

What does it mean to follow 'all' of the Church's teachings?

"In the culture, if you stand for virtues and principles and morals, you are far right," went a Facebook post I stumbled upon. "In the Church, if you are devout and follow 'all' of the teachings of the Church, you are rigid. Got that?"

Not untrue, though I'd want to qualify both claims. The second sentence is the one that interests me here. It may be meant for encouragement or for virtue-signaling. In either case, the question to be answered is what "follow the teachings" means. It has more possible meanings than we might think, and some of those deceive us into thinking we're doing better than we are. A Catholic can follow without following.

Does it mean follow as in following a legal commitment? The kind of thing almost everyone does when they hit "agree" to the pages and pages-long legal statement about updating an app? You make a contractual agreement, which could in theory bind you in ways you don't want to be bound. But you can't claim to follow it all – or even understand it all – and for practical purposes, most of it's irrelevant to your life.

It's easy to hold all the teachings of the Church in that sense. And perfectly proper to do so. You can legitimately hold it in the same way you agree to the app's legal document. The Church teaches a lot of things, some of it at a high level of complexity and sophistication, and the actual application to most of our lives can be very obscure. We say the Nicene Creed at Sunday Mass without knowing the mind-bending subtleties of Trinitarian theology.

Few of us have the gifts or the time to work it all out. We trust the Church knows what she's doing even if we don't.

She'll work out how it all applies to our life. So yes, it does mean this.

Does the word also mean follow as in following instructions? The kind of thing almost everyone does when they use a manual for their new television or their new app. You look up the instructions on what you need to do and ignore all the rest. It's easy to hold the teachings of the Church in that sense, and perfectly proper to do so.

You look to the Church for the answers to the questions you have to answer. Again, you have reason to trust the Church to know what you don't. So yes, it means this, too.

But that's not enough. It's legal and impersonal. It's obedient, but it's not exactly faithful. To truly follow the teachings means to accept Jesus' simple request: "Come, follow me." It means joining in his life – in our case, the life of his body, the Church. It means listening, acting, responding, engaging, helping.

The story of the rich young ruler – the story of someone who said no to Jesus' face – fills out what it means to truly follow the teachings.

First, the story makes clear that we can follow in the first and second ways without really following in the third. ("Jesus said, 'You know the commandments.' ... He said to Jesus, 'Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth.'") It shows how good we can be without being good enough. We can use the Church as a source of teachings and rules, and live by them, without submitting ourselves completely to her leading.

And for understandable reasons. Following Jesus can mean being taken where you don't want to go. It is more active and open-ended, and possibly very costly, requiring trust you don't always want to give. It is something whose meaning and requirements you understand more deeply and more practically the longer you live as a Catholic.

Second, the story tells us that whatever the Church and her Lord call us to do expresses God's love for us. ("Jesus, looking at him, loved him.") It isn't a game, trying to test people's faith by pushing them too hard. Whatever God asks us to do will work for our own good. Why Jesus asked the rich young ruler to give up everything he had, we don't know, but Jesus knew that was the challenge he needed.

Third, it makes clear that following the Church and her Lord may require what might feel to us like extreme and foolish obedience. ("Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor.") Jesus sees things differently.

I don't think I'm being unfair in noticing that some who boast of their faithfulness ignore the Church's social teaching. They can be hypersensitive to someone who doesn't insist on the teaching about sex with all the rigor they demand, while letting off the apologist for the rapacious practice of business.

Finally, it warns us of what can happen if we follow in the first two senses but not the third. It doesn't always end well. ("At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.")

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