origin of currents of thought that posit a radical opposition between moral law and conscience, and between nature and freedom.
 2. Misunderstanding of the relationship between freedom and law:
 - a. VS 54: The way in which one conceives the relationship between freedom and law is thus intimately bound up with one's understanding of the moral conscience. Here the cultural tendencies ... in which freedom and law are set in opposition to each another and kept apart, and freedom is exalted almost to the point of idolatry--lead to a "'creative' understanding of moral conscience.
 - b. VS 55: Some even hold that this process of maturing is inhibited by the excessively categorical position adopted by the Church's Magisterium in many moral questions; for them, the Church's interventions are the cause of unnecessary "conflicts of conscience."
 - c. When men advocate the rights of conscience, they often don't mean the rights of the Creator, he says, but of their judgment and humor without thought of God.

- d. Many Catholics disregard the Council's clear teaching that "the supreme rule of life is the divine law itself, the eternal, objective and universal law by which God, out of his wisdom and love, arranges, directs and governs the whole world and the paths of the human community" (DH 3)
3. Situational ethics
 - a. VS 55: According to the opinion of some theologians, the function of conscience had been reduced, at least at a certain period in the past, to a simple application of general moral norms to individual cases in the life of the person. But those norms, they continue, cannot be expected to foresee and to respect all the individual concrete acts of the person in all their uniqueness and particularity. While such norms might somehow be useful for a correct "assessment" of the situation, they cannot replace the individual personal decision on how to act in particular cases. The critique already mentioned of the traditional understanding of human nature and of its importance for the moral life has even led certain authors to state that these norms are not so much a binding objective criterion for judgments of conscience, but a "general perspective" which helps man tentatively to put order into his personal and social life. ... In their desire to emphasize the "creative" character of conscience, certain authors no longer call its actions "judgments" but "decisions": only by making these decisions "autonomously" would man be able to attain moral maturity.
 - b. VS 61. Consequently "in the practical judgment of conscience," which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, "the link between freedom and truth is made manifest". Precisely for this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of "judgment" which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary "decisions". The maturity and responsibility of these judgments--and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject--are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions.
 - c. VS 56: By taking account of circumstances and the situation, [it] could legitimately be the basis of certain "exceptions to the general rule" and thus permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. A separation, or even an opposition, is thus established in some cases between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil. On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called "pastoral" solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, and to justify a "creative" hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept.
4. Conscience as opinion — many just think conscience is their own opinion, or gut feeling, about the way things ought to be.
5. Conscience as feelings or superego
 - a. Conscience is not feelings of moral approval or disapproval, like the Freudian superego, the continuation of the moral valuations of parents in your actions of whether they'd approve or not. Understood in this sense, it will frequently condemn what is not wrong or approve what is not right. Psychological conscience cannot of itself provide a person with moral guidance.
 - b. We don't feel the conscience; it is a judgment of reason, though sometimes concomitant subordinate emotions will play a secondary role.
 - c. (Melina) There is an emotional aspect which supports reason, but conscience itself is a rational act. The feelings associated are secondary, though they support conscience. The extent and depth of the feelings depend upon somatic constitution. The feelings do not belong to the essence of the conscience. When we follow our conscience, we follow the judgment of reason and not our emotions. We can do the right thing even though we feel no satisfaction or even sadness. The neurotic person may feel guilty even though the reason says that they haven't done anything wrong.

6. Newman stressed this false notion of conscience in his letter to the Duke of Norfolk
 - a. Let us see what is the notion of conscience in this day in the popular mind. There, no more than in the intellectual world, does "conscience" retain the old, true, Catholic meaning of the word. There too the idea, the presence of a Moral Governor is far away from the use of it, frequent and emphatic as that use of it is. When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand, what they think is an Englishman's prerogative, for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one's leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition, if he like it, in his own way. Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a license to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will.

C. Now to what the conscience is

1. GS 16: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law that he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems that arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience that by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.
2. CCC 1778 Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.
3. CCC 1780: Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the prudent judgment of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.
4. 3 things
 - a. voice of God
 - b. general knowledge of right and wrong
 - c. practical judgment terminating a process of moral deliberation.
5. Well-formed conscience versus an erroneous one.
 - a. CCC 1790 A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.

- i. VS 62. Paul's admonition urges us to be watchful, warning us that in the judgments of our conscience the possibility of error is always present. Conscience is "not an infallible judge;" it can make mistakes.
 - b. CCC 1791 This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man "takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin." In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits.
 - i. VS 63. Conscience, as the ultimate concrete judgment, compromises its dignity when it is "culpably erroneous," that is to say, "when man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin"[109]. Jesus alludes to the danger of the conscience being deformed when he warns: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Mt 6:22-23).
 - ii. St. Bonaventure said that conscience is the herald of God. The herald would have a trumpet in the city squares and give his message. He would sound and announce the law of the sovereign. The herald speaks in the name of the king and speaks with the authority of the king. Conscience speaks in the name of God. But the herald has to be tuned in to the king. The conscience has to be formed to apply the principles of morality to particular acts. To summarize, conscience is the voice of God and has God's authority. It must always be obeyed, but we have to be concerned that our herald, our conscience, is tuned into the message of the king
 - c. 1792 Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct.
 - d. 1793 If - on the contrary - the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience.
 - e. VS 62: Conscience, as the judgment of an act, is not exempt from the possibility of error. As the Council puts it, "not infrequently conscience can be mistaken as a result of invincible ignorance, although it does not on that account forfeit its dignity; but this cannot be said when a man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin".[107] In these brief words the Council sums up the doctrine which the Church down the centuries has developed with regard to the "erroneous conscience."
6. Newman
- a. Catholics consider [conscience] be the internal witness of both the existence and the law of God. ... Though it may be called, and is, a law of the mind, they would not grant that it was nothing more; I mean, that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise, with a vividness which discriminated it from all other constituents of our nature;
 - b. Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway.
- D. Newman even took up the subject of obedience in the Church

1. He's normally cited as a defender of conscience against the authority of the Church. In his famous quotation from the end of his letter to the Duke of Norfolk he writes, "If I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards."
2. But in order to understand it, you need to understand what principles he said earlier:
 - a. The basic point is that the obedience that we give to the magisterium represented by the pope depends on a well-formed conscience, because that is the means by which we obey the Pope as a command.
 - b. **So indeed it is; did the Pope speak against Conscience in the true sense of the word, he would commit a suicidal act. He would be cutting the ground from under his feet.** His very mission is to proclaim the moral law, and to protect and strengthen that "Light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world." On the law of conscience and its sacredness are founded both his authority in theory and his power in fact. Whether this or that particular Pope in this bad world always kept this great truth in view in all he did, it is for history to tell. I am considering here the Papacy in its office and its duties, and in reference to those who acknowledge its claims. **They are not bound by the Pope's personal character or private acts, but by his formal teaching.** Thus viewing his position, we shall find that it is by the universal sense of right and wrong, the consciousness of transgression, the pangs of guilt, and the dread of retribution, as first principles deeply lodged in the hearts of men, it is thus and only thus, that he has gained his footing in the world and achieved his success. **It is his claim to come from the Divine Lawgiver, in order to elicit, protect, and enforce those truths which the Lawgiver has sown in our very nature,** it is this and this only that is the explanation of his length of life more than antediluvian. **The championship of the Moral Law and of conscience is his *raison d'être*.**
 - c. **When it has the right of opposing the supreme, though not infallible Authority of the Pope, it must be something more than that miserable counterfeit** which, as I have said above, now goes by the name. If in a particular case it is to be taken as a sacred and sovereign monitor, its dictate, in order to prevail against the voice of the Pope, **must follow upon serious thought, prayer, and all available means of arriving at a right judgment on the matter in question. And further, obedience to the Pope is what is called "in possession;" that is, the *onus probandi* of establishing a case against him lies, as in all cases of exception, on the side of conscience. Unless a man is able to say to himself, as in the Presence of God, that he must not, and dare not, act upon the Papal injunction, he is bound to obey it, and would commit a great sin in disobeying it. *Primâ facie* it is his bounden duty, even from a sentiment of loyalty, to believe the Pope right and to act accordingly. He must vanquish that mean, ungenerous, selfish, vulgar spirit of his nature, which, at the very first rumour of a command, places itself in opposition to the Superior who gives it, asks itself whether he is not exceeding his right, and rejoices, in a moral and practical matter to commence with scepticism.** He must have no willful determination to exercise a right of thinking, saying, doing just what he pleases, the question of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, the duty if possible of obedience, the love of speaking as his Head speaks, and of standing in all cases on his Head's side, being simply discarded. **If this necessary rule were observed, collisions between the Pope's authority and the authority of conscience would be very rare.** On the other hand, in the fact that, after all, in extraordinary cases, the conscience of each individual is free, we have a safeguard and security, were security necessary (which is a most gratuitous supposition), that no Pope ever will be able, as the objection supposes, to create a false conscience for his own ends.

VIII. Conclusion

- A. There are larger issues at work here with respect to authority in the Church, the authority Christ had, passed on, and sent them Holy Spirit to continue so that it might continue that service. We see a real challenge to the authority of Christ in Lk 4:

1. Luke 4:1 And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit 2 for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." 4 And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" **5 And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, 6 and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours." 8 And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" 9** And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; 10 for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,' 11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" 12 And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" 13 And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.
- B. We see the same battle afflicting the Church in time as seen in the Book of Revelation:
 1. Rev. 13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bears, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. **And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.** 3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. 4 Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" 5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, **and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months;** 6 it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. **And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation,** 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain. 9 If any one has an ear, let him hear: 10 If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. **Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.**
- C. The whole question comes back to the Book of Genesis. The one who hates us wants to get us to oppose the authority of God so that we might "become like God," so that we can, like him, oppose and pretend that we have authority from him. It's clear that sometimes people can fail in their exercise of authority, but for us as believers, we need constantly to remind ourselves that the devil wants to break down our trust of God. We need to ask God's help to increase our trust, to trust that he knew what he was doing when he chose to have his authority exercised in a particular way in the Church for our salvation.

IX. Questions and comments