THE REQUISITES FOR AN INFALLIBLE PONTIFICAL DEFINITION ACCORDING TO THE COMMISSION OF POPE PIUS IX

One hundred years ago, petitions for the definition of the doctrine of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception as divinely revealed Catholic dogma were pouring in upon the Holy See. The movement had become powerful during the reign of Pope Gregory XVI, who died on June 1,1846. It continued and increased under the rule of Pope Pius IX, who succeeded to the papal throne on June 16 of that same year. Soon after his election, the new Pontiff asked twenty prominent theologians, taken from the ranks of both the diocesan and the regular clergy, to study the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and to submit to him in writing their individual judgments as to its definability. Then, on February 2, 1849, from Gaeta, where he had retired because of the sedition in Rome, he,wrote to the bishops of the Catholic Church to ascertain their teaching and the belief of their flocks on the matter of the Immaculate Conception. When well over nine-tenths of the Catholic episcopate had signified their own belief and that of their flocks in this prerogative of Our Lady, Pope Pius IX appointed a special commission, chosen from among the theologians who had already been consulted on the matter of the Immaculate Conception, to investigate the question even more profoundly than had previously been done.

Cardinal Fomari was named president of this special commission. Serving under him were Prosper Caterini, himself destined soon to be called to the cardinalatial dignity, Canon Audisio, Fathers John Perrone, Charles Passaglia, and Clement Schrader, of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Mariano Spada, O.P., and Fr. John Baptist Tonini, O.F.M. Conv. Fr. Tonini died before the actual sessions began, and his place was taken by his fellow Conventual, Fr. Angelo Trullet.

This Commission met for the first time on May 8, 1852. This first session was given over to matters of organization and procedure. In its second and third sessions (May 19, and June 8, 1852), the commission devoted itself to the expression of the principles governing the definability of any doctrine as revealed Catholic dogma, stating first what is not necessary, and then

what must be considered as sufficient for an infallible pontifical definition. In view of the fact that the Church's position with regard to the doctrine of Our Lady's Assumption into heaven is today almost exactly the same as its stand on the teaching of the Immaculate Conception was in 1852-53, these pronouncements on the nature of dogmatic progress should be of great interest to our priests and seminarians.

At its second session, that of May 19, 1852, the commission agreed unanimously on the accuracy of four principles, stating the qualities with which a doctrine need not be endowed in order to be defined as revealed Catholic dogma.

(1) *The fact that there have been conflicting teachings on this subject within the Catholic Church in the past, or, the fact that all have not heretofore agreed on this teaching, does not render a doctrine incapable of definition.*[1] Bishop Augustine de Roskovâny's Latin rendering of the Italian summary of the commission's *Acta* makes it clear that the members adduced the example of the rebaptism controversy in support of this thesis. They also pointed to the fact that controversialists on opposing sides of a theological dispute habitually express their willingness to abide by a decision of the Church, thus, in the eyes of the members, expressing their belief that the Catholic Church can pronounce and define even in a matter which has hitherto been discussed freely within its own schools.

(2) *The fact that even authoritative writers can be quoted in opposition to a teaching does not render that teaching incapable of definition.* The members of the commission claimed that this principle is shown as valid through the examination of the history of almost any defined dogma. In particular, however, they pointed to the example of the Council of Trent, which proclaimed the Church's belief in the absolute immunity of Our Lady from all actual sin and imperfection in the face of previous denial of this truth even on the part of Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

[1] In this article I have generally followed the Latin version of the Italian resume of the *Acta* of this commission published in Bishop Augustine de «ekoriuiy's *Beata Virgo Maria in Suo Conceptu immaculata ex Monumentis Oaniunt Secularum Demonstrata* (Budapest, 1874), Vf, 13-19. Brief summaries « these theses will also be found in Cardinal Manning's *The Vatican Council Its Definitions. A Pastoral Letter to the Clergy* (New York: D. and J. hadKer, 1871), pp. 240 B., in Bishop Malou's *L'Immaculée Conception de la Vierge Marie, considérée comme dogme de foi* (Brussels, 1857), pp. 351 ff., and o the brilliant article by Fr. Charles Baliê, "De definibilitate assumptionis ". Virginis Mariae in caelum," in *Antonianum,* XXI, I (Jan. 1946), 20 ff.

(3) *In order that a doctrine be definable, it is not necessary that there should be explicit, or even implicit, testimony to this doctrine in Sacred Scripture, since it is certain and manifest that the scope of revelation is wider than that of Scripture.* In support of this principle, the members of the commission appealed to the dogmas of infant baptism, of the real and complete presence of Our Lord under each of the Eucharistic Species, and of the Procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son as from one principle.

