

The Catholic Church is a force for good

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Background

The Catholic Church is the world's largest Christian church and says it has over a billion members. Its claim to authority rests on the doctrine of the apostolic succession, through which the Church claims to be the true successor of the original Christian community founded by Jesus in his selection of Saint Peter, and through which its bishops and priests claim spiritual and sacramental authority.

The Catholic Church teaches that the Holy Spirit reveals God's truth through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. These are interpreted by the Magisterium, the Church's teaching authority, which – through apostolic succession – is exercised by the Pope and the college of bishops in union with the Pope. Catholic theology divides the functions of the Magisterium into two categories: the infallible Sacred Magisterium and the fallible Ordinary Magisterium. Matters which the church claims infallibility include such "moral" issues as contraception, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality, all of which are addressed by definitive Church teachings, as well as doctrinal issues such as the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is not alluded to in the Bible.

While doctrinal authority is highly centralised, since the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, the Church has pursued a contrasting policy of greater openness and dialogue. Vatican II modernised the liturgy, enhanced the role of lay Catholics, opened dialogue with other churches and non-Christians, and identified the church as the "pilgrim people of God" – on the move, alive to the problems of the modern world, an open church rather than a static, unerring, defensive citadel. Vatican II sparked a period of more open debate about the Church's mission and discussion of its most fundamental doctrines, but the attempt to build bridges between Christianity's ancient truths and the contemporary world has not been an easy one.

The Catholic Church is a force for good in social affairs

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We can thank the Church for much European culture, knowledge and technology

It has been the dominant influence on the development of Western society both up to and after the Reformation. The great western traditions of art, music and architecture were all nurtured by church patronage. Catholic monasteries developed new technologies and fostered the creation and preservation of literature and learning. Western universities and many schools can trace their origins to Catholic clerical foundations. Protestant churches

Church teaching on sex condemns millions to death

Each year, 600,000 women die needlessly during pregnancy and childbirth and thousands more die from botched illegal abortions. Each year, 5.8 million people become HIV positive and 2.5 million die from Aids. Today, more than 28% of African children have lost one or both parents to Aids. Yet the Church has consistently lobbied to block international policy decisions that would make condom education and use a major tool in the prevention of unwanted pregnancies

were built on Catholic foundations.

The Church supplies popular spiritual nourishment

Through its ritual, liturgy and institutions such as pilgrimage and the veneration of saints, the Church provides a uniquely rich framework for people's everyday lives and a focus for social networks and works of charity. It also provides comfort and security for people at difficult times – during illness, bereavement and death. The human yearning for spiritual nourishment of this sort is apparent in the popularity of pilgrimage destinations. There are more than 6,000 of these in Europe alone, generating around 60 million visits a year.

Roman Catholicism delivers moral absolutes

The great advantage of Catholicism, unlike, say, Anglicanism, is that it does not trim its views to suit the fashion of the times. Thus it gives people the character, confidence and the strong values they need to live productive and worthwhile lives and make a positive contribution to society.

Catholic mercy directs good works to those in greatest need

The Church operates numerous social ministries throughout the world and it teaches that individual Catholics are required to practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy as well. The seven corporal works of mercy are: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead.

The Church upholds the sanctity of human life

The Church's key message is of the timeless Christian principle of the sacredness and dignity of human life from the moment of conception. This is what underpins its stance on contraception, abortion and euthanasia. It also underpins its social principles which support the rights of workers, oppose unfettered capitalism, defend the oppressed and campaign for a more just world trading system. To have any validity at all, moral principles must be universal everywhere and at all times, so it is absurd to suggest that the Church should say that contraception and abortion are fine, when both are clearly contrary to biblical teaching. Just because many people fall short of Christian ideals and modern society puts a premium on the pursuit of pleasure and material riches is not an argument for the Church changing its message.

The Church does not condemn homosexuals any more than recreational heterosexuals

Catholic teaching on homosexuality is often misunderstood. Catholic doctrine distinguishes between the person and the act. Homosexual acts are regarded as being evil, but not people with homosexual tendencies who are to be accorded the same rights and respect as anyone else. By the same token, heterosexual lust and fornication are described in the Catechism as "morally disordered" – willing abstinence is an essential part of Catholic life in sexual matters as in all other forms of appetite - the Church has no truck with purely "recreational" sex. But no one suggests that the church condemns heterosexuals.

