

Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner

Section Three Chapter XI The

Infallibility of the Pope



This is the continuation of the previous chapter of Dr. Boettner's book, [Chapter X Purgatory](#).

1 Definition

The Vatican Council, which met in Rome, in 1870, defined the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope as follows:

"...We teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith and morals to be held by the universal Church, by the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that His Church should be endowed for defining doctrines regarding faith and morals, and that therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff of themselves—and not by virtue of the consent of the Church—are irreformable."

To this pronouncement there was attached the inevitable anathema of the church on all who dare to disagree:

"But if any one—which may God forbid!—presume to contradict this our definition: let him be anathema:"

It will be noticed that in this pronouncement there are three important restrictions: (1) infallibility is not claimed for every statement made by the pope, but only for those made when he is speaking *ex cathedra*, that is, seated in his papal chair, the chair of St. Peter, and speaking in his official capacity as the head of the church;¹ (2) the pronouncement must be intended as binding on the whole church—infallibility is not claimed for statements addressed to particular segments or groups within the church which may relate more or less to local conditions; and (3) the pronouncements must have to do with matters pertaining to "faith and morals." In actual practice, however, the term "faith and morals" is broad enough and elastic enough to cover almost any and every phase of religious and civil life. Practically every public issue can be looked upon as having some bearing on faith or morals or both. The Vatican takes full advantage of this, and the result is that within the Roman Church almost any statement issued by the pope is

assumed to be authoritative.

¹ A scientific commission appointed by Pope Paul VI in July, 1968, to investigate the antiquity of the "Chair of St. Peter," using modern scientific methods for dating old objects, reported early 1969 that the chair dates from the late ninth century. It is of French origin. There is some evidence that it was the coronation chair of Charles II, king of France, known as Charles the Bald, who was crowned in Rome on Christmas day, 875, by John VIII, in an attempt to restore the Western (Holy Roman) empire. Hence while it may have historical and symbolical value, it is not an antique of the first century.

2 The Nature of the Pope's Infallibility

The doctrine of papal infallibility does not mean that the pope is infallible as a man. It does not relate to his personal habits. It does not mean that he is sinless. Nor does it mean that he is inspired as were the apostles so that he can write Scripture. It means rather that in his official capacity as teacher of the church he has the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that he can interpret and state clearly and positively doctrines which allegedly have been a part of the heritage of the church from the beginning. Theoretically he cannot produce new doctrines, but some of the decrees issued have had that effect.

That the alleged infallibility cannot relate to personal morals is perfectly clear in the light of history. We merely state a fact when we say that some of the popes have been grossly immoral. That was one of the contributing factors in the rapid progress of the Protestant Reformation. Roman Catholic historians readily admit these facts. Some of the popes have been so illiterate that it would be absurd to attribute to them scholarly ability sufficient to propound doctrine. Even Cardinal Bellarmine, a Jesuit and a papal champion, now a canonized saint, frequently warned Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605) that, not being a theologian, he could not expect to understand the Molinist controversy (concerning semi-Pelagianism). Words such as those of Pius V (1566-1572), to the effect that all the Huguenots should be exterminated, are explained away on the ground that in such cases the pope was not speaking *ex cathedra*.

It is interesting to notice that the popes, in issuing their decrees or pronouncements, do not label them *ex cathedra* or not *ex cathedra*. We may be sure that if this power were a reality they would not hesitate so to label them, that in fact they would find it very advantageous to do so. Surely it would be of inestimable value to know which deliverances are *ex cathedra* and which are not, which are infallible and authoritative and which are only private observations and therefore as fallible as those of anyone else. It seems impossible to secure such a list. We may safely assume that the proclamation of Pope Pius XII regarding the assumption of the Virgin Mary (1950) was *ex cathedra*. According to some Roman Catholic writers such utterances are relatively infrequent. It is also interesting to notice that neither the Church of Rome in her corporate capacity, nor any of her infallible popes, have ever given the world the benefit of their sanctity and infallibility in a commentary on the Bible, which assuredly would be a

blessing of inestimable value. In fact they have never published an infallible exposition of even one chapter.

How then is anyone to know whether any given pronouncement is *ex cathedra* and therefore infallible? The pope presumably would be the most likely person to know his own intentions. How does he distinguish between pronouncements? Can he call up this peculiar kind of inspiration at any time? Does he have a particular sensation or feeling of any kind when exercising it?

