

## THE TEACHING AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

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The Fathers of our glorious republic did not rest content when they had drawn up a code of laws for the mutual protection and advancement of state and citizens. Profiting by the lessons of history and looking into the future they foresaw that the birth of new parties, the clash of conflicting interests, the machinations of fanatic radicals would all combine to undermine the foundation stone of the government—the Constitution. To protect it from such assaults and to preserve in all its integrity this document that guaranteed the highest welfare of both citizens and state they built around it a safeguard—the Judiciary. This department was composed of men learned in letters and in the law, officially empowered to interpret the true sense of the Constitution and its application in particular cases. Our Fathers built well. For over a century the Chief Justice has stood faithfully guarding his charge. Armed with the weapon of authority he has baffled the secret attacks of sophists and partisans. He has preserved unimpaired the foundation stone of the nation.

When the Christian Society was founded it too had its constitution to be guarded and perpetuated for posterity. This constitution was the compilation of doctrinal and moral teachings which Christ entrusted to His Apostles and which they and their co-workers gave to the world, some in writing, others by word of mouth. It was by belief in these divinely revealed truths of Holy Scripture and Tradition and by conformity with the precepts therein contained that man was to be saved. For this reason the deposit of supernatural truth is called the Remote Rule of Faith.

During the lifetime of the Apostles the integrity of the sacred treasure of truth was insured. Those from whose inspired pens the salutary message had flowed were the competent and legitimate guardians of the text and its authoritative interpreters. But with the death of the holy writers was the official guardianship of the precious deposit of truth likewise to cease? Was the chest containing the priceless bread of salvation to be left a prey to the pride and caprice of heretics? Were the children of future generations thus to be deprived of the knowledge of the truth which was to make them free? Indeed if this were so; if Christ made no provision for the preservation and interpretation of the doctrine of salvation, the Divine Founder stands convicted of shameful

indifference to the future welfare of His society. To make the acceptance of the truth which He taught the necessary means of salvation; so necessary in fact that "He that believeth not shall be condemned" (Mark XVI, 16); and yet to fail to institute an authority to guard this saving doctrine intact and to interpret its true meaning for men are inconsistencies which cannot be imputed to the Divine Wisdom of the Son of God.

To assert that the sacred deposit of Divine Revelation or the Remote Rule of Faith needs no interpreter other than man's conscience, is with eyes wide open to walk into the impenetrable stone wall of an intrinsic impossibility. The content of the Scriptures is supernatural truth of Faith. A knowledge of and a belief in this truth is, as all admit, the necessary condition by which man is raised from the level of sin to the supernatural plane and set aright on the way to eternal beatitude. But because these truths are supernatural they are beyond the reach of man's reason, the proper object of which is natural, scientific truth. Supernatural science cannot be experimented upon by a human instrument. There is clearly an irremediable disproportion between the measured, supernatural truth, and the measured, natural reason. In the words of St. Peter as "No prophecy of Scriptures is made by private interpretation" (II Pet. I, 20), so neither will the inspired text reveal its true meaning to an individual examination; for in it "are certain things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest to their own destruction" (II Pet. III, 16).

Nor is the difficulty dissolved by the additional element of a special assistance of the Holy Ghost in each individual conscience. Truth which is one and invariable cannot admit of contradictory interpretations. Yet private judgment has rendered more than one hundred various interpretations for the words: "This is My body, this is My blood." Therefore to contend that these diverse and contrary opinions are the results of Divine instruction, is either to charge the Holy Spirit with the teaching of error in at least ninety-nine out of the hundred cases, or to fall back upon an explanation which would destroy the efficacy of His action; for if the Holy Ghost sets out to teach men truth and fails in the attempt, His operation has not attained its end. It is plain that both these conclusions are impossible; the one directly opposed to the truth of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity; the other a denial of His omnipotence.

If Christ's mission of universal redemption was not to have

been in vain and His condemnation of the unbeliever not to have been an idle utterance; there must have been left to man some means by which he could know with certainty those truths to which he must assent and those works which he must perform. We have seen, moreover, that neither the theory of an individual examination of the Scripture nor that of a private illumination of the Holy Ghost can be admitted. It follows that Christ must have intrusted the interpretation of His Divine message to some external authority. The voice of this divinely commissioned teacher must necessarily be infallible; for upon the doctrine which it proposes and explains depends an issue of no less consequence than the eternal salvation of mankind. Moreover, this infallible voice must speak the language of all men; for Christ would "have all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. II, 4). Its vibrations must be heard during all times, for Christ told us "heaven and earth shall pass, but My words shall not pass" (Matt. XXIV, 35).

Where can we find this living authority? In whom can we recognize that Divine voice? To what body did Christ intrust His Divine message? Who has from the beginning, in the tone of certainty, taught all men "to observe all those things which Christ commanded"? In whom has been fulfilled Christ's promise of an abiding presence: "I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world"? (Matt. XXVIII, 20).

There is but one upon earth who can meet all these requirements of the Divine Teacher of the Christian doctrine. That one is the Roman Catholic Church. Not only can she alone prove a title to infallibility, but earth knows of no rival claimant to the divine gift essential to a teacher of Divine truth. She alone traces the beginning of her missionary career to the Cenacle in Jerusalem. She alone has sent her missionaries to all nations. She alone speaks the language of all men. She has enkindled the spark of faith in worldly, pagan hearts. In kingly presences she has thundered forth the laconic "It is not lawful for you." She has lighted up prison dungeons with the torch of faith. She alone bears the marks of Christ's teacher. In her hands are the credentials of a Divine mission, the genuineness of which the ancient Fathers unanimously attest. She is the rule of faith for man. She is "The Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Tim. III, 15).

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References—DeGroot: *Summa Apologetica*. Tanquery: *Dogma*.

—Bro. Basil Sheehan, O. P.