

SEEKING CLARITY IN A TIME OF DOUBT: SETTING THE STAGE AT VATICAN I

In 1900, a 25-year-old **Winston Churchill** wrote a telegram, later published in the *Manchester Guardian*. Speaking of the **Boer War**, he opined about the value of magnanimity, especially to one's enemies. He cautioned against revenge: "Beware of driving men to desperation; even a cornered rat is dangerous...." In the late 19th century, Pope Pius IX was trying to respond to those who effectively had backed the Church into a corner. What emerged from this process was a solemn definition about **papal primacy** and the **protection** offered the entire church through the gift of **infallibility**. The way it played out on a world stage cannot be divorced from the fallout of the French Revolution and its vicious attack on the Church. In harsh times, the bishops (and pope!) needed to respond decisively. Too many though, saw the response as one of defensiveness.

Sometimes, discretion is the better part of valor. The Church is strongest, **not** when **defending** herself, but when **defining** herself. Vatican Council I sought to do the latter; too many only discerned the former. Its first decree, entitled *Dei Filius*, sought to show that human **reason** is capable of assenting to the knowledge of God. Faith ought neither be divorced from reason (i.e. two ships passing in the night) nor made inferior to it. Some truths "not of themselves beyond the scope of human reason, can, even in the present state of the human race, be known by everyone without difficulty, with firm certitude and with no intermingling of error." While the assent of faith **not a blind** movement of the mind, neither can we attain full knowledge without the grace of God aiding us. It's not an "either-or" but the classic "both-and" proposition.

The Council outlined parameters for belief, categories that are relevant even today. Faith is a supernatural virtue that, with God's grace aiding us, allows us to **believe** as true what God has revealed. So, what are those propositions to believe? *Dei Filius* laid them out: "Wherefore, by **divine and catholic** faith all those things are to be **believed** which are **contained** in the word of God as found in **scripture and tradition**, and which are proposed by the **church** as matters to be believed as divinely revealed, whether by her **solemn judgment** or in her **ordinary and universal magisterium**." That's a mouthful—every word is chock full of meaning and today is recited as the Oath of Fidelity by new clerics. Vatican I laid the parameters for belief and for the intersection of faith and reason. Closely linked to the *internal* assistance of the Holy Spirit may be found *external* indications of God's revelation, e.g. miracles and prophecies.

It is critical to grasp the distinction between dogmas that are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith by means of the Church's **solemn judgment** and those proposed as such by the ordinary and universal magisterium. By nature, dogmas of the faith are **free from error**—infallible. They may in the future be more effectively expressed. There are several means of expressing dogma. One, a **papal proclamation**, (solemn judgment) is exceedingly rare. The most common error in understanding infallibility is in thinking that every papal utterance falls under the **umbrella** of infallibility—it most certainly does not. The misconception stems from a radical identification of infallibility with the person of pope alone. Sadly, the start of the Franco-Prussian War **abruptly ended** the council. A more fulsome articulation of the relationship between papal infallibility and the college of bishops would have to wait nearly 100 years.

In the meantime, **isolated** texts of Vatican I centering on the person of the pope led to **confusion**, a reality that some prelates considered ahead of time, including **St. John Henry Newman**. Having spent his life in academia and possessing a keen sense of the laity, he saw the fundamental question as: "What should be the relationship of faith to a skeptical, secular age?" He initially belonged to the group of bishops who— **not disputing** the reality of infallibility— questioned whether it was

opportune to define it formally. He said: “Christianity has been too often in what seemed deadly peril, that we should fear for it any new trial now... Commonly the Church has nothing more to do than to go on in her own proper duties, in confidence and peace; to stand still and to see the salvation of God.”

Vatican I squarely addressed the issue of papal primacy and rightly so. The pope’s role is different from other bishops. St. Peter’s leadership of the Twelve in the scriptures is undeniable. Many non-Catholic Christians acknowledge that a **certain primacy** was given to Peter and— one infers— also to his successors, as the Church marches through time. The exact **nature and scope** of that primacy was the issue. Vatican I placed tremendous emphasis on the pope’s “full and supreme power of jurisdiction,” not only in faith and morals but also in “the discipline and government of the Church dispersed through the whole world.” But it did not clarify the precise relationship between the pope and an individual bishop’s teaching authority. That clarification had to wait until Vatican II. Stay tuned!

- Household hint: Keep a pair of “**cheaters**” in your laundry room. When cleaning my garage stall, I found a **cardigan** sweater that I had completely forgotten about. When sending it through the washer, I couldn’t read the label. Only when removing it from the **dryer** did I have my glasses. Bingo— **100% wool**. It sure felt like **cotton** to me! No worries— if in my golden years I **shrink** to 5’2” a spiffy sweater awaits!
- I have previously written of the **Uyghur** ethnic group, a Muslim minority in China that has been persecuted and subjected to forced labor in “re-education” camps. A recent United Nations report acknowledges this fact. Yet the world seems **powerless** to apply sufficient pressure upon the Chinese government to change its ways.
- The last pre-conclave election. In 1294, the Cardinals were embroiled in a vicious stalemate, as the Church lingered without a pope for two years! **Peter of Morrone** was a saintly monk living in a remote Benedictine hermitage. He sent a message about God’s displeasure. They responded by putting his name forward! On August 29, Peter was crowned **Pope Celestine V** in the city of L’Aquila. He later **resigned** the papacy, the last to do so before Benedict XVI.
- Batter up! I invite Cathedral men of the parish to join me Monday evening at **5:30 p.m.** for a time of faith, food and fellowship—in that order! We will meet in the **courtyard**, enjoy some great food and a time of prayer. I will speak about two of my favorite topics— the intersection of our Catholic faith and baseball!
- **Safety and Security** envelopes are in the pews. All donations will be used to **purchase additional cameras** (\$1000 each) to remove several “blind spots” on campus. We are taking particular care to monitor the parking lot during Masses. Your generosity is greatly appreciated.
- My two **favorite** St. Augustine quotations: “Late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!” (*Confessions* X, 27); “Seek His face always with burning desire.” (*De Trinitate*, 15.27.51)

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector