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**IS PAPAL
INFALLIBILITY
REASONABLE?**

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CLAREMONT, N. H.

**A DIVINE SAFEGUARD
AGAINST ERROR**

By the Rev. John A. O'Brien, Ph. D.,
Chaplain of the Catholic Students,
University of Illinois.

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IS PAPAL INFALLIBILITY REASONABLE?

There is probably no dogma of the Catholic religion, which is so frequently misunderstood, and which occasions so much opposition on the part of our dear non-Catholic friends, as that which proclaims the infallible teaching authority of the Church as centered in the person of her supreme head, the Pope, the ruler of Christ's Church on earth. Let me invite our dear non-Catholic readers to consider this question in a calm, friendly manner. I am confident they will find that what they really wage war against is not papal infallibility as held by the Catholic Church, but a caricature of that teaching which exists only in their minds.

I would ask but one favor of them: That they approach this discussion with an *open* mind. To establish the truthfulness and the reasonableness of this teaching of our holy faith, I shall appeal not to the authority of

the Church, but to the words of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and to the court of common understanding.

First, let us consider what papal infallibility does *not* mean. Contrary to the conception of many people, infallibility does not mean that the pope is inspired. The Apostles and Evangelists received this gift, and their writings are accepted as the revealed Word of God. But the Church does not teach that the pope is inspired, or that he receives a divine revelation properly so called.

Thus the Vatican Council declares: "For the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter in order that they might spread abroad new doctrine which He reveals, but that, under His assistance, they might guard inviolably, and with fidelity explain, the revelation or deposit of faith handed down by the Apostles."

Confused With Sinlessness

Secondly, infallibility does not signify that the pope is impeccable or

incapable of moral wrong. Many people are in the habit of pointing to some one pontiff, whose character is not entirely free from blemishes, and saying: "See, there is a pope who was guilty of a misdeed. That proves that he was not infallible, and, therefore, that none of the popes are." The answer is simple. The objection does not come within speaking distance of the meaning of infallibility. Why? Because infallibility does not mean sinlessness, or freedom from all human weaknesses or shortcomings.

As a matter of fact, the popes have been, with few exceptions, men of virtuous lives. Twenty-nine out of the first thirty pontiffs died as martyrs for the faith. Out of the two hundred and sixty-one who have sat upon the Chair of Peter, seventy-nine are invoked upon our altars as saints of God because of their eminent holiness. Only about half a dozen have been charged with moral lapses. This is a strikingly small proportion when it is remembered that one out of the

twelve chosen by Christ Himself was a Judas Iscariot.

Even if a great majority of the Pontiffs, however, should have led vicious lives, this circumstance would not have impaired the prerogative of infallibility. This was bestowed upon the office they occupied, not for the protection of their morals, but for the guidance of their judgment in their religious teaching. Thus, for example, a judge is clothed by the laws of our country with certain legal power and authority. If in his private life he were guilty of some moral indiscretions, this circumstance would not rob his decisions of their validity. His authority in court is not dependent upon the character of his private life. It is conferred upon him by virtue of the office which he holds.

So, likewise, the prerogative of infallibility is conferred upon the office of the papacy, and is dependent in no way upon the private life of the incumbent. Like the legal authority of a judge, it is conferred upon the office

for the welfare of the society for which such an office was established.

Acknowledges Frailties

As a matter of fact, the pontiff proclaims the frailties which he has in common with all humanity. Each morning, at the beginning of Mass, he says at the foot of the altar in all humility: "I confess to Almighty God, and to His saints, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed." Likewise, at the Offertory of the Mass, he prays: "Receive, O Holy Father, Almighty, everlasting God, this oblation which I, Thy unworthy servant, offer for my innumerable sins, offenses and negligences."

Despite the eminence of his office, the pope does not pretend to be exempt from either the frailties or the temptations which constitute the common lot of all humanity. Not for a moment does he claim an utter sinlessness of life because of the mark of infallibility inhering in the office he holds.

