

Outlines of Dogmatic Theology, Volume I

by Sylvester Joseph Hunter, 1894

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Treatise IV, Chapter VI, N. 211

211. Dogmatic Facts .—But besides these speculative truths, there are certain matters of fact concerning which the Church can judge with infallible certainty. These are called by many writers dogmatic facts, although others use this expression only of one class among them, which was much discussed in the course of the controversy with the Jansenists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These heretics were anxious to keep the name of Catholic, and finding their doctrine on grace condemned by the Church, endeavoured to escape from the condemnation by showing that the Church had misunderstood their writings, to which it was replied that the infallibility of the Church extended to the determination of the true sense conveyed by a form of words; and the phrase “dogmatic fact” was little heard of except in regard to such determinations.

We will proceed to mention some dogmatic facts, in the wider sense, adding the reason why we hold that they come within the infallible authority of the Church. But it must be remembered that if the Church speak on any of these matters, it does not follow that she has exercised her infallibility; she may have intended to exert a merely disciplinary authority alone (n. 203), regulating the outward conduct only, but not touching men’s inward belief. The doubt that may sometimes arise in particular cases must be solved by considering the terms and circumstances of the utterance. In this part of the subject we are not writing controversially, at least as regards those who do not acknowledge the authority of the Holy See; we are merely stating the Catholic doctrine.

First, then, the Church is infallible when she declares what person holds the office of Pope; for if the person of the Pope were uncertain, it would be uncertain what Bishops were in communion with the Pope; but according to the Catholic faith, as will be proved hereafter, communion with the Pope is a condition for the exercise of the function of teaching by the body of Bishops (n. 208); if then the uncertainty could not be cleared up, the power of teaching could not be exercised, and Christ’s promise (St. Matt. xxviii. 20; and n. 199, II.) would be falsified, which is impossible.

This argument is in substance the same as applies to other cases of dogmatic facts. Also, it affords an answer to a much vaunted objection to the claims of the Catholic Church, put

forward by writers who think that they find proof in history that the election of a certain Pope was simoniacal and invalid, and that the successor was elected by Cardinals who owed their own appointment to the simoniacal intruder; from which it is gathered that the Papacy has been vacant ever since that time. A volume might be occupied if we attempted to expose all the frailness of the argument which is supposed to lead to this startling conclusion; but it is enough to say that if the Bishops agree in recognizing a certain man as Pope, they are certainly right, for otherwise the body of the Bishops would be separated from their head, and the Divine constitution of the Church would be ruined.

In just the same way the infallibility extends to declaring that a certain Council is or is not ecumenical; that certain systems of education are, or are not, injurious to faith and morals; that the principles of certain societies are immoral; and that certain ways of life, especially in Religious Orders, are not merely free from moral evil, but are laudable. Unless the Church could judge upon these matters, she could not exercise her office of guiding and instructing her members.

The matters of Beatification and Canonization require a few words more of explanation. The great authority on the whole subject is the work of Pope Benedict XIV. *De Canonizatione*, from which the late Dr. Faber took the matter of the Essay which served as a kind of preface to the Oratory series of Lives of the Saints. (Faber, *Essay on Beatification, &c.*) It is enough to say here that sometimes the Holy See, after suitable investigation, pronounces a solemn judgment that the virtue of a deceased person was heroic (n. 231), and that God has testified to his sanctity by miracles worked by his intercession; and then it is accustomed to declare that the person may be publicly allowed the title of "Blessed," and that Mass and Office may be said in his honour within certain limits of place, or by certain classes of persons. If after an interval it is judged that God has been pleased to show by further miracles His approval of what has been done, then a further decree may be issued by which the Pontiff defines that the person is a "Saint," and is to be honoured as such in the whole Church with public worship. No writer of repute doubts that this last decree of Canonization is an exercise of the infallible authority of the Church, for were it mistaken, the whole Church would be led into offering superstitious worship; but there is a controversy as to whether this same can be alleged of Beatification, for this decree is in a manner reviewed in the subsequent process. We have no space to enter into the arguments on both sides of this question, and will only remark that on every view the decree of Beatification commands at least the respect of all the faithful, as being the deliberate judgment of the common Father. If any one be inclined to scoff at the process by which the miracles are established in these cases, he may be referred to the records of the causes, where he will see the scrupulous care with which the evidence is scrutinized. (See n. 255.)

Lastly, the Church's infallible authority extends to determining the true sense conveyed by forms of speech, whether solitary words, or propositions, or books; and this without reference to the meaning intended by the author, of which in general the Church does not judge. This is the class of cases to which the name of dogmatic facts is more particularly applied. The exercise of this power by the Church has in all ages been most distasteful to

all who have wished to retain the character of being Catholic, at the same time that they are wanting in the spirit of hearty interior submission to the living teacher; and statesmen who care little about truth and much about peace, join in protesting against what they represent as undue insistence on mere words. Thus the Arians of the fourth century, in conjunction with the Emperor Constantius, protested against the Catholics who insisted on their acceptance of the word “consubstantial,” which the Council of Nice had used in defining the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity; they wished, they said, to use no words not found in Scripture, novel words; but the Catholics replied by asking whether newly-discovered poisons might not render necessary novel drugs as antidotes (St. Hilar. *Contra Constantium*, n. 15, 16; *P.L.* 10, 594); and since that day the disputed word has held its place in the Catholic Creed. In the same way, the Council of Trent (Sess. 13, can. 2; Denz. 764) defined that the word Transubstantiation was most fit to apply to the change of the elements in the Eucharist; and the Synod of Pistoia, which raised objections similar to those just quoted from the Arians, and would have omitted the word, was condemned by Pope Pius VI. (*Auctorem Fidei*, prop. 29; Denz. 1392) on the ground that the word was consecrated by the Church for the defence of the faith against heresies. The controversy with the Jansenists turned partly on the question whether the Church had authority to declare that the famous five propositions were contained in the book written by Jansenius; this was felt to be the central point of the whole matter, for if the Church could not determine the meaning of language she would be powerless to teach: her only medium of instruction is human language. For an account of this mortal contest, the reader must go to the historians. (See Jungmann, Diss. in *Hist. Eccles.* Diss. XL.) At the present day, Jansenism as a heresy no longer exists, at least in any conspicuous form; but the spirit of Jansenism, which wishes to claim Catholic communion without submission of mind and will to the hierarchical Church, still shows itself frequently in various forms.

212. Recapitulation.—In this long chapter we have shown that there is in the Church by Divine appointment a hierarchy of governors, who have, among other functions, authority to teach the members of the Church, and this with Divine guarantee that they will not err. The difficulties that are raised against this doctrine were discussed; it was shown that though the laity are not the teachers, yet from the faith of the laity the faith of the teachers may be inferred; that the seat of the infallible authority cannot be fully explained until the doctrine concerning the Roman Pontiff has been established; and finally it was shown that the authority extended to certain matters which though not actually revealed, are yet closely connected with Revelation.