We begin by examining the issue of authority and by squarely analyzing the root of the problem. There is no denying that we have witnessed many issues with authority in recent years, but part of the dilemma we face is that, as a society, we have misunderstood authority altogether. We have confused true and proper authority with authoritarianism, which is the usurping of authority by those who have no moral right to wield it. The first thing we need to understand is the difference between authentic authority, that authority which comes from God, and usurped authority, that which is claimed by men in defiance of, or in contradiction to, true authority.

**Authentic Authority**

The exercise of authority by God is rooted in his loving purpose for the human race. Jesus tells us in unambiguous terms, “I came so that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). The authority of God is at the service of the human family. The word authority in Latin is *augere*, which means to augment, increase, or enhance. God’s use of authority is meant to help us reach our ultimate fulfillment as whole and complete children of God! When authority is used in an arbitrary or self-serving manner it does not serve the purposes for which it was established by God, that is, to enhance our well-being on earth and ultimately to point us to God, the source of all true authority.

**Usurped Authority**

Truth is, much of the authority that has caused us grief has actually been the result of authoritarian behavior, which is not an exercise of true authority at all. Authoritarian power is a counterfeit of true authority; it places its own demands above God’s ways and above our good. The Christian concept of authority is the opposite of authoritarianism, and it is fully revealed in the life of Jesus Christ.
The Christian concept of authority

True authority is illustrated most clearly through the life of Christ. His life, death, and resurrection are the model upon which the Christian understanding of authority is built. It is only through the complete submission of the Son to the Father that Jesus achieved the right to act in the Father’s name. Jesus’ authority had three key ingredients, and the presence of these components are, in the Christian view, what make an exercise of authority “true”:

• **Jesus’ authority had its source in God, and it always pointed back to the Father and accomplished the Father’s will.** Jesus said, “I do not seek my own will, but the will of the one who sent me” (John 5:30). A person or institution with true authority recognizes that authority comes from God, and they exercise it in such a way that it reflects his will, and not merely their own.

• **Jesus exerted His authority by serving others and by laying down His life for them.** “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). This is vividly manifested in Christ’s washing of the disciples’ feet and in his sacrifice on the Cross. Jesus, the Son of God, acquired glory and power precisely by becoming a servant, and by laying down his life for us. Following his example, one who exercises true authority must first be willing to be called “servant,” and must be prepared to lay down his life for others. “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (John 13:14).

• **Christ wielded his authority in the service of truth, and he demonstrated that its purpose is ultimately to guide men to eternal life.** Christ used his power to proclaim the truth about what is good and bad for us, and to reveal the truth that we are made for eternal union with God. Those who exercise true authority must find their greatness in modeling the truth to others, and in serving as true representatives of the source and foundation of their power, God the Father in heaven. “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1).

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1 John 17:1–2: “Father . . . give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you, just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him.”
Human beings need true authority.

Because we live in society, human beings need true authority in order to live peacefully. God has created us as social beings, and he has written into our nature the demand for authority. True authority, as revealed by Christ, provides the necessary framework for us to live in peace. This principle is easily seen in a family, where parents exercise authority to inform their children about what is good and bad for them, and to teach them to live peacefully among others. Such instruction is the foundation for happiness, and it serves the well-being of children.

Parents make rules so that children will do good things and avoid those that are harmful. Boundaries help children know their limits and function within a clear framework and a healthy environment. Parents discipline children to bring them in line with what is best for them so that their chances for doing well are maximized and their chances of harming themselves and others are minimized.

Likewise, we all know that these motives and principles are not only applicable to children but to adults as well. This simple analogy can help us grasp how and why God exercises his authority over us.

The lack of proper authority is a recipe for anarchy.

Just as it is true that proper authority lends itself to order, peace, and human happiness, it is also true that without such authority chaos flourishes, creating an environment that can rapidly lead to anarchy. We don’t have to look far back in modern history to see examples of what happens when a legitimate governing body is removed from a country. This lack of authority results in confusion, turmoil, and violent conflict until a new governing body is established.

Likewise, most parents don’t have to dig too deep to remember a time when we relinquished our authority temporarily (perhaps even for a moment while we were on the phone), and quickly discovered that the children wreaked havoc while they could. Such experiences demonstrate that a void in authority invites bedlam, and that proper authority and discipline are needed to maintain order. More importantly, they provide a foundation for us to know the truth.

