

## THE TEACHING MINISTRY OF BISHOPS

Topic: The Teaching Ministry of Bishops:  
Custodians of the Cache or Shepherds of the Search?  
Convener: Laura Taylor, Vanderbilt University  
Presenter: Terrance W. Klein, Fordham University  
Respondent: Robert L. Masson, Marquette University

Teaching the truth is the first ministry of bishops discussed in *Christus Dominus*, the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, but how does one do this in cultures that no longer think of truth as something that can be taught? We do not picture truth as standing apart from the human person, as an atemporal constant that endures through centuries of ever-shifting human vagaries, or as a monad-like conceptual conglomerate that possesses meaning in itself, apart from any relational considerations.

We think of it as a quality that characterizes conceptual relationships, acts of perception and understanding. For us truth is inherently relational, intrinsically temporal, inextricably tied to the human person seeking it. One could say that truth today remains as a direction of pursuit, but not an object of possession. How do theologians reference and reverence in language a God who eludes comprehension, and how do preachers share a "Word" so timeless that every sermon outdates itself?

The peculiar post-Enlightenment concern has to do with the nature of concepts and their inability to capture the nonconceptual. If concepts are thoroughly linguistic constructions, meaning that they shift with language itself, how do we understand the Gospel to be what it certainly claims to be: a definitive call to the merciful presence of God revealed in the Christ? In preaching the Gospel, what remains the same amidst the flux?

Post-Enlightenment thought constantly reminds us that words do not speak for themselves. They must be interpreted, because words are explicated even when we don't think we are delineating them. The fundamentalist who spurns interpretation is simply the fool who doesn't recognize his or her act of interpretation. In the lapidary formulation of Emmanuel Levinas: "A reason freed from temporal contingencies, a soul coeternal with the Ideas, such is the self-image cultivated by a reason that has forgotten itself."

Wittgenstein insisted that words derive their meanings from language itself, not from objects standing beyond it. But then one might rightly ask how it can be that words shift—meanings emerge, merge, and submerge—and yet the Gospel remains the same. Words draw meaning from what Wittgenstein called language games. These emerge out of basic forms of human activity: commands, questions, prayers, reports, lists, etc. Revelation is not a language game, but it is language game-dependent.

Theological assertions shift in formulation, not because the God they reference changes, but because language shifts. This is why the only way to understand the meaning of a theological assertion is to attempt to replicate the original game, the nexus in which it came to birth. If one doesn't understand the context, one doesn't understand the concept. Yet the theological task remains incomplete. Why? Because the task of the word, the text, is to address today's interlocutor. The

theologian can study the fields of reference that first produced the language games upon which revelation depends, but she cannot presume to transport those very same fields of meaning into the twenty-first century. One could say that the task is to recreate the game, using the same rules on a different field. The rules will guarantee continuity, but a different field (and new players!) will bring forth a new game. This is another characteristic of postmodern thought: the endless fecundity of the text and the tradition in which it stands.

One sees something similar in the metaphoric process. A metaphor works through a combination of the stable and the unstable, the known and the unknown. To use the language of French phenomenology, the metaphor reveals through the distance that stands between the known and the unknown. However the key point, in terms of what Newman called the development of doctrine, is that a contemporary insight itself might so radically reconfigure the combinatory elements as to look like an innovation, even a startling one. It's only when one examines the foundational rules of the language game that one realizes that the game always contained this possibility, never before exploited.

*Response: Cache, Quest, and Minding Metaphors*

A distinction must be made between the metaphoric and the metaphorical. To show a claim is metaphoric is not evidence of truth or falsity, nor does it sidestep that question, but only shows: how it is one or the other, and why questions of truth and meaning are interdependent. This is crucial in a culture ambivalent about truth, to avoid the temptation to think of truth as a cache of concepts and doctrinal propositions or to reduce our efforts to live in the truth as mere quest without substantive truth claims. Better to speak of "minding the "metaphoric" and to keep that underlying distinction in mind, avoiding a third temptation to think that "ministry to truth" might be resolved by an easy "both/and." There is no simple reconciliation of truth as cache or quest. The challenge is intellectual, moral and religious conversion to a new world of meanings.

TERRANCE W. KLEIN  
*Fordham University*  
*New York, New York*