

MT. ST. MICHAEL
Tuesday Evening Doctrine Classes – 6:30-7:30 p.m.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE ON THE PAPACY

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May 21, 2019
POPE WHO WERE FALSELY ALLEGED TO BE HERETICS

A. We are assured by Church teaching that there has never been a heretical Pope.

1. Vatican Council I, in the Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, Ch. 4, solemnly teaches:

So the fathers of the fourth Council of Constantinople [869-870], following the footsteps of their predecessors, published this solemn profession of faith: The first condition of salvation is to maintain the rule of the true faith. And since that saying of our Lord Jesus Christ, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church (Matthew 16:18) cannot fail of its effect, the words spoken are confirmed by their consequences. **For in the Apostolic See the Catholic religion has always been preserved unblemished, and sacred doctrine been held in honor.** Since it is our earnest desire to be in no way separated from this faith and doctrine, we hope that we may deserve to remain in that one communion which the Apostolic See preaches, for in it is the whole and true strength of the Christian religion...

This gift of truth and a never-failing faith was divinely conferred upon Peter and his successors in this chair, that they might administer their high duty for the salvation of all; that the entire flock of Christ, turned away by them from the poisonous food of error, might be nourished on the sustenance of heavenly doctrine, that with the occasion of schism removed the whole Church might be saved as one, and relying on her foundation might stay firm against the gates of hell.

2. One of the Fathers who attended the Council, Archbishop John Purcell of Cincinnati, commented as follows afterwards:

The question was also raised by a Cardinal, "What is to be done with the Pope if he becomes a heretic?" It was answered that there has never been such a case; the Council of Bishops could depose him for heresy, for from the moment he becomes a heretic he is not the head or even a member of the Church. The Church would not be, for a moment, obliged to listen to him when he begins to teach a doctrine the Church knows to be a false doctrine, and he would cease to be Pope, being deposed by God Himself.

If the Pope, for instance, were to say that the belief in God is false, you would not be obliged to believe him, or if he were to deny the rest of the creed, "I believe in Christ," etc. The supposition is injurious to the Holy Father in the very idea, but serves to show you the fullness with which the subject has been considered and the ample thought given to every possibility. If he denies any dogma of the Church held by every true believer, he is no more Pope than either you or I; and so in this respect the dogma of infallibility amounts to nothing as an article of temporal government or cover for heresy.

(Abp. John B. Purcell, quoted in Rev. James J. McGovern, [Life and Life Work of Pope Leo XIII](#) [Chicago, IL: Allied Printing, 1903], p. 241; *Imprimatur* by Abp. James Quigley of Chicago; underlining added.)

- B. Objections to the Infallibility of the Pope (pp. 303-310, of Msgr. G. Van Noort's Dogmatic Theology, Vol. II, *Christ's Church*, Newman Press: Westminster, Maryland, 1957)

Many facts from the Church's history are adduced as objections to the infallibility of the pope. Here, only the main ones will be considered. In dealing with these facts, we are interested in one point only: whether the pope ever made a mistake when speaking ex cathedra.

