

Do Catholics have to Assent to Non-Infallible Church Teaching?

On Dec. 31, 1930, Pope Pius XI issued his landmark encyclical *Casti Connubii* on Christian marriage. In it, the Holy Father reminded Catholics that it is not permissible to prefer one's own judgment over that of the Church on matters of Faith and morals. A Catholic is not allowed to accept from the Church only what seems correct to him, nor can he decide to withhold his assent from teaching that is not presented infallibly:

Wherefore, let the faithful also be on their guard against the overrated independence of private judgment and that false autonomy of human reason. For it is quite foreign to everyone bearing the name of a Christian to trust his own mental powers with such pride as to agree only with those things which he can examine from their inner nature, and to imagine that the Church, sent by God to teach and guide all nations, is not conversant with present affairs and circumstances; or even that they must obey only in those matters which she has decreed by solemn definition as though her other decisions might be presumed to be false or putting forward insufficient motive for truth and honesty. Quite to the contrary, a characteristic of all true followers of Christ, lettered or unlettered, is to suffer themselves to be guided and led in all things that touch upon faith or morals by the Holy Church of God through its Supreme Pastor the Roman Pontiff, who is himself guided by Jesus Christ Our Lord.

(Pope Pius XI, Encyclical *Casti Connubii*, n. 104)

In our recent post refuting Dr. Peter Kwasniewski, we pointed out that

the papal office was instituted as the sure norm of orthodoxy at every point in time in Church history, guaranteed by Christ Himself. This does not mean that every papal magisterial act is infallible, but it does mean that every papal magisterial act is authoritative, thus binding on consciences and, by the providence of Almighty God, always safe to follow. This means that souls cannot be led astray by any pernicious error if they follow the teaching of the Pope. That safety is guaranteed and caused by Christ Himself.

("Would God permit a Non-Catholic Pope? Response to Peter Kwasniewski", *Novus Ordo Watch*, Feb. 28, 2019; italics given.)

This thesis has raised some eyebrows and triggered confusion among people not familiar with it. To prove that this is indeed the position of the Catholic Church that was believed and taught before Vatican II, we produced a quote from Cardinal John Franzelin's manual *Tractatus de Divina Traditione et Scriptura* (available in English as *On Divine Tradition*).

In this post, in addition to the brief excerpt from *Casti Connubii* presented above, we will offer another, much more elaborate piece of evidence: a pre-Vatican II essay that explains at length what kind of assent a Catholic must render to the Church's teachings, even to those that are not infallible.

The essay in question comes from Canon George Duncan Smith of St. Edmund's College in Ware, England, and was published in the theological periodical *Clergy Review* in 1935. It is a

refreshingly clear, readable, and thorough exposition of how the Church teaches and what a Catholic's obligation is with regard to that teaching.

"Must I Believe It?"

by Canon George Smith Ph.D., D.D.

The doctrinal power of the Catholic Church is apt to provoke two contrary reactions in those who are outside the fold. Some it attracts, others it repels. The earnest seeker after truth, the man who seriously wants an answer to the riddle of his life and purpose, and is either mentally dazed by the contradictory solutions offered or else baffled by the bland scepticism which so often greets his anxious questionings, may perhaps turn with relief to a Church which teaches with authority, there to find rest from his intellectual wanderings. On the other hand, there is the seeker whose enjoyment, one is inclined to suspect, lies chiefly in the pursuit of truth and who cares little whether he ever tracks it down. To think things out for himself or, like the Athenians, to be telling or hearing some new thing is the very breath of his intellectual life, and to him any infallible pronouncement is anathema. A definitive statement of truth is not for him a happy end to a weary search; it is a barrier which closes an avenue to his adventurous quest. An infallible teacher is not a welcome guide who leads him home; he is a monster who would deprive him of the freedom which is his right.

To these two opposite attitudes on the part of the seeker there correspond two different methods on the part of the apologist. For the apologist is in some respects like a salesman: he likes to give the inquirer what he wants, and he puts in the forefront the wares which are most likely to attract. To the non-Catholic who is weary of doubt and uncertainty he holds out the alluring prospect of a Teacher who will lead him to the goal which he is restlessly seeking, who with infallible authority will give him the final answer to any problem that may perplex him. To the non-Catholic who is jealous of his intellectual freedom he says: Do not imagine that by submitting to the Church you will be forfeiting your freedom of thought. The matters upon which the Church teaches with infallible authority are relatively few; with regard to the rest you are free to believe as you like.

Admittedly these are bald statements which no apologist of repute would permit himself to make without considerable qualifications. Nevertheless they will serve by their very baldness to illustrate two very different standpoints from which even Catholics themselves may be inclined to view the teaching authority of the Church. It may be regarded as guidance or it may be regarded as thralldom; and according as guidance is desired or thralldom feared the sphere of obligation in the matter of belief will be extended or restricted. There are those who would have the Pope pronounce authoritatively on the rights or wrongs of every war, on vivisection and performing animals, on evolution and psycho-analysis, and are somewhat aggrieved because he defines a dogma so rarely. But there are also those who seem almost to dread the pronouncements of authority, who "hope that the Church will not commit herself" on this subject or that, who before accepting any doctrine ask whether the Pope has defined it or, if he has defined it, whether it was by an infallible and irrevocable utterance. Either attitude has its dangers, either attitude mistakes the function of the divinely-appointed Teacher. It may even be debated which excess is more greatly to be deplored. However that may be, the title of this article should be taken as indicating that the writer has in view the over-cautious believer, whose unfounded fears he hopes to allay, reserving for another

occasion – or leaving to another hand – the task of restraining his over-ardent brother. In considering, therefore, the general principles which should guide Catholics in their attitude towards doctrinal authority we shall have in mind especially the Catholic who approaches every doctrine with the wary question: "Must I believe it?"

I.

Let us be clear about our terms, for the ground is littered with ambiguities. When the Catholic inquires concerning his obligation to believe he understands by belief, not a mere opinion, but an act of the mind whereby he adheres definitely to a religious doctrine without any doubt, without any suspension of assent. When he says that he believes a thing he means that he holds it as certain, the motive or ground of his certainty being the authority of the Church which teaches him that this is so. And this rough-and-ready conception of belief, or "faith," may be considered for practical purposes and in the majority of cases to suffice. But in the delicate matter of defining the Catholic obligation a greater degree of accuracy is reasonably demanded. It is not exact to say that the ground of belief is always the authority of the Church. Ultimately in a divinely revealed religion that ground is the authority of God Himself, on whose veracity and omniscience the believer relies whenever he makes an act of faith. Absolutely speaking an act of divine faith is possible without the intervention of the Church. It is sufficient to have discovered, from whatever source, that a truth has been revealed by God for the acceptance of mankind, in order to incur the obligation of believing it by an act of divine faith, technically so called because its motive is the authority of God Himself.

However, "that we may be able to satisfy the obligation of embracing the true faith and of constantly persevering therein, God has instituted the Church through His only-begotten Son, and has bestowed on it manifest marks of that institution, that it may be recognised by all men as the guardian and teacher of the revealed word."¹ Accordingly the main truths of divine revelation are proposed explicitly by the divinely instituted Church for the belief of the faithful, and in accepting such truths the believer adds to his faith in God's word an act of homage to the Church as the authentic and infallible exponent of revelation. The doctrines of faith thus proposed by the Church are called dogmas, the act by which the faithful accept them is called Catholic faith, or divine-Catholic faith, and the act by which they reject them – should they unhappily do so – is called heresy.

But there are other truths in the Catholic religion which are not formally revealed by God but which nevertheless are so connected with revealed truth that their denial would lead to the rejection of God's word, and concerning these the Church, the guardian as well as the teacher of the revealed word, exercises an infallible teaching authority. "Dogmatic facts,"² theological conclusions, doctrines – whether of faith or morals – involved in the legislation of the Church, in the condemnation of books or persons, in the canonisation of saints, in the approbation of religious orders – all these are matters coming within the infallible competence of the Church, all these are things which every Catholic is bound to believe when the Church pronounces upon them in the exercise of her supreme and infallible teaching office. He accepts them not by divine-Catholic faith, for God has not revealed them, but by ecclesiastical faith, by an assent which is based upon the infallible authority of the divinely appointed Church. Theologians, however, point out that even ecclesiastical faith is at least mediately divine, since it is God who has revealed that His Church is to be believed: "He that heareth you heareth me."

Already it is apparent that the question: "Must I believe it?" is equivocal. It may mean: "Is this a dogma of faith which I must believe under pain of heresy?" or it may mean: "Is it a doctrine which I must believe by ecclesiastical faith, under pain of being branded as temerarious or proximate to heresy?" But in either case the answer is: "You must believe it." The only difference lies between the precise motive of assent in either case, or the precise censure which may attach to disbelief. The question thus resolves itself into an investigation whether the doctrine under discussion belongs to either of these categories. And here again there is the possibility of undue restriction.

