

Did Vatican II Teach Infallibly?

The Ordinary and Universal Magisterium

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Paul VI wearing the tiara he
later cast aside

Most traditional Catholics know that Vatican II taught heresies and other errors. They rightly refuse to accept this false teaching. But when asked how it can be right to reject the teaching of a General Council of the Catholic Church, they reply that Vatican II was a special kind of council; it was non-dogmatic and non-infallible. As such it could err, and did err, and Catholics may reject its errors without doubting the legitimacy of the authority that promulgated those errors. They will often add that the promulgating authority – Paul VI – himself explicitly declared that his council was non-infallible and non-dogmatic.

This popular explanation rides rough-shod over Catholic doctrine and plain reality. The truth is that Vatican II so plainly fulfils the conditions required for infallibility that not even Paul VI ever dared to deny this. Hence if its teaching contains egregious errors against the faith, this fact necessarily calls into question the papal status of Paul VI himself.

To show that this is so, let us look more closely at the ways in which the Church infallibly teaches divine truth to her children. Here is what the 1870 Vatican Council taught:

All those things are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith which are contained in the Word of God, written or handed down, and are proposed by the Church either by a solemn judgment or by her ordinary and universal magisterium to be believed as divinely revealed. (Dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius*, chapter 3, “Concerning Faith”, Denzinger 1792)

¹ *The Four Marks* is a sedevacantist Catholic newspaper based in Ballantine, Montana. Subscriptions and back issues with more articles by John Daly can be purchased at www.TheFourMarks.com/downloads.htm

It is quite extraordinary how many traditional Catholics, including some sedevacantists, have entirely forgotten one of these two means which the Church uses to teach us. It is very often asserted that only the solemn definitions of popes and councils oblige under pain of heresy and are protected by infallibility. Yet here we see just such a solemn definition stating that Catholics have an identical obligation to believe the Church's teachings (under pain of heresy) irrespective of whether this teaching is communicated by "solemn judgments" or by the "ordinary and universal magisterium". Both are equally infallible. Nor should there be anything surprising in this, for the "ordinary magisterium" is precisely the *ordinary* or *usual* way by which Catholics receive the Church's teaching and it is absurd to suggest that their knowledge of doctrine is not guaranteed to be true, for in that case the great mass of Catholics who do not directly consult the texts of dogmatic definitions would be incapable of making a true act of divine faith since they would have only a more or less probable opinion about what Christ's Church in fact teaches.

Writing in the *Clergy Review* for April 1935, Canon George D. Smith, Ph.D., D.D., was already drawing attention to this misunderstanding which has worsened among traditional Catholics since Vatican II:

“What is liable to be overlooked is the ordinary and universal teaching of the Church. It is by no means uncommon to find the opinion, if not expressed at least entertained, that no doctrine is to be regarded as a dogma of faith unless it has been solemnly defined by an ecumenical Council or by the Sovereign Pontiff himself. This is by no means necessary. It is sufficient that the Church teaches it by her ordinary magisterium, exercised through the Pastors of the faithful, the Bishops, whose unanimous teaching throughout the Catholic world, whether conveyed expressly through pastoral letters, catechisms issued by episcopal authority, provincial synods, or implicitly through prayers and religious practices allowed or encouraged, or through the teaching of approved theologians, is *no less infallible than a solemn definition* issued by a Pope or a general Council. If, then, a doctrine appears in these organs of divine Tradition as belonging directly or indirectly to the *depositum fidei* [“deposit of faith”] committed by Christ to His Church, it is to be believed by Catholics with divine-Catholic or ecclesiastical faith, even though it may never have formed the subject of a solemn definition in an ecumenical Council or of an *ex cathedra* pronouncement by the Sovereign Pontiff.”

Another theologian made the same point a little later:

By a strange reversal, while the personal infallibility of the pope in a solemn judgment, so long disputed, was definitely placed beyond all controversy [in 1870], it is the Ordinary Magisterium of the Roman Church which seems to have been lost sight of. It is as if the very brilliance of the Vatican I definition had cast into shadow the truth hitherto universally recognised; we might almost say as if the definition of the infallibility of solemn judgments made these henceforth the exclusive method by which the Sovereign Pontiff was to put forward the rule of faith. (...) The theological mark of heresy has to be applied, not only to what contradicts a defined truth, but also to what conflicts with a truth clearly put forward by the Ordinary Magisterium. (Dom Paul Nau: *The Ordinary Magisterium of the Church Theologically Considered*, Solesmes, 1956.)

When we say that many traditional Catholics have totally failed to understand this point, an obvious example is furnished by the late Mr. Michael Davies. In his *The Second Vatican Council and Religious Liberty*, (p. 257) he wrote: “The testimonies which follow should be more than adequate to convince any reasonable person that the documents of Vatican II do not pertain to the Extraordinary Magisterium *and are therefore not infallible, and therefore not divinely protected from error.*” (Emphasis added.) This sentence amounts to an outright denial of the infallibility of the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium, which, as we have just seen, is a dogma of faith!

It should also be noted that when the Fathers of the 1870 Vatican Council were discussing the draft of *Dei Filius* before voting, questions were raised about the meaning of the word “universal” in the expression “Ordinary and Universal Magisterium” and the Council’s official “relator”, Bishop Martin, referred them to Pope Pius IX’s *Tuas Libenter* (21st December 1863). This document (Denzinger 1679-84) clarifies exceedingly well the obligations of the faithful regarding acts by which representatives of the teaching Church communicate doctrine to them. Here is the most relevant part, which confirms precisely the words of Mgr. Martin:

Even limiting oneself to the submission made by the act of divine faith, this could not be restricted to those things that have been defined by the express decrees of ecumenical councils and by the decrees of this See, but must be extended also to what is passed on as divinely revealed by the Ordinary Magisterium of the whole Church *spread over the world...* (Denzinger 1683)

Thus the “Ordinary and Universal Magisterium” designates the teaching power of the pope and bishops of the whole world together. No special *kind* of teaching is required. Nor is it necessary for the teaching to be given over a lengthy period of time. If the universal teaching authority, i.e. the pope and the bishops with moral unanimity, pass on to the faithful a teaching as revealed, the faithful are obliged under pain of heresy to believe that doctrine with divine faith. It is a denial of the certain meaning of this dogma to reject some teaching that the pope and bishops are transmitting to the faithful *today* on the grounds that the same consensus cannot be traced back in history.

The Church’s infallibility also extends, of course, to matters connected with revelation but not included therein, and which are to be believed with ecclesiastical rather than divine faith, but for the present we have no need to enlarge on this distinction. We must simply retain the fact that when the pope and the bishops agree in communicating to the faithful certain statements about faith and morals as belonging to the Church’s teaching, the Holy Ghost protects this doctrine from any danger of error and all Catholics are quite as bound to embrace this teaching as if it were taught by a solemn *ex cathedra* judgment.

It is all we need to make good the claim that Vatican II fulfilled the conditions for infallibility...*if* Paul VI was a true pope. For it was certainly an occasion on which, in all appearance, pope and bishops united in transmitting to the faithful a substantial body of religious tenets presented as being authentic Catholic doctrine. Thus, even if the Council did not issue those solemn judgments known as acts of the Extraordinary Magisterium, its doctrines necessarily belong to the infallible teaching of the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium...*always provided* that they were promulgated by a true pope, for the bishops without their head have no such protection.

As we have remarked, the inevitable answer made to this argument is that Paul VI, and Vatican II itself, stated the contrary. This would be an extraordinary paradox if it were so, for infallibility is not an option that popes can turn on and off at whim: when a true pope and true Catholic bishops teach doctrine to the faithful, the Holy Ghost protects them from error *whether they like it or not* if we may so express it. But the plain fact is that it is not true at all that either Paul VI or the Council itself ever denied that Vatican II taught infallibly.

