

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

CHAPTER 10:

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE "GOSPEL" OF JESUS:

INFALLIBILITY OF - AND WITHIN - THE CHURCH

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

This course is a revised translation of the work "I Fondamenti del Cristianesimo" written by Rev. Piero Ottaviano and Didaskaleion.

The course is divided into units with a logical sequence. Therefore we suggest you to read them following their progressive order.

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10 INTERPRETATION OF THE GOSPEL: INFALLIBILITY OF - AND WITHIN - THE CHURCH.

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10.1 THE PROBLEMS

Christians are to follow Jesus' teachings, but:

- Jesus spoke Hebrew/Aramaic, addressing his contemporaries;
- The New Testament's version which reached us is written in Greek;
- Every written text is to be interpreted.

As a result two problems eventually arose within the Church:

- How should the exact meaning of Jesus' teaching be established?
- How should his teaching be adapted to new situations?

That is to say: who has the authority to infallibly interpret Jesus' thought?

Let us consider, for instance:

- 1) Jesus said: *"If one comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, (...) he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).*

Now then, how should this statement be understood? In a literal way?

- 2) What was Jesus' stand about the pill? It is difficult to find an answer to such question in the New Testament, for there was no such thing at the time of Jesus.

10.2 THE ANSWER

In order to answer this ticklish question let us proceed step by step:

10.2.1 THE EARLY CHRISTIANS' TESTIMONY

If we want to know about the insight of Jesus of Nazareth and cannot get back to him directly, having no documents written by him, we have to turn to the ones who were close to him and in turn became the co-founders of Christianity: the apostles. Many of them would rather give verbal accounts of the works and the words of Jesus, instead of writing them down.

Those who gave credit to the Apostles and believed their words would eventually become Christians and, although they did not know Jesus, they would in turn start preaching his gospel to other people, just as they themselves had been taught by the apostles. In this way an oral tradition about Jesus arose and spread for about twenty years. The source of such tradition, anyway, was the teaching of the apostles, who were still in a position to intervene - by word of mouth or written - whether to rectify any possible straying or misinterpretation, or to make up for any incomplete teachings (this is actually what often happened to both Peter and Paul).

*This is commonly called a "**constituent tradition**", for it is the only substantial source where our knowledge about Jesus comes from, and it ended when the last apostles had died out.*

Thereafter, no "new" revelation about Jesus may be accepted, for its veracity could no longer be ascertained.

Therefore, this is the dawning of the era of the tradition's (whether written or oral) preservation, which is only meant to hand down the teachings of and about Jesus.

Various *writings* began to be written and spread within Christian communities. They were written by:

- either the *apostles* who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his practice;
- or *Paul*, who had been converted after Jesus' death and claimed that he saw him alive;
- or *disciples* who had written down the oral teaching of some apostles.

The need to record the traditions about Jesus originated from the fact that the end of the world, which some Christians thought to be imminent, was still not coming and in the meantime the apostles were eventually dying out.

The risk existed that their teachings might be misunderstood or manipulated. In order to avoid this, they started spreading the writings of some apostles or of some of the apostles' direct disciples. This is what the New Testament would later originate from.

As such writings were spreading within communities who had witnessed the apostles' testimony, they would surely have been rejected - or, at least, regarded with suspicion - had they ever contained any different teaching from the ones handed on by the apostolic tradition: this is what actually happened, for instance, with at least one letter falsely ascribed to Paul (cp. II Thess. 2,1) and with all the so-called "apocryphal" gospels, the Didache' and so on...

Therefore, it was up to Christian communities to judge which books should be accepted as binding for faith; this would be done after appraising their conformity with the apostolic oral tradition.

The Christian faith could therefore not be grounded on the New Testament, but on Tradition (which, of course, the New Testament is part of), because:

- Christianity had already existed for twenty years before any of the books making up the New Testament even existed;
- The Bible does not say which books do belong to the Bible.

