

Truth and the limits of church

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When the Vatican recently forced the Rev. Thomas J. Reece to resign as editor of America magazine, his supporters and opponents squared off.

Reece backers called his departure an ominous sign that the new pope is cracking down on any voices that even hint of dissent in the church.

Reece critics, by contrast, said good riddance. They viewed him as a Vatican basher who misused his Jesuit magazine to air - and promote - views they considered wrongheaded and even heretical.

I view the Reece matter as an internal Catholic fight. So my opinion about it is nearly irrelevant. Still, I think it provides an opportunity for all people of faith to ask anew some foundational questions about religion, such as:

. Who establishes, or at least codifies in a formal way, what we say we believe?

. How much room is there for discussion of, and even dissent from, traditional positions or teachings?

. When does sincere questioning turn into rebellious challenge, and when does such challenge become schismatic and eventually produce heresy (a loaded word that gets tossed around too frequently)?

As a follower of Jesus, who himself was viewed as something of a heretic, I tend to have lots of tolerance for theological positions that challenge tradition as long as those holding them really understand what they're rejecting. Sometimes, to encourage appreciative questioning, I will flippantly say, "Thank God for the heretics. The church needs them." I'm usually about, but no more than, half-serious.

In the Reece case, the question is whether the Catholic Church has room in it for people who say they love the church, as Reece says he does, but who question authority and who want the freedom to discuss matters of doctrine and practice without being silenced.

But this is also a question for all faith communities. Are they firm at the center but soft around the edges? That is, do they hold to essential beliefs but allow for exploration and new ways of seeing? Are they even willing to let adherents offer new language and new approaches to core beliefs?

In Catholicism the church's normal teaching authority is known as the "ordinary magisterium." Papal encyclicals and pastoral letters from bishops are examples. Teachings conveyed in this way are viewed as authentic and legitimate but not set in the kind of theological concrete that happens when a pope issues an infallible teaching, as has happened only twice since papal infallibility was formally defined in the 1800s. (The Second Vatican Council modified the definition somewhat in the 1960s.)

So Catholicism has created room for some teachings that don't require the kind of no-more-discussion adherence mandated for other types of teachings. These discussable teachings at least allow for questioning and alternative interpretations without penalty.

But in 1990, when Pope Benedict XVI was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he produced a document, "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," through the Vatican office charged with defending the faith. It said that teachings of the ordinary magisterium deserve obedience, even if they aren't issued infallibly because "all acts of the Magisterium derive from the same source, that is, from Christ who desires that His People walk in the entire truth."

In some ways, other faith communities also allow for various levels of adherence to teachings. In my Presbyterian denomination, for instance, we have a collection of historic statements of belief called the Book of Confessions. But we say those statements are always secondary to the Bible, which means we can challenge them and argue about them, though officers and pastors are bound by their essential tenets.

In Islam, various scholars can and do issue religious rulings, called fatwas, but there is sometimes disagreement among followers and even other muftis about the truth they contain.

Though Tom Reece's forced resignation is an internal Catholic dispute, it provides a chance for those of us outside Catholicism to ponder the limits of authority in our faith communities.

It also reminds us that even if the truths our religion proclaims are eternal, the ways they are communicated may have to be different from the past so new ears can hear them.