

The Grammar of Dissent

Identifying and Engaging Heresy

Issue: What is heresy? What is dissent? How might Catholics effectively engage dissenters?

Response: The Code of Canon Law, canon 751, defines heresy as “the obstinate denial or doubt, after baptism, of a truth which must be believed by divine and catholic faith.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* identifies heresy as a sin against faith, and thus against the First Commandment (no. 2089).

Over the past few decades, heresy has become entrenched in many Catholic institutions, from colleges and universities to hospitals, from magazines and periodicals to chancery offices. Rather than use the term “heresy,” many use the broader term “dissent” to express an attitude of opposition to the Holy Father and official Church teaching on a spectrum of issues that includes matters of Church discipline and governance as well as faith and morals.

The Catholic faithful, to effectively engage those who dissent from Church teaching, should (a) know and articulate the fullness of the Catholic faith; (b) draw upon Sacred Tradition, including the documents of Vatican II; (c) patiently develop relationships through respectful interpersonal dialogue; (d) understand the worldview of dissident Catholics and strive to find common ground; (e) use allegory, analogy, and compelling images to counter esoteric arguments; (f) maintain a sense of humor; and above all (g) strive for holiness.

Discussion: Someone once complained to St. Thomas More about his use of the word “heresy,” arguing that it’s not a nice word. St. Thomas’ response was that it’s not a nice thing.

Today one hears about fashionable sins, such as intolerance or sexism, or about publicized sins, such as child sex abuse or corporate theft, or about perennial sins, such as lying or cheating. But we don’t hear too much about heresy. It’s not a nice word. In fact, one hears so little about it, one might think that the thing itself no longer exists, having gone the route of other pre-enlightened, medieval concepts like limbo and indulgences.

Heresy exists today not only in ancient Church documents, but more importantly in the hearts and souls of many baptized Catholics. Pope John Paul II has said that society today is facing what he calls a “crisis of faith.” If that’s true, then it’s reasonable to assume that contemporary Catholics are not immune from temptations to heresy and other sins against faith.

Some very intelligent people don’t understand their heresy or dissent as something sinful or otherwise adversely affecting their status as Catholics. Instead, they see themselves as heroes, prophets, and scholars who are ahead of the doctrinal development curve. They believe that their “faithful dissent” will one day be vindicated, that today’s heresy will be tomorrow’s orthodoxy. They cite instances where the Church purportedly has reversed



The Last Judgment (detail) Michelangelo

herself in the past, and they claim the mantle of Church luminaries such as Cardinal Newman and St. Catherine of Siena, whose controversial views found favor with subsequent generations of Catholics.

How do the Catholic faithful respond to this line of dissent? Surely the best we can do for those whose faith is weak or has been poisoned by “faithful dissent” is to pray and make sacrifices for them with the serene confidence that Our Lord will lead them back to the fullness of faith. Yet those who dissent include family members, friends, and colleagues. How can and does the Lord use us as His instruments of conversion? The following are seven ways to reach out to dissident Catholics.

Be Thinking Catholics

The term “thinking Catholic” is often used as a code word today to identify Catholics who consider themselves sophisticated and educated enough to choose for themselves what Church teachings they accept. Anyone who accepts all the Church’s teachings, even on issues such as contraception, abortion, homosexual activity, and women’s ordination, is, in their estimation, simply not thinking.

Engaging dissident Catholics on issues such as these inevitably leads to discussions of usury, or religious liberty, or slavery, or some other issue where the Church purportedly has changed her position. It’s important to understand these issues so as to make the necessary distinctions and corrections. Organizations like CUF are there to help provide solid, background information on these diverse subjects, and there are now some excellent websites where one can have quick and easy access to Church documents and other Catholic resources.

An articulate defense of Church teaching helps to burst the stereotype that faithful Catholics don’t think, while a dismissive, *ad hominem* response only strengthens the stereotype. We must stand up for the truths of our faith in the media, in the classroom, and in the public square, realizing that the best de-

fense is not defensive. Even more, dissident Catholics try to rattle their opponents by calling into question firmly held beliefs. A serene, personal response, confident that holy Church does have answers even when we might not have them on the tip of our tongue, goes a long way toward diffusing the air of intellectual superiority assumed by many leading dissidents.

Vatican II’s a Home Game

Scott Hahn once posed an elaborate question in one of his theology classes about responding to a Protestant interpretation of a passage from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Students started to offer rebuttals based on the Letter of St. James and other teachings from Scripture and Tradition. Finally, Dr. Hahn interrupted, saying, “Wait a minute! Romans is a ‘home game’

for Catholics.” He emphasized that Romans is not a “Protestant” book that needs to be countered with a “Catholic” book like James. Rather, he wanted the students to understand Romans and claim it as their own.