A rather amusing aspect of this whole affair is the extreme reluctance of all the popes since 1870, when this decree went into effect, to use this amazing gift. The church and the world have passed through many controversies and have been faced with many perplexing problems in the solution of which some infallible pronouncements with divine authority behind them would have been of inestimable blessing. But instead the hierarchy as well as others have often been perplexed and have made many mistakes—we need recall only such events as the support given by the Vatican to Mussolini in his rise to power and in his military campaigns in Ethiopia and Spain, the concordat signed with Hitler, and the unflinching support given the Spanish dictator Franco since he first came to power. During these perplexing times the popes have been as confused as anyone else. They have merely issued “encyclicals” (formal letters, in Latin, addressed to all the bishops), for which no infallibility is claimed, and which can be modified or set aside by a successor. But of what conceivable value is papal infallibility unless it be to insure clarity and certainty of statement when circumstances make it desirable that the church should speak with authority? Furthermore, the procedure now followed when a pope wants to make an important statement is that he asks certain theologians or bishops to make a study of the subject and to give him their report. The report is then submitted to many others, whose opinions over a long period of time are considered. Last of all he decides on the matter. But if he possesses the attribute of infallibility why should he consult with theologians and bishops who individually are subject to error? Why is he not able to make the pronouncement merely upon his own authority? We take this reluctance as *prima facie* evidence that all concerned know that in reality no such infallibility exists, and that they do not want to run the risk of being discredited by such statements.

The average Roman Catholic layman usually assumes that anything the pope puts in writing relating to faith and morals is as infallible as if it had been uttered by Christ Himself. But representative churchmen are more cautious and warn that it is not easy to distinguish between *ex cathedra* and non-*ex cathedra* statements.

The notion that any human being is in any way infallible does not commend itself to the mind of a Christian. To most people such a claim does not seem worthy of serious consideration. There can hardly be any more brazen exhibition of arrogance, bigotry, and intolerance than this claim that the pope, who in reality is a mere man, is the very mouthpiece of God on earth, God’s sole deputy, and that he can impose dogmatic decrees under pain of excommunication and death in this life and the loss of eternal salvation in the next. How true the words of England’s Lord Acton, himself a Roman Catholic, who after visiting Rome and seeing at firsthand the workings of the

papacy wrote: "All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

How utterly different is this attitude of the popes from that of Peter, in whose succession they claim to follow, who humbly called himself a "fellow-elder" and who warned so clearly against "lording it over the charge allotted to you" (1 Peter 5:1-3)! And, more importantly, how utterly different from the attitude set forth by Christ, who said: "Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28).

The doctrine of infallibility appeals to many people who are poorly informed and who are adrift spiritually. These people know practically nothing about the Bible. Consequently, they have no sound theology on which to base their actions. Oftentimes they are bewildered by the conflicting claims of the various churches and by the disappointing conduct of some church members. Particularly in the spiritual realm a state of uncertainty is a state of misery, so the Roman Church finds this situation ideally suited for her purpose. She skillfully presents her claims to speak with divine authority, and it is not surprising that there are those who respond. These people are fascinated by the call of a church which promises stability and calm. If the priest or the church says a thing is all right, then for them it is all right. Their consciences are relieved in that they no longer have to worry about the right or wrong of certain actions. They tend to surrender without first examining the promised certainty, only to find after it is too late that they have been cruelly deceived and that they cannot surrender their consciences to the rule of any man or church.

3 Infallibility Not Taught in the Bible

The silence of Scripture concerning an infallible church or concerning Peter as an infallible pope is sufficient to disprove the idea. Yet the most prominent characteristic of the papacy, the thing that sets it apart from all other churches, is its claim to supremacy, authority, infallibility. Had there been an infallible source of authority in the church, it is inconceivable that Peter, the alleged bishop of Rome, writing two general epistles and mentioning his departure which he indicated was close at hand (2 Peter 1:13), would not have acquainted the members of the church as to what guide or authority they were to follow after he was taken from them, or how that guide or authority was to be chosen. But he does not even mention the subject. On the other hand Christ and the apostles warned against false Christs, false prophets, false teachers who would arise and make such claims.

The Bible says: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:14). But the Church of Rome demands that all follow blindly and with implicit faith the interpretation of the Bible given by the pope and his hierarchy. In doing so it usurps the place of the Holy Spirit as teacher and leader. That Peter, the alleged first pope, was not infallible as a teacher of faith and morals is evident from his conduct at Antioch when he refused to eat with Gentile Christians lest he offend certain Jews from

Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11-16). Instead, he would have fastened the ritual requirements of Judaism on the new Christian Church. This should have been no problem at all for him if he had the special guidance of the Holy Spirit claimed by the Church of Rome for the pope. Furthermore, if any one of the apostles was to be chosen as the infallible head of the church, it would seem that that one should have been Paul, and not Peter. For both as a man and as a teacher Paul was a far greater personality. But the fact is that the New Testament nowhere gives the slightest indication that any man was to be chosen for that position.

In the New Testament, in addition to the two letters written by Peter, we have thirteen written by Paul. But in none of those does he refer to Peter as the bishop of Rome, or of any other church. In Paul's most important letter, that to the church of Rome, he does not so much as mention Peter. In his letter to Timothy he mentions the office of bishop or elder, but he does not mention that of archbishop, supreme bishop, or pope. Surely if such an important office as supreme bishop or pope existed, he would have mentioned it. Nor in the literature of the early church during the second or third century is there any mention of a supreme bishop or pope. There are references to Christ as the Chief Shepherd, but none to any man as having that or any similar title.

The fact is that we have our infallible rule of faith and morals in the New Testament Scriptures. And having that it is not necessary to bestow infallibility on any man. For one who wants to know the truth, we point him to the Scriptures and say: "Here it is. Believe and practice what is taught here and you will live. The one who turns aside from this rule will not have life."

