

To religiously guard and faithfully expound the deposit of faith

Today we conclude our survey of the second category in the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary* – teachings set forth definitively, even though not formally proclaimed to have been divinely revealed. The occasion of the publication of the *Commentary* was St John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, in which he declared: 'This second paragraph of the *Profession of faith* is of utmost importance since it refers to truths that are necessarily connected to divine revelation.' (3)

Quoting the *Commentary* again: 'Every believer...is required to give firm and definitive assent to these truths, based on faith in the Holy Spirit's assistance to the Church's Magisterium, and on the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the Magisterium in these matters.' (6) Here it refers to the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* approved by St Paul VI, which stated: 'According to Catholic doctrine, the infallibility of the Church's Magisterium extends not only to the deposit of faith but also to those matters without which that deposit cannot be rightly preserved and expounded.' (1973) That Declaration refers in turn to Vatican II's teaching that 'this infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine of faith and morals, extends as far as the deposit of Revelation extends, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded.' (*Lumen Gentium* (1964) 25)

In recent months we looked at some infallible *moral* teachings from the second category, particularly regarding the fifth and sixth commandments. Concluding its examples of truths to be held definitively, the *Commentary* finally mentions truths to be held definitively that are connected to revelation 'by historical necessity': 'the legitimacy of the election of the Supreme Pontiff or of the celebration of an Ecumenical Council, the canonisations of saints' (such things are called 'dogmatic facts'); Pope Leo XIII's declaration on the invalidity of Anglican ordinations. (11) Obviously, such things are not part of the public revelation that ended with the death of the last Apostle, handed on in Scripture and Tradition. But although they are not *themselves* divinely revealed, the Church still has the power of teaching historical realities like these definitively, so as to faithfully guard and expound the deposit of faith.

For example, safeguarding of the faith would be threatened if we could not say for sure that a particular council was truly Ecumenical, or that a particular pope was validly elected. A pope or a council could give a teaching, apparently infallible from its form, but someone might use the loophole, 'Is he really the pope? Was that really a valid Ecumenical Council?' The *Doctrinal Commentary* is indicating that the Church can teach infallibly even about such points – thus safeguarding the original doctrine that the pope or council was proclaiming.

A recent example: several years back, a few extremist voices claimed that the election of Pope Francis was invalid because Pope Benedict was supposedly still the pope – and so they excused themselves from obeying Francis' teachings. Before that, there had already been a tiny fringe in recent decades who said that the last *several* popes weren't real popes at all, back to the times of Vatican II. Ridiculous splinter groups even proclaimed their own 'popes', claiming in effect to be the 'real' universal Catholic Church (though obviously lacking the visible mark of *catholicity* itself – universality – one of the four marks of the true Church affirmed in the Creed).

One could go into lots of details to refute such things, but we can also just go to the 'big picture'. Our confidence in Christ's promises assures us that the Holy Spirit would not allow the entire

Church to be deceived in such a dramatic way (just as he would not allow the entire Church to be deceived by a teaching, infallible in the form of its proclamation, that was nonetheless false).

History has seen times when there were two or even three claimants to the papacy, and it was not clear (at least not to the whole Church) whose was the rightful claim. There *was* a real pope – it just wasn't certain who that was. But in those cases there wasn't the infallible consensus of the universal Church that this man or that man was pope. It is different with modern popes, where the bishops and faithful have been morally unanimous in adhering to them as true popes.

Central to the whole point of the papacy is to be a *visible* centre of unity. The teachings of the visible authority are what give us certainty of *invisible* things, the truths of faith and morals. But if we could never even have full confidence that the *apparent* pope was *really* the pope, the visibility itself would be gone, and the certainties of faith would be undermined.

We won't often come across these fringe opinions, but if we do, it is good to be aware that it is not a matter of 'legitimate difference of opinion' for Catholics whether (for example) Francis is the true pope; likewise with the validity of ecumenical councils, such as Vatican II. To deny such things is to depart from the infallible consensus. In this connection we also recall the very grave sin of schism – 'the refusal of submission to the Supreme Pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him.' (*Code of Canon Law*, Canon 751; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2089) Schism incurs automatic excommunication (and one is obliged to be in submission to the actual pope, not a pope of one's own fantasy).

The *Commentary* next mentions canonisations of saints. These are held to be infallible declarations that the person canonised is truly in heaven. This infallibility has been the consensus of theologians, virtually unanimous by last century, and different popes have affirmed it. So as the *Commentary* indicates, to remain in full communion with the Catholic Church we must hold definitively the truth of every papal declaration of canonisation.

The *Commentary* refers finally to Leo XIII's declaration on the invalidity of Anglican ordinations. Leo proclaimed: 'We pronounce and declare that ordinations carried out according to the Anglican rite have been, and are, absolutely null and utterly void.' (*Apostolicae Curae* (1896) 36) (This was an infallible declaration on Anglican orders at that point in time. That does not rule out that since 1896 individual Anglicans may have derived valid Orders by involving in their ordinations non-Anglican bishops who possibly had apostolic succession.)

True bishops and priests, and therefore the true Eucharist, are still retained by the Eastern Churches separated from the Catholic Church, such as the Orthodox; but not by ecclesial communities deriving from the Protestant Reformation. (cf. Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism (1964) 15; 22) Only those separated local communities and their groupings led by bishops in apostolic succession are properly termed 'Churches'; but these are wounded in their condition as particular local Churches insofar as they lack full communion with the Catholic Church, in which subsists the one and universal Church of Christ. (cf. *Dominus Iesus* (2000) 17)

Our reflection today on the Church's infallibility even in this second tier of teachings highlights the 'watertight' nature of Christ's promises. God will not allow the Church to go astray because of some loophole, such as 'the pope' not truly being the pope. God is not a legalist out to trick the Church. Our faith in all the infallible teachings comes from our trust in God as our loving Father; in Christ's promises; and in the Holy Spirit leading us into the complete truth. (*Jn* 16:13)