



What is and isn't a heresy?

Dear Father Kerper: In a Bible study group I attend, some people state that certain writers and scholars are “heretical” and others are “orthodox.” These scholars are all Catholics, as far as I know. What exactly do these terms mean? How do I know for sure whether someone is “heretical” or “orthodox”?

When Catholics talk among themselves, especially about controversial religious matters, they would be wise to always use language correctly. The two words that you mention – heresy and orthodoxy – should be used sparingly, if at all.

“Heresy” comes from the Greek word for “choice,” specifically the “choice” to remove one or more beliefs from a complete set of inter-related propositions. Heresy, then, is not just about religion; it also exists within other fields of thought.

The Catholic Church has a very precise definition of heresy. It appears in the Code of Canon Law: “Heresy is the obstinate denial or obstinate doubt after the reception of baptism of some truth which is to be believed by divine and Catholic faith.” (cc. 751)

This definition has three key elements. First, heresy is strictly limited to truths that are settled and indispensable

teachings of the Catholic faith. For example, it is heretical to deny the bodily resurrection of Christ, the existence of original sin, and the divinity of Christ. The Church has always taught these truths clearly and definitively.

To insist, as some do, that the Eucharist must always be received by everyone under the forms of both bread and wine, that baptism must be done by full immersion, or that the Church should not grant annulments is not heretical. For sure, such propositions contradict established Church positions, but they do not rise to the level of heresy because they do not touch the core of Catholic faith.

Second, because heresy is a choice against some specific belief within the complete “set” of Catholic teachings, one must first accept the “set.” Hence, one must be a baptized person in full communion with the Catholic Church.

In other words, only a Catholic can be a heretic. Other people may hold positions that are heretical, but they’re not heretics because they never accepted the whole “set” anyway.

Third, and most important, heresy requires full knowledge, understanding, and deliberation.

This brings us to a crucial distinction found within classical Catholic theology: the difference between “formal” and “material” heresy.

In the case of “formal” heresy, the person must know and properly understand what the Church actually teaches and then freely reject it.

This happens rarely. More often than not, someone will insist that the Church has no authority to teach about a specific matter, say, the ordination of women, or that the teaching is not really definitive.

As to “material” heresy, this happens every day, even among the most devout. Here a person misunderstands or misstates a key Catholic teaching, thereby unknowingly advancing a serious theological error. This happens when a person has a partial, distorted, or unbalanced understanding of the faith.

Now, let’s consider your great question about how Catholics can know what is heretical.

The Church has a juridical process that examines accusations about heresy. After a thorough study of a person’s public statements and extended dialogue to discover what the person has really said, means, and believes, the Church will finally declare that a person has committed heresy – or has not. Until the Church has made that judgment, no Catholic should ever accuse another of heresy. When they do so, they are inadvertently doing injury to our Catholic communion by inciting emotions rather than making a reasoned and justified statement.

On the positive side, the Church has the longstanding practice of providing an *imprimatur* for books and other publications. This Latin word simply means, “let it be printed” and indicates that the local bishop believes that the book contains nothing heretical.

Today, the *imprimatur* appears on most books and materials used for religious education. It also appears on some Bibles, not for the biblical content but for the footnotes, introductions, and so on.

Whereas in the past, just about every Catholic book – even some poetry! – had an *imprimatur*, today most do not. The lack of an *imprimatur* does not mean the book is heretical.

Now that we know something about heresy, we have to consider its opposite: orthodoxy.

The term “orthodoxy” combines two Greek words which can be translated as “straight belief” or even “right worship.” It stands in opposition to “heterodoxy,” which means “other/chosen belief.”

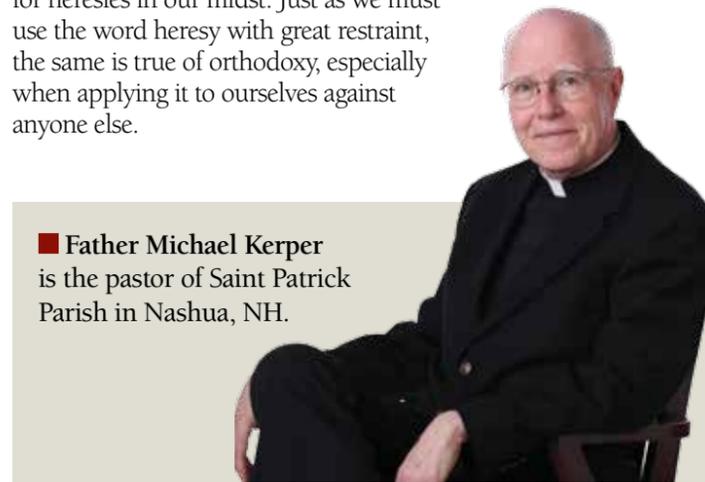
While the Church has a very clear definition of heresy, she does not precisely define orthodoxy. Indeed, the word is somewhat alien to Catholicism, appearing only once in the texts of the Second Vatican Council and never in the New Testament.

So, what is orthodoxy? Here’s a useful definition from G. K. Chesterton, the great English Catholic writer: “[I]t means the Apostles’ Creed, as understood by everybody calling himself Christian until a very short time ago, and the general historic conduct of those who held such a creed.”

Chesterton, writing in 1908, insisted that orthodoxy is a “flesh and blood” reality, not just an intellectual system. In terms of the believer, orthodoxy happens when the fullness of God’s Truth – the Person of Jesus Christ – becomes integrated with the believer’s life.

Without this fusion of “right belief” and “right living” in and with the living Christ, orthodoxy can become a joyless catalogue of dogmas, always searching for heresies in our midst. Just as we must use the word heresy with great restraint, the same is true of orthodoxy, especially when applying it to ourselves against anyone else.

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