

Unchanging Catholic faith: the authority of Peter and his Successors

Having reflected in recent months on doctrines of faith about the Sacraments, we next come to doctrines concerning the Church herself. Some time back we started this series of reflections by looking at the evidence from Scripture, history and reason supporting our belief in the Catholic Church as the fullness of the one true Church of Christ. But today we'll start looking at some of the actual *dogmas* of the Church about the Church, specifically the teachings of the First Vatican Council in 1870, referred to by the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*.

Vatican I gave the Church's most authoritative teachings about the papacy itself. But of course the papal authority as taught in more *detail* by Vatican I didn't *begin* with Vatican I. Rather, the Council declared truths that were actually part of what Christ established in his Church from the outset. Papal authority wasn't artificially 'tacked on' to Scripture and Tradition later on.

Christ made Peter the rock foundation from the start – before the New Testament was written, before any Church law or custom or tradition – giving him the keys of the Kingdom and telling him that whatever he bound or loosed on earth would be considered bound or loosed in heaven. (*Mt* 16:18-19) (This didn't mean, of course, that Peter or his Successors might *change* divine truth. Rather, the Holy Spirit guides the Magisterium to be in harmony with the genuine meaning of God's Word given to us through Scripture and Tradition.)

With the First Vatican Council, the teaching on the papacy was stated with fuller *clarity* than previously. That's normal for all doctrines: the one unchanging faith gradually understood in more depth over the centuries, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is 'development of doctrine' – not the casting aside of earlier dogmas, or a supposed change in their meaning; but rather, a clearer, more refined and detailed expression of one and the same Apostolic Tradition.

So never imagine that development of doctrine could mean abandoning past dogmas. That would mean the Holy Spirit, who protected those past teachings from error, was now contradicting himself. In reality, because the Holy Spirit never leaves the Church, fundamental continuity between past and present is an essential Catholic belief.

Neither can the meaning of dogmas be changed. A simple example: suppose a theologian affirmed that Christ 'rose from the dead' – but really only meant that he rose 'spiritually' or 'in the hearts of the disciples'. Keeping the same words as a cover, the change in meaning would actually *destroy* the real meaning and intent of the dogma as always understood by the Church.

Guarding against this false approach of 're-interpretation', Vatican I proclaimed: 'That meaning of the sacred dogmas is perpetually to be retained which our Holy Mother Church has once declared, and there must never be a deviation from that meaning on the specious [misleading] ground and title of a more profound understanding.' (Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* (1870), DS 3020) And the Council infallibly condemned the opinion that 'as science progresses, at times a sense is to be given to dogmas proposed by the Church different from the one that the Church has understood and understands'. (*Dei Filius*, DS 3043) This was re-affirmed after Vatican II by authority of Pope St Paul VI: 'As for the *meaning* of dogmatic formulas, this remains ever true and constant in the Church, even when it is expressed with greater clarity or more developed.' (CDF *Mysterium Ecclesiae* 5 (1973), DS 4540)

Turning to Vatican I's actual teachings on the papacy – its First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, *Pastor Aeternus* (1870), began by affirming that the Church (as is clear from the Gospels) was established by Christ himself:

‘The Eternal Shepherd and Guardian of our souls, in order to continue for all time the saving work of redemption, determined to build his holy Church so that in her, as in the house of the living God, all who believe might be united together in the bond of one faith and one love... Just as he sent the apostles whom he had chosen for himself out of the world as he himself was sent by the Father, so also he wished shepherds and teachers to be in his Church until the consummation of the world.’ (DS 3050) The permanence in the Church of all the essentials that Christ gave her, until he returns in glory, we call *indefectibility*.

The rest of *Pastor Aeternus* is about the supreme authority and infallibility of St Peter and his Successors, the Popes. 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 re-affirmed everything Vatican I had taught about the papacy (cf. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 18 (1964)).

Vatican I firstly taught about the primacy given to Peter himself: ‘We teach and declare that, according to the testimony of the Gospel, the primacy of jurisdiction over the universal Church of God was immediately and directly promised and given to Blessed Peter the Apostle by Christ the Lord.’ (DS 3053) Anathema was pronounced against anyone saying the opposite. (DS 3055)

And Peter's primacy passes on to the Popes, the Roman Pontiffs: what Christ established must ‘remain unceasingly in the Church, which, being founded upon the Rock, will stand firm to the end of the world.’ (DS 3056) So the Council defined: ‘If anyone says that it is not according to the institution of Christ our Lord himself, that is, by divine law, that blessed Peter should have perpetual successors in the primacy over the universal Church; or that the Roman Pontiff is not the successor of Blessed Peter in the same primacy; let him be anathema.’ (DS 3058)

‘We teach and declare that by the appointment of our Lord the Roman Church possesses a sovereignty of ordinary power over all other Churches... to which all... both pastors and faithful, both individually and collectively, are bound, by their duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, to submit, not only in matters which belong to faith and morals, but also in those that pertain to the discipline and government of the Church throughout the whole world... This is the doctrine of Catholic truth, from which no one can deviate without loss of faith and of salvation.’ (DS 3060)

‘We further teach and declare... that none may reopen the judgement of the Apostolic See, than whose authority there is no greater, nor can any lawfully review its judgement.’ (DS 3063) And anathema was pronounced against anyone denying the Pope's full, supreme and immediate authority over the whole Church, in discipline and governance as well as faith and morals. (DS 3064)

Next we will look at Vatican I's most famous teaching, and how the Dogmatic Constitution *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.