4 History of the Doctrine before 1870

We may well ask: If the doctrine of infallibility was taught by Christ or by any of the apostles, why did the Roman Catholic Church wait for more than eighteen centuries before giving it acknowledgment? Dr. Geddes MacGregor, in his book, *The Vatican Revolution*, says:

"In spite of the early recognition of the importance of the See of Rome and the consequent prestige of its bishop, there is not even a hint of an *ex cathedra* notion before the eleventh century. Even in the fourteenth, in the lively debates on the nature of papal pronouncements, no such common notion was being either combatted or upheld" (p. 137).

And Edward J. Tanis, in his booklet, *What Rome Teaches*, says:

"Ireneus, who was a disciple of Polycarp (a disciple of John the apostle), died about the year 200. He knew what the early church believed and taught, and he wrote many books against heresies of various kinds, but Ireneus never taught that Christ intended any bishop to be the infallible head of the church.

"*Tertullian* was the greatest theologian of the early church before Augustine, the learned scholar who developed the doctrine of the Trinity, emphasizing

the equality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He died in the year 220. If any man knew what Christ and the apostles taught, Tertullian knew it. But Tertullian never heard of an infallible head of the church.

“One of the ablest scholars in the early church was Jerome, who died in 420. He provided the church with a new and better translation of the Scriptures and until this day his Latin translation of the Bible has been in use in the Roman Catholic Church, evidence that this scholar is held in high esteem among Roman Catholics. But even so great a scholar did not teach that the church had an infallible head.

“Gregory the Great was one of the most powerful and influential popes, bishop of the congregation in Rome from 590 to 604. He made a large contribution to the improvement of the preaching and music of the church and was an ardent defender of the Catholic traditions, but Gregory never taught that he was the infallible head of the whole church. Foakes-Jackson, the scholarly historian quotes Gregory the Great as saying that the title of pope as ‘Ecumenical Bishop’ (bishop of the whole church) was ‘proud and foolish’ and ‘an imitation of the devil’” (p. 17).

The clear teaching of history is that the office of pope was a gradual development. The early bishops in Rome knew nothing of it. They neither claimed the title nor exercised the power. But as time went on, particularly after the fall of the Roman empire, more and more power, political as well as ecclesiastical, fell into the hands of the bishop of Rome, and so the papacy developed.

For centuries before the doctrine of papal infallibility was adopted there was much difference of opinion as to where that infallibility lay. Some held that it rested in the councils speaking for the church. Two councils, that of Constance (1415), which deposed the first Pope John XXIII after he had held the office for five years and had appointed several cardinals and bishops who continued to hold their offices, and that of Basle (1432), declared that “even the pope is bound to obey the councils.” At another time it was held that infallibility lay in acts of the councils approved by the pope. But in 1870 it was declared to reside in the pope alone, and all good Roman Catholics now are compelled to accept that view. The Jesuits, because of their influence at the Vatican and their ability to influence the popes, supported that view. But the principal question remains: Which council pronouncement was “infallible,” that of Constance and Basle? Or that of the Vatican Council? Clearly they are contradictory and cannot both be right.

That the popes have not always been considered infallible is made clear by a review of events in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Such a survey is given by Dr. Harris as follows:

“In the 1300’s the popes moved to Avignon, France, and for seventy years were manifestly subservient to the French kings. This has been called the ‘Babylonian Captivity’ of the papacy. Following this time, Gregory XI went back to Rome. His successor, Urban VI (1378-1389) made an election promise to return to France, but election promises are not always kept and he later refused. The French then called his election illegal and elected a new rival

pope, Clement VII (1378-1394). This continued until a council was called at Pisa in 1409 which deposed both rival popes and elected a new one, Alexander V (1409-1410). The rival popes refused to accept the council and so three popes were on the scene. After the death of Alexander V, he was succeeded by John XXIII, whom Roman Catholics do not acknowledge and whose name the present pope has taken to show the illegality of the first John XXIII. Roman Catholics do not accept the Council of Pisa as an ecumenical council (that is, one representative of the whole church). But most of them accept Alexander V whom it elected! (Hefele, History of the Church Councils, Vol. I, p. 58). The Council of Pisa declared that a council is superior to a pope.

"The schism continued and the Council of Constance (1414-1418) was called. This council deposed all three popes and elected a new one, Martin V (1417-1431). ... The Council of Constance also declared that a council is superior to a pope, and thus it acted to depose three popes at once. Hefele, one of the best known Roman authorities, takes the odd position that the first forty sessions of the council were not ecumenical but that sessions 41-45, presided over by Martin V whom they elected, were ecumenical. Martin proceeded to confirm all the decrees of the first forty sessions except those which minimized the papacy. Here, of course, was the pope's dilemma. If the earlier sessions were valid, the Council was supreme over the pope. If not, the other popes were not deposed and Martin V was not rightly elected! The Vatican Council of 1870 declared: 'They err from the right course who assert that it is lawful to appeal from the judgment of the Roman Pontiff to an ecumenical council, as to an authority higher than that of the Roman Pontiff.' This is wonderful. The pope is higher than a council. The Vatican Council made him so! But a previous council, just as regular, had denied him to be so" (article, *The Bible Presbyterian Reporter*, December, 1958).

