

element of his human experience. Therefore, I must also have a relationship with Mary."

The re-evangelization of people who have already heard the Christian message, including the baptized who have abandoned the practice of their faith, is a special difficulty. Two issues are involved. The first is a question of relevance of doctrine which is not perceived because of an erroneous understanding of one or several elements of Catholic faith. Through dialogue the evangelist can show that what the Church teaches is God's answer the mystery of life.

Second, the Church's faith can appear as a list of propositions having no coherent order. The perceived lack of order is itself an obstacle, since man by nature is made to know order. "If the interrelatedness of all of the doctrines regarding both faith and morals is not perceived, one can be left with the impression that it would be possible to accept one or other doctrine, and leave the rest aside" (Archbishop William Levada, *Origins*, vol. 23, p. 739). By showing the connections among the articles of faith, the evangelist can lead a person to perceive the integrity and unity of the whole of Catholic faith.

Implications for Apologetics

The mind's natural capacity to grasp causal connections and consequent order is a great asset to the apologist. Sometimes a person does not see that the denial of one truth leads to the denial of another which he does not intend to deny. By pointing out the unintended, ancillary denial, the apologist can lead a person to reconsider his first denial. Often a person's difficulty is due to an exaggeration of a truth which conflicts with another.

For example, in response to claims that Catholics elevate Mary to the level of God, an apologist need simply to refer to Vatican II on the subordinate role of Mary, on her mediation being totally dependent upon Christ's, and her veneration contributing to, not detracting from, the worship of God (LG, Ch. 8). Mary can only be understood in the light of Christ, though it is true that, by better understanding Mary's place in God's plan, we more fully comprehend the mystery of Christ. Another apologetic use of the hierarchy of truths is to show how one fundamental truth sheds light on many others. For example, the truth that in the saving actions

of Jesus Christ God's love is effective necessitates the conclusion that grace brings about a real change in the human condition. This is the foundation for the Catholic understanding of the sacraments causing grace *ex opere operato*, and for the insistence that moral teaching is more than just an ideal at which to aim, but an obligation we are made capable by grace of fulfilling.

Another example is the relationship between Christ and the Church. Ecclesiologists point out that the early Christological heresies reappear as errors about the Church. The mystery of Christ is so closely connected to the mystery of the Church that errors about Christ implicitly contain errors about the Church. As a final example, moral theologians following the lead of Vatican II (esp. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24) and Pope John Paul II ground Christian anthropology and morality in the mystery of the Trinity as a communion of Persons. Because God is a mystery of interpersonal communion, man, who made in His image, is made for communion based on the truth.

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Pamphlet 353

Understanding the Hierarchy of Truths

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Catechists, evangelists, apologists and others today sometimes encounter the term "hierarchy of truths." Sometimes the term is misused to imply that some truths of the faith are negotiable or that some truths are less true than others. In fact, the hierarchy of truths is merely the principle of ordering the mysteries of faith based on the varying ways they are related one another as elements of Christian revelation, as summarized in the Creed.

Because the hierarchy of truths is so often misunderstood, it is important to examine it. What follows is an examination of the principle itself, based on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, as well as a discussion of some implications of the hierarchy of truths for evangelization and apologetics.

Hierarchy of Truths in Magisterial Texts

The first magisterial use of the expression was at Vatican II, in the context of ecumenical dialogue: "When comparing doctrines with one another, they [theologians] should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 11). This is closely allied to the axiom that the bond of faith that unites Christians is greater than the things that divide them.

Here the Church recognizes that the way to agreement regarding disputed points of doctrine is the way of faith itself, grounded in essential truths about God and Christ. The hierarchy of truths also has application in the Church's catechetical activity: "This hierarchy does not mean that some truths pertain to faith itself less than others, but rather that some truths are based on others as of a higher priority, and are illumined by them. On all levels catechesis should take account of this hierarchy of the truths of faith."

These truths may be grouped under four basic heads: the mystery of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Creator of all things; the mystery of Christ the incarnate

Word, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation; the mystery of the Holy Spirit, who is present in the Church, sanctifying and guiding it until the glorious coming of Christ, our Savior and Judge; and the mystery of the Church, which is Christ's Mystical Body, in which the Virgin Mary holds the preeminent place" (*General Catechetical Directory*, no. 43).

This text excludes a misunderstanding, summarized by Cardinal Schönborn: "the 'hierarchy of truth' does not mean 'a principle of subtraction,' as if faith could be reduced to some 'essentials' whereas the 'rest' is left free or even dismissed as not significant. The 'hierarchy of truth . . . is a principle of organic structure.' It should not be confused with the degrees of certainty; it simply means that the different truths of faith are 'organized' around a center" (*Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 42).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) employs the hierarchy of truths, linking it to the teaching of Vatican I on the mutual connections among the mysteries or articles of faith (no. 90). Vatican I taught: "If reason illumined by faith inquires in an earnest, pious and sober manner, it attains by God's grace a certain understanding of the mysteries, which is most fruitful, both from the analogy with the objects of its natural knowledge and from the connection of these mysteries with one another and with man's ultimate end" (*Dei Filius*, Ch. IV).

