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Pars II, Disputatio II, Articulus IV, Sectio II De factis dogmaticis

In particular, the Church is infallible in judging dogmatic facts. This must be held at least as theologically certain.

1. What is a dogmatic fact? — 1. In itself, any revealed fact can be called dogmatic; however, after the controversy arose with the Jansenists, that term assumed a certain particular meaning, such that with respect to revelation a threefold species of facts is distinguished: facts *directly and properly revealed*, e.g., the resurrection of Christ, the conversion of Paul, which are themselves so many dogmas and the most certain object of infallibility; other facts are *merely historical*, which are neither revealed nor enter into any connection with revealed truths. Finally, there exist *facts more strictly called dogmatic*, namely those which, although they are not revealed, are nevertheless so connected with revelation that they cannot be called into doubt without some revealed truth or dogma being endangered. Of this kind are, for example, that the text of Scripture as we use it is genuine, that certain councils are truly ecumenical, that Pius X is the legitimate successor of St. Peter, etc.

2.\ And these dogmatic facts are divided into two classes: dogmatic facts *in a more general sense* or *simply* such, and dogmatic facts *in a stricter sense* or *dogmatic texts*. A dogmatic fact *in the strict sense* is a *doctrinal fact*, which concerns whether in some book a certain heretical or *orthodox sense is found*.¹ These, therefore, are found in books or texts of human origin, which

¹ {org. 1} The distinction lies especially in this: that the *former facts* concern the physical or moral person from whom the doctrine of faith proceeds, while the *latter concern the signs* by which the doctrine is expressed. Hence the *former* are connected with revelation by a nexus of certitude or manifestation, insofar as when these are denied, revealed truths are rendered uncertain; thus when the legitimacy of the pontiff is called into doubt, his

nevertheless treat of revealed matters and are consequently either consonant with or opposed to the deposit of faith. Thus indeed books or texts can be distinguished as being of three kinds: *sacred or inspired, merely profane, dogmatic.*

When the Church judges concerning such a text or book, you must distinguish two things: *the question of fact* and *the question of law*. In order that some book may be condemned or approved, it must first be established that some doctrine—namely, that on account of which the book is approved or rejected—is contained in that same book or text: *the question of fact*, which inquires *what is the sense* of such a book or of its author. This being supposed, there arises the question whether the doctrine itself is conformable or not conformable to revelation: *the question of law*, which judges *what kind of sense it is*, whether right or wrong. — Concerning this latter question we are not here concerned; this was resolved in the preceding disputation, where we defined that the Church is infallible in expounding and proposing revealed truths and those connected with them; this question, however, supposes that the former has been resolved.

We are dealing with the *first question*, namely whether the Church can infallibly judge whether in any particular book, understood as such according to the author's intention, a determinate doctrine is to be understood in a certain dogmatic sense or not. You will immediately understand that the meaning can again be *twofold*: *one meaning that is obvious, natural, objective*, which the words convey according to common usage in speaking and according to the rules of sound interpretation; this is also called the meaning of the author *qua author*; for indeed a person who writes and publicly publishes a book is rightly presumed to have intended that meaning which his words signify according to usage received among men. *The other meaning* is the *merely subjective* meaning of the author, that *which belongs to him who is the author*, which is not expressed by the force of the words and context, yet perhaps may have been supposed internally by the author in a completely arbitrary manner.

The Church does not judge concerning the purely subjective or arbitrary sense of the author, which, being internal and hidden, can neither benefit nor harm the faithful, but concerning the objective and natural sense, concerning the sense of the author *qua author*, which ought to be understood by all prudent readers. In judging this sense, however, we say that the Church is infallible.

II. We shall not dwell long on dogmatic *facts* in the broader sense. The matter *indeed* seems manifest in itself. Suppose, for example, that the Council of Trent were not legitimate: neither could the faith of those things which were defined by the council remain unshaken; suppose that the Supreme Pontiff were not legitimate: no one could believe anything from him with that firmness which is proper. Since *moreover* every authentic declaration of faith depends upon such a fact, all faith would already be undermined if such facts could not be declared certain. — *Furthermore*, what is said concerning dogmatic texts can immediately be applied here as well.

definitions can no longer be retained with certainty as defined truths. The *latter* are connected with revealed truths by a nexus of signification or truth, not of certitude alone; for if the Church were to repudiate those things which are in fact in conformity with revelation, it would already betray the truth itself; cf. Palmieri *de rom. pont.* § 21 n. V.

1. Regarding dogmatic texts, the matter is proven *from the practice of the Church*. — a) From those things which were done with the Jansenists in the 17th century, who were the principal adversaries in this matter. For they readily conceded that the Church is infallible regarding revealed truths; but with singular obstinacy they denied that it had been infallible when it judged that Jansenius had proposed heretical doctrine in his book “Augustinus.” — The history itself unfolds roughly as follows:

Jansenius wrote the book “*Augustinus*,” believing that he had finally discovered the genuine doctrine of this holy doctor concerning grace. From this book, thirty-five bishops of France extracted five propositions and brought them to the Supreme Pontiff Innocent X, asking him to render judgment concerning them: they were condemned in the *constitution Cum occasione* (1653).

The friends of Jansenius then admitted that those propositions had been justly condemned in every respect, but led by Arnauld, they denied that the same propositions actually existed in Jansenius’s book or, which amounts to nearly the same thing, that they had been condemned in the sense that Jansenius himself had intended (*in sensu auctoris*). But Alexander VII (1656) declared and defined against this empty exception that “those five propositions were extracted from the book of Cornelius Jansenius, Bishop of Ypres, which is entitled ‘Augustinus,’ and were condemned in the sense intended by the same Cornelius Jansenius” (*constitution Cum ad s. Petri sedem and Regiminis apostolici*).

The Jansenists had not yet acquiesced and devised a new exception, saying that by force of these constitutions they were bound to respectful silence, but not indeed to internal assent; for the pontiff is infallible in rendering judgment concerning doctrine or concerning a proposition considered in itself, but is not infallible in judgment concerning fact—whether the propositions are found there under a certain sense, namely the sense of the author. — Behold, they denied precisely what we defend. And what happened? Clement XI, then pontiff, overturned this evasion as well, reproved the Jansenists’ position, and himself established our assertion by declaring (1705): “The obedience owed to the aforementioned apostolic constitutions is by no means satisfied by that respectful silence, but *the sense condemned in the five aforesaid propositions of Jansenius’s book*, which their words present, as is alleged, *must be received and condemned as heretical by all the faithful of Christ* not only with the mouth, but also *with the heart*, nor can the aforesaid formula be legitimately subscribed to with any other mind, spirit, or belief” (*constitution Vineam Domini; Denzinger n. 1350*).

Therefore, by force of the declaration of the supreme pontiff, all the faithful must hold by internal assent that the propositions of Jansenius as such, according to the sense which they objectively establish, are heretical. *But* in proscribing heresies the Church is certainly infallible. *Therefore* she shows herself infallible also in declaring such dogmatic texts.

b) Nor was this done as a unique occurrence in the practice of the Church. Thus already the First Council of Nicaea condemned Arius both through his writings and by reason of them;² similarly the fathers of the Council of Ephesus “anathematized Nestorius’s letter and dogmas” (*D. n. 125*). Thus the Fifth Ecumenical Council pronounced anathema upon anyone who “should defend the

²{org. 1} Cf. Hefele *Konziliengeschichte* II c. 2 § 31.

impious *writings of Theodoret* and should not anathematize the aforesaid most impious compositions” (D. 226), indeed the entire *matter of the Three Chapters* revolved around this: that the *books of Theodore* of Mopsuestia, the *writings of Theodoret*, the *letter of Ibas*, and simultaneously with their books their authors as well should be condemned. Thus also *Martin V* ordered certain persons to be questioned “whether they believed the *books and doctrines (of Wycliffe and Hus)* to have been perverse.”

