

## DOCTRINE, DOGMA, TRADITION ('T' OR 't') WHY DISTINCTIONS MATTER

In a world that routinely views words such as doctrine and dogma in a purely pejorative light, it is tempting to run quickly in the opposite direction, avoiding any potentially controversial discussions. Others dig in, taking great comfort in such terms, at times seeking more clarity than even the Church herself offers. Case in point—when I visited Israel in 1988, some people on the pilgrimage were shocked to see a **Church of the Dormition**, in honor of Mary. “Heresy,” one exclaimed! The Blessed Mother did not die, or so he believed. But in fact, the Church has not definitively spoken one way or the other in this regard. In the Eastern tradition since at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Mary “fell asleep” and was assumed to heaven before her body underwent any decay. They pray in their liturgy: “In giving birth you kept your virginity; in your Dormition you did not leave the world, O Mother of God, but were joined to the source of Life. You conceived the living God and, by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death.” (Byzantine Liturgy, Troparion, Feast of the Dormition, August 15th.)

But wait a second! Didn't Pope Pius XII declare the Dogma of the Assumption? As we Minnesotans say—“You betcha, he did.” In a 1950 Apostolic Constitution entitled *Munificentissimus Deus* (how's **that** for a title!), consider carefully Pope Pius XII's words in this key sentence: “by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, **having completed the course of her earthly life** (my emphasis added; Lat: *expleto terrestri vitae cursu*), was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.” This was a solemn act *ex cathedra* and formalized the Catholic teaching on the Assumption as an infallible dogma of the faith. This example is illustrative of the complexities involved in reading Church documents and understanding their nuances. The chosen words neither imply “after having died” nor “while still alive being assumed into heaven.” The formulation is deliberately ambiguous, due to the vigorous discussion on this very point.

Some maintained that the object of this privilege of the Assumption was the *glorious resurrection* of the Blessed Virgin. Of necessity, this would have presupposed the fact of her death. Other theologians maintained that the doctrine of the Assumption has within its scope only the *glorious Assumption* of Mary, body and soul into heaven, whether she died or not. Now you may object— but one of the effects of Original Sin is death, right? Mary was preserved from Original Sin. True, she was. But is it death or the corruption of the body at death that is an effect of Original Sin? Okay, I've made my point, and this is clearly what keeps theologians employed and presenting papers at conferences! The Church is loath to exceed what is certain, most especially in solemn declarations. We see Mary as the faithful servant of God who shared intimately in the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord. The Church does not go out on a limb, trying to answer every question definitively. This disappoints some, but is the right course.

In this example, it is not a question whether Mary is enjoying the blessedness of heaven— she absolutely is according to our Catholic faith. The end point is identical; it's simply a question whether her journey to heaven began in the normal course of events immediately following her death, or if she was assumed to heaven while living. The consensus today is that she died, fully experiencing the human condition, participating in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. But we cannot, nor should not desire to remove all mystery from our faith. Surety is not possible this side of the grave in all matters, and frankly, I am fine with that.

The Magisterium is the teaching authority established by Christ as a gift first and foremost to the Church. It is exercised in two principal ways: the *Ordinary* Magisterium and the *Extraordinary* Magisterium. In each case, a particular teaching **may be** infallible (i.e. not subject to error), even though it may be developed or clarified in further generations. Most teachings are **not** defined infallibly. But that does not in any way signal that they may be disregarded. I have long thought that people make too much of the “infallible-fallible” distinction. “If it is not infallible, then it can be wrong.” That attitude completely misses the point, primarily because we have **never** based our faith solely upon infallible dogmas. To do so would reduce the richness and complexity of our faith. As the official commentary to *Ad Tuendam Fidem* stated so

beautifully: “In every profession of faith, the Church verifies different stages she has reached on her path toward the definitive meeting with the Lord. No content is abrogated with the passage of time; instead, all of it becomes an irreplaceable inheritance...”

The parameters of infallibility were laid out in 1870 at **Vatican I** in a document entitled *Pastor Aeternus*, which sought to clarify the nature of papal primacy in the Church. Infallibility is a **gift to the entire Church**, not to one man, even if that man happens to be the pope. This is clearly spelled out. Vatican I ended suddenly due to the Franco-Prussian War. It took Vatican II, nearly 100 years later, to complete the development of the scope of infallibility with a fuller discussion about the role of the bishops, both collectively and in their roles as teachers in the dioceses they shepherd.

- The **Sovereign Order of Malta** has been in the news lately, but not in a flattering way. Stories center on an internal dispute within the order. A lay religious order of the Church since 1113 A.D., it is active in 120 countries, carrying out charitable works, assisting infirm pilgrims at Lourdes, and countless other initiatives. This too shall pass, and I pray that they emerge even stronger.
- Talk about **frequent flyer** miles! A sixty-six year old **Laysan albatross** has hatched yet another chick at the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. She was first banded in 1956 and these birds mate for life. You parents who may be struggling to encourage their 20-something year-old kids to “get out of the nest,” might want to think again!
- Awkward! Of the nearly 300 weddings at which I have presided, one is seared in my memory. On a doubleheader wedding Saturday in 1990, I forgot to change the post-it note, with the new names. When I glanced down to introduce “Mr. and Mrs....” I instantly panicked. I remembered their first names but couldn’t recall his surname for the life of me. After an uncomfortable pause, I used her maiden name as the new couple’s last name. Unlike the Oscars Best Picture gaffe, I was quickly forgiven at the reception!
- I am old enough to remember **Blue Laws** that kept most stores closed on Sundays. Can’t say that I am surprised at the Sunday Liquor Sales bill passing both chambers. Disappointed, but hardly surprised. Six days a week in which to buy a six-pack isn’t enough? It’s called planning ahead!
- Life remains extremely difficult for Christians in Egypt. Another Coptic Christian was killed in the **Sinai Peninsula** by Daesh, the Arabic acronym for the Islamic state. He is the sixth during the month of February.

Sincerely in Christ,

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Rector