

Do We Need the Church's Teaching?

By Tom Tarzian

Perhaps some of us wonder at times why we should pay any attention to the Church's—that is her Magisterium's—teaching on faith and morals. Perhaps we question whether we really need guidance in faith and morals.

Let's make this into three questions, using me as an example: first, do I, Tom Tarzian, really need guidance in morals and faith; second, if I do, why; and third, why should I look to the Magisterium for it?

Let's start with the first question: do I need guidance in morals and faith?

I confess that in my all too frequent prideful moments I'm tempted to think I don't need such guidance. In those moments I'm tempted to think I can decide what's right and wrong on my own, just using what I think of as my conscience or the Word of God which the Bible tells me God has implanted in my heart. And sometimes I think I can get the guidance I need directly from God in prayer.

But if I'm being really honest with myself I know there is something about my nature that, in many cases, makes it difficult, if not impossible, for me to determine what is right and wrong on my own, even with the help of prayer. Perhaps you know this about yourself, too?

Now let's tackle the second question: why is this the case—why can't I always correctly determine what is right and wrong on my own?

I think a major reason is the fall. And I don't mean the season that comes after summer and before winter.

The fall I'm talking about is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) calls man's original disobedience toward God in which “man *preferred* himself to God and by that very act scorned him. [Man] chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of [man's] creaturely status and therefore against his own good.” (CCC 398) In other words, we abused the freedom God gave us and chose to disobey Him. That was the fall. And the Catechism tells us that all of our sins since then are essentially the same thing: “disobedience toward God and lack of trust in His goodness.” (CCC 397)

The Catechism also tells us that the fall had a very harmful effect on our—in this case my--human nature. The Catechism says that while my human nature has “not been totally corrupted [by the fall]...it is wounded...; [my nature is now] subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death and inclined to sin--an inclination to evil that is called ‘concupiscence’” (CCC 405). “When man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn toward what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from his good creator.” (CCC 401) And the Catechism says I'm now inclined “to prefer [my] own

judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.” (CCC 1783) “Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action, and morals.” (CCC 407)

What the Catechism says about my fallen nature I can, unfortunately, confirm from my own experience.

Now this is not to say that I don’t have the ability to reason or that reasoning isn’t important. After all, it’s precisely through reasoning that I’m able to grapple with and answer these questions. And it’s not to say that I don’t have inclinations to good as a result of God’s Word implanted in my heart—otherwise I wouldn’t have the urge to try to do what is right in the first place. But I am saying that as a result of the fall I also have strong inclinations to selfishness and other evils and my judgment when it comes to matters of morality and faith—when it comes to figuring out what actually is the right thing to do in every case—my judgment is confused and subject to error. (*Fides et Ratio* 22)

According to St. Augustine, I’ve become in this particular sense, in the sense that my judgment regarding matters of morality and faith is impaired, in this sense I’ve become a fool. (*The Usefulness of Belief* 4, 14, 17)

I’m a little offended that St. Augustine, whom I greatly admire, thinks I’m a fool but I have to admit he has a point.

Now what does a fool like me—someone who wants to do what is right but knows he cannot reliably figure that out on his own in many situations—what does a fool like me need more than anything else?

More than anything else a fool like me needs to find a “wise man” to guide him.

But--and this is one of my favorite quotes from St. Augustine—“how can fools find a wise man?” (*The Usefulness of Belief* 28), especially if all those in the pool of potential wise people, that is, all of us humans, are to one extent or another fools in the sense we’re talking about here?

In my case, I’m tempted to either try to find someone to guide me with whom I feel comfortable or someone with whose teaching I agree. Maybe these are really the same thing?

But the truth—which is what I’m seeking--is frequently not comfortable. And when it comes to selecting a Church it seems to me looking for someone with whom I agree amounts to wanting to have God on my own terms and not necessarily on God’s terms. This is not the kind of guidance a fool like me needs—it is really little more guidance than the fool can give him or her self. Would I try to find a good brain surgeon by considering how each prospective surgeon performs operations? Wouldn’t I rather have a recommendation from someone I can trust?

