

Historical Papers, Vol. IV: Dr. Littledale's Theory of the Disappearance of the Papacy

by Fr. Sydney Smith S.J., 1896

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Essay 18

The conclusion he draws from this “accepted maxim,” is that he is not bound to prove for certain that any portion of the two hundred and fifty Popes usually accounted such, were invalidly elected, but that he will have attained his end if only he can bring together a series of charges of intrusion, simony, &c, against a sufficiently imposing number of Popes; for if there are charges, so he invites us to reason on the basis of the aforesaid maxim, there is a probability of their truth, and probability is enough to divest the persons charged of their claim to constitute links in the chain of succession. I trust I have made clear Dr. Littledale's contention, which we may now word compendiously thus: All doubtful Popes are to be taken as no Popes at all, and therefore as flaws in the succession; and all Popes are to be taken as doubtful against whom any writer or writers have brought a charge of intrusion, simony, &c. This last proposition is not, indeed, explicitly stated by Dr. Littledale, but it is what he implies, and what underlies his arguments throughout.

Having thus laid down his principles, or rather, having thus laid down principles which he assures us are those of the Roman canon law, this writer proceeds to apply them to the records of Papal history. We shall have occasion in the course of our investigation to refer more in detail to these historical applications, but for the present it will be enough to summarize his results which he exhibits in a table at the end of *The Petrine Claims*. According to this table, out of the two hundred and nineteen Popes whose names are set down in the lists as having occupied the Chair of St. Peter previously to 1536, the date of the death of Clement VII., sixty-five must be eliminated as spurious—eight as having been heretics, fourteen as having been simoniacally appointed, twenty-three as having been intruded into the See by secular powers, four as having been irregularly elected, six as having been non-resident, ten as having been promoted by an election of doubtful, and nine by an election of disputed, validity.¹ But why stop at 1536, we naturally inquire, and

¹ {org. 1} These numbers when added up make seventy-four. But against a few Popes double grounds of nullity are charged.

the answer is, that from that date Dr. Littledale conceives the succession to the Papacy to have lapsed altogether. Alexander VI. and Julius II. were simoniacally elected, and yet Julius II., by his Bull *Quum tam divino* (1503), “pronounces all simoniacal elections to the Papacy void, and incapable of being validated by any recognition accorded to the Pope as chosen, and Gammarus, Auditor of the Rota, in his commentary on the Bull, alleges it to be so worded as to be retrospective in effect, fully voiding all such former elections.” Hence, since, after the death of Julius II. and still more after that of Clement VII., there was no longer a single Cardinal living whose appointment had proceeded from a valid Pope, there were none then living, and never again could be any living, qualified to elect a true Pope, and all subsequent Popes not having received the votes of qualified electors must be deemed spurious.

Here is Dr. Littledale’s indictment, and perhaps some may think it effective. “At the very least,” some one may be inclined to say, “it places me under the necessity of a complicated historical inquiry, altogether beyond my powers; for until I have investigated all these historical cases, how can I know for certain that the Pope who now rules the Church is a true Pope, and how, as a matter of necessary consequence, can I know that the Church which adheres to him is the true Church?”

But such fears are needless. We shall, indeed, take some useful dips into history, and with the result of understanding better how much our ingenious critic has run astray. Still for all practical purposes it is not necessary to dip into history at all. The principle just enunciated, that the Church which adheres to a false Pope can only be a false Church, so far from offering us increased motive for alarm, indicates the secure and easy path out of the maze prepared for us. It is true that a Church which adhered to a false Pope could not be a true Church, and why is this, save because the true Church cannot adhere to a false Pope? But if this is so, since we know on certain and quite independent grounds which is the true Church, we have only to ask ourselves in reference to any particular Pope—either the living Pope whom we are called upon to obey, or some past Pope in whom we are historically interested—whether the true Church adheres or adhered to him, or not, and then we can be sure at once, independently of all detailed historical investigations, whether the title by which he entered upon the See of Peter was valid or not. And so likewise if we find that the true Church has separated itself entirely from any claimant to the Papacy, we have at once in this easily obtained knowledge, the certainty that such a claimant had not a valid title to the See. The only cases to which the application of this principle is not helpful are those of Popes whose reigns were so short that the Church Universal had hardly time to give distinct signs of adherence or rejection, or those (likewise short-lived) of whose lives the extant records are too scanty to show clearly whether the Church regarded them as legitimate or as intruders. But these exceptions are few and unimportant. Of the vast majority of individual Popes, and still more of the line of Popes, reaching not merely up to the sixteenth century, but to our own days, it is absolutely clear that they received that loyal adherence and obedience from the Universal Church which Leo XIII. receives now, and which of itself is so sure a sign of the legitimacy of his title that we can even make it the matter of an act of faith that he is the true Vicar of Jesus Christ.

