Church's Infallibility

September 17, 2016

From earth to Heaven go up problems. From heaven to earth come down solutions. Many a Catholic problem needs only to be taken on high to become rather less problematic. A classic example might be the problem of the Conciliar Popes, a problem with which we have been confronted since 2013 as never before, at least so brutally. There is in any case a mystery involved, but if we do not climb high enough, we fall easily prey to one of the two classic temptations: either he is the Pope so I must obey, or I cannot obey so he cannot be Pope. But if I climb above the humanity of the Pope to the divinity of the Church, then I realise that so-called Papal infallibility is actually Church infallibility, which leaves much more room for this or that Pope, or even a series of Popes, to be rather less than satisfactory. Let us go straight to the 1870 definition of infallibility, itself infallible. Here is the text, with some words highlighted, and figures inserted:—

We teach and define that it is a dogma Divinely revealed that the Roman pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra *, that is when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians,* **1** *by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he* **2** *defines* **3** *a doctrine regarding faith or morals* **4** *to be held by the universal Church, by the Divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that* **his Church** *should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals, and that therefore such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves and not from the consent of the Church irreformable. —?Vatican Council, Sess. IV, Const. de Ecclesiâ Christi, Chapter iv.*

In this text we see clearly the famous four conditions for the Pope to be speaking infallibly, but we see also immediately following the two words here highlighted which seem to be not

often noticed, but which make very clear where the Pope's infallibility comes from: <u>it comes not from himself but from the Church</u>. Let us draw a familiar comparison from modern life, from a housewife plugging her electric iron into a socket in the wall. For the iron to be heated, she must plug it into the socket, but the electricity which will then heat her iron comes obviously not from herself but from the local power station.

For a Papal definition to be infallible, the Pope must plug the four conditions into the Church, so to speak, and he is the one and only person on earth that can do that, which is why it is called "Papal infallibility," but the infallible protection from error which he then obtains comes not from himself but from the Holy Ghost through the Church, somewhat as the electricity comes not from the housewife but from the power station through the socket. And so just as the housewife may have all kinds of personal qualities or defects, but just so long as she puts the plug into the socket, they make no difference to her iron being heated or not, similarly the Pope may be a Saint or much less than a saint, but if he is the duly appointed or elected Pope, then from the moment that he engages the four conditions, his definition will be necessarily free from error.

What this means is that whenever the Pope does not engage those four conditions, strictly speaking he can talk nonsense just like the rest of us, without the <u>Church</u> ceasing to be infallible. And in fact her Ordinary Infallibility is much more important than this Extraordinary Infallibility of Papal definitions, as previous issues of these "Comments" sought to illustrate with another familiar comparison, that between a mountain and its snowcap (see ECs 343 and 344, Feb 8 and 15 of 2014). The snowcap may provide greater visibility, but to be visible where it is seen it totally depends on the mountain's bulk beneath it. So once we take the problem on high, it is not so important for the Church if the Conciliar Popes are out

of their minds. We may suffer here below from fallible Popes, but Mother Church remains serenely infallible.

Kyrie eleison.