

Be Aware of Fake (Catholic) News

Some years ago when I was in the seminary, I was serving briefly at a parish during a January term. The parish had a Hispanic community, and one of the priests at the parish mentioned to me as we were going through town that an evangelical church had an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in front of it. The church was in no way affiliated with the Catholic parishes in town, but he noted it gave the illusion that it was in fact a Catholic Church.

This was in the days long before Facebook, Twitter and social media. But for centuries, Catholics have had to deal with many wolves in sheep's clothing - people and organizations that present themselves as Catholic, and either overtly try to bring people out of the Catholic Church, or present an opinion as being sound Catholic doctrine when in reality it may either be in error, or just the opinion of the individual printing the pamphlet or putting together a website.

Saint Paul surely dealt with this problem. In the readings from our daily Mass last Monday, he writes to his flock knowing that some are being lied to and falling away. He writes lamenting that some are "so quickly forsaking the one who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel." (Gal. 1:6). Sadly, so many have done just that. So what can we do to make sure we are getting the "straight story" about our faith, and also how do we try to help those who may have fallen away?

For starters, we remember what Jesus said to Peter: "upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). Christ created one Church, not multiple ones. The Church has been through much through the centuries; we've been attacked from without and within; we've seen the incredible virtue of many great saints and popes and also the sinfulness of many too. But the Church still stands. We must remember that in a special way, the Church links us to God, and it is through our Catholic Church we receive the sacraments that bring us closer to God and help sanctify us and make us holy.

This Church is also there to shepherd us. Jesus gave the apostles authority before He ascended to the Father; to baptize and make disciples of all the nations. He said to Peter: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19). This authority is given to the other apostles too, and has been handed down to the bishops and priests, who administer the sacraments, but also, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, continually guide the faithful.

With respect to the teaching authority of the Church, it's important to remember there are differences in what is being taught with respect to the level of authority behind it. For instance there are dogmas we all hold as Catholics; the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist; the Resurrection; the sanctity of human life. If one rejects a dogma, they are outside of the faith. However, there are other teachings that sometimes people struggle with. These may include issues such as capital punishment, or the use of

contraceptives. The Church speaks clearly on these matters, but certainly many people may struggle with that teaching. In these matters, carefully read the catechism or the church document attributed to it (often footnotes are in the catechism or there is a papal encyclical on the subject). But know that the struggle means you are thinking about your faith, it in no way makes you a “bad” Catholic.

There are also what are called “theological opinions.” These are opinions on matters of the faith shared by a theologian, a priest, bishop, etc., but are not necessarily binding. For instance with respect to voting, some priests and bishops will express opinions on a candidate or party or issues. Other clergy may express a different opinion; it may be there is no clear-cut black and white answer to an issue. For instance, immigration: we want to be welcoming to the immigrant, but when one says “I’m for immigration” what does that mean exactly? Other issues are much more clear-cut; it’s why abortion is such an important, preeminent issue as it is always an attack on innocent human life. The point is when you see a priest or bishop on YouTube or online, they may speak on issues from politics to how Mass is celebrated and express an opinion that is not always reflective of something that is binding on the faithful.

Wanting to grow in the understanding of the faith, how do we make sure we are getting good information? As I’ve shared before, there are some great mainstream websites out there; the United States Conference of Catholic bishops (usccb.org); Catholic Answers (catholic.com) which is a great apologetics site; EWTN’s home page at ewtn.com; the Vatican’s home page at vatican.va just to name a few. With printed materials, you can also look for the imprimatur symbol on it, showing it’s been reviewed by Church authorities. I also visit many other sites that may be more opinion-based, just make sure you remember there’s a difference between an opinion site that’s not binding as opposed to the catechism.

Using the tools that are out there to educate ourselves about the faith, it’s also important we take a page from Saint Paul and reach out when those we care about have fallen away. Some people are led astray because they get frustrated at a parish or with something in their local or in the universal Church; others start going to a Protestant church because of the message of the preacher or the music. Still others fall away because other things grab their attention in the world. When we have an understanding of our faith and see someone we love no longer coming to Mass, as a starting point we listen to them. What is the cause for why they feel as they do? Maybe they did not experience feeling welcomed by their priest or parish; maybe they are just angry about something. We listen, but we also try to remind them they have a place in the Church, and most of all are loved by God. We also pray for them, and try to be patient knowing many times people do return to the faith. But we also articulate what the Church teaches and try to help them.

Lastly, know there are people out there both within and outside of the Church who give bad information. Some people really have an agenda, and so they really do not like a particular pope or bishop, so may present one as being more orthodox than another; others will claim the Church has fallen, etc. While it is fine to have opinions on how a

bishop, priest or pope administers or their style or what we might like them to do more of, be on guard when opinion turns into attacks.

Emotions are powerful things. They are good, but they can also cause us to make many mistakes, from voting to relationships being ruined to our faith. Sadly, people leave the Catholic Church for so many reasons, from a lack of catechesis or ignorance of the faith, to being angry about something in their local parish to being manipulated by lies about the Catholic Church from a Protestant church or another faith. From the start as Saint Paul reminds us, it's been a problem. Let's open our eyes to the incredible treasure we have in the faith, and strive to be a fisher of men by seeking out the lost and casting our nets into the sea.

God bless,

Fr. Paul