Chapter 1

Toward the *Syllabus of Errors*

We never make mistakes.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

You need to watch your back in this city.

Anytus in Plato's *Meno*

The present book is not a monograph on the wider history of the recent papacy, let alone on the ordinary and universal magisterium of the Catholic Church, though the understanding – or lack of it – of the latter will receive scrutiny when it relates to the authority and influence of the papacy itself. Rather, it is a study – claiming to be based in accurate accounts of the relevant historical events – of actions and their social, moral and spiritual effects: in particular the effects of the Decrees of Vatican I promulgated on 18 July 1870, which defined the dogma of papal infallibility, thus establishing that solemn (*ex cathedra*) dogmatic definitions of the pope are (as it was put) 'irreformable of themselves without any consent of the whole Church'.

That determination would seem to maintain that in certain well-defined respects the Catholic Church was revealing herself as a spiritual autocracy where the writ of the pope must run whatever the wider Church might wish (and however 'Church' might be understood). That accepted, the actual *proclamation* of 'papal infallibility' – rather than the assumption of it among at least some of the Catholic 'sheep' – could not but produce (and was intended to produce) a relationship between pope and Church (and an understanding of that relationship) very different from that which had pertained hitherto. As we shall see, the

effects of the change could be good, less than good or outright bad, thus suggesting that papal infallibility, indeed infallibility itself, requires further and more careful consideration: not least for the effect it has and has had on the mentality and indeed the integrity of adherents.

Prescinding for now from questions of the Church's ordinary and universal magisterium, it is clear that the problem of excessive papal power and the corresponding risk of subservience, with morality in Western Christendom being reduced to obedience, lurked beneath the surface long before the times of Pius IX. Yet in earlier days even the great Leo I, speaking through his legates at the Council of Chalcedon, though applauded for his 'Tome' by the Eastern bishops ('Peter has spoken through Leo'), had failed to win support on an important jurisdictional issue. For Chalcedon confirmed the decision of the Council of Constantinople (381) that Constantinople, imperial capital and upstart patriarchate, should outrank the apostolic sees of Alexandria and Antioch. And Leo accepted defeat.[1] Nor indeed was his eventually definitive 'Tome' accepted without debate: though authoritative, it had to be approved.[2]

But that was before 1054, and scholars are now usually agreed that the problem of increasing papal power (not least over the deposition of kings and emperors and already moving in the direction of reducing Catholic behaviour to obedience to the pope[3]) became serious after the Great Schism of that year which finally separated Western and Eastern Christianity. Rome remained the only patriarchate in the West: untrammelled now by Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem whose patriarchs had always resisted Roman claims to absolute jurisdiction and who would prefer to continue on their own less centralized way.

The 'Great Schism', however, allowed Pope Gregory VII to begin the long process of increasing papal power, and to maintain that it should be recognized both inside and outside this his own 'patriarchate', a development – and not only of jurisdiction – widely welcomed in the West.[4] Thus Catherine of Siena, now declared Doctor of the Church,

1. For an introduction to the see of Rome as a patriarchate see Y. Congar, *Eglise et papauté* (Paris, Cerf, 1994), pp. 11-30.
2. This was pointed out at Vatican I by Bishop Hefele, distinguished conciliar historian, to the expressed annoyance of many of the assembled bishops who thus showed themselves unwilling to listen to reason and ultimately to truth (see J.W. O'Malley, *Vatican 1: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church (*Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019), p. 201.
3. Cf. Congar, *Eglise et papauté* 100.
4. For a helpful summary of the process of papal expansion see J.M.R. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome* (English translation by John de Satgé, London: SPCK,

noted in her letter 207 that 'even if the pope were a devil incarnate, rather than a kind father, we must nevertheless still obey him – not because of his person, but for the sake of God, since Christ wants us to obey His vicar'. This view, though perhaps intended as a counterfactual, is both revealing and disturbing.

That accepted, it is still reasonable to believe – not least from the historical fact of strong hostility to the decisions of Vatican I during the Council itself – that the development of a different ecclesial climate and an enhanced papal absolutism dependent on papal infallibility as now defined is an important historical event: an absolutism, that is, which (with possible variants, as we shall see) points to the near-inevitability of a faulty and confused understanding of infallibility past and present. In and after Vatican II this would affect not only ecclesiastical jurisdiction but the nature and solidity of the most basic revealed and scriptural elements of the 'rule of faith'. Indeed, from the very start, one effect of Vatican I was that many thought no further Church Councils necessary. As a writer in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (3/1) put it in 1903, the primacy of the Roman Pontiff is all we need.

Any account of the nature and effects of papal power as reinforced at Vatican I needs to be fleshed out in detail, for while the phrase *ex cathedra* might seem both to establish and severely to limit the newly determined papal authority, it lacks precision. Its effects on the wider community of Catholic believers – as can be seen with hindsight, or so I shall argue – have been such as to change – perhaps better, to 'develop' – the attitude of both popes and their flocks not only to papal power but to their understanding of religious truth itself, and to a degree hardly imaginable to any except to the most extreme (if not most cynical) infallibilists in 1870.