The Church accords women equal dignity with

and in the battle against Aids. At a recent world conference on women and population development, it successfully led the effort to block the inclusion of safe, legal abortion on the list of basic reproductive rights for women. It has used its voice to limit access to family planning, safe abortion – even in countries where abortion is legal – and emergency contraception, even for women who have been raped in an act of war. The Church has had no hesitation in quoting specious scientific evidence to back its case. In Kenya a church pamphlet stated that HIV can pass through condoms and in 2003, the Vatican claimed that "serious scientific studies" backed this view. No scientists supported the claim. It was a lie.

Catholic teaching on sex forces people to be hypocrites

The Church's condemnation of homosexuality, divorce and even safe sex effectively debar huge numbers of good Catholics from the sacraments or forces them to become two-faced hypocrites. While there was a rapid increase in Catholic divorce rates, divorced Catholics who remarry are barred from the sacraments. In Italy where about 85% identify themselves as Catholic, a recent study showed that 70% approve of premarital sex, birth control and divorce, and the country has one of the world's lowest fertility rates – a resounding thumbs down to the church's teaching on contraception. In Britain, a 2008 study found that most practising Catholics were ignoring the Church's teachings on contraception and sex. Even many priests disagree with church teaching. In England, a 2003 survey of Roman Catholic priests found most did not support the Church's ban on artificial contraception and 40% thought the church's attitude to divorce and remarriage should be liberalised. 61% did not believe that sex with a married woman should debar priests from practising.

The Church's teaching on homosexuality is cruel and outdated

The Church condemns homosexuality as a "disorder", despite the fact that all the evidence suggests that people are born homosexual and can't change the way they are. Effectively the Church offers two solutions for gays: a) stay at home and pretend to be a monk; b) marry a heterosexual and try not to make them too miserable. Both of these "solutions" have led to terrible individual suffering. Though the church claims not to be anti-homosexuals, it perpetuates bigotry behind which homophobes and gay bashers can hide.

The Church denigrates women

By outlawing contraception and abortion, he denied women their right to control their own bodies. Papal pronouncements – that rape victims in Bosnia must be denied abortion, or that contraception was "intrinsically evil" – reinforced that sense. The ban on contraception did more to subvert the standing of the Church among women than almost anything else. Catholic women who used birth control were effectively forced to act out their disrespect for the Church's moral teachings every time they did so. In Africa, otherwise excellent Catholic mission hospitals were prohibited from offering birth control services to poor mothers, leaving them to bring children into the world to die of malnutrition. Even worse was the denial of contraception to women infected with HIV (which has been disproportionately prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s). After Vatican II many Catholics looked for a greater role for women in the running of the Church. But the church has refused to discuss the possibility of ordaining

men

In 1988 Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity of Women), which declared that women had a different, yet equally important role in the Church. He recognised "an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights". Women who see their role primarily as wives and mothers have been sidelined by modern radical feminists who seek to abolish all differences between women and men. The Church recognises that these roles are the essence of being a woman and, especially through its emphasis on the example of the Virgin Mary, it gives women the central status they deserve. The ban on women priests has firm biblical foundations which cannot be swept aside. In 1994, the encyclical *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (On Ordination to the Priesthood) explained that the Church follows the example of Jesus, who chose only men for the specific priestly duty.

The Church cannot be blamed for the sins of its members

The Catholic Church has always upheld ideal standards of conduct for its clergy, including, since the later Middle Ages, the enforcement of celibacy, but it has usually been realistic about the prospect of these standards being met. The Catholic Church is a church for sinners, not for some specially chosen "elect". The church hierarchy has nevertheless been appalled by recent scandals involving paedophile priests and has acknowledged that its response has not always been appropriate. In the early days policy was often based on the popular psychological theory that people could be cured of such behaviour through counselling. But there has never been any doubt where the Church stands morally on the issue, Pope John Paul II declared that "there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young". The US Church instituted reforms to prevent future abuse including requiring background checks for Church employees and volunteers. The worldwide Church has prohibited the ordination of men with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies".

