

A Time For Listening To The Ordinary Magisterium

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Kung

The Swiss priest Hans Kung ranks among the most famous theologians of our times, and it is interesting to note that Prime Minister Tony Blair has met with him on a number of occasions and says he has been influenced by his thought. However it should be remembered that in 1979 he had his licence to teach as a Catholic theologian withdrawn by the Vatican. Doubts had long been raised about Kung's view of the divinity of Christ, and this in turn was seen to affect his basic assessment of Christianity; whether it is a doctrinal religion, and whether its doctrines can be taught and held with certainty. So it is not surprising that at the time of his discreditation as an official Church theologian, the root of the quarrel was his constant criticism of Papal authority, especially the teaching about infallibility. Whatever the personal situation of Hans Kung and whatever his current views may be, this is surely not a time for re-opening the destructive debates of thirty years ago. This is a time for evangelizing with conviction and purpose, for preaching with clarity, certainty and firm faith. People today need to know that Catholicism is credible and divinely founded. So the infallibility of the Church and the reasons for it - which are indeed rooted in the literal divinity of Jesus Christ - is an important question. But we also know that formal infallible statements are rare and somewhat extraordinary events in the Church's life. It would seem more important today to re-emphasize the need to listen to and accept what is called the "ordinary magisterium" of the Church. The ordinary magisterium consists of those teachings of the Pope and Bishops which are not considered to have the privilege of infallibility, but which, according to the Second Vatican Council, Catholics are also called to adhere to "with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind". This magisterium - or teaching office in the Body of Christ - is called 'ordinary' not because its content is less worthy of our attention, but because it is the ordinary way for the Church to teach. Unfortunately many of our people have gained the impression over the last thirty years or so that there are very few matters of real certainty in Catholicism, most of the Church's teaching being subject to the shifting sands of theological fashion. This view is reinforced by the commonly expressed view that certain teachings - about contraception or the ordination of women for example - are just the current opinion of a rather conservative Pope, and once he has gone to his reward we might get another more suitable to the spirit of the modern world who will change the teaching. This constant culture of doubt in matters that are basic to personal and ecclesiastical life does great harm to the young especially. Nothing strong and lasting can be built on such shaky foundations. Our motive for emphasizing the ordinary magisterium is the firm belief that only by accepting the Church's teachings with a full and open heart will the wisdom of our faith be witnessed to in our sad secular world. The Catholic faith does not consist of just a few isolated doctrines which have been infallibly defined, and then the rest is just a matter of taste and opinion. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church shows with great power, the Catholic faith is an organic whole containing a

wealth of divine and human wisdom. The secular world offers plenty of 'make-your-own-mind-up-and-do-as-you-like-ism', but there is little evidence that this brings joy and integrity to human beings. It is a serious betrayal of apostolic duty to give people the impression that what the Church has to offer is largely the same philosophy, except for a few arcane doctrines.

Our Secular Culture

Nowhere is this more true than in the Church's ordinary teaching on family life and sexual relationships. This is the area of the ordinary magisterium that is most widely ignored and called into question, but it is an area in which we most urgently need to listen to the wisdom of the Church, and to know that what we hear is actually the definitive teaching of Christ. In the formation of young people and adults, it is impossible for views on sexual morality to be unaffected by our secular culture. If one looks at the television programmes children and adults watch, it is very difficult to find any religious role model, or indeed any role model at all that would endear one to the Church's teachings on sex and marriage. Brookside and Eastenders are prime examples of popular programmes that depict hardly anyone in stable relationship, and certainly never a young person seriously considering the idea of chastity when being attracted to a member of the opposite or same sex. The psychology of Freud which identifies personal fulfillment with the fulfillment of the sexual urge clearly holds sway in our culture, and any attempt to promote a Christian ethic is seen as hopelessly out-dated.

Our Experience

The experience of most good Catholic parents and of priests in youth work is that sadly there is no guarantee that the teenager brought up in a Catholic home, and through the Catholic school system, will understand anything more of the reasons for the teaching of the Church (which is so contrary to our prevailing culture) than their non-Catholic peers. Indeed, it would seem that one can have very little expectation of an ebullient defense of the church's teaching in our Catholic schools, and parents would have to be particularly well formed to battle for their children against the influences of the day. Such is the influence of our secular culture that we had recently, in a leading Catholic newspaper, a feature on a famous pop star who apparently is a 'committed Catholic', even though she got married on a 130ft Bermudan cruiser changing her usually modest style to become a scantily-clad 'uberbabe'.

The Disastrous Consequences of the Present Situation

In such a poisoned atmosphere one could be forgiven for thinking that what the Church teaches is unrealistic. Could it be that it is meant for a parallel universe, but not our own? The Pope is accused of just such lack of realism when Clifford Longley, writing recently on the issue of artificial contraception in *The Tablet*, says "it bears no relationship to reality to say, as *Familiaris Consortio* does, that such cases result in the 'falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love'". What Clifford Longley and many others are really saying is that they simply do not accept 'the inner truth of conjugal love' as Jesus proclaims it through his Church.