The Council of Constance declared that "every lawfully convoked ecumenical council representing the church derives its authority immediately from Christ, and every one, the pope included, is subject to it in matters of faith, in the healing of schism, and the reformation of the Church." But the Vatican Council of 1870 has decreed that infallibility is vested in the pope as head of the church, when speaking *ex cathedra*.

There were times during the Middle Ages when the popes increased their power until they were the unquestioned rulers in both the church and the state. Some deposed kings and lesser civil officials, and could imprison or commit individuals to servitude for life. The decree of excommunication, directed against individuals, in which those excommunicated were cut off from the church and were placed outside the protection of the civil law, and the interdict, by which whole nations were branded as outlaws and placed under the ban, were terrible things. Some popes took it upon themselves to declare any political action not pleasing to them null and void, as Innocent III did with Magna Carta after it had been won by the people of England from a despotic king, or as Pius V did in 1570 when he attempted to "uncrown" Queen Elizabeth I of England, and to release the people of England from allegiance to her. The Roman Catholic ideal is that the pope should be able to crown and uncrown kings, and that kings and other civil rulers should acknowledge that their power comes from God through the pope as God's representative on earth.

Where the Roman Church has been able to realize its ideal, it has made civil rulers vassals of the pope.

Before 1870 the ultimate authority commonly acknowledged in the Roman Church was the church speaking through its councils. While the doctrine of papal infallibility had been discussed for some centuries, it had never met with general favor. Instead, it had been repugnant to many of the most eminent scholars and theologians and to a large majority of the hierarchy. For nearly two hundred years before the Vatican Council the Roman Catholic bishops, clergy, and laity of England and Ireland had denied that infallibility was a doctrine of the church. In 1825, for instance, when the restoration of political privileges to English Roman Catholics was under discussion in Parliament, a British government commission asked a panel of Irish Roman Catholics if the Roman Church held that the pope was infallible. The bishops correctly replied that it did not. On the basis of that assurance the privileges were restored. Two catechisms in general use before 1870 verify this position. Keenan's A Doctrinal Catechism asks: "Must not Catholics believe the pope in himself to be infallible?" And the answer is: "This is a Protestant invention; it is no article of the Catholic faith; no decision of his can oblige, under pain of heresy, unless it is received and enforced by the teaching body, that is, the bishops of the church" (p. 305). When papal infallibility was decreed by Pope Pius IX in 1870, this question and answer were quietly omitted from the catechism without note, comment, or explanation. The Catechism of the Catholic Religion gave substantially the same reply (p. 87).

It is well known that Cardinal Newman was strongly opposed to the promulgation of the doctrine of infallibility. But having left the Church of England in order to join the Roman Church and having given it such fulsome praise, he was powerless to prevent the change and did not have the courage to come back out of it. Shortly before the decree was issued, he wrote to a friend, comparing the impending decree with that setting forth the Immaculate Conception which was issued in 1854: "As to the immaculate Conception, by contrast there was nothing sudden, or secret, in the proposal. ... This has taken us all by surprise." And on January 18, 1870, while the council was in session, he wrote to Bishop Ullathorne, deploring what seemed imminent, and asked: "What have we done to be treated as the Faithful never were treated before? Why should an aggressive and insolent faction [by which he meant the Jesuits] be allowed to make the hearts of the just to mourn whom the Lord hath not made sorrowful?" It was a bitter pill for Newman to swallow, but he submitted and acknowledged papal infallibility.

5 The Vatican Council of 1870

The council which ratified the infallibility decree was clearly packed in favor of the Jesuit-controlled papal party. MacGregor, who has made a special study of this council and its effect on the Roman Church, says:

"Out of the 541 prelates from Europe, the Italian peninsula, with a population of 27 million, was represented by 276, or 11 more than the whole of the rest of the continent including Britain and Ireland. ... Even more horrifying is the fact that those of the Papal States that had not at that

time been seized, and which had a population of less than three quarters of a million, were represented by sixty-two bishops, while five million Roman Catholics elsewhere were represented by only three bishops—those of Paris, Cambrai and Cologne—all three critical of the standpoint of the papalist party. ... It was calculated in an anonymous pamphlet circulated in Rome after the Council had been in operation for five months and attributed to Mgr. Darboy, Archbishop of Paris, that one hundred ninety-one members of the Council had no constitutional right to be there at all" (*The Vatican Revolution*, p. 28-29).

The church historian Philip Schaff says there was strong opposition to the call for the council, and that delegates representing 80 million Roman Catholics were opposed to it. A preliminary vote in secret session gave the delegates a limited opportunity to express themselves. Eighty-eight delegates voted against it, 65 voted for it with reservations, and over 80 abstained. But the papal party was in firm control and easily carried the final voting. To take sides against the strong-willed pope and against the Jesuits a minority had to be particularly courageous to express itself at all. It was a foregone conclusion that the decree would be passed. Opposition clearly was futile, and could mean reprisals affecting the delegates' present positions or injury to any chances for future promotion. Before the final vote was taken 410 bishops petitioned in favor of the dogma, and 162 against it.

