

De Ecclesia Catholica Praelectiones Apologeticae (*Apologetic Lectures on the Catholic Church*)

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ARTICLE THIRTY-FIVE

On the Infallibility of the Church Concerning Dogmatic Facts

I. On the notion of dogmatic fact. — 1. A dogmatic fact is said to be a fact which, although not contained in the sources of revelation, is nevertheless so connected with revealed doctrine that knowledge of that fact is necessary for teaching a dogma and for safely preserving it (Mazzella).

2. Dogmatic facts of this kind are of different types:

a) facts upon which depends the authority of councils, of Roman Pontiffs, or even the validity of episcopal ordination; thus the fact of the legitimate convocation of some council, the legitimate election of a Roman Pontiff, the valid consecration of some bishop are dogmatic facts. Thus the Church, against the Old Catholics, holds that the First Vatican Council was legitimately convoked, and Leo XIII declared Anglican ordinations invalid.

b) The meaning of signs by which revealed doctrine is either expressed or denied = *dogmatic texts*: thus it is a dogmatic fact to determine the meaning of some term which the Church uses in defining a dogma, or the meaning of some book which is condemned by the Church as heretical.

For in the definition of any doctrine there is presupposed and included a judgment about the meaning of the terms of the definition, just as in the condemnation of any book there is presupposed and included a judgment about the meaning of that book.

Thus the Council of Nicaea condemned the book “Thalia” of Arius as heretical, the Council of Ephesus rejected the writings of Nestorius and approved the writings of Cyril of Alexandria, the

Second Council of Constantinople judged concerning the “Three Chapters,” and the Council of Trent defined that the canon of the Mass contains no errors¹.

3. The most celebrated case is the Jansenist case. Jansenius, in the book entitled “Augustinus,” set forth and defended various errors as the doctrine of Saint Augustine.

Innocent X condemned five propositions excerpted from the book as heretical². The Jansenists responded by means of a distinction between the question of law and the question of fact, admitting the infallibility of the Church in the question of law—namely, whether the condemned doctrine, taken in itself and abstracted from the book in which it might be contained, is false—but denying infallibility concerning the question of fact—namely, whether the condemned doctrine was actually contained in the book “Augustinus.” But Alexander VII (1656) declared and defined: “that those five propositions were excerpted from the book of Cornelius Jansenius, whose title is ‘Augustinus,’ and were condemned in the sense intended by the same Cornelius³.”

The Jansenists began to employ the pretext of *religious silence*, namely denying the necessity of mental adhesion to pontifical decrees, admitting only the obligation of religious silence. Hence Alexander VII in the year 1664 proposed this formulary of submission to the Jansenists: “I, N..., with sincere heart reject and condemn the five propositions excerpted from the book of Cornelius Jansenius entitled *Augustinus*, and in the sense intended by the same author, just as the Apostolic See has condemned them, and thus I swear⁴.” Clement XI in the year 1705 declared the necessity of hearing the Church “not only by remaining silent, but also by interior submission,” and established that “the sense of Jansenius’s book condemned in the five propositions, which the words of those [propositions] convey, as is alleged, must be rejected and condemned by all the faithful of Christ *as heretical*, not only with the mouth but also with the heart⁵.”

The “*sense intended by the author*” is not that which the author perhaps had *in the secret of his heart* and wished to express, but that which the author’s *words* according to common and natural rules of interpretation *objectively express* or convey.

4. As the examples adduced demonstrate, the *Church* in her decrees commonly *enunciates a dogmatic fact proper indirectly*: thus the Council of Trent, by declaring that the Canon of the Mass is immune from errors, directly declares the *truth of the doctrine* of the Canon, and indirectly judges concerning the *meaning* of the Canon; similarly with councils or Roman Pontiffs in approving or condemning books. A twofold judgment of the Church must therefore be distinguished: the first, properly dogmatic, concerning the *truth of the doctrine* of some book;

¹ {org. 1} Sess. XXII, can. 6, cf. c. IV; DENZ., 953, 942.

² {org. 1} DENZ., 1092.

³ {org. 2} DENZ., 1098.

⁴ {org. 3} DENZ., 1099.

⁵ {org. 4} DENZ., 1350.

the second, concerning the *meaning* of the book—and this second judgment is properly about a dogmatic fact.

5. Many theologians indeed, both ancient and recent, understand by “dogmatic fact” not only historical fact—what, for example, is the meaning of some book—but both historical and doctrinal fact⁶. According to this way of understanding it, it pertains to dogmatic facts that the Canon of the Mass is immune from error, that the book of Jansenius is heretical, that the Vulgate contains the word of God. But it is better, along with other theologians, to understand under the name “dogmatic fact” only historical fact, certainly as connected with doctrine: for one thing is a question of fact, another is a question of law.