Contraception causes licentiousness causes Aids

The Church is right to argue that condoms are not the answer to the scourge of Aids since contraception is among the trends that have led to the breakdown of sexual morality which has impoverished people's lives and given rise to Aids. In practical terms, too, condoms are not the answer. They lead to a false sense of security in situations where one faulty condom or one "accident" can be a death sentence. Other solutions must and can be found to deal with problems such as overpopulation and Aids, including sexual continence within marriage and abstinence outside. The stress on abstinence and fidelity has already proved effective in the battle against Aids, as shown in countries like Uganda. The only consistent message is one of sexual responsibility and of the sanctity of human life.

women as priests despite a desperate shortage of new priests and the fact that there were twice as many nuns as monks. Indeed, Pope John Paul made the ban on women priests a matter of papal infallibility, which it had not been before, effectively preventing any of his successors from changing church policy on the issue. Yet recent surveys show that in Ireland, Italy, Spain and the US, most Catholics favour the ordination of women.

The Church has been hypocritical about paedophile priests

In the past decade there has been an avalanche of revelations about sexual and other abuse carried out by Catholic priests and members of religious orders in countries around the world. By February 2004, 4,400 priests in America alone had been "credibly accused" of attacking 11,000 minors over a 50-year period. Bishops who knew about abuse allegations failed to report them to police and reassigned accused priests after first sending them to psychiatric counselling. This year's publication of the Ryan Commission's report on 'endemic' child abuse in schools run by Roman Catholic religious orders in Ireland, shows the problem was widespread. The Commission found that, over many decades, Irish Governments had colluded in a conspiracy of silence with the church as no action was taken even though abuse was known to be endemic. More than 800 individuals were identified as physical or sexual abusers – an extraordinary number compared with the handful of prosecutions that have taken place. The Vatican's response too has been tardy and inadequate. In 2002 it blamed the crisis on "pan-sexuality and sexual licentiousness" in society and made clear that the church would maintain "secret canonical norms" to avoid a "culture of suspicion" – a cover-up in other words. The curia also blamed gay priests, thus making the false equation between homosexuality and paedophilia. The attitudes that made such abuse possible persist. In 2003 a survey found that one in 10 Catholic priests in England and Wales felt that paedophilia should not debar priests from active ministry.

The Catholic Church is a force for good in political affairs

Agree

The Church has taken a moral stand against repressive dictatorship

Catholics were prominent in resistance to the Nazis

The Church has learned from the mistakes of the past

The Catholic Church is a champion of the oppressed

The Catholic Church is a force for world peace and reconciliation

The Church has taken a moral stand against repressive dictatorship

The Ferdinand Marcos regime in the Philippines was doomed in the mid-1980s from the moment the Catholic Church turned against it, says Ian Buruma. Thousands of ordinary citizens defied the tanks when Marcos threatened to crush "People Power" with force, but the presence of priests and nuns gave the rebellion its moral authority. Many political dissidents in South Korea were inspired by their Christian beliefs, and the same is true in China. No one can deny that the religious authority of Pope John Paul II was a spur to Poland's rebellion against Communist dictatorship in the 1980s. His speech in Warsaw in 1979 was a defining moment in the history of Europe. It inspired and sustained Solidarity, the people's movement that freed Poland from atheistic Communism, prompting a process that led to the eventual collapse of the entire Soviet system. The strength of the Roman Catholic Church, argues Buruma, "is belief itself, in a moral order that defies secular or indeed religious dictators".

Catholics were prominent in resistance to the Nazis

Pope Pius XI issued the 1937 encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*; drafted by the future Pope Pius XII, and read from the pulpits of all German Catholic churches. It condemned any ideology that "exalts race, or the people, or the State, or a particular form of State ... and divinises them to an idolatrous level" and has been described as the "first great official public document to dare to confront and criticise Nazism". Active resisters to the Nazis during World War II were often devout Catholics. Some sheltered Jews, despite their own prejudices against the Jews, simply because they saw it as their religious duty. Of the 2700 ministers who were imprisoned at Dachau during World War II, over 2600 were Roman Catholic priests, of whom 2000 were ultimately put to death. Prominent members of the Jewish community have contradicted recent allegations that Pope Pius XII was indifferent to the plight of the Jews and spoken highly of his efforts to protect Jews. The Israeli historian Pinchas Lapide interviewed war survivors and concluded that Pius XII "was instrumental in saving at least 700,000, but probably as many as 860,000 Jews from certain death at Nazi hands".