Let us examine the evidence so often invoked. To do so, we must go back to our extract from Mr. Michael Davies. In support of his statement, Davies quotes the following words of Paul VI in a general audience of 12th January 1966:

In view of the pastoral nature of the Council, it avoided any extraordinary statements of dogmas endowed with the note of infallibility but it still provided its teaching with the authority of the Ordinary Magisterium which must be accepted with docility according to the mind of the Council concerning the nature and aims of each document.

Mr. Davies exultantly inquires: “What could be more clear? Pope Paul states unequivocally that the documents of Vatican II do not pertain to the Extraordinary Magisterium and that they are not endowed with the note of infallibility.” But while we agree with Davies that his first claim is clear – no act of the Extraordinary Magisterium – we are forced to deny his second claim – no infallibility.

No doubt the words of Giovanni-Battista Montini (Paul VI) are somewhat tendentious here, but he quite definitely does *not* state that no teaching of the Council was protected by infallibility. He merely states that no teaching of the Council belonged to the infallible *Extraordinary Magisterium* (what Vatican I calls “solemn judgments”). He then adds that it *all* belonged to the *Ordinary Magisterium*, without commenting on whether this is infallible too. It should also be noted that Davies gravely weakens the force of the original, which says, “it has fortified its teachings with the authority of the *supreme* Ordinary Magisterium”.

Moreover in his letter of 21st September 1966 to Cardinal Pizzardo on this subject, Paul VI states that the teaching of Vatican II on matters of faith and morals “constitutes a proximate and universal norm of truth, from which it is never lawful for theologians to depart...”. That is evidently more than can be claimed indiscriminately for every encyclical or act of the Ordinary Magisterium falling short of the condition of universality. It can *only* be said of teaching protected by infallibility. Mr. Davies’s researches seem not to have led him to this quotation.

His second and “clinching” authority is the formal Notification published in March 1964 by Council secretary Archbishop Felici and later appended to the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. It states that “in view of conciliar practice and the pastoral purpose of the present council, this sacred Synod defines matters of faith and morals as binding on the Church only when the Synod itself openly declares so.” But once again this text only excludes *solemn definitions*, (since the Council never claimed to make any), but it in no way excludes the infallibility of the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium which teaches without definitions.

And by the same kind of unfortunate oversight which led Mr. Davies (may he rest in peace) to forget the word “supreme” in his first quotation, he has in this second, scruffily translated, quotation entirely omitted the crucial following sentence: “Other matters that the Sacred Synod proposes as being *the doctrine of the Supreme Magisterium of the Church must be*

received and embraced by each and every one of Christ's faithful in accordance with the intentions of the Sacred Synod itself, manifested either by the subject matter or by the manner of expression, according to the norms of theological interpretation."

Thus we see that the Council in fact formally claims to have exercised the supreme Magisterium of the Church and refers us for the recognition of the status and authority of its various teachings to its own texts and to the traditional norms of theological interpretation. It made no "solemn definitions" (Extraordinary Magisterium), but its teachings possess the authority of the supreme Ordinary Magisterium and all the faithful are obliged, it claims, to receive and embrace them.

It is very hard to see how the "supreme ordinary Magisterium" could be anything other than the "Ordinary and Universal Magisterium" of Vatican I and of Pope Pius IX's *Tuas Libenter*, which is necessarily infallible in all its teaching on faith and morals. This is so not only because non-infallible acts of the Ordinary Magisterium cannot be "supreme", but also because the criterion that distinguishes the infallible Ordinary and Universal Magisterium from non-infallible acts of the Ordinary Magisterium is precisely its universality, and never has this condition been so evidently fulfilled as at the Second Vatican Council when almost all the world's bishops were gathered together and at the moment of promulgation of the decrees by the man recognised as pope, not a dissenting voice was heard.