Among those who opposed the decree was the scholarly archbishop Strossmayer, who made a famous speech in which he declared boldly:

"I have set myself to study with the most serious attention the Old and New Testaments, and I have asked these venerable monuments of truth to make known to me if the holy pontiff, who presides here, is the true successor of St. Peter, vicar of Christ, and the infallible doctor of the church. I find in the apostolic days no question of a pope, successor to St. Peter, the vicar of Jesus Christ, any more than a Mohammed who did not then exist. Now having read the whole New Testament, I declare before God, with my hand raised to that great crucifix, that I have found no trace of the papacy as it exists at this moment."

And in concluding his speech he said:

"I have established: (1) that Jesus gave to His apostles the same power that He gave to St. Peter. (2) That apostles never recognized in St. Peter the vicar of Jesus Christ. (3) That Peter never thought of being pope, and never acted as if he were a pope. (4) That the councils of the first four centuries, while they recognized the high position which the bishop of Rome occupied on account of Rome, only accorded to him the preeminence of honor, never of power or jurisdiction. (5) That the holy fathers in the famous passage, 'Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church,' never understood that the church was built on Peter (*super Petrum*) but on the rock (*super petram*). That is, on the confession of the faith of the apostle. I conclude victoriously, with history, with reason, with logic, with good sense, and with a Christian conscience, that Jesus Christ did not confer any supremacy on St. Peter, and that the bishops of Rome did not become sovereigns of the church, but only by confiscating one by one all the rights

of the episcopate.”

The bishops from the United States and Canada had very special reasons for disliking the infallibility decree. Lord Acton, of England, a Roman Catholic historian and editor whose scholarship cannot be questioned, recognized the peculiar circumstances under which this decree placed the American bishops and wrote in their defense:

“The Americans ask how they are to live under the free constitutions of the Republic, and maintain their position of equality with their fellow citizens, after committing themselves to the principles attested by papal infallibility, such as: (1) Religious persecution and the coercive power of the church. (2) The claim of Catholicism to exclusive mastery in the state. (3) The pope’s right to dispense from oaths. And (4) The subjection of the civil power to his supreme dominion.”

The discussion was abruptly closed before all the opponents had been heard. When the vote was to be taken practically all of those who were opposed to the decree absented themselves, since they did not want to be officially on record against it. Five hundred thirty-three delegates answered in the affirmative, two answered in the negative, and 106 were absent. And well might any delegate hesitate before voting against the decree, for to it would be attached the anathema: “If any one—which may God forbid!—shall presume to contradict this our definition, let him be anathema.”

The decree having been passed, all the bishops were required to give their consent. MacGregor writes:

“Some of the recalcitrant bishops were exceedingly dilatory in sending in their submission. But they did, and the papalists have ever since made a great deal of this fact. The alternative to submission was excommunication. This extreme penalty is terrible for a devout layman, since it deprives him of the sacraments, the greatest solace in a Catholic life. It is even worse for a priest for it cuts him off absolutely from every friend he is likely to have, not to mention his livelihood, making him at worst an object of contempt, at best an object of pity. But for a bishop excommunication is a sentence almost past endurance. Even the most heroic could hardly be expected to face it” (*The Vatican Revolution*, p. 63).

Thus the Roman Church, having no sure Scriptural anchorage concerning the problem of authority, drifted about for centuries before solving this problem. As we have indicated, some of the strongest opposition to the infallibility decree came from within the Roman Church. The leading German theologian, Dollinger, who had been a teacher of theology for 47 years, strenuously opposed the decree, and insisted that the three leading criteria in all such controversies—universality, antiquity, and consent—were clearly lacking. He could not be induced to change his mind, and was excommunicated on April 17, 1871. A further result of the decree was that a small group of anti-infallibilists met in Munich, Germany, in September, 1871, withdrew from the Roman Catholic Church, and formed the “Old Catholic” Church, which, although not as well known as it should be, continues to this day and serves as a salutary and inconvenient reminder of the outrage perpetrated against

the leading German theologian of the Roman Catholic Church.

By its vote the Council in effect abdicated its power and acknowledged that there was nothing that any future council could do that could not be done as well or better by the pope himself. Since the pope is acknowledged to have the guidance of the Holy Spirit and therefore to possess every power that a council could have, he has no particular need to call a council. This was clearly foreseen by Dollinger who, in a monumental work, *Papal Infallibility* (1871) wrote:

“Councils will for the future be superfluous: the bishops will no doubt be assembled in Rome now and then to swell the pomp of a papal canonization or some other grand ceremony, but they will have nothing to do with the dogma. If they wish to confirm a papal decision... this would be bringing lanterns to aid the light of the noon-day sun.

