

The “Hierarchy of Truths”

Pope Francis [has retrieved] one of the most neglected themes of the (Second Vatican) council, the “hierarchy of truths.” The council writes: “When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.”¹ In this brief passage, the council introduced a crucial distinction between the content of divine revelation, understood as God’s self-communication in Christ by the power of the Spirit, and those church doctrines which, in varying degrees, mediate that content. When the council first articulated this teaching in *Unitatis redintegratio*, Oscar Cullmann, noted Protestant theologian and observer at the council, remarked that this teaching was “the most revolutionary . . . not only in the schema *De Oecumenismo*, but in all the schemas of the council.”²

Unfortunately, since the council there has been little recourse to the hierarchy of truths in magisterial documents.

Pope Francis has recalled for us, however, the true spirit of the council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths. He insists in *Evangelii gaudium* that doctrines are not ends in themselves; they serve us when they draw us into life-giving relationship with Christ. He writes:

All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council explained, “in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.” This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching (EG 36).

He writes:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing (EG 35).

Francis is not afraid to affirm church doctrine as basic to Christian identity, but he consistently orients that doctrine toward the basic Christian kerygma and situates it within the pastoral life of the church.

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¹ *Unitatis redintegratio*, The Decree on Ecumenism, 11. The English translation is taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport: Costello, 1996).

² Oscar Cullman, “Comments on the Decree on Ecumenism,” *Ecumenical Review* 17 (1965): 93.

Source: Richard R. Gaillardetz, professor of Catholic systematic theology at Boston College. Excerpted from his address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, “The ‘Francis Moment’: A New Kairos For Catholic Ecclesiology,” published in *CTSA Proceedings* 69, 2014, 75-80.