Heeding the 1964 Notification and Paul VI's words, let us be instructed by the Council as to its own intentions regarding the status of its teachings. Two of its decrees are referred to as "dogmatic constitutions", and "dogmatic" is an unusual word to use to identify fallible or non-obligatory doctrines. One of the dogmatic constitutions is *Lumen Gentium*, concerning the Church, which states the following theological rule:

Although the bishops do not individually enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, yet when, even dispersed throughout the world, but keeping the bond of communion with one another and with the successor of Peter, they agree in authentically teaching a single doctrine of faith and morals as to be definitively held, they infallibly express the teaching of Christ.

Even if it were not already certain Catholic truth, as being taught by every approved theologian, this statement quite definitely and undeniably declares the mind of the Second Vatican Council itself as to the conditions for the infallibility of the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium. And since it is evident that the bishops of Vatican II agreed in teaching a great many doctrines of faith and morals as to be definitively held in virtue of the Council's teaching, it follows that they certainly *did* attribute that infallibility to their own Council whenever it clearly gave such a teaching.

Nor is there anything in any way novel about the above doctrine of *Lumen Gentium*. It is the standard doctrine of the theologians and is stated very clearly indeed by Pope Pius XII in an act of the Extraordinary Magisterium, the constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* defining the Assumption of our Blessed Lady. Referring to the statements of the world's bishops made before the dogma was promulgated, the pope says:

The outstanding agreement of Catholic prelates and faithful, affirming that the bodily Assumption of God's Mother into heaven can be defined as a dogma of faith, since it shows us *the concordant teaching of the Church's ordinary doctrinal authority and the concordant faith of the Christian*

people which the same doctrinal authority sustains and directs, thus *by itself and in an entirely certain and infallible way*, manifests this privilege as a truth revealed by God and contained in that divine deposit which Christ has delivered to his Spouse to be guarded faithfully and to be taught infallibly. (...) Thus, from *the universal agreement of the Church's ordinary teaching authority we have a certain and firm proof*, demonstrating that the Blessed Virgin Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven (...) is a truth that has been revealed by God and consequently something that must be firmly and faithfully believed by all children of the Church. For, as the Vatican Council asserts, “all those things are to be believed by divine and Catholic faith which are contained in the written Word of God or in Tradition, and which are proposed by the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by its Ordinary and Universal Magisterium, to be believed as divinely revealed.”
(Italics added)

We are thus entirely justified in our conclusion that the teachings of Vatican II on matters of faith and morals fulfil all the conditions necessary for the infallible exercise of the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium *if the promulgating authority was truly pope*. And far from being contradicted by any text of Paul VI or Vatican II itself, this fact is unmistakably affirmed by both.

In fact this is so evident, and yet so patently unacceptable to many traditionalists, that frequent attempts have been made to escape from it. These attempts have been so numerous as to remind one of the sailor's maxim: “If you can't make good knots, make plenty of 'em.” But poor arguments remain unconvincing for serious minds however many of them there are.

Let us examine a few of them:

1. It is sometimes claimed that the teaching of Vatican II was insufficiently unanimous. However what matters is not the dissent expressed on the Council Floor during debates but the consent at voting and at the time of promulgation. Even then, it is *moral* unanimity that matters, not the absence of any tiny disagreeing number. In the case of religious liberty, for instance, there were in fact 70 votes against (“non placet”) opposing 2308 favourable (“placet”) votes. This proportion already surpasses the pro-infallibility consensus at Vatican I, which has always been regarded as morally unanimous. And when the declaration was promulgated shortly afterwards, at the same time as three others, nearly every one of the opposing bishops signed the text, including Archbishop Lefebvre and Bishop de Castro Mayer. Attempts to deny the fact of these signatures have proved futile. Debate as to their import continues, but plainly they at least *appear* to imply consent and if any bishop continued to reject the teaching of *Dignitatis Humanae* on religious liberty after its promulgation and despite his signature to it, the world's Catholics remained entirely unaware of this fact for at least the next ten years.