“What is truth?” (John 18:38)

Another problem that must be addressed in any discussion about authority is the crisis concerning truth itself. Modern philosophy has led many people to believe that we create the truth, and that it is dependent upon our own personal perceptions. The prevalence of this notion is evident in our popular vocabulary: We regularly say and hear phrases such as “that may be true for you, but it is not true for me.” We have been bombarded with messages that truth is relative, and that there is no higher authority than our own set of opinions. The double-headed crisis concerning authority and truth have led many people to confusion and even despair, and it is painfully obvious that we must reclaim an authentic Christian understanding of both concepts if we are serious about re-evangelizing the world in the twenty-first century.
There is Truth, and we can know Him.

God our Creator and Father does not want us, his children, to live in chaos and disorder. He also does not want us to live in uncertainty about what is true. In his great love for us God revealed the truth, so we can live happily in this life and spend eternity with him in the next. God's revelation of truth began with covenants he made with human beings throughout the Old Testament that prepared us for the sixth and final covenant—the new and everlasting covenant through Jesus Christ. **God’s truth is found in a person, Jesus Christ, and in the message he proclaimed and lived while on earth.** Everyone is invited to come to know the truth through faith in Jesus, and all are called to believe and obey all Christ taught while he was on earth.

The Christian concept of truth

As Christians we believe that truth comes from God and that it exists independent of our own personal perceptions about it. The truth was revealed in its fullness by God through his eternal Son Jesus Christ, **“the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).** Christ entered time and became man to reveal to the world the truth—the truth that God is a loving and merciful Father who desires to have an intimate personal relationship with us and incorporate us into his family. Through his life, death, and resurrection Christ announced the wonderful news that God loves every human being infinitely, and that he desires to relate to us as his own sons and daughters. We call this proclamation of good news the Gospel.

“The truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

While he was on earth, Christ our Lord preached the Gospel, “the source of all saving truth.” The Gospel is the message of God’s saving love, personified in Jesus Christ and demonstrated through his self-offering on the Cross, which won freedom from sin and death for all humanity. We receive this freedom through faith in Christ and through Baptism, and by obeying all that Jesus commanded.

God in his love and mercy not only revealed the truth, he provided a way for people in all times and places to know it with certainty. He accomplished this by establishing the Church. **“And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way” (Ephesians 1:22–23).** The Church functions as Christ’s living Body on earth and is **“the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).** God established the Church solely so that all can know the truth, and thus come to live with him eternally. God entrusted the fullness of truth to the Catholic Church, and he endowed her with true authority so she can faithfully proclaim it to all people. The Church’s authority therefore exists in the service of the truth and in service of all people—to instruct us about what Christ revealed we must believe and do in order to go to heaven.

“I would not believe the Gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not bid me to do so.”

—St. Augustine in his work titled *Against the Letter of Mani*, A.D. 397
The Holy Spirit empowers the Apostles to teach the truth.

Our Lord Jesus not only preached the truth, but he also graciously arranged it so that it could be heard by people all over the earth. Christ achieved this by entrusting the Gospel to twelve personally selected Apostles and by commanding them to proclaim it to all nations and individuals upon his ascension into heaven.

Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

Jesus knew that the Apostles would not be able to hand on the Gospel in all of its integrity without His supernatural assistance. After all, they were just men. He therefore promised to send them the Holy Spirit to help them remember all that he had taught.

I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you. (John 14:25–26)

It is through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the Apostles were empowered to teach the fullness of truth to others, and to convey to them the good news of salvation just as Jesus had instructed them.

Around A.D. 80 St. Clement, Bishop of Rome, who was a direct acquaintance of the Apostles and may be the “Clement” mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3, writes in his Letter to the Corinthians: “The apostles received the gospel for us from our Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus, the Christ, was sent by God. Thus Christ is from God and the apostles from Christ. In both instances the orderly procedure depends on God’s will . . . they preached in the country and city, and appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of future believers.”
Overseers of the household of God

Alongside their role as guardians of the Sacred Deposit, Jesus established the Apostles as overseers of the whole Church, which the Bible refers to as the “household of God,” God’s family. “Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

As overseers, their role was one of preaching, teaching, and sanctifying—preaching the Gospel as given by Jesus, teaching the doctrines of the faith entrusted to them, and making God’s children holy through the celebration of the sacraments Christ established. In short, they were given Christ’s own authority to supervise the Church and to serve her members as spiritual father figures and teachers. They were to formally instruct the Church about the Deposit of Faith, directing God’s sons and daughters as to what to believe (questions of faith) and how to behave (questions of morals) in order to claim their family inheritance, heaven.

