



a Kendall Hunt Company

## Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



### Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session, read all the readings.

Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10

Psalm 131:1, 2, 3

1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13

Matthew 23:1-12

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Is there a particular reading that appeals to you? Is there a word or image that engages you?

RCL Benziger  
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Read the following **Word in Liturgy** and **Catholic Doctrine** sections. Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need.

### The Word In Liturgy

The author of Malachi wrote in the post-exilic period (mid-fifth century) when religious syncretism and other deviations from the covenant were still very much a problem among the Jewish people. In the section we read today (up to verse 9), the prophet's wrath is directed against the priests and their failure to maintain the purity of the cult. As leaders of the people, they bore a special responsibility for their sins ("[you] have caused many to falter by your instruction," v. 8), and so God's judgment against them will be harsh. In verse 10, a new subject is introduced, that of intermarriage. The prophet condemns this because of how

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easily it leads to laxity with regard to the worship of false gods. Marriage to a pagan is like a betrayal of the family unity ("Why then do we break faith with one another?" v. 10).

In Malachi's condemnation of leaders whose instruction leads astray the people, we have a powerful reminder of the great blessing God has bestowed on us by sending the Holy Spirit to guide the teaching authority (i.e., the magisterium) of the Church. Today's responsorial psalm seems to reflect the realization that only in God can we place our ultimate trust and hope. ("In you, Lord, I have found my peace.") In contrast to the arrogance of the priestly caste condemned in Malachi, the author of Psalm 131 (most likely a woman) exemplifies humble trust and reliance on God alone.

In the gospel, Jesus accepts the traditional Jewish view regarding the teaching authority of religious leaders ("Do everything and observe everything they tell you," v. 3), but at the same time he offers a scathing critique of the disparity between the words and deeds of those who exercised that function in his day. With chapter 23, Matthew begins the final section of his narrative (23:1-25:46) prior to the saga of Jesus' death and resurrection (26:1-28:20). This is the opening of the so-called "Eschatological Discourse." Jesus begins by first warning the people against the Scribes and Pharisees (vv. 1-12) and then pronouncing his own judgment ("woe to you . . .") against them (vv. 13-36). The prohibitions at the end of today's pericope against using certain titles (Rabbi, father, teacher) seem to reflect the polemic of Matthew's community against the Jewish establishment of the time (circa 80 a.d. and after) more than specific teachings of Jesus.

## **Catholic Doctrine**

### ***The Role of the Magisterium***

The word magister in classical Latin meant not only "school master" or "teacher" but also anyone who was master of a particular trade, art, or even of ships and groups of slaves. In medieval usage it indicated either the teaching authority of the university professor or of the bishop. In modern Catholic usage the term "magisterium" refers to the teaching function and authority of the hierarchy of the Church, that is, the pope and bishops. It is also used to refer directly to the whole college of bishops (headed by the pope) as one complete entity.

Catholics believe that the teaching function within the Church has four dimensions: (1) a gospel rationale, (2) a hierarchical and collegial character in service to the people of God, (3)

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a particular twofold object, and (4) levels of articulation and assent by which it operates. \_\_\_\_\_

Catholic belief holds that the bishops are the successors of the apostles and, as the Second Vatican Council states, they are “endowed with the authority of Christ” authentically teaching, informing the faith of people and directing their conduct (LG 25). In other words, we believe that those who exercise magisterial or teaching authority in the Church are sent by Christ—they do not do this on their own, they do not “invent” the gospel, but are gifted by the sacrament of ordination to be Christ’s emissaries (CCC 875).

The Second Vatican Council stipulated that the magisterium is not above the Word of God, but “serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it conscientiously, and explaining it faithfully, by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit” (DV 10). Thus, when conflicts or confusions arise within the Church regarding the articulation of the content of faith, it falls to the magisterium to settle those issues and questions.



The Church is constituted hierarchically, that is, each member has a proper role to fulfill in contributing to the mission of Christ. Bishops, in their magisterial or teaching ministry, lead and guide the faithful. They exercise this guidance in varying forms. Individually, within his own diocese, a bishop may issue a pastoral letter on an aspect of Church teaching. He may also promote through diocesan agencies sound catechetics and educational institutions. Bishops who have been established as a particular group, for example, a conference of bishops of a country, may also exercise guidance for their episcopal conference and, for example, issue a letter or statement or create a policy direction or pastoral plan. Catholic bishops are understood to function together as a whole worldwide college or body united to the pope, the bishop of Rome. Evidence of this is seen, in an extraordinary way, when all the bishops gathered with the pope hold an ecumenical council. No matter which forms it takes, the entire purpose of this hierarchical and collegial exercise of the bishops’ teaching authority is to be of service to Christ’s flock, the people of God (CCC 876).

What is the purpose of the magisterium? Its purpose is to guide people in faith and morals. In other words, the teaching authority of the bishops pertains to Christian belief or to the practice of the Christian way of life. \_\_\_\_\_

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The Catholic Church upholds that there are various levels of articulation of teaching. Because we believe that God guarantees us the possibility of objectively professing belief without error, we understand that Christ endowed the Church with the gift of infallibility. The pope, in virtue of his ministry as supreme pastor and teacher, exercises the gift of infallibility when he proclaims by a definitive act (he describes it as such, as infallible) a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. Ecumenical councils, together with the pope, can also exercise their teaching authority infallibly (CCC 891). It is important to note that the Church speaks of infallibility as a gift, a charism given to the Church by the Holy Spirit (LG 25). Thus, a pope or an ecumenical council infallibly define teachings that are already contained in the deposit of revelation and that serve to make the people of God “live their lives in holiness and increase their faith” (DV 8). By their nature, infallible teachings require one’s obedience and the assent of faith (CCC 891). Noninfallible or the ordinary teaching of the bishops and the pope require one’s religious assent (CCC 892), which means that one must be open to the teaching, give it a fair hearing, and attempt to understand its rationale in order to facilitate an intellectual acceptance of it.

Without magisterial authority, the Church could never propose that the faith be articulated in a particular way at certain points in history. In other words, we could never as a community objectively grapple with what has been revealed to us by God. The Church would not be able to adequately preach the gospel, apply it to life, or formulate creeds. The role of the magisterium is to provide surety, in Christ, of the expression of faith and how that faith is put into practice.