In view of these facts, is it not strange that ministers of the Christian gospel should seek to discredit the dogma of papal infallibility by telling their congregations that there have been sinful popes? In what manner are the interests of the Prince of truth advanced by deliberately misrepresenting the teaching of the Catholic Church on this point? Surely Protestantism is not strengthened, nor is Catholicism weakened, by the artifice of building a sham opponent, a man of straw, and then with much gusto, demolishing it.

Sciences Not Included

Thirdly, infallibility does not mean that the pope is free from the possibility of error in discussing questions of natural science, such as physics, geology, astronomy, or medicine—matters which involve in no way the deposit of revealed truth. Neither does the inerrability of the pontiff extend to purely political questions, such as the form of government a nation ought to adopt, or the candidates

for whom Catholic citizens ought to vote. It does not, therefore, restrict the freedom of the scientists nor trespass upon the civil authority of the state.

Fourthly, infallibility does not signify that the pontiff is immune from liability to error in any domain when he speaks merely as a private teacher. In this capacity he is liable to err even in matters of faith and morals. Thus Benedict XIV wrote a treatise on Canon Law. Such a work is subject to criticism in the same manner as is any other work of a Doctor of the Church.

Real Meaning

What, then, does infallibility really mean? Simply this: When the pope in his official capacity, as successor of St. Peter and head of the Church on earth, promulgates to the whole Church a decision on faith or morals, he is preserved from error. It is to be noted that three conditions are required: (1) The pope must speak *ex cathedra*, i. e., from the Chair of

Peter, in his official capacity. (2) The decision must be for the whole Church. (3) It must be on a matter of faith or morals.

The pope has no authority to invent a new doctrine. He is not the author of revelation, but only its interpreter and expounder. He has no more authority to break a divine law or to distort an iota of Scripture than you or I. His function is to hand down unchanged the deposit of divine truth to all generations of men.

Similar to Supreme Court

His office in the interpretation of Holy Scripture is fundamentally the same as that of the Supreme Court of the United States in the interpretation of the Constitution. When a difference of opinion arises as to the construction of a constitutional provision, the question is referred in the last resort to the Supreme Court, at Washington. When the chief justice with his associates pronounces judgment upon it, that decision is accept-

ed by all parties as final and irrevocable by any other court.

Every citizen of our country praises the wisdom of the founding fathers in arranging this tribunal for the peaceful adjudication of disputes concerning the meaning of the Constitution, which the fathers foresaw would inevitably arise. Without such a court, the Constitution would soon be torn into shreds by conflicting interests. Anarchy, secession and civil war would speedily displace the political union of so many states having different racial complexions and different economic interests.

That the Union has been preserved is traceable to the existence of the Supreme Court. Indeed, historians are agreed that the one Civil War which has occurred in the century and a half of our national existence, would have been avoided if our domestic quarrel had been submitted to the Supreme Court instead of having been left to the arbitrament of the sword.

The same basic arrangement which has preserved the unity of our States

has safeguarded the unity of the Catholic Church. Without the supreme court of the papacy to appeal to, the Catholic Church would long ago have been torn into a thousand warring factions. One has but to observe the innumerable divisions which have rent the body of Protestantism during the few centuries of its existence, to perceive the chaos and anarchy that would have developed during the nineteen hundred years of the Church's existence, if she were without the divinely-established tribunal of papal infallibility as a court of last appeal. The marvellous unity of the Church which has provoked the admiration of the world is the happy consequence of the work of her supreme and infallible court, which has been functioning with unbroken continuity for nineteen centuries.

A Difference?

The analogy between the function of the Supreme Court in the interpretation of the Constitution, and that of the pope in the interpretation of

Holy Scripture, can scarcely fail to make a profound appeal to every citizen of our country regardless of religious belief. A non-Catholic lawyer, to whom the writer pointed out this similarity, commented as follows: "Yes, indeed, the analogy is striking. But there is a difference worth noting. It is this: While recognizing that the decision of the Supreme Court is binding and without appeal, we do not admit it to be infallible. It may still be wrong. Whereas, you Catholics maintain that the decision of the pope is not only binding, but is infallible. In that respect, the comparison limps."