“If the bishops know the view and will of the pope on any question, it would be presumptuous and idle to vote against it. An ecumenical assembly of the church can have no existence, properly speaking, in the presence of an ‘ordinarius ordinariorum’ and infallible teacher of faith, though, of course, the pomp, ceremonial, speeches, and voting of a council may be displayed to the gaze of the world. ...

“Bishops who have been obliged to swear ‘to maintain, defend, increase, and advance the rights, honors, privileges, and authority of their Lord the Pope—and every bishop takes this oath—cannot regard themselves, or be regarded by the Christian world, as free members of a free council.

“The practical effect of the infallibility decree has been to stifle the development of theological doctrine within the Roman Church. For only the pope can speak with authority, and when he speaks there can be no opposition. No longer can a church council or a theologian appeal to the Scriptures as against the pope. Paul says: “The word of God is not bound” (2 Timothy 2:9). But by this decree the Word of God is frozen and chained down by a well-nigh unbreakable chain.

It is interesting to notice that in the early Christian and later Roman Catholic Church history there have been but twenty-one ecumenical councils, the latest having been the Second Vatican Council, which was called by Pope John XXIII, and which began its sessions in Rome, in October, 1962. It would seem, however, that such a council can be little more than a puppet gathering, since any action that it may take can become effective only after that action has been approved by the pope. It is safe to say that nothing will be done contrary to the pope’s wishes.

MacGregor calls the infallibility decree “the most momentous decision in the history of the Roman Church” (p. 3). He says that it “sounded the death knell to the democratic element in the Roman Catholic tradition”; and adds that, “So absolute is the papal authority that not even the entire church may dare to review or modify the pope’s judgment in tiny way. If the whole of the rest of the church should disagree with the pope, the whole of the rest of the church would be in error” (p. 6).

That the Vatican Council does mark a turning point in the history of the Roman Church is clear. For centuries the popes avoided church councils like the plague, because they regarded them as rivals to their own authority. But the Vatican Council changed all of that by making absolute the pope's power and thus making all councils practically superfluous. The papacy today tolerates no criticism from its own people. There was a time in the early history of the church when priests, monks, and even the laity could express their criticisms of the church and be heard. But that has all disappeared and today the Roman Church is a total dictatorship with an infallible pope at its head. Says Dr. Walter M. Montano, editor of *Christian Heritage*, "All voices are silenced; protests are crushed; dissenters are excommunicated. A total dictatorship—in spirit and letter—rules every aspect of the Roman Catholic Church" (booklet, *Can a True Catholic Be a Loyal American?*, p. 14).

6 Errors of the Popes

It is difficult to say whether a claim such as that of infallibility is more wicked or ridiculous. It certainly is wicked, because it gives to a man one of the attributes of God and usurps the headship of Christ in the church. And it is ridiculous, because the history of the popes reveals many grievous errors, moral and doctrinal, with one often denying what another has affirmed. The claim to infallibility is so fantastic that it is hard to take seriously since the "infallible" church and the "infallible" popes have made so many mistakes. Many of their solemnly worded decrees are contradictory to the Word of God. And much of the prestige and temporal power of the Roman Church was gained through the use of forgeries such as the alleged "gift of Constantine," or the Isadorian decretals.

Many of the popes have taught heretical doctrines. Some have been grossly immoral, although the theologians say that this does not affect their official powers. Several have been condemned by later popes and church councils, and some have been declared "antipopes," that is, fraudulently chosen or elected, and later dropped from the official record. Among popes committing serious errors are the following:

Callistus (bishop of Rome, 221-227) is said by Hippolytus, a third century writer, to have been a kind of Unitarian, identifying the Father and the Son as one indivisible Spirit.

Liberius, in 358, subscribed to a heretical Arian creed in order to gain the bishopric of Rome under the heretical emperor Constantius. He broke with and anathematized Athanasius, the great trinitarian defender of the Nicene Creed, who records him as an opponent.

Zozimus (417-418) pronounced Pelagius an orthodox teacher, but later reversed his position at the insistence of Augustine.

Vigilinus (538-555) refused to condemn certain heretical teachers at the time of the monophysite controversy, and boycotted the fifth Ecumenical Council which met at Constantinople in 553. When the Council proceeded without him and threatened to excommunicate and anathematize him, he submitted to its opinions, confessing that he had been a tool of Satan (cf. Hefele, one of the

best known Roman Catholic writers, *History of the Christian Councils*, Vol. IV, p. 345).

Honorius (625-638). The heresy of Honorius was clearly official. Dr. Harris has treated this case quite fully in the following paragraph:

"The greatest scandal of this nature is pope Honorius. He specifically taught the Monothelite heresy in two letters to the patriarch of Constantinople [that is that Christ had only one will, which by implication meant that he denied either His deity or His humanity]. The opinion was condemned by the sixth ecumenical council (680) which condemned and excommunicated Honorius by name (Honorio haeretico anathema, Session XVI). The Roman breviary contained this anathema until the sixteenth century (until the time of Luther, when apparently the Reformers made so much of it that it was quietly dropped). ... Honorius was a heretic according to Roman Catholic standards and was condemned by church councils and popes for 800 years. Such facts are not known to most Protestants as they arise from the technical study of history. They naturally are not publicized by Roman Catholics. But facts they are. And they entirely disprove the papal claims" (*Fundamental Protestant Doctrines*, II, p. 13).

