

## Opinion

# Acting on faith

## The Catholic Church is dogmatic - which is good for everyone

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**T**he Catholic Church is no stranger to criticism from those who disagree with its teachings, but the petition posted recently on the White House Web site to label the church a “hate group” is beyond the pale, even in an age when an aggressive secularism seeks to marginalize the influence of religious belief.

The church has long been criticized as “too dogmatic.” Demands are constantly made that it change its 2,000-year-old teachings on marriage, family, sexuality, morality and other matters related to the truth about human beings. But even if others do not agree, the church understands that what it proclaims is revealed truth — the Word of God. The church’s teachings are timeless. They cannot be changed, even though adherence may be upsetting to some. That the church is built on a rock with fixed beliefs is a positive feature, both because it can withstand the shifting winds of public opinion and because of the cherished content of our faith itself, which fosters love among Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Although these precepts may be misunderstood by many today, the fundamental vocation of the Catholic Church is to provide the witness of love and truth to the world, including offering the voice of an informed conscience. Catholics are taught to respect the fundamental, inherent dignity of every person, each made in the image of God, and to work to establish a just society. The church teaches that it is our obligation to manifest love of neighbor, to provide charitable service to others, and to promote truth, genuine freedom and authentic humanism. We work for the poor, the oppressed and the suffering, because that is what our faith teaches we must do. There is thus a positive side to being dogmatic: The teachings and works of the church advance the common good throughout civil society. Just as our dogma is constant, so is the work it commands.

The Archdiocese of Washington is the largest nongovernmental provider of social services in our area: Seventy-five programs in 48 locations offer assistance to whoever needs it, regardless of religion, race, gender, nationality or sexual orientation. Each year, more than

100,000 people in the Washington area rely on Catholic charitable organizations for housing, food, job training, immigration assistance, legal aid, dental care, mental health care, lifespan services for those with disabilities and their families and prenatal care and assistance for vulnerable pregnant women and unwed mothers.

Catholic hospitals provide millions of dollars’ worth of uncompensated care every year to our poor and vulnerable, and Catholic schools save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars annually in per-pupil costs.

The church does not do these things for money or profit or because they’re nice to do. When the church treats the sick and injured, or feeds the hungry, or teaches, or provides assistance to those in need, it does so as an answer to the call made by Jesus Christ. We are obligated to do these and other works of mercy and to give voice to moral truth because He asks us to.

The church has made these and other indispensable positive contributions for two millennia. Indeed, the Catholic Church was essential to the formation of Western civilization as we know it. Scholars point out that it was the church that established the modern university and hospital systems. Modern-day music, art, architecture, economics, philosophy and our legal system all have their roots in the Catholic Church. Concepts such as natural rights and social equality, not to mention the idea that government and religion are separate spheres, were developed in Catholic thought. And it was Catholics supported by the church — with its dogmatic ideas that faith and reason are complementary and that the universe is orderly — who led the way in the sciences, including astronomy, cosmology, physics, chemistry, genetics, optics and seismology.

The church is dogmatic, and that is good — even if it means that the church is a sign of contradiction in the world and the object of animus and disdain. It is a positive, attractive feature that what we profess is unchanging and unchangeable — the good news of a love and truth that we are called to share with the world. It is good for Catholics and non-Catholics. Were the church to compromise its creed, if we were to simply go along with today’s secularized culture, not only would the church cease to be the church but the common good would suffer greatly.