Conclusion: The books of the New Testament hold the genuine apostolic tradition about Jesus; but that can hardly be acknowledged unless by granting that the churches of the 1st and 2nd centuries have made a good selection and guaranteed and handed it on correctly over centuries (whoever cannot accept this will surely not succeed in knowing with certainty about Jesus' words and acts).

10.2.2 THE APOSTLES' TESTIMONY ABOUT JESUS

Now, when reading the accounts of the New Testament, we can easily make out that the nucleus as handed on by the apostles about Jesus was that Jesus had risen from the dead.

However, to the apostles, the importance of Jesus' resurrection is not only due to the fact that it actually happened, but is also a guarantee as given by Jesus himself in order to be believed when he said that:

- He was the Son of God;
- He brought the word of God (the Truth). Cp. Matt. 12:38-40; 6,4; Luke 11:29-32; John 2:18-22; Acts 2:36 and 10:36-43; Rom. 10:9-10 (which is a reprise of Deut. 18:18-22 "God will raise up a prophet like Moses").

The *act of faith in the apostles* basically consists in accepting their testimony. He who chooses to trust the apostles who report such an exceptional feat as Jesus' resurrection should no longer find it hard to trust them, whatever they relate about Jesus.

Therefore, he is likely to expect the apostles:

- 1) to have handed on in a substantially exact way both the acts and the words of Jesus;
- 2) to have correctly interpreted the meaning of His words (also when adjusting them to suit the requirements of the various communities where they were being preached);
- 3) to have been honest when reporting Jesus to have spoken in God's name (= as a prophet) and that, as a result, he was a bearer of God's truth.

This applies also to *Paul*, for the communities of the 1st and 2nd centuries accepted his writings just as they did accept the ones by other apostles (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Within Jewish circles, it is frequently claimed that Jesus was a rabbi practicing and teaching within Hebraism and that his message had been altered by Paul, who is said to have depicted Christianity in a different way from Jesus'.

Obviously, the ones who claim this should prove it as well. Now this is quite a difficult thing to do, since Jesus wrote nothing that possibly reached us and we therefore know nothing but what was reported by the communities regarding Paul's teaching as fundamental for Christianity: they must have found that it was up to Jesus'. The doubt as to whether these communities could tell the difference between either teaching would inevitably cause another doubt to arise, namely, whether they would understand Jesus' teaching at all.

10.2.3 ANSWERS AS PROVIDED BY THE NEW TESTAMENT

This is the New Testament's answer to the question: "Who has the authority to correctly interpret Jesus' thought?"

1) The Holy Ghost

The authoritative interpreter of Jesus' thought is the Holy Spirit as poured by Jesus resurrected upon his own disciples.

Essential documentation:

I will pray the Father and He will give you another Paraclete (defender, advocate) (to be) with you over the centuries, the spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot accept because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you do know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. The defender, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:16-26)

When he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth; He will not speak on his own, but he will say (literally: speak) what he hears and he will tell you what is yet to come. (John 16:13)

2) The Christian's conscience

The Holy Spirit operates, above all, by means of Christian conscience. As a matter of fact, the Christian, having received Jesus' Spirit, knows how to put Jesus' thought into practice.

Essential documentation:

Peter (said) to them, "Change your hearts and everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit". (Acts 2,38-39)

Now, when the apostles who were in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John there; when they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them: they had simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they (Peter and John) placed their hands on them and these received the Holy Spirit. (Acts, 8,14-17)

You, however, are not from the flesh but in the spirit, if the spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ, then he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body (is) dead because of sin, while your spirit (is) life through justification. And if the spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead abides in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His spirit, who abides in you. (Romans 8,9-11)

3) The Apostles / Peter / the Church

Conscience is not the only standard by which Jesus' thought may be interpreted with certainty, for it still may have doubts (Romans 14:23: "...But he who has doubts...").