This condemnation of Honorius as a heretic shows clearly that the bishops of that time had no idea whatever of papal infallibility. For how can a pope be infallible and at the same time be condemned as a heretic? Also let it be noticed that Honorius held the papal chair for thirteen years.

Gregory I (590-604) called anyone who would take the title of Universal Bishop an antichrist, but Boniface III (607) compelled the emperor Phocas to confer that title upon him, and it has been used by all later popes.

Hadrian II (867-872) declared civil marriages to be valid, but Pius VII (1800-1823) condemned them as invalid.

A curious case arises in regard to Hadrian IV (1154-1159), who authorized the invasion and subjugation of Ireland by the British king Henry II. That conquest marks the beginning of British rule in Ireland, a thing which has been bitterly resented by the Irish. It is of more than passing interest to note that Hadrian was an English pope, the only Englishman ever to hold that position. But that should make no difference. A pope is a pope regardless of nationality or race. In view of the attitude of later Roman Catholics toward British rule in Ireland, they evidently will have to say that in sanctioning the invasion the pope's decree did not relate to morals. Or perhaps the problem is to be solved by saying that when the pope authorized that much to be regretted invasion, he was not seated on the papal chair, but was perhaps at the table, or perhaps reclining on a sofa! Indeed, if at the moment he did not happen to be seated on the papal chair, we may have to forget the whole matter. For by such means the Roman Church to escape from its embarrassing position as regards this invasion of Ireland, and to hold that there was no infallible mistake after all. But it will hardly do to say that the pope was not speaking *ex cathedra*. For if he has that great power but fails to use it in such momentous decisions, or uses it carelessly, he surely is culpable.

How can one infallible pope, Eugene IV (1431-1447), condemn Joan of Arc (1412-1431) to be burned alive as a witch, while another pope, Benedict XV, in 1919, declares her to be a saint?

There has been some dispute in the Roman Church concerning which version of the Vulgate should be used. Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) preferred the old version, personally supervised every sheet of an edition then being published, and prefixed an editorial bull to the first volume excommunicating anyone who in republishing the work should make any alterations in the text. But it turned out that the work contained so many errors that it had to be recalled, and another infallible pope published another version, altered in many particulars.

The condemnation of Galileo for his theory that the earth moves around the sun is a special case in point. Dr. Zacchello has stated this well:

“Were popes Paul V (1605-1621) and Urban VIII (1623-1644) infallible when they condemned Galileo for holding a true scientific theory? Did they not declare the Copernican theory was false, heretical, and contrary to the word of God? Did they not torture and imprison Galileo in the dungeons of the Inquisition for not sharing their erroneous views? In their decree prohibiting the book of Copernicus, *De Revolutionibus*, the congregation of the index, March 5, 1619, denounced the new system of the mobility of the earth and the immobility of the sun as ‘utterly contrary to the Holy Scriptures’” (*Ins and Outs of Romanism*, p. 28).

How is the decree of Clement XIV (July 21, 1773) suppressing the Jesuits to be harmonized with the contrary decree of Pius VII (August 7, 1814) restoring them?

Sixtus V (1585-1590) recommended the reading of the Bible, but Pius VII (1800-1823) and various other popes condemned that practice.

As regards infallibility in the moral sphere, consider these cases. Pope John XI (931-936) was the illegitimate son of Pope Sergius III by a wicked woman named Marozia. The nephew of John XI, who took the name John XII (956-964), was raised to the papacy at the age of 18 through the political intrigue of the Tuscan party which was then dominant in Rome, and proved to be a thoroughly immoral man. His tyrannies and debaucheries were such that, upon complaint of the People of Rome, the emperor Otho tried and deposed him. Some of the sins enumerated in the charge were murder, perjury, sacrilege, adultery, and incest. Yet he is reckoned as a legitimate pope through whom the unbroken chain of apostolic authority descends from Peter to the pope of the present day.

Alexander VI (1492-1503) was one of the Borgia popes, from Spain, and had been made a cardinal at the age of 25. He had six illegitimate children, two of whom were born after he became pope. The charge of adultery was brought against him repeatedly. His third son, Caesar Borgia, was made a cardinal and was appointed to command the papal armies. The intrigues and immoralities of his daughter Lucretia Borgia, brought a full measure of disgrace upon the papal office. The Roman Catholic historian, Ludwig Pastor, in his *History of*

the Popes, grants that he lived the immoral life of the secular princes of his day, both as cardinal and as pope (V, 363; VI, 140); that he obtained the papacy by the rankest simony (V, 385); and that he brought that office into disrepute by his unconcealed nepotism and lack of moral sense (VI, 139). The eloquent reformer Savonarola urged his deposition, whereupon Alexander had him condemned as a heretic, hanged, and publicly burned in 1498.