The Vatican Council has defined that "all those things are to be believed by divine and Catholic faith which are contained in the word of God, written or handed down, and which the Church, either by a solemn judgement or by her ordinary and universal teaching, proposes for belief as having been divinely revealed."³ What is liable to be overlooked is the ordinary and universal teaching of the Church. It is by no means uncommon to find the option, if not expressed at least entertained, that no doctrine is to be regarded as a dogma of faith unless it has been solemnly defined by an oecumenical Council or by the Sovereign Pontiff himself. This is by no means necessary. It is sufficient that the Church teaches it by her ordinary magisterium, exercised through the Pastors of the faithful, the Bishops whose unanimous teaching throughout the Catholic world, whether conveyed expressly through pastoral letters, catechisms issued by episcopal authority, provincial synods, or implicitly through prayers and religious practices allowed or encouraged, or through the teaching of approved theologians, is no less infallible than a solemn definition issued by a Pope or a general Council. If, then, a doctrine appears in these organs of divine Tradition as belonging directly or indirectly to the depositum fidei committed by Christ to His Church, it is to be believed by Catholics with divine-Catholic or ecclesiastical faith, even though it may never have formed the subject of a solemn definition in an oecumenical Council or of an ex cathedra pronouncement by the Sovereign Pontiff.⁴

But, satisfied that the doctrine has been authoritatively and infallibly proposed for belief by the Church, our questioner still waits to be informed whether it is a doctrine which has been formally revealed by God and is therefore to be believed under pain of heresy, or whether it is one of those matters which belong only indirectly to the depositum fidei and therefore to be believed by ecclesiastical faith. In the majority of cases this is not difficult to decide: dogmatic facts, canonizations, legislation – these evidently are not revealed by God and belong to the secondary object of the infallible magisterium. But the line of demarcation between dogmas and theological conclusions is not always so clear. There are some doctrines concerning which it may be doubted whether they are formally revealed by God or whether they are merely conclusions which are deduced from revealed truth, and it is part of the theologian's congenial task to endeavour to determine this. The doctrine of the Assumption is a case in point. But so far as Catholics generally are concerned it is not a matter of great importance, for if the Church – as we are supposing – teaches such doctrines in the exercise of her infallible office the faithful are bound sub gravi to believe them; in practice it is a question of determining whether he who denies them is very near to heresy or whether he has actually fallen into it. In either case he has committed a grave sin against faith.

II.

It is time now to turn our attention more particularly to the first word in our question, and to bring our inquiry to bear precisely upon the moral obligation of the Catholic in the matter of belief. For the Catholic not only believes, he must believe. To the question: "Why do you believe?" I may answer by indicating the motive or ground of my assent. But to the question: "Why must you believe?" I can only answer by pointing to the authority which imposes the obligation.

It is important, I think, to distinguish two aspects of teaching authority. It may be regarded as an authority in *dicendo* or an authority in *jubendo*, that is, as an authority which commands intellectual assent or as a power which demands obedience; and the two aspects are by no means inseparable. I can imagine an authority which constitutes a sufficient motive to command assent, without however being able to impose belief as a moral obligation. A professor learned in some subject upon which I am ignorant (let me confess – astronomy) – may tell me wonderful things about the stars. He may be to my knowledge the leading authority – virtually infallible – on his own subject; but I am not bound to believe him. I may be foolish, I may be sceptical; but the professor does not possess that authority over me which makes it my bounden duty to accept his word. On the other hand the school-boy who dissents, even internally, from what his teacher tells him, is insufferably conceited, and if he disagrees openly he is insubordinate and deserves to be punished. By virtue of his position as authoritative teacher the schoolmaster has a right to demand the obedient assent of his pupils; not merely because he is likely to know more about the subject than those over whom he is set – he may be incompetent – but because he is deputed by a legitimate authority to teach them.

However, let us not exaggerate. *Ad impossibile nemo tenetur*. The human mind cannot accept statements which are absurd, nor can it be obliged to do so. A statement can be accepted by the mind only on condition that it is credible: that it involves no evident contradiction, and that the person who vouches for its truth is known to possess the knowledge and veracity which make it worthy of credence; and in the absence of such conditions the obligation of acceptance ceases. On the other hand, where a legitimately constituted teaching authority exists their absence will not lightly be presumed. On the contrary, obedience to authority (considered as authority in *jubendo*) will predispose to the assumption that they are present.

Turning now to the Church, and with this distinction still in mind, we are confronted by an institution to which Christ, the Word Incarnate, has entrusted the office of teaching all men: "Going therefore teach ye all nations...teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Herein lies the source of the obligation to believe what the Church teaches. The Church possesses the divine commission to teach, and hence there arises in the faithful a moral obligation to believe, which is founded ultimately, not upon the infallibility of the Church, but upon God's sovereign right to the submission and intellectual allegiance (*rationabile obsequium*) of His creatures: "He that believeth...shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned." It is the God-given right of the Church to teach, and therefore it is the bounden duty of the faithful to believe.

But belief, however obligatory, is possible only on condition that the teaching proposed is guaranteed as credible. And therefore Christ added to His commission to teach the promise of the divine assistance: "Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world."

This divine assistance implies that, at any rate within a certain sphere, the Church teaches infallibly; and consequently, at least within those limits, the credibility of her teaching is beyond question. When the Church teaches infallibly the faithful know that what she teaches belongs, either directly or indirectly, to the depositum fidei committed to her by Christ; and their faith thus becomes grounded, immediately or mediately, upon the divine authority. But the infallibility of the Church does not, precisely as such, render belief obligatory. It renders her teaching divinely credible. What makes belief obligatory is her divine commission to teach.

The importance of this distinction becomes apparent when we consider that the Church does not always teach infallibly, even on those matters which are within the sphere of her infallible competence. That the charisma is limited in its exercise as well as in its sphere may be gathered from the words of the Vatican Council, which defines that the Roman Pontiff⁵ enjoys infallibility "when he speaks ex cathedra, that is when, exercising his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, according to his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church." Hence infallibility is exercised only when the supreme teaching authority, in the use of its full prerogatives, determines in an irrevocable manner⁶ a doctrine on faith or morals to be held, either by divine Catholic faith or by ecclesiastical faith,⁷ by all the faithful. If, therefore, at any time a pronouncement is issued by the Ecclesia docens which is shown not to be an exercise of the supreme authority in all its fullness, or is not addressed to the whole Church as binding on all the faithful, or is not intended to determine a doctrine in an irrevocable manner, then such pronouncement is not infallible.

To formulate and to discuss the criteria by which an infallible utterance may be diagnosed as such is another task for the theologian, and in any case is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purpose it is sufficient to register the fact that much of the authoritative teaching of the Church, whether in the form of Papal encyclicals, decisions, condemnations, replies from Roman Congregations – such as the Holy office – or from the Biblical Commission, is not an exercise of the infallible magisterium. And here once again our cautious believer raises his voice: "Must I believe it?"

III.

The answer is implicit in the principles already established. We have seen that the source of the obligation to believe is not the infallibility of the Church but her divine commission to teach. Therefore, whether her teaching is guaranteed by infallibility or not, the Church is always the divinely appointed teacher and guardian of revealed truth, and consequently the supreme authority of the Church, even when it does not intervene to make an infallible and definitive decision on matters of faith or morals, has the right, in virtue of the divine commission, to command the obedient assent of the faithful. In the absence of infallibility the assent thus demanded cannot be that of faith, whether Catholic or ecclesiastical; it will be an assent of a lower order proportioned to its ground or motive. But whatever name be given to it – for the present we may call it belief – it is obligatory; obligatory not because the teaching is infallible – it is not – but because it is the teaching of the divinely appointed Church. It is the duty of the Church, as Franzelin has pointed out,⁸ not only to teach revealed doctrine but also to protect it, and therefore the Holy See "may prescribe as to be followed or proscribe as to be avoided theological opinions or opinions connected with theology, not only with the intention of infallibly deciding the truth by a definitive pronouncement, but also – without any such

intention – merely for the purpose of safeguarding the security of Catholic doctrine.” If it is the duty of the Church, even though non-infallibly, to “prescribe or proscribe” doctrines to this end, then it is evidently also the duty of the faithful to accept them or reject them accordingly. Nor is this obligation of submission to the non-infallible utterances of authority satisfied by the so-called *silentium obsequiosum*. The security of Catholic doctrine, which is the purpose of these decisions, would not be safeguarded if the faithful were free to withhold their assent. It is not enough that they should listen in respectful silence, refraining from open opposition. They are bound in conscience to submit to them,⁹ and conscientious submission to a doctrinal decree does not mean only to abstain from publicly rejecting it; it means the submission of one’s own judgment to the more competent judgment of authority.

But, as we have already remarked, *ad impossibile nemo tenetur*, and without an intellectual motive of some sort no intellectual assent, however obligatory, is possible. On what intellectual ground, therefore, do the faithful base the assent which they are obliged to render to these non-infallible decisions of authority? On what Cardinal Franzelin¹⁰ somewhat cumbrously but accurately describes as *auctoritas universalis providentiae ecclesiasticae*. The faithful rightly consider that, even where there is no exercise of the infallible magisterium, divine Providence has a special care for the Church of Christ; that therefore the Sovereign Pontiff in view of his sacred office is endowed by God with the graces necessary for the proper fulfilment of it; that therefore his doctrinal utterances, even when not guaranteed by infallibility, enjoy the highest competence; that in a proportionate degree this is true also of the Roman Congregations and of the Biblical Commission, composed of men of great learning and experience, who are fully alive to the needs and doctrinal tendencies of the day, and who, in view of the care and the (proverbial) caution with which they carry out the duties committed to them by the Sovereign Pontiff, inspire full confidence in the wisdom and prudence of their decisions. Based as it is upon these considerations of a religious order, the assent in question is called a “religious assent.”

But these decisions are not infallible, and therefore religious assent lacks that perfect certainty which belongs to divine Catholic faith and ecclesiastical faith. On the other hand belief in the Providence which governs the Church in all its activities, and especially in all the manifestations of the supreme ecclesiastical authority, forbids us to doubt or to suspend assent. The Catholic will not allow his thought to wander into channels where he is assured by authority that danger threatens his faith; he will – indeed he must – suffer it to be guided by what he is bound to regard as the competent custodian of revealed truth. In the cases which we are now contemplating, he is not told how to adhere with the fullness of certainty to a doctrine which is divinely guaranteed by infallibility; but he is told that this particular proposition may be maintained with perfect safety, while its contradictory is fraught with danger to the faith; that in the circumstances and in the present state of our knowledge this or that interpretation of Scripture may not safely be forsaken; that a particular philosophical tenet may lead to serious errors in a matter of faith. And the Catholic must shun the danger of which he is authoritatively warned by bowing to the judgment of authority. He must not doubt, he must assent.

