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Papal Infallibility: Peter and Paul Are Interdependent



Timothy Flanders

We see in the Latin liturgical tradition an interesting thing: with the major feast on June 29 as well as the minor feasts, both apostles are always commemorated [1]. If the feast is chiefly of the Prince of the Apostles, then St. Paul is also commemorated with an additional collect and vice versa [2].

This liturgical interdependence between St. Peter and St. Paul reflects the ecclesiastical interdependence of primacy with conciliarity — primacy as manifested in the individual bishop of Rome with his juridical authority on every level and conciliarity as manifested in the person of St. Paul representing the authority of Tradition. This recalls the words of the Angelic Doctor in his treatment on fraternal correction:

It must be observed, however, that if the faith were endangered, a subject ought to rebuke his prelate even publicly. Hence Paul, who was Peter's subject, rebuked him in public, on account of the imminent danger of scandal concerning faith, and, as the gloss of Augustine says on Gal. 2:11, "Peter gave an example to superiors, that if

at any time they should happen to stray from the straight path, they should not disdain to be reproved by their subjects.” (II-II q33 a4 ad 2)

Thus, in the tragic situation in which there exists “an imminent danger of scandal concerning faith” due to the pope’s own words or deeds, according to St. Thomas, a public rebuke is an act of charity. Thus we see that although St. Paul is not given *juridical* authority over St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles is himself bound to Tradition. Therefore, the faithful have an authority over the pope not juridically, but by virtue of the Tradition itself to which the pope is bound. And thus we see that the ecclesiastical interdependence is shown in the fact that while the person of St. Peter is infallible in certain cases, the Tradition itself (insofar as it is *de fide*) is infallible in all cases. It is to Tradition that the faithful, imitating St. Paul, can bear witness even to the point of a public rebuke of the Roman pontiff.

This truth especially bears upon our present crisis, which began in the 19th century around the First Vatican Council, not the Second. This is when the person of the pope gained such popularity in the minds of the faithful that some began to elevate him above his office. By Vatican I, there existed at least three parties. On the one side, the conciliarists asserted that the council had juridical authority over the pope. On the

other side, the ultramontanists asserted the pope had infallible authority *in any or all cases*. But Vatican I implicitly condemned both parties in its definition. It stated that the pope was infallible if and only if the following conditions are met:

1. The pope must be speaking in his capacity as head of the Church, not as a private individual.
2. It must be a teaching on faith and morals.
3. It must be sufficiently evident that he intends to teach with definitive authority irrevocably.
4. It must be clear that he intends to bind the whole Church.

This doctrine is a result of, not a presupposition upon, the historical evidence. It seeks to reconcile the fact that the Tradition holds the pope to be the infallible point of unity (e.g., The Formula of Hormisdas) and yet has also fallen into error at certain times (e.g., Honorius).

Why were not the other sources of infallibility defined (as that of the episcopacy was at Vatican II)? This was probably due to the fact that the Italian armies were attacking Rome at the time of the council, forcing the council to close prematurely (it was not officially closed until 1962). Thus, it may be due to the incompleteness of this definition that the “Spirit of Vatican I” has nevertheless caused a certain ultramontanism to obtain since then, which has contributed to the current crisis, which we will discuss below.

Papal infallibility is limited by Tradition itself

From what has been said above, we may say papal infallibility is limited by the Tradition itself under three aspects. The first aspect is the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary. An exercise of papal infallibility (as well as that of a general council) is a mode of the Church's infallibility that is extraordinary, meaning rare and only under certain conditions. This aspect of infallibility is *not* the normal mode upon which the faith of an individual Catholic rests. Rather, the Tradition itself is the ordinary mode of infallibility for a Catholic. His life of faith is lived with constant reference to this ordinary infallibility, and only rarely in reference to the extraordinary. Thus, papal infallibility is bound to the ordinary infallibility of the Church as to its frequency. Moreover, the extraordinary is not *above* the ordinary, but the extraordinary must serve it. Thus, it is said:

The task of authentically interpreting the word of God [Tradition], whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been

handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. (*Dei Verbum* 10)

Therefore, it can rightly be said that there is *only one authority in the Church*: Tradition.

