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It has come to my attention that some scurrilous accusations are being made about me by various Catholic bloggers. The allegations are based on serious distortions of my theological position through the publication of highly selective and decontextualized quotations from my work. I have no reason to hope that the people writing these blogs are willing to enter into the kind of informed theological debate that would reflect well on the Catholic community, and I think in general it is better to ignore them. They are a very small minority and they are held in contempt by many Catholics in this country. However, given that they seem intent on destroying my reputation as a theologian, I want to explain my position for those who are interested.

I am an academic theologian who is also a practising Catholic. (This is subtly different from claiming to be a Catholic theologian if that implies somebody with a licence who is authorised to teach by the official magisterium). I do not work in a Catholic university but in a College with Catholic foundations in a state-funded secular university. It is a unique and I believe precious feature of the British higher education system that theologians such as myself are given a space of academic freedom in which to pursue our vocations without interference from Church or state. Any academic theologian working in a university must follow Cardinal Newman's advice of seeking to promote an intellectual culture in which reason rather than fideism is the basis for enquiry and research, knowing that in the Catholic tradition reason and revelation go hand in hand, and 'grace perfects nature'. In other words, the probing use of reason should never be seen as the enemy of faith. It is a vital contribution that academic theologians make to the vitality and dynamism of Catholic life and culture, and it requires critical, robust and rigorous engagement with all intellectual resources.

However, I have always respected the difference between working in an academic context and working as a theological educator within the Catholic community. This is a difficult balance to maintain and I am not saying I always get it right, but I would never abuse the trust placed in me by bishops and other religious leaders, by using a platform in a church-based context to knowingly misrepresent the Church's teachings or to mislead people about what these teachings are.

I have also always had absolute respect for the difference between the doctrinal truths of the faith, made knowable through revelation alone, and those truths which are arrived at by reason and which involve philosophical reflection informed by natural law and in engagement with other sources of human knowledge. So, with regard to all the doctrinal teachings that belong within the deposit of faith entrusted to the Church, my theological position is absolutely orthodox. Where I question some of the Church's teachings, this is always to do with moral and social questions, informed by reason and natural law, which according to Catholic tradition must be argued in such a way that Catholics are able to enter into dialogue and debate with non-Catholics on questions of shared concern and practice. I may have made many errors in the things I have written and said, but that is a risk that must be taken by anybody who engages in intellectual debate about complex ethical issues with an informed conscience. If I were questioning the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Real Presence, the Resurrection of the Body, the Virgin Birth, the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption, the CDF and

the bishops would I believe have a right and a duty to point out my errors in a spirit of charity and good will. I have defended all these doctrines robustly in my theological publications. They are the grammar of the Catholic faith and knit our community together across the time and space of our historical existence, whatever our legitimate differences on social and moral issues.

In the Church's dialogue with secular law and culture, the laity must be willing to engage in public debate in order to seek the most viable solution to complex ethical debates which affect non-Catholics as well as Catholics, and which require us to seek the common good in changing times and contexts. Of course there will be disagreements about this, but when Catholics handle such disagreements with intelligence and mutual respect, it can be a potent witness to the intellectual depth and diversity of our tradition. The bloggers publicly attacking me cause scandal by degrading this rich tradition in favour of a narrow and bigoted authoritarianism. I do not believe it serves the Catholic community well to present us as an entirely homogeneous group with neither the personal freedom nor the intellectual understanding to grapple with challenging social and ethical issues and to come to different positions about these.

I have been called pro-abortion in some recent blogs, and I find that deeply offensive. I am the mother of four children, and I am personally pro-life. I do not believe that there is any justification for the followers of Christ ever to endorse killing as a good or commendable act, whether it be abortion, war, capital punishment or euthanasia. However, there are serious issues that must be addressed with regard to how far the Church should use the law to defend positions which may not be defensible from the perspective of those who do not share the Christian faith. I have argued robustly against all late abortion, and I have written in detail about the serious abuses and violations which currently take place in Britain with regard to abortion. Many 'pro-choice' arguments put forward by secular feminists are morally repugnant and alienate those with a genuine concern for the sanctity and dignity of human life. It should be the aim of every Christian to work towards a world in which neither war nor abortion is necessary, while avoiding a dangerous utopianism which denies the complex and often tragic realities of human life. This means that a rightful concern to minimise the incidence of abortion must be balanced against the knowledge that nearly 70,000 of the world's poorest women die every year as a result of illegal abortion, and many thousands more suffer serious long-term injury. Anyone who claims to be pro-life should be as concerned for the lives and well-being of these women as they are for their unborn children. These dilemmas are far more complex and anguished than either so-called pro-choice feminists or anti-abortion campaigners are willing to acknowledge. As a woman theologian who has personal experience of the joys and the struggles of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, I believe that I have a responsibility to reflect upon and address some of these issues. I find myself on the receiving end of profound hostility from both feminists and Catholic conservatives because of this.

The other claim that has been made against me recently is that "Tina Beattie mocks the Mass as an act of homosexual intercourse", and that extracts from my work are "sacrilegious and deeply offensive". This is pernicious. In the work that is cited and quoted by these bloggers, I was writing an extended critique of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose writings I have studied for a number of years. My comments were made in the context of my deep concern over his highly sexualised representation

of the Mass. This criticism is shared by a number of others who have written on von Balthasar. The suggestion that I mock the Mass because I criticise another theologian's interpretation is outrageous.

I have also argued that there is theological justification for the ordination of women, and this is the one area in which I acknowledge that the arguments concern the sacramental tradition rooted in revelation, and not the natural law tradition rooted in reason. Ordination is not a right but a vocation which belongs within the sacramental mystery of the Church and which entails the gift of grace. However, my position on this is informed by the closest possible engagement with the Catholic sacramental and theological tradition. I am expressing views that are shared by many, many Catholics, including many priests and not a few bishops and cardinals. The teaching on women's ordination is not infallible, and a papal commission appointed by Pope Paul VI found no decisive biblical teaching either in favour of or against women's ordination. It is therefore possible for a theologian such as myself to explore the tradition with such questions in mind, although I recognize that the magisterium has tried to prohibit all such discussion.

I would end with two quotations, from Catholics whose credentials are absolutely impeccable.

The Right Way To Suppress Error

(Pope John XXIII, Opening Address to the Second Vatican Council: <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/pope0261i.htm>)

In these days, which mark the beginning of this Second Vatican Council, it is more obvious than ever before that the Lord's truth is indeed eternal. Human ideologies change. Successive generations give rise to varying errors, and these often vanish as quickly as they came, like mist before the sun.

The Church has always opposed these errors, and often condemned them with the utmost severity. Today, however, Christ's Bride prefers the balm of mercy to the arm of severity. She believes that, present needs are best served by explaining more fully the purport of her doctrines, rather than by publishing condemnations.

What do you do personally?

(Cardinal Martini, posthumously published interview <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=21013>)

The Church has been left behind for 200 years. Why does she not shake? What are we afraid of? Fear instead of courage? However, the faith is the foundation of the Church. The faith, confidence, courage. I am old and sick, and I depend on the help of others. The good people around me make me feel the love. This love is stronger than the feeling of distrust that I sometimes perceive in to the Church in Europe. Only love conquers fatigue. God is Love. I still have a question for you: what you can do for the Church?