Jesus gave such authority:

a) to the **Apostles**

They were the true source for the interpretation of Jesus' teaching, for he had said to them:

He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me (Matt. 10:40)

He who listens to you listens to me, he who despises/rejects you despises/rejects me and he who despises me despises Him who sent me (Luke 10:16)

(Jesus said) I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them [...] Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world: and for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. (John 17:14-19)

Moreover, the apostles affirm to act with the authority of the Holy Ghost (for instance, by stating circumcision is unnecessary to be a Christian (Acts 15:28).

b) to **Peter**

According to the words of Jesus, the apostles needed to be confirmed in their faith. This function Jesus bestowed upon Peter:

(Jesus said to Peter) And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16:18-19)

In Jewish way of thinking, "binding" and "loosing" meant to evaluate if a given action is within the law, or not (cp. John 5:18: "Jesus had loosed (broken) the sabbath"). Commonly, the Jews accorded this prerogative (of "binding" and "loosing") to their Masters (Rabbis). According to some exegetes, this included also the power to cleanse sins, but this can't be documented with full certainty.

And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. (Luke 22:31-32)

It's commonly believed that "brethrens" means "apostles".

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter: "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" He saith unto him: "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee". He saith unto him: "Feed my lambs". He saith to him again the second time: " He saith unto him: Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." He saith unto him: "Feed my sheep". He saith unto him the third time: "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time: "Lovest thou me?". And he said unto him: "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." Jesus saith unto him: "Feed my sheep". (John 21:15-17)

It's commonly assumed that "lambs" and "sheep" mean the apostles, and / or the flock of Christians as a whole.

But, after the death of Peter and of the Apostles, whom should one turn to in order to get the true interpretation?

c) to the disciples, namely the **Church**¹.

The New Testament acknowledges that the Church, namely the whole of the disciples of Jesus, has the authority to infallibly interpret Jesus' thought.

Essential documentation from the words of Jesus:

*"Amen I say to you: whatever you bind on earth ²will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven"
(Matthew 18:18)*

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor (Defender) to be with you forever: the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. [...] the Counselor (Defender), the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:16-26)

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. (John 16:13)

¹ By the word "church" we understand the whole of Christians, not only the hierarchy. Very often, when claiming that "The Church was wrong in doing this or in doing that" people actually refer to someone belonging to its hierarchy. People actually meaning to say that the whole of the Church is somehow wrong ought to give evidence to such an assumption. We then might retort, "By what standard are you claiming that the Church was/is wrong?" The Christian tradition has it that the Church has got the authority it proves to have by acting.

² Namely, the power Jesus gave to his disciples (the Church) to enable them to interpret the Christian law, which parallels the one as given to Peter in Matt. 16:19.

Essential documentation from the words of the apostle Paul:

... God's household, which is (the) Church (=assembly) of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth... (1 Tim. 3:15)

You know what instructions we gave you by the authority/on behalf of the Lord Jesus... Therefore he who rejects these prescriptions does not reject man, but the God who gave you His Holy Spirit. (1 Thess. 4:2-8)

Essential documentation from the words of the apostle John:

As for you, the anointing you received from Him remains in you and you do not need anyone to teach you, but as His anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real and not counterfeit, and just as He taught you, you are to remain in Him. (1 John 2:27)

... Because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever (2 John 2)

10.3 THE CHURCH IS INFALLIBLE

From these texts from the New Testament it can be inferred that the Spirit of truth, which is Jesus' Spirit, is ever assisting Jesus' disciples so that they will not get mistaken when interpreting what Jesus taught and is contained in both the written and oral tradition: *this is what the infallibility of the Church is all about.*

Infallibility is the service (and also the power) to interpret with certainty the meaning of the statements made by both Jesus and the apostles concerning Christian life. Therefore, it applies to faith and morals *only*.

This was already maintained, among others, by:

1. Meliton of Sardi, around 150 A.D.:

"The Church is the deposit of truth" (Paschal Sermon, 40).

