

## "NOW I BELIEVE"

ALAN SMITH, O.P.

---



WITH the year 1870, the Roman Catholic Church in Europe stood on the threshold of desperate days. That year was to see the Papal States seared by the revolutionary flames fanned by Garibaldi and his cohorts. Bismarck's empire was to be scarcely a year old before his *Kulturkampf* would try the faith of Catholics subject to the rule of the man of "blood and iron." France was to suffer humiliating defeat from the Prussian power, and the scourge of Gallicanism and excessive Liberalism was to continue a distressing problem for the "eldest daughter of the Church." Yet, despite the impending storm, the Vatican Council was in session, and hot debate raged through its meetings. The definition of papal infallibility had been proposed, and a resolute minority was determinedly forcing the enthusiastic majority to prove the truth of such a dogma. The majority had to prove beyond doubt that such a dogma was contained in the deposit of faith, i.e. in Scripture or tradition. History was fine-combed for difficulties and proofs; exegetes and theologians were pouring over the pages of Sacred Scripture; tradition and patristic literature were subjected to most intense study. For six weeks the air of the Council chamber almost sparked with brilliant flashes of erudition as the best on both sides gave the best that was in them. Finally, discussion came to an end. No one could reasonably protest that both sides had not ample time for their say. When the last vote was taken, only two bishops opposed the opportuneness of the definition. One was an American, Bishop Fitzgerald of Little Rock, Arkansas; the other, Bishop Riccio of Cajazzo. Dramatic was the scene when Bishop Fitzgerald stepped forward, knelt at the feet of Pope Pius IX, and touchingly said, "Holy Father, now I believe." Bishop Riccio did likewise.

The non-Catholic world and even some Catholics (such as the "Old Catholics" of Germany) scorned to follow the humble submission of these good bishops. "As if the Pope were sinless," scoffed some. But the Church had not defined the Pope as being sinless. Impeccability and infallibility are two different things. "As if the Pope could foresee all things," jibed others. But the Church had not pronounced the Pope was a prophet. Prophecy and infallibility are two different gifts. "Now we shall be smothered by an avalanche of new revelations," cried still others. But the Church did not say the

Pope had the power of making new revelations. He was to define, to make more clear, what was already revealed. Besides, over seventy years have passed since infallibility was defined, and the much-feared dogmatic deluge is not in evidence. Obviously misunderstanding the actual definition, the unbelievers argued about the question in circles. Like a revolving door, they went around and around the point without ever making progress. Their misconception of an almost absurdly simple doctrine made that doctrine simply absurd.

What was the precise statement of the Church? "We teach and we define as divinely revealed the dogma that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, enjoys infallibility in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals." In other words, the Pope enjoys immunity from even the possibility of error when he defines doctrine touching faith or morals. Why? Because divine assistance is given him that he may teach as God wills he teach—the truth only and always. The phrase *ex cathedra* may be puzzling, but once understood, it is a convenient and accurate expression of the exact circumstances under which papal infallibility is employed. The Holy Father speaks *ex cathedra* when, using his supreme authority as head of the Church, he defines and proposes some dogma, pertaining to faith or morals, as a revealed doctrine to be believed by all. Correctly understood, then, the dogma of infallibility is anything but the example of tyrannical stupidity some would have us believe. Their "bogeyman" springs from the darkness of their own comprehension, not from the light of faith.

Whence comes this doctrine? Has it any scriptural backing? Did the Saviour ever refer to such a claim? Questions are hurled from every side, but the answer is definite. Yes, Christ did promise such a gift. Once He said to Peter: "Thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now though the word "infallible" is not mentioned, yet that infallibility is contained in that promise cannot rightly be denied. Peter and his successors, the Popes, are to be the foundation of Christ's Church on earth. They are likened to a rock, and that rock is the rock of truth. Notice the divine precision in this choice of metaphor. Recall the parable of the house builded upon a rock. The elements—the wind, the waves, and the rain—all beat upon it, but still that house stood. Why? "Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world." (Mt. c. 28, v, 20). Christ will remain with His Church. He has given His word. Are we to regard His pledge like the promise of the parabolical son who assured his father he would work in the vineyard and "he went not" (Mt. c. 21, v. 30). "Feed my lambs; feed my sheep." (Jn. c. 21 v. 15 ss.).

Could Christ's command to Peter be any clearer? And what are Peter and his successors to feed the sheep, the faithful believers, of Christ? Does Christ wish His little ones to be poisoned with error? God forbid! And God does forbid it by remaining with His Church to aid it, to direct it, to guide it in its infallible decisions. What God has commanded, that He gives the strength to do.

Where, then, is the irrationality in this dogma of infallibility? Consider the unreasonableness of a fallible church. Why should anyone follow the decisions of such a church? How can anyone find certitude in the opinions, for they would be but mere opinions, of such a church? Listen to those who ridicule infallibility, and see the inanity of their conclusions. We are to hold either one of two sides—that infallibility does not exist at all in anyone, or else everyone of us is infallible. If we hold the first, we are insulting the wisdom of Almighty God. We are simply likening God to the foolish man of the parable who built his house on sand. We are expected to believe that the God-Man, Jesus Christ, founded a church and neglected to provide for the maintenance of the truths He had consigned to it. If that is sound thinking, Lord save us from thought! And, on the other hand, if we follow the other part of the dilemma, we have every cause to be mocked. Are we to say that every man is infallible? Are we to hold the infallibility of those who dogmatically despise our dogma? Why they hold just about every shade of opinion. Their tenets contradict one another; their paths to Heaven are a maze of obscurities; their self-constituted infallibility is shaken by every new scientific hypothesis, by every newly popular political creed, and by every new emotion they experience. They cried in derision because we say one man, the Pope, is infallible when he speaks as Pope. They substitute, for the infallibility of the Pope, the infallibility of every man, even men the most ardent census-taker couldn't locate. To follow their weather-vane religions would be to seek a mental Nirvana and a spiritual grave-yard. They offer us stones for bread and venom for drink.

We need not apologize for our apologetics. We have Sacred Scriptures, the word of God, to support our claim. We can go back through tradition, through the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and we can study the early practices of that Church. The strong light of fact strengthens our assertion against attack. Why strive needlessly to beat to the dust what has never risen above it? Why strangle what has never breathed? From any and all sides our position is impregnable. We should be the world's happiest tenants. We live in the house that God built.