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Fr. O'Connell's Q&A

Certainty of the Pope's Status

Question: What certainty have we that the reigning Pontiff is actually the primate of the universal Church—that is, that he became a member of the Church through valid baptism and that he was validly elected Pope?

Answer: Of course, we have human moral certainty that the reigning Pontiff was validly elected in conclave and accepted the office of Bishop of Rome, thus becoming head of the universal Church. The unanimous consensus of a large group of Cardinals composing the electoral body gave us this assurance. And we also have human moral certainty that the reigning Pontiff was validly baptized, since there is a record to that effect in the baptismal register of the church in which the sacrament was administered. We have the same type of certainty that any bishop is the true spiritual head of the particular see over which he presides. This type of certainty excludes every *prudent* fear of the opposite.

But in the case of the Pope we have a higher grade of certainty—a certainty that excludes not merely the *prudent* fear of the opposite, but even the *possible* fear of the opposite. In other words, we have infallible certainty that the present Sovereign Pontiff has been incorporated into the Church by a valid baptism and has been validly elected head of the universal Church. For if we did not have infallible assurance that the ruling Pontiff is truly in the eyes of God the chief teacher of the Church of Christ, how could we accept as infallibly true his solemn pronouncements? This is an example of a fact that is not contained in the deposit of revelation but is so intimately connected with revelation that it must be within the scope of the Church's magisterial authority to declare it infallibly. The whole Church, teaching and believing, declares and believes this fact, and from this it follows that this fact is infallibly true. We accept it with ecclesiastical—not divine—faith, based on the authority of the infallible Church.