

THE
INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

A COURSE OF LECTURES

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BY

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THE HESITATIONS OF THE INFALLIBLE GUIDE.

DR. GOLDSMITH tells us that the Vicar of Wakefield's daughters were given by their mother a guinea a-piece, because the honour of the family required that they should always have money in their pocket; but that each was under strict conditions never to change her guinea. The Pope seems to possess the gift of infallibility on the same terms. The 'honour of the family' requires that he should have it, but obvious considerations of prudence constantly deter him from using it. The slowness of the Pope to interfere in controversies within his own communion is part of a system. I could give illustrations in abundance of the nervous fear of the infallible authority to commit itself irrevocably to any opinion, without leaving always an outlet for retreat in case of need; but the copiousness of material makes selection difficult.

Romish teaching has constantly a double face. To those within the communion it is authoritative, positive, stamped with the seal of infallibility, which none may dispute without forfeiting his right to be counted a good Catholic. Consequently, I have heard Roman Catholic laymen express the utmost astonishment at hearing their Church charged with want of positiveness in her utterances, this being, in their opinion, the last fault that can be charged upon her. But this is because they only know how she speaks to those who will not venture to challenge the correctness of her teaching. She speaks differently to those who have courage to impugn it and bring it to a test. Then the statements assailed are said to be but private, unauthorized opinion, to which the Church is not pledged, and which may be proved to be absurd without injuring her reputation.

(1) For example, since we are told that private judgment is insufficient to determine with certainty the meaning of Scripture, it might be expected that the infallible guide would publish an authorized commentary on Scripture, setting forth the interpretation guaranteed by that unanimous consent of the Fathers, according to which the Creed of Pius IV. binds all to interpret. But nothing of the kind has been done. If annotated editions are sometimes issued with the approval of the authorities, the sanction is intended to imply no more than apparent freedom from grave heresy, and the notes rest only on the credit of the authors.

Indeed it did at one time seem that the very thing I ask for was about to be done. In the year 1813, advertisements were circulated announcing an edition of THE CATHOLIC BIBLE, 'explained or illustrated with valuable notes or

annotations, according to the interpretation of the Catholic Church, which is our infallible and unerring guide in reading the Holy Scriptures and leading us unto salvation.’ The names of all, or almost all, the Irish Roman Catholic bishops were printed as patronizing the undertaking; and, when the work actually appeared, the title-page professed that the edition was sanctioned and patronized by the Roman Catholic prelates and clergy of Ireland. What more could anyone wish than this? But the issue of this attempt to give ‘the interpretation of the Catholic Church, which is our infallible and unerring guide in reading the Scriptures,’ was so unfortunate that the attempt is not likely to be repeated.

When the promised edition (Macnamara’s) appeared, some copies fell into the hands of Protestants, who called attention to the doctrine of the Rhemish notes which they contained. There is no subject to which the annotators so perpetually recur as the duty of the individual to hold no intercourse with heretics that can be avoided; and the duty of the State to punish heretics, and even put them to death.¹ The agitation on the subject of the Emancipation Bill

¹ Here are some of them:—

Matt. xiii. 29.—‘The good must tolerate the evil where it is so strong that it cannot be re-dressed without danger and disturbance of the whole Church; and commit the matter to God’s judgment in the latter day. Otherwise, where ill men, be they heretics or other male-factors, may be punished or suppressed without disturbance and hazard of the good, they may and ought, by public authority, either spiritual or temporal, to be chastised or executed.’

Luke ix. 55.—‘Not justice nor all rigorous punishment of sinners is here forbidden, nor Elias’s fact reprehended, nor the Church or Christian princes blamed for putting heretics to death; but that none of these should be done for desire of our particular revenge, or without discretion and regard of their amendment and example to others.’

2 Tim. iii. 9.—‘All wise men in a manner see their falsehood, though for fear of troubling the state of such commonwealths, where unluckily they have been received, they cannot be suddenly extirpated.’

Acts xxv. 11.—‘If St. Paul doubted not to claim the succour of the Roman laws, and to appeal to Cæsar, the prince of the Romans not yet christened, how much more may we call for the aid of Christian princes and the laws for their punishment of heretics and for the Church’s defence against them?’

