

Vacancy Sense – I

April 18, 2015

The Dominican priests of Avrillé, France, have done us all a great favour by republishing the considerations on the vacant See of Rome written some 400 years ago by a famous thomist theologian from Spain, John of St Thomas (1589–1644). Being a faithful successor of St Thomas

Aquinas, he benefits from that higher wisdom of the Middle Ages when theologians could still measure men by God instead of having to measure God by men, a tendency which began as a necessity (if souls could no longer take medieval penicillin, they had to take a lesser medicine), but which culminated in Vatican II. Here, much abbreviated, are the main ideas of John of St Thomas on the deposition of a Pope:–

I Can a Pope be deposed?

Answer, yes, because Catholics are obliged to separate themselves from heretics, after the heretics have been warned (Titus III, 10). Also, a heretical Pope puts the whole Church in a state of legitimate self-defence. But the Pope must be warned first, as officially as possible, in case he would retract. Also his heresy must be public, and declared as officially as possible, to prevent wholesale confusion among Catholics, by their being bound to follow.

II By whom must he be officially declared a heretic?

Answer, not by the Cardinals because although they may elect a Pope, they cannot depose one, because it is the Universal Church that is threatened by a heretical Pope, and so the most universal possible authority of the Church can alone depose him, namely a Church Council composed of a quorum of all the Church's Cardinals and Bishops. These would be convoked not authoritatively (which the Pope alone can do) but among themselves.

III By what authority would a Church Council depose the Pope?

(Here is the main difficulty because Christ gives to the Pope supreme power over the entire Church, with no exception, as Vatican I defined in 1870. Already John of St Thomas gave arguments of authority, reason and Canon Law to prove this supreme power of the Pope. Then how can a Council, being beneath the Pope, yet depose him? John of St Thomas adopts the solution laid out by another famous Dominican theologian, Thomas Cajetan (1469–1534). The Church's deposition of the Pope would fall not upon the Pope as Pope, but upon the bond between the man and his Papacy. That may seem hair-splitting, but it is logical.)

On the one hand not even a Church Council has authority over the Pope. On the other hand the Church is obliged to avoid heretics and to protect the sheep. Therefore, just as in a Conclave the Cardinals are the ministers of Christ to bind this man to the Papacy, but Christ alone gives him his papal authority, so the Church Council would be the ministers of Christ to unbind this heretic from the Papacy by their solemn declaration, but Christ alone, by his divine authority over the Pope, would authoritatively depose him. In other words, the Church Council would be deposing the Pope not authoritatively from above, but only ministerially from below. John of St Thomas confirms this conclusion from the Church's Canon Law, which states in several places that God alone can depose the Pope, but the Church can pass judgment on his heresy.

Alas, as the Dominicans of Avrillé point out, nearly all Cardinals and Bishops of the Church today are so largely infected with modernism that there is no human hope of a Church Council seeing clear to condemn the modernism of the Conciliar Popes. We can only pray and wait for the divine solution, which will come in God's good time. To follow, is a Pope not automatically deposed by his mere heresy?

Kyrie eleison.