2. Irenaeus of Lyon, around A.D. 170:

"After receiving the message and the faith, the Church keeps it (...) and proclaims, teaches and hands on the truth" ("Adversus Haereses" 1.1,10,2)

"We received this (faith) from the Church and we keep it: like a precious deposit contained in a valuable vase, by means of the Holy Ghost it recovers its vigour and it rejuvenates the vase which holds it, too. For it was to the Church that the gift of God was entrusted...: and within the Church the communion with Christ - the Holy Spirit - has also been laid, confirming our faith... Where the Church is the Spirit of God also is; where the Spirit of God is,

both the Church and all kinds of grace are. The spirit is the Truth"
("Adversus Heraeses" 1.3,24,1).

*"God will judge all those who are outside the truth, namely
outside the Church" ("Adversus Heraeses" 1.4,33,7).*

3. Cyprian of Carthage, A.D. 251

*"The bride of Christ will never be adulterous... She is saving us for
God... He whose mother is not the Church cannot have God as
Father. (De Ecclesiae Unitate, 6)*

4. Origen (around A.D. 250)

*The Holy Scripture maintains that the whole Church of God is the
body of Christ as made alive by the Son of God (...); as the soul
makes a body alive and moves it (...), so the Logos suitably moves
the whole body - the Church - and makes it alive".
(Against Celsus VI,48)*

5. Tertullian of Carthage, in the 3rd century:

*"It is true that every doctrine (=teaching) which agrees with the
churches founded by the apostles - the source of faith - is to be
regarded as founded upon the truth, for it is the truth that keeps
what the churches have received from the apostles, the apostles
having in turn received it from Jesus and Jesus from God (Father);
on the contrary, any doctrine contradicting the truth of either the
churches, or the apostles, or Christ, or God is to be regarded as
being false" (De praescriptione haeretic., 21)*

Actually, the definition for the infallibility of the Church has been expressed through the following traditional principle:

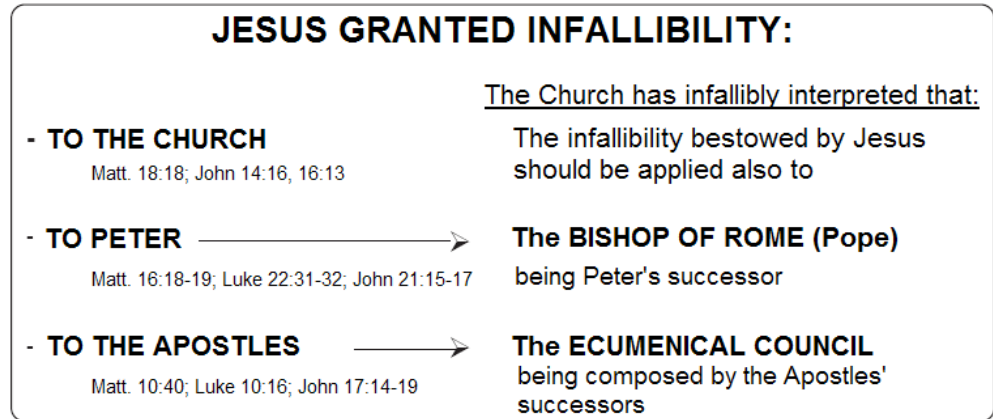
"The rule for faith is that which has **always** been believed **by everybody** and **everywhere**".

So, what if controversies arise, namely what if the churches disagreed with one another?

10.4 THE CHURCH IS INFALLIBLE

Christians have always³ regarded as infallible:

- the **bishop of Rome**, Peter's successor;
- the **ecumenical council**, namely the meeting of all bishops gathered together, as successors of Peter.



Let us develop these ideas.

10.4.1 INFALLIBILITY OF POPE AND ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

As we've discussed above, Jesus bestowed infallibility upon Peter and the Apostles.

