



# Knowing the difference between Catholic doctrine and popular belief



**DEAR FATHER KERPER,** A few months ago, I became the caregiver of an old friend. He's 92-years-old and in hospice care. When I last visited him, he seemed very agitated. It seems that a Catholic woman took it upon herself to tell him that he would never see his deceased wife because she had never been baptized. He fully accepted the woman's statement because, as he said, "she knows her catechism as well as special revelations from saints." I'm afraid his anguish over his deceased wife will deprive him of a peaceful death. How can I help him put aside what the woman said?

Your unsettling description of your friend's situation reminded me of similar cases of people who've suffered spiritual harm at the hands of misinformed Catholics. One such case remains forever lodged in my mind.

About 12 years ago, I struck up a friendship with a very intelligent man who went to the local doughnut shop every day.

One day he suddenly announced: "I used to be a Catholic. Do you want to know why I left?" I said, "Yes."

He then declared, "I left the Church because my fourth-grade teacher — a nun — told me that after a person dies an angel pulls out the soul through the corpse's nose."

My jaw dropped. I had never heard

of such a thing. I responded by saying, "But the Church doesn't teach that." He shot back, "She was a nun. She represents the Church, right? I believe what she said."

By the way, this man, unbeknownst to me, had a large malignant abdominal tumor. He refused treatment and died a few weeks after our final conversation. Had he ever found peace?

As you see, misinformation can be harmful. Therefore, to provide a helpful response, we need to consider two dimensions of matter: the spiritual and theological.

As your friend faces imminent death and still grieves over his wife, he primarily needs spiritual care, which includes reassurance, comfort and spiritual support. For some reason or other, your friend accepted the extreme opinion that, in effect, his wife was already damned.

Rather than arguing the theological point, I suggest you speak to him about God's infinite mercy and desire to save humanity. Perhaps the sincere proclamation of God's love by you will counter-balance the "bad news" from the woman. You should also try to assist his journey toward eternal life by inviting him to experience the peace that flows from confession and the anointing of the sick.

Now let's look at two relevant theological matters: "private revelations" and the difference between unchangeable doctrine and acceptable opinion.

## PRIVATE REVELATIONS

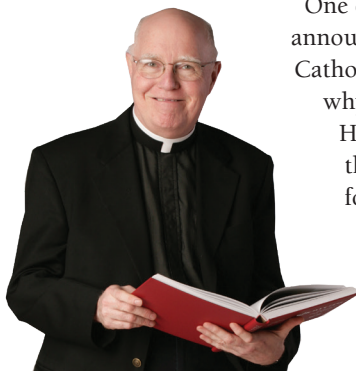
You mentioned that your friend had heard of some sort of "special revelations." I'm not sure what these are, but many frightening accounts of purgatory and hell float through the internet.

Sad to say, some people confuse these "revelations" with doctrine. I suspect that my friend from the doughnut shop did that, turning a bizarre legend mentioned in fourth grade into an irreformable doctrine.

Now that such "revelations" and new "devotions" multiply so quickly, we need standards for judging the value and authenticity of such things. Fortunately, two documents issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 1978 and 2011 provide excellent guidance.

First, the CDF distinguished between "public" and "private" revelations. The first consists of inspired sacred Scripture and clearly defined doctrines, including a few not found directly in sacred Scripture, such as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.

"Private" revelations consist of visions, miraculous events and "locutions" — words spoken by the Lord, Mary and saints. The Church designates these as "private" because they usually occur beyond the public eye, even within the interior of persons



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

who experience these unusual events. Such revelations, however, never transmit new doctrines or information. As such, the Church never requires anyone to believe in these revelations, even those recognized by the Church.

Second, the CDF evaluates the people who receive revelations. This process usually includes a psychological examination, a review of the person's moral character and certification they embrace the fullness of the Catholic faith. "Revelations" that contradict established doctrine, contain bizarre elements or directly attack Church leaders, never receive the Church's approval.

Third, Church authorities then carefully study the "fruits" of the events reported. If they draw people closer to God and the saints, the Church is more likely to have a favorable view. Even then, the Church generally avoids direct endorsement of private revelations.