This is no mere theory, but the common doctrine of Catholic theologians, as will appear sufficiently from the following passage in Ferraris' *Bibliotheca*, a work of the highest authority. In his article on the Pope,² Ferraris says:

It is *of faith* that Benedict XIV., for instance, legitimately elected and accepted as such by the Church, is the true Pope—(common doctrine among Catholics). This is proved from the Council of Constance, sess. *ult.* where Martin V. Const. *Inter Cunctos*, decrees that those who return from heresy to the faith shall be asked, among other points, "Whether they believe that the Pope canonically elected, for the time being, his name being expressly mentioned, is the successor of St. Peter, having supreme authority in the Church of God." For thereby he supposes it to be an article of faith, since those who abjure heresy are "interrogated only as to truths of faith."

It will be said, "Yes, but he speaks only of a Pontiff canonically elected and as such accepted by the Church, and his authority cannot therefore be quoted for the case of one whose canonical election is called in question." This, however, is an objection which Ferraris himself anticipates, and he meets it thus:

Through the mere fact that the Church receives him as legitimately elected, *God reveals to us the legitimacy of his election*, since Christ has promised that His Church shall never err in a matter of faith, . . . whereas she would err in such matter of faith if the conclusion did not hold; since the Church in acknowledging the elect to be the true Pope, acknowledges him as an infallible rule of faith, while (if he were not really the true Pope) he would be fallible, &c.

The Church, then, cannot err in recognizing her Head. She can neither adhere to a spurious head, nor separate herself from the true Head. The grounds for this proposition have been indicated to us by Ferraris, but it may be useful to expand his account of them a little more fully. By the terms of the fundamental promises of our Lord to His Church she is guaranteed two prerogatives—indefectibility and immunity from error, together with the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, overruling the movements of hearts and minds and the course of events, in order to secure for her the continuance of these two prerogatives. Now the Pontificate is an essential element in the Church's constitution. If, therefore, the Pontificate were to lapse, the Church would be sustaining a loss in her essentials and so reveal herself as not indefectible. And again, the Church is preserved from religious error by her reliance on the infallible voice of her Supreme Pastor. But if she could err by failing to discriminate between her true Head and a counterfeit, with the result of adhering to the latter, she would be hopelessly exposed to the risk of erring in religious doctrine through receiving it from wrong and unaided lips.

And here let us bear in mind that Dr. Littledale cannot say to us, "Yes, but all this implies that yours is the true Church—which is what I deny." He cannot say this, because he has

² {org. 1} S.v. *Papa*, p. 949.

granted this much for the sake of argument, undertaking, *even on the assumption* of our Church being the true Church, to show that the continuity and continuance of the Papal line cannot be held as genuine. Nor, as has been remarked, do we merely assume the truth of our Church. We prove it by solid, ample, and convincing arguments. Of course to deal with this proof in its generality would be out of place here. But it will not be out of place, since it will tend to render clearer the force of the principle, “He is the true Pope who is recognized by the true Church,” if I indicate concisely the outlines of one line of proof by which we establish the truth of the Church which looks to the See of Peter as its necessary centre of unity.

Cardinal Newman has written:

The Church authenticates herself to be the Church by her Notes. It is the great Note of an ever-enduring *coetus fidelium*, with a fixed organism and unity of jurisdiction, a political greatness, a continuity of existence, in all places and times, a suitableness to all classes, ranks, and callings, an ever-energizing life, an untiring, ever-evolving history, which is her evidence that she is the creation of God, and the representative and home of Christianity.³

This is in fact an argument from the Notes in which we profess belief when we recite the Nicene Creed—One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. As Notes they mark the living Church, being her unique and visible endowment, by the possession of which she is distinguished from all other claimants. Their value lies just in this, that, whilst we behold them and ponder upon them, we are led to the conviction that their realization in the Church which bears them is nothing less than a moral miracle, so impossible is it for human beings, so numerous and varied in their intellectual and other characteristics, unless aided by some overruling Divine power, to preserve themselves in unity so close, so widespread, so abiding, and so spiritual; and being led to this conviction, we find ourselves in the possession of a convincing proof of the truth of the Catholic Church and of her claims, independent of, though powerfully aided by, the deeper study of history, past and present.

A line of reasoning like this, which is after all the primary line of reasoning by which we are all held in the Church, or brought to the Church, carries right down to the solid bed rock of self-evident principles the justification of our suggested mode of dealing with Dr. Littledale’s historical and canonical cavils.

³ {org. 1} *Essays Critical and Historical*. Note on Essay ix. p. 88.