

## Concerning Information, Knowledge and Wisdom

### Familial relationships

When the Second Vatican Council spoke of “familial relationship” between the laity and the pastors” (LG 37), it was making the point that each learns something from the other when it comes to understanding, interpreting and applying the Church’s teaching.

The practical implications of this were later spelled out in c.212, which emphasises both the rights of the laity and the respect due to the teaching ministry of pastors. But more than that, good collaboration in practising and presenting the Church’s teaching is rooted in the relationships proper to a community of Jesus’ disciples. Their learning from each is qualitatively affected by *friendship* between them.

### A little learning

If before the Council it was the insights and the rights of the laity that were often neglected, perhaps today it is the ministry of the pastors that is being disrespected – not by careless Catholics, but by zealous Catholics, who seem to be very sure of themselves. Of whom was the poet speaking when he said: “a little learning is a dangerous thing”? The harshness and sarcasm to which pastors are sometimes treated does not come from those family relationships the Council describes, and not from the Holy Spirit.

Adequately presenting the Church’s teaching involves much more than just getting information, even from the best of sources. Information on its own is not knowledge. Much less is it wisdom. Someone has rightly asked: whatever happened to wisdom that it got buried in knowledge; whatever happened to knowledge that it got buried in information?

Information is only the raw material for knowledge. It needs to be processed through the methods proper to theology. In this way we see individual teachings in the light of each other and in the light of the whole. This involves years of study.

At the time the Catechism of the Catholic Church was issued, Cardinal Ratzinger emphasised the importance of “mediating” the Catechism. This is something more than merely drawing conclusions for local application, and it is more than merely repeating the text. It involves a process of internalising, interpreting and re-expressing the text in other ways. He even said the Catechism “is not and cannot be the only possible way, or even the best way, of giving a catechetical re-expression to the Christian message”. It belongs to the ministry of bishops and bishops’ conferences to oversee these processes of “mediation” and ensure faithfulness to the apostolic tradition.

In a private discussion with two of New Zealand’s bishops during the 1989 Synod, Cardinal Ratzinger confirmed that bishops and bishops’ conferences have a similar role in interpreting and applying Instructions issued by Roman Congregations for the Universal Church.

How did Cardinal Ratzinger get it so wrong, if it is sufficient just to repeat what can be read in the Catechism or in an Instruction?

What would be left of the charism and vocation of theologians if the ability to read the internet or the Catechism were all that is needed, without the need for years of theological study?

And what would be left of the teaching ministry of bishops if it were reduced to merely repeating what anyone could pick up from the media?

These are the kind of questions that must be faced by those who use information (albeit accurate information) in isolation from theological method and independently of the teaching ministry of bishops.

They might also notice that according to the Council, the factors which give rise to ongoing development and growth in the Church's *understanding* of its faith are rooted in the *lived experience* of the faith (DV n.8) – and therefore in the life of the Church at every *local* level.

### **The need for bishops to speak up**

That is why the charism and responsibility for authenticating Catholic teaching belongs to the *whole* episcopate, including and especially the Bishop of Rome. Regional bishops would be acting in an un-Catholic way if they were not to assume their share of responsibility for how the Church's teaching continues to be clarified and expressed.

If the reaction of some Catholics to a recent explanation of the Church's teaching on contraception and avoiding the spread of infection proved anything, it proved the need to say what was said. Otherwise, people really will think that clarifications such as those recently offered by at least two Cardinals and a consultor to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith amount to a "change" in the Church's teaching. It was important to explain why this is not so.

It is also required of pastors that they hold the torch for those thinking Catholics and others who know instinctively that some of the Church's teachings have been inflated beyond what the Church actually teaches.

### **Wisdom**

Beyond knowledge is wisdom. Knowledge is its raw material still being processed through prayer, reflection and life-experience. Of course, it is also a gift. Those who are least likely to feel the need for wisdom are those who are most sure of their own knowledge. Lots of information and easy access to it have become their power-base. (The power-base in society used to be with those who hold wisdom).

Some of those who rely heavily on information would probably find Cardinal Ratzinger's remarks on *mediating* and on *the role of bishops' conferences* bewildering – even if they are not so long out of the seminary.

The Catholic laity are entitled to pay more attention to those who have heard more confessions, visited more homes, worked with more addicts, failed more often, and experienced their own vulnerability over a longer period of time. They seem to know something that is not taken from the internet. (I used to feel scandalised by these priests – I had learned the books very well. I was yet to learn humility.)

**An increasing need**

Legislation on social, economic and industrial issues, and ethical questions arising from bio-technology, are just some obvious areas in which pastors and laity need each other for a proper understanding of how the Church's teachings apply. This will become more so, not less so. How shall we put in place the structures needed to facilitate friendship?