

German Bishops' Error and True Development of Doctrine

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“The time is sure to come when people will not accept sound teaching, but their ears will be itching for anything new and they will collect themselves a whole series of teachers according to their own tastes; and then they will shut their ears to the truth...” 2 Tim. 3:4,5

The Apostle Paul issued that warning to his disciple, Timothy, in the second letter he wrote to him. Certainly, this “time” has come on other occasions throughout the history of the Church. But there is no doubt this warning speaks loudly to the age in which we now live.

In the beginning of the Letter of Jude the Apostle uses a phrase which is of great importance. The letter was written to deal with a similar smoke of confusion in the early Church as we see in the German Church and are increasingly experiencing in the whole Church today. The fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith were being challenged, and in some cases, rejected and replaced by error. Jude writes: “Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

This “once for all” still stands — and it must be defended against some who seek to change the unchangeable. We must “contend for that faith.” Even some in ordained leadership are telling the faithful, amidst all the smoke of our current theological confusion, that certain errant teachings and practices are a “development of doctrine.” But this concept of development is being improperly used as a cover for attempts to change what is unchangeable.

On November 28, 2012, His Eminence Cardinal Daniel DiNardo ordained me as the Fourth Catholic Bishop of Tyler, Texas in a small auditorium just down the street from the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and its parish elementary school, St. Gregory.

The auditorium was very familiar to me because on several occasions I had joined the students in their annual musicals in the same auditorium. But, on this day, the children joined me on what is likely the most important day of my life.

It was on that stage in front of 1,800 people that His Eminence, during the Rite of Ordination, asked me several questions, two of which are vital to my mission as a bishop. First, “Are you resolved to be faithful and constant in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ?” and second, “Are you resolved to maintain the deposit of faith, entire and incorrupt, as handed down by the apostles and professed by the Church everywhere and at all times?” My response to both questions was a resounding “I am!”

It was at this point that the deeper meaning of the phrase “**deposit of faith**” came alive for me. I also began to understand my role in magisterial teaching and my serious call, as a successor of the Apostles, to the ongoing task of “Guarding the Deposit of Faith” given by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself to the Apostles and handed down since then. These two powerful questions, and my response to them, continue to guide me in my role as the chief teacher and shepherd of the flock of Jesus Christ in the Catholic Diocese of Tyler, Texas.

As baptized Christians, there is a way in which we have all been given that deposit of faith from the Lord himself, handed down to the Apostles, along with the charge to guard. It is a deposit which we cannot and must not seek to change. The deposit of faith is the truth, given to us from the one who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). It must be handed on without alteration.

Jesus made it clear in his charge to the first Apostles to teach the nations “**everything I have commanded you.**” He promised “know that I am with you always, until the end of the world” (Matt. 28:18-20). And, He is still with us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in his Church. **He is the head of his Church. We are members of his mystical body. We must teach what the head has given us to teach.**

Yet, sadly, there are increasing efforts among some to deny the very existence of such a deposit of faith. And, even by some in ordained ministry, to change the unchangeable. Perhaps the most blatant and obvious example of this error recently occurred in Germany. I affirm and support a statement issued by my brother bishop, His Excellency Donald J. Hying, on March 21, 2023. The entire statement can be read here (<https://madisoncatholicherald.org/bishop-hying-bishops-in-germany/>), in the Diocese of Madison’s Catholic Herald.

The bishop wrote: “For three years, the leaders of the Catholic Church in Germany have been involved in their “Synodal Way,” a process of conversation and decisions among the bishops and laity, regarding Church doctrine and practice, which culminated recently in three days of voting on particular issues. The majority sanctioned the blessing of same-sex unions, the ordination of women, and transgendered people, a fundamental change in the governing authority of bishops, and a radical rewrite of Catholic sexual morality.”

He adds, toward the end of his statement, “...No one has the authority to change Church teaching, as if the truth given is malleable and adaptive to changing cultural norms. Such a path would lead to both error and irrelevance. When people express their dismay to me about the turbulence in the Church and the many conflicting opinions about doctrine and morality, I simply reaffirm that the Faith does not change. We have the Scriptures, the Tradition, and the Catechism.”

I join my brother bishop in this reaffirmation that the faith does not change. Furthermore, I thank him for the clarity and charity which was reflected in his March 21st statement. In this letter I wish to address the effort to use a false notion of the concept of the “development of doctrine” to change unchangeable doctrine.

