

PAPAL INFALLIBILITY AND FAITH **(J.F.M.H. 2.2.2017)**

The opening article of the Apostles' Creed lays the foundation for everything else we believe as Christians. It is remarkable how many truths of faith are implied in the simple sentence, "**I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.**" Each of these truths has been questioned in the course of the Church's history, and each is being challenged today. That is why as Catholics it is important to know exactly what we profess when saying the first article of our Creed. Faith differs from knowledge in that it is an assent determined, not by evidence but by the authority of the informant. In its theological sense the Roman Catholic understanding of the ascent of '**Faith**' is that it is a **supernatural Virtue** whereby we believe **without doubting** whatever **God has revealed to man, because He revealed it.**" Such a statement excludes any definition of 'Faith' that allows human judgments or human prejudices in its composition. One has only to look of the religious history of this country to find out where that leads.

That the church is infallible is clear to one who reflects on the teaching and purpose of Christ. For if our Lord established a body of teachers, who might yet teach as His doctrine what was really in contradiction to it, then man could hardly be expected to gain any benefit from it, or indeed to be certain when he had actually obtained it; or when obtained, whether it would be any advantage to him to have done so. If that were the case then all the years of teaching devoted by our Lord to the training of the Twelve would seem to have been futile. The new Gospel delivered by the Apostles to an unbelieving world was obviously a Gospel on which much depended for the betterment of the children of men, since it required the death of God-made-man to establish it as a kingdom. The meaning therefore, of the New Testament is that a definite message had come into the world, so important, that the words of Moses were not to be esteemed as of greater authority, and the Law itself no longer compelled. The Apostles, too, were conscious of the enormous claim they were making, in continuing the very work of our Lord. Remembering His promise to send the Paraclete to take His place, they promulgated their decrees, at the Council of Jerusalem, with the tremendous prologue; "**It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.**" They assert, therefore, that they and the Holy Spirit are, conjoint forces, whose purpose was to teach the world the truth of God. For this office of teaching, it is essential that there should be an infallible teacher.

But the need for infallibility of teaching did not cease with the Apostles. In a sense it might seem that during their lifetime the need was less, for obviously the early converts would have been content to accept the decisions of those who had lived with the Master, and had been trained by Him, and by their personal familiarity with His modes of expression and even the very inflexions of His voice, and so had been able to give authoritative interpretations to the simple teaching that alone would at first be considered necessary. But as time went on and all who actually knew our Lord died, and as the restless mind of man was perpetually asking for new decisions, or explanations upon new points of moral perplexity, and interpretations of the being and actions of God, there must have appeared the need for an infallibility that should be both **living** and **final**. An appeal to the past is always a secret appeal to the prejudice of the present, for into the past each reads his own interpretations, unless there is some final court that has the power to declare what the past itself intended.

In the early centuries we find that councils were called together, and debated the points at issue, and then announced what the tradition of the people of God was; but this method depended largely upon local conditions, and there were people who hurried through

councils to prevent the opposing party from arriving in time to vote. Hence it became clear that even the decisions of the council required to be ratified by some other authority before they would be accepted by the Church as a whole. Thus partly by necessity, partly because our Lord had so laid it down in the general supremacy bequeathed to St. Peter, and partly because there was no one else who could perform the office, the Pope (or Bishop of Rome), began to be recognised by the faithful as the mouthpiece of the infallible Church. Even in the lifetime of St. John, the Christians appealed to the successor of St. Peter to settle a disputed election to the Bishopric of Corinth. Then as the centuries went on and the means of communication became so much easier, the need and possibility of quick appeal to Rome meant the increase of central authority. Then, finally, the infallibility of the Pope was declared an article of faith at the Council of the Vatican in 1870, what tradition had always approved, the Church now declared to be the immemorial belief of the faithful of Christ, not as to his every utterance, as some had contended, but only (a) **when as shepherd and teacher of all Christians**, he (b) **defined** (c) **a doctrine concerning faith or morals** (d) **to be held by the whole Church**. If any of these four conditions were unfulfilled, then, though the decision may be true and valid, it is not to be held binding on the conscience. We have to remember that the voice of the Pope is the voice of the age-long tradition of the Christian people, and the Pope has no power to make new dogmas, but only to declare what is the full content of the doctrine revealed by God through Jesus Christ and His Gospel. In such solemn declarations, however, he is preserved from all error by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord once asked all the apostles what men thought about Him. So long as they were describing the uncertainties of ignorant men they all said the same. But when he asked what the disciples themselves thought about him, it was the Apostle Peter who was the first to confess the Lord. And when Simon had said, *"You are Christ, the son of the living God"*, Jesus replied *"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven."* **"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of Hell shall not hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom: whatever you bind on Earth shall be considered bound in Heaven, whatever you loose on Earth shall be considered loosed in Heaven."** (Mt 16:18-20) Later after Christ's death and resurrection, and after the meal following the miraculous draft of fishes, Christ fulfilled the promise on hearing Peter make a triple protestation of love by telling him to **"Feed My lambs", "Tend my sheep" and "Feed my sheep"**. (Jn. 21:15-17) ... And after this He (Christ) said **"follow me"**. (Jn.21: 19) It was not food to eat and drink that Christ's flock was to be fed, but the truth in which He had instructed Peter and the other Apostles by His life and teaching, so that His flock would also believe He was sent by His Almighty Father.

In praying about the Apostles Christ says, *"I have given them Thy word – Thy word is truth."* (Jn. 17 8,14) The Apostles were sent out to teach all Nations as ambassadors of Christ. They too demanded assent to their preaching, not as the word of mere men, but *"as it is indeed the Word of God that works in you, that you have believed."* (1 Thess. 2.13) Neither the facts nor the infallibility of revelations are on their own so evident as to compel our acceptance. Assent is therefore **free**, and this freedom of faith is its second important characteristic. The Scriptures show this when they set forth faith as a virtue, and declare the reward or punishment that result from its exercise or neglect. St. Paul puts it this way **"without faith it is impossible to please God."** (Heb.10.38) **"By faith the just man lives."** (Heb 11.6)