(4) *In order to show that the doctrine to be defined belongs to Tradition, it is not necessary to adduce a series of Fathers and of of other witnesses reaching back to apostolic times.* The "Tradition" to which the members of Pope Pius' commission referred was the divine Apostolic Tradition, which, together with the Sacred Scripture, is a source of supernatural public revelation. In formulating this fourth principle, the members of the commission took cognizance of the fact that the early monuments of tradition, among which the patristic writings are to be numbered, do not state the entire content of that divine teaching which was delivered to the Church by the apostles.

According to the commission, anyone who denies this fourth principle must logically reject one of the following five truths.

(A) Not all of the doctrine entrusted to the Church as the content of divine public revelation was immediately, at the very outset of the Church's life, set down in writing by the Fathers.

(B) Not all of the ancient *monuments* of divine apostolic tradition (the writings and inscriptions of the early Christians) have survived until our time, even though the tradition itself has survived and is just as perfectly possessed, guarded, and taught by the infallible Church today as it was in apostolic times.

(C) Although the whole content of divine public revelation has always been guarded and presented infallibly by the Church, it has not always been, in its entirety, distinctly conceived and formally expressed.

(D) A doctrine proposed as a part of the divine apostolic tradition by the true Church of Jesus Christ at any one period in its history cannot possibly be in opposition to what has been taught as divinely revealed by the Church at an earlier time.

(E) A doctrine proposed at any time within the true Church of God as a part of divine public revelation must, by reason of the

divine assistance promised and given to the Church, have been taught in the past at least in an implicit manner by the majority of the *ecclesia docens.* Moreover, such a teaching could never have been denied by a majority of the authentic teachers within the Church.

The commission appealed directly for verification of its fourth principle to the procedure of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, to the Lateran Council of 649, under St. Martin I, and to the dogmatic letters of Popes St. Leo I and St. Agatho. The commission found that all of these authorities appealed to the faith of the Fathers and of Tradition, while making no effort to cite sources from the first three Christian centuries. At the same time it noted that they all appealed to texts which, in relation to their teaching, were quite recent.

In formulating and explaining this fourth principle, the commission of Pope Pius IX took into careful account both the continuity and the progress of Catholic dogma. The entire content of divine public revelation was handed over to the Church by the apostolic college. This entire deposit of faith has been taught and guarded infallibly by the visible Catholic Church since its beginning, and will be so taught and guarded until the end of the world. At the same time, however, there has been, and, with God's help, there will continue to be, a definite advance in the appreciation of this body of divine truth within the Church. Teachings which, in earlier ages, were proposed and taught in an inchoate and comparatively indistinct manner have been brought out and stated explicitly in later periods. Both analysis and synthesis have played their parts in this dogmatic progress, which, however, always has been, and ever will be, an advance in the understanding and appreciation of the same one body of truths revealed by God through Jesus Christ, and preached in and to His Church by His apostles.

Hitherto the commission had fixed its attention on marks not needed to show that a certain proposition is capable of receiving an infallible pontifical definition. Now it turned to the consideration of those characteristics which are sufficient to qualify a doctrine as definable. Five of these characteristics were indicated.

(1) *There must be a certain number of solemn testimonies directly pertinent to the proposition in question.* The commission asserted that no one could deny the principle other than by flying

in the face of the constant procedure of the Oecumenical Councils, of the dogmatic letters of the Pontiffs, and, indeed, of the whole economy of the Church. There was a direct appeal to the action of the Council of Ephesus against Nestorius, of the Third Council of Constantinople against the Monothelites, and of the Second Council of Nicaea against the Iconoclasts.

(2) *A proposition is capable of being defined if there can be found one or many revealed principles containing this proposition.* At this point the commission observed that the placing of such "principles" served only to bring out virtual and immediate revelation. Thus, it asserted, from the revealed principle that Jesus Christ is perfect God and perfect man, it follows that the fact that He has two wills is revealed. In the same way, from the revealed principles that there is one God and that there are three divine persons, and that in God everything is one except for relations of origin, it follows that the doctrine to the effect that the Holy Ghost could not procede from the Father and the Son other than from one principle of spiration is revealed.

This statement, like the ones before it, represented the unanimous teaching of the members of the commission. It is distinctly worthy of note that the commission taught without reservations the definability of a proposition which had been known in previous times only through the light of virtual revelation. It did not, of course, go into the distinction upon which the stand of theologians like Schultes and Tanquerey is based. These writers claim that a properly theological conclusion, that is, one which has been known and has been knowable only by means of a real process of reasoning from revealed principles could never be defined as a dogma of divine Catholic faith. The commission of 1852 made no effort to determine whether or not the proposition contained in revealed principles might be inferred by a process of reasoning in the strict sense of the term.