Let me now address to my dear non-Catholic reader the words I then addressed to my legal friend: The difference you point out is true. But it is to be noted that the circumstance of making the decision of the Supreme Court final and irrevocable demands in theory that it should be infallible. For its decision should not bind unless it be unvaryingly the voice of truth and justice. Otherwise

there is the possibility of binding the parties under penalty of imprisonment to accept a false and unjust decision. The pronouncement has, therefore, all the practical consequences of infallibility. Strict logic would require that a decision that has all the sanctions of infallibility should actually be infallible.

Now it is to be admitted that while the Supreme Court has the sanctions for an infallible decision, it does not, nevertheless, really possess infallibility. Why? Simply because the founding fathers, who conferred its powers upon it, did not themselves possess infallibility and were not able, therefore, to give to the Supreme Court the actual inerrancy which its decisions, binding, final, and without appeal, would logically require.

Christ Was Able to Give

But Jesus Christ is the Founder of the Catholic Church and of the supreme tribunal of papal infallibility. In giving to that court the power of making its decisions binding and

without appeal, He gave it that which the authoritativeness and the irrevocability of its decisions really demand—actual infallibility.

For unlike the founding fathers, He possessed infallibility and was able, therefore, to confer it upon the highest tribunal in His Church, yes, more than that, He was in duty bound to confer it, for otherwise He would be responsible for a court whose decision was binding in conscience upon all its members, and yet in that decision there would be the possibility of falsehood and injustice. "Upon reflection," said my legal friend, "I must admit that I can see no possibility of escape from the logic of that conclusion."

From the binding and irrevocable character of the decisions of the Pope speaking in his official capacity, infallibility follows, therefore, as a logical necessity.

Let us now see if the voice of reason is confirmed by the handwriting of history. Let us see if such inerrancy was, as a matter of historical

fact, conferred by Christ upon Peter, the first pontiff of His Church.

Christ Rewards Peter

The scene occurs at Caesarea Philippi. Peter has just made his memorable profession of faith in Christ's divinity, saying: "Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God." The Master rewarded Peter in the following words: "Blessed art thou Simon Bar-Jona: because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in heaven, and I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be found also in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven." (Matt. 16:17-19.)

This solemn conferring upon Peter of the primacy among the Apostles and the authority to teach and rule the Church is couched in distinctly

Aramaic phraseology, abounding in characteristic Jewish metaphors and idioms. When translated into English the passage loses some of its force. Thus the word "kepha" is used for both "Peter" and "rock" in the language by our Lord. What Christ said to Peter then was: "Thou art Rock (kepha) and upon this rock (kepha) I will build My Church."

The expression "gates of hell" signifies the powers of death or evil. The conferring of keys is a common Jewish metaphor indicating the bestowal of authority. Down to the present day the key remains as the symbol of jurisdiction. When a distinguished visitor arrives in one of our large cities, the officials sometimes confer upon him a large key as the symbol of his authority to rule the city for the day. Translating the rich imagery and symbolism of the Aramaic language used by our Saviour into current English, Christ said in effect to Peter:

"You are the solid foundation upon which I will build My Church. I as-

sure you that the powers of death and evil shall not prevail against it. I give you the authority to rule the Church, to bind and to loosen; to decide what is right and wrong, lawful and unlawful, and your decisions are ratified by God Himself."

Christ Pledges His Guidance

On the memorable occasion of the Last Supper, Christ said to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for *thee*, that *thy* faith fail not: and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren." (Luke 22: 31-32) Here again the Saviour assures Peter that the powers of evil shall not prevail against him, and authorizes him to guide and strengthen his brethren in the faith.

On a previous occasion when Christ had secured from Peter the pledge of his love and loyalty, He said to him: "Feed My lambs . . . Feed My lambs . . . Feed My sheep." (St. John 21:15-17.) In these words

Our Lord authorizes Peter to feed with the nourishing food of truth not only the lay members of the fold, but the elders in the flock, the disciples and the Apostles as well.

The conferring of infallible teaching authority, centering in Peter the visible head of the Church, is likewise evident from the words Christ addressed to all the Apostles: "All power is given to Me in heaven and in earth. Going, therefore, teach ye all nations: baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and behold *I am with you* all days, even to the consummation of the world." (St. Matt. 28:18-20.)