The Church has learned from the mistakes of the past

The conundrum of whether evils such as the crusades or the Inquisition should be judged by the standards of their age or ours raises tricky issues of historical relativism, though most historians agree, at least, that the courts of the Inquisition were less brutal than their secular equivalents at the time. Nonetheless, the Church has shown honesty and humility in acknowledging the "sins" of the past. Pope John Paul II

Disagree

The Crusades laid the foundations for today's poor relations with the Islamic world

The Church has validated tyranny

European colonialism was rubber-stamped by the Church

The Catholic Church condoned fascism

The Church keeps supporting repressive right-wing regimes

The Crusades laid the foundations for today's poor relations with the Islamic world

Six general councils of the Church endorsed the Crusades and numerous popes told Christian monarchs that they would be in mortal sin if they refused to fight. The brutalities committed by Christian armies during the crusades has left a legacy of distrust between Muslims and Christians which continues to influence how Islam sees the West, and vice versa. Chronicles record a story of a crusader-bishop who referred to the impaled heads of slain Muslims as a joyful spectacle for the people of God.

The Church has validated tyranny

The Catholic Church has always worked hand in glove with repressive secular powers, providing they were Catholic. In medieval Europe, inquisitions were launched by secular rulers to prosecute "heretics" for political purposes, often with the approval of Church hierarchy. The Spanish Inquisition was started in 1478 to deal with converts from Judaism and Islam to Catholicism, who were distrusted because of their assumed political rather than their religious views. Jean Antoine Llorente, secretary to the Spanish Inquisition from 1790-92, admitted: "The horrid conduct of this Holy Office weakened the power and diminished the population of Spain by arresting the progress of arts, sciences, industry, and commerce, and by compelling multitudes of families to abandon the kingdom; by instigating the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors, and by immolating on its flaming shambles more than 300,000 victims."

European colonialism was rubber-stamped by the Church

Pope Alexander VI formally divided the newly discovered world of Asia, Africa and the Americas between Spain and Portugal, encouraging a process of colonisation which proved disastrous for many indigenous societies. The belief that the people in these places were "souls" which needed to be saved led the Church to destroy ancient cultures, outlaw long-held beliefs and legitimise the slaughter of the many who resisted conversion. Earlier in the 15th century, a papal bull issued by Pope Nicholas V had given the Portuguese king the right to take "Saracens, pagans and any other unbelievers" as slaves.

The Catholic Church condoned fascism

Before he became Pope, Pius XII negotiated the 1933 Reichskonkordat with Nazi Germany, a document that represented an important step toward the legitimisation of Hitler's regime. As Pope, Pius followed a policy of neutrality and was accused of moral cowardice in refusing to speak out against Nazi atrocities. By the end of 1942, Pius had learnt details of

failure of Catholics to help Jews during the Holocaust which, he acknowledged, might have been made easier by Christian anti-Semitism. The church has never pretended that it has all the answers or that its hierarchy is infallible in all things. The evidence is that it learns from its mistakes.

The Catholic Church is a champion of the oppressed

In the early colonial period, the church spoke out against abuses committed against native peoples by explorers and conquerors. Antonio de Montesinos, a Dominican friar, openly rebuked the Spanish rulers of Hispaniola in 1511 for their cruelty and tyranny in dealing with the American natives. The writings of Catholic clergy such as Bartolomé de Las Casas and Francisco de Vitoria led to debate on the nature of human rights and to the birth of modern international law. Pope Paul III in the 1537 bull *Sublimis Deus* confirmed that the souls of Indians were "as immortal as those of Europeans" and they should neither be robbed nor turned into slaves. That commitment continues to this day and is reflected in campaigns for world debt forgiveness and action on world poverty.

The Catholic Church is a force for world peace and reconciliation

Pope John Paul II was a prominent critic of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and in conflict zones around the world – Rwanda, Uganda, Colombia, the Philippines, Congo, Mozambique, Guatemala, Chile, Peru and Bosnia – Catholic leaders, often with the help of organisations like Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, have helped to build institutions to achieve conflict mediation, reconciliation and, where possible, democracy.

the Holocaust from at least nine different countries, yet he rejected requests to make a formal protest. The British envoy to the Holy See at the time felt the Pope was more concerned that Rome might be bombed than with "Hitler's massacre of the Jewish race", and one Foreign Office memo described him as the "greatest moral coward of our age". The Church's approach to Nazi Germany was of a piece with its attitude to Fascism more generally. The Church came out strongly in support of General Franco during and after the Spanish Civil War; one of many controversial canonisations in recent years was that of Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer (1902-75), founder of the right-wing Opus Dei, which had nine members in Franco's cabinet. In Portugal the Church supported the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. In France the right-wing nationalist movement *Action Française*, which campaigned for the return of the French monarchy and for aggressive action against Jews, was backed by a strong section of the clerical hierarchy and by eleven out of seventeen cardinals and bishops. The Belgian Fascist movement *Rexism* also arose out of a conservative Catholic movement and its publications.

