

‘All those things’ are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith

We’ve been looking at the teachings of Vatican I on the nature of faith, and today we turn to its delineation of the *material content* of faith – what it is we must actually believe. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* proclaimed: ‘All those things are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith that are contained in the word of God, written or handed down, and which by the Church, either in solemn judgment or through her ordinary and universal magisterium, are proposed for belief as having been divinely revealed.’ (DS 3011; cf. Pope St Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God* (1968) 20; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 182)

In the Holy See’s 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary* to which we’ve been referring, this set of teachings constitutes its first category of doctrines. The obstinate doubt or denial of any one of these doctrines is heresy. As Pope Francis reaffirmed in 2021 in his revision and tightening of the Church’s penal law, this incurs, as previously, automatic excommunication (cf. Canons 751, 1364; various mitigating factors such as ignorance can prevent this consequence).

Everything divinely revealed comes from the word of God – not simply the *written* word, inspired Scripture, but ‘the word of God, *written or handed down*’: both Scripture and Tradition. The Second Vatican Council explained in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, ‘Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church...But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.’ (10)

The Church infallibly proposes a teaching as divinely revealed either by a solemn judgment (a dogmatic definition by the Pope or by an Ecumenical Council confirmed by the Pope); or by the ordinary and universal magisterium – when the bishops, even though dispersed through the world but remaining in communion among themselves and with the Pope, are in agreement in their authentic teaching that some doctrine is to be believed as divinely revealed. (cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 25; CDF, *Doctrinal Commentary* 5)

Vatican II emphasised the importance of the absolute purity of Catholic doctrine. In its Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), it stated: ‘It is, of course, essential that the doctrine should be clearly presented in its entirety. Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism [peacemaking], in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded.’ (11)

St John Paul affirmed the same in his encyclical on Commitment to Ecumenism, *Ut unum sint* (1995). He wrote ‘...it is not a question of altering the deposit of faith, changing the meaning of dogmas, eliminating essential words from them, accommodating truth to the preferences of a particular age, or suppressing certain articles of the *Creed* under the false pretext that they are no longer understood today. The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety. In matters of faith, compromise is in contradiction with God who is Truth.’ (18)

It is crucial to make no exception or qualification in our acceptance of all teachings the Church proclaims infallibly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Any exception places a ‘filter’ on God’s word and promises, making our own judgement and opinion the ultimate test and

standard that each of God's teachings must satisfy if we're to accept them (even if 'almost all' of God's teachings do manage to pass our 'test').

If done deliberately and knowingly, this 'filtering' negates supernatural faith, replacing saving faith *in God* with faith *in ourselves*. St Thomas Aquinas explains how, once we make a single exception, even the many other teachings we might continue to 'believe' are no longer actually held in virtue of genuine divine faith at all. (cf. *ST II-IIae*, 5, 3) Just as by any single mortal sin we reject supernatural charity, by doubt of a single dogma we also reject supernatural faith. If I believe 99% of dogmas but reject 1 %, I don't have 99% faith – I have zero faith, because I've rejected the underlying principle of faith, which is to make God's word the ultimate standard.

This doesn't refer to those excused by ignorance – for example a faithful Catholic who is simply unaware that a particular point belongs to the faith of the Church; or those who have never had it sufficiently brought home to them in the first place that we're obliged to accept all the Catholic dogmas as guaranteed by God. Because of their lack of full knowledge they wouldn't be committing a mortal sin against faith; so the virtue of faith infused at Baptism would still remain, even though lacking its full and proper outward expression.

Pope Francis proclaimed in his Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, 'The Light of Faith': 'Since faith is one, it must be professed in all its purity and integrity. Precisely because all the articles of faith are interconnected, to deny one of them, even of those that seem least important, is tantamount to distorting the whole. Each period of history can find this or that point of faith easier or harder to accept: hence the need for vigilance in ensuring that the deposit of faith is passed on in its entirety and that all aspects of the profession of faith are duly emphasised.' (47-48)

And he affirmed in *Evangelii gaudium*, 'All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith...' (36) That echoes the words of the CDF Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973) published by authority of Paul VI: 'It is true that there exists an order, as it were a hierarchy, of the Church's dogmas, as a result of their varying relationship to the foundation of the faith. This hierarchy means that some dogmas are founded on other dogmas which are the principal ones, and are illuminated by these latter. But all dogmas, since they are revealed, must be believed with the same divine faith.'

The point being, sometimes it is implied that it doesn't much matter if we don't believe the 'less central' dogmas as long as we believe the 'more central' ones (like Christ's divinity or resurrection). But more central or less central, God has spoken each one. So by deliberately calling any one of them into doubt, we reject God's truthfulness and abandon faith.

The words of Pope Benedict XV from a century ago are still relevant: 'It is our will that Catholics should abstain from certain appellations which have recently been brought into use to distinguish one group of Catholics from another.' (So we think in our own time of labels like 'liberal' Catholic, or 'conservative' or 'progressive' or 'traditionalist' Catholic. We don't need labels like that: either we hold the full Catholic faith or we don't.)

The Pope continued: 'Such is the nature of Catholicism that it does not admit of more or less, but must be held as a whole or as a whole rejected: "This is the Catholic faith, which unless a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved" (*Athanasian Creed*). There is no need of adding any qualifying terms to the profession of Catholicism: it is quite enough for each one to proclaim "Christian is my name and Catholic my surname," only let him endeavour to be in reality what he calls himself.' (*Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum* (1914) 24)