Luke xiv. 23.—‘St. Augustine referreth this “compelling” to the penal laws, which Catholic princes do justly use against heretics and schismatics, proving that they who are by their former profession in baptism subject to the Catholic Church, and are departed from the same after sects may and ought to be compelled into the unity and society of the universal Church again. And therefore in this sense, by the two former parts of the parable, the Jews first, and secondly the Gentile that never before believed in Christ, were invited by fair sweet means only; but by the third such are invited as the Church of God hath power over, because they promised in baptism, and therefore are to be revoked not only by gentle means, but by just punishment also.’ See *infra* the passage quoted from Thomas Aquinas.

Rev. xvii. 6.—‘The Protestants foolishly expound this of Rome, for that there they put heretics to death, and allow of their punishment in other countries; but their blood is not called the blood of saints, no more than the blood of thieves, man-killers, and other malefactors, for the shedding of which by order of justice no commonwealth shall answer.’

was then going on; and this publication threatened seriously to damage the prospects of the Bill, by confirming apprehensions then prevalent as to the use Roman Catholics would be likely to make of any political power they might obtain. Accordingly, the book was denounced by O'Connell, and you will find in his published speeches² that he had no scruple in calling on the Catholic Association to repudiate these notes, which he stigmatized as 'odious,' 'execrable,' 'abominable,' notwithstanding that they had for two hundred years been recognized as approved by high Roman Catholic authority. These 'odious' doctrines have higher authority³ in their favour than perhaps Mr. O'Connell was

² Meeting of Catholic Association, Dec. 4, 1817. (*O'Connell's Speeches*, edited by his Son, vol. ii., p. 257.)

³ It seems to me that the Rhemish annotators had every reason to believe that they were only teaching the doctrine approved by the highest authorities in their Church—doctrine which the Church had never had any hesitation in following in practice. It will suffice to quote here the conclusions come to by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa* 2^{da} 2^{dae}, Qu. xi., Art. 3) on the question, 'utrum haeretici sint tolerandi.' He says, 'The question must be considered as regards the heretics themselves and as regards the Church. On the side of the heretics is sin, for which they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication but even to be excluded from the world by death. Now it is a much more grievous thing to corrupt the faith, through which the soul has its life, than to falsify money, which serves the needs of temporal life. So if falsifiers of money, or other malefactors, are at once justly consigned to death by secular princes, far more may heretics when once convicted of their heresy, be not only excommunicated, but even justly put to death. On the side of the Church there is mercy for the conversion of the erring, and therefore she does not condemn at once, but, as the Apostle says, "after a first and second admonition." But if after that he still continues obstinate, the Church, having no hope of his conversion, provides for the safety of others by separating him from the Church by the sentence of excommunication, and further leaves him to the judgment of secular princes to be exterminated from the world by death.'

On the previous question (Qu. x., Art. 8), 'utrum infideles compellendi sint ad finem,' his ruling is, that Jews or Gentiles, who have never received the faith, ought not to be compelled to receive it; but that heretics and apostates should be compelled to fulfil what they had promised. On our Lord's words, 'Let both grow together until the harvest,' he makes a comment for which I am sorry to say he is able to quote St. Augustine's authority, that since the reason is given, 'Lest haply while ye gather up the tares ye root up the wheat with them,' it follows that if there is no danger of rooting up the wheat, it is safe to eradicate the tares.

He goes on to consider Qu. xi. Art. 4, whether relapsed heretics ought to be received on their repentance. He regards this question as decided by the Decretal, *Ab abolendam*, 'Si aliqui post abjuramentum erroris deprehensi fuerint in abjuratam haeresim recidisce, seculari iudicio sunt relinquendi.' He defends this decision as follows: The Church, according to our Lord's precept, extends her charity to all, even to her enemies and persecutors. Charity teaches us to wish and work for our neighbour's good. His chief good is the salvation of his soul; consequently the Church admits a relapsed heretic to penance, which opens to him the way of salvation. But it is only in a secondary degree that charity looks to temporal good, such as life in this world, possession of property, and so forth. We are not bound in charity to wish these things to others, except in subordination to the eternal salvation of themselves and others. If one man's possession of any of these good things might hinder the eternal salvation of many, we are not bound to wish it to him, but rather to wish the contrary, both because the good of many ought to be preferred to the good of one. Now if relapsed heretics were kept alive, and allowed to possess property, this might prejudice the salvation of others, both because there is danger of their re-

aware of, and I do not think it so easy for the Roman Catholic Church to repudiate them. But Mr. O'Connell was quite right in considering that he was at liberty to reject the opinions of any commentator, however respectable.