Logically implied in these precautionary decisions is a truth of the speculative order, whether ethical or dogmatic. But upon that speculative truth as such the decree does not pronounce; it envisages merely the question of security.¹¹ Thus, for example, the answer of the Holy Office

to the question about craniotomy¹² is based upon a moral principle which is a part of Catholic ethical doctrine. But the Congregation did not define that principle as a truth, although it is a truth. It merely stated that it is unsafe to teach that such an operation is licit; that Catholic ethical doctrine would be endangered by such teaching. Therefore the Catholic is bound to reject the suggestion that the operation may be permissible; he must believe that it is not allowed. Otherwise he would put himself in the danger of denying an ethical doctrine of the Catholic Church. On June 5th, 1918, the Holy Office in reply to a question decreed: "non posse tuto doceri...certam non posse dici sententiam quae statuit animam Christi nihil ignoravisse."¹³ Implied in this decision is the (speculative) truth that in Christ there was no ignorance. But the Holy Office did not define that truth. It merely stated that it is unsafe to cast any doubt upon the opinion that the soul of Christ was free from ignorance. Therefore the Catholic must hold it as certain that Christ was ignorant of nothing; otherwise he would endanger the integrity of Catholic doctrine.

But in the absence of infallibility there is the possibility of error, and hence the stickler for philosophical accuracy may refuse to religiously assent the attribute of certainty. Without quoting the homily on certainty which the judge reads to the jury at the beginning of his summing-up, we may none the less recall it to memory, and add to it the consideration that in the case before us the presumption in favour of truth, resting as it does upon the *auctoritas universalis providentiae ecclesiasticae*, renders the possibility of error so remote as to engender a high degree of what is known as "moral certainty." The generality of the faithful are not troubled by difficulties in these matters, and no fear of error assails them. The learned, however, are not always so fortunate; their studies may tempt them sometimes to question the non-infallible decisions of authority. Obedience to that authority, while it does not forbid the private and respectful submission of such difficulties for official consideration, none the less demands that all Catholics, learned and unlearned alike, yield their judgment to the guidance of those whom Providence has set to guard the deposit of faith.¹⁴

To sum up, Catholics are bound to believe what the Church teaches. To refuse the assent of divine-Catholic faith to a dogma is to be a heretic; to refuse the assent of ecclesiastical faith to a doctrine which the Church teaches as belonging indirectly to the deposit of faith is to be more or less near to heresy; to refuse internal religious assent to the non-infallible doctrinal decisions of the Holy See is to fail in that submission which Catholics are strictly bound to render to the teaching authority of the Church.

Are there, then, no fields of thought in which the Catholic may wander fancy-free? There are indeed; and they are the happy hunting-ground of the theologian. But he speculates more freely when he is free from the danger of error. His investigations are more fruitful, pursued within the limits of God's truth. There he is free, with the freedom with which Christ has made him free.

The Doctrinal Value of the Pope's Ordinary Magisterium

Countless people of varying theological positions and alliances proclaim themselves, and sincerely seek to be, traditional Roman Catholics. Few, however, actually consult the very sources from which genuine traditional (i.e. pre-Vatican II) Catholic teaching can be gleaned, such as this 8-volume dogmatic theology manual, preferring instead the popular literature of authors who wrote in response to the revolution of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Yet it stands to reason that, if all prejudice towards any traditionalist "camp" is to be avoided, there can be no better source to dispel the theological confusion and controversies of our times than the very authorities and works on matters of Sacred Theology that were used by the Church herself before the Modernists usurped the positions of power at the very top, beginning with the election of Angelo Roncalli as "Pope" John XXIII in 1958.

A very common error in our day is the idea that papal teaching is not binding, not authoritative, unless it is proclaimed *ex cathedra*, in which case it is protected by infallibility due to the special assistance of the Holy Ghost. This error has its root in another mistaken notion, namely, the idea that the believer's obligation to assent arises from the Church's inability to err. But this is false: The obligation to assent arises from the Church's authority as the divinely appointed teacher, even aside from matters of infallibility: "He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me; and he that despiseth me, despiseth him that sent me" (Lk 10:16).

The question thus presents itself: What is the origin of this widespread error about the binding nature of papal teaching? Where are people getting the idea that only infallible Church dogma must be assented to? Whatever their source is, it is most certainly not a traditional Catholic theology book, that is, not one from an approved theology work published before the death of Pope Pius XII.

The following three essays, clearly written not only for theologians but also for educated laymen, are a good example of the true traditional teaching expounded at a time when no one yet knew of a "Vatican II" or "Novus Ordo" anything:

"Must I Believe It?" by Canon George Smith (1935)

"The Doctrinal Authority of Papal Encyclicals" by Fr. Joseph Clifford Fenton (1949)

"The Doctrinal Authority of Papal Allocutions" by Mgr. Joseph Clifford Fenton (1956)

In 1950, Pope Pius XII published the landmark encyclical *Humani Generis*, an absolutely critical document that refuted many theological errors renescent at the time, including the idea that the ordinary teaching of the Pope is little more than an opinion one can choose to take or leave. The Pope shot this down when he stated clearly: "Nor must it be thought that what is expounded in Encyclical Letters does not of itself demand consent, since in writing such Letters the Popes do not exercise the supreme power of their Teaching Authority. For these matters are taught with the ordinary teaching authority..." (*Humani Generis*, n. 20).

At the Sixth Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) in 1951, Fr. Edmond Darvil Benard (1914-1961) gave a lecture on this very topic, the transcript of which, including an appended "digest of discussion", we are excited to share with you today.

Fr. Benard's presentation is entitled "The Doctrinal Value of the Ordinary Teaching of the Holy Father in View of Humani Generis" and has been made available at the web site of Boston College. It can be accessed for reading online at the following link:

"The Doctrinal Value of the Ordinary Teaching of the Holy Father in View of Humani Generis" by Fr. Edmond D. Benard Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America Vol. 6 (1951), pp. 78-107

The scanned PDF file can also be downloaded, simply by clicking the "Download" button at the top right in the viewer that opens when you click the link.

We hope that this essay will enlighten many souls, reminding them that traditional Catholic teaching (for example, on the Papacy) is to be sought not in the works of Michael Davies and Roberto de Mattei but, first and foremost, in the approved theological works before the Vatican II Sect came into being. Traditional Catholic doctrine can never be replaced by theological ideas proposed in our day, which often are merely custom-tailored to account for the apostasy that has taken place while at the same time carefully aiming to avoid the highly undesirable conclusion of Sedevacantism.

Our position with regard to the Vatican II apostasy, the nature of the institution that has emerged with it, and the status of the papal claimants after Pius XII's death, must be the consequence of the pertinent Catholic doctrine taught, believed, and held by the Church before the entire mess began. Hence, consulting and trying to understand that very doctrine is of the utmost importance.

Those accepting Francis as Pope while trying to adhere to the traditional Catholic Faith should ask themselves how Francis fits into Pope Pius XII's description of the papal office in Humani Generis: "...this sacred Office of Teacher in matters of faith and morals must be the proximate and universal criterion of truth for all theologians, since to it has been entrusted by Christ Our Lord the whole deposit of faith — Sacred Scripture and divine Tradition — to be preserved, guarded and interpreted.... (n. 18).

Thus, if it is admitted that Francis' magisterium is not "the proximate and universal criterion of truth" for the Catholic — and it obviously isn't —, then either traditional Catholic doctrine is false, or Francis isn't a valid Pope.

Now which of these two alternatives is compatible with traditional Catholicism?

THE DOCTRINAL AUTHORITY OF PAPAL ENCYCLICALS

By Msgr. Joseph Clifford Fenton

Exact from the American Ecclesiastical Review, Vol. CXXI, August 1949, pp. 136-150

Part I

Since the year 1878, when Pope Leo XIII began to rule, as Christ's vicar on earth, over the Church militant, over one hundred fifty encyclical letters have been issued by the Sovereign Pontiffs. These encyclical letters have exercised an incalculably powerful influence in the direction of Catholic teaching and of Catholic life. Appearing as they have, at an average rate of one in a little less than six months, these documents have come to be recognized as the most frequently used vehicles of the Holy Father's ordinary teaching of the flock entrusted to his care.

Despite their manifest and unique importance, however, the papal encyclicals have never been given anything like a completely adequate treatment in the literature of sacred theology. Some of the textbooks used in our seminaries today give no special consideration whatever to the doctrinal authority of these documents. Others content themselves with a sweeping oversimplification and blithely dismiss all the encyclicals as "non-infallible" pontifical statements. A third group of authors, more scientific in their approach to this problem, maintain that these documents contain some infallibly true teachings, doctrines presented as infallible on the authority of the encyclicals themselves. Even within this last-mentioned group, however, we find most frequently little detailed explanation of the various norms by which we can recognize infallibly authoritative statements of the Holy Father's ordinary magisterium in his encyclical letters.

Despite the comparative inadequacy of the treatment they give to the papal encyclicals, however, all the theological works dealing with this subject make it perfectly clear that all Catholics are bound seriously in conscience to accept the teaching contained in these documents with a true internal religious assent. It is the common teaching of the theologians who have written on this subject that the internal assent due to a great number of the doctrines proposed in the papal encyclicals is something distinct from and inferior to both the act of divine Catholic faith and the act most frequently designated as *fides ecclesiastica*. Most theologians hold that, while there is nothing to prevent an infallible definition of truth contained in or connected with the deposit of revelation in papal encyclicals, and while *de facto* it is quite probable that at least some infallible pronouncements have been made in this way, the Holy Father has not chosen to use the complete plenitude of his apostolic doctrinal authority in presenting most of the truths contained in his encyclical letters. Nevertheless, they all insist that even in this portion of his ordinary magisterium the Holy Father has the right to demand, and actually has demanded, a definite and unswerving internal assent to his teaching from all Catholics.

Unfortunately, in our day, we have encountered certain discussions of matters treated at some length in papal encyclicals by Catholic writers who have, for all practical purposes, disregarded and even opposed the pertinent statements in the pontifical documents. The men who have

adopted this attitude seem to take cognizance of the common theological teaching that much of the material presented in the encyclicals does not come to us from the Holy Father with an absolute guarantee of infallibility. They seem, on the other hand to have forgotten the no-less-certain doctrine of the theologians that the internal and sincere assent due to teachings presented even in a non-infallible way by the supreme teacher and ruler of the Church militant is definitely and seriously obligatory. The obligation holds until the Church might come to modify its position on some particular portion of the teaching contained in the encyclicals, or at least until the time when very serious reasons for such modification might become apparent.