The Church keeps supporting repressive right-wing regimes

Pope John Paul kept silent about repression in Argentina and met with dictators such as Augusto Pinochet of Chile. Both he and Pope Benedict XVI (as Cardinal Ratzinger) denounced South American liberation theology which argued for political engagement in pursuit of a "preferential option for the poor". Four Catholic priests who joined the left-wing Sandinista government – which came to power in Nicaragua in 1979 after ousting Anastasio Somoza's brutal dictatorship – were excommunicated. The result has been to undermine a strand of Catholicism that offered real hope to the world's poor and oppressed. Pope John Paul put the wartime Pope, Pius XII, on the road to sainthood, despite widespread criticism of his failure to take strong action against Nazi anti-Semitism. He also decided to beatify Pius IX, Pope between 1846 and 1878, a notorious anti-Semite who forced the Jews of Rome into a ghetto, baptised their children by force, and restricted their rights. Another controversial candidate for sainthood is the Croatian wartime Archbishop, Cardinal Stepinac, whom Jewish groups accuse of collaborating with the Nazi regime in Croatia.

The Catholic Church is a force for good in religious affairs

Agree

Its strength is fundamentalism in doctrine combined with worldly realism

Vatican II has made the church outward-looking and inclusive

The Church's strength is based on timeless moral principle

The Church is healthy and vibrant

Disagree

The Protestants were right about church corruption

The Catholic Church denies intellectual freedom

The Catholic claim to be the one true church prevents religious unity

In the West, the Church is dying on its feet

A religion incapable of compromise is doomed to irrelevance

Its strength is fundamentalism in doctrine combined with worldly realism

Much of what is good about the Roman Catholic Church, argues an Independent editorial, depends on its history both as Roman, in that it holds to a set of principles and laws which are culturally specific, and as Catholic – which literally means "about (kata) the whole (holos)", or universal in Greek – in that it attempts to embrace people everywhere. Although the Church is fundamentalist in doctrine, its strength has been that it is not fundamentalist in the application of doctrine. Its success as a global religion owes much to the fact that in practice it did not insist too much in South America, for example, on adherence to rules made up in Italy. It sees itself as a church for sinners rather than, as with many Protestant churches, as a church of saints.

Vatican II has made the church outward-looking and inclusive

A nineteenth century Catholic would be amazed at the transformation of the Church after Vatican II. What was once a fortress Church is now seriously engaged in dialogue with non-Christian religions as well as other Christian bodies without any compromise of Catholic doctrine. Through his revolutionary encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul invited other Christian leaders to help redefine his ministry as Pope; something that had never been done before. He received Protestant leaders in the Vatican with affection and respect and became the first pope ever to preach in a Lutheran church. It was the decision of the Anglican Church to ordain women priests, overturning centuries of tradition, which scuppered hopes of reconciliation.

The Church's strength is based on timeless moral principle

The Church's unwavering moral teaching has made it a rock amid the shifting sands of moral relativism. Even if people do not comply with every instruction the Church issues, they crave and appreciate what it stands for. Cardinal Ratzinger, the present Pope Benedict XVI, said that "a Church that accommodates itself too closely to the world has lost its purpose," meaning that the whole point of the Church is to stand for timeless principles. The emphasis given by Pope John Paul II to church unity rightly returned the church to its central, God-centred purpose, thus saving it from quarrelsome, schismatic fate of Protestant churches which give divided and confusing messages on many of the central beliefs of the Christian faith.

The Church is healthy and vibrant

Under John Paul II and in the spirit of Vatican II, the church embraced the development of lively "new movements" which emphasise spirituality, such as Focolare, the Taizé community, the Neo-Catechumenate, Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei and Ascent. Although declining church attendances in the West reflect a general decline in religious observance affecting all churches, in Africa, the number of Catholics more than doubled, and in the whole world, numbers rose from about 757 million to more than 1.1 billion under his pontificate.

The Protestants were right about church corruption

The wealth and corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and its failure to reform itself led directly to the Reformation which split and weakened the Christian world. More recently, the shameful cover-up of the activities of paedophile priests and a series of scandals involving Vatican finances have dented its moral authority and showed that, fundamentally, the Church has not changed its instincts; that there is one law for the Church and another for everyone else.