2. The matter can also be illuminated *from a much more universal principle*. Christ indeed established the Church as an infallible teacher of faith for mankind, so that men might be made more certain about the truths of faith and their meaning: therefore, regarding questions of faith, *insofar as they are raised or can be raised among men*, who are members of the Church. But among men, questions of faith are raised only through words, propositions, or texts which, though connected with dogma, are nevertheless not inspired or formally revealed by God—*dogmatic texts* to be understood in a certain definite sense. Therefore, if the Church has been established as an infallible teacher for mankind, it must exercise this infallibility especially in declaring the meaning of such texts. Necessarily, then, whenever the Church makes a judgment about the truth or falsity of any doctrine, it also makes a judgment about human words and their meaning by which the doctrine is expressed. And this certainly applies to the Church’s own pronouncements, whether those made now or those made in the past, by which it explains the dogmas themselves.

But it also applies to the pronouncements of others. Indeed, if the Church is not infallible even regarding these, anyone can spread doctrines opposed to revelation with impunity and escape the Church’s judgment, on the grounds that the Church is not infallible in determining the meaning of their words; nor can the Church effectively guard against men learning and holding false doctrines as true, because the meaning of their words and writings cannot be reached by the Church (Pesch, *Compendium* I, n. 346).

To this point you should refer what is read in 1 *Tim* 6, 20; or 2 *Tim* 1, 13: “Hold fast the form of sound words, which you have heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus”; and *ibid.* 2, 16: “But shun profane and vain babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness, and their word will spread like cancer.”

Moreover, our principle is also employed by Saint Thomas [Aquinas] in 2, 2 *q.* 11 *a.* 2 *ad* 2, saying: “Through the words which one speaks, he professes his faith; for confession is an act of faith; and therefore if there should be disordered speech concerning those things which pertain to faith, corruption of faith can follow from this.” — Now it certainly belongs to the Church to prevent such corruption.

The Jansenists themselves well understood that this distinction between the infallibility of the Church concerning a *question of law* and fallibility concerning a *question of fact*, if it were admitted, would provide an impregnable defense for their heresy; but by this very cunning of theirs they brought it about that the truth was explicitly proposed and perceived more clearly by all (Pesch *n.* 540).

Corollary. It immediately follows that the Church is infallible also in employing terms for aptly proposing truths. Therefore, the Church infallibly decreed against the Arians that the Son is ‘*homousios*’ or ‘*consubstantial*’ with the Father, and that this must be admitted by all the

faithful; similarly, it was infallible in employing the term *transubstantiation* concerning the mystery of the Eucharist.

III. Objections are resolved. — 1. They object quite wrongly that only revealed truths are the object of the Church's magisterium. For besides revealed truths, which are the primary object of infallibility, there is also a secondary one, which comprehends matters connected with the faith.

But such an object, they say, is impossible; for if such matters were infallibly defined by the Church, they would have to be admitted with faith *either* divine *or* ecclesiastical; *however*, divine faith is impossible in matters not immediately revealed, and ecclesiastical faith does not exist. — *Response*: It is certainly established that such facts declared by the Church must be admitted; whether by divine or ecclesiastical faith is another question, which need not be resolved here.

Nevertheless, they insist, no necessity appears for the Church to be concerned even about the texts and meaning of an author. For revealed truth is sufficiently safeguarded if heretical doctrines are declared as they lie in themselves, abstracting from certain books and texts. — *You will respond* that the Church and its magisterium have been instituted for the faithful, so that they may think and speak correctly about revealed matters; therefore the Church cannot abstract from the manner in which the truths of faith are proposed to or on behalf of the faithful in books, or are expounded by individual faithful.

2. To declare the meaning of some book or proposition pertains to philologists or grammarians; *but* the Church has nothing in common with philology or grammar. — *We respond*: Even theologians employ words to manifest their meanings; therefore words under this respect certainly pertain also to theologians; although the mere external composition and etymology of words may rightly be committed to grammarians.

But at least regarding the author's own meaning, the Church can know nothing with certainty; therefore, at least about this it cannot define infallibly. — One must distinguish: The Church cannot know the subjective meaning which the writer may have arbitrarily attached to his words [I concede] or [let it pass]. It cannot know the objective meaning which the words, as they sound, establish among people, and which the author himself is necessarily presumed to have attached to his words [I deny]. — This objective meaning of the author, which other people reading his writings also apprehend, is what the Church considers; but the arbitrary meaning neither the Church nor any mortal cares about.