John XXIII (1410-1415) was deposed by the Council of Constance because of simony and immorality, and the Roman Church now attempts to deny that he ever was a legitimate pope. Apparently the recent John XXIII will have to be known as Pope John XXIII, the Second. During the period of history known as the Middle Ages many of the popes were guilty of nearly every crime in the catalogue of sin. Twenty-nine of those who held the office at one time or another, but who are now said to have obtained it by fraud or otherwise to have been unfit for it, are now listed as "anti-popes." Repeatedly the papal office was bought and sold by cardinals and popes as unworthy men sought to gain control. These abuses, together with many others, are described with surprising frankness and detail in a recent book, *The Papal Princes*, by a Roman Catholic, Glenn D. Kittler, with the Nihil Obstat of Daniel D. Flynn, S.T.D., Censor librorum, and the Imprimatur of Cardinal Spellman (1960; 358 pages; Funk & Wagnalls, New York).

In 1939 Pope Pius XII was inaugurated as the 262nd pope. But in 1947 Vatican scholars revised the official list of popes, dropped some, added some, questioned others, and reduced the number to 261. St. Anacletus, who was supposed to have reigned about the year 100, was eliminated when research showed that he and St. Cletus, who reigned about the year 76, were the same person. Donus II (973) was dropped when research showed that he never existed. Alexander V and John XXIII, fifteenth century figures, were relegated to the list of anti-popes, or false claimants. The reign of John XIV (984) was once divided into two, erroneously adding a non-existent John to the series. In 1958 Pope John XXIII was inaugurated as the 262nd pope. But in 1961 still another pope was deposed, Stephen II (752). With the inauguration of Paul VI in 1963 he was accounted by some to be the 262nd pope, although the 1963 Pontifical Yearbook has abandoned for the present any attempt to number the popes, giving as its reason the impossibility of determining the validity of some of the names. Quite a record we would say for a church boasting infallibility, whether that infallibility be vested in its councils or in its popes!

We have called attention to the numerous false doctrines set forth by Pope Pius IX in his Syllabus of Errors (1864). We single out just one for special mention as completely contrary to our American ideals of civil and ecclesiastical relations, namely, that which declares that the church and the state should be united, with the church in the dominant position. In fact he went so far as to declare that the separation of church and state is one of the principal errors of our age. Recently, however, the Knights of Columbus have circulated a pamphlet in which they declare that the pope in condemning the separation of church and state did not have in mind the kind of separation that exists in the United States. But the Syllabus made no exception for the United States. It was an unqualified assertion of the basic

principles that should govern the church and the state everywhere in the world. The United States has the same form of government today that it had in 1864. Hence the Knights of Columbus are quite clearly resorting to subterfuge, and are simply attempting to shield the Roman Church from responsibility concerning one of its official doctrines which is diametrically opposed to our American form of government. The almost universal feeling today, even among enlightened Roman Catholics, is that the issuance of the Syllabus of Errors was in itself a serious error.

And yet despite these cases of error and many others that could be cited, the infallibility decree, which was retroactive and therefore applies to all earlier as well as later popes, officially pronounces all of the popes infallible as teachers of faith and morals.

We should point out that there have been several popes who expressly disclaimed the attribute of infallibility (we may even say, the divine attribute of infallibility, for only God is infallible as regards faith and morals), most conspicuous of whom have been Vigilius, Innocent III, Clement IV, Gregory XI, Hadrian VI, and Paul IV.

Thus Rome's claim to infallibility is contradicted by Scripture, logic, and history. Dr. Harris writes appropriately:

"The fact is, the popes are not infallible. They preach and teach another gospel. They not only contradict themselves, but contradict the Bible as well. All the fanfare of wealth, the tinsel of ceremony, and the prestige of power which we witness at Rome cannot avail before God. The present pope John XXIII is neither infallible nor orthodox nor the successor of Peter, nor of any other of the holy apostles of Jesus Christ. He is an imposter as was the first John XXIII of the fifteenth century."

As we have indicated, this alleged attribute of infallibility has been used only very sparingly by the popes, evidently because they do not want to risk being caught up by false statements. Apparently it has been formally invoked on only three occasions—twice by Pope Pius IX, once when he proclaimed his own infallibility, and once when, without benefit of a church council, he set forth the doctrine of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary; and once by Pope Pius XII, when he promulgated the doctrine of the assumption of the Virgin Mary. And, we would say, in each instance the pope employing it set forth colossal error. Indeed the pope must be quite a practical joker if, possessing such power, he so seldom gives any indication that he is using it, but keeps the people guessing whether or not he is speaking authoritatively.

Probably no other element of the papal system causes the Romanists more embarrassment than this doctrine of papal infallibility. In the first place it asserts a doctrine that can be easily disproved, and in the second place it serves to focus attention on the utter unreasonableness of the powers claimed by and for the pope. To Protestants the whole ex cathedra business appears on the one hand, as particularly monstrous and vicious, and on the other, as just a big joke—a joke perpetrated on the Roman Catholic people who are so docile and unthinking and so poorly informed as to believe in and submit to such sophistry.

(Continued in the next chapter, [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XII Penance, Indulgences: Salvation by Grace or by Works?.](#))

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