At the head of the Apostles the Lord placed Peter, the first pope, who alone received the “keys to the kingdom of heaven” from Christ. With these keys, which represented the full authority of Christ the King, Peter would act as Christ’s visible representative on earth, serving in union with the other Apostles as a father figure in governing the Church, but endowed with a unique position of authority as “Papa” or leader of the whole Church. Peter’s office would be a continuous one in the Church, one that would pass down in succession from one pope to the next until the return of Christ.

Around A.D. 180 St. Irenaeus (who was a disciple of St. Polycarp, who himself was a disciple of the beloved Apostle St. John) testified to the succession of popes in his work Against Heresies. This same succession continues to our day, with Pope John Paul II. St. Irenaeus wrote:

“The blessed Apostles (Peter and Paul), having founded and built up the Church (of Rome), they handed over the office of the episcopate to Linus. Paul makes mention of this Linus in the Epistle to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; after him, in the third place from the Apostles, Clement was chosen for the episcopate . . . to this Clement, Evaristus succeeded; and Alexander succeeded Evaristus. Then, sixth after the Apostles, Sixtus was appointed; after him, Telesphorus, who was also glorious martyred. Then Hyginus; after him, Pius; and after him, Anicetus. Soter succeeded Anicetus, and now in twelfth place after the Apostles, the lot of the episcopate has fallen to Eleutherus. In this very order, and by the teaching of the Apostles handed down in the Church, the preaching of the truth has come down to us.”

Matthew 16:19: “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

The English word “pope” comes from the word “papa,” which means father.
How the Church speaks infallibly

Infallibility operates within specific guidelines.
The charism of infallibility operates within specific guidelines, and it provides the Church's leaders with God's protection against teaching error.

The Church speaks infallibly when:

- the successor of St. Peter (also called the Pope or the Bishop of Rome)
- speaks definitively to the entire Church,
- either alone or in communion with all of the bishops of the Church (the successors to the Apostles),
- on doctrinal matters of faith and morals.

When the above conditions are met, the pope and bishops cannot err, because the Holy Spirit has guided them to reaffirm the Deposit of Faith by defining a truth of revelation or by clarifying a truth of revelation more clearly.

Is “defining a truth of revelation” the same as adding to revelation?
The short answer is emphatically no! The Catholic Church teaches that revelation ceased with the death of the last Apostle. There will be no further revelation until the final and ultimate revelation—the return of Jesus Christ in glory. Remember, the Apostles and their successors were only given the authority to transmit and interpret the Deposit of Faith. They were not authorized to alter it or add to it in any way.

When the bishops “define” a truth of the faith, it simply means that they state more clearly what the Church received in the Deposit of Faith and already holds to be true. The need for such clarification is generally initiated by a challenge to the truth known as “heresy,” which prompts the Church's leaders to state in more precise terms what the Church believes. Thus, though the content of the Sacred Deposit never changes, the Church's understanding and articulation of the truth she holds is continually sharpening over time.

The Church speaks infallibly through both the Extraordinary Magisterium and the Ordinary Magisterium.

The Extraordinary Magisterium defines matters of faith.

It is through the Extraordinary Magisterium that the pope and the bishops of the Church generally define matters of faith, that is, questions pertaining to what we believe as God's family (e.g., the Creed, the Canon of Scripture, the Divinity of Christ, the Seven Sacraments, etc.). Such infallible definitions are called dogmas, and they must be believed in order to be Catholic. The word “extra-ordinary” indicates that the promulgation of such definitions does not occur every day in the Church, but are instead extraordinary events in the life of the Church.
Our response to infallible teaching

We owe the highest assent of our mind and will, known as the “obedience of faith,”12 to the infallible teachings of the Church. Another way of putting it is to say that when the Church speaks solemnly in declaring a matter of faith or morals to be true and necessary for our salvation, we are to believe it as God’s word. Through this obedient response, we, the faithful, actually participate in the charism of infallibility, as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to “adhere unfailingly”13 to the Deposit of Faith and pass it on to another generation through the lives we live. In receiving and passing on the Deposit of Faith, all of us take part in the Church’s mission, which is to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth for the salvation of souls.

Is everything the Magisterium says infallible?
Though the infallible pronouncements of the Catholic Church are of utmost importance to our souls, there are other ways that the Magisterium speaks to us. In the course of the Church’s life, our leaders communicate with us regularly about a broad spectrum of topics, giving us everything from pastoral directions on current issues (e.g., norms for dealing with liturgical abuses) to devotional practices (e.g., outlining the mysteries of the Rosary) to disciplinary guidelines for living the Christian life (e.g., setting forth fasting regulations).

