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Colloquī *: to discuss*

No Matter How You Parse It

Heresy is error, error is heretical, a heretic is heretical

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Heresy is error, error is heretical, a heretic is heretical

Somewhere, somehow, somewhen we have completely lost our minds and nowhere can we find them. This is nothing new, of course, as it is by all appearances a pathological condition inherent of the human race. God created man with a mind and a soul and by every evidence, man promptly proceeded to lose them both, leaving God shaking his head wondering what he did wrong.

It used to be said that a man who had lost his mind was in some state of mental distress which only a doctor learned in the branch of medicine commonly referred to as psychiatry could competently address. This, quite naturally, depended upon the psychiatrist maintaining some degree of sanity even having lost his mind in the process of becoming learned; not an easy task by any means.

In his marvelous book *Heretics*, G.K. Chesterton, introduces the subject of heresy in a rather ingenious way, by first writing of orthodoxy, while never wandering much afield—being one of those rarities who always kept his mind close at hand thereby never giving himself the opportunity to lose it—he states quite clearly that anyone who would confess himself heretical must have indeed lost his mind.

Nothing more strangely indicates an enormous and silent evil of modern society than the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of the word “orthodox.” In former days the heretic was proud of not being a heretic. It was the kingdoms of the world and the police and the judges who were heretics. He was orthodox. He had no pride in having rebelled against them; they had rebelled against him. The armies with their cruel security, the kings with their cold faces, the decorous process of State, the reasonable processes of law—all these like sheep had gone astray. The man was proud of being orthodox, was proud of being right. If he stood alone in a howling wilderness he was more than a man; he was a church. He was the centre of the universe; it was round him that the stars swung. All the tortures torn

out of forgotten hells could not make him admit that he was heretical. But a few modern phrases have made him boast of it. He says, with a conscious laugh, “I suppose I am very heretical,” and looks round for applause. The word “heresy” not only means no longer being wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous. The word “orthodoxy” not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong. All this can mean one thing, and one thing only. It means that people care less for whether they are philosophically right. For obviously a man ought to confess himself crazy before he confesses himself heretical.¹

Of interpreting scripture to accord with one’s own conscience, Peter, to whom Jesus entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven, wrote: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:21). Peter then goes on to warn of heresies and heretics.

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words; from of old their condemnation has not been idle, and their destruction has not been asleep.

For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven other persons, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomor’rah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly; and if he rescued licentiousness of the wicked (for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deed), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.



False teachers are like unstable souls
2Peter 2:14

Bold and wilful, they are not afraid to revile the glorious ones, whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a reviling judgment upon them before the Lord. But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed, reviling in matters of which they are ignorant, will be destroyed in the same destruction with them, suffering wrong for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reviling in their dissipation, carousing with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way they have gone astray; they have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Be'or, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a dumb ass spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved. For, uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passion of the flesh men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire (2 Peter 2).

From the mouth of Peter, our first pope, come harsh words indeed for anyone who would teach, and preach, heresy to the Body of Christ, the children of God. Subsequent Popes and councils would do no less, declaring anathema against both heresy and heretic. In the first two or three centuries of the early Church, heresy and schism were not clearly distinguished; a similar overlapping occurred in medieval scholasticism. Heresy is understood today to mean the denial of revealed truth as taught by the Church. Nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher defined it as "that which preserved the appearance of Christianity, and yet contradicted its essence".² The Catholic Church makes a distinction between 'material' and 'formal' heresy. Material heresy means in effect "holding erroneous doctrines through no fault of

one's own" as occurs with people brought up in non-Catholic communities and "is neither a crime nor a sin" since the individual has never accepted the doctrine.³ Formal heresy is "the wilful and persistent adherence to an error in matters of faith" on the part of a baptized member of the Catholic Church. As such it is a grave sin and involves *ipso facto* excommunication. Here "matters of faith" means dogmas which have been proposed by the infallible magisterium of the Church⁴ and, in addition to this intellectual error, "pertinacity in the will" in maintaining it in opposition to the teaching of the Church must be present.⁵ Lawrence Feingold writes that divine faith is lost through formal heresy.

