



Divine Authority and the Necessity of Papal Infallibility

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The dogma of papal infallibility is probably the best known contribution of the 20th General Council held at the Vatican in 1869-1870, and it remains one of the most controversial teachings of the Catholic Church. The dogma is admittedly startling: “When the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*...he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals.”¹ Even more astounding is its necessity.

Although some opponents of this dogma assert that Pius IX “convoked the council of the Vatican solely to have papal infallibility proclaimed,”² the Pope actually had a much broader objective in mind, namely “the correction of modern errors and a seasonable revision of the legislation of the Church.”³ In the opinion of others, “the impending demise of the [pope’s] temporal power played a part in the bolstering of the spiritual power, and the proclamation of papal infallibility.”⁴ Although this is an interesting supposition in view of the Church’s divine Founder who said that “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18, 36), it fails to account for the long and universal tradition of submission to the decisions of the Roman see in matters of faith and morals prior to 1870 when papal infallibility was formally defined, for it “had been explicitly taught long before and had been assumed from the very beginning without question down to the time of the Protestant Reformation.”⁵

¹ First Vatican Council. Session 4, *Constitutio dogmatica prima de ecclesia Christi*, (18 July 1870), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. and trans. Norman P. Tanner, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 816.

² Joseph Kirch, “Vatican Council,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912). <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15303a.htm>>.

³ Kirch, “Vatican Council.”

⁴ P. Partner, et al, “States of the Church,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed, Vol. 13, (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 497.

⁵ Patrick Toner, “Infallibility,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07790a.htm>>.

In fact, the formal definition of papal infallibility was just one of the ecclesiastical attributes—along with indefectibility and visibility—that emerged from the main work of the council, which undertook to define the Catholic faith and the Church of Christ in response to the error of rationalism. Its definition also implied “obliquely and indirectly” the infallibility of the Church according to “the traditional usage according to which the dogma is assumed as an implicate of ecumenical magisterial authority.”⁶ Since “it is only in connection with doctrinal authority as such that, practically speaking, this question of infallibility arises,”⁷ this essay will attempt to trace the theme of doctrinal authority running through the texts of the First Vatican Council to show how infallibility ultimately derives from the very authority of God. In doing so, it will be seen that infallibility is not a mere historical accretion, nor is it an extravagant claim of a power-hungry hierarchical structure on the eve of losing its temporal authority; rather it is a charism necessary for the Church’s fulfillment of the salvific mission entrusted to Her by Christ.

The errors current at the time of the Vatican Council mainly stemmed from rationalism, the philosophical offspring of the Protestant revolution which three centuries earlier had “rejected the divine Magisterium of the church and allowed religious questions to be a matter for the judgment of each individual.”⁸ The doctrine of rationalism or naturalism not only calls into doubt the divine authority of Scripture, “which they at one time claimed to be the sole source and judge of the Christian faith,”⁹ but ironically, rationalism also denigrates the rational nature itself—if matter is all that exists, then reason ultimately doesn’t matter at all. To protect the faithful from the errors of those whose “abandonment and rejection of the christian religion...has

⁶ Toner, “Infallibility.”

⁷ Toner, “Infallibility.”

⁸ First Vatican Council. Session 3, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, (24 April 1870), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. and trans. Norman P. Tanner, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 804.

⁹ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 804.

plunged the minds of many into the abyss of pantheism, materialism and atheism,”¹⁰ the fathers at Vatican I set about defining first the Catholic faith and then the Church of Christ.

The dogmatic constitution on the Catholic faith starts, appropriately enough, with a “definition” of God, Who is authoritative and necessary by nature. He is “creator and lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immeasurable, incomprehensible, infinite in will, understanding and every perfection”¹¹ who “brought into being from nothing the twofold created order, that is, the spiritual and the bodily, the angelic and the earthly, and thereafter the human which is, in a way, common to both.”¹² This assertion of the divine creation of man is itself a blow to the errors of the rationalists, who to this day fail to account for the spiritual endowments of Evolved Man. Moreover, since God is “one, singular, completely simple and unchangeable spiritual substance,”¹³ it is clear that God is distinct from His manifold material creation, not the sum total of it as pantheists assert. Finally, the fact that “everything that God has brought into being He protects and governs by His Providence,”¹⁴ dismisses the claims of atheists, who unfortunately do not realize that they (and their denials of God) would immediately cease to exist altogether if God stopped thinking about them even for one instant. Even though it goes without saying (and the council does not say) that God is necessary, St. Thomas Aquinas has “baptized” the Aristotelian proof for the necessity of God: Since “one cannot proceed to infinity among

¹⁰ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 804.