The second aspect under which the pope is bound to Tradition comes when we consider the Church's sources for its ordinary infallibility. They are the following:

1. Scripture (written Tradition)
2. Tradition (unwritten Tradition)
3. The consensus of the Fathers
4. The consensus of prior ecumenical councils and infallible papal pronouncements
5. The consensus of the scholastics
6. The consensus of the whole body of the faithful

Further sources and distinctions can be discussed, as well the theological notes (we are also not discussing the fallible ordinary magisterium). But we may say here that papal infallibility is thus limited by ordinary infallibility by the fact that the former can never contradict the latter, being its servant.

From this we can draw out our third aspect, which comes from the fact that the prior Tradition on faith and morals, already established as infallible, become the *material cause* of an ex cathedra statement. The four causes then break down like this:

Material cause: faith or morals from Tradition

Efficient cause: the bishop of Rome

Formal cause: manifestly definitive language (“speaking ex cathedra”) that formally clarifies faith or morals

Final cause: to guard Tradition for all time

Tradition’s faith and morals are the material cause that binds papal infallibility in two ways. First, it cannot speak on matters other than these infallibly. Thus, any discussion of politics, economics, or science as such can never form the object of infallibility. Second, since the Tradition is the material cause, not only must papal infallibility not contradict Tradition, but Tradition must also be the thing *out of which* the statement is made. In other words, the development of doctrine must be preserved with the Tradition, preserving the “same sense and same understanding” as the Church has held within Tradition.

Further, the final cause points again back to the Tradition as the ordinary mode of infallibility. This is shown particularly when the definitions states:

For the Holy Spirit was promised to the successors of Peter not so that they might, by his revelation, make known some new doctrine, but that, by his assistance, they might religiously guard and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles. (*Pastor Aeternus*, 4.6)

Thus, the current Code of Canon Law states:

No doctrine is understood as defined infallibly unless this is manifestly evident.
(749 3)

“Manifestly evident” is shown when the Tradition is the thing out of which the infallible statement is made. Now, the definition given in *Pastor Aeternus* says papal infallibility is irreformable “from himself and not from the consensus of the Church” (*ex sese et non ex consensu ecclesiae*). But this is to be understood against conciliarism, to exclude the *current* consensus as the efficient cause. From the aspect of the material cause, the definition is from the consensus of the Church, if this consensus is understood to be Tradition.

Against current errors

Taking these things into consideration, we may begin to understand properly the limits of papal infallibility. It is ludicrous to suggest that the pope has the power to declare heresy *ex cathedra*. Such a thing is shown by definition to be impossible, since papal infallibility depends upon the Tradition for its material cause. To say that such a thing is possible is to claim that one can construct a wooden chair out of concrete: it is a contradiction in terms. If such a thing were actually attempted (God forbid), infallibility could never be “manifestly evident” since the heresy would make it manifestly fallible. Papal infallibility, moreover, would only undermine its own foundation, since it proclaims its own authority as rooted in Tradition.

Further, since this is the case, we may see the curious way in which the current crisis has been orchestrated. The enemies of Christ have been able to take substantial control of the Vatican. But they have still not been able to produce an “infallible” statement to enshrine their errors. Instead, they rely on four things to spread their errors, all of which are themselves ecclesiastical errors.

First, they spread the error that the pope in fact has power *over* Tradition. They foolishly suppose that if they can simply gather enough support, they can convince the pope to allow contraception or ordain women. This is the false “Spirit of Vatican I.”

On the contrary, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* 4 states:

[Since] the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church...We declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer sacramental orders on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.

[3]

Thus, the pontiff declared that since Tradition holds one thing, it is beyond the pope's authority to change it even with an infallible statement. To attempt to do so would contradict the very nature of papal infallibility. The pope simply does not have that much power.

The second error used by the Church's enemies is in convincing the magisterium to issue documents that contain ambiguous language. This has happened since the organized group of German and other prelates successfully threw out the original documents of Vatican II [4]. They were able to convince the Council to adopt equivocal language on the pretense that it would be more "pastoral." They then used this ambiguity to promote their errors after the Council.

