

Author's Preface

Who would not know that the holy canonical Scriptures both of the Old and the New Testament have a priority over all subsequent writings of bishops such that there cannot be any doubt or dispute at all as to whether whatever is written there is true or right; but that the writings of bishops after the settlement of the canon may be refuted both by the perhaps wiser words of anyone more experienced in the matter and by the weightier authority and more scholarly prudence of other bishops, and also by councils, if something in them perhaps has deviated from the truth; and that even councils held in particular regions or provinces must without quibbling give way to the authority of plenary councils of the Christian world; *and that even the earlier plenary councils are often corrected by later ones, if as a result of practical experience something that was closed is opened, something that was hidden becomes known.*

Augustine, *De baptismo contra Donatistas* 3.2

The Pope is to be judged by no one, save in the case where he deviates in a question of faith.

Humbert of Silva Candida (eleventh century)

Since my reasons for writing the following tract are partly personal, it is incumbent on me to explain what otherwise might seem the composition of a Vanity. When I was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1980, I never expected to find paradise on earth: I knew enough history not to make that mistake. I did, however, find the moral teaching of the Church, especially on abortion and other 'pro-life' issues, compelling and challenging. I had always opposed abortion even when I was a

non-Christian, seeing it as an offence against justice – and I realized that the Catholic Church was chief among the remaining bulwarks against it. I also recognized that the Church's stance on abortion – reaffirmed at the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes* 51) – is part of a larger account of morality whereby its commands and prohibitions depend on the recognition of a set of objective standards – perhaps like Platonic Forms of the virtues, though I long hesitated to pursue that line of thought since it implied that such Forms must be numbered among the attributes of some divinity. Eventually I overcame my hesitations and joined up.

Now, more than 40 plus years on, I have come to recognize that the Church's hold on these moral standards, though 'officially' dependent on Scripture and Tradition (however related), is rapidly weakening, not only under the assault of contemporary secularism, consequentialism, even nihilism, but because of serious unresolved problems in the understanding and governance of the Church itself: in particular problems related to attitudes to the pope, the papacy and papal infallibility, as indeed to unclarity about the concept of 'infallibility' more generally. The present book is an attempt to show – in part – how and why these attitudes have developed: to argue, that is, that especially since the First Vatican Council, Catholic teaching (not, of course, Catholic truth) – and not only in morals – has come to be seen as too dependent on the will and authority of the Roman bishop.¹ I would argue that this is an aberration which points to a new version of voluntarism in moral theory, with the risk that doctrinal error in moral teaching will entail new varieties of Arianism – that is, an implicit denial of the divinity of Christ – with too often in practice the reduction of morality to mere obedience.

Not that I should be misinterpreted as denying infallibility as intelligibly interpreted; thus Catholic teaching of the Resurrection of Christ, for example, must be held by the Church to be infallible if her teaching is to be even worth considering. But such 'dogmas', which the Church insists are to be believed as part of the *depositum fidei*, must be distinguished from moral claims and other 'non-dogmatic' doctrines which are to be 'held' as teaching of the theoretically inerrant 'ordinary magisterium', though some of them, as the historical record shows, have

1. Some signs that the implications of this are at last becoming clearer can be found: cf. P. Kwasniewski, *The Road from Hyperpapalism to Catholicism: Rethinking the Papacy in a Time of Ecclesial Disintegration* (Waterloo, ON: Arouca Press 2022); J.P. Joy, *Disputed Questions on Papal Infallibility* (Lincoln, NE: Os Justi Press, 2022). Elsewhere Kwasniewski warns of the 'Spirit of Vatican I'.

been drastically revised – and unfortunately Church apologists have frequently denied that such ‘revisions’ have occurred. In strict Catholic-speak to deny dogma makes you a heretic, while to deny non-dogmatic teachings is to promote falsehood.

That said, my primary concern in the present study is with what has sometimes been called ‘creeping infallibility’ and especially with the presumably *unintended* effects of the version of papal infallibility *defined* – historically that is the key word – at Vatican I. I shall argue that that definition has brought to light over time various dangerous incoherences in the concept of infallibility itself as often interpreted: in particular that, whatever the reasons for the present version of papal infallibility being originally judged ‘opportune’, it has revealed itself as encouraging both confusion about ‘definitive’ teaching – which is to say about the relation between ‘dogma’ and ‘doctrine’ – and an unwarranted respect for immediate utterances of the Supreme Pontiff even if these might appear contrary to both Scripture and Tradition intelligently understood.

That in its turn has encouraged an excessively autocratic – at times even domineering – attitude at the top and a self-deluding servility easily identifiable as plain bad faith among the ‘lower ranks’. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is less to evaluate theological trends since Vatican I – though my view of some of them can hardly be concealed – but to scrutinize the effects they have had on Catholic believers, clergy and lay alike. What follows is written in the hope that as others come to see the seriousness of the problem, some proper solution, however apparently drastic, may eventually be found. On a worst case scenario the book may serve as some sort of historical record of a catastrophe.

George Weigel has improved my chapter on John Paul II and I hope will pardon me for not accepting all of his challenging comments. On the book as a whole, I have received much helpful comment from two friends whose peace will be safeguarded if they remain anonymous in these ‘interesting times’ – and as usual Anna Rist has checked the text meticulously for clarity, quality-English and discretion. As also in the past, and in homage to Plato and to the reality of things, I have at times had recourse to satire to temper earnestness.