The Church, being infallible, has "always and everywhere" interpreted that these words of Jesus' should also apply to:

- the successors of Peter, namely the Bishops of Rome (Popes);
- the successors of the apostles, namely the bishops gathered in an ecumenical council.

Both the Protestant and some Orthodox do not agree on this subject.

- For Protestants, faith should be grounded on the mere Scripture, and it's not clearly stated in the Scriptures whether the texts being quoted to support Peter's - and the apostles' - infallibility ought to be extended to the Pope and the Ecumenical Council.
- The Orthodox acknowledge only the Ecumenical Council's infallibility, not the Pope's. Although they would formerly accept the Pope's infallibility (at least until the time of Patriarch Fotius, i.e., in the 9th century) they no longer do, at least from the 11th century on.

Let's see in detail.

The Church has regarded as infallible:

1. *The Episcopal College (= Ecumenical Council)*

Everywhere the church has always recognized that the bishops gathering together under the primate of the bishop of Rome (Peter's successor and first bishop) are

³ "Always": This concept is being refuted by some theologians; however, after a thorough historical analysis, we believe that such refutation is undue (see further on).

infallible, being the apostles' successors and the spokesmen of the faith of all Church: the Ecumenical council.

Evidence of such statement can be found within the history of ecumenical councils. Only small groups of Christians have refused to recognize some of their decisions to be infallible.

Restrictions:

As far as the ecumenical council is concerned, the Church has anyway placed some restrictions on the use of infallibility:

- The council must be "ecumenical", i.e., universal (all bishops are to be invited);
- It can only define the truths concerning either faith or morals - not politics, history or sciences - ...;
- It has to state expressly and undoubtedly that it intends to bind the faith of all Christians (the formula which is often used in such occasion is: "anathema sit" = be excommunicated);
- It has to proceed unanimously⁴ - or by an enormous majority);
- It has to be in consonance with the Pope.

2. The Bishop of Rome

It may (and it actually did) happen that whole communities, and maybe even their bishops, give discrepant interpretations as regards some points of the Christian faith.

- *In the 16th century, for instance, the German churches - along with Luther and many bishops - and the Italian ones would interpret the Chapters 5-8 of Paul's Epistle to the Romans in two opposite ways.*

In such cases, who is right and who is wrong? Whom should Christians follow when there is no more unanimity?

Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to call an ecumenical council. This is when the pope's infallibility turns out to be useful, or necessary.

As a matter of fact, *everywhere* the church has *always* recognized that the *bishop* of Rome is infallible, *for he is the successor of Peter and the representative of the faith of all Church.*

There are many historical evidences of this statement, at least until the 11th century. Then, after the churches of Rome and Constantinople had split in A.D. 1054, such statement started being refuted in the East. Suffice to mention just a few events:

- *About A.D. 96, the bishop of Rome, Clement, intervened in the disputes within the Church of Corinth without anybody denying him the right to do so.*

⁴ That's where a possible objection might arise: "Can the lies of the majority become a truth?" The Christian's only possible answer is an act of faith: "the Holy Ghost vowed that this would never happen".

- *The chairmanship of the first councils (4th – 5th centuries) was always entrusted to the bishop of Rome - even when they were held in the East - who would in turn exercise it through his deputies.*
- *During the council of Calcedon in A.D. 451, after the lecture of the book by Pope Leo Magnus to Flavianus, all the bishops clapped their hands saying, "This is indeed the faith of the Fathers! We have just heard Peter speaking from Leo's lips".*

On 18th July 1870 Vatican Council I thus summed up traditional faith:

*"When the Roman pontiff speaks "ex cathedra" as he defines any doctrine regarding either faith or morals (namely, when the Pope - accomplishing his task as pastor and Doctor of all Christians according to his supreme apostolic authority - defines a doctrine concerning the faith and the morals that all Church is to retain), then in virtue of the divine assistance as promised to him through blessed Peter, he enjoys the very infallibility which the heavenly Redeemer has endowed his church with. **Therefore, the statements made by the Roman pontiff are irreproachable in themselves - not by the consent of the Church.** Whoever dares contradict this definition be excommunicated"*