Following the Church's Creeds, the CCC identifies the Trinity as the central mystery of Christian faith and "the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light which illumines them" (no. 234). Finally, the recent *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) states: "All aspects and dimensions of the Christian message participate in this hierarchical system" (no. 115). It goes on to mention: the Christocentric nature of the history of salvation; the Trinitarian structure of the Creed; the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, and therefore of the Eucharist, in the sacramental system; the primacy of the two commandments of love of God and neighbor in Christian moral teaching; the way the Lord's Prayer is a "summary of the Gospel" and sum of all petitions. For Pope John Paul II, "The truth that God is Love constitutes as it were the apex of all that has been revealed This truth illumines the whole content of

divine revelation" (Gen. Audience, Oct. 2, 1985). God is Himself love (1 Jn 4:8), and this love is fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

Theology of the Hierarchy of Truths

God's ordering wisdom is the foundation for the hierarchy of truths. God has revealed this order to man, who by faith receives it and expresses it through propositions (CCC, nos. 156, 170). The use of propositions corresponds to the human mode of knowing: composing and dividing based on causal relations. Since the human mind grasps reality through causes, ordering what God has revealed depends upon the various ways in which "cause" is understood.

For example, the text of *Dei Filius*, above, identifies an order based on the final cause or end of man: All that God has done in the economy of salvation is directed to our salvation, eternal life with God. This allows the mind to identify the order of means to end, a distinction with profound implications, for example, in doctrine pertaining to morals, sacraments, and the Church. In morals, this is verified in the Lord's teaching about the Sabbath being made for man (Mk 2:27) and the Church's understanding of the dominical obligation; in the sacraments, it is seen in Trent's teaching on Baptism of desire; in ecclesiology, its application yields an understanding of apostolic authority as a divinely instituted means to the service of holiness. But at the beginning and end of all is God Himself, the first and final cause of all things. This is often expressed in Church documents by reference to God's wisdom and goodness (or love) as the absolute starting point for all that exists and all that has been revealed (see *Lumen Gentium*, no. 2; *Dei Verbum*, no. 2).

Since God is Three Consubstantial Persons, the doctrine of the Trinity is the central truth of faith. A Trinitarian-based hierarchy of truths must also be Christologically-based. Jesus Christ, Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is the fullness and perfection of revelation. He is the Alpha and Omega and the center of history. He is the instrumental efficient cause of the fulfillment of God's plan, as well as the exemplary and meritorious cause of our salvation. Thus, a "christocentric accent is not opposed to the trinitarian view; it is through the Incarnation of the Eternal son, his life, death and Resurrection, that the Father is revealed and the Spirit is

given. Therefore, catechesis, to be trinitarian, has to be christocentric" (*Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 44-45).

Throughout the Church's history, controversies have been the occasion for the Church to define some necessary implications of a doctrine. For example, the doctrine of Mary as Mother of God defined at the Council of Ephesus is incomprehensible without prior knowledge of Jesus Christ as true God and true man. Again, the doctrine on the human and divine wills of Christ presupposes the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. These two examples show how the hierarchy of truths is a principle of the development of doctrine.

Implications for Evangelization

The principle of the hierarchy of truths allows evangelists to build a solid foundation for the development of faith while focusing on a kerygmatic central proclamation of the Good News of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ Who died to forgive sins. To be effective, the evangelist's message must correspond to the basic questions people have about life, death, suffering, justice, love and sin. The evangelist knows that Jesus Christ is God's answer to all questions (CCC, no. 68), and needs to be skilled in showing how all questions are reducible to a few fundamental ones.

Christocentric evangelization seeks to lead people to faith in Jesus Christ who revealed God's love and died to save us. Once Jesus is loved for what He has done for us, a person can begin to love Him in Himself, and becomes interested in all of His message, His relationship with His Father, with Mary, the apostles, etc. Vatican II affirmed the Christocentric foundation of Catholic faith when it taught that entering and remaining in the Church becomes a religious obligation, and therefore determines one's relationship with God, precisely when one sees that the Church was made necessary by Christ (LG, no. 14). The task of catechesis is to make this explicit, but this task is greatly aided by a prior Christocentric faith. A Christocentric introduction to Mary might go as follows: "St. Paul taught: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20); 'Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us' (CCC, no. 521). Now Christ's relationship with His mother is an essential