As has turned out, only one later papal pronouncement (that of the Assumption in 1950) has been recognized as strictly meeting the *ex cathedra* requirement, though the Immaculate Conception had already been pronounced to be such (that without the support of any proclaimed definition of papal infallibility and with only limited consultation of

1983), pp. 50-60. See also Y. Congar, 'The Historical Development of Authority in the Church: Points for Christian Reflection', in J.M. Todd (ed.), *Problems of Authority* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), pp. 119-55. For an introduction to Pius IX see R. Aubert, *Le pontificat de Pie IX* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1952) and C. Butler, *The Vatican Council 1869-1870* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930). For more authoritative accounts see G. Martina, *Pio IX,* 3 vols (Rome: Gregoriana, 1974-90) and K. Schatz, *Vaticanum I,* 3 vols (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1992-94).

bishops) by Pius IX's own Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of 8 December 1854: whether prophetically, as some came to see it, or, as others thought at the time, as a trial balloon.[5] An earlier encyclical (*Ubi primum*, 1849) had requested episcopal comment on the proposed new dogma and to that request about 600 replies were received, only two calling the proposal indefensible, while 24 considered it 'inopportune' (word whose ambiguity will require further comment), while a fair number of those approached failed to reply, thereby probably indicating, if not indolence, a certain degree of easily disregarded opposition.

That 'consultation' – the results of which in significant respects foreshadow the behaviour of bishops when confronted with the possibility of defining infallibility itself – being satisfactorily completed without further debate, work on the text of the encyclical was undertaken by a commission of theologians already established under the chairmanship of the Jesuit Carlo Passaglia.[6] After further limited consultations, significantly among others with a second influential Jesuit, Giovanni Perrone (1794-1876), who had already published extensively on the subject, Pius, defying precedent, proclaimed the Bull, on a fundamental matter of Catholic dogma, entirely on his own authority, Conciliar backing being neither received nor even sought, with Pius, it seems, displaying his soon-to-be vindicated authority, seeing his action as throwing down a gauntlet to all the errors of the 'modern world'. The ground for *ex cathedra* pronouncements being thus conveniently prepared, authorization could follow – and it is to be noted that ultramontanists and their successors (being usually less than ecumenically minded)

5. In a letter to Henry Oxenham (1874) Ignaz von Döllinger claimed that Pius's handling of the Immaculate Conception was a 'calculated precursor to the actions of 1870'. He made similar comments to others, including to the Anglican cleric, Alfred Plummer. For wider unease in Germany, see G. Müller, 'Die Immaculata Conceptio im Urteil der mitteleuropäischen Bischöfe', *KD* 14 (1968), pp. 46-70. I owe these references to T. A. Howard, *The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Döllinger, and the Quandary of the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 245.

6. Passaglia, it is to be noticed, later 'broke ranks' with the majority of the Society and with the Vatican when on the morrow of the near-unification of Italy in 1860 he urged Pius to accept the loss of the Papal States and was promptly excommunicated. This intriguing demonstration of Pius's deeply held belief that the spiritual authority of popes is necessarily backed by political power would form a paradigm case of the link between throne and altar in a confessional state. Cf. O. Chadwick, *A History of the Popes, 1830-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 152-53.

have always seen the further development of Marian dogma as a corollary of their ecclesial claims, while Mary herself, by her appearances at Lourdes in 1858, might seem to have vindicated Pius's actions.

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Disputes not only about growing papal power but even about the possibility of papal infallibility had arisen briefly in the Middle Ages,[7] and they underlay (or were later claimed to underlie) the Counter-Reformation ecclesiology of (among others) Cardinals Bellarmine and Baronius. As yet the matter was left vague, for despite vigorous Roman objections in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to 'Gallican' moves to limit papal power and papal authority, there was as yet no immediate call to *define* infallibility. After 1789, however, the growing ultramontane party determined to settle the matter once and for all, the extreme anti-Catholicism of the times seeming to demand infallibility as a way of shoring up the threatened bastions of the wider Church.

In order, therefore, to evaluate the intellectual state of the Church and of those of its members who pondered such matters after 1850 (comparatively few were laymen, for the 'sense of the faithful' was still officially identified with the attitudes, and attitudes to one another, of the pope and the bishops, though a further few of these laymen would

7. The first medieval dispute leading to claims about specifically *papal* inerrancy – as distinct from the inerrancy of the Roman See or of the wider Church – concerned the making of final decisions on the canonization of saints. This was a comparatively minor juridical development, with only indirect implications for papal infallibility in matters of faith and morals. Later, the 'Spiritual' Franciscans called for a wider definition of papal inerrancy: not viewed as increasing papal power but – ironically – as diminishing its practical implications, and for the very specific reason that Pope Nicholas III, especially in his Bull *Exiit* of 1279, had agreed with the Franciscans that their way of life represented the perfection taught by Christ to his apostles. This thesis met with considerable resistance, to subvert which, and fearing that a later pope might cancel Nicholas's pro-Franciscan stance – as indeed turned out to be the case with John XXII – the 'Spirituals' followed the lead of Peter John Olivi, then William of Ockham, in arguing that no pope could revoke the teachings of his predecessors on faith and morals but was bound by them since they had been taught infallibly, and popes, though infallible, were constrained by the decrees of their infallible predecessors. For details see B. Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150-1350* (Leiden: Brill 1972); D. S. Prudlo, *Certain Sainthood: Canonization and the Origins of Papal Infallibility in the Medieval Church* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).