2. It is argued that the Council was “pastoral” and therefore not “dogmatic” – the two being allegedly incompatible. This claim, however, fails in (a) logic and (b) fact.

(a) Logically it involves a straightforward category error for it is as absurd to oppose “pastoral” to “dogmatic” as to oppose “circular” to “yellow”. The incompatibility of the two qualities is entirely imaginary. “Pastoral” simply means “after the manner of a shepherd”. In Christian usage the metaphor of the shepherd representing the bishop or pope not only does not exclude the role of authoritative teaching but in fact primarily

signifies that role, for the first duty of Christian pastors is to *teach* as the first duty of shepherds is to feed their sheep on wholesome pasture. There is therefore nothing un-pastoral about teaching religious truths infallibly. A “pastoral” council, if it teaches on faith and morals, is *also* doctrinal or dogmatic in character.

(b) In plain fact two of the Council’s constitutions expressly describe themselves as “dogmatic” (viz. *Lumen Gentium*, the “dogmatic constitution on the Church” and *Dei Verbum*, the “dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation”). So the claim that the Council gave no dogmatic teaching directly contradicts the Council itself. Moreover, Paul VI himself, expressly reaffirmed the fact that a pastoral role rather implies than excludes doctrinal teaching in his “*motu proprio*” *Pastoral Munus* of 30th November 1963 according to which “Christ Jesus linked the pastoral office to the duty of teaching...” (“*Pastorale munus, cum quo Christus Iesus gravissima coniunxit officia docendi...*”) – a statement which is entirely traditional.

3. Some have claimed that the Council’s subject matter did not fall within the sphere of faith and morals. Those who make this claim seem never to have read the texts and are contradicting the express statement of the Council’s 1964 Notification and the September 1966 letter of Paul VI cited above. Vatican II’s thoroughly erroneous and scandalous doctrines covered such fields as the nature of the Church and her Magisterium, her relations with false religions, the correct conduct of missionary activity, the current status of the chosen people of the Old Testament, the means of obtaining grace and salvation, etc. All these concern faith and morals. Moreover in the celebrated case of religious liberty, concerning which Vatican II flagrantly taught in almost identical words the direct opposite of Pope Pius IX’s *Quanta Cura* (an act of the Extraordinary Magisterium), the Council insisted that its doctrine concerned a natural human right founded on the dignity of the human person *as made known by divine revelation*.

4. Other escapists, unwilling to falsify easily verifiable facts about the Council itself, have cheerfully altered Catholic doctrine instead. They claim in particular that the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium is infallible only when the teaching it proposes is *not only* taught by all the bishops at a given moment but can *also* be shown to have been taught by them over a very lengthy period. To justify this claim they appeal to the famous “Vincenzian Canon” or touchstone of traditional doctrine: “What has always been believed, everywhere, and by all.” This requirement is also useful to those who deny the Church’s teaching that Baptism “in voto” (by desire) can suffice for justification and thus for salvation.

But the requirement is in fact heretical! The teaching of the 1870 Vatican Council on the subject is dogmatic and plain and any doubt of interpretation is resolved by reference to the conciliar discussions. The term “universal” implies universality in place, not in time. In technical terms, it is synchronic universality, not diachronic universality, which conditions the infallibility. What has been believed always and everywhere is infallibly true, but teaching may be infallibly true without having been explicitly believed always and everywhere. The present teaching of the Church’s supreme teaching authority, whether expressed in a solemn judgment or by ordinary acts, is necessarily infallible and thus quite incapable of bringing in false or new doctrine, though it may render explicit what has been hitherto implicit or make certain what has fallen into doubt. If flagrantly false doctrine is taught under conditions that ought to guarantee infallibility, it is not just the novelty that must be rejected, but the authority imposing it also, for legitimate authority cannot err in such cases and blatant error is therefore a sure proof of illegitimacy.

