

child that must be fed.

Such is a mistaken idea of the Catholic mind. The loyal Catholic believes the teachings of the Church, observes her laws, obeys her discipline, and listens to her advice. But in so doing he makes no sacrifice of his intelligence or his conscience. Because his submission to the Church is an intelligent submission, based on the conviction that Jesus Christ is God, and that God is truth. As there is but one God, there is but one coherent body of truth that cannot contradict itself, and the Catholic believes that this satisfying body of truth is to be found in the Church.

The Catholic is not required to forfeit his liberty of thought. For aside from the fact that his submission to the dogmas and the discipline of the Church is a free act, an exercise of his liberty, there still remains beyond these limits a vast and beautiful field of truth for the Catholic to explore and to enjoy—a field that attracts and holds under its powerful spell many non-Catholic philosophers, artists, and writers.

Therefore, in answer to the question, “How can the Catholic Church permit differences of opinion among her members?” the Church answers in broad terms: “Because the Catholic Church is an institution in which there is room for such difference, for within her gathering, while there are truths which must be believed, namely, her doctrinal teachings, there are also many opinions of her theologians and writers which she does not bind her children to adopt, and it is here that the differences occur.”

The Evangelization Station
Hudson, Florida, USA
E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net
www.evangelizationstation.com

Pamphlet 192

Liberty of Thought in the Catholic Church

Unity in Essentials, Freedom in Accidentals

To many persons who are not Catholics, and are unfamiliar with the wide field of Catholic theology it may be perplexing to hear that on many points connected with revelation and Catholic teaching there are not only individual differences between Catholics, but that there are even whole theological schools maintaining opposite opinions on certain subjects. The question very naturally arises in the mind of the non-Catholic: “Is this not a contradiction?”

The Catholic Church claims unity of doctrine, and here we have plurality. She holds that she is infallible, and here are Catholic doctors who differ in their teaching. She points to the divisions of the sects as a proof of their fundamental error in doctrine, while she overlooks the sects within her own fold, and recognizes equally as true Catholics both those who affirm a thesis and those who deny it.

This difficulty, which appeals as a serious one to many, does not at all startle a Catholic and for the honest enquirer into the true relation between Catholic theology and the Catholic Church, the objection loses all its effectiveness. To explain this relation more clearly, let us take this example: ex-President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Republican and ex-President John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, it will be conceded, were both genuine Americans, both ardent

patriots, both firm believers in the principles of the Constitution, and both devoted their lives to its vital preservation and integrity.

On this common ground they would have agreed, and would have worked together harmoniously. Nevertheless, each of these men belonged to different political parties, and each looked to the welfare of his country from a different, perhaps opposite, perspective; each would have, if possible, prevented the other from gaining a position where his theory of government could be put into practice. Yet, both men were patriotic Americans. We all understand the situation very well and are not surprised by it, for we are on one side or the other ourselves. We love our country, we cherish its Constitution, we obey its laws; but we do not thereby find it necessary to agree upon ways and means, nor need we refrain from argument and discussion as to the choice of this or that method, since discussion is really intended to clear up difficulties.

In short, it is the case of perfect agreement on essentials and division on accidentals or, as the saying goes, “they agree to disagree.”

Now the disagreement of Catholic theologians within the Catholic Church is somewhat of a parallel situation in the spiritual order. The Church is a society; it has its forms of government, its spiritual constitution, and its laws. It aims at a definite end and it lays down certain teachings that must be believed before its members can, as children of the Church attain that end.

These teachings are the dogmas of the Church, the teachings of faith, every one of

which, all Catholics, from the Pope down to the most humble soul, must either implicitly or explicitly believe under pain of exclusion from the fold.

If a Catholic were to willfully reject one of these dogmas, he would be considered and treated by the Church just as his country would treat him should he betray her — as an outcast and a traitor. And so, just as all Americans are one in that fundamental attachment to our land, so all Catholics must be one in their unquestioning adherence to the dogmatic teachings of their faith.

It becomes immediately clear that, over and above this necessary belief in dogma, there is a vast outlying field possible, which is more or less open to discussion. For the Catholic Church does not, as many believe, demand of her children an act of faith in everything that pertains to her religion. She insists upon her dogmas, it is true, and she safeguards these dogmas by forbidding discussion upon or views of subjects that would scandalize her children, endanger their faith or disturb their peace and harmony.

But, beyond this, they are free to choose and to hold their opinions on any religious topic; they may discuss ways and means, just as our Congress discusses them; they may hold opposite opinions on the same subjects, and they may defend their opinions with all the enthusiasm and ingenuity possible. The only proviso made is that the Catholic faith shall not be jeopardized, nor Catholic unity impaired by reckless or ill timed speculations.

Such liberty of thought and speech has had its place in the Church from the earliest

times. St. Peter and St. Paul are thought to have warmly opposed each other on the question of circumcision; St. Cyprian and St. Stephen took different views as to whether heretics should be re-baptized; St. Augustine and St. Jerome, and St. John Chrysostom, and St. Athanasius—in fact, all the doctors of the Church, wrote and spoke not only against those outside the Church, but against those inside as well, only with the difference that in the former instances they defended the dogmatic teachings of the Church, and in the latter some line of action or some point of view which they deemed best to aid the Church under the existing circumstances.

It can be readily understood, therefore, how within the Church itself, and in accord with her spirit and her teachings, different schools of thought may arise. The well-known schools of the Dominicans and Jesuits is a case in point, and their discussions of the difficult subject of grace are a matter of history. Both sides agree that grace exists, that it is a gift from God, that it lifts man to the capacity of performing a supernatural act—they agree on all points of Catholic teachings.

But on the precise question—what is this gift of grace in itself, in its very entity? — upon this they do not agree, and it is not necessary they should agree until the Church speaks authoritatively upon the matter.

The whole difficulty of understanding the differences among Catholics arises from the supposition that the Catholic has no liberty whatever with regard to his religion, that his Church does all the thinking for him, tells this view the Catholic is not allowed to think for himself, his mind is likened to that of a