

Doctrine

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Our English word “doctrine” has its roots in the Latin verb *docere*, “to teach” (*doctor* is the Latin for “teacher”), and it means, in the broadest sense, simply that which is taught, what a teacher communicates to his disciples. In its most refined form, doctrine would be represented by any organized body of knowledge that purports to be true. Thus, we commonly speak of a particular philosophical doctrine, or economic doctrine. The term is also used to describe the teachings of certain prominent individuals, especially philosophers, and we frequently run across references to, for example, the doctrine of René Descartes, or the doctrine of Georg Hegel.

However, it is when “doctrine” is applied to religious subject matter that it takes on very special connotations, and this is particularly the case when it is applied to the truths of the Catholic faith. Here the term refers to truths of the highest order, as is clearly indicated by the fact that *sacra doctrina*, “sacred doctrine,” is St. Thomas Aquinas’s habitual way of referring to theology. The doctrine or teachings of theology is sacred because it has its origin in God Himself. Father John Hardon provides us with this definition of doctrine: “Any truth taught by the Church as necessary for acceptance by the faithful.”

Why, we might ask, would it be necessary for the faithful to accept Church doctrine? Would it be simply for practical identification purposes? That is to say, taking that to be the correct criterion, the idea would be that we are able to know who Catholics are because they are the ones who accept the teachings of the Catholic Church, just as we would be able to know who Masons and Unitarians are because they are the ones who subscribe to the principles espoused by the respective organizations to which they belong. Obviously, it is not as superficial a matter as that. It is necessary for us as Catholics to accept the Church’s doctrine, in the first instance, simply because it is true, for the truth is always eminently acceptable, but also, and not insignificantly, we accept the Church’s doctrine because it is to our eternal benefit to do so. When we faithfully adhere to what is found in the deposit of faith we are but availing ourselves of the fathomless riches found in the teachings bequeathed

to us by Christ Himself, *Doctor Supremus*, the “Supreme Teacher,” He who says, “I am the truth.”

Faith, be it natural or supernatural, must have an object to which it is directed. No one can simply believe; we always, and necessarily, believe in *something*. What is the object of our Christian faith? It is doctrine, the teachings of Christ. Without doctrine, there is no faith; without faith, there is no hope; without hope, there is no charity. And in the absence of charity we live in a moral wasteland; we may act, but our actions are empty.

But is doctrine really as central as I am making it out to

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be here? Couldn’t it be argued—as in fact many people today do argue—that true religion is essentially a matter of personal experience, and is not so much about knowledge as it is about feelings? According to this way of looking at things Christianity should be thought of as chiefly a matter of loving outreach, and the adherence to doctrine should be regarded as secondary—if of any really vital importance at all. We should concern ourselves, first and foremost, the argument goes, with social issues rather than with theological issues. We should be more concerned with spreading the wealth than with spreading the faith.

This attitude has a certain superficial appeal to it, and it has managed to seduce even some Catholics, but it cannot stand up under close scrutiny. It presents us with a false dichotomy, suggesting that it is a matter of *either* feeding the poor *or* preaching the faith, whereas it is, always has been, a matter of both. The two are inseparable.

The poor, Our Lord assures us, we will always have with us, and that is because the damaging effects of original sin will be weighing down the human race until the end of time. There is poverty in the world because there is sin in the world; poverty will be eliminated when sin is eliminated. (Let me emphasize, parenthetically, that I am speaking here of purely physical poverty. A state of poverty, thus understood, would be a state in which those in it, not by their own choice, are subjected to degrading and dehumanizing conditions. In marked contrast to this there is evangelical

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