5. What should we think of the claim that Vatican II fails to meet the requirements for the infallibility of the Ordinary Magisterium because it does not impose on the faithful the *duty* to believe its teaching? This argument slips up twice, for in the first place, theology knows no such requirement for infallibility, and in the second, Vatican II in any event made it quite clear that the faithful *must* believe its teachings.

It is true that the Church's authority to teach is derived from her power to command assent, but it is by no means necessary that she should explicitly command assent whenever she teaches. On the contrary, the fact that she imparts her doctrine to the faithful – by any means she may choose – suffices to manifest the duty incumbent on the faithful of submitting to that teaching. Hence it is that *Tuas Libenter* affirms the duty to believe as infallibly true whatever “is passed on as divinely revealed by the Ordinary Magisterium of the whole Church spread over the world...” (Denzinger 1683). No special mode or tone of teaching is designated – the word used is the general one of “pass on” (“traduntur”).

In fact we have already seen Pope Pius XII declare that the morally unanimous agreement of the bishops that the Assumption is a divinely revealed truth constitutes infallible proof that this was so even before that truth had been communicated to the faithful. And we have seen Canon George Smith observe that, “...the unanimous teaching [of the bishops] throughout the Catholic world, whether conveyed expressly through pastoral letters, catechisms issued by episcopal authority, provincial synods, or implicitly through prayers and religious practices allowed or encouraged, or through the teaching of approved theologians, is no less infallible than a solemn definition issued by a Pope or a general Council.”

It is evident that these ways of communicating religious truth to the faithful seldom express any formal order to believe that truth; the duty to do so is so plain as not to need explicit statement. On the other hand Vatican II's “Notification” attached to *Lumen Gentium* expressly states that whatever “the Sacred Synod proposes as being the doctrine of the Supreme Magisterium of the Church *must* be received and embraced by each and every one of Christ's faithful”. Moreover, anyone who cares to consult the 1965 volume of the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* can see at a glance that Paul VI promulgated the gravely erroneous religious liberty text and many others on 8th December 1965 with all the formalities that could be required if he had been a true pope promulgating sound and obligatory truth. Here is an extract: “...we order and command that all that the Council has decided in synod be sacredly and religiously held by all of Christ's faithful, unto the glory of God... These things we edict and prescribe, decreeing that this present letter must ever be and remain firm, valid and efficacious and obtain and retain its full and integral effects... Given at Rome, under the fisherman's ring...” Indeed there could be no doubting the obligatory character of doctrine so put forth, if only it had been put forth by a Catholic and had not been manifestly false and heretical.

6. That brings us to the final attempt to evade the obvious conclusion – the perfectly exasperating claim, endemic among supporters of the SSPX, that for teaching to be infallible, it must be orthodox, and therefore that Vatican II's teaching cannot be infallible. This is of course true in the sense that no expression of blatant error can have been protected by infallibility. But it is disastrously false if it is used to make the orthodoxy of the doctrine taught a *condition* of the Holy Ghost's protective intervention which we call infallibility, or a *standard* whereby the faithful may judge what is infallible and what is not. The guaranteed orthodoxy of a given teaching is a *consequence* of its infallibility. It cannot be a *criterion* for detecting that infallibility. That would destroy the whole purpose of infallibility. The faithful would no longer be able to recognise sound doctrine by the fact of its having been taught by the pope and bishops in union. They would have to assess the teaching of pope and bishops in

the light of an extrinsic and non-infallible criterion of orthodoxy. They would no longer be docile subjects of the Magisterium but its judges, and therefore superior to it. Granted Vatican II's doctrines are false and pernicious and therefore were not protected by infallibility, the question then arises: why not? That they are false is not an answer to this question. We are asking *why* the Holy Ghost did not protect them from being false.

The facts show that the conditions for infallibility were apparently fulfilled, for the bishops of 7th December 1965 under Paul VI were morally unanimous in presenting their teaching on faith and morals to the Church as definitive and to be believed as a consequence of divine revelation itself. If they were not in fact infallible, this can only be because the lynchpin of their consensus, the authority of a true bishop of Rome, was lacking.

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