

Christ's Church, Volume II

by Monsignor Gerard Van Noort, 1957

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Section I, Chapter III, Article I

89. Assertion 2: The Church's infallibility extends to dogmatic facts.

This proposition is *theologically certain*.

A *dogmatic fact* is a fact not contained in the sources of revelation, on the admission of which depends the knowledge or certainty of a dogma or of a revealed truth. The following questions are concerned with dogmatic facts: "Was the Vatican Council a legitimate ecumenical council? Is the Latin Vulgate a substantially faithful translation of the original books of the Bible? Was Pius XII legitimately elected bishop of Rome?" One can readily see that on these facts hang the questions of whether the decrees of the Vatican Council are infallible, whether the Vulgate is truly Sacred Scripture, whether Pius XII is to be recognized as supreme ruler of the universal Church.

From the time of the Jansenist controversies, theologians have understood by the term "dogmatic fact" especially the following question: "Is such and such a doctrine (orthodox or heretical) really contained in such and such a book?" The Jansenists in fact admitted the Church's infallibility in a *question of right* or of dogma, i.e., the Church could decide whether this or that doctrine (considered in itself and prescinding from the book in which it was said to be expressed) was heretical. But at the same time they denied its infallibility in a *question of fact*, e.g., whether this (heretical) doctrine was really stated in such and such a book, as, e.g., Jansen's *Augustinus*.^[9] One can readily see that a determination of this fact would determine whether one could or could not maintain and defend the doctrine of this book.

Proof:

1. From the *purpose of infallibility*. The Church is infallible in those related matters in which an error would constitute a danger to the faith. But dogmatic facts are matters of this kind. The reason should be obvious from the examples alleged above. What good would it do to proclaim in theory the infallible authority of ecumenical councils if one could licitly doubt the legitimacy of a specific council? What good would it do to acknowledge the inspiration of the Sacred Books in their original forms—forms long ago extinct—if one could not

definitively establish the substantial fidelity of copies of the original, and of the translations which the Church has to use? Could Christians be effectively protected against errors in their faith if the Church could not warn them against poisonous fare, such as are books which contain heresy or errors in religious matters?

2. From the *practice of the Church*, which (a) often resolutely and officially repudiated heretical writings as e.g., the *Thalia* of Arius in the Council of Nicaea and the works of Nestorius in the Council of Ephesus; (b) declared the Vulgate to be authentic at the Council of Trent,^[10] and the Canon of the Mass to be free of any error;^[11] (c) asserted specifically in the case of Jansen that “reverent silence” about a dogmatic fact is not at all adequate, “but that all faithful Christians must condemn as heretical in their hearts as well as with their lips the opinions [which the Church has] condemned in the five aforementioned propositions of Jansen’s book, opinions which the very words of those propositions quite clearly state.”^[12]

A famous objection is that concerned with the *Three Chapters* (Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia and his works; some of the works of Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, and the letter of Ibas, a priest of Edessa, to Maris of Persia, all of which works favored Nestorianism). The Council of Chalcedon is said to have approved these works and the Second Council of Constantinople and Pope Vigilius subsequently to have condemned them. Consequently, they say, at least one of them was in error about a dogmatic fact. But this conclusion is not justified, for although the fathers of Chalcedon, *after having expressly condemned Nestorianism*, accepted Theodore and Ibas as members of the Council, they passed no explicit decision regarding the *Three Chapters*.

90. Corollary

The Church does not usually pass judgment directly on the dogmatic fact itself; but on the proposition which, through the medium of a dogmatic fact, is deduced from a revealed premise (either through a true reasoning process or through a merely explanatory syllogism). Of course, whatever the Church declares directly must be maintained by everyone, e.g., that the Vulgate contains the word of God; that Pius XII is head of the Church; that the doctrine of this or that book is heretical. It arrived at these decisions in the following manner: every faithful translation of the inspired books contains the words of God; but the Vulgate is a faithful translation: therefore. . . . Anyone legitimately elected bishop of Rome is head of the Church; but Pius XII was legitimately elected; therefore. . . . Any book containing this doctrine is heretical; but such and such a book contains this doctrine; therefore. . . . Since then, the Church’s decision is concerned more directly with the conclusion deduced from revelation with the help of a dogmatic fact, rather than with the dogmatic fact itself (which is assumed in the decision rather than directly affirmed), dogmatic facts can rightly be called not only secondary but also *indirect objects of infallibility*.

It may help to mention that several theologians treat this question a bit differently. For they understand by the term “dogmatic fact” not a premise drawn from history, on which the conclusion would depend, as in the examples above, but *the conclusion itself*, e.g., that

the Vulgate contains the word of God or that such and such a book is heretical. If one prefers this view of the matter, he will then define a dogmatic fact, in the words of the illustrious de Groot, as “a fact in which a doctrine is expressed.”

One may wonder what name is to be given the conclusion, following the view proposed above. To answer that, a distinction is necessary. If the conclusion is the result of a real reasoning process, it is to be called a *theological conclusion*. But if the syllogism is merely explanatory, then it expresses a truth *formally but implicitly revealed*. The precise meaning of this distinction will be explained in the treatise on Faith (no. 200).