The concept of the “development of doctrine” is not itself a doctrine. It is a theory by which we explain how our understanding of doctrine deepens and grows, – and how our expression of the unchangeable doctrine can also develop. In the wake of the welcomed canonization of St. John Henry Cardinal Newman, there appears to be a concerted effort among some to misuse his teaching on the development of doctrine as a vehicle to push false teaching forward. It is a betrayal of this Saint’s teaching.

St. John Henry Cardinal Newman drew his inspiration for his 1845 Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine from the fifth-century monk and theologian, St. Vincent of Lerins. That Saint’s writings on the proper understanding of the development of doctrine are found in what is called the Commonitorium. In an article for First Things entitled “Four Ideas About Development (<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/11/four-ideas-about-development>),” Michael Pakaluk, a Professor of Ethics at the Catholic University of America, explained:

“If you actually read the treatise Commonitorium by **St. Vincent of Lerins** — often cited as the origin of the theory of development — **you’ll see that his main preoccupation is to show that the faith never changes.**

Pope John Paul II's motto for the turn of the millennium was 'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow'."

Pope St. John Paul II was quoting the Letter to the Hebrews ([Hebrews 13:8](#)): The misuse of the theory of the development of doctrine to attempt to change what is unchangeable is more of the bad fruit arising from a growing, dangerous [doctrinal relativism](#) within the Catholic Church which, at times, even seems to [deny the very existence of objective truth](#).

On April 18, 2005, on the eve of the convocation where he would be chosen to serve as the Successor of Peter and take the name Benedict XVI, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger gave a homily wherein he warned of the spreading dangers of this kind of relativism in the teaching of the Church which he loved and served with such fidelity. Here are his words, which eerily seem even more important in this current hour:

"...How many winds of doctrine we have known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking....The small boat of thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves — thrown from one extreme to the other: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism, and so forth.

"Every day new sects are created and what Saint Paul says about human trickery comes true, with cunning which tries to draw those into error (cf. Eph. 4, 14). Having a clear faith, based on the Creed of the Church, is often labeled today as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism — which is letting oneself be tossed and 'swept along by every wind of teaching' — looks like the only attitude which is acceptable in today's standards. We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires."

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, soon to become Pope Benedict XVI, continued in this homily, by calling the Church to an "adult faith":

"However, we have a different goal: the Son of God, true man. He is the measure of true humanism. Being an 'Adult' means having a faith which does not follow the waves of today's fashions or the latest novelties. A faith which is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ is adult and mature. It is this friendship which opens us up to all that is good and gives us the knowledge to judge true from false, and deceit from truth."

"We must become mature in this adult faith; we must guide the flock of Christ to this faith. And it is this faith — only faith — which creates unity and takes form in love. On this theme, Saint Paul offers us some beautiful words — in contrast to the continual ups and downs of those who were are like infants, tossed about by the waves: (he says) make truth in love, as the basic formula of Christian existence. In Christ, truth and love coincide. To the extent that we draw near to Christ, in our own life, truth and love merge. Love without truth would be blind; truth without love would be like 'a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal' (1 Cor. 13,1)."

Bishops, indeed, all clergy, religious, consecrated and lay faithful of the Church, should prayerfully reflect on this beautiful deposit of faith continually. We should strive to know it, understand it, love it, teach it faithfully, and live it. It is the true measuring stick of that mature faith to which the late Pope Benedict called all of us to in the homily quoted above.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we can, and we should, seek ever fresh ways of presenting and applying the deposit of faith. That is the proper understanding of the development of doctrine. But we have no right to change the doctrine and no authority to alter it.

All bishops must follow the solemn promise, the one we made at the time of our episcopal ordination, to "maintain the deposit of faith, entire and incorrupt, as handed down by the apostles and professed by the Church everywhere and at all times." This is a sacred duty.

It is also binding on all clergy, indeed, on all members of the Church. For bishops, if we fail in our duty, not only will we cause the faithful to suffer, but we will offend God — and face serious consequences for failing to live out the charge we were given at our episcopal ordination.

To conclude: although the Church's understanding of this body of teaching, this sacred deposit, can and does properly develop in how it is expressed, and deepen in how it is understood, it can never be changed in substance.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes: “The apostles entrusted the sacred deposit of the faith [the depositum fidei; see 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12-14] contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to the whole of the Church. By adhering to (this heritage) the entire holy people, united to its pastors, remains always faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread [the Eucharist] and the prayers. So, in maintaining, practicing and professing the faith that has been handed on, there should be a remarkable harmony between the bishops and the faithful” (CCC, n. 84).

– Bishop Joseph Strickland, March 29, 2023