(3) *A proposition is capable of being defined if it shows a necessary connection with dogmas. In other words, a proposition ought to be accepted as revealed when from the denial of this proposition there follows by logical and immediate necessity the denial of one or more revealed principles.* Such a connection, according to the unanimous teaching of the commission, is equivalent to immediate virtual revelation. As examples of the use of this principle, the members of the commission pointed to two Catholic dogmas,

that which tells us of the existence of a real difference between mortal and venial sins, and that which expounds the truth that the effects of the sacraments do not depend upon the good or the bad character of their secondary ministers. Only by holding the distinction between venial and mortal sins as something revealed can a man assent to the fundamental Christian teachings which tell us that there actually are sins unto death, and that there are sins not incompatible with perseverance in the life of divine grace. Only by holding it to be revealed truth that the effects of the sacraments do not depend upon the good or the bad character of the secondary minister can a man logically believe that these sacraments produce their effects *ex opere operato* and that Jesus Christ is the primary minister of the sacraments.

Once again, it is of interest to see that the commission did not hesitate to ascribe the character of definability to a proposition which had hitherto been known in the light of immediate virtual revelation. The proposition judged as definable in the light of this third principle is just as truly a theological conclusion as is that which is explained in the previous statement In both cases the proposition which is held to be definable is something known by a process of reasoning. In the one case, the reasoning is considered under the form of a syllogism, in the other, under the form of a dilemma.

(4) *A proposition may be defined as Catholic dogma if it is Preached as a part of divine public revelation in the concordant teaching of the actual episcopate.* The members of the commission held unanimously that no one could deny this principle without calling into question the promises of Our Lord Himself, and without rejecting the standard constantly used by the Fathers in demonstrating the articles of faith. The commission pointed to the examples of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, and Fulgentius, all of whom considered a theological question to have been settled once they had ascertained the teaching on this point of the various Sees of Christendom, and particularly that of the principal one among them.

In proposing this point, which, incidentally, played a great role in the definition of the Immaculate Conception, and which may play a similar part in a forthcoming definition of Our Lady's Assumption, the commission took cognizance of the fact that the Catholic Church is infallible in its teaching always. The teaching

of the Church over the centuries, and the teaching of the Church at any one period of its history, are both unerring statements of the divinely revealed teaching. Thus if the episcopal college, which is not the successor to but actually the continuation of the apostolic college, teaches that such and such a doctrine is a part of divine revelation at any one time in the Church's history, we may be perfectly assured that, by reason of the divine protection and enlightenment given to the Church, that teaching is perfectly correct, and the doctrine in question is perfectly capable of definition as a dogma of divine Catholic faith.

(5) *A proposition is capable of definition when it is shown to be a part of divine public revelation by the practice of the Church.* The members of the commission agreed that, in this principle, the term "practice" referred to external acts of worship and of religion. They agreed that the only practice which could serve to show the revealed character of a theoretical proposition upon which the practice itself is based would have to be universal, solemn, and mandatory. It would have to be universal practice, belonging to the Church Catholic, and not simply to one See or group of Sees. It would have to be solemn, in the sense that this activity would have to be in some way joined to the actual worship of God in the Church. Finally, it would have to be mandatory rather than elective in the Church of God. Thus, according to the commission, a practice within the entire Church, joined to the public cultus within the Church, and imposed upon the faithful by the commands of their legitimate ecclesiastical superiors could be a sufficient sign that the theoretical proposition upon which this practice depended was actually revealed by God.

To explain this fifth and last of their principles, the members of the commission drew up and unanimously approved five theses. First they indicated the basic and obvious fact that every practice of the sort they had indicated is necessarily connected with some theoretical proposition which informs and directs this practice. Secondly they asserted that not every theoretical proposition which informs and governs Catholic practice is necessarily one which is contained in divine public revelation. In support of this contention they showed that the question of baptism or non baptism of a monstrous foetus would be governed by the theoretical decision (from philosophical sources) as to whether or not this particular being could be considered as human. They like-

wise appealed to the existence of certain liturgical feasts. The feast of St. Michael depends, to a certain extent, upon the reality of an apparition of the Archangel: that of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, upon the triumph of Heraclius:that of the Rosary, upon a private revelation from Our Lady. Yet none of these facts can be attested in the content of divine public revelation.