1. Against *St. Peter* himself two objections are raised. First, he denied Christ on the night of His passion; secondly, he forced Gentile converts to adopt Jewish religious practices (see Gal. 2:11-14).
 At the time of the passion Peter was not yet the supreme shepherd and teacher of the Church. Obviously, then, he could not act in that capacity at that time. As a private individual he sinned seriously, but he did not lose the faith.
 The second objection is closer to the point, for Peter was then head of the Church. It is, however, a rather superficial argument against infallibility. When Peter deliberately separated himself from the Gentile way of life – so not to shock Judaic-Christians – he did act imprudently. He did cause some harm to the progress of the faith. (That is why St. Paul scolded him for it: he knew how much Peter’s example meant.) Whether Peter was acting in good conscience or not is not here our concern. One fact is abundantly clear: Peter by no means handed down any doctrinal decision on the matter. That is why Tertullian could write, “It was indeed a fault of conduct, but not of teaching” (*De praescriptione* 23).
2. *Pope Liberius* (352-366) is alleged to have betrayed St. Athanasius and the whole Catholic faith by signing the formula of Sirmia which was either Arian or semi-Arian in doctrine.
 - a. For the sake of argument let us grant that Liberius did actually sign this heretical document (some historians dispute the point). The mere signing of the document could not possibly be considered an *ex cathedra* decision. Even anti-Catholic critics admit that the pope, after two years of exile and captivity) only finally signed to release himself from persecution. Such circumstances, far from showing that the pope intended to hand down a decision binding the universal Church, exclude any such intention.
 - b. Even in the supposition that Liberius did sign his name to one of the formulae at Sirmia, the one he signed would have been the third formula (in the year 358). This formula was not in itself heretical. Even though the formula, by omitting the term *homoousios* made sacrosanct by the Council of Nicaea, contained a less accurate formulation of the Catholic Faith and was consequently more acceptable to the semi-Arians, strictly speaking it was not erroneous.
 - c. Finally; a number of historians think there can be some real doubt whether Liberius actually signed or not.
3. *Pope Vigilius* (537-555) is accused of first condemning “The Three Chapters,” then of forbidding their condemnation, and finally of once more condemning them.
 Vigilius did not change in the slightest his decision about the doctrinal matter in question. He always and clearly rejected the Nestorianism with which “The Three Chapters” were infected. But the pope was under extremely difficult circumstances (as Justinian’s prisoner), and, surrounded by deceit and political intrigue, hesitated to make a *prudential judgment*. He did hesitate about the wisdom of condemning, at that time, those writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Ibas, bishop of Edessa, which were called the *Tria Capitula* (the authors themselves were already in their graves). The writings did deserve censure, but since their authors, after explicitly rejecting Nestorianism, had been welcomed back by the fathers of the Council of Chalcedon, condemnation of the writings would have been a stumbling block to many people, particularly the Westerners. These people would have taken the condemnation as a slap at the authority of the Council of Chalcedon. Consequently, even if the pope acted a bit imprudently in this matter, he definitely made no error in matters of faith...
4. It is alleged of *Pope Honorius I* (625-38) that: (a) in two letters to Sergius, bishop of Constantinople, he taught Monotheletism and, did so, indeed, so clearly that (b) he was afterwards for this very reason condemned as a heretic by the sixth ecumenical council (Third Constantinople) in the year 680.
 - a. The letters of Honorius do not contain any *ex cathedra* statement. The pope made no doctrinal decision; he approved the request of Sergius that silence should be observed in the question of “a single or double operation” in Christ, “Exhorting you that avoiding the use of the newfangled term of a single or double operation...” (Kirch 1064); and again, “It is not necessary for us to give a definitive decision on this matter of one or two operations” (Kirch 1068).
 But to urge silence on a matter is just the reverse of a peremptory definition!
 The letters of Honorius do not contain any doctrinal error. Even though the pope does refrain from using the term of a double will or double operation, he does teach in equivalent terms the existence of two wills and a twofold operation by asserting that Christ possesses two complete, unconfused natures, which operate and are sources of operation, and one operator.
 The phrase: “We confess that there is one will of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Kirch 1073) in nowise prevents this conclusion. In the context in which the clause occurs, the meaning is simply this: in Christ’s human nature there is perfect harmony between His rational will and His sensitive appetite (for the latter is perfectly subject to

the former), hence there is in Christ's humanity but one will, one that is to say, not physically but morally. Pope John IV (840-42) ratified this orthodox meaning in his *Apologia pro Honorio* coauthored, it is interesting to note, by the same John Sympon who had cosigned the letters of Honorius himself.

It must be admitted, however, that the clause "we confess one will," even though it did not have a Monotheletic meaning in Honorius' mind and does not have such a meaning objectively – provided the context be considered carefully, not casually – could be easily twisted to give it a perverted sense.