3. From the practice of the Church, not much seems to follow; for indeed the Church has condemned writings in the same manner as the heretical persons themselves, as the Fifth Council says, for example: "we condemn Theodore together with his impious writings." *But* in condemning persons, [the Church] is not infallible. *Therefore* neither [is it infallible] with regard to their writings. — *Response*: The Church, by doctrinal judgment, infallibly condemns both the persons themselves, insofar as they objectively expressed heresies in certain words and as authors are identified with their words, but it does not thereby consider per se their subjective and internal disposition. — *Otherwise* the Church punishes heretics, and then it presupposes their contumacy and internal perversity; in this criminal judgment (concerning what they call a particular fact) it can certainly err.

In form therefore: I concede the Major premise. — *I distinguish the minor:* The Church condemning persons, as long as it identifies them with their errors objectively proposed by doctrinal judgment, is not infallible *I deny*; acting by criminal judgment concerning their subjective and internal disposition *I concede* or *I concede*. — *I contradict the consequence:* it is not infallible with regard to writings considered in themselves *I deny*; with regard to the internal mind or subjective guilt *I concede*.

4. The adversaries invoke the sayings of certain fathers and ancient theologians, by whom these men have asserted that the Church is infallible in matters of faith, but not so in questions of fact. Thus, for example, Saint Thomas: “In matters of faith,” he says, “the Church does not err; but in other opinions which pertain to particular facts ... it is possible for the judgment of the Church to err on account of false witnesses” (*Quodlibet 9, article 16*). — From his very words (“on account of false witnesses”) the distinction by which this difficulty may be resolved becomes nearly evident: for the holy doctor is not speaking of dogmatic facts, but of judicial facts, “as when it concerns possessions or crimes or things of this kind” (*ibid.*).

a) *In particular* from history, exceptions should be cited here which they derive from those events that occurred with Pope Vigilius (*cf. above p. 392*) and after the Fifth Council with Pelagius II concerning the same matter. The latter writes to the bishops of Istria, who were resisting the condemnation of the Three Chapters: “License is openly granted to us that whatever was done at Chalcedon outside matters of faith concerning persons may be reconsidered. For the special concern of synodal councils is faith; therefore whatever is conducted beyond faith is shown, as Leo teaches, to present no obstacle if it should be recalled to judgment” (*ep. 5, 19; Migne PL 72, 733*). But what can be reconsidered is not subject to infallibility. — *But* Pelagius seems to have understood the questions “concerning persons,” which he elsewhere also calls “superfluous,” as those matters which were conducted in that Fifth Council regarding internal dispositions, formal sin of heresy, etc.; that he did not exempt truly dogmatic facts from the peremptory judgment of councils, Pelagius himself shows even in the same letter, in which he strictly maintains that the condemnation of the Three Chapters must be assented to entirely.

b) Among more recent theologians they invoke Bellarmine, who, setting aside his solution previously given in the case of Honorius as probable, adds this other one, “which is that of Johannes de Turrecremata (*de eccl. II 93*), who teaches that the fathers of the sixth synod indeed condemned Honorius, but based on false information, and therefore erred in that judgment; for although a legitimate general council cannot err, just as this sixth council did not err, in defining dogmas of faith, nevertheless it can err in a question of fact. Therefore we can safely say that these fathers, deceived by false rumors and misunderstood letters of Honorius, undeservedly numbered Honorius among the heretics” (*de rom. pont. IV 11*). — In truth, Bellarmine did not speak accurately about the matter; but other theologians are also found from that time who spoke similarly; what follows from this? The error of a few — committed at a time when the supreme authority of the Church had not yet so clearly declared the matter! *Moreover*, Bellarmine taught the infallibility of the Church in dogmatic facts more than once; therefore, if you wish to understand him more leniently, you might think of the condemnation of Honorius as a heretic *qua man*, insofar as he himself was internally and subjectively inspired by a heretical spirit; thus you will have a merely human fact, not a dogmatic one, in which the possibility of error in councils is admitted. Cf. Wilmers *de eccl.* n. 253.