In its third explanatory thesis, the commission asserts that there are unquestionably practices in the Catholic Church immediately connected with theoretical truths which form a part of the content of divine public revelation. In support of this thesis the commission pointed to the axiom: *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi.* It also appealed to the procedure of the Second Council of Nicaea, condemning the Iconoclasts and approving the use and the veneration of images as conformed to the practice of the Church, to that of St. Basil, who used the doxology employed by the faithful to show the divinity of the Holy Ghost, to that of St. Jerome, who appealed to the practice of the Church in proving the legitimacy of the cult of relics against Vigilantius, and to that of St. Augustine, who established the doctrine on the propogation of original sin on a proof drawn from the existence of exorcism. The commission also mentioned the common procedure of theologians, who employ the practice of the Church as one of the *loci theologici.*

The fourth of the explanatory theses put forward by the commission asserts that there is a standard by which we can judge whether or not the theoretical proposition upon which a practice of the Church depends is a part of divine public revelation or not. Such a criterion, according to the fifth and last thesis, may be found either in the character of the proposition itself, or in the testimony of credible witnesses. The commission mentions the fact that certain propositions are such that, within the teaching of the Church, they could have come from no source other than that of divine revelation. An example of this type of proposition is the teaching that St. John the Baptist was sanctified in the womb of his mother. Others could be known naturally or by a process of revelation, and their presence in the teaching of the Church must be explained by some testimony outside of the existence of the propositions themselves.

These were the principles in the light of which the special commission appointed by Pope Pius IX proceeded to the considera-

tion of the definability of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. In the last analysis, they are the principles in the light of which the definability of the doctrine of the Assumption must also be considered. They take cognizance of the definability of a theological conclusion, but they do not limit themselves to the consideration of propositions which can be or which must be deduced from existent dogmatic formulae by way of syllogistic reasoning. Thus they give an extraordinarily complete and perfect picture of that dogmatic progress and continuity which is at once the characteristic and the glory of the Catholic Church.

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Primitive Protestantism

My readers, no doubt, will remember the exceeding joy and surprise with which, at the close of my long search after Protestantism in the first ages, I at length stumbled on a staunch Calvinist in the person of Simon Magus. ***"Not by virtuous actions*** (said this heretic) ***but by Grace is salvation to be attained."*** It will also, perhaps, be recollected that, from certain generous scruples, I then hesitated to take advantage of such disreputable authority; and, though long foreseeing that my Protestantism must be heretical descent, yet felt anxious, for the honor of all parties, that it should be of some better breed. To say the truth, too, I was not quite sure that this glimpse of genuine Calvinism might not be, after all, but a chance sparkle, and that I should see nothing more of it On passing on, however, from the Arch-heretic to the numerous sects that sprung from him I found this feature of the parent faithfully reproduced in all his offspring; I found that they all, in some point or other, anticipated the Reformed lights of Geneva and Wittemburgh; and that if I had, at once, designated Simon Magus as the fount and wellspring of some of the most boasted of the Protestant doctrines, I should have asserted no more than it was now in my power indisputably to prove.

----- Thomas Moore in the ***Travels of an Irish Gentleman «l» Search of e Religion*** (Baltimore: John Murphy Company, no date), p. 109.

Answers to Questions

MASS OR STIPEND?

Question: If for some reason a pastor does not celebrate the *Missa pro populo* on a certain Sunday, can he subsequently fulfil his obligation, or cancel it, by contributing a dollar to the church funds?

Answer: The pastor would certainly not satisfy his obligation or cancel it in this manner. It is the spiritual value of the Holy Sacrifice that the Church requires the pastor to procure for his people on certain days, and the monetary equivalent of the usual stipend is utterly inadequate to compensate for the treasures of grace of which the parishioners have been deprived when their priest has failed to say one of the Masses incumbent on him by reason of his office. However, if the pastor is lawfully impeded from celebrating the *Missa pro populo* on a certain day, he can give a stipend to another priest who is willing to say the Mass, and thus the obligation is fulfilled (Can. 466, §1; 339, §4).

CUMULATIVE INVESTITURE IN THE SCAPULARS

Question: In the July issue of *The American Ecclesiastical Review,* p. 63, it is stated that the faculty to bless and to impose the five scapulars with a single formula includes the right to bless and to impose any one of the five separately. Although the reason adduced for this answer would seem to be valid—that the greater power includes the lesser—does it not fail to take into account the actual legislation of the Holy See regarding this matter?

Answer: Our correspondent is correct; the answer given in the July issue does not take into consideration an explicit decree of the Congregation of Indulgences, given Sept. 12, 1883. This decree asserts that the faculty to bless and to impose four or five scapulars with one formula of itself is not sufficient for the valid blessing and imposition of the aforesaid scapulars, but it is necessary in addition that there be had or obtained from the superior of the respective order the faculty of blessing and imposing the