The Catholic Church denies intellectual freedom

The Catholic Church's claim to have a monopoly on truth makes it intolerant of dissent. In recent years, Latin American "liberation theologians" such as Leonardo Boff, have been punished, silenced or simply deprived of their licence to teach. In Europe, "dissident" local initiatives have been stifled in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, Hungary and Ukraine. The Swiss theologian Hans Kung was stripped of his title as an official teacher of Catholic theology after he rejected the doctrine of papal infallibility. A book about women priests by the British nun, Sister Lavinia Byrne, was incinerated on the Vatican's orders. In America, Charles Curran of the Catholic University in Washington was stripped of his licence because of his liberal views on secularism, and Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle was required to accept a minder to scrutinise his comments on marriage annulments and his dealings with the local homosexual community. At least the Church of England is prepared to listen and debate issues.

The Catholic claim to be the one true church prevents religious unity

Christianity and Christian societies have been weakened and traumatised by religious division, yet the Catholic Church, while committed in theory to ecumenism, does nothing to help heal divisions. Pope John Paul II in particular scuppered prospects of reconciliation with the Protestant churches: Hans Kung observed that "It is hardly possible to kick our ecumenical brothers in the teeth more roughly than this Pope has done". Inter-faith dialogue with the Anglican Church which began under Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI in 1968 foundered as a result of his definitive 'No' on the ordination of women.

In the West, the Church is dying on its feet

The gulf between the Church's moral teaching and the modern world has resulted in a catastrophic fall in vocations and congregations in the West. From the mid-1960s into the 1990s, 100,000 priests (20,000 in the US) and 200,000 nuns left. The number of priests in England and Wales fell from 7,000 in 1980 to 5,500 in 2000. In 1965, 96% of the French population were Catholic, 45% attending Mass regularly. Today those percentages are 62% and 12%. Only 7% of French children and youths ever go to church. At the turn of the millennium, the bishops of Europe declared that the peoples of the entire continent had decided to live "as though God did not exist". Worldwide, the percentage of Catholics in Christianity fell from over 50% in 1970 to 42% in 2000. The main loss was to evangelical Protestantism in Latin America and Africa.

A religion incapable of compromise is doomed to

irrelevance

In his book, *How the Pope Became Infallible*, Catholic historian Bernhard Hasler described how papal infallibility, introduced as a concept as late as 1870, contained the seeds of the Church's destruction. Even at the time it was adopted the catholic intelligentsia recognised that, at some point in the future, this principle would lead the Church down a blind alley. Times were certain to change and in unpredictable ways, but the Church would be locked into teachings that could not be changed without destroying the principle of infallibility itself. Just as critics had predicted, institutional self-destruction is now well underway over the issue of contraception. The Church cannot change its position on birth control (which it confirmed in 1968, overturning the recommendation of a painstaking pontifical commission of theologians and scientists which had concluded that the Church's traditional teaching was outdated and based on bad science) without undermining all of its dogma, but its stance is undermining its standing on sexual and other issues. To most Catholics it is obvious that an HIV positive man who sleeps with his wife, or with anyone else, without wearing a condom is behaving outrageously – but not to the Vatican. Ian Linden, of the Catholic Institute for International Relations has said: "The Church is seen as so demonstrably out of touch on this that people do not take seriously what it has to say about arms control, business ethics or the unfair distribution of resources in the world."

Conclusion

Ever since the Reformation, Christian leaders and communities have struggled with the central question of religious authority which, by its nature, they regard as timeless and unitary. It was the denial of papal authority that led to Protestantism. Yet Protestant leaders in their turn struggled to assert authority over their own churches in the face of the free-for-all "priesthood of all believers". The result has been more sectarianism, division and doctrinal and moral uncertainty.

The Catholic Church has struggled to uphold its authority in a world in which respect for authority of all sorts is breaking down, and which the difficult edicts of faith are increasingly at variance with the realities of modern life. The price of this has been a sort of collective "cognitive dissonance" among ordinary Catholics who often fail to practice what their church preaches.

Perhaps the fairest verdict is that there is truth in the arguments of both supporters and critics. The Church is and has been a force for good and a force for ill. It all depends on your priorities. That paradox, of course, implies that truth is not unitary, but relative - a thoroughly secular concept that the Church would reject out of hand.