The attitude to which we have referred makes at least a summary examination of the theologians' teachings about the doctrines contained in papal encyclicals imperative. In this examination we shall consider those writers who stress the non-infallible character of the teachings contained in these documents and then those who insist upon the fact that some of the statements propounded in the encyclicals can be or actually are infallible pronouncements. We shall begin, however, with a list of those authors who make no adequate mention of the encyclicals in their treatment of the Church's magisterium.

VARIOUS ATTITUDES AMONG THE THEOLOGIANs

An astonishingly large number of prominent theologians can be found among those who take no adequate cognizance of the encyclical letters in their treatises on papal infallibility. These men content themselves with an examination of and a theological demonstration for the formula by which the Vatican Council defined the Holy Father's infallibility. Bishop Joseph Fessler, [1] the Vatican Council's secretary, used this approach in his reply to the "Old Catholic" Schultes. The famous and highly influential Cardinal Cammillus Mazzella [2] followed the same line, as did Archbishops Richard Downey, [3] Valentine Zubizarreta, [4] and Horace Mazzella, [5] Bishop Michael d'Herbigny, [6] Canon Auguste Leboucher, [7] and Fathers Sylvester Berry, [8] Hugo Hurter, [9] Sylvester Hunter, [10] Bernard Tepe, [11] Raphael Cercia, [12] Basil Prevel, [13] Gabriel Casanova, [14] and Gerard Paris. [15] As a group these writers frequently give the impression that they consider only those truths proposed by the Holy Father solemn*i iudicio* as infallibly defined, to the exclusion of those truths which he sets forth *ordinario et universali magisterio*.

Another very imposing group of theologians explicitly list the papal encyclicals, at least in a general way, as non-infallible documents. Bishop Hilarinus Felder, [16] Msgr. Caesar Manzoni, [17] and Fathers Emil Dorsch, [18] Reginald Schultes, [19] Antonio Vellico, [20] Ludwig Koesters, [21] Ludwig Lercher, [22] and Aelred Graham [23] teach thus in their treatises. The same view is set forth by Fr. Mangenot in his excellent article on the encyclicals in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, [24] by Fr. Lucien Choupin in his outstanding monograph, [25] by Fr. Thomas Pegues in his frequently quoted article in the *Revue thomiste* on the authority of the encyclicals, [26] and by Canon George Smith in his brilliant study on this subject in the *Clergy Review*. [27] Fr. Jean Vincent Bainvel, along with Choupin and Schultes, incidentally, refers explicitly to the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII and classifies them as non-infallible, [28] while the article of Pegues was written as an answer to a question sent in to the *Revue thomiste* about the doctrinal authority of Pope Leo's encyclicals. Fr. Herman Dieckmann

The distinguished theologians who deny the papal encyclicals the status of infallible documents teach, none the less, that the faithful are bound in conscience to accord these letters not only the tribute of respectful silence, but also a definite and sincere internal religious assent. To this end many of them, like Fr. De Groot, [30] apply to the encyclicals a teaching with the eminent and brilliant Dominic Palmieri had developed about the Catholic attitude towards non-infallible teaching in the Church. [31] Pegues, in his *Revue thomiste* article, makes this application with his usual clarity.

‘Hence it follows that the authority of the encyclicals is not at all the same as that of the solemn definition, the one properly so-called. The definition demands an assent without reservation and makes a formal act of faith obligatory. The case of the encyclical’s authority is not the same.

This authority (of the papal encyclicals) is undoubtedly great. It is, in a sense, sovereign. It is the teaching of the supreme pastor and teacher of the Church. Hence the faithful have a strict obligation to receive this teaching with an infinite respect. A man must not be content simply not to contradict it openly and in a more or less scandalous fashion. An internal mental assent is demanded. It should be received as the teaching sovereignly authorized within the Church.

Ultimately, however, this assent is not the same as the one demanded in the formal act of faith. Strictly speaking, it is possible that this teaching (proposed in the encyclical letter) is subject to error. There are a thousand reasons to believe that it is not. It has probably never been (erroneous), and it is normally certain that it will never be. But, absolutely speaking, it could be, because God does not guarantee it as He guarantees the teaching formulated by way of definition’. [32]

Lercher teaches that the internal assent due to these pronouncements cannot be called certain according to the strictest philosophical meaning of the term. The assent given to such propositions is interpretative *condicionatus*, including the tacit condition that the teaching is accepted as true “unless the Church should at some time peremptorily define otherwise or unless the decision should be discovered to be erroneous.” [33] Lyons [34] and Phillips [35] use the same approach in describing the assent Catholics are in conscience bound to give to the Church’s non-infallible teachings. Fr. Yves de la Brière speaks of the “submission and hierarchical obedience” due to these pronouncements. [36]

Msgr. Manzoni lists the encyclicals among the documents in which non-infallible teaching is to be found. He holds that the definition of which the Vatican Council speaks in proposing the doctrine of papal infallibility is to be found only in the exercise of the solemn, as distinguished from the ordinary magisterium. In explaining the binding force of these non-infallible pronouncements, he, like Bishop Francis Egger, [37] and Fathers Mangelot, [38] MacGuinness, [39] and Dieckmann, [40] employs an explanation formulated by Cardinal Franzelin in his *Tractatus de divina traditione et scriptura*.

Franzelin holds that the Roman Pontiff can command all Catholics to assent to a given proposition (either directly or by condemning the contradictory statement), for either one of two different reasons. First the Holy Father can intend to define this proposition infallibly as

true or as *de fide*. Again he can will merely to look after the security of Catholic doctrine. The magisterium of the Church has been equipped with help from God by reason of which the first sort of teaching gives infallible truth, while the second affords infallible security. Employing the plenitude of its power, the teaching Church operates as the *auctoritas infallibilitatis*. Working, not to define, but merely to take those steps it deems necessary to safeguard the faith, it is the *auctoritas providentiae doctrinalis*. To this *auctoritas providentiae doctrinalis* and to the teachings it sets forth, the faithful owe the obedience of respectful silence and of an internal mental assent according to which the proposition thus presented is accepted, not as infallibly true, but as safe, as guaranteed by that authority which is divinely commissioned to care for the Christian faith. [41]

The explanations developed by Franzelin and by Palmieri are adequate and exact. The first gives an excellent account of those teachings presented by the Holy See as propositions which can be taught safely. Palmieri, for his own part, offers a fine exposition of the status of propositions taught by competent authority, yet not presented as infallibly true. Both explanations can be employed profitably in dealing with some of the pronouncements of the various Roman congregations and with much of the teaching of the encyclicals. It would seem, however, that it would be a serious mistake to imagine that they can properly be applied to the entire body of doctrine set forth in these papal documents. It must be noted that neither Franzelin nor Palmieri made such an explicit application in the development of their own theories.

Several of the most influential modern theologians teach explicitly that some of the teaching in the papal encyclicals come to us as parts of the Church's infallible doctrine. Thus Tanqueray [42] and De Guibert [43] hold that some of the propositions set forth in the papal encyclicals are infallibly true since they are presented by the Holy Father in his infallible ordinary magisterium. Cardinals Billot [44] and Lepicier [45] teach that many of the pronouncements contained in the encyclicals are to be accepted as infallibly true. The manuals of Hervé, [46] Yelle, [47] Blanch, [48] Herrmann, [49] Scheeben, [50] and Saiz Ruiz [51] show that their authors are convinced that the encyclicals cannot simply be dismissed as non-infallible documents. The manuals of Wilhelm-Scannell, [52] Michelitsch, [53] Van Noort, [54] Pesch, [55] and Calcagno [56] come to the same conclusion in another way, by warning their readers that not all of the teachings contained in the encyclicals are to be considered as infallible. Thurston also teaches that some of the teachings contained in the encyclicals are to be received as infallibly proposed. [57] Brunsmann contents himself with the observation that the doctrinal encyclicals impose an obligation upon the consciences of all the faithful. [58]

THE VATICAN COUNCIL AND THE HOLY FATHER'S ORDINARY MAGISTERIUM

Despite the divergent views about the existence of the infallible pontifical teaching in the encyclical letters, there is one point on which all theologians are manifestly in agreement. They are all convinced that all Catholics are bound in conscience to give a definite internal religious assent to those doctrines which the Holy Father teaches when he speaks to the universal Church of God on earth without employing his God-given charism of infallibility. Thus, prescindng from the question as to whether any individual encyclical or group of encyclicals may be said to contain specifically infallible teaching, all theologians are in agreement that this religious assent must be accorded the teachings which the Sovereign Pontiff includes in these documents. This assent is due, as Lercher has noted, until the Church might choose to modify the teaching previously presented or until proportionately serious reasons for abandoning the non-infallible teaching contained in a pontifical document might appear. [59] It goes without saying that any reason which would justify the relinquishing of a position taken in a pontifical statement would have to be very serious indeed.

It might be definitely understood, however, that the Catholic's duty to accept the teachings conveyed in the encyclicals even when the Holy Father does not propose such teachings as a part of his infallible magisterium is not based merely upon the dicta of the theologians. The authority which imposes this obligation is that of the Roman Pontiff himself. To the Holy Father's responsibility of caring for the sheep of Christ's fold, there corresponds, on the part of the Church's membership, the basic obligation of following his directions, in doctrinal as well as disciplinary matters. In this field, God has given the Holy Father a kind of infallibility distinct from the charism of doctrinal infallibility in the strict sense. He has so constructed and ordered the Church that those who follow the directives given to the entire kingdom of God on earth will never be brought into the position of ruining themselves spiritually through this obedience. Our Lord dwells within His Church in such a way that those who obey disciplinary and doctrinal directives of this society can never find themselves displeasing God through their adherence to the teachings and the commands given to the universal Church militant. Hence there can be no valid reason to discountenance even the non-infallible teaching authority of Christ's vicar on earth.

The Vatican Council, in its famous conclusion to the constitution *Dei Filius*, insisted very strongly upon the Catholic's duty to accept that portion of papal teachings in which the encyclical letters are included. The Council appended the following two statements to its first dogmatic constitution.