Heresy is a particular kind of disbelief by which someone who believes in Christ obstinately rejects the authority of the Church to define doctrine and corrupts or denies some truths of faith. They "choose" and obstinately hold their tenets of faith according to their own reason and will, which they put above the authority of the Church. Interestingly, the word "heresy" comes from the Greek for election or choice.⁶ Every heresy involves a kind of picking and choosing of the faith according to one's own personal (or group) criteria. This is the same spirit that leads to "cafeteria Catholicism."

It is important to distinguish "formal heresy" from "material heresy." Heresy, properly speaking, always implies a *culpable resistance* to the faith that involves *obstinacy* in rejecting truths revealed by God that one knows to be taught infallibly as such by the Church. This presupposes that one has been baptized and exposed to sufficient motives of credibility to recognize the authority of the Church in conscience, and thus cannot be considered invincibly ignorant. This obstinate rejection of dogmas of faith by such a person is formal heresy, and it is gravely sinful. St. Augustine characterizes formal heresy as follows: "In Christ's Church those are heretics who hold mischievous and erroneous opinion and when rebuked that they may think soundly and rightly, offer a stubborn resistance, and refusing to mend their pernicious and deadly doctrines, persist in defending them."⁷ Canon 751 of The Code of Canon Law defines heresy as "the obstinate denial or obstinate doubt after the reception of baptism of some truth which is to be believed by divine and Catholic faith."

It is possible, however, to be in error with regard to the tenets of the faith simply through ignorance, but without obstinacy or willfulness. In this case one is said to be a "material heretic," but not a "formal heretic."⁸

Father Benoit-Dominique de La Soujeole, O.P., a professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland adds further, noting, "The heretic no longer professes the Church's faith; he takes his personal choice as the basis for his belief. Now, since the faith of the community comes from God himself as he is revealed (object of faith), we see that the heretic destroys within himself the motive for faith, because his motive for believing is his personal judgment, whereas the object of faith, what he believes, is at most a distorted, mutilated truth."⁹ He goes on to briefly explain excommunication.

Excommunication is a canonical measure that falls under the external forum. In and of itself it does not exclude from the communion of grace. Like any canonical penalty, it is a punitive measure aimed at a baptized person, an obstinate sinner, who is guilty particularly of heresy or schism. It deprives that person of certain means of grace, including absolution. This is a very serious or even extreme measure that is justified by the preservation of the ecclesial common good. Like any penalty, it also has a medicinal aspect. It has considerable ecclesial effects: for a cleric, loss of pastoral authority (in particular loss of faculties to celebrate the sacraments), for any baptized person—being deprived of the sacramentals, of the benefit of indulgences, of the fruitful reception of the sacraments. This rent in the social fabric of the Church is canonical in nature; it excludes those excommunicated from the communion of the faithful, which is protected by the canonical powers of the Church (as a means of salvation). Wrongly used,¹⁰ it does not in and of itself break off unity in the theological virtues. The Excommunicated person is a penalized member of the Church, and is not necessarily spiritually dead.¹¹

By declaring anathema, the heretic is *formally* excommunicated. One of the most recent was the *Community of the Lady of All Nations*, also known as the *Army of Mary*, founded by Marie Paule Giguère in Quebec in 1971. The movement believes its elderly founder is a "reincarnation" of the Virgin Mary. *The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* determined on July 11, 2007 that her followers had been excommunicated.

Make no mistake, the Church has always and everywhere condemned heresy. Over two millennia, there have been well over sixty formal heresies condemned and countless heretics excommunicated by the Catholic Church and the Magisterium.

But heresy is not confined to the big ones, those which have been named and formally condemned. Heretics are everywhere among us, like weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), likewise their heresies. Heresy is error in belief by choice, choosing such error is heretical, a heretic then, is, by choice, always and everywhere, heretical. Everyone, *everyone* is guilty of heresy at some time, in some manner, for man was given free will and the power to make choices. When you think about it, heresy has been a part of the human condition since the beginning and look what it got our first parents: excommunication!