We have to understand that a similar dynamic is at work when it comes to dissident Catholics and Vatican II. In books such as Maureen Fiedler and Linda Rabben, eds., *Rome Has Spoken*, we hear about a rigid, out-of-touch teaching of the pre-Vatican II Church. Then Vatican II revolutionized and modernized (i.e., changed) the Church’s position. Now we’re enduring a pontificate that has forsaken Vatican II’s reforms and has retrenched in keeping with the older view.

The assumption on the dissidents’ part is that Vatican II is on “their side.” We have to realize that Vatican II, as a legitimate ecumeni-

Heaven Can Wait

Fr. Charles Curran, Fr. Hans Kung and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger all die on the same day and go to meet St. Peter to learn their eternal fate.

St. Peter approaches the trio, explaining that each will be dealt with separately, in accordance with the Church’s teaching on the “particular judgment” (cf. Catechism, nos. 1021-22).

St. Peter begins with Fr. Curran, shouting, “Charles! In my office!” Fr. Kung and Cardinal Ratzinger wait anxiously as one, two, three hours pass. Finally, Fr. Curran staggers out of St. Peter’s office, drained and exhausted.

“What happened?” the others ask.

“Well, it’s not that bad,” Fr. Curran responds, “considering I basically denied the Church’s moral law while serving on earth. Fifty years in purgatory, but I’m gonna make it, thank God.”

Then, Fr. Kung goes into St. Peter’s office. Fr. Curran and Cardinal Ratzinger anxiously wait as one, two, three, four, five hours six hours pass! Finally, Fr. Kung crawls out of St. Peter’s office, barely able to move.

“What happened? What happened?” the others ask.

“Well, it’s not that bad,” Kung responds, “considering I basically called into question the Church’s entire deposit of faith while serving on earth. A hundred years in Purgatory, but I’m gonna make it, thank God.”

Finally, Cardinal Ratzinger, the Church’s legendary “watchdog of orthodoxy” goes into St. Peter’s office. Frs. Curran and Kung wait anxiously as one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine hours pass. Finally, the door to St. Peter’s office opens and out steps, not Cardinal Ratzinger, but St. Peter.

“What happened?! What happened?!” the befuddled priests inquire.

“Well,” the humbled keeper of heaven’s gate begins, “it’s not that bad . . .”

cal council of the Church, is rightly a “home game” for us. Rather than work around Vatican II, and thus implicitly play into the dissidents’ older tradition or the current papacy, we must learn what Vatican II really taught—without all the spin or the well-documented misadventures in implementation—and actually use the Vatican II documents to our advantage. Vatican II actually affirms teachings such as priestly celibacy, the inerrancy of Scripture, papal authority, and the need for moral conscience to be formed in accordance with Church teaching.

Suitable Accommodations

One of Vatican II’s explicit goals was “to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 1). Unfortunately, in the Church’s laudable efforts to adapt to changing conditions and engage contemporary society, some of her members have been too accommodating to the world. Instead of being a counter-cultural sign—particularly in the area of sexual morality—the Church in some quarters has bought into secular and dissident thinking, with unhappy results, on issues ranging from seminary formation and homosexual activity to classroom sex education.

The response to this hyper-accommodation of the world should not be an elitism or separatism that would quarantine the perceived infidels, lobbing an occasional grenade (or scud missile) from a safe fox-hole. Perhaps that same section of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is instructive here: that we should “strengthen whatever can help to call all mankind into the Church’s fold.”

Here, the way of the Church, the way of Pope John Paul II, seems to be one of dialogue. An interpersonal dialogue allows us to develop a relationship and ask probing questions. Neither a frontal attack nor avoidance is likely to provide opportunities for entrenched dissenters to change their views. But a friendly, respectful exchange that gets them to examine their motives and presuppositions might.

Who’s the Pope?

Dialogue with dissenters is not easy. Some go so far as to drive a wedge between God and the Church. In other words, they consider themselves right with God irrespective of their relationship with and stance toward the Church, whose teachings from which they dissent are suspect. They even trot out the same issues that Protestant apologists and secularists alike have used to try to discredit the Catholic Church, such as Galileo, the Crusades, and the Inquisition.

A difficulty in addressing this line of argumentation arises when we assume a Catholic worldview on the dissenter’s part, when his ecclesiology is at best Protestant. In fact, if he were coming from a conservative Protestant perspective, we could at least argue from the Bible. More frequently, however, the dissident Catholic’s worldview more closely resembles a more liberal or secular brand of Protestantism of which he’s the “pope” and decides for himself which religious and scientific data is credible and in keeping with his preconceived convictions.

Unfortunately, much of the more virulent dissent involves gender and/or sexuality issues in which the proponent is hardly a neutral or objective player. Given their vested interest in preserving a given lifestyle or agenda, often no amount of argumentation will work, and what remains for us are the three p’s—prayer, penance, and patience.

Dissenters often don’t see the Church the same way we do. Even aside from the fact that they believe that the Church will eventually vindicate their position, many of the issues on which they dissent undercut our efforts to find common ground. These issues include infallibility, the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, the primacy of conscience, and even the manner in which the Church is constituted and governed. Dissent in these and similar areas affects not only what they believe, but also how they assess challenges to what they believe.