- b. Before anything else, this much is absolutely sure: Honorius was not condemned as guilty of preaching heresy in his official capacity (*ex cathedra*). Something more, he was not even condemned as being privately a heretic. Strictly speaking, he was condemned for being a *helper* of heresy. Whatever might have been the intention of the fathers of the sixth ecumenical council, this much is certain: the decree of the council would be of no value except insofar as it was ratified by the Apostolic See. Now Leo II, who had succeeded Agatho as pope before the end of the council, in his ratification of the Fathers' decree either explained the decree in such fashion or so mitigated it that the upshot was that Honorius was to be stigmatized not as a heretic, but as a helper of heresy.

Here are Leo's words to Constantine Pogonatus ratifying the Council's decree: "We anathematize the inventors of the new error, that is, Theodosius, Cyrus, Sergius, Pyrrhus, Paul, Peter . . . and also Honorius who *did not enlighten* this Apostolic See with the doctrine of apostolic tradition, but *allowed* its immaculate faith to be soiled by profane betrayal" (Kirch 1085). A short time later, Leo wrote to the bishops of Spain explaining the matter. Honorius was condemned along with the others: "because instead of extinguishing the incipient flame of heretical doctrine, as befits the holder of apostolic authority, he rather fanned it *by his negligence*."

Was, then, Honorius actually a helper of heresy? Prescinding from the question of serious subjective guilt, from which many authors excuse the pope, this much must be said: Honorius was a bit gullible in relying so readily on Sergius' advice and he acted unwisely in persuading people not to preach about the twofold operation which he himself, nonetheless, personally admitted. He acted still more unwisely by adding that odd-sounding clause about "one will in Christ." Because of these imprudences he did (unwittingly) help to fan the rising blaze of the Monotheletic heresy. Instead, he should have combatted the heresy energetically with a clear and distinct explanation of apostolic doctrine as befitted his apostolic office. Finally, it seems probable that the only reason the Apostolic See acquiesced in this grave censure of Honorius was to prevent even further damage by making some concessions to the Greeks who were quite incensed about the condemnation of some of their leaders.

All this explanation is offered on the hypothesis that both the letters of Honorius and the acts of the sixth council are completely authentic. Quite a few scholars – whose opinion has not won wide acceptance, however – have tried to show that a number of interpolations have been inserted in either the letters of Honorius or the acts of the council.

5. *John XXII* (1316-1334) has been accused of being a heretical pope, for teaching that the souls who die in the state of grace do not see the Beatific Vision until *after* the General Judgment (this extract is by Fr. Anthony Cekada, in a January 28, 2015 *Quidlibet* blogpost, titled "Dr. de Mattei Prescribes an Anti-Sede Tranquilizer." It was written in response to Dr. Roberto de Mattei's false argument that John XXII retained the Papacy while falling into heresy). Fr. Cekada writes:

The accusation of heresy arose from a series of sermons John XXII preached in Avignon, France in which he maintained that the souls of the blessed departed do not see God until after the Last Judgement. Sounds promising as an anti-sede argument at first, since John XXII was always recognized as a true pope. However:

(a) **The doctrine on the Beatific Vision had not yet been defined** – John XXII's successor, Benedict XII would do that.

Dr. de Mattei, perhaps sensing a weakness in his analogy because of this, waffles on the point: when it came to the common teaching on the beatific vision at the time, John XXII "contested the thesis," "fell into heterodoxy," "entered into conflict with Church tradition on a point of primary importance," "sustained the view," "re-proposed the error," "tried to impose this erroneous view," etc.

So while in the title of his article, Dr. de Mattei speaks of "a pope who fell into **heresy**," he shies away from employing the specific technical term "heresy" in his text. And the **heresy** of the post-Conciliar popes, including Bergoglio, is the starting point for the sede argument.

(b) Then there is the *mode* that John XXII, who had been a theologian before his election, employed to present his arguments and conclusions.

Here, the theologian Le Bachelet says that John XXII **proposed his teaching only as a “private doctor who expressed an opinion, *hanc opinionem***, and who, while seeking to prove it, recognized that it was open to debate.” (“Benoît XII,” in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, 2:662.)

