

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

THE CHURCH OF ROME claims that when the General Church Council or the pope makes any official pronouncement on matters of faith or morals, it is impossible for them to err, and that in them alone lies infallibility. Whatever is thus pronounced by the pope is believed by the faithful, and whatever is commanded is to be obeyed.

Surprisingly enough, this Roman Catholic tenet became an Article of Faith only in 1870, and that after centuries of wordy conflict, not only between Romanists and Protestants, but between Romanist and Romanist. For several centuries before the infallibility of the pope was decreed at the Vatican Council of 1870, the popes had acted as though they were infallible, but against much opposition.

One instance of this opposition occurred in 1682, when the French Catholic Church decided that, in spite of the pope being “head of the church,” and that what he promulgated was applicable to the whole church, yet unless the General Council assented to his dictum, it was not to be received as infallible. In such a situation as this, Catholic believers were put in the impossible position of having to obey two authorities, each of which refused to acknowledge the infallible authority of the other.

Not only were popes and councils at loggerheads, but pope disagreed with pope. In the Vatican Council of 1870—note the date, over eighteen hundred years after the beginning of church history—the dogma of Papal Infallibility was forced through the Council and promulgated. The word “forced” is used because it accurately describes the facts, as witness the words of Bishop Strossmayer uttered in the Council:

History raises its voice with authority to assure us that some Popes have erred. You may protest against it, or deny it, as you please, but I will prove it.

Pope Victor first approved Montanism, and then condemned it. Liberius (358) consented to the condemnation of Athanasius and made a profession of Arianism that he might be recalled from his exile and reinstated in his See.

Gregory I calls anyone anti-Christ who takes the name of “universal bishop,” and contrariwise Boniface II (607-8) made the patricide Emperor Phocas confer the title upon him.

Pascal II (1088-99) and Eugenius III (1145-53) authorized dueling; Julius II (1509) and Pius IV (1569) forbade it.

Eugenius IV (1431-39) approved of the Council of Basle, and in the restitution of the chalice to the Church of Bohemia; Pius II (1458) revoked the concession.

Hadrian II (867-72) declared civil marriage to be valid; Pius VII (1800-23) condemned it.

Sixtus V (1585-90) purchased an edition of the Bible, and by a bull recommended it to be read; Pius VII (1800-23) condemned the reading of it.

Clement XIV (1700-21) abolished the order of the Jesuits, permitted by Paul III, and Pius VII reestablished it.

If you then proclaim the infallibility of the actual Pope [Pius IX] you must either prove that which is impossible, that the popes never contradicted each other, or you must declare that the Holy Spirit has revealed to you that the infallibility of the papacy only dates from 1870. Are you bold enough to do that?

I say, if you decree the infallibility of the present Bishop of Rome, you must establish the infallibility of all the preceding ones without excluding any; but can you do that when history is there establishing with clearness equal to the sun that the popes have erred in their teaching? Could you do it and maintain that avaricious, incestuous, murdering, simoniacal popes have been Vicars of Jesus Christ? . . . Believe me, history cannot be made over again; it is there, and will remain to all eternity, to protest energetically against the dogma of Papal Infallibility.

In spite of all the protests raised, the Council declared for infallibility. But how did the voting go?

At the first voting, 418 votes were cast in favor of infallibility and 146 against, while some present refrained from voting. After further discussion extending over several months, another vote was taken, as a result of which 534 were for Papal Infallibility, with only two against, while 106 did not vote. A few of these latter were absent through sickness, but the great majority refused to attend. As a last step, the two dissident voters submitted to the will of the majority, and the dogma of Papal Infallibility was promulgated. Many of the theologians and professors in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria resisted the decision, however, and in the following year, 1871, broke away to form a new organization which was called the Old Catholic Church.

So the battle was over. Political disorders attending the establishment of the new kingdom of Italy prevented the continuance of the Vatican Council, which scattered without formally closing its proceedings, and no General Church Council has since been convened, the pope, a self-immolated prisoner in the Vatican, being left in his palace, shorn of his territories, but holding in his grasp for himself and his successors the spoil of Papal Infallibility as his sole prerogative.

When a pope dies and another has to be appointed, it is done by a series of ballots, beginning with a number of nominations, and the voting being done by the College of Cardinals, all of them fallible men. The new pope need not have been a member of the college himself, but since 1378 none but cardinals have been appointed. During the election, the cardinals are not permitted to exchange information or opinions, and the ballot goes on day after day until the requisite number is cast for one candidate. At last other names are eliminated from the confusion of conflicting opinions, and one name stands out. That man, himself as fallible as the rest, is then consecrated by all the other fallible members of the college, and by that act of consecration receives the gift of infallibility. As Bishop Strossmayer pointed out, that decision puts Rome on the horns of a dilemma. Either the popes became infallible in 1870 by a special revelation, and not before, or else the dogma of Papal Infallibility is retroactive, and covered all the previous popes, including those whose vices and crimes make their names a blot on papal history.

Apparently Rome accepts the latter alternative, for she claims that she never has introduced any new doctrine. And so, in spite of all the obloquy and contradictions involved, all the popes from the beginning have been infallible! Rome struggles to cover herself by saying:

Infallibility, freedom from error in declaring to the world the Gospel of Christ, and impeccability, freedom from sin, are two totally different things. While we naturally expect the Popes to be of the highest moral character—and most of them have been—the official prerogative of infallibility has nothing whatever to do with the Pope’s personal goodness or wickedness. . . . It is true that in the latter half of the 19th century certain Catholic writers tried to whitewash Alexander VI, viz., Bernacchi, Chantrel Leonetti, Nemeo, Ollivier, and others. But it is not fair to style them dishonest, for a Catholic naturally feels called upon to defend the honor of the Pope, as any true man feels bound to defend his mother’s good name. Call them unscholarly, if you will, or ignorant, but remember that we hold with Leo XIII: “The Church has no need of any man’s lie.” The most scholarly Catholic historian of the Popes, Ludwig Pastor, grants that Alexander lived the immoral life of the secular princes of his day, both as Cardinal and as Pope (History of the Popes, V, 363; VI, 140); that he obtained the papacy by the rankest simony (Ibid. V, 385); and that he brought his high office into disrepute by his unconcealed nepotism and lack of moral sense (VI, 139). He frees him, however, from the calumnious charges of incest and poisoning (IV, 135). —The Question Box, p. 176-7.

“The immoral life of the secular princes of his day . . . rankest simony . . . unconcealed nepotism . . . lack of moral sense”! All admitted by Rome’s most scholarly Catholic historian. Yet Alexander VI in spite of his “peccability”—euphemism for sins which one dare not enumerate in detail—still stands on the Roman Catholic Church’s register of the “Vicars of Christ,” gifted with infallibility, but not graced with holiness.

What more can be said? Either God through the centuries has by His Spirit directed the appointment of this long line of popes, or He has not. If He has not, nothing of man’s doing is or has been binding upon Him. But what of the alternative? For any man to say that such evil men as appear all too often in this “unbroken succession” of “infallible popes” were there by God’s appointment is surely sinking into the deepest depths of blasphemy of the God who says, “**Be ye holy, for I am holy.**” In contrast with the above, let us look at the standard God has set for bishops:

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?). Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil (I Timothy 3:2-7).

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers (Titus 1:5-9).

Nothing is said in the Scriptures to support Papal Infallibility, but much is said concerning the spiritual and moral qualifications of those whom God would have to oversee His flock on earth, the church, which He bought with His own blood.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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