

Tractatus de Ecclesia Christi sive continuatio theologiae de verbo incarnato (*Treatise on the Church of Christ or a Continuation of the Theology of the Incarnate Word*)

by Louis Cardinal Billot, 1909

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Quaestio XIV - De Romano Pontifice, Thesis XXIX, §3

But whatever you may still think about the possibility or impossibility of the aforementioned hypothesis, this at least must be firmly held as entirely unshaken and placed beyond all doubt: that the adherence of the universal Church will always be, by itself alone, an infallible sign of the legitimacy of the person of the Pontiff, and consequently of the existence of all conditions that are requisite for legitimacy itself. Nor must the reason for this be sought from afar. For it is derived immediately from Christ's infallible promise and providence: *The gates of hell shall not prevail against it*, and again: *Behold, I am with you all days*. Indeed, it would be the same for the Church to adhere to a false pontiff as if she adhered to a false rule of faith, since the Pope is the living rule whom the Church must follow in believing and always in fact does follow, as will appear even more clearly from what will be said in the future. Certainly, God can permit that sometimes the vacancy of the See be protracted for a longer time. He can also permit that doubt may arise concerning the legitimacy of one or another elect. But He cannot permit the whole Church to recognize as pontiff one who is not truly and legitimately such. Therefore, once he has been accepted and joined to the Church as the head to the body, the question of a possible defect in the election or the absence of any condition necessary for legitimacy should no longer be raised, because the aforementioned adherence of the Church radically heals every defect of the election, and infallibly demonstrates the existence of all required conditions. And let this be said in passing against those who wish to justify certain schismatic attempts made during the time of Alexander VI on the grounds that they were made by one who claimed to possess most certain proofs of Alexander's heresy, which were to be revealed in a general Council. But indeed, to omit now other reasons by which that opinion could easily be refuted, this one suffices: It is evident that at the time when Savonarola was writing his letters to princes, the whole of Christendom was adhering to and obeying Alexander as the true pontiff. Therefore, by that very fact, Alexander was not a

false pontiff, but legitimate. Therefore he was not a heretic, at least not with that heresy which, by removing the status of being a member of the Church, consequently deprives one of pontifical power or any other ordinary jurisdiction by the very nature of things.

Thus far concerning those matters which pertain to the perpetuity of Peter's primacy in the Roman Pontiffs. Now we must treat *of the power and nature of the primacy*.