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Vatican's doctrinal congregation isn't so supreme anymore

Thomas Reese | Feb. 14, 2014 Faith and Justice

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) was once known as the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition. Later it became the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office. Even after the Second Vatican Council, when it got its current name and lost the adjective "supreme," it was still the top dog in the Roman Curia.

This is the congregation that went after so-called Modernists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It imposed biblical fundamentalism on the church until *Divino Afflante Spiritu* *[1]* (1943) by Pope Pius XII freed Scripture scholars to use modern literary and scientific tools to study the Bible. It also silenced American Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray when he wrote about issues of church and state, and it took on famous French theologians before Vatican II.

After Vatican II, CDF went after Catholic ethicists who questioned the church's ban on artificial birth control. Neither liberation theologians in Latin America nor Asian theologians working on interreligious issues were exempt from investigation. Even bishops were subject to reprimand. Most recently, it has been going after the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States.

The congregation's word was also supreme in the Roman Curia. According to *Pastor Bonus* [2] (1988), the apostolic constitution governing the Curia, "Documents being published by other dicasteries [offices] of the Roman Curia, insofar as they touch on the doctrine of faith or morals, are to be subjected to its prior judgment" (article 54).

Since almost every document coming out of the Curia deals with faith or morals (except documents on Vatican finances and international relations), CDF reviewed practically everything published by other congregations and councils. Those who have complained about a lack of coordination in the Curia often missed this point. In fact, the Roman Curia was remarkable in its ability to speak with one voice, and much of this was due to the tight control CDF maintained over other congregations and councils.

For example, whenever the Council for Interreligious Dialogue wanted to issue a statement, it had to deal with Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Whenever there were disagreements, the Council for Interreligious Dialogue always lost. Even English translations of the Mass were reviewed by the supreme congregation.

There is no question that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was supreme under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. No one would have questioned its supremacy when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was prefect.

But the supreme congregation doesn't look so supreme anymore. It has been publicly criticized by a curial cardinal from Brazil, by the president of the German bishops' conference, and by two cardinals who are members of the Council of Cardinals, appointed by the pope to advise him on reforming the Vatican. Even Pope Francis told Latin American religious not to worry about the congregation.

- CDF's decision in 2012 to place the Leadership Conference of Women Religious under the control of three U.S. bishops was made without consultation or knowledge of the Vatican office that normally deals with matters of religious life, the office's leader complained [3]. It caused him "much pain," Cardinal João Braz de Aviz said.
- Pope Francis met with top officials of the Latin American Conference of Religious and was reported to have said [4]: "They will make mistakes, they will make a blunder, this will pass! Perhaps even a letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine [of the Faith] will arrive for you, telling you that you said such or such thing. ... But do not worry. Explain whatever you have to explain, but move forward."
- Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich, a member of the Council of Cardinals, publicly issued a rebuke of Archbishop Gerhard Müller [5], current prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on the subject of divorced and remarried Catholics: "The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cannot stop the discussions."
- Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, defended a plan to offer Communion to divorced Catholics [6] despite Müller's opposition.
- Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, coordinator of the Council of Cardinals, told *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* newspaper [7] that Müller is "still learning." As a German theology professor, Rodriguez Maradiaga said Müller is convinced something could "only be wrong or right -- and that's it. But I say: The world, my brother, is not like that. You should be a little more flexible when you hear other opinions so that you don't only say: No, this is fixed and final."

Even one of these events would have been newsworthy in earlier days, but to have five takedowns in less than a year was unimaginable a short time ago. Nothing like this has happened since the Second Vatican Council, when the CDF prefect, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, was attacked by Cardinal Josef Frings in a speech written by then-Father Ratzinger.

In January, Pope Francis gave his most explicit talk on the role of CDF [8] when he spoke to the congregation's members. While confirming their role in "promoting and protecting the doctrine of the faith," he went on to warn the congregation against the temptation to domesticate the faith or reduce it to abstract theories.

Since the early times of the church, the temptation has existed to understand the doctrine in an ideological sense or to reduce it to an ensemble of abstract and crystalized theories (*Evangelii Gaudium* [9], 39-42). In reality, doctrine has the sole purpose of serving the life of the People of God, and it seeks to assure our faith of a sure foundation. Great, in fact, is the temptation to appropriate to ourselves the gifts of salvation that come from God, to domesticate them -- perhaps even with a good intention -- to the views and the spirit of the world. And this is a temptation that is constantly repeated.

Theirs is a "delicate task" that is always to be done in collaboration with local bishops and episcopal conferences. Pope Francis wants a kinder and gentler CDF that seeks always to have "a constructive dialogue, respectful and patient with authors," he said. "If truth exacts fidelity, the latter grows always in charity and in fraternal help for those called to mature and clarify their convictions." In other words, the congregation should be "distinguished for the practices of collegiality and dialogue."

NCR's Thomas C. Fox and other observers interpreted this as the pope saying, "Tone it down [10]." Theologians are certainly hoping the days of investigations of their colleagues are over. "I haven't heard of anything, but I would guess that it's too early to say that a truce has broken out," said canon lawyer Fr. James Coriden. Such a truce would encourage theologians and bishops to work together again as they did at the Second Vatican Council.

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