

## Q: Why doesn't the Catholic Church catch up with the times and modernize its teachings?

With the media frenzy going on around Pope Benedict and the election of a new Pope, I can't help but be saddened by some of the news coverage, editorials and online threads I've been seeing as of late.

I constantly read comments along the lines of the Church being "divided between liberals and conservatives", or something to that affect. Often, the particular commentators will carry on citing that Pope Benedict has failed to modernize the Catholic Church, and that somehow it's teachings, especially in the area of morality, are antiquated and need to be changed.

They often then try and make the point that many people have left the Church over just such issues, and that Pope Benedict's outdated stand on things such as contraception, homosexuality, abortion and other life issues, divorce and remarriage, women priests and a host of other areas has not only driven these people from the Church, but has maybe left the Church as an irrelevant, outdated entity, destined to soon drift by the wayside.

Unfortunately, all these commentators have a very misunderstood concept of what the Office of the Pope and the Catholic Church are. Let me try and gently, clearly and charitably clear up some of the misconceptions around all of this.

For starters, it is very important to know that when Pope Benedict, or any Pope for that matter, teaches officially, infallibly in the area faith and morals, he is not trying to advance his own personal beliefs or agenda. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. The role of the Pope and the Magisterium of the Church (the teaching office of the Church, composed of the Pope and all the bishops teaching in union with him) is **not to teach anything new**. In his inspired New Testament letter, St. Jude confirms that public revelation ended with the death of the last Apostle.

No, the church has no authority to teach anything but what Jesus and the Apostles taught. And because of this, it has **absolutely no authority to change its teachings** to fit with modern sentiment or public opinion. They are the teachings that Jesus delivered to it some 2000 years ago and **cannot change**. These teachings were true then and they are true now, and by their very nature, God's laws cannot change. Yes, the Church can grow in its understanding of these teachings and doctrines, but no Pope will ever have the authority to **change** them. If someone is hoping and speculating that the Church will yet change its teachings in these doctrinal areas one day, they are in for a disappointment, because it simply **can't** change what Jesus has taught - no matter how many people call for it.

And even if a Pope wanted to make such a change, the Holy Spirit just wouldn't allow it. Recall that in the Upper Room, Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit

to His Church, and He confirmed that the Holy Spirit would “*teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you... guide you into all the truth... and... declare to you the things that are to come*” (**John 14:26 to 16:13**). Additionally Jesus promised that “*whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven*” (**Mat 16:19**). The Holy Spirit Himself will guide the Church into all truth, and protect it from ever teaching error.

And there are many instances in the history of the Church where exactly this has happened. For instance, read the incredible story surrounding Popes Agapetus, Silverius and Vigilius and the Monophysite Heresy (that Jesus had only one nature) of Empress Theodora. Pope Agapetus was murdered for refusing to teach this heresy, then his successor, Pope Silverius was exiled and murdered as well -starved to death to make way for the heretical Bishop Vigilius to become Pope and teach the Empress’ personal, but heretical beliefs -and Vigilius himself had a hand in this. After all this, Vigilius was finally installed as Pope. But as Pope he recanted and refused to teach this new doctrine, even after murdering his way to do so. Instead, he repeatedly reinforced the Church’s constant teaching on the 2 natures of Jesus, both divine and human, in one divine person. And it appears that Vigilius himself was then murdered for proclaiming these same truths.

In fact, in 2000 years the Church has never contradicted itself when teaching officially on faith and morals. And when you consider all the various doctrinal pronouncements the Church has made over those 2 millennia, that is an amazing record, to say the least -miraculous even! And of the 266 Popes we have had to date, thankfully there has only been a handful of scandalous ones. Providentially, most of them taught nothing at all.

If the Church were just a human institution, we might expect it to flip-flop in doctrinal areas, especially when under the strain of public pressure. We’ve seen such instances in groups such as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, to name a few. But we see nothing of the sort in the Catholic Church.

Over the last 2000 years, only the Catholic Church and some Eastern Orthodox rites have consistently upheld the constant Christian teaching in the areas of abortion, contraception, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage and more -teachings that, only a few decades ago, virtually every Christian denomination in the world held.

But the Church does not claim to be just another human institution. It is a divine institution, the Body of Christ, built by the wisest of builders, Jesus himself -built upon rock with the promise that the Gates of Hell would not prevail against it, and then, stunningly, left with “*the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven*” (cf **Mat 16:16-21**).

Yes, it is composed of weak, sinful human beings that can fall -and have fallen (remember, Jesus picked 12 and one of them was Judas -we should expect weeds and wheat). But guarded by the Holy Spirit, the Church is able to faithfully proclaim the Gospel, despite its human shortcomings, despite when it’s own ministers can’t

uphold its teachings. If we ourselves had to be sinless to unhypocritically teach morality to our children, very quickly, there would hardly be a parent left that could teach a thing...

And to claim that there can be both “liberal” and “conservative” Catholics, I would answer a very guarded, “yes”. But “yes” only to the degree that we can have diversity in the many rich, non-doctrinal areas of the Church’s life that can be, by their nature, changed or be discussed further -for example in changeable Church disciplines (pastoral, changeable enactments of the Church to help the faithful), in the various Rites, liturgies and cultural traditions of the Church –or in those areas of teaching that have yet to be doctrinally defined in some manner by the Church.

But when it comes to the doctrines of the Church - “official” Church teachings in areas of faith and morals - there can be only one set of unifying truths that all must hold to be truly Catholic. The Church exists as a kingdom, not a democracy. We cannot vote for what we would like Jesus to have taught. We see this going on right now in many Christian denominations, and we are watching many crumble before our eyes. We must faithfully hold to what Jesus taught, no matter how difficult or unpopular this becomes –to the truths He revealed once and for all to the Apostles, and that are preserved in a living, sacred way through the Apostolic, holy order of the Church. What was true then is true now And we **MUST** do this charitably, no matter how strong or uncharitable the opposition becomes. And I dare say, this is going to get harder to do, not easier...

May God bless and keep our Pope!

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