

Primacy and the "Infallibility" of the Roman Pope – Fr. V. Potapov

Orthodoxy is faith "in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church". Outside of the Church, there is no salvation, just as there was no salvation outside of Noah's ark in the days of the flood. Orthodoxy is firm faith in the fact that in the mysteries of the Church lies God's saving grace.

The Orthodox Church, as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15), as a living organism, against which even "the gates of hell shall not prevail" Matthew 16:18), and which has Christ Himself as its Head, abiding with it "always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20, NKJV)

Such a Church as a whole cannot err; for the whole Church to err would be tantamount to her spiritual death, but, by virtue of the Saviour's promise, she cannot die. But if the Orthodox Church as a whole cannot err, her individual members, individual gatherings and groups and even large parts of her can fall into error. And since the opinion of the whole Church is made manifest at Ecumenical Councils, the Ecumenical Councils are the infallible custodians and interpreters of Divine Revelation - not because the members of the councils are individually infallible, but because the decisions of the councils are the voice of the whole Church, which is directed by the grace of the Holy Spirit (the decisions of the councils always begin with the words: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" [see Acts 15:28]).

This view of the infallibility of the universal Church, which comes from Christ and His apostles, was common in Christianity during the course of the first centuries and remained unchanged in the Orthodox Church. But in the West, side by side with other deviations, this view of the infallibility of the Church also under-went distortion. The Roman bishop was always considered one of the members of the council, and he submitted to its decisions. But, in the course of time, the pope of Rome began to attribute the privilege of ecclesiastical infallibility to himself alone and, after long efforts, finally secured the recognition of his absurd pretension at the Vatican Council of 1870.

Besides the invisible Head, Jesus Christ, Catholics recognize yet a visible head, the Roman bishop, the pope, and they consider him, and not the universal Church, infallible.

The teaching on the supremacy of the pope arose in the ninth century and is the main dogma of the Roman confession and its main difference with Orthodoxy. Catholics assert that Christ made one of His disciples, namely the Apostle Peter, His vicar on earth, the prince of the apostles, the head of the visible Church with plenipotentiary authority over the apostles and over the whole Church, and that only through him did all the remaining apostles receive their grace-filled rights. Catholics also assert that the Roman pope became the successor of the Apostle Peter and received all rights and privileges from him as well. He, the pope, is the head of the whole Church, the vicar of Christ, the sole bearer for the whole visible Church of all her grace-filled rights; his voice in matters of faith, speaking *ex cathedra* - "from the chair", that is, officially - is infallible and obligatory for each member of the Church individually and for all together.

In this dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, three elements stand out: 1) the teaching on the supremacy of the Apostle Peter, 2) on the supremacy of the pope and 3) on his infallibility.

Today we shall touch on the first two parts of the teaching on the papacy. Catholics base the teaching on the supremacy of the Apostle Peter on two passages of Sacred Scripture. The first pertains to the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew (verses 13-19):

"When Jesus came into the coasts of Cæsarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus

answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

In the Saviour's words quoted above, nothing is said about the supremacy of the Apostle Peter or in general about his relation-ship to the other apostles. Here, Christ is speaking about the founding of the Church. But the Church is founded not on Peter alone. In the Epistle to the Ephesians (2:20), the Apostle Paul, addressing the Christians, says: "[Ye] are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone"; while in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (3:10-11), the Apostle Paul, speaking about the creation of Christ's Church, expresses it thus: "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." In the Apocalypse, where the Church is compared to a city, it says: "And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:14).

But let us return to the main passage of the Gospel according to Matthew, by which Catholics attempt to prove the supremacy of the Apostle Peter over the other apostles and, through him, of the pope of Rome over the whole Church. In this Gospel excerpt, the context clearly shows that the Apostle Peter's confession of Christ as the Son of God did not contain his opinion alone, but that of all the apostles as well, and that is why, in actuality, the Saviour's promise also pertains to them all. The Saviour's question, "But whom say ye that I am?", was asked completely unexpectedly, and before the other disciples grasped it, the Apostle Peter, as the most impulsive, forestalled them, which happened not infrequently in other instances as well, and answered the Saviour first.

