

The Sources of Revelation: Divine Faith, Volume III

by Monsignor Gerard Van Noort, 1961

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- OCR of the original text by AI (claude-3-7-sonnet-20250219).
- Last Edit: April 7, 2025.
- Version: 1.0
- Selection pages: 265–268

Divine Faith, Chapter I, Article V, Assertion 2

Assertion 2. Theological truths which the Magisterium of the Church teaches infallibly must be held with an assent of ecclesiastical faith.

Since it was established in the volume, *Christ's Church*, that the Church's infallible teaching power extends to matters *connected* with revelation and that its infallible authority deserves an *absolutely firm assent*, the only question which remains is what name to give that assent and how to describe its nature. These points will be discussed in just a moment.

Meantime, notice that the Church possesses infallibility not only when she is defining some matter in solemn fashion, but also when she is exercising the full weight of her authority through her ordinary and universal teaching. Consequently, we must hold with an absolute assent, which we call "ecclesiastical faith," the following theological truths: (a) those which the Magisterium has infallibly defined in solemn fashion; (b) those which the ordinary magisterium dispersed throughout the world unmistakably proposes to its members as something to be *held* (*tenendas*). So, for example, one must give an absolute assent to the proposition: "Pius XII is the legitimate successor of St. Peter"; similarly (and as a matter of fact if this following point is something "formally revealed," it will undoubtedly be a dogma of faith) one must give an absolute assent to the proposition: "Pius XII possesses the primacy of jurisdiction over the entire Church." For—skipping the question of how it begins to be proven infallibly for the first time that this individual was legitimately elected to take St. Peter's place—when someone has been constantly acting as pope and has theoretically and practically been recognized as such by the bishops and by the universal Church, it is clear that the ordinary and universal magisterium is giving an utterly clear-cut witness to the legitimacy of his succession.

The term, *ecclesiastical faith*, and its distinction from divine faith is rather commonly admitted by most recent theologians. Still there are quite a number of theologians who reject that term and that distinction by saying that the assent with which we hold truths not formally contained in revelation but infallibly proposed by the Church is, as a matter of fact, *divine faith*. They defend this viewpoint by a double argument.

They say: 1. Even when it comes to matters only connected with revelation the Church plays the part of God's messenger and does so with divine assistance. Consequently, God speaks through His messenger, the Church: or, the testimony of the Church is the testimony of God; therefore the assent owed to such testimony is an assent of divine faith.

Answer: That the Church in defining truths connected with revelation is playing the part of a divine messenger in such fashion that God "*speaks*" through the Church—I make a distinction. In the *strict* sense of the term, meaning that the Church proposes truths received from God in exactly the same way as did the prophets and the apostles *acting as organs of revelation*; or, in such fashion that when the Church so speaks she is doing so by real *inspiration* and under the impulse of God in exactly the same way as did the sacred writers, who were *not* the "principal" cause of their message but only its *instrumental* cause—this I *deny*.

That the Church plays the part of a divine messenger in a *loose*, broad sense of the term, namely, that in carrying out the general mission entrusted to her by God the Church does herself make judgments, acting as the *principal* cause, about matters necessarily bound up with revelation and does by her own judgment (which God by various means preserves from error, but means which do not include either revelation or genuine inspiration) does issue doctrinal decrees—this I *concede*. Surely the power of jurisdiction (which includes the magisterial office) is not purely instrumental, or ministerial, but is in its own way a principle power. For the Church's rulers by a power which is their very own, or inherent in them (even though bestowed upon them from above), found or establish decrees, whether doctrinal or disciplinary, of which the *principal* cause is *themselves*, not God.

It follows logically that the Church's testimony in matters bound up with revelation can be called "divine" testimony only in a very loose, or improper use of the term. For even though it proceeds from men backed up by divine authority and fortified by divine assistance, it really proceeds from men as from its principal cause and thus is and remains *intrinsically human testimony*. Now human testimony can never deserve an assent of divine faith.

Nevertheless, the Church's testimony does differ vastly from every other sort of human testimony both by reason of its *dignity* and, above all, by its *certitude*—both of which factors accrue to it *extrinsically*. First, by its *dignity* because that testimony is given to execute the general duty imposed upon the Church by God; and secondly, by the certitude it brings: for every other sort of human testimony, of whatsoever kind, offers a certitude that is only strictly moral (i.e., having its foundation in the hypothesis of the human-moral order); whereas the testimony of the Church, by reason of the divine assistance guiding it, offers a metaphysical-moral certitude and it is, on this score, equivalent to divine testimony.

Since the Church's testimony differs in *kind* (species) both from divine testimony, by reason of its principle, and from human testimony, by reason of its certitude, it holds a kind of midway position between both types of testimony. There is then, good reason for acknowledging the existence of "ecclesiastical faith" which holds a position midway between divine faith and merely human faith and is specifically different from each of

them. That is the reason also why many theologians in order to make a very clear distinction between divine and ecclesiastical faith (and also from a “religious assent,” which will be discussed below) reserve the term “*to believe*” for matters of divine faith, whereas for assents of an inferior kind they use the term: “*to hold*” (*tenere* vs. *credere*).

Argument 2: They say: we only know of the Church’s infallibility in reference to connected matters, by divine revelation. Consequently when we accept some definition on these matters, we do indeed directly (proximately) give our assent to the Church, but ultimately we give it to God Himself; and thus you have faith only mediately (indirectly) indeed, but a faith which is truly divine.

Answer: This argument presumes that the nature of faith depends not only upon the very motive proper to the assent (in the case at hand, the authority of the Church) *but also upon the means* by which we have *become acquainted with* the existence and value of this motive (in the case at hand: divine revelation). But, that point cannot be granted as will be obvious from the matters discussed when we take up the *analysis of the act of faith* itself (see below nos. 291-304). In the meantime, this point will suffice for a refutation of that argument: if the position of these theologians were valid then divine faith itself ought to be called *mediately human*, for the existence and value of the authority of God revealing, insofar as it is the motive of faith, is not known in any other way than by human means.

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Even though the act of ecclesiastical faith differs from the act of divine faith in kind or species, there is good reason for referring it to the theological habit, or virtue of faith. Habits normally encompass many other activities which bear a relationship to something itself unified. That is why we distinguish between the principal acts of such habits and acts which are merely connected with them. So the act of putting on spiked shoes in a locker room, or of washing golf balls is referred to the golfing habit even though they are not an intrinsic part of the golf-swing. So, too, the one infused habit of faith extends itself to, or encompasses all assents which are connected with divine faith, whether connected by way of safeguarding and defending the faith, or by way of preparing for faith as, for example, the judgment of credibility.