

Theological Precision and Charity

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 5 December 2019

In an age when doctrinal confusion reigns supreme, the excuses for the lack of theological precision and the failure to make clear distinctions abound. The necessity of sound doctrine for salvation has been ignored and obscured, contributing to poor seminary formation for the clergy and poor catechesis for the laity. Under the guise of avoiding legalism, many theologians and ecclesiastical authorities dismiss the need for doctrinal precision and clarity, arguing that focusing on such technical considerations leads to a lack of charity. However, none of these excuses suffice to dismiss the urgent need for theological precision: on the contrary, insisting on sound doctrine is actually itself an act of charity, ultimately serving the mission and supreme law of the Church, the salvation of souls.

The need for precision is recognized plainly enough in the various natural and physical sciences. If a doctor is negligent and measures the dosage of a drug incorrectly, he could put the lives of his patients at risk. If an engineer is careless with his measurements and calculations while building infrastructure, he could threaten public safety. Why, then, should theological science be treated any differently? In fact, precision is even *more* important in theology, as it is the salvation of souls that is at stake and not simply natural human life. Since the introduction of the *nouvelle théologie*, Catholic schools, universities, and seminaries have completely lost sight of the venerable tradition bequeathed to the Church by the scholastics, particularly their careful distinctions.

While not every ordinary layman is a theologian who needs to understand every fine distinction, for the Church as a whole, distinctions are important and at least indirectly impact the thinking of all the faithful. The Teaching Church needs this knowledge to expound the faith properly and uphold Catholic teaching, thereby passing sound doctrine onto the Church Taught. And while catechesis does not always have to entail using obscure, complex terms, there is no doubt that distinctions do impact ordinary laymen. Why distinguish between mortal and venial sin? Proximate and remote occasions of sin? Formal and material cooperation with evil? To a non-Catholic, these distinctions may seem excessive and unnecessary, but to a properly catechized Catholic, these considerations are not only essential to the spiritual life, but in fact second nature!

The primary objection many have to the Church's insistence on theological clarity is particularly pernicious, because it is the banner under which all error and indifferentism is flown. This excuse disguises itself as Christian charity: it is alleged that the insistence on precision is legalistic and contradicts the love of God. This creates a false dichotomy between doctrine and charity, whereas in reality, there should be none. As the author of the *Sachsenspiegel* wrote in the thirteenth century: "God is Himself law and therefore law is dear to Him." There is no real distinction between God and the eternal law, which establishes order in creation and directs every creature to its proper end.¹ The last end of man is God Himself, and because God is love, there is

¹ *Summa Theologiae I-II*, q. 91, art. 1, ad. 3.

no incongruity between law and love; after all, “he that loveth not, knoweth not God: for God is charity” (1 John 4:8).

There can be no incompatibility between law and love, for God Himself is both law and love. The irrational fear of imagined legalism expressed by modern ecclesiastics and theologians in this age of doctrinal confusion is thus unfounded, and the mind of the Church prevails, continuing in its emphasis on the ever-urgent need for theological precision.