Thus, it is incorrect for Dr. de Mattei to claim that John proposed his thesis as “an act of ordinary magisterium regarding the faith of the Church.”

In the pope’s second sermon, moreover, he said the following: “I say with Augustine that, if I am deceived on this point, let someone who knows better correct me. For me it does not seem otherwise, **unless the Church would so declare with a contrary statement** [*nisi ostenderetur determinatio ecclesie contraria*] or unless authorities on sacred scripture would express it more clearly than what I have said above.” (Le Bachelet, DTC 2:662.)

Such statements **excluded the element of “pertinacity” proper to heresy.**

So, two of the conditions which by definition are necessary for heresy to exist were simply not present in the case of John XXII.

(Returning to Van Noort)

6. Finally, we have the widely publicized case of Galileo whose teaching on the motion of the earth and the immobility of the sun was condemned as “false and completely opposed to Divine Scripture.”
 - a. It should be candidly admitted, we think, that the Sacred Congregation did condemn Galileo’s teaching by what was actually a *doctrinal* decree. The opinion of some theologians that the decree of March 5, 1616 was a purely *disciplinary* decree, merely forbidding the reading of books containing Galileo’s theory and nothing more than that, is, in our opinion, difficult to square with the facts of the case. Likewise it should be frankly admitted that the Congregations of the Inquisition and of the Index committed a *faux pas* in this matter. Even though that mistake is easily understandable in the circumstances of the time, it cannot be completely excused.
 - b. It is beyond question that in the whole case of Galileo no *ex cathedra* decision was ever handed down. The pope was aware of the decree of the congregation, and approved it *as a decree of the Congregation*, even though (as was customary at the time) no explicit mention of papal approbation is found in the decree itself. But the pope himself in his capacity as pope did not hand down any decision. Neither did he make the Congregation’s decision his own in any special way. In the Galileo case, therefore, we have a decision which is by its very nature revocable and nothing more. As a matter of fact, both the more sensible theologians of the time and a fair number of the scientists of the day understood the matter in exactly that light.

Likewise, the decree of July 22, 1633 which ordered Galileo to abjure his errors and, furthermore, did so under pain of certain penalties – even though it was sent to all the bishops by order of Urban VI – possesses no other authority than the authority of the Sacred Congregation of the Inquisition. This is quite clear from the ending of a decree of this type: “And so, we, the undersigned cardinals, pronounce...”; there then follows a list of their names without any mention made of the pope.

Since in this whole question, he who occupied the chair (*sedebat in cathedra*) never handed down a decision, there is simply no *ex cathedra* decision in the Galileo case. Consequently it is futile to adduce it as an objection to papal infallibility.

Footnote: Monsignor Journet feels that the authors of the decrees of 1616 and 1633 committed a fault against prudence due to a failure of nerve. They failed to act quickly enough and resolutely enough in detaching the scriptural question from the scientific one:

Where precisely were the authors of these fallible decrees at fault? They lacked the courage to detach the question of Scripture at once from the dispute over the geocentric issue. That, it seems, would have been the prudent thing to do. “Cardinal Baronius,” wrote Galileo to the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, “used to say that God did not wish to teach us how the heavens go, but how we are to go to heaven.” One wishes that all the theologians of that day had spoken like Cardinal Baronius! Then they would not have involved the fallible magisterium of the Congregations in a prudential and doctrinal error.

St. Robert Bellarmine considered that, till proof to the contrary should be forthcoming, the true meaning of Scripture was represented by the geocentric thesis. So did most theologians, Catholic and Protestant. And the Bible undoubtedly says that “the sun riseth and goeth down and returneth to his place, and there rising again, maketh his round by the south and turneth again to the north” (Eccles. i. 5). But they should have remembered and applied the great exegetical principles laid down by men like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas – namely, that the Holy Spirit did not set out to teach men the inner constitution of nature, but what may be useful for salvation (St. Augustine), and that the Bible speaks of nature according to the sensible appearances (St. Thomas). *Church of the Incarnate Word*, pp. 356-7.