Reflections on such definition:

- a) The bishop of Rome enjoys the same infallibility as the Church does;
- b) **The foundation:** the pope is infallible not because he says so (this would be nothing but a vicious circle), and not even because his infallibility was given to him by the ecumenical council, but because the Church has always recognized him to be infallible (including the Church of Constantinople, at least until the time of Fotius – 9th century);
- c) The pope's infallibility is just functional, namely it is not related to him individually, but only to the function that the bishop of the Church of Rome is to fulfil as regards the communion of all Churches;
- d) The bishop of Rome derives his importance from his being the successor of Peter, the apostle to whom Jesus promised that his faith would never fail (cp. Luke 22,31-32; Matthew 16,16-19; John 21,15-17). Therefore, the faith of the Church of Rome (which is expressed through its bishops) is the standard by which the faith of all churches has to be measured.

The importance of the bishop of Rome is not due to the political fact that Rome was the Capital of the Empire, but to Peter's presence in Rome⁵ - although it seems logic enough that Peter, in order to have the Christian faith thoroughly spread, had opted for the Empire's largest cities, such as Antioch and Rome.

- e) The Pope's decisions are irreproachable in themselves - and not by the Consent of the Church - for the Pope's infallibility is expressly needed whenever the Church splits as a result of the interpretation of some points of faith;

⁵ There is certainty about both Peter's presence in Rome and his tomb on the Vatican hill. Such data are clearly reported by ancient accounts and also confirmed by the archaeological excavations as superintended by Mrs. Margherita Guarducci.

Restrictions:

Like it happened with the ecumenical council, the Church has placed some restrictions also on the pope's exercise of his own infallibility:

- he can only define the truth concerning either faith or morals (as also stated by the definition provided by Vatican Council I);
- he is to say explicitly and unmistakably that he intends to bind the faith of all Christians.

10.4.2 REMARKS

- 1) Notice that between infallibility and non-infallibility there is no such thing as "*semi-infallibility*". Therefore, when the Pope makes an affirmation concerning either faith or morals
 - either he intends to avail himself of his infallibility (thus having to say it explicitly). In such case, whatever statement has to be retained as true and binding for faith by all Christians;
 - or he does not intend to avail himself of his own infallibility. In this case the pope's authority is not binding (unless he quotes some affirmations having previously been defined as infallible by some other council or pope).

Therefore, *should any Christian then want to refute such affirmation - for a good reason - he may do so (with all due respect), at the risk of acting against the law of Jesus Christ.*

Conversely, when a Christian is in doubt, and yet complies with what the Pope says, he is presumably not acting against the teaching of Jesus Christ.

- 2) With regard to infallibility, sometimes we come by objections like: "What if a pope became insane and infallibly defined as true and binding for faith some affirmations which have never been accepted by the Church?"
 - The answer can be nothing but an *act of faith*: the Holy Ghost (and He alone) has promised on oath that this will never happen; namely there cannot be any contradictions between the Pope and the Church;
- 3) When we say that the pope is infallible we do not mean that he is faultless (= that he is not liable to sin).
- 4) We have to make a distinction between the *infallibility* and the *primacy* of the bishop of Rome.
 - The meaning of *primacy* is that the bishop of Rome, being the successor of Peter (whose function in the first community was that of head of the apostles), is the first bishop, the head of the Episcopal College, the natural president of the ecumenical council (even the Orthodox used to agree to that; cp. the historical matter with Fotius and Caerularius).
 - This does not mean that the Pope is the head of the Catholic Church: every bishop is head of the church, for Vatican Council II taught that "episcopacy is a sacrament" (cp. Lumen Gentium nr. 21). This means that *bishops receive their authority from Jesus Christ, of whom they are vicars, not from the Pope* (who, in the West, also appoints bishops) and *administer the sacraments in their*

own name, not in the Pope's. Furthermore, Vatican Council II mentioned "the membership and the rights pertaining to the College of Bishops": this means that bishops, as well as the Bishop of Rome, other than being responsible for their own dioceses, do share responsibility and a sort of control on the other churches as well. (Lumen Gentium nr. 20-23)

