

The Infallible Magisterium of the Roman Pontiff

In August we looked at the dogmas of the First Vatican Council (1870) concerning the supreme authority over the Church conferred by Our Lord on St Peter and his successors, the popes. Today we will see how Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ *Pastor Aeternus* reaches its climax in its dogmatic definition that the pope, when he proclaims a teaching *ex cathedra*, possesses the infallibility that Christ willed for his Church.

Long before Vatican I, it was already understood that *the Church* was infallible; and that *Ecumenical Councils* confirmed by the pope possessed this infallibility in their definitions of faith. So Vatican I's definition was not simply the pope infallibly declaring his own infallibility (which might be thought somewhat circular). Rather, one organ of the Magisterium already accepted as infallible – an Ecumenical Council in union with the pope – clarified that it was a divinely revealed dogma that *another* organ of the Magisterium – the pope speaking *ex cathedra* without a Council – was also infallible, and in fact had been ever since St Peter. (So before Vatican I, popes had already given *ex cathedra* teaching – an obvious example, the Immaculate Conception in 1854.)

In proclaiming papal infallibility, Vatican I first referred back to teachings of earlier Councils, particularly those in which bishops of east and west were united. The Council Fathers then declared, 'Therefore, faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, for the glory of God our Saviour, the exaltation of the Catholic religion, and the salvation of Christian peoples, with the approval of the sacred Council,

'We teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed: 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 that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining the doctrine concerning faith or morals; and that such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are therefore irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church. But if anyone – which may God avert! – presume to contradict this Our definition, let him be anathema.'

We can note several things. First, in an *ex cathedra* definition the pope must address the universal Church, as *shepherd and teacher of all Christians* (so not just in his capacity as a private theologian; or speaking to only one part of the Church, such as the Diocese of Rome). Second, he must manifest his intention to *define*, that is, to give a final definitive ruling on some point. Third, all this is only in matters of *faith and morals*, not other fields of knowledge.

Neither can the pope invent totally new teachings. The Council explained that 'the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter, that they might disclose a new doctrine by his revelation, but rather that, with His assistance, they might reverently guard and faithfully explain the revelation or deposit of faith that was handed down through the Apostles.'

Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* confirmed that the Magisterium 'is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with

a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.’ (10)

Obviously, the normal words and thoughts of a pope in his everyday life make no claim to divinely-guided authority, let alone infallible authority. (And needless to say, it has never been Catholic belief that popes are ‘impeccable’, that is, free from sin.) But limiting ourselves to the official teachings of the pope, these mostly belong to his *ordinary* Magisterium, found for example in encyclicals and similar documents. Such teaching is indeed guided by the Holy Spirit in a general way, and so calls for religious submission of will and intellect, with sincere adherence to his judgments. (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* 25) Still, this teaching is not of itself absolutely infallible, and does not call for the absolute and irrevocable assent of faith.

Leaving aside canonisations (which are standardly seen as infallible declarations that the canonised saint is indeed in heaven), it is generally held that the most recent infallible definition was Pope Pius XII’s proclamation of the dogma of Our Lady’s Assumption in 1950. But so many of the things we believe and hold come from infallible definitions not of popes but of Ecumenical Councils; or from the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium – the pope and the bishops in union with him, albeit scattered around the world, unanimously handing on some teaching as definitive, even if there had never been a definition on the point.

Even though infallible dogmatic definitions by a pope are fairly rare, knowing that Christ has given the Successors of Peter the power to declare teachings in this way when necessary, strengthens our assurance that in the papacy, God has blessed his Church with an unshakable rock of strength, a visible centre of unity that in the last resort cannot fail. ‘You are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’

I wanted to say a few words about my experience during the September 22 earthquake. As many legionaries would know, I was delivered in an extraordinary way from serious injury or worse, when two angel statues from the dome far above the high altar in my church toppled to the ground while I was saying Mass. Moved by a strong thought to get away from the sanctuary immediately, I left with only four seconds to spare, before the impact of the first angel statue only a couple of metres from where I had stood at the altar.

I do believe I was protected especially by Mary’s prayers, and also by my Guardian Angel. The second angel statue that fell, after sliding along the floor, came to rest just behind the Vexillum, that was still in the upper sanctuary from the Centenary Mass a couple of weeks earlier. The statue could have easily gone on to push the Vexillum down the steps, but no – the fallen angel was brought to a halt, and Mary’s Standard was left in the same position as before the earthquake. And to me, that was a sign that Our Lord used his Mother’s prayers as an instrument of unshakable safety for me. I’d already been told in recent days that people were specially praying to Mary for me at the time of my ordination anniversary the previous week. So thank you, dear legionaries, for your prayers for me. And thanks to Our Blessed Mother, thanks to my Guardian Angel, thanks in all things to God, who leads us safely in all things according to his everlasting love.