The most prominent commentator on this passage, the French theologian Jean Vacant, calls attention to the fact that the Council deliberately worded its admonition in such a way as to make it clear that the duty, incumbent upon all the faithful, of accepting and observing the various pontifical constitutions and decrees is founded upon the prerogatives of the Holy See itself. [61] All the Council seeks to do is to warn the members of the Church of an already existent obligation. The people are admonished to receive and to keep the doctrines proposed by the Holy Father through the documents to which the Council alludes, not because the Council teaches that such teachings are to be accepted, but rather because the Holy See, which obviously has the right to do so, has demanded such assent for its own teachings.

The Vatican Council speaks of a duty, a moral obligation binding in conscience. All of the faithful are bound in conscience to keep, i.e., to give a continuing assent, to these pontifical documents which proscribe and forbid those errors which are more or less closely related to "heretical wickedness." The Council specifically mentions the fact that it refers to errors not condemned explicitly in its own constitution.

It is important to note that the Vatican Council speaks of this obligation as something belonging to the integrity of the duty of faith itself. It warns the faithful that they must persevere in their assent to the teachings of the pontifical constitutions and decrees precisely because "it is not enough to keep away from heretical wickedness unless those errors which more or less closely approach it are also diligently avoided." The Council looks upon those errors castigated in the various documents emanating from the Holy See as factors which would ruin the purity of the faith in the man unfortunate enough to accept them.

Vacant and Scheeben make it clear that in speaking of the Decreta (as distinct from the Constitutiones), the Vatican Council definitely included the pronouncements of the various Roman Congregations among those teachings which Catholics are bound in conscience to accept perseveringly. [62] These pronouncements are unquestionably non-infallible statements. They have obviously less authority than those documents which emanate directly from the Holy Father, even when the Vicar of Christ does not intend to use the fullness of his apostolic teaching power. If these decrees of the Roman Congregations are mentioned as doctrinal pronouncements "to be observed" by all of the faithful, then it is perfectly clear that the Vatican Council, speaking as the voice of the entire ecclesia docens, insists that the teachings set forth in papal encyclicals must be accepted sincerely.

The Vatican Council's exhortation has reference, immediately and directly, to those Constitutiones et Decreta which appeared prior to the promulgation of the Dei Filius and which dealt with doctrine closely connected with the teachings set forth in the Dei Filius. Indirectly however, by reason of the Council's mode of procedure, it most certainly affirmed the obligation incumbent upon all Catholics of accepting and assenting to the teachings presented to the City of God on earth, even in a non-infallible manner, by the Roman Pontiff. It must be remembered that the Council did not intend to oblige the faithful to accept these pontifical statements by reason of any command contained in the Dei Filius. It simply warned them to be faithful to the obligation already incumbent upon them by reason of the pontifical authority itself. The encyclicals which have appeared since the year 1870 have manifestly just as much claim to be accepted and believed by all the faithful as had the pontifical documents issued prior to that date.

The internal acceptance which Catholics are bound to give to that portion of the Church's teaching not presented absolutely as infallible is described as a "religious assent." It is truly religious by reason of its object and of its motives. The Vatican Council's conclusion to its Constitution Dei Filius stresses the religious object of this assent. The faithful are reminded of their obligation to believe the doctrinal pronouncements of the Roman Congregations because these statements denounce and forbid definite errors which are closely connected with "heretical wickedness" and which thus are opposed to the purity of the faith. Teachings that contradict errors of this sort are obviously religious in character since they deal more or less

directly with the content of divine revelation, the body of truth which guides and directs the Church of God in its worship.

The letter *Tuas libentur*, sent on Dec. 21, 1863 by Pope Pius IX to the Archbishop of Munich, stresses in a singularly effective way the religious motivation of the assent Catholics are bound to give to those teachings presented in a non-infallible manner in the Church's ordinary magisterium. After reminding his readers that the dogma itself can be set forth by the Church's ordinary magisterium as well as in its solemn judgments, the great Pontiff made the following statement.

In this letter Pope Pius IX insists that the men in the assembly to which he refers (the men who took part in the a Catholic theological meeting in Germany), must not lose sight of the fact that Catholic savants must submit themselves to the doctrinal pronouncements of the Roman Congregations "in order that they may bring new advantages to the Church by their writings." The Sovereign Pontiff shows himself keenly aware of the essential functional nature of theological investigation. God calls men to work in the sacred sciences, not to form themselves into a more or less edifying debating club, but to labor effectively for His Church on earth. That labor is something which can be accomplished only under the direction of the Church and ultimately under the direction of the supreme teaching authority within the Church.

The motive for this theological inquiry is thus something essentially religious, and the inquiry itself is definitely a corporate function, meant by its very nature to be carried on for the Church and under the Church's guidance. The man who refuses to place his thought and his teaching wholly under the Church's direction and who chooses to ignore or to oppose sections of the Church's authoritative teaching on the ground that these sections are not absolutely guaranteed by the Church's charism of infallibility has definitely frustrated in advance any advantage which might have accrued to the Church through his efforts in the field of sacred theology. By his own decision he is out of harmony with the corporate labor and the direction of theological inquiry.

The "religious assent" of which the theologians speak is due to the individual doctrinal pronouncements of the various Roman Congregations. It is due on manifestly stronger grounds to the individual doctrinal pronouncements not presented as infallible teachings but set forth in papal encyclicals. Again, the obligation is even more powerful in the case of a body of teaching presented in a series of encyclicals.

It would manifestly be a very serious fault on the part of a Catholic writer or teacher in this field, acting on his own authority, to set aside or to ignore any of the outstanding doctrinal pronouncements of the *Rerum novarum* or the *Quadragesimo anno*, regardless of how unfashionable these documents be in a particular locality or at a particular time. It would, however, be a much graver sin on the part of such a teacher to pass over or to discountenance a considerable section of the teachings contained in these labor encyclicals. In exactly the same way and for precisely the same reason it would be seriously wrong to contravene any outstanding individual pronouncement in the encyclicals dealing with the relations between Church and State, and much worse to ignore or disregard all of the teachings or a great portion of the teachings on this topic contained in the letters of Pius IX and Leo XIII.

It is, of course, possible that the Church might come to modify its stand on some detail of teaching presented as non-infallible matter in a papal encyclical. The nature of the *auctoritas providentiae doctrinalis* within the Church is such, however, that this fallibility extends to questions of relatively minute detail or of particular application. The body of doctrine on the rights and duties of labor, on the Church and State, or on any other subject treated extensively in a series of papal letters directed to and normative for the entire Church militant could not be radically or completely erroneous. The infallible security Christ wills that His disciples should enjoy within His Church is utterly incompatible with such a possibility.

In the matter of individual pronouncements, it is interesting to observe the teaching of one of the most competent and respected scholars in the Church on the doctrinal effect produced by a statement in a papal encyclical. The encyclical *Mystici Corporis* speaks of the bishops' ordinary power of jurisdiction as something "communicated to them immediately by the Sovereign Pontiff." Msgr. Alfredo Ottaviani, in the latest edition of his *Institutiones iuris publici ecclesiastici*, speaks of this doctrine as "*sententia, hucusque considerata probabilior, immo communis, nunc autem ut omnino certa habenda ex verbis Summi Pontificis Pii XII.*"

PART II

(American Ecclesiastical Review, Vol. CXXI, September, 1949, 210-220)

By this judgment about the present doctrinal status of the thesis that the residential bishops of the Catholic Church receive their power of jurisdiction immediately from the Roman Pontiff rather than immediately from Our Lord, Msgr. Ottaviani has given us eminently practical and hence and exceptionally valuable appreciation of the authority inherent in papal encyclicals. The great Roman writer tells us, in the most recent edition of his *Institutiones iuris publici ecclesiastici*, that up until the present time, this thesis had been considered as more probable and even as a *sententia communis*, but that from now on it is to be held as entirely certain by reason of the words of the present Holy Father. Msgr. Ottaviani alludes to a passage in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* in which the Holy Father states this teaching, as he had done a year before the appearance of this encyclical in his discourse to the parish priests and the Lenten preachers of Rome. Msgr. Ottaviani assumes rightly that the authoritative statement of this thesis in the papal letter raised this teaching from the status of a more probable doctrine to that of a perfectly certain proposition. [1]

This observation on the part of Msgr. Ottaviani constitutes a valuable practical corrective to a certain tendency towards oversimplification and minimism which had begun to invade some recent judgments on the doctrinal authority of the Holy Father's encyclical letters. In the face of sweeping generalizations which classify all the teachings of the encyclicals as doctrines which might conceivably be erroneous, the distinguished Roman prelate scholar can list one such thesis as "*nunc...omnino certa habenda ex verbis Summi Pontificis Pii XII.*"

It remains true, of course, that this designation of the thesis as "entirely certain" is the work of a private theologian. Yet we are sometimes tempted to overlook the no-less-obvious fact that the process of taking together all those teachings whose chief claim to acceptance in the

Church of God on earth is their inclusion in a papal encyclical and listing them all simply as "morally" certain is likewise the work of private theologians. It is something which definitely cannot be ascribed to the *ecclesia docens*.

A great deal of confusion and minimism with reference to the doctrinal authority of papal encyclicals would seem to proceed from a misunderstanding of the Holy Father's ordinary and universal magisterium. Ever since the time of the Vatican Council, there has been an unfortunate inclination on the part of some authors to imagine that the Council's definition of papal infallibility applied only to the Sovereign Pontiff's solemn and extraordinary utterances, as distinguished from what is called his ordinary pronouncements. Furthermore some have accepted the inaccurate notion that the Holy Father speaks infallibly only when he delivers a solemn dogmatic definition. An examination of the Council's definition, particularly in the light of its historical background, shows that the Church intended to place no such restriction in its teaching on the subject.

The Vatican Council thus defined the Holy Father's doctrinal infallibility.

