

Heresy, Schism, and Apostasy

As most students prepare to return to classes this week, it is good for each of us (whether we are students or not) to remember that each of us is called to continually grow in our faith. A large part of that growth comes through prayer, worship, contemplation, and meditation. But direct study of the faith should always be included in that as well. Without that effort that comes from study, we are severely limiting ourselves. It would be like trying to learn how to read without going to school or devoting any time to learning. You cannot expect to learn how to read by simply surrounding yourself with books and letters.

Part of the Mass (and the homily in particular) are meant to teach, but this is only a small part. It is also meant to convict and console, exhort and inspire, and prepare ourselves for the celebration of the sacraments. We should always be seeking ways to supplement our catechesis. This bulletin article is one more way I try to provide some of that teaching. I encourage you to read your bulletin, either electronically or a physical copy. Maybe sign up for various Bible study programs, or join the parish in using Formed as other education tools to help us learn throughout our lives.

With that in mind, I want to talk about the definitions of the terms, heresy, schism, and apostasy as used in the Church, and the distinctions between them. You can refer to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2089 for more detailed definitions which I will paraphrase here. Apostasy is probably the easiest to define. It is when a person who has voluntarily embraced the faith (been baptized) later abandons that faith *entirely*, and embraces Judaism, Islamism, Paganism, etc., or simply falls into a complete neglect of all religion. A person who has committed apostasy is called an apostate.

Heresy is when a believer (baptized person) obstinately denies or doubts some *part* of the faith which must be believed (dogmas and doctrines of the Church). Not everything said by the Pope or taught by the Church falls into this category. The classic example is the Assumption of Mary which we recently celebrated. For many years, theologians and others could disagree on whether or not Mary was assumed into heaven body and soul at the end of her life on earth and not be considered a heretic. But after 1950 when Pope Pius XII dogmatically (and infallibly) defined the Assumption, obstinate disagreement with that truth would mean professing heresy. Obstinacy is an important part of the definition as well in order for there to be formal heresy. The person must be aware that his/her belief is contrary to the Catholic faith, yet continue to hold that belief even after taught properly or corrected.

Schism is when someone voluntarily separates themselves from the unity of the Church. Technically apostasy and heresy would also fall under this definition; all heretics are also schismatics. But it is possible that a person can be in schism and still believe all that the Church teaches (i.e. not be a heretic), and it is usually this more narrow definition that is meant in text and speech. Most schismatics in this epoch of the Church are those who refuse to submit to the authority of the Pope.

These definitions are helpful for us to know. They are meant to help us seek truth and hold to it so that we avoid the pitfalls they represent. They are not meant primarily as attacks to shame or

criticize those who might fall into their categories. Like a doctor must be able to define and label a disease in order to properly treat those threats to the human body, so the Church defines these ways that the Body of Christ can be attacked so that we can address them properly according to their unique circumstances. I am also not writing this so we can all go around and label other people as heretics or apostates, but so that we can more closely examine our own lives, reject any lies we might believe, and profess our faith completely in Christ and the Church he founded, and help others find their way to Him as well.

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