Use Word Pictures

Often the best way to communicate abstract ideas effectively is by means of analogies or word pictures.

For example, a gay activist might find it offensive to hear homosexuality described as a trial or suffering or cross (not to mention disorder) when he experiences it as a gift. After affirming that all people have significant crosses in life and expressing sincere empathy for all who struggle with the trial of same-sex attractions, we might use concrete images to explain that he might not experience homosexuality as a cross because he hasn’t yet received the grace to see it as such. A 300-pound glutton may not experience his desire to overeat as a cross but as something pleasurable, because he likes to eat. Only when he sees and accepts that gluttony is causing him spiritual and, indeed, physical health problems will he then be confronted with the decision to either take up his cross or wrongly reject such a cross as being too heavy (even with God’s grace), unjust (God’s not fair), or an arbitrary requirement imposed on him by mean-spirited health freaks (let’s shoot the messenger).

One’s approach to many issues in the Church is often shaped by how easy (or difficult) one thinks it is to get to heaven. Do most people make it? Obviously on this side of the divide a head count is impossible (except of course for saints and blessed). God’s mercy is limitless, but Scripture also repeatedly advises the faithful to choose the narrow road to salvation.

The mini-canonizations that take place at many contemporary Catholic funerals reflect the general assumption that everybody (except maybe for the occasional Hitler or bin Laden) goes to heaven. If that’s really true, then imposing rigid standards of sexual morality, from contraception and divorce and remarriage to homosexuality and cohabitation, unnecessarily limits one’s freedom. Those who’d oppose such activities (i.e., sins) are intolerant and out-of-touch. More to the point, why should one change his or her lifestyle

when the conduct in question doesn't affect one's salvation?

If the Church is right on these morality issues, what would be the ramifications? And if the dissident is right, what would be the ramifications? Dissent is the worse bet, as it endangers one's chance of attaining eternal happiness.

A man in an office near the top of a tall building likes to throw his empty Coke bottles and other debris out his window. He can't see the ground below. He's banking on there being no one on the sidewalk below. Leaving aside the litter issue, that person is obviously taking a criminally reckless approach that could have severe, long-term consequences. On the flipside, throwing this garbage into the wastebasket in his office may not provide the same passing thrill, but there's no risk.

When it comes to issues such as the Church's moral teachings, is the Catholic dissident so sure that the Church is wrong that he is willing to stake his salvation on it? That is the question that anyone who dissents from Church teaching—and acts upon such dissent—must honestly face.

Lighten Up

One of the best icebreakers is a good sense of humor. In a positive sense, humor is attractive and can build bridges. It also inoculates us against the temptations to take ourselves too seriously or to let righteous hostility toward error manifest itself in ungodly hostility toward those in error. Another one of the dissenters' favorite stereotypes of faithful Catholics is that they're "mean-spirited" or "angry." A light-hearted, smiling demeanor goes a long way toward destroying this stereotype.

Witness Protection

When we stand with the Church, especially to defend her moral teachings, we are taking the high ground. This is, of course, the right and noble thing to do, but it also singles us out as targets. If there is any discernible inconsistency between what we say and how we act, we're dismissed as hypocrites

and held up to ridicule or worse. Clearly all Christians should lead lives worthy of their calling in Christ, not only for its powerful witness, but because that's what the Lord expects of His disciples.

In a special way, we need to purify ourselves of any vestiges of homophobia, preconciliarism, anti-semitism, misogyny, and other sins routinely applied to us for no other reason than because we stand with the Church. Until the last dissenter is converted, we'll be called such names and worse. All the same, we must continuously examine ourselves to ensure that there aren't elements of truth in these outrageous personal attacks. Yes, we hate the sin, but do we manifest the same zeal and commitment in loving the sinner?

The Path of Charity

The havoc wreaked upon the Church from within in recent decades by dissenting Catholics can be very distressing. However, through the eyes of faith we must give thanks

for this opportunity to grow in our own faith and to bear witness to Our Lord and His Church in the face of persecution and ridicule. We cannot be truly committed to ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, and missionary activity if we're not serious about bringing "back" (even when they don't think they've "left") our own Catholic brothers and sisters who have gone astray. We can't give up on them. Indeed, we may just be the ones who are supposed to welcome them home.

In all of this we must walk the path of charity. This is the virtue that allows us, as the Catechism, quoting Pope John Paul II, says, "to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to evil, and the violence which under the illusion of fighting evil only makes it worse" (no. 1889).

Last edited 9/17/03

This Faith Fact was adapted from an article by Leon Suprenant that originally appeared in This Rock (November 2002).

RECOMMENDED READING

Holy Bible (Catholic edition)
Catechism of the Catholic Church
(paperback and hardback available)
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**Catholics United for the Faith
827 N. Fourth St.
Steubenville, OH 43952
(800) 693-2484
www.cuf.org**

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