Such directives and guidelines may come to us through various means such as papal addresses, exhortations, or letters (called encyclicals), which are intended for the whole Church. They may also be directed locally, coming from the bishops of particular geographical areas or dioceses as they speak to the faithful through episcopal conferences, letters, and other documents. Because these teaching mechanisms are not infallible in and of themselves (though they may affirm infallible doctrines), the response due to them is not the “obedience of faith” described above, but respectful submission and conformity as we lovingly and trustingly defer to the teaching authority of those appointed by Christ.

What if we disagree with Church doctrines?
Sometimes, we may encounter genuine difficulty in fully embracing what the Catholic Church teaches. Indeed, we may experience an honest struggle in reconciling our beliefs or behaviors with those proclaimed by the Church. Perhaps we are a convert from Protestantism who experienced problems accepting doctrines such as Papal Infallibility or the Immaculate Conception. Or maybe we are a practicing Catholic who undergoes a real struggle in grasping the Church’s teaching on moral issues. Can we pick and choose what doctrines to believe?

12 Romans 1:5: “Through him, we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name.”
13 Vatican II, The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, par. 8.
“Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15)

The answer lies in a question, and it is exactly the question we must confront when encountering Jesus Christ himself: “Who do you say that I am?” If we pose this question honestly about Christ, then we must pose it also about his Church, for the Head and its Body are inseparable. When Saul was persecuting the Church, he heard the voice of Jesus saying “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? . . . I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4–5). Who do we say that the Church is? Do we believe that the Church was founded by Christ for our salvation, and that she, and not our own set of feelings and opinions, is the “pillar and foundation of truth?”

If we answer these questions affirmatively, then our struggle to conform ourselves to the uncompromising truth that the Church sets forth will not be one of angry dissent as we selectively reject the teachings with which we disagree. Our grappling will instead entail an earnest plea for God’s assistance as we humbly recognize that the shortcomings lie in our own faith and understanding—not in the truth that the Church proclaims.

Conversion requires transformation of both heart and mind.

Conversion is a gradual process that involves opening ourselves totally to the truth and honestly challenging our own subjective views. This transformation can be difficult. We are surrounded by a secular culture with its own values, attitudes, and practices that are often at odds with a Christian worldview. As a result, we struggle when faced with these conflicting views, particularly when the Church’s teachings may appear to be more difficult to follow. The fact is, this challenge is not new, nor is it insurmountable. St. Paul tells us:

Do not conform yourself to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

A key to such transformation often lies in our will. We must choose to place ourselves under the authority established by God in the service of truth—the Church. Though submitting to the Church’s authority may seem at first blush to be an act that restricts freedom, countless saints have found that in embracing the authority of the Church they did not experience bondage and burden, but true freedom, joy, and peace, finding as St. Augustine did that “authority alone can open the door for all those who desire to learn the good in all its greatness and hidden depths” (from Augustine’s work “On Order”).

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14 2 Timothy 3:15.
Mindless vs. Mindful

That said, are Catholics expected to be a mindless company of compliants who blindly believe whatever the Church’s Magisterium tells us? Far from it, we are in actuality called to be informed and mindful Christians who are knowledgeable about the Church's doctrines and confident that they flow from the will of God for the good of our souls. The Church takes great pains to faithfully transmit what Christ revealed and to teach the doctrines on faith and morals with Christ's own integrity, sensitivity, and love.

Our submissive posture in response to the Church’s authority bespeaks our understanding of God's divine plan of salvation. In fact, it concretely demonstrates our firm belief that God’s plan includes true and proper authority for the building up of our supernatural family, the Church.15 The Church’s authority flows from God, and it exists on earth only so that men can encounter Christ and thus come to live eternally with him in heaven. The doctrines she sets forth were revealed by her founder, Jesus Christ, and their purpose is not to constrict and encumber us, but to provide the means for us to know and live the truth according to God’s will.

When we accept the authority established by God, we conform ourselves to his will, just as when we “receive” the one Christ sends, we “receive” him.

Amen, amen I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.

(John 13:20)

And when we receive him, we receive the one who sent him, namely the Father in heaven, under whose authority we ultimately reside. Recognizing this reality, faithful Catholics embrace all that the Church teaches because we trust in Jesus Christ and in his plan for our salvation, and we obey the Church's directives resting assured that they will bring us happiness and freedom in this life and in the next. Our response to the Church's teaching authority is therefore not blind, coerced, or minimalistic (believing and obeying the bare minimum), but instead genuinely welcoming and joyful as we embrace the Church as Mother and Teacher, confident that she is guided by the Holy Spirit in shaping our souls for everlasting life.

15 Ephesians 4:11–13: “And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God.”