## DOCTRINE VS. OPINION

Your friend has a very firm grasp on at least one key Catholic teaching: the necessity of baptism for salvation. The old formula, "no salvation outside the Church," remains in place. Indeed, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms the necessity of baptism four times (paragraphs 846, 1257, 1258 and 1277).

However, the woman who spoke to your friend went far beyond the boundaries of Church teaching, which affirms the necessity of baptism without concluding that every unbaptized person is certainly deprived of salvation.

Fortunately, we have an excellent case study of how the Church delicately teaches difficult doctrinal points. I refer to the beautiful document from the International Theological Commission published in 2007 with the approval of Pope Benedict XVI. The Commission did two things.

First, it distinguished between unchangeable doctrines and acceptable opinions. The Commission declared that limbo had "never entered into the dogmatic definitions of the Magisterium." In other words, the proposition that unbaptized people could not be saved but instead placed in limbo, was never settled Church teaching.

Even the *Baltimore Catechism* of 1891, which mentions limbo, describes it as a "common belief," not doctrine. As such, a Catholic may believe it but not propose it to others as Church teaching.

Second, the Commission, while repeatedly affirming the necessity of baptism, also repeatedly affirmed the freedom of God to act beyond all doctrinal and canonical limitations.

The Commission stated, "While considering sacramental baptism necessary inasmuch as it is the ordinary way established by Jesus Christ to configure human beings to himself, the Church has never taught the 'absolute necessity' of sacramental baptism for salvation; there are other avenues whereby the configuration with Christ can be realized."

The woman who told your friend that he would never see his unbaptized wife actually denied that "there are other avenues" to eternal life known only to God. In effect, the woman prematurely closed the door on salvation.

Your experience with your dying friend reminds us how important it is to acquire the ability to distinguish between what the Church actually teaches as contrasted with opinions and even distortions. This "talent" for pastoral theology ultimately comes from the Holy Spirit and descends on all God's faithful people who have an open mind and open heart. Indeed, your question and concern for your friend shows you're already on the right track. ■

También hay una lápida de granito con forma de cruz y grabada con un cáliz. Marca el lugar de descanso de los restos terrenales de uno de nuestros pastores. Su tumba se colocó frente a los edificios de nuestra iglesia parroquial, escuela, rectoría y convento que él construyó como un monumento en honor a quienes sirvieron y murieron durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial. La parte inferior de la piedra dice: "Erigida por sus feligreses agradecidos".

Estos recuerdos rememoran la historia de un pueblo y la mía personal. Los escribo porque están guardados en el mayor archivo y biblioteca de la vida que llamamos nuestra. Mientras que los pueblos precristianos llamaban a estos lugares necrópolis (ciudad de los muertos), los primeros cristianos los llamaban, en cambio, "coemeteria" (lugares de descanso). Nuestros cementerios católicos son terrenos consagrados para ser lugares de reposo pacífico y de custodia de los restos terrenales de los difuntos.

El entierro en el suelo o en un mausoleo o cripta demuestra el cuidado que se debe dar a una persona creada a la imagen de Dios, cuyo cuerpo se unió con un alma inmortal que ha dejado lo corporal para regresar al cuidado eterno de Dios, y, finalmente, cuyo cuerpo resucitará para saludar y ser saludado por el mismo Jesucristo cuando venga a juzgar a vivos y muertos, como profesamos en nuestro credo de cada domingo.

En la historia, venimos a la vida terrenal durante muchos años o muy pocos, o incluso de forma tan aplastante, antes de ver la luz del día. El cementerio católico está consagrado para marcar esa historia, esa presencia, la misma persona que Dios siempre conocerá pero que otros a menudo olvidan. Cuando visitamos, miramos, leemos y hacemos una pausa para orar, alguien que es amado por Dios vuelve a contar su historia.

En la esperanza cristiana, venimos a nuestro cementerio y marcamos con una piedra sagrada el lugar de la resurrección cuando Nuestro Señor llamará: "¡Durmiente, despierta! ¡Un cielo y una tierra nuevos, y un cuerpo revestido de inmortalidad te esperan!" y responderemos en compañía de nuestros hermanos y hermanas: "¡Aquí estamos, Señor! ¡Has venido y no llegas tarde! ■"

*El obispo Peter A. Libasci, D.D., es el décimo obispo de la Diócesis de Manchester.*