It is all a question of what we take to be 'reality' – our own disordered experience or God's account of his own creation. We all know that there can be an agonising credibility gap between what our fallen nature feels to be 'normal', often reinforced by what a pagan culture accepts as 'respectable', and the standards of true holiness pronounced by God. This can indeed make God's way seem unreal and unattainable at first. But once the mind has submitted, once grace is accepted and progress in the way of the Spirit has begun, then another experience and another Reality begins to dawn on us. This is what conversion is all about, is it not? But there seems to be a pervading sense of doubt among Catholics that taking the moral high ground – that is the moral ground on which Jesus stands - in sexual matters will actually lead to a better society. We seem to call into question whether in these matters the Second Vatican Council and the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, have "handed on to our times a truly prophetic proclamation", as *Familiaris Consortio* puts it. Yet priests and teachers would be the first to point out the disastrous consequences which a secular view on sex and relationships has had on the family of today. So many children have their development hampered by the break up of their families, lacking the daily love and support of two parents. Of course there are many sad cases and endless complications, so this is not said to judge any individual. If anything we must all take the blame as a society for such an unhappy situation, because we have allowed seductive lies about human living and loving to shape our world.

There is enough evidence of the disastrous nature of the state of family life and of the consequences of this in our society, that one would expect this to be recognised in informed secular circles. There are hints that it may be so, but the full consequence of admitting just where we went wrong and how far down the wrong track we have come, would mean nothing less than a return to the full, orthodox Catholic faith as taught 'in season' (the ordinary magisterium) and 'out of season' (the extraordinary magisterium) by the Church.

Times statistics

The Sunday Times on April 6th 2003 (p.20) carried an arresting headline which ran: "Revealed: the formula for a perfect marriage". The article which followed was in no way agenda-led. It was simply an analysis of the marriages of 17,000 forty-somethings in one of the biggest social surveys of what people find makes marriage work. There is a constant note of surprise about what ought to be obvious, but still important findings: "One of the issues this (survey) highlights is that there are things that have gone on before you met your partner that affect the marriage." One of the most important findings to emerge was the link between disrupted adult relationships and divorce or separation in an individual's family of origin. According to the survey a man whose parents separated before he was 20 has a 40% increase risk of getting divorced, while for a woman in the same position the risk is also increased by 16%. In a society where divorce is so prevalent, this should be a real cause for concern. Religious belief played a part

in the low risk characteristics of wedded bliss. It was also noted that “One of the biggest surprises thrown up by the research is that cohabiting before marriage increases rather than decreases the chances of divorce.” The only surprise on our part would be if this message ever reached our television screens or became part of school sex education! Youth is no less idealistic than in past times, and most young people want to have a happy marriage. So one is left asking why such a survey was given so little prominence. The survey indicates how, far from the Church being unrealistic, it is our secular society that blinds itself to facts, and therefore is insensitive to the pain and the untold damage caused by its own false teaching. In any other area of social life such a situation would be at least a cause for concern, but when such statistics emerge in the area of family life - the basis on which society depends – then it ought to be a cause for downright alarm. All of this is a telling confirmation of Fr. Holloway’s words in *Catholicism: A New Synthesis*: “It is not possible to rupture the order of truth and good as it is established between God and human nature, or between a man and his neighbour, and still experience fulfillment. Therefore at the bottom of every love which is false there lurks a pain”. Those who regularly subscribe will know that FAITH has been a consistent defender of the Church’s teaching on these issues. When one looks back at the editorials of Fr. Holloway we find prophetic words about our present situation. It is time for Church leaders and those involved in the formation of our young people to realise that the Church in its teachings on sex and marriage has something which should no longer be our ‘best-kept secret’. (The Church’s social teaching is important too, but it can no longer claim the dubious honour of that title). It is no surprise that the movements which are flourishing in the Church today are those that are faithful to the fullness of Catholic ethics. The success of the Papal youth days is a powerful witness to the Pope’s belief that young people find the teaching on chastity and the right place for sex in the married relationship an ennobling, rich and attractive vision. For the sake of our young people’s happiness, it is time for the whole Church to teach the message of Jesus in full on the issue of sex and love. The Holy Father is constantly giving us clear leadership on this as well as other topical issues.

This is no time to dig up the bones of old debates about the technical conditions of infallibility. The Pope does not need to wait for solemn Councils or infallible definitions in order to be our teacher and guide in the faith. It is the love of Christ that should urge us on, not some ‘odium theologicum’. It is time we all listened to the Pope in his ‘ordinary’ magisterial ministry, especially about human relationships and the moral law. For far from the secular world being able to tell us what ‘real’ love is, it is in fact the Catholic vision of love and sex that leads to the understanding and experience of true love’s ways.