

No Bull

Papal Authority and Our Response

ISSUE: What is the origin and purpose of papal authority? What obedience is due the Pope by the People of God?

DISCUSSION: Papal authority has divine origin. The Lord made Simon alone, whom He named Peter, the “rock” of His Church. He gave him the keys of His Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock.

The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter’s successor, “is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful” (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] 23). “For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ ... and as pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered” (LG 22).

When the Pope speaks on matters concerning faith and morals, or even Church discipline, the faithful are bound by divine obligation to obey. As faithful Catholics, we must embrace his pronouncements with docility. Only in this way will our hearts be open to the truth found within.

Christ established the Church in such manner that her authority is part of her nature. He established her as “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and gave her divine authority to preserve unity and truth (cf. Mt. 28:18-20).

Divine Origin of the Papacy

As Isaiah 43:1 points out, the act of naming claims the one named. This “claiming” includes the recognition of a particular purpose or mission. Scripture makes this evident in the passages about God’s naming of Abraham and Israel (Gen. 17:5, 32:29). When Nebuchadnezzar appointed Mattaniah as king of Judah, he changed Mattaniah’s name to Zedekiah as a sign that the new king’s authority came from the king of Babylon (2 Kings 24:17). In this same way, Jesus claims Peter and his successors to be the visible source of authority in His Church.

Our Lord said to Simon:

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Mt. 16:18-19).

Until Jesus named Peter, Scripture only referred to God as “rock,” in the sense of an unfailing bulwark against the powers of evil. By making Peter the “rock” of His Church, Christ grants him divine authority over the Church on earth as His universal Vicar. He gives Peter divine power to fulfill his mission. The name “Rock” identifies Peter’s mission with the authority of Christ. The primary function of this authority is unity (cf. Lk. 22:31-32).

Because of Baptism, the Catholic faithful have a divine obligation to maintain unity with the Catholic Church. Profession of faith, ecclesiastical governance, and the sacraments constitute the visible bonds of unity between the Catholic faithful and the Church of Christ ruled by the Pope and bishops in union with him. As Christ conveyed to Peter and the first apostles, if any of these bonds of unity are lacking, unity with the Church is lacking: “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Lk. 10:16).

By divine will, unity demands obedience to lawful authority in the Church. Because the Pope is the supreme authority in the Church and has the specific obligation to ensure unity of faith, obedience to him is an act of the will required of the Catholic faithful. Such obedience expresses the faith by which we are saved.

Expressions of Papal Authority

To understand papal authority, we must understand the authoritative nature of the deposit of faith. Jesus Christ is the fullness of all Revelation. He is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word made flesh. Through Him, all have access to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Through His words and deeds, especially His death and Resurrection, He has entrusted the sum total of all truth to His bride, the Church. The fullness of Christ's Revelation is the one deposit of faith. Because it is given by Christ, the deposit of faith is inerrant, unchangeable, and has application in every culture for all ages. Being the source of all divinely revealed truth, the one deposit of faith is the wellspring from which all doctrines and definitions of the faith flow. To summarize,

All that is contained in the written word of God or in tradition, that is, in the one deposit of faith entrusted to the Church and also proposed as divinely revealed either by the solemn magisterium of the Church or by its ordinary and universal magisterium, must be believed with divine and catholic faith; it is manifested by the common adherence of the Christian faithful under the leadership of the sacred magisterium; therefore, all are bound to avoid any doctrines whatever which are contrary to these truths (canon 750).

To ensure unity of faith, the Magisterium of the Church has the task of interpreting the deposit of faith and applying it to specific times and circumstances. The Magisterium of the Church sometimes offers a solemn definition on a matter pertaining to faith or morals. These definitions provide absolute certainty that the teaching belongs to the deposit of faith. In other instances, the Magisterium identifies the truth found in the deposit of faith without providing a solemn definition. In these instances, though not solemnly defined, the teaching cannot be changed because it is true. These teachings are infallible.

If the Pope appeals to the deposit of faith, whether by pronouncement of the solemn or ordinary Magisterium, the teaching must be believed with divine and catholic faith. Additionally, the manner in which he speaks requires a certain docile acceptance by the Catholic faithful. The level of docility depends on the type of pronouncement and the manner in which it is given.

Solemn and Ordinary Magisterium

Pronouncements that demand full assent of divine and catholic faith require precise wording. These magisterial teachings fall into two categories: *solemn* and *ordinary*.

When, in exercise of the solemn Magisterium, the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, the faithful are bound to accept the teaching with divine and catholic faith and must avoid any doctrines that are contrary to these truths. The exercise of the solemn Magisterium by the Pope occurs when he proclaims with a definitive act that a doctrine of faith or morals is infallible teaching. This infallibility derives from the authority Christ entrusted to His Church, and extends as far as the deposit of faith itself, as well as to doctrinal elements needed to preserve, expound, or observe this deposit and the precepts of the natural law (cf. 1 Tim 6:20; Catechism, nos. 2035-36, 2051).

Infallible character is not given to a document as a whole, but only to that portion which explicitly defines a doctrine of faith or morals. The wording of such definitions must reflect the intention to define infallibly. It must be precise and clear. An excellent example of this type of wording can be found in an apostolic constitution of Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*. This pronouncement defines the Assumption of Mary and states:

[B]y the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory. Hence if anyone, which God forbid, should dare willfully to deny or to call into doubt that which we have defined, let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith.¹

More frequently, the Pope appeals to the deposit of faith by use of the ordinary Magisterium. This occurs when he definitively confirms a teaching as pertaining to the deposit of faith. Examples of such teachings include: male-only priesthood (Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*), the intrinsic evils of abortion and euthanasia (Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae*), and the intrinsic evil of contraception (Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*).