Further. In the Lord's words, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church", Catholics regard the words "Peter" and "rock" as identical and draw the conclusion that allegedly the Saviour wanted to found the Church on Peter himself, as on an individual, and on him alone. But here is a confusion of terms - the proper name is confused with the appellative. The proper name of this apostle in Hebrew is Simon. The Saviour, seeing the firmness of his faith, gives him a new name, or, more precisely, a nickname (as He also did with regard to James and John, calling them "Boanerges", that is, "sons of thunder" [Mark 3:17]) - Cephas in Hebrew, Petros in Greek. Here is a kind of play on words, which Catholic scholasticism also utilizes.

As for the mention of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and the right to bind and loose, here, in the person of the Apostle Peter, the Lord is giving a promise to all the apostles - especially since He repeats the very same promise and in the same expressions with regard to all the disciples in the same Gospel according to Matthew, slightly later (8:18); and after His resurrection, Christ fulfilled this promise, having said to all the disciples: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23).

Now, let us turn to that passage in the Gospel according to John, which Catholics cite, attempting to prove that the su-premacy of the Apostle Peter over the rest of the apostles was established by God. In the twenty-first chapter of this Gospel (verses 15-17) we read: 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, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? 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."

In these words, Catholics see the fulfillment by the Lord of that promise which was given by Him before to the Apostle Peter, that is, the granting of authority and supremacy in the Church to Peter; moreover, by sheep they understand the apostles, while by lambs - the rest of the faithful.

The Saviour's words, recorded in the Gospel according to John, were uttered shortly after the resurrection, that is, when the Apostle Peter was still found under the heavy oppression of his faintheartedness and renunciation of Christ. It was essential not only for him, but for the other disciples as well, to restore him to his previous apostolic dignity. This restoration was accomplished in this conversation. The words, "lovest thou me more than these?", serve as a reminder of Peter's self-confident words, "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended" (Matthew 26:33-35), and, "Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death" (Luke 22:33). The threefold question, "lovest thou me?", corresponds to the threefold renunciation by Peter, whom at this point the Lord no longer calls "Peter", but "Simon", his former name. The fact that Peter was grieved, was saddened after the Lord's third question would be completely inexplicable if we are to allow that the discussion here is about granting the supremacy and vicariate to Peter. And, to the contrary, this sadness is fully understandable if the Apostle Peter had seen in the Lord's words a reminder of his renunciation. And it is hard to reconcile the Saviour's further words with the supremacy of the Apostle Peter. While following after the Teacher, the Apostle Peter, having seen John, asked: "And what about this man?", and in reply he heard: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me" (John 21:22). It is hard to suppose that the Saviour would speak thus to him whom He had assigned as His vicar and as the prince of the Apostles.

As for the Saviour's words to Peter: "Feed my lambs; feed my sheep", the word "feed" does not at all signify the supreme authority of pastorship, as Catholic theologians assert, but simply the authority and responsibilities of pastorship proper to all the apostles and their successors. And there is no necessity to understand the words "sheep" and "lambs" in the sense of flock and pastors, understanding by the latter the very apostles themselves, as the Catholics would like, but more simply, following the Holy Fathers of the Church, to see in the sheep and the lambs two groups of the faithful - the less perfect and the more perfect, the infants in the faith and the adults.

The Orthodox Church teaches that the twelve apostles were completely equal among themselves according to their dignity, authority and grace. In a certain sense, it is possible to call the Apostle Peter the first, but the first among equals. This teaching is confirmed by the whole history of the apostles, as it is set forth in the books of the New Testament, where the full equality of the apostles among themselves is demonstrated indisputably (for example, Matthew 4:18-19; 10:1, 40; 19:28; 20:24-27; 23:8-11; Mark 10:35-37, 16:15; Luke 22:22-30 and many others); many passages demonstrate that the apostles received not only the grace of apostleship, but also the right to act by this grace in the Church, directly from Christ the Saviour, and not from the Apostle Peter (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 9:1-6, John 20:21-23, and many others), and that all the apostles without exception are liable to a higher court - the Church (for example, Matthew 18:17).