In this passage the Council proclaimed it to be a dogma of Catholic faith that the Holy Father teaches infallibly when he gives an *ex cathedra* definition on matters involving faith or morals. First of all, in order to understand the import of this conciliar statement, we must understand that it no way limits papal infallibility to dogmatic definitions strictly so-called. The language of the Council was deliberately framed to exclude this limitation. During the sessions of the Council's *Deputatio pro rebus ad fidem pertinentibus* Cardinal Bilio procured the temporary adoption of a formula proposed by Bishop Conrad Martin of Paderborn, according to which the Holy Father would be said to exercise infallibility in defining *quid in rebus fidei et morum ab universa Ecclesia fide divina tenendum....*The strenuous opposition of Archbishop Henry Edward Manning of Bishop Ignatius Senestrey prevented the final approval of this formula. The wording ultimately adopted and used in the actual constitution *Pastor aeternus* was substantially that proposed by Cardinal Cullen, a formula drawn up deliberately to exclude the limitation involved in the one offered up by Martin and Bilio. [3]

Hence it is a grievous mistake to imagine that, according to the teachings of the Vatican Council, the Holy Father can speak infallibly only when he solemnly proclaims a dogma of divine faith or when he solemnly condemns some teaching as heretical. Thus the fact that the encyclicals do not contain solemn definitions, like that of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception or solemn definitions of heresy, like that contained in the Constitution *Cum occasione*, by Pope Innocent X, in no way militates against the inclusion of strictly infallible papal teaching in these documents.

The Vatican Council never had the opportunity to consider and to propound its teaching on the object of the Church's infallibility. Because it expected to pronounce on this matter, however, it did not wish to insert the teaching on the object of infallible teaching in the Constitution *Pastor aeternus*. Hence the conciliar definition does not say positively that the Holy Father can speak infallibly when he defines a teaching which is so connected with formally revealed truth that this formal revelation could not be adequately and accurately presented by a living and infallible teacher apart from it. The deliberate exclusion, on the other hand, of a formula which

would have asserted only that the Holy Father is infallible in defining a truth which must be held on divine faith stands as amply sufficient evidence that the teaching Church considers the Sovereign Pontiff by virtue of his position capable of issuing infallible definitions on matters included in what sacred theology knows as the secondary objects of the Church's magisterium.

The theological treatise *de ecclesia Christi* is quite explicit about this secondary object of the Church's inerrant magisterium. The *ecclesia docens* can teach infallibly on those subjects which are so connected with the deposit of divine public revelation that an erroneous presentation of these subjects would lead to an improper teaching of the primary object of the Church's infallible magisterium. It is at least theologically certain that the Church can teach infallibly about mere theological conclusions and about those truths of the philosophical order which serve as *praeambula fidei*, about dogmatic facts, the approval of religious orders, and the canonization of Saints.

In order to appreciate the doctrinal authority of the encyclical letters we must take cognizance of the fact that there is nothing whatsoever in the Vatican Council's definition of papal infallibility which could legitimately give rise to the opinion that the entire content of the teachings proposed in the encyclicals can be dismissed simply as non-infallible doctrine. It would appear, on the other hand, that especially when a number of these documents deal with a certain individual subject and when the more recent letters repeat and emphasize teachings which have been stressed in previous encyclicals, that some, at least, of the doctrine thus presented to the Church universal should be considered as taught infallibly by the Church's ordinary and universal magisterium. Thus it would seem that some teachings whose main claim to acceptance on the part of Catholics is to be found in the fact that they are stated in papal encyclicals would actually demand an assent higher than that which must be accorded to the content of the Church's authentic but non-infallible magisterium. Such truths would demand the kind of assent usually designated in theology under the title of *fides ecclesiastica*.

The Vatican Council's definition asserts that the Holy Father possesses that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that His Church should be equipped in defining about faith or morals when he speaks *ex cathedra*. It describes an *ex cathedra* pronouncement as one in which the Holy Father, "exercising his function as the pastor and teacher of all Christians, defines with his supreme apostolic authority a doctrine about faith or morals to be held by the universal Church." There is nothing in this description to prevent a recognition of some of the statements in the Holy Father's ordinary magisterium, and particularly some of the statements in the encyclical letters, as infallible pronouncements.

It is evident that in those encyclical letters which are addressed to all the ordinaries of the Catholic Church throughout the world the Holy Father is exercising his function as pastor and teacher of all Christians. He exercises that same function also when he issues a pronouncement directly to some individual or to some portion of the Church, ultimately, however, directing it to and intending it as normative for the entire Church militant. All of the doctrinal encyclicals qualify under this point, as well as by reason of the fact that they contain the Holy Father's teachings on matters of faith or morals.

There is no reason whatsoever to suppose that the style of the encyclical letters is in any way incompatible with the possibility of a genuine papal definition, in which the Sovereign Pontiff, *pro suprema sua Apostolica auctoritate*, defines a teaching on faith or morals as something to be held by the universal Church. A definition is an ultimate and irrevocable doctrinal decision. The *ecclesia docens* pronounces this decision and intends that no one in the future shall ever contradict it. A defined doctrine is a teaching which cannot be questioned legitimately at any time after the definition is given.

When the Holy Father issues a definition, he obviously makes it clear that he is making an irrevocable statement of doctrine. The manifestation comes in solemn form where, as in the case of the definition of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception in the *Ineffabilis Deus*, or in the decision on Anglican orders in the *Apostolicae curae*, a consecrated set of terms is employed. But there can obviously be a genuine definition even apart from this solemn form of pronouncement. Where a question of grave moment has been disputed among Catholics, and where the Holy Father intervenes to settle this question once and for all, there is clearly a definition, a decision which all Catholics are bound to accept always as true, even though no solemn terminology be employed.

In his extremely interesting work, *Une hérésie fantôme: L'Américanisme*, the Abbé Félix Klein quotes a passage from a letter written by the late Cardinal Richard to the priest of his archdiocese. In this letter the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris shows that he considered the letter *Testem benevolentiae* a real definition, despite the fact that this letter does not contain any solemn form of pronouncement. He wrote as follows.

It is evident, then, that Cardinal Richard considered the letter *Testem benevolentiae* as a definition in the strict sense of the term. The letter sent to the American hierarchy through Cardinal Gibbons was, he believed, clearly intended to settle doctrinal questions which had arisen in France, question for the resolution of which the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris had sought pontifical intervention. The teaching thus presented was something "to which the faithful were obliged to remain attached." It was a doctrine concerning faith and morals which, according to Cardinal Richard, was "to be held by the universal Church." From this point of view, then, there was and there is nothing to prevent this particular doctrinal letter of Pope Leo XIII from being considered as a document containing a genuine papal definition.

The same set of circumstances are to be found in the case where a series of pontifical encyclicals bring out the same teaching. In such a case, as, for example in the series of pontifical pronouncements on Church and State, the teachings of the earlier documents are repeated and re-stated in more recent letters. Thus there is an indication that the Sovereign Pontiffs wished definitively to close discussion on the points at issue, and to have the teachings thus repeated accepted always by all the members of the Church.

There is, furthermore, still another way in which the Holy Father, speaking directly to an individual local Church, can still be said to present teaching normative for the entire Church militant. This comes about when he exercises his function as the authorized teacher of the Roman Church itself. From the earliest Christian times the *ecclesia Romana*, considered precisely as an individual congregation within the universal kingdom of God on earth, has

rightly been considered as infallible in its doctrine. Its teaching and its belief were correctly considered as normative for the universal Church militant. Hence, in authoritatively imposing or defining the object of belief in the Roman Church, the Holy Father can rightly be considered as ruling indirectly but definitively for the universal Church in this world.

The Vatican Council, we must remember, also teaches that the Bishop of Rome makes an infallible *ex cathedra* definition when he defines "exercising his function as pastor and teacher of all Christians *pro suprema sua Apostolica auctoritate*." The encyclical must not be considered, obviously, as documents containing *ex cathedra* definitions except where the Holy Father speaks and teaches in them using "his supreme apostolic authority."

It must be understood from the very outset that a document is not disqualified from consideration as something in which the Roman Pontiff speaks with the fullness of his apostolic authority merely by reason of the fact that it mentions no penalties or sanctions to be imposed against those who refuse to accept its teaching. Theologians are substantially in agreement on this point. Furthermore, in order to have the exercise of supreme apostolic authority on the part of the Roman Pontiff, there is no single formula which must be employed. All that is requisite is that the Vicar of Christ on earth, speaking for the benefit of all the faithful, should propose a definite teaching concerned with faith or morals irrevocably and finally as something to be accepted by all.

If he should propose some teaching as merely safe, or as merely probable, then it is obvious that he does not intend to use the plenitude of his apostolic power. If, on the other hand, he tells his children that a definite doctrine is to be held irrevocably by all, or, on the other hand, if formally and definitively he stigmatizes a teaching with doctrinal, as distinct from a merely disciplinary censure, it is clear that he is exercising the plenitude of his apostolic doctrinal authority when he speaks for the entire Church militant. He is definitely commanding the internal assent of all Christians for a teaching which he imposes on his own responsibility. This is manifestly the supreme expression of the apostolic doctrinal power.

We must not lose sight of the fact that, according to the Vatican Council, the Holy Father's infallible authority in defining truths concerning the faith and morals is exactly co-extensive with that of the Church itself. The Church can teach infallibly by solemn judgment or by its ordinary and universal magisterium. It is obvious that the solemn judgment of the Holy Father in defining a dogma of faith is equally valid and equally infallible when compared with the solemn judgment of an oecumenical council. It seems equally true that the ordinary teaching of the Holy Father, when that teaching prescribes irrevocably the acceptance of a truth concerning faith or morals by the entire Church on earth, is fully as valid and as infallible as the teaching of the entire *ecclesia docens* involving the same doctrinal command.

It is quite probable that some of the teachings set forth on the authority of the various papal encyclicals are infallible statements of the Sovereign Pontiff, demanding the assent of the *fides ecclesiastica*. It is absolutely certain that all of the teachings contained in these documents and dependent upon their authority merit at least an internal religious assent from all Catholics. Hence we do not find anything like a direct negation of the authority of these letters on the part of Catholic teachers.

