

The one true religion

Last month we looked at the Gospel testimony about the authority Christ gave to Peter, and the early Church's testimony about the Popes as Peter's Successors. Today we'll look at some subsequent Magisterial teachings on papal authority.

Already at the Ecumenical Council of Florence (1439), which for a time reunited the Eastern Orthodox Church with the Catholic Church, the Orthodox and Catholic Bishops proclaimed together: 'We define that the holy Apostolic See and the Roman pontiff have the primacy over the whole world and that the same Roman pontiff is the successor of blessed Peter, the prince of the apostles and the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole Church, the father and teacher of all Christians; and that to him, in the person of blessed Peter, was given by our Lord Jesus Christ the full power of feeding, ruling, and governing the whole Church...' (DS 1307)

In 1870, the First Vatican Council proclaimed papal infallibility: 'We teach and define that it is a dogma revealed by God: That the Roman pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, possesses through the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter the infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining the doctrine concerning faith or morals...' (*Pastor Aeternus* DS 3074)

We mustn't imagine infallibility began with Vatican I. It was already long-understood that in virtue of Christ's promises the *Church* was infallible; that *Ecumenical Councils confirmed by the Pope* were infallible. Vatican I was clarifying the more limited question: is it divinely revealed that also the *Pope*, when making a definition even *without* an Ecumenical Council, possessed from the beginning that infallibility that Christ willed for his Church? The answer was yes; but beyond papal infallibility, there already existed numerous infallible definitions from Ecumenical Councils – one obvious example, the teachings of the Nicene Creed.

Vatican I closed early because Rome was captured by the Kingdom of Italy, so the teaching on the Church was left incomplete – only the papacy had been covered. Vatican II (1962-65) redressed the balance, giving a broader teaching on all aspects of the Church, such as the bishops and the laity. But it also reaffirmed everything Vatican I had taught about the papacy:

'This Sacred Council, following closely in the footsteps of the First Vatican Council, with that Council teaches and declares that Jesus Christ, the eternal Shepherd, established His holy Church...He placed Blessed Peter over the other apostles, and instituted in him a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion. And all this teaching about the institution, the perpetuity, the meaning and reason for the sacred primacy of the Roman Pontiff and of his infallible magisterium, this Sacred Council again proposes to be firmly believed by all the faithful.' (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 18 (1964))

And so Pope St Paul VI, promulgating *Lumen Gentium* (which without his signature would have no authority) commented: 'This promulgation really changes nothing of the traditional doctrine. What Christ willed, we also will. What was, still is. What the Church has taught down through the centuries, we also teach.' (Allocution, 21/11/1964)

Vatican II also expanded on the infallibility of the College of Bishops: ‘Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they nevertheless proclaim Christ’s doctrine infallibly whenever, even though dispersed through the world, but still maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter, and authentically teaching matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement on one position as definitively to be held. This is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church, whose definitions must be adhered to with the submission of faith.’ (*Lumen Gentium* 25)

So there are three ways the Magisterium teaches infallibly: (1) definitions by an Ecumenical Council in union with the Pope; (2) definitions by the Pope alone, without a Council; (3) the bishops dispersed through the world, in union with the Pope, agreeing in their authoritative teaching on a position to be held definitively. This last is more basic than the first two: it’s simply the whole teaching Church around the world, handing on the Tradition of Faith. Even before the first Ecumenical Council (Nicaea I, 325) the Church in this manner was already infallibly teaching, for example, that Jesus was the Son of God, who died and rose for us. Catholics didn’t have to wait for Nicaea to have certainties of faith.

And concerning the one true Church, Vatican II affirmed: ‘We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men.’ (Declaration on Religious Liberty 1)

‘This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd, and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority, which He erected for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth”. This Church constituted and organised in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him...’ (*Lumen Gentium* 8)

This expression that the one Church of Christ ‘subsists in’ the Catholic Church was chosen to convey the two realities that the *fullness* of Christ’s Church was only in the Catholic Church, yet that many *elements* of this one true religion existed ‘without this fullness’ in the other Christian communities. (cf. Pope St John Paul II *Ut unum sint* 14 (1995))

‘The use of this expression, which indicates the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, does not change the doctrine on the Church. Rather, it comes from and brings out more clearly the fact that there are “numerous elements of sanctification and of truth” which are found outside her structure, but which “as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, impel towards Catholic Unity”.’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responses to some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* (2007))

As Vatican II’s ‘Decree on Ecumenism’ had explained: ‘It is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the People of God.’ (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 3 (1964))