Whenever one "takes his personal choice as the basis for his belief", whenever one picks and chooses what to believe and what not to believe "above the authority of the Church", that is heresy, that is heretical thinking, and "is at most a distorted, mutilated truth", a grievous sin against God. "Heresy and schism are names of *sins*; sin is always a personal reality, and it is not something presumed."

Now, it comes to mind that all this going on about heresy and heretics may have put those who have lost their minds further into madness, or leastwise further dulled the sharp edges of the hole where what they have now so dearly lost once was shrouded; now well and truly potted with sugarplum fairies with flowers in their hair and a pocketful of progressive posies singing kumbaya to no one in particular. The world has gone mad scientist, rejecting the mystery of God for modern science, "ignoring definite human discoveries in the moral world, discoveries as definite, though not as material, as the discovery of the circulation of the blood."

We cannot go back to an ideal of reason and sanity. For mankind has discovered that reason does not lead to sanity. We cannot go back to an ideal of pride and enjoyment. For mankind has discovered that pride does not lead to enjoyment. I do not know by what extraordinary mental accident modern writers so constantly connect the idea of progress with the idea of independent thinking. Progress is obviously the antithesis of independent thinking. For under independent or individualistic thinking, every man starts at the beginning and goes, in all probability, just as far as his father before him. But if there really be anything of the nature of progress, it must mean, above all things, the careful study and assumption of the whole of the past.¹³

Nothing, it seems, smells so much of heresy, heretic and heretical thought than the modern progressive doctrine of the “Practicing Catholic,” that consistently promotes that Shakespearean line, “To be or not to be. That is the question” as if to emphasize that the answer has been doctrinally decided. Nothing could be further from the truth, but there is truth, then there is practical progressive truth—truth as you are wont to make it. Those who are called, of their own free will, into full communion with the Catholic Church at their baptism are invited to profess before God and the Catholic community the Catholic faith: “I believe and profess all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God.” Where is the wiggle room? Where is the option out button, the option to choose what one believes and to ignore what one does not? To be Catholic is to believe and profess ALL, not some, of what the Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims. To paraphrase Yoda, “Be or be not Catholic. There is no *practicing*.”

The progressive doctrine of “Practicing Catholic” implies a false choice; it is heresy in the choosing; it is subtle and slides down easy, especially for those who have lost their minds and care not to find them. The problem is practicing admits error, so much so that it allows and ignores without thought or reason. God is love; Jesus spoke of love; man has exchanged lust for love. God is merciful; Jesus spoke of mercy; man speaks of injustice and inequality. God is kind; Jesus tells us to be kind; man chooses to be cruel. God is good; Jesus spoke of the goodness of God; man chooses to sin against the goodness of God. God is forgiving; Jesus forgave sinners; man chooses an unforgiving god, himself. Kumbaya, kumbaya.

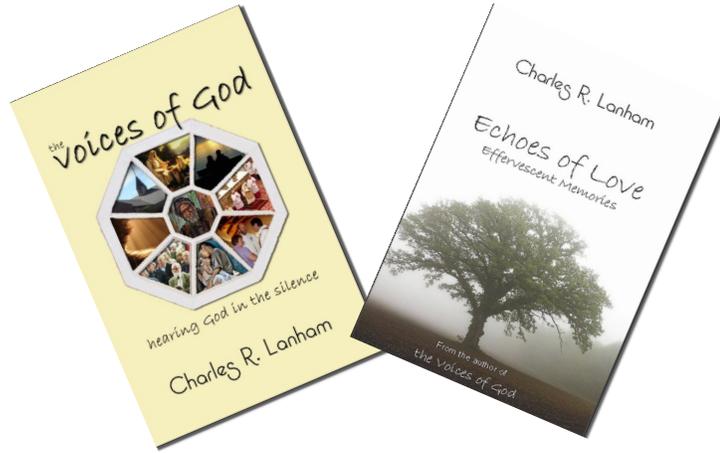
To hear some say it, rules are suggestions, commandments are mere opinions, doctrine is fallible, morality is malleable, sin is forgivable so why even mention it. It is more Catholic to be kind, merciful, loving, and good—whatever kind, merciful, loving and good happen to mean. Better to make a mess than seek holiness; better to enjoy the moment now, worry about the hereafter, later; better to practice whatever than believe Catholic, live Catholic, be Catholic. What? What the Catholic Church has always taught is now suddenly up for a vote? Never has and never will be. Catholicism, despite the prevailing opinion of many, is not personal preference. Anyone, any-

