

What is Catholic Faith?

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Inflation is an economic term that refers to a situation in which the value of money decreases while the price of consumer goods remains the same or increases. The dictionary defines the verb "to inflate" as "to fill something with air or gas so as to make it swell; to enlarge or amplify unduly or improperly."

Inflation not only occurs in the economic order; it can also occur in the Church. When claims for religious truth are "enlarged or amplified unduly or improperly," the actual truth loses some of its credibility. The extreme consequence of such inflation is that all religious truths lose their value.

These considerations came to mind when the bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska, published in his diocesan newspaper portions of a letter sent to him in late November by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. Cardinal Re has upheld the bishop's decision rendered more than ten years ago to excommunicate members of his diocese who belonged to the national lay organization Call to Action and 11 other groups.

The bishop had claimed that membership in such organizations is "always perilous to the Catholic faith and most often is totally incompatible with the Catholic faith."

Call to Action appealed to the Vatican to reverse the bishop's "extrasynodal legislation," but the appeal was rejected.

Information given to this column at the time indicated that other U.S. bishops had advised the bishop of Lincoln not to press the issue because of the unfavorable publicity his threat of excommunication was generating around the country.

For ten years the issue did, in fact, lie dormant. This column is not aware of anyone in the Lincoln Diocese who, because of their continued affiliation with Call to Action, remained away from Holy Communion and the other sacraments or was refused any of these sacraments. That may have happened, but it is unlikely that the press would not have reported it.

According to the story in the Southern Nebraska Register, repeated in a Dec. 11 dispatch from ZENIT, a news agency operated by the Legionaries of Christ, Cardinal Re's letter to the bishop of Lincoln stated that the "judgment of the Holy See is that the activities of 'Call to Action' in the course of these years are in contrast with the Catholic Faith.... Thus to be a member of this Association or to support it, is irreconcilable with a coherent living of the Catholic Faith."

This column has no interest in attacking the bishop of Lincoln or Cardinal Re, and it leaves to canon lawyers to decide whether the bishop was on solid canonical grounds when in 1996 he issued his original extrasynodal legislation and decree of automatic excommunication, following a 30-day grace period.

What is of concern here is the claim that was initially made by the bishop and most recently confirmed by Cardinal Re that being a member of, or simply giving support to, a national lay organization like Call to Action, is "always perilous to the Catholic faith and most often is totally incompatible with the Catholic faith," or that "the activities of 'Call to Action'...are in [such] contrast with the Catholic Faith" as to be "irreconcilable with a coherent living of the Catholic Faith."

These claims beg the question: What constitutes "the Catholic faith"?

Is every official teaching of the Catholic Church, at whatever level, and every disciplinary decree of a Roman congregation a matter of "Catholic faith," or what the traditional Latin manuals of theology called "de fide"?

Is there no doctrinal difference, for example, between the Church's current discipline of obligatory celibacy for priests of the Latin rite and the teachings of the ecumenical councils on the divinity of Jesus Christ? Is the belief in angels on the same doctrinal level as belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

Are the matters of faith contained in the Creed that is recited at Mass on Sundays and great feasts of no greater doctrinal authority than the Church's current teaching on the ordination of women or the current practice in the Roman Catholic Church regarding the selection of bishops?

The 1962 edition of the so-called Spanish Summa, the best of the Latin manuals in wide use prior to the Second Vatican Council, lists 14 different levels of authority for church teachings, eight of which include the words "de fide." In each instance, the category requires that the teaching be found somehow in the sources of Revelation and/or infallibly taught by the Church.

Which specific matters of "Catholic faith" does Call to Action reject? Or are we dealing here with doctrinal inflation?

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* The Tidings is the weekly newspaper of the Los Angeles Archdiocese.