A couple of "Roman" quotations indeed back this idea:

- The inscription on the Basilica of St. Sabina in Rome (5th century). Above its entrance there's a dedication mosaic. A golden character writing in Latin on a light blue field reads as follows:

*"When Celestine held the highest apostolic rank and shone in the whole world as **the first among Bishops**, a priest of Illyrian descent living in the Urbe (= Rome) built the church that you now behold. He was called Peter, and he certainly deserved that name, (for) from birth he was raised at the school of Christ; he was rich towards the pauper, yet poor himself; by shunning possessions in this life, he well deserved to hope (to receive) the life to come."*

- A letter by Pope Gregory the Great (A.D. 590-604) replying to Eulogos, patriarch of Alexandria in Egypt:

"Gregory to Eulogos, bishop of Alexandria. Your Holiness, who is so dear to me, has thoroughly written about Saint Peter's chair and said that it is the very apostle who is now seated on it and always will as long as he has successors. To tell the truth, I avow my unworthiness, not only as regards the fact of being honored as a chief, but also as for the number of the faithful. However, I acknowledged with pleasure everything that has been said as for the statements about St. Peter's chair as made by him who is seated on it. And although distinctive honors do not thrill me at all, I rejoiced about the fact that what you, o most saint ones, have credited to be has been credited to yourself also.

Who would ignore that the Holy Church was made stable upon the steadiness of the head of the apostles, the one who received a firm heart, along with his name - since Peter derived his name from "rock"? - For to whom did the Voice of Truth ever say: "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven"; to whom did He ever say: "As for you, once you have changed your heart, do strengthen your brothers"; and, again, "Simon, son of John, do you love me? Take care of my sheep".

Therefore, even if the apostles are many, it was right in virtue of that primate that only the seat of the apostles' Head should stand out with authority, belonging to one person only - although in three places (Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, editor's note). He glorified the seat where he deigned to settle down for good and where he laid down his earthly life; he gave prestige to the seat where he sent his evangelist disciple; he gave steadiness to the seat where he remained for seven years, although he was soon to part. Now then,

*since the seat at the head of which are now three bishops is but one
- as one is the apostle whom it belongs to - whenever I hear that
you are well spoken of, I feel I am well spoken of, too".*

10.5 THE CHRISTIAN AND THE CHURCH

Practically speaking, how can a Christian know that a given statement concerning Christian faith is actually true?

This is the answer as given by Tradition:

- Any affirmation concerning Christian faith is **surely true** when:
 - it is *explicitly and unmistakably written* in the New Testament (provided that the Church has unanimously interpreted it);
 - it *has always been retained as truth* of faith by everyone and everywhere. (This is the so-called "Sensus ecclesiae" =the Christian feeling);
 - it has been *defined infallibly by a pope or an ecumenical council*.

- Apart from such cases, Catholics may personally accept as standard of faith other statements contained in the Tradition as well, but they are not to impose them as truth of faith to others, nor pass judgment (=excommunicate for heresy) on the ones whose ideas do not correspond to their own⁶. Besides, it is worthwhile noting that the definitions as given by either the Pope or the ecumenical council do not make up any new truth of faith, but simply acknowledge them, having such never been denied by anyone. Actually, the Church has no doctrine of its own, but it is simply keeping Jesus⁷.

Therefore, the right question should sound like this: "What does Jesus teach, through the Church, as regards this or that matter?"

⁶ Christians are willing to believe in Jesus Christ, but not in anyone trying to "sell" his own convictions as if they were Jesus'. They have the right to ascertain whether there is indeed a connection between the truths they are to believe in and Christ - or the Tradition.

