

COMMUNICATING IN THE NAME OF THE CHURCH

Discourse Should Heed Pope Benedict's Call
for Mutual Respect, Civility and Humility



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In his recent book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI includes a fascinating papal disclaimer: "It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium, but is solely an expression of my personal search 'for the face of the Lord' (*Ps 27:8*). Everyone is free, then, to contradict me. I would only ask my readers for that initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding."¹

In this brief statement, Pope Benedict makes a vitally important distinction, one that should be remembered by anyone who, by reason of office or area of expertise, has the responsibility of speaking or writing in the name of the church. This distinction involves clarifying whether the author or speaker is offering official church teaching on a particular subject, or putting forth a personal interpretation or opinion regarding application of the church's doctrine.

This article will explore the implications of this crucial distinction. It will also examine how the inevitable ensuing debates regarding controversial issues of health care ethics can, and should, be fulfilled in a manner reflecting the mutual respect and "initial goodwill" that the Holy Father reminds us are necessary if we are to achieve true understanding of one another.

Anyone who has had the privilege of addressing an audience on complex topics such as medically assisted nutrition and hydration, forgoing life-sustaining treatment, or emergency contraception for victims of sexual assault knows all too well the perils that lie ahead. Inevitably someone who disagrees will accuse the speaker of heresy, or at the very least misrepresentation of the church's teaching. Therefore, in preparing to face the daunting task of offering insights or thoughts on subjects such as these in what has become an increasingly contentious environment, several

principles that flow out of the referenced statement from Pope Benedict may be helpful.

CHURCH TEACHING OR ETHICAL OPINION?

At times, writers or speakers put forth an opinion on an ethical issue, implying that this opinion carries indisputable authority. They inaccurately assert that what they are saying is the official teaching of the church, therefore giving the impression that no other opinion is legitimate or valid. As a result of this assertion, an unsuspecting audience is left with the option of either going along with what they have just heard or read, or disagreeing and suffering under the impression that they are being disobedient to the church, possibly even believing themselves to be guilty of a serious sin.

For example, how should readers approach an article that appears in a diocesan newspaper on a complex ethical issue? When an author expresses a personal opinion or interpretation of the church's teaching on this issue without a clarifying disclaimer, some readers may well be left with the impression that what they are reading is what their pastor thinks, their bishop thinks, or even what the pope thinks. They mistakenly believe that simply because a statement appears in a diocesan publication, it must be official church teaching.

Unless a disclaimer similar to the one offered by Pope Benedict is in place, the distinction between official teaching and personal theological opinion is simply lost or, in some cases, even deliberately obscured.

Something else to be wary of is the practice of "proof-texting." This is when an author or speaker picks and chooses those statements or parts of statements that bolster or support an opinion, while ignoring other statements that

offer alternative points of view. Just as biblical scholars must study Sacred Scripture in its totality to accurately understand and interpret it, the church's teaching must also be looked at in its totality to be fully, honestly and accurately presented and understood.

LEVELS OF AUTHORITY

It is important to recognize that individuals may fail to appreciate the fact that various forms of church teaching, i.e., encyclicals, pastoral letters and allocutions, carry varying levels of authority. Not every church statement is created equal in terms of religious submission of will or conscience it requires.

In the book *Ethics of Health Care* (third edition), co-authors Frs. Benedict Ashley and Kevin O'Rourke distinguish between defined and pastoral teaching in terms of church statements. "The need to discern the type of teaching offered by the Church follows from the custom of bishops and bishops' conferences, which often state that they are offering pastoral teaching as opposed to defined teaching. Pastoral teaching is an application of defined teaching to contemporary social issues. Because such issues are changeable, the teaching of pastoral statements is not absolute and needs to be applied prudently by the persons to whom it is directed. ... Decisions by the magisterium (definitive teachings) leave no room for further discussion except for explanation, clarification or further detail."²

It is vitally important to remember that if the Holy See has not offered a definitive statement on a specific moral issue, the opportunity for expression of differing theological opinions is allowed. This will lead to the necessary dialogue, discussion and debate that are part of the process of coming to a fully formed conscience, as well as a more completely developed understanding of the application of the church's teaching to specific issues.

CIVILITY AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

As we enter into these debates and discussions, we are challenged to do so with, as the Holy Father asks, an "initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding." It is becoming increasingly apparent in our society that debates over highly controversial issues, both civil and religious, have taken on an increasingly vitriolic tone. Very often the debates begin with disagreements over facts, but quickly deteriorate into name calling and personal attacks.

The public debate surrounding the Terri Schiavo case is a perfect example. Many individuals, including those representing religious groups, engaged in what became an ugly war of words. The civility and mutual understanding called forth by the Gospel and spoken of by the pope seemed tragically absent from these public disputes.

Helping to ensure that civility and mutual understanding are not lost, individuals with the responsibility of speaking or writing on these particular cases or topics must be empowered by humility, an increasingly rare virtue. This critical quality assists us in expressing our opinions calmly, rationally and clearly while also acknowledging the fact that someone else may legitimately come to a different conclusion. This is not because the person who disagrees with us is obstinate or morally evil, but rather has examined the facts and the underlying teaching and reached a different conclusion in good conscience.

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MORAL CERTITUDE VS. ABSOLUTE CERTITUDE

This spirit of goodwill flows from understanding that when we are confronted with the question of formation of conscience in regard to complex moral issues, we strive for moral certitude rather than absolute certitude. By its nature, moral certitude often leads to differing opinions or conclusions. If we could achieve absolute certitude on all of these issues, there would be no discussions, no debates, no differing opinions.

Moral certitude is a form of knowledge or a level of certainty that is sufficient for a person to make a sound moral judgment. It would certainly be more emotionally satisfying to have absolute certitude that a course of action we are taking, or an opinion we are putting forth, is based on absolute or mathematical certainty that we are right. However, in situations where we are applying fundamental principles to concrete circumstances, moral certitude, which has a lesser degree of certainty and does not completely rule out the possibility of error, is usually the best we can hope for. It is important to remember that in circumstances calling for decisive action, the church

has never required that we withhold action until we have reached absolute certitude.

Ashley and O'Rourke describe this reality in a clear and succinct fashion when they write, "The practical level of concrete application of ethical principles is an area where official Church teaching can be of great help, but where perfect clarity or undebatable certitude is often lacking due to the nature of particular decision making. At this practical level, one can only say, 'I am as sure of my decision as I can be, but I realize that I could be wrong' (moral certitude)."³ This particular statement reflects the humility that Pope Benedict speaks of when he asks for mutual goodwill.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Disagreement and debate have always been a part of the church's history and life. One could even argue that the richness of our Catholic heritage is partly due to the church's welcome of the free exchange of ideas and opinions over time. Ideas and opinions are evaluated in light of our fundamental principles as they are handed on in the magisterial teaching and applied to concrete situations.

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The distinctions this article has explored are significant. Failure to learn from our Holy Father's disclaimer will lead to more contentious and hostile debates. Putting these guidelines into practice while expressing our opinions with requisite humility will lead to greater harmony and unity, resulting in greater clarity for those seeking our guidance and assistance.

People look to the church and its leaders for direction and counsel, particularly when they are struggling with complex ethical issues and painful moral choices. By following the example of Pope Benedict, we will be better prepared to offer people hope, wisdom and enlightenment as we speak to them faithfully in the name of the church. ■



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NOTES

1. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday Press, 2007), 23.
2. Benedict Ashley and Kevin O'Rourke, *Ethics of Health Care* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 63.
3. Ashley and O'Rourke, 65.



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