II. The Catholic doctrine concerning the infallibility of the Church regarding dogmatic facts appears most clearly in the Jansenist case, insofar as the apostolic constitutions require internal and unconditional assent to the condemnation of Jansenius’s book according to the sense intended by the author and expressed through the five propositions that were extracted from it. The same principle, however, appears in other condemnations and judgments concerning dogmatic facts. To this is added the common consensus of theologians.

III. Thesis: The Church is infallible concerning dogmatic facts.

Proof 1. From the object and purpose of infallibility. The Church is infallible concerning revealed truths to be guarded and expounded. But it cannot infallibly guard and expound revealed truths if it errs concerning dogmatic facts.

Proof 2. From the nature and condition of the Church’s magisterium. — The magisterium of the Church teaches through words, as through signs of concepts and doctrine. But error concerning signs or the meaning of signs simultaneously involves error concerning doctrine. Therefore, the Church is necessarily infallible also concerning the signs of doctrine.

Similarly P. MARÍN-SOLÁ, l. c., I, 454 ff.

Proof 3. Without infallibility concerning dogmatic facts, the entire infallibility of the Church would be rendered vain and ineffectual. To what purpose would the dogmatic definitions of Councils and Roman Pontiffs serve if their legitimate convocation or election can be called into doubt? To what purpose does a dogmatic definition itself serve if there is doubt whether the Church has employed the correct term to express true doctrine? Who can believe the symbols of faith if the meaning of the terms is not established?

IV. Objections. — 1. Dogmatic facts are in no way revealed, e.g., that Pius XI was legitimately elected. Therefore, they are entirely outside the object of infallibility.

Response. Hence dogmatic facts in no way pertain to the primary object, yet they do pertain to the secondary object, which indeed also comprehends things connected with revealed truths.

⁶{org. 1} Thus CL. DE GROOT writes: “A dogmatic fact is contained in two things: namely, a question of law, whether such a teaching agrees with revealed doctrine or disagrees with it; and a question of fact, whether such a verbal formula or, in the case of Jansenius, such a book contains a teaching of this kind,” p. 318.

Objection 2. The Church has sometimes contradicted herself in judgment concerning dogmatic facts and therefore is not infallible: thus especially in the question of the Three Chapters. For indeed the Council of Chalcedon declared Theodoret and Ibas to be orthodox, while the Second Council of Constantinople condemned the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, and Ibas as heretical, and Pope Vigilius approved this kind of sentence.

Response. The Council of Chalcedon declared the *persons* of Theodoret and Ibas to be orthodox, but only after they had anathematized the doctrine of Nestorius; however, the Second Council of Constantinople condemned their *writings*, just as Pope Vigilius did⁷.

Hence there is no contradiction. For the rest, it should be noted that in the Council of Chalcedon, it was not the internal faith of Theodoret and Ibas that was approved, but the confession of faith provided by them; similarly, the Second Council of Constantinople condemned the obvious sense of the writings of Theodoret and Ibas, but not the sense which they perhaps intended but did not express; indeed, it can be said not without foundation that the writings of Theodoret and the letter of Ibas were condemned according to the sense in which they were understood by the Nestorians. The same must be said regarding the condemnation of the writings of Nestorius, although their obvious sense quite clearly indicates heresy⁸.

V. Concerning the manner in which the Church judges dogmatic facts. — A dogmatic fact can be considered in two ways: *a)* according to itself and as a mere historical fact: and thus it is outside the scope of the Church's infallibility; *b)* as it is connected with some dogma: and thus it becomes an object of infallibility.

From this follows the manner by which the Church judges dogmatic fact *de facto*. For a merely historical fact is determined by historical arguments, and the Church by no means neglects arguments of this kind; but a dogmatic fact as such—that is, as connected with the law of doctrine—is adjudicated by dogmatic arguments, that is, by arguing and proceeding from the truth of the dogma which is in question. In this manner the Church properly judges concerning dogmatic fact, and in such judgment is preserved from error through the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

By this method the Roman Pontiffs condemned propositions excerpted from the book of Jansenius as heretical (a doctrinal judgment) and consequently simply held that the excerpted propositions were truly contained in the said book (a judgment concerning dogmatic fact).

⁷ {org. 1} Cf. TIXERONT, *History of Dogmas*, III, ch. III, § 2 and ch. v, § 2 3.

⁸ {org. 1} Cf. R. SCHULTES, *The Doctrinal System of Nestorius, in Katholik*, 1913; vol. XI, p. 233-247, and vol. XII, p. 126-134.