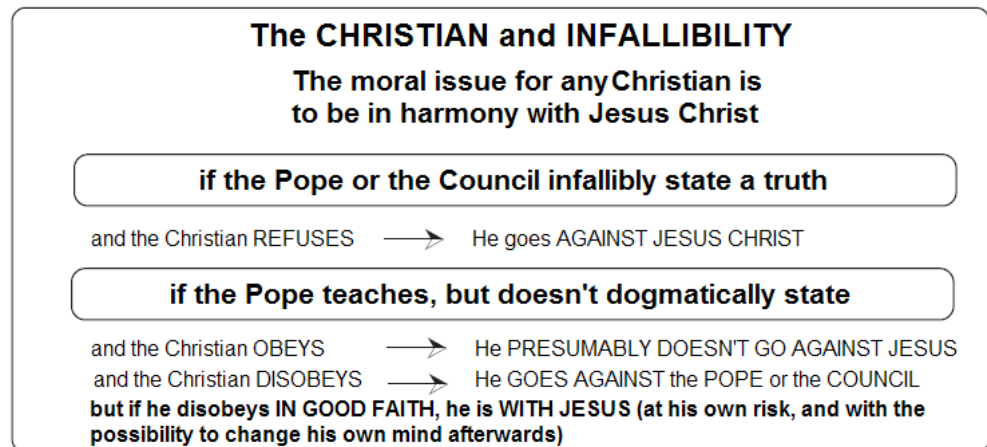
⁷ Any such question as: "What does the Church think about this or about that?" should be answered by pointing out in first instance that the Church has no doctrine of its own, but is handing on the one as given by Jesus.

10.6 DOGMAS AND ECCLESIAL TEACHING

10.6.1 DOGMAS

Any truth of faith which is to be retained by all Christians is called "dogma"⁸.

Denying dogmas is considered a heresy, which causes one to be turned away from the Church.



There are two kinds of dogmas:

- **definite dogma:** namely a dogma which has been infallibly determined through a pronouncement/proclamation by some Pope or Ecumenical Council (e.g.: the divinity of Jesus, which was defined by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325).
As a rule, dogmas are to be defined whenever some Christian has tried to deny them thus causing the Church to split. In case of any important conviction for faith, the authority (either the Pope or the ecumenical council) intervenes and fixes it infallibly.
- **non-definite dogma:** namely some truth which has been implicitly believed by everyone, always and everywhere. (e.g.: Jesus' resurrection has never been defined as a dogma, for no Christian has ever questioned it).

Please note that not all convictions taught by catechism are dogmas for faith. Such convictions may be retained as truth for faith, but rejecting them is no heresy and will not cause anybody to be turned away from the Church (e.g.: the apparitions of Mary at Lourdes; Limbo for non-baptized infants...).

⁸ In December 1991 "Civiltà Cattolica" thus describes dogmas: "Providential gelling of the faith existing within both the faithful and the hierarchy, as meeting within a prospect which is in turn prescriptive and binding in virtue of the fact that it voices the pre-existing faith of the whole Church".

10.6.2 ECCLESIASTICAL TEACHING

The bishops' public teaching is called ecclesial teaching.

It is divided into:

- **ordinary teaching:** e.g., teachings which are commonly made through preaching;
- **extraordinary teaching:** i.e., teachings made by the Pope or the ecumenical council through the definition of dogmas.

How is the Christian to evaluate such teachings?

The following scheme should help make it clear.

Ecclesial Teaching		
<i>Kind of teaching</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>to be regarded as</i>
ordinary	Bishop	non-infallible
ordinary and universal	Episcopal College (with Pope)	infallible (when there's unanimity over convictions always believed)
extraordinary and universal	Ecumenical Council (with Pope)	infallible (when explicitly stated) non-infallible (if not stated)
ordinary	Pope	non-infallible
extraordinary (ex cathedra)	Pope	infallible (when explicitly stated)