

## Morality and Church authority

Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs, 31 December 2014

<http://www.ccepa.ca/blog/?p=448>

Mark Mercer  
Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3  
(902) 420-5825  
[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

The Roman Catholic Church is not likely to alter its teachings on sex, birth control, abortion, or homosexuality any time soon, despite the sincere efforts of Pope Francis to foster change. This fact saddens many people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. But why should it? Why, that is, should anyone care what the Church teaches?

Catholics who see nothing wrong with same-sex intimacy or intrauterine devices are free to leave the Church, if they want. If they don't want to leave it—if, for instance, they wish to be present to the miracle of transubstantiation, or they don't want to upset their parents—then they can simply ignore the teachings they think false.

Since the priests cannot put anyone in jail, or fine them, or get them fired from their jobs, Catholics who would reject Church teachings have no reason to fear that rejecting them will land them in hot water. This is true not only for those who merely disagree with the Church, but also for those who actually live in ways the Church condemns.

So let the Church teach what it will about sex and the rest. It's up to us to sort out for ourselves what to believe and what to value.

An objection to taking a “who cares?” attitude toward Church teachings is that the Church does, in fact, have authority in many people's lives. True, the Church cannot have sinners jailed, at least not in secular nations, but nonetheless being called a sinner hurts and humiliates. That's why we should care that the Church alter its teachings: so that it no longer hurts or humiliates those who have sex outside marriage, or use birth control, or are homosexual, or seek an abortion.

The fault here, though, is not with the Church, but with those who would let what the Church says bother them. If one doesn't think birth control wrong, then one shouldn't feel that by wearing a condom one has sinned. If one doesn't feel one has sinned, then accusations that one has shouldn't hurt. (Unjust criticism shouldn't hurt; and the just sort should be welcomed.) The task isn't to change the Church, but to overcome one's vulnerability.

Perhaps that's easier said than done. Nonetheless, to be vulnerable to unjust criticism is to labour under a serious, and seriously debilitating, misapprehension. It's to hold that there are authorities in matters of morals. Without that belief, a person called a sinner would recognize that whether she actually is one is simply another hypothesis to investigate (or ignore). Her own judgement on the matter should be the judgement that guides her behaviour and feelings.

There are no authorities on matters of morals. Authorities on Church doctrine exist, of course, just as authorities on snails and the Renaissance do; but whether Church doctrine on right and wrong is correct (whether snails are tasty; whether Renaissance art is moving) is not a matter

on which any pronouncement is authoritative. We must always find our own good reasons for rejecting or accepting any contention about how to live.