The history of the Apostolic Council (Acts, Chapter 15) speaks especially clearly against the supremacy of the Apostle Peter. The Antiochian Christians appeal not to the Apostle Peter for the resolution of their perplexity, as should have occurred if we are to believe the Catholic dogma, but to all the apostles and pres-byters. We see in this excerpt from the book of the Acts of the Apostles that the question at the Council is subject to a general discussion by the Council and that the completion of the matter at the Council belongs to the Apostle James, and from his words the decision is written, and not from the words of the Apostle Peter.

The fact that Peter, according to the testimony of Sacred Scripture, is sent by the apostles (Acts 8:14), gives an account of his actions to the apostles and the faithful (Acts 11:4-18) and listens to their objections and even denunciations (Gal. 2:11-14), which of course, could not be if Peter were the prince of the apostles and head of the Church, also speaks against the Catholic teaching.

Orthodox theology strictly differentiates between the grace-filled service of the apostles and that of bishops. Bishop Alexander (Semenov-Tian-Shansky) writes of this: "The significance of the apostles was exceptional and in many ways exceeded the significance of bishops. Bishops head local churches, while the apostles were wandering preachers of the Gospel. An apostle, having founded a new local Church in some locale, would ordain a bishop for it and would himself go to another place to preach. In consequence of this, the Orthodox Church does not honor the Apostle Peter as the first bishop of Rome. Nonetheless, the Holy Church always allowed that among the bishops one is recognized as first in honor, but concerning his infallibility there is no discussion. "In the first ages, the primacy of honor belonged to the Roman bishop, while after his falling away into schism, it passed to the Patriarch of Constantinople" ("Orthodox Catechism", Paris, 181, page 160).

The teaching on the infallibility of the pope, which was completely unknown to the ancient, undivided Church, appeared in the Middle Ages, just like the teaching on the supremacy of the pope; but for a long time it met opposition on the part of the more enlightened, honest and independent members of the Catholic Church. Only in the year 1870, at the First Vatican Council, did Pope Pius IX succeed in turning this teaching into a dogma, in spite of the protest of many Catholics, who even preferred to leave this church and found their own community (of the Old Catholics) than to accept so absurd a dogma. By virtue of the definition of the Vatican Council, the pope is infallible when he, as the pastor and teacher of all Christians, defines or proclaims the truths of the faith *ex cathedra*, that is, officially, as the head of the Church. The nebulous expression *ex cathedra* is not understood in the same way by all Catholic theologians; but, no matter how one understands it, the Catholic dogma contradicts the whole spirit of Christ's teaching, which rejects the possibility of infallibility for an individual man, no matter what position he might occupy.

The dogma of the infallibility of the pope contradicts the whole history of the Church and of the papacy itself. History provides a whole series of indisputable facts concerning the errors of popes in dogmatic questions and the contradictions of popes among themselves in matters of faith. For example, Pope Sixtus V, in concert with the bishops, issued a Latin translation of the Bible corrected by him and, under threat of anathema, required it to be accepted as the most authentic. There proved to be major mistakes in this translation, and subsequent popes withdrew it from church use. Which of the popes was infallible, Sixtus or his successor? Pope Leo III not only refused to insert the *filioque*, the addition "and the Son," into the Symbol of Faith, but even commanded that the intact Symbol be engraved on tablets and set up in church. Within two hundred years, Pope Benedict VIII inserted this addition into the Symbol of Faith. Which of them was infallible? Out of the numerous instances of the dogmatic errors of the Roman bishops, it is sufficient to mention Pope Honorius (625-638), who fell into the Monothelite heresy (the false teaching, according to which Christ has only one will - the Divine) and was excommunicated from the Church by the Sixth Ecumenical Council. At this council, the delegates of the Roman bishop, Agathon, also were present and signed its decisions.

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