There is, however, an attitude towards the encyclicals which can be productive of doctrinal evil, and which can lead to a practical abandonment of their teaching. According to this attitude, it is the business of the theologian to distinguish two elements in the content of the various encyclicals. One element would be the deposit of genuine Catholic teaching, which, of course, all Catholics are bound to accept at all times. The other element would be a collection of notions current at the time the encyclicals were written. The notions which would enter into the practical application of the Catholic teaching, are represented as ideas which Catholics can afford to overlook.

Despite its superficially attractive appearance, however, this attitude can be radically destructive of a true Catholic mentality. The men who have adopted this mentality imagine that they can analyze the content of an individual encyclical or a group of encyclicals in such a way that they can separate the pronouncements which Catholics are bound to accept from those which would have merely an ephemeral value. They, as theologians, would then tell the Catholic people to receive the Catholic principles and to do as they liked about the other elements.

In such a case, the only true doctrinal authority actually operative would be that of the individual theologian. The Holy Father has issued his encyclical as a series of statements. Apart from those which he himself stamps as merely opinionative, all of these statements stand as the Holy Father's own declarations. The man who subjects these declarations to an analysis in order to distinguish the element of Catholic tradition from other sections of the content must employ some norm other than the authority of the Holy Father himself.

The Holy Father's authority stands behind his own individual statements, precisely as these are found in the encyclicals. When a private theologian ventures to analyze these statements and claims to find a Catholic principle on which the Holy Father's utterance is based and some contingent mode according to which the Sovereign Pontiff has applied this Catholic principle in his own pronouncement, the only effective doctrinal authority is that of the private theologian himself. According to this method of procedure, the Catholic people would be expected to accept as much of the encyclical as the theologian pronounced to be genuine Catholic teaching. This Catholic teaching would be recognizable as such, not by reason of the Holy Father's statement in the encyclical, but by reason of its inclusion in other monuments of Christian doctrine.

It is very difficult to see where such a process would stop. The men who would adopt this course would inevitably force themselves to treat all doctrinal pronouncements of the Popes after the fashion of the teachings of private theologians. The writings of earlier Pontiffs are certainly no more authoritative than those of the more recent Sovereign Pontiffs. If a man chooses to dissect the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, there is no reason why the documents which emanate from Gelasius or from St. Leo I would not be subjected to the same process. If the statements of Pius IX are not valid exactly as they stand, it is difficult to see how those of any other Roman Pontiff are any more authoritative.

There is, of course, a definite task incumbent upon the private theologians in the Church's process of bringing the teachings of the papal encyclicals to the people. The private theologian is obligated and privileged to study these documents, to arrive at an understanding of what the Holy Father actually teaches, and then to aid in the task of bringing this body of truth to the people. The Holy Father, however, not the private theologian, remains the doctrinal authority. The theologian is expected to bring out the content of the Pope's actual teaching, not to subject that teaching to the type of criticism he would have a right to impose on the writings of another private theologian.

Thus, when we review or attempt to evaluate the works of a private theologian, we are perfectly within our rights in attempting to show that a certain portion of his doctrine is authentic Catholic teaching or at least based upon such teaching, and to assert that some other portions of that work simply express ideas current at the time the books were written. The pronouncements of the Roman Pontiffs, acting as the authorized teachers of the Catholic Church, are definitely not subject to that sort of evaluation.

Unfortunately, the tendency to misinterpret the function of the private theologian in the Church's doctrinal work is not something new in the English Catholic literature. Cardinal Newman in his Letter to the Duke of Norfolk (certainly the least valuable of his published works), supports the bizarre thesis that the final determination of what is really condemned in an authentic ecclesiastical pronouncement is the work of private theologians, rather than of the particular organ of the ecclesia docens which has actually formulated the condemnation. The faithful could, according to his theory, find what a pontifical document actually means, not from the content of the document itself, but from the speculations of the theologians.

As to the condemnation of propositions all she (the Church) tells us is, that the thesis condemned when taken as a whole, or, again, when viewed in its context, is heretical, or blasphemous, or whatever like epithet she affixes to it. We have only to trust her so far as to be warned against the thesis, or the work containing it. Theologians employ themselves in determining what precisely it is that is condemned in that thesis or treatise; and doubtless in most cases they do so with success; but that determination is not *de fide*; all that is of faith is that there is in that thesis itself, which is noted, heresy or error, or other like peccant matter, as the case may be, such, that the censure is a peremptory command to theologians, preachers, students, and all other whom it concerns, to keep clear of it. But so light is this obligation, that instances frequently occur, when it is successfully maintained by some new writer, that the Pope's act does not imply what it has seemed to imply, and questions which seemed to be closed, are after a course of years re-opened. [5]

If we were to apply this procedure to the interpretation of the papal encyclicals, we would deny, for all practical purposes at least, any real authority to these documents. We would be merely in a position to admit that the Holy Father had spoken on a certain subject, and to assent to his teaching as something which the theologians would have to interpret. In the final analysis, our acceptance of doctrine or truth as such would be limited to what we could gather from the interpretations of the theologians, rather than from the document itself.

This tendency to consider these pronouncements of the *ecclesia docens*, and particularly the statements of the papal encyclicals, as utterances which must be interpreted for the Christian people, rather than explained to them, is definitely harmful to the Church. It is and it remains the business of Catholic theologians to adhere faithfully to the teachings of the encyclicals and to do all in their power to bring this body of truth accurately and effectively to the members of Christ's Mystical Body.

THE DOCTRINAL AUTHORITY OF PAPAL ALLOCUTIONS

By Joseph Clifford Fenton from the American Ecclesiastical Review
(circa 1956, pp. 109-117)

The papal allocution is a comparative newcomer among the important vehicles of the Holy Father's ordinary magisterium. The first Sovereign Pontiff to employ the allocution extensively for doctrinal purposes was Pope Pius IX. The first allocution cited in Denzinger's *Enchiridion symbolorum* is the *Acerbissimum vobiscum*, delivered by Pope Pius IX in a Secret Consistory on Sept. 27, 1852.[1]

Some indication of the frequency with which Pope Pius IX used allocutions to bring out important doctrinal truths may be gleaned from the fact that there are seventeen of these allocutions among the thirty-two sources from which the teachings of the famous *Syllabus errorum* were derived. The *Acerbissimum vobiscum* was one of these sources. Like the "*Acerbissimum*," all of the other allocutions used in drawing up the "*Syllabus*" were delivered by the Holy Father in Secret Consistories.[2]

Like Pope Pius IX, the present Holy Father [Pope Pius XII] has used the consistorial allocution as an important instrument of his ordinary magisterium. To point to only two examples, during the course of the Marian Year of 1954 he issued doctrinal decisions of outstanding moment in the consistorial allocutions *Si diligis* and *Magnificate Dominum*. [3] Pope Pius XII, however, has also made doctrinal statements of great importance in allocutions delivered to private groups, that is, to groups other than those which include the hierarchy. Thus, for example, he has set forth some basic points of Catholic teaching about what should be the relation between the Church and the state in two allocutions, the *Ci riesce* [4] delivered to the National Convention of the "*Unione dei Giuristi Italiani*" on Dec. 6, 1953, and the *Vous avez voulu*, [5] spoken on Sept. 7, 1955, to the tenth annual Convention of the Historical Sciences.

Despite the fact that there is nothing like an adequate treatment of the papal allocutions in existing theological literature, every priest, and particularly every professor of sacred theology, should know whether and under what circumstances these allocutions addressed by the Sovereign Pontiffs to private groups are to be regarded as authoritative, as actual expressions of the Roman Pontiff's ordinary magisterium. And, especially because of the tendency towards an unhealthy minimism current in this country and elsewhere in the world today, they should also know how doctrine is to be set forth in the allocutions and the other vehicles of the Holy Father's ordinary magisterium if it is to be accepted as authoritative. The present brief paper will attempt to consider and to answer these questions.

The first question to be considered is this: Can a speech addressed by the Roman Pontiff to a private group, a group which cannot in any sense be taken as representing either the Roman Church or the universal Church, contain doctrinal teaching authoritative for the universal Church?

The clear and unequivocal answer to this question is contained in the Holy Father's encyclical letter *Humani generis*, issued Aug. 12, 1950. According to this document: "if, in their 'Acta'

the Supreme Pontiffs take care to render a decision on a point that has hitherto been controverted, it is obvious to all that this point, according to the mind and will of these same Pontiffs, can no longer be regarded as a question theologians may freely debate among themselves."[6]

Thus, in the teaching of the *Humani generis*, any doctrinal decision made by the Pope and included in his "Acta" are authoritative. Now many of the allocutions made by the Sovereign Pontiff to private groups are included in the "Acta" of the Sovereign Pontiff himself, as a section of the *Acta apostolicae sedis*. Hence, any doctrinal decision made in one of these allocutions that is published in the Holy Father's "Acta" is authoritative and binding on all the members of the universal Church.

There is, according to the words of the *Humani generis*, an authoritative doctrinal decision whenever the Roman Pontiffs, in their "Acta," "de re hactenus controversa data opera sententiam ferunt." When this condition is fulfilled, even in an allocution originally delivered to a private group, but subsequently published as part of the Holy Father's "Acta," an authoritative doctrinal judgment has been proposed to the universal Church. All of those within the Church are obliged, under penalty of serious sin, to accept this decision.

Occasionally we encounter some utterly misleading comment on the meaning of the expression "data opera" in this section of the text of the *Humani generis*. In the excellent "Harper's Latin Dictionary" the expression "operam dare" is explained as meaning "to bestow care or pains on, to give attention to" something. It should be quite clear that this does not add any new note to a pontifical doctrinal judgment or decision. According to the terms of the tremendous responsibility he has received from Our Lord Himself, the Sovereign Pontiff is definitely expected to give special and outstanding attention to any doctrinal decision he gives at any time and in any way, when he speaks as Pope and uses either his solemn or his ordinary magisterium. Hence, there is and there can be no such thing as a decision in the field of Catholic doctrine, given by the Pope acting in his public capacity, precisely as the pastor and the teacher of all Christians, which is not set down "data opera."