On the contrary, Vatican I states:

If anyone shall assert it to be possible that sometimes, according to the progress of knowledge, a sense is to be given to doctrines propounded by the Church different from that which the Church has understood and understands; let him be anathema. (*Dei Filius* c. 4)

Thus, no matter what is said or how ambiguous it is, no sense can be given to any Magisterial document that contradicts the sense as understood by the Tradition on faith and morals. Moreover, by its nature, an infallible statement must be manifestly univocal, since the faithful cannot be bound by equivocations. The third tactic in use is the attempt to bind the faithful to non-infallible teaching. What the enemies do is proclaim an ambiguous document, give it a heretical meaning, then attempt to bind the faithful as if it were infallible.

On the contrary, Vatican II says of itself:

Taking conciliar custom into consideration and also the pastoral purpose of the present Council, the sacred Council defines as binding on the Church only those things in matters of faith and morals which it shall

openly declare to be binding. (*Lumen Gentium*, Appendix)

Thus, the Council repeated many infallible things from Tradition already binding but did not bind the faithful to any new doctrine. Thus also, Pope John Paul II did not require the SSPX to be bound by Vatican II to be reconciled in 1988. This does not mean that the Council should be dismissed, but it should be received with humility according to each theological note. However, any attempt to impose an erroneous doctrine by means of the Council is a contradiction in terms. As the text itself shows, binding doctrines must also be manifestly binding.

The final method the enemies use is in forcing the magisterium to issue documents that have no reference to the prior magisterium on the same topic. Again, this began at Vatican II, when, for example, a document was issued on ecumenism without reference to the prior documents on this subject. This issue has continued with the popes since. So St. John Paul II's encyclical on the family ignores the two prior encyclicals on the same topic. Pope Francis's death penalty teaching ignores the teaching before Papa Wojtyla. Thus, the enemies attempt to use this to have us ignore the prior Magisterium.

On the contrary, the Declaration of Truths (1) states:

The right meaning of the expressions ‘living tradition,’ ‘living Magisterium,’ ‘hermeneutic of continuity,’ and ‘development of doctrine’ includes the truth that whatever new insights may be expressed regarding the deposit of faith, nevertheless they cannot be contrary to what the Church has always proposed in the same dogma, in the same sense, and in the same meaning.

Thus, even if a new document ignores prior teaching, it is false to say the prior teaching should be ignored or is abrogated. This is a similar tactic to the one above about a different sense and is answered in the same manner. Moreover, the nature of infallibility is such that since it must take Tradition as its material cause, it cannot make a different sense out of the same sense.

In conclusion, as long as the “Spirit of Vatican I” persists, it cannot be too often repeated: the object of papal infallibility is to guard Tradition and maintain the infallibility of the Church as a whole. A proper understanding of papal infallibility will help the faithful recoup Tradition as the ordinary mode of the Church’s infallibility. This in turn will help pave a way through this current crisis.

For further reading on this topic, please see the sources from Fr. Ripperger (upon which this essay is based) in the Current Crisis section under Resources. See also my essay on Pope Francis.

[1] Conversion of St. Paul, St. Peter's Chair at Antioch, and the Chains of St. Peter.

[2] Some of this commemoration was lamentably removed by Bugnini starting in 1955.

[3] *Declaramus Ecclesiam facultatem nullatenus habere ordinationem sacerdotalem mulieribus conferendi, hancque sententiam ab omnibus Ecclesiae fidelibus esse definitive tenendam.*

[4] On the takeover of the council by the German "Rhine group," see two sources favorable to Vatican II: *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber* by Ralph Wiltgen (TAN, 1991) and *What Happened at Vatican II* by John O'Malley (Harvard University Press, 2010). This can also be seen by the influential heterodox Vatican II *periti* Schillebeeckx, Küng, Rahner, et al., in their promotion of error via the journal *Concilium* following the Council, prompting Ratzinger, et al. to split from them and create the journal *Communio* instead.

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