While these documents do not contain explicit definitions as noted above, their wording clearly appeals to the authority of the Pope to confirm what proceeds from the deposit of faith. As such, these teachings enjoy infallibility and demand the assent of divine and catholic faith.

An excellent example of this type of pronouncement is found in *Humanae Vitae* (HV). Pope Paul VI did not use definitive language appealing to the solemn Magisterium. He did appeal to the ordinary Magisterium and the pronouncement's basis in the deposit of faith and the natural law:

It can be foreseen that this teaching will perhaps not be easily received by all.... [Y]et she does not because of this cease to proclaim with humble firmness the entire moral law, both natural and evangelical. Of such laws the Church was not the author, nor consequently can she be their arbiter; she is only their depositary and their interpreter, without ever being able to declare to be licit that which is not so by reason of its intimate and unchangeable opposition to the true good of man (HV 18).

Because these teachings have not been proposed or confirmed through a solemn definition, many mistakenly believe that such teachings can be revised. As Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, the secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explains:

[T]he truth and irreformability of a doctrine depend on the *depositum fidei* [deposit of the faith], transmitted by the Scripture and Tradition, while infallibility refers only to the degree of certitude of an act of magisterial teaching.... In the light of these considerations, it seems a pseudo-problem to wonder whether this papal act of confirming a teaching of the ordinary, universal Magisterium is infallible or not. In fact, although it is not *per se a dogmatic definition* . . . a papal pronouncement of *confirmation* enjoys the same infallibility as the teaching of the ordinary, universal Magisterium, which includes the Pope not as a mere Bishop but as the Head of the Episcopal College.²

Authentic Magisterium

The authentic Magisterium represents the Pope's authority to teach. The Pope exercises the authentic Magisterium whenever he teaches on faith and morals. Whether the document contains infallible statements or not, the document as a whole carries this authority. "[T]he faithful 'are to adhere to it with religious assent' which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it" (Catechism, no. 892, quoting LG 25). This level of obedience is further defined in canon 752 of the Code of Canon Law as "a religious respect of intellect and will.... [T]herefore the Christian faithful are to take care to avoid whatever is not in harmony with that teaching."

The Pope commonly uses encyclicals to communicate such pronouncements. *Humanae Vitae*, for example, contains teachings of the ordinary Magisterium that require the assent of divine and catholic faith. However, the primary intent of the encyclical was not to define such teachings, for they had already been recognized by the Church. Rather, the intent was to lead the faithful in a better understanding of Revelation and apply the deposit of faith to the particular circumstances of our time. The faithful are obligated to embrace such teaching with religious assent of intellect and will and avoid whatever is not in harmony with the encyclical as a whole.

Constitutions and Decrees

Canon 754 of the Code of Canon Law identifies another level of obedience pertaining to constitutions and decrees issued to establish discipline and answer erroneous opinions. While not demanding a full assent of faith, these documents call for an assent of will that flows from faith, and the faithful are obliged to observe them. One example of this type of pronouncement would be the apostolic constitution *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*, which sets forth the norms for beatification and canonization. Another example is the apostolic constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, which was used to promulgate the Code of Canon Law for the Latin Church. As the means of promulgating the Code, this constitution binds the faithful to observe these laws and disciplines.

Obedience to Christ demands obedience to the Pope. There is no authority on earth who can legitimately amend decrees or judgments of the Pope. Other than God Himself, there is no authority above the Pope. Obedience to him must flow, not so much from an understanding of faith, but from faith itself, which guides and nourishes the will. Thus, whether dealing with infallible doctrine or a decree that concerns a Church discipline, obedience to the Pope exemplifies a unity of faith founded on the will of Christ.

The Papal Office

Pope John Paul II is the 264th pope in the history of Christendom. One of the earliest witnesses to the unbroken chain of papal succession is Saint Irenaeus (c. 140-c. 202), the second Bishop of Lyons, who wrote:

The blessed Apostles, having founded and built up the Church, they handed over the office of the episcopate [of Rome] to Linus. Paul makes mention of this Linus in the Epistle to Timothy. To him succeeded Anencletus ... Clement ... Evaristus ... Alexander ... Sixtus ... Telesphorus ... Hyginus ... Pius ... Anicetus ... Soter ... and now, in the twelfth place after the apostles, the lot of the episcopate has fallen to Eleutherus. In this order, and by the teaching of the Apostles handed down in the Church, the preaching of the truth has come to us.

—*Against the Heresies*, 3, 3, 3

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Do I believe in everything the Church teaches, or just those teachings I agree with or find easy to accept?
2. Everyone is tempted to doubt. Do I give in to this temptation? What can I do to strengthen my faith, especially during times of temptation?
3. The word “docile” literally means “teachable.” Do I have the virtue of docility? Do I accept the God-given authority of the Church and allow her to teach me?

¹ Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution Defining the Dogma of the Assumption *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), nos. 44-45.

² Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, S.D.B., “Magisterial Documents and Public Dissent,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (English ed., January 25, 1997), 6-7, original emphasis. See also Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter To Protect the Faith *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (1998), which reiterates the faithful’s obligation to assent to the teachings of both the ordinary and solemn Magisterium of the Church with a “divine and Catholic faith.”

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