¹¹ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 805.

¹² First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 805-806.

¹³ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

¹⁴ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 805.

necessary beings the cause of whose necessity lies in an outside source, we must therefore posit a first necessary being, which is necessary through itself. This is God.”¹⁵

Having “defined” God, the council next expounds revelation. Although God “can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things by the natural power of human reason,”¹⁶ He nevertheless chose “to reveal Himself and the eternal laws of His will to the human race by another, and that a supernatural, way”¹⁷ by which “those matters concerning God...[can] be known by everyone without difficulty, with firm certitude, and with no intermingling of error.”¹⁸ If God had created man for a merely natural end, divine revelation would not have been necessary—man’s reason alone would have sufficed. However, since God “has destined man for a supernatural end, that is, one that totally surpasses what his natural powers can ever attain,”¹⁹ divine revelation is “absolutely necessary”²⁰ for man to reach the supernatural end of “sharing in the good things of God that utterly surpasses the understanding of the human mind.”²¹

Divine revelation “is contained in written books and unwritten traditions, which were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ himself.”²² The books of the Bible are held “to be sacred and canonical, not because the Church subsequently approved them by her authority after they had been composed by unaided human skill, nor simply because they contain revelation without error, but because, being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles, Book 1, God*, Ch. 15, a. 5.
<<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles.htm> >.

¹⁶ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

¹⁷ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

¹⁸ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

¹⁹ Kenneth Baker, S.J., *Fundamentals of Catholicism*, Vol. 2, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 23.

²⁰ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

²¹ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

²² First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

have God as their author, and were as such committed to the Church.”²³ Since fallen man’s individual attempts to penetrate the meaning of Scripture are subject to error, an authoritative interpreter of Holy Writ is necessary to ensure that its true meaning is proclaimed. This authority belongs by divine right to the Church, who alone has “the right to judge of the true meaning and interpretation of holy Scripture.”²⁴

Faith, then, is the response of the rational creature to divine revelation, and the council’s definition of faith continues the themes of authority and necessity. Interestingly, the fathers point out that faith is not merely an apprehension of the intrinsic truth of revelation; rather it is a gift by which we believe what God has revealed “because of the authority of God himself, who makes the revelation and can neither deceive nor be deceived.”²⁵ Although the submission of intellect and will to the authority of God’s revelation is obligatory due to the supreme authority of revelation, it is not, however, “a blind movement of the mind,”²⁶ for God willed to provide “outward indications of his revelation...first and foremost miracles and prophecies”²⁷ so that the “submission of our faith should be in accordance with reason.”²⁸ Since “God cannot deny himself, nor can truth be in opposition to truth,”²⁹ the council teaches that any apparent contradiction between faith and reason is due either to a faulty understanding of dogma or to faulty reasoning. Moreover, since “the doctrine of faith which God has revealed is put forward not as some philosophical discovery capable of being perfected by human intelligence, but as a divine deposit committed to the spouse of Christ to be faithfully protected and infallibly

²³ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

²⁴ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 806.

²⁵ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 807.

²⁶ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 807.

²⁷ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 807.

²⁸ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 807.

²⁹ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 809.

promulgated,”³⁰ the Church’s dogmas, like their Author, are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow—always maintaining that same meaning “which has once been declared by holy mother Church”³¹ with no abandonment of this sense “under the pretext or in the name of a more profound understanding.”³²

Since “no one can achieve justification without faith nor can anyone attain eternal life unless he perseveres in it to the end,”³³ there must be an organ by which revelation, which ended with the death of the last Apostle, is faithfully transmitted. This organ is the Church, which Christ endowed “with clear notes to the end that she might be recognized by all as the guardian and teacher of the revealed word.”³⁴ Our Lord could have established any sort of institution that He liked, but we know with certainty, thanks to divine revelation, that “he set blessed Peter over the rest of the apostles and instituted in him the permanent principle of both unities [faith and communion] and their visible foundation.”³⁵ Since this principle of unity is needed for “the continual salvation and permanent benefit of the Church,” it “must of necessity remain forever, by Christ’s authority, in the Church which founded as it is upon a rock, will stand firm until the end of time.”³⁶ This necessity means that neither the principle of unity nor the primacy that attends it died with St. Peter; rather, both are passed on to each of his successors in their turn upon elevation to the Roman see. In addition to supreme jurisdiction “to tend, rule and govern the universal church,” the Roman primacy “includes also the supreme power of teaching.”³⁷

³⁰ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 809.