The expression "I am with you" occurs altogether about ninety times in the Old and New Testaments, and always signifies that special divine assistance will be given to guarantee the success of the mission assigned. Christ is Truth. Where Christ is, error cannot co-exist. It is the definite

assurance to the infant Church that in teaching mankind the religion of Christ, the Church will not lead the world astray by teaching falsehood. Christ says to the Apostles in effect: "I, the Eternal Truth, will abide with you, will speak and teach through you, and give you my unfailing guidance and assistance."

Christ Promises the Spirit of Truth

In the same explicit way Christ promises to send the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Truth, upon the Apostles: "And I will ask the Father, and he shall give you another Paraclete, that he may abide with you forever. The Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, nor knoweth him; because he shall abide with you, and shall be in you But the Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you." (St. John 14:16-17, 26.)

In these words Christ assures the infant Church of the abiding presence of the Spirit of Truth guiding her in her teaching mission. This assurance of the Church's unfailing fidelity to the teachings of her divine Founder is the evidence of what we call the infallibility of the Church as focussed in her supreme head, the pope, the successor of Peter.

Many other utterances of Christ guaranteeing His unfailing guidance to His Church and her leader in the divinely appointed task of teaching all nations might be cited. The ones already presented, however, are ample evidence to carry conviction to the open mind.

How Bridge the Gap?

A few questions now remain to be considered. First, a university professor once said to me after I had presented the above evidence: "Father, I grant that the scriptural evidence is abundantly sufficient to show that Christ guaranteed to Peter and his

fellow Apostles a guidance that would safeguard them from error in their teaching. But isn't there quite a large gap from Peter to Pope Pius XI? What evidence is there that Pius XI enjoys in the twentieth century the immunity from error given to Peter in the first?"

Let me address to my dear non-Catholic reader the words I addressed to my professional friend: The mission which Christ gave to Peter and his fellow Apostles was that of teaching all nations and all mankind. It was to endure until the last soul shall be gathered into the arms of its Creator. But Peter and his associates were mortal men, destined to pass away with their generation while their mission was to continue. The guidance of Christ was, therefore, to continue with their successors. This is clearly disclosed by the words of Christ: "*Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world.*" Since the Apostles were not to live until the end of the world, Christ promised to be with them in the per-

son of their successors unto the end of time.

The logic of this conclusion can be denied only by those who believe that Christ was interested in saving only the souls of those who lived in His day, and was totally indifferent about all posterity. This, no Christian would maintain. Therefore, Christ must have provided for the certain transmission of His teachings to mankind through all the centuries. This is possible only through a teaching authority that is divinely safeguarded from error. Therefore, Pius XI enjoys today, and all his successors will enjoy, the same infallible teaching authority which was conferred upon the first pope, Peter the fisherman.

Is An Infallible Bible Sufficient

Second. A Protestant Bishop in a sermon against Papal Infallibility recently said: "For my part, I have an infallible Bible and this is the only infallibility that I require." While plausible at first view, such a

statement cannot stand the test of scrutiny.

Let me address myself in the following kindly manner to this Bishop, as the representative of all who share such a view: Either, my dear friend, you are infallibly certain that your particular interpretation of the Bible is the correct one or you are not. If you maintain that you are infallibly certain, then you claim for yourself—and you cannot very well deny the same for every other reader of the Bible—a personal infallibility, which you deny only to the pope and which we claim only for him. According to this view each of the hundreds of millions of readers of the Bible becomes a pope, while the only one who is not a pope is the pope himself. You avoid admitting the infallibility of the pope by multiplying infallibility by the number of readers of the Bible.

If you do not claim to be infallibly certain that your interpretation of the whole Bible is correct, then

of what value is it to have an infallible Bible without an infallible interpreter? In either case, your statement crumbles. The plain fact is that *an infallible Bible without an infallible living interpreter is largely futile*. Infallibility never gets from the printed pages to the one place it is needed, the mind of the reader. The myriad divisions within Protestantism offer ample evidence of the truth of this statement.