There is an authoritative papal statement, according to the text of the *Humani generis*, whenever the Sovereign Pontiff takes the trouble to issue a decision on a point which has hitherto been controverted, and inserts that decision in his own "Acta." Basically, such a decision is made in one of two ways. When there is a real controversy, two contradictory and hence mutually exclusive resolutions of an individual question are being urged, one by one group, another by that group's opponents. The Roman Pontiff issues an authoritative decision in that controversy in a positive way when he accepts and presents one of these opposing solutions as "doctrina catholica," or, in some cases, as "de fide" or as "doctrina certa." There is a negative pontifical judgment when the Sovereign Pontiff repudiates one of the two opposing theses as teaching which it is sinful or rash to hold, or, in the case of an infallible definition, as heretical or erroneous.

Now the questions may arise: is there any particular form which the Roman Pontiff is obliged to follow in setting forth a doctrinal decision in either the positive or the negative manner? Does the Pope have to state specifically and explicitly that he intends to issue a doctrinal

decision on this particular point? Is it at all necessary that he should refer explicitly to the fact that there has hitherto been a debate among theologians on the question he is going to decide?

There is certainly nothing in the divinely established constitutional law of the Catholic Church which would in any way justify an affirmative response to any of these inquiries. The Holy Father's doctrinal authority stems from the tremendous responsibility Our Lord laid upon him in St. Peter, whose successor he is. Our Lord charged the Prince of the Apostles, and through him, all of his successors until the end of time, with the commission of feeding, of acting as a shepherd for, of taking care of, His lambs and His sheep.[7] Included in that responsibility was the obligation, and, of course, the power, to confirm the faith of his fellow Christians.

And the Lord said: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren." [8]

St. Peter had, and has in his successor, the duty and the power to confirm his brethren in their faith, to take care of their doctrinal needs. Included in his responsibility is an obvious obligation to select and to employ the means he judges most effective and apt for the accomplishment of the end God has commissioned him to attain. And in this era, when the printed word possesses a manifest primacy in the field of the dissemination of ideas, the Sovereign Pontiffs have chosen to bring their authoritative teaching, the doctrine in which they accomplish the work of instruction God has commanded them to do, to the people of Christ through the medium of the printed word in the published "Acta."

The *Humani generis* reminds us that the doctrinal decisions set forth in the Holy Father's "Acta" manifestly are authoritative "according to the mind and will" of the Pontiffs who have issued these decisions. Thus, wherever there is a doctrinal judgment expressed in the "Acta" of a Sovereign Pontiff, it is clear that the Pontiff understands that decision to be authoritative and wills that it be so.

Now when the Pope, in his "Acta," sets forth as a part of Catholic doctrine or as a genuine teaching of the Catholic Church some thesis which has hitherto been opposed, even legitimately, in the schools of sacred theology, he is manifestly making a doctrinal decision. This certainly holds true even when, in making his statement, the Pope does not explicitly assert that he is issuing a doctrinal judgment and, of course, even when he does not refer to the existence of a controversy or debate on the subject among theologians up until the time of his own pronouncement. All that is necessary is that this teaching, hitherto opposed in the theological schools, be now set forth as the teaching of the Sovereign Pontiff, or as "*doctrina catholica*."

Private theologians have no right whatsoever to establish what they believe to be the conditions under which the teaching presented in the "Acta" of the Roman Pontiff may be accepted as authoritative. This is, on the contrary, the duty and the prerogative of the Roman Pontiff himself. The present Holy Father has exercised that right and has done his duty in stating clearly that any doctrinal decision which the Bishop of Rome has taken the trouble to make and insert into his "Acta" is to be received as genuinely authoritative.

In line with the teaching of the *Humani generis*, then, it seems unquestionably clear that any doctrinal decision expressed by the Sovereign Pontiff in the course of an allocution delivered to a private group is to be accepted as authoritative when and if that allocution is published by the Sovereign Pontiff as a part of his own "Acta." Now we must consider this final question: What obligation is incumbent upon a Catholic by reason of an authoritative doctrinal decision made by the Sovereign Pontiff and communicated to the universal Church in this manner?

The text of the *Humani generis* itself supplies us with a minimum answer. This is found in the sentence we have already quoted: "And if, in their 'Acta,' the Supreme Pontiffs take care to render a decision on a point that has hitherto been controverted, it is obvious to all that this point, according to the mind and will of these same Pontiffs, can no longer be regarded as a question theologians may freely debate among themselves."

Theologians legitimately discuss and dispute among themselves doctrinal questions which the authoritative magisterium of the Catholic Church has not as yet resolved. Once that magisterium has expressed a decision and communicated that decision to the Church universal, the first and the most obvious result of its declaration must be the cessation of debate on the point it has decided. A man definitely is not acting and could not act as a theologian, as a teacher of Catholic truth, by disputing against a decision made by the competent doctrinal authority of the Mystical Body of Christ on earth.

Thus, according to the clear teaching of the *Humani generis*, it is morally wrong for any individual subject to the Roman Pontiff to defend a thesis contradicting a teaching which the Pope, in his "Acta," has set forth as a part of Catholic doctrine. It is, in other words, wrong to attack a teaching which, in a genuine doctrinal decision, the Sovereign Pontiff has taught officially as the visible head of the universal Church. This holds true always and everywhere, even in those cases in which the Pope, in making his decision, did not exercise the plenitude of his apostolic teaching power by making an infallible doctrinal definition.

The *Humani generis* must not be taken to imply that a Catholic theologian has completed his obligation with respect to an authoritative doctrinal decision made by the Holy Father and presented in his published "Acta" when he has merely refrained from arguing or debating against it. The *Humani generis* reminded its readers that "this sacred magisterium ought to be the immediate and universal norm of truth for any theologian in matters of faith and morals."^[9] Furthermore, it insisted that the faithful are obligated to shun errors which more or less approach heresy, and "to follow the constitutions and decrees by which evil opinions of this sort have been proscribed and forbidden by the Holy See."^[10] In other words, the *Humani generis* claimed the same internal assent for declarations of the magisterium on matters of faith and morals which previous documents of the Holy See had stressed.

We may well ask why the *Humani generis* went to the trouble of mentioning something as fundamental and rudimentary as the duty of abstaining from further debate on a point where the Roman Pontiff has already issued a doctrinal decision, and has communicated that decision to the Church universal by publishing it in his "Acta." The reason is to be found in the context of the encyclical itself. The Holy Father has told us something of the existing situation which

called for the issuance of the "Humani generis." This information is contained in the text of that document. The following two sentences show us the sort of condition the Humani generis was written to meet and to remedy:

"And although this sacred magisterium ought to be the immediate and universal norm of truth on matters of faith and morals for any theologian, as the agency to which Christ the Lord has entrusted the entire deposit of faith - that is, the Sacred Scriptures and divine Tradition - to be guarded and defended and explained, still, the duty by which the faithful are obligated also to shun those errors which approach more or less to heresy, and therefore 'to follow the constitutions and decrees by which evil opinions of this sort have been proscribed and forbidden by the Holy See,' is sometimes ignored as if it did not exist. What is said in encyclical letters of the Roman Pontiffs about the nature and constitution of the Church is habitually and deliberately neglected by some with the idea of giving force to a certain vague notion which they claim to have found in the ancient Fathers, especially the Greeks." [11]

Six years ago, then, Pope Pius XII was faced with a situation in which some of the men who were privileged and obligated to teach the truths of sacred theology had perverted their position and their influence and had deliberately flouted the teachings of the Holy See about the nature and the constitution of the Catholic Church. And, when he declared that it is wrong to debate a point already decided by the Holy Father after that decision has been published in his "Acta," he was taking cognizance of and condemning an existent practice. There actually were individuals who were contradicting papal teachings. They were so numerous and influential that they rendered the composition of the Humani generis necessary to counteract their activities. These individuals were continuing to propose teachings repudiated by the Sovereign Pontiff in previous pronouncements. The Holy Father, then, was compelled by these circumstances to call for the cessation of debate among theologians on subjects which had already been decided by pontifical decisions published in the "Acta."

The kind of theological teaching and writing against which the encyclical Humani generis was directed was definitely not remarkable for its scientific excellence. It was, as a matter of fact, exceptionally poor from the scientific point of view. The men who were responsible for it showed very clearly that they did not understand the basic nature and purpose of sacred theology. For the true theologian the magisterium of the Church remains, as the Humani generis says, the immediate and universal norm of truth. And the teaching set forth by Pope Pius IX in his Tuas libenter is as true today as it always has been.

But when we treat of that subjection by which all Catholic students of speculative sciences are obligated in conscience so that they bring new aids to the Church by their writings, the men of this assembly ought to realize that it is not enough for Catholic scholars to receive and venerate the above-mentioned dogmas of the Church, but [they ought also to realize] that they must submit to the doctrinal decisions issued by the Pontifical Congregations and also to those points of doctrine which are held by the common and constant agreement of Catholics as theological truths and conclusions which are so certain that, even though the opinions opposed to them cannot be called heretical, they still deserve some other theological censure. [12]

It is definitely the business of the writer in the field of sacred theology to benefit the Church by what he writes. It is likewise the duty of the teacher of this science to help the Church by his teaching. The man who uses the shoddy tricks of minimism to oppose or to ignore the doctrinal decisions made by the Sovereign Pontiff and set down in his "Acta" is, in the last analysis, stultifying his position as a theologian.

The man who is privileged to teach the science of sacred theology should never allow himself to lose sight of the fact that he is one of those called in by the apostolic college to aid in a teaching work to which that apostolic college alone has been divinely commissioned. The doctrine which the theologian is expected to teach clearly, accurately, and unequivocally is not some teaching which has been discovered by men, but rather the supernatural revelation of the Triune God. The teacher of or writer in sacred theology is carrying out his task by the orders and under the direction of the apostolic magisterium itself. He accomplishes his work successfully only in the measure that he whole-heartedly accepts the doctrinal decisions addressed to the universal Church by the visible head of the Church.