

“WHEN THE MAGISTERIUM INTERVENES...”

- Topic: Investigations regarding the Exercise of the Magisterium in Contemporary Social and Ecclesial Contexts
- Convener: Richard R. Gaillardetz, University of Toledo
- Presenters: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University  
 Anthony Godzieba, Villanova University  
 Vincent Miller Georgetown University/University of Dayton

This three-year research seminar is dedicated to a study of the exercise of the magisterium, with special attention to new developments in fundamental theology, ecclesiology and cultural analysis. Bradford Hinze offered the session's first paper "A Decade of Disciplining Theologians: A Preliminary Report." He summarized his research into instances of magisterial intervention over the past decade by the CDF and by doctrinal committees of episcopal conferences. He considered as well ecclesiastical activities related to the conferral/non-conferral of a *nihil obstat*, *missio canonica* or *mandatum*, and various other indirect exercises of ecclesiastical intervention. He considered shifts in the kinds of doctrinal topics about which current ecclesiastical authorities seem particularly concerned and delineated the various cases of ecclesiastical investigation and discipline by geography, process and outcome. Hinze gave voice to a litany of laments from theologians who have found themselves subject to these investigations: 1) the anonymity of one's accuser and critics; 2) the role of secrecy in the investigative process and the attendant experience of isolation; 3) the reliance on unfair and often decontextualized interpretations of a theologian's work; 4) an a-historical appeal to doctrinal teaching; 5) a failure to separate the roles of investigator, prosecutor and judge; 6) inadequate processes of communication with the theologian under investigation; 7) interrogation masked as dialogue; 8) the potential defamation of a theologian's character; 9) failure to trust the good will of theologians and the entire people of God; 10) a culture of surveillance, policing and intimidation. Hinze concluded with some concrete proposals: 1) the creation of an advisory council of theologians at the diocesan level; 2) the development of new models of collaboration between bishops and theologians at the level of episcopal conferences, including annual meetings with representatives of the various theological societies; 3) the return to the practice of the first millennium, when doctrinal disputes were resolved at synods and councils.

The second paper, offered by Anthony Godzieba, was titled, "*Quaestio Disputata*: The Magisterium in an Age of Digital Reproduction." Godzieba drew on the work of Walter Benjamin, who held that a work of art loses its essential "authenticity" in the process of widespread reproduction. This authenticity and the peculiar claim that a work makes on those who engage it depend on "the presence of the original." Large scale reproductions of a work dramatically enhance a work's accessibility and immediacy but do so at the expense of "shearing off" the work's context and history of interpretation. The work of art is rendered a "free floating," "homeless object."

Godzieba then applied this theory to the exercise of doctrinal pronouncements, using the example of the late Pope John Paul II's allocution on assisted nutrition and hydration. Godzieba illuminated the way in which its authority was artificially absolutized through the process of "digital immediacy." Instant access to this document through the Vatican website and various other websites, blogs, listservs, etc., allowed it to be detached from any "thick" process of communal interpretation and reception. The difficult and complex historical process of ecclesial "reception" was replaced by the immediacy of "perception" and "appropriation." In a digitally-immediate culture, immediacy equals authenticity equals authority. This has two consequences: 1) structures of Church authority take on the characteristics of contemporary managerial culture, while authentic *communio* is diminished; 2) traditional criteria for discerning the authority of magisterial statements are exposed as clearly inadequate to cope with the flood of ecclesial representations in a "digital storm," and new hermeneutically "thicker" criteria are needed.

Miller's paper, "When Mediating Structures Change: Transformations of Magisterial Authority in Digital Culture," acknowledged that digital mediation tends to absolutize the authority of magisterial documents but argued that the commodifying tendencies of our digital culture undermine authority as well. When believers encounter magisterial teaching in commercial and popular media, they are likely to engage it with the interpretive habits of those contexts.

The second half of his paper turned to these questions. The contemporary "cultural ecology" is dominated by heterogenization and deterritorialization. Heterogenization refers to the creation of insular sub-cultures. The internet reinforces this heterogenizing process by facilitating "virtual communities" that enable us to limit our social interactions to those who share our convictions, values, viewpoints, etc. Deterritorialization refers to the ways in which communities can float free from physical geography, and consequently from the need to engage one another across differences and disagreements. These phenomena are in evidence in unfolding "congregationalization" of Catholic parishes. These twin dynamisms reduce community and orthodoxy to the politics of identity.

Finally, Miller considered how both bishops and theologians are in danger of being assimilated to the model of the "special purpose organization" – advocacy groups defined by a carefully circumscribed agenda of issues and concerns (e.g., abortion, environment, immigration, etc.). Their ability to focus public attention on a carefully delimited range of issues is highly effective in the media, but works against the demands catholicity for comprehensive orthodoxy and the embrace of the entire believing community. The effect of these processes is to marginalize the exercise of ecclesiastical authority. As an example, Miller notes the ways in which these special purpose organizations exerted far more influence in the last presidential election campaign than the carefully crafted, comprehensive treatment of Catholic social teaching by the USCCB document, *Faithful Citizenship*.

Important insights emerged from the seminar discussion, including: 1) the distinctive manner in which magisterial acts are perceived in non-western ecclesial

contexts; 2) the asymmetry in the treatment of clerical/professed religious theologians and lay theologians; 3) the relative marginalization of the *Shared Doctrinal Responsibilities* document produced by the then NCCB in collaboration with the CTSA and CLSA.

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