A Hybrid

This fact is well stated by a non-Catholic writer, Mallock, in his *Is Life Worth Living?* (p. 267) "Any supernatural religion," he says, "that renounces its claim to this (infallibility), it is clear, can profess to be a semi-revelation only. It is a hybrid thing, partly natural and partly supernatural, and it thus practically has all the qualities of a religion that is wholly natural. In so far it professes to be revealed, it of course professes to be infallible;

but if the revealed part be in the first place hard to distinguish, and in the second place hard to understand; if it may mean many things, and many of these things contradictory, it might as well never have been made at all. To make it in any sense as infallible revelation, or in other words a revelation at all *to us*, we need a power to interpret the testament that shall have equal authority with that testament itself."

Indeed, the question might well be asked of those who deny the establishment by Christ of an infallible teaching authority to safeguard the unity of His Church: Do you not indict the intelligence of our divine Lord when you deny to Him the foresight shown by the founders of the Republic in providing for a supreme authority to interpret the constitution and thus safeguard the permanence of the Union? Is it reasonable to suppose that divine Omniscience would fail to provide as effectively for the preservation of the unity of the Church as the

founders did for the unity of the Republic?

Infringement and Intellectual Freedom

Third. A last question remains. Is not the doctrine of papal infallibility an undue infringement upon the freedom of the intellect? Is not a Catholic hampered in his search for scientific truth by a blind degrading obedience to the arrogant claims of an infallible Church? Here a distinction is necessary. There is a legitimate freedom and an illegitimate one. The first is the freedom of believing the truth. The second is the freedom of believing error, which is in reality an abuse of the mind and constitutes a form of intellectual anarchy.

No one has the right to believe error anymore than one has the right to do wrong. The freedom of believing that four plus four are twenty-seven is enjoyed only by the inmates of an insane asylum. There is an inalienable obligation binding

every rational person to believe the truth. This is the only obligation which the doctrine of infallibility imposes. It is not a limitation of intellectual liberty but an augmentation of it. For the acceptance of truth always enlarges the domain of the intellect. "You shall know the truth," said Christ, "and the truth shall make you free." (St. John 8:32)

A Catholic does not give a blind degrading obedience to a fallible teacher who might ask him to accept without question any preposterous statement. The Church does not possess the authority to invent new doctrines, but only to interpret those divinely revealed. Thus the able and scholarly encyclicals of the last two pontiffs are not strictly speaking, infallible, since they do not absolutely define a dogma of faith. When a dogma is defined for the universal Church, this does not mean that it is invented, but merely that an article of the faith always held implicitly, is now set forth in explicit terms.

Newman and Kinsman

This doctrine does not restrain a Catholic from the free prosecution of scientific truth, nor prevent him from the acceptance of any fact clearly demonstrated by science. Truth can never contradict truth. Nor can one truth ever serve as an obstacle to the acceptance of other truth, but only as a stimulus. Infallibility, as Cardinal Newman points out, "is a supply for a need, and it does not go beyond the need. Its object is, and its effect also, not to enfeeble the freedom or vigor of human thought, but to resist and control its extravagances." (Apologia, p. 253)

While visiting with the writer in 1930, Dr. Frederick J. Kinsman, formerly Episcopalian Bishop of Delaware, and one of the greatest scholars in his church, repeated to an audience of University students what he had previously written in his *Salve Mater* (p. XIII): "My attitude toward the Church is one of entire submission. 'Crucifixion of

the intellect,' some object. I should call it 'resurrection,' but so long as I experience the fact, I shall not quarrel about the word. My chief consciousness as a Catholic is a new freedom. Cardinal Gibbons, in a little address to me, said that in spite of 'exterior hardships,' which he knew I must encounter, he hoped that I might enjoy 'interior sunshine.' That I think expresses what has been given."

What the compass is to the sailor tossed about in his frail bark by a tempestuous sea in the dark of night, infallibility is to the wayfarer searching for religious truth amidst the error that envelops him as a mist on every side. It is his certain guide to the harbor of truth. It is the safeguard which a beneficent Father has provided for the unerring transmission of revealed truth to His children in all the centuries of time. Papal infallibility is, therefore, not only entirely reasonable, but it is an absolutely necessary safeguard for the transmission of truth, without

the admixture of error, to all the generations of men.

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