one who believes anything *knowingly* in contradiction to the doctrines of the Church is a heretic, *ipso facto* excommunicated from the Church and cannot continue to claim to be Catholic, practicing or otherwise. There is no such thing as watered-down Catholicism, there is no such thing as *à la carte* Catholicism; pick and choose means heresy, there is simply no other words to describe it.

One final thought. Peter warns us of false prophets, false teachers who preach and teach destructive heresies. False prophets and teachers clothe themselves in snake-skin and speak with tongues of subtly and guile. A look at history reveals that the among the heretics were those who professed to know the will of God. If “God did not spare the angels when they sinned,” why presume the prophets behind the throne are any better? Listen to the Word of God and believe; do not let yourself be deceived by the serpent.

Amen.

1. G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc. 2006; first published London: John Lane Company, 1905), 1.
2. MacGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology*, Blackwell: 2001, p.153 .
3. Cross, F.L.; Livingstone, E.A., eds. (1974). "Heresy", *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2 ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Ott, Ludwig. *Manual de Teología Dogmática*, Herder, Barcelona:1968, p.31.
5. Prümmer, Dominic M. *Handbook of Moral Theology*, Mercier Press: 1963, Sect. 201.
6. See *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 11, a.1.
7. *De civitate Dei* 18.51 (PL, 41:613).
8. Lawrence Feingold, *Faith Comes From What Is Heard: An Introduction to Fundamental Theology*, (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2016), 47.
9. Benoit-Dominique de La Soujeole, O.P., *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 533.
10. Church history has witnessed saints who were excommunicated during their lifetime.
11. Benoit-Dominique de La Soujeole, O.P., *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 536.
12. Benoit-Dominique de La Soujeole, O.P., *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church*, 536.
13. G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, 90.



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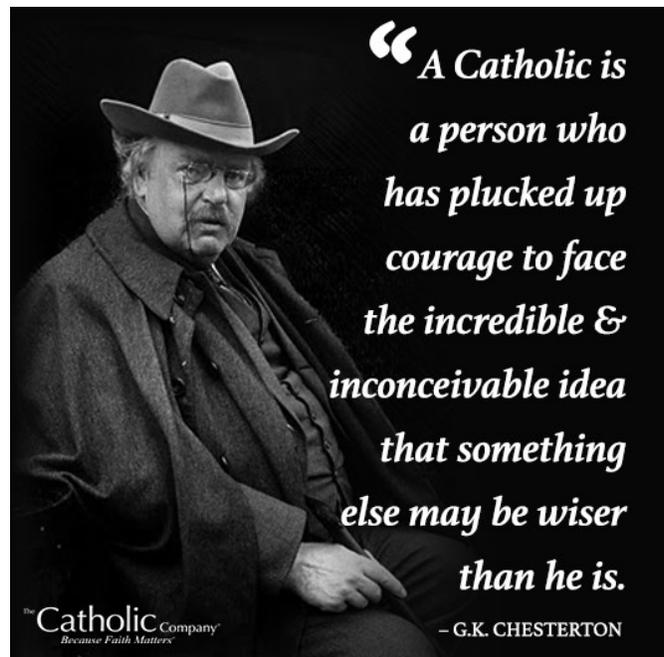
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Just going to church
doesn't make you a Christian any more
than standing in your garage makes you
a car. ~G. K. Chesterton



Colloquī, the present infinitive of *colloquor* (Latin: *to talk, to discuss or to converse*) is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God. Each week **Colloquī** will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more. Be forewarned! Essays may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the expressed intent to seek the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth, so help us God.

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