³¹ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 809.

³² First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 809.

³³ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 807.

³⁴ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 807.

³⁵ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica prima de ecclesia Christi*, ed. Tanner, 812.

³⁶ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica prima de ecclesia Christi*, ed. Tanner, 813.

³⁷ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica prima de ecclesia Christi*, ed. Tanner, 815.

It is to this supreme power of teaching that the gift of infallibility applies, “not so that [the successors of Peter] might...make known some new doctrine, but that, by [God’s] assistance, they might religiously guard and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles.”³⁸ From this purpose, both the object and the necessity of the infallibility emerge. “The object of the Infallibility is the formally revealed truths of Christian doctrine concerning faith and morals”³⁹ and those closely connected with it. The necessity of infallibility is clear because “the Church could not achieve this purpose if she could not infallibly decide regarding doctrines and acts which are intimately linked with Revelation.”⁴⁰

Like her divine Founder, who manifests His “almighty power most chiefly in sparing and showing mercy,”⁴¹ the Church uses her divinely conferred authority “so that the whole flock of Christ might be kept away...from the poisonous food of error and be nourished with the sustenance of heavenly doctrine.”⁴² Since her authority is remarkably reminiscent of that wielded by good mother, it is appropriate that the phrase “Holy Mother Church” appears no less than six times in the decrees of Vatican I, the first general council to use this favorite expression of the Church’s dutiful sons. Thanks to the kindly authority of Holy Mother Church, Christians can safely and intelligently affirm with St. Ignatius of Loyola: “To keep ourselves right in all things, we ought to hold fast to this principle: What seems to me to be white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it.”⁴³

³⁸ First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica prima de ecclesia Christi*, ed. Tanner, 816.

³⁹ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, (Rockford: Tan Books, 1974), 298.

⁴⁰ Ott, *Dogma*, 299.

⁴¹ Collect, Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, *The Roman Catholic Daily Missal* (1962), (Kansas City: Angelus Press, 2004), p. 750.

⁴² First Vatican Council, *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*, ed. Tanner, 816.

⁴³ St. Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated by George E Ganss, S.J., (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992), 135.

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Though papal infallibility was only set in stone in 1870, the idea had been part of church history and debate as far back as 519 when the notion of the Bishop of Rome as the preserver of apostolic truth was set out in the Formula of Hormisdas. Gregory VII. In 1075 Pope Gregory VII in his *Dictatus Papae* (The Pope's Memorandum) put it more bluntly. Moreover, papal teaching authority was not seen as being wholly independent of councils of the church. No major controversy in the first thousand years of Christianity was ever settled simply by papal decree. It was not until the nineteenth century that moves began to make a formal acknowledgement that the pope was infallible. It was seen as a useful tool in the Church's rejection of the liberal, secular agenda that was sweeping Europe. Papal infallibility is a dogma in the Roman Catholic Church that the Pope is immune from error in specific matters of faith and moral doctrine. Many, both inside and outside the Catholic church, erroneously believe the Pope is considered infallible regarding anything he says or does. In fact, Papal infallibility has only been invoked twice since being officially codified into Catholic dogma during the First Vatican Council of 1869. The Vatican Council specified the conditions for Papal infallibility as Papal Infallibility is this same principle, but applied specifically to the Pope, the only bishop to which it is ever individually applied. Therefore, to be specific, Papal Infallibility is the belief that the Pope is preserved by God from articulating something that is in error when he makes an official proclamation regarding a matter of faith or morals intended to be binding upon the consciences of all faithful believers. Your question was "what is the best evidence against Papal Infallibility?" *Humani Generis* even contains the last time the claim is made that the Body of Christ and the "Roman Catholic Church" are one and the same, exclusive of all others claiming to be Christian - an idea soundly rejected by a higher authority and the ordinary magisterium of the Church.