St. Augustine's answer to how a fool like me can find a guide is that I need God's recommendation. Only with God's help can it be done. (*The Usefulness of Belief* 28, 29) I think I need God's help in at least three ways: first, to recognize I'm a fool who needs guidance; second, to point me toward those I should choose to guide me and third, those whom He's chosen to guide me need His help in knowing how to guide me.

As I've already said, God allows me to be reminded that I'm a fool who needs guidance on the all too numerous occasions when I make—or I'm tempted to make--obvious mistakes in moral or religious judgment.

But can you think of a time when God Himself gave help to someone in knowing how to guide me and when He pointed out to me to whom He's given that help?

How about when the Bible tells me God came to earth as Jesus Christ, performed miracles to get my attention, selected His Apostles, taught them, authorized them to teach me, breathed the Holy Spirit on them and chose Peter to lead them; the same Peter whom he called the rock on whom He founded His Church and to whom He gave the keys of His Church and much other authority, including the job of shepherd of His whole flock—including me? (CCC 881) And Peter and the Apostles passed this authority on to their successors, the popes and the bishops who came after them, who are the Magisterium of the Church. (CCC 77, 765, 767, 857, 880-892, 1556, 2034)

In other words, this happened when God in the person of Jesus created the Magisterium and gave it—and continues to give it--His assistance in teaching about faith and morals so that I might have the benefit of its guidance in these areas. (CCC 888-892)

As a result, I've come to realize that I should believe in Magisterial teachings...because I should believe in the teaching authority of the Magisterium...because this authority comes from God Himself, from the flesh and blood yet fully divine person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And I'm not alone. St. Augustine said that he only believed in the Gospel because he believed in the authority of the Catholic Church. (CCC 119)

To paraphrase St. Peter, I've come to understand that there's nowhere else for me to go for guidance in these matters than to the teaching office of the Church my Lord Jesus founded, which is the Catholic Church.

So when I say I believe in "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" in the Nicene Creed every Sunday I'm making one simple yet all encompassing act of faith in my Lord's one holy catholic and apostolic Church, including in the teaching authority of her Magisterium. (CCC 85-87, 172-175, 880-892)

Just because I choose the Magisterium as my guide doesn't mean I won't still struggle with certain Magisterial teachings. After all, I'm still a fool with a fallen nature

inclined to error. But these struggles can actually be helpful. They can help reform my nature, that is form my conscience (Cardinal Ratzinger, *Bishops, Theologians and Morality*, 1985, II, 1). But this can happen only if I struggle honestly and quietly, praying and trying for humility, objectivity, understanding, conversion, even repentance, as Cardinal Pell wrote in *First Things*.

And as I struggle I must keep firmly in mind that, for all the reasons I've just given, the Magisterium is infinitely more likely to be right than I am.

Finally, if I really believe in the teaching authority of the Magisterium, I must believe (according to my Webster's one meaning of believe is "to accept trustfully and on faith") the Magisterial teachings I'm struggling with and try my best to apply them in my life even while I struggle with them. If I fail—as I do all too frequently—I must go to confession and try again.

Let's test the reasonableness of my statement that the Magisterium is infinitely more likely to be right about matters of faith and morals than I am. I come from a wealthy, conservative family. I'm the chief executive officer and majority shareholder of my colleagues' and my business. Much of the Church's social teaching contradicted what I believed when I first heard it—for example, her teaching on the obligations and responsibilities of property ownership. Even the fact that the Church had social teaching seemed suspicious to me. I have also struggled with some of the Church's teaching on sex. And perhaps most seriously, I struggle with the teachings on God's goodness and love. Now let me ask you, if you were placing a bet, would you bet that I'm more likely to be right about these things than the Magisterium?

My guess is you bet on the Magisterium and I'm not offended that you did. But if you think that the Magisterium is more likely to be right about these things than I am shouldn't you, in all humility, consider that it's also more likely to be right about them than you are?

In any case, I hope I've at least persuaded you that it's worth your while to pay attention to the Church's teaching on faith and morals.

God bless.