(2) Perhaps it may be said that it was needless for the Roman Church to publish commentaries on Scripture, since it is not to Scripture she sends her people for instruction in the doctrines of their faith. She has catechisms and other books of instruction, from which her people may learn. But has she ventured to put her seal of infallibility to any one of them?

Not so; catechisms, sermons, books of devotion, are guarded by no such gift. If we detect a catechism in manifest error, if we find a preacher or a book of devotion guilty of manifest extravagance, no matter how eminent the man, or how widely popular the book, the Church always leaves a loophole for disowning him, and we are at once told that the infallible authority has spoken by no such medium. But why has she not? Does it not seem strange that a communion possessing the high attribute of infallibility should make no use of it in the instruction of her people? It cannot be said that this neglect does not lead to ignorance and error on the part of the people. I need take no other example than the case I have already mentioned of 'Keenan's Catechism,' where a book circulated by thousands, with the highest episcopal approbation, went on, year after year, teaching doctrine which has now to be withdrawn as false. The consequence of this neglect is, that those who filled the office of authorized teachers in the Church of Rome were left in such ignorance of its doctrines, that it has now got to be owned that we heretics knew better what were the doctrines of the Roman Church than did its own priests. One Romish controversialist after another, when taken to task about the Roman theory of the Papal power, repudiated as a gross Protestant misrepresentation those doctrines which the

lapsing again, and infecting others, and because, if they got off without punishment, others might be careless about falling into heresy. So in the case of those who for the first time return from heresy, the Church not only admits them to penance, but keeps them alive, and sometimes, if she believes them to be truly converted, even restores them to the ecclesiastical dignities which they had held before. But relapsing is a sign of instability concerning the faith; so that on a subsequent return to the Church they are admitted to penance, but not freed from the sentence of death.

Accordingly the practice was, that a relapsed heretic who recanted was first strangled, then burnt. If he did not recant he was burned alive, but Bellarmine's biographer, Petrasancta, explains that this was not done out of cruelty, but in the merciful hope that the extremity of bodily suffering might induce the culprit to save his soul by recanting at the last moment (see the passage cited, *Selbstbiographie des Cardinals Bellarmin* p. 235). In the same place a long list is given of heretics capitally punished at Rome. See also Gibbings, *Were heretics ever burned alive at Rome?* Gibbings remarks, that one of the propositions selected from Luther's writings, and condemned by Pope Leo X. in the Bull *Exsurge*, in 1520, as pestiferous and destructive, &c., is, 'Haereticos comburi est contra voluntatem Spiritus'

Pope, with the assent of the Vatican Council, now tells us are not only true, but have been held by the Church from the beginning. Thus, to quote one controversial book extensively circulated in America: 'Though I have plainly told the Protestant minister that the infallibility of the Pope is no part of the Catholic creed, a mere opinion of some divines, an article nowhere to be found in our professions of faith, in our creeds, and in our catechisms, yet the Protestant minister most ungenerously and uncandidly brings it forward again and again, and takes the opportunity from this *forgery* of his own to abuse the Catholic Church.' 'Here,' says an 'Old Catholic' commentator, 'we have an extraordinary phenomenon: two Protestant ministers, who understood clearly what was the teaching of the Catholic Church on the point in question, and two Catholic priests, writing in defence of the faith, who yet knew nothing about a fundamental doctrine of faith, to say nothing of the bishops and priests who approved of and circulated their works. If this be so,' he says, 'where is the advantage of an infallible Church?' Where, indeed, if those who have not the benefit of its guidance succeed better in arriving at a knowledge of the Church's doctrines than those who have?

(3) Well, perhaps it may be said, it is not from books at all that the Church means her people to learn. To the people in general the voice of the Church is only the voice of the priest. Ordinary laymen certainly cannot study decrees of Popes or Councils, or works on scientific theology. They must take the doctrine of their Church as their authorized teachers expound it to them. Well, are those teachers infallible? Why, no, is the answer; but practically, the people have the full benefit of the gift of infallibility. It is true their priest is not infallible; but they know that if he teaches any heresy, he will be suspended by his bishop: if the bishop neglect his duty, he will be called to account by the archbishop: if the archbishop be heretical, he will be removed by the Pope. But this statement is only partially true. I believe it is true that any attempt to remove errors from the teaching of the Church of Rome is likely to be summarily checked, and therefore that she is greatly debarred from that best kind of reform—reform from within. But I see no equal safeguard against adding to and exaggerating errors she holds already. It is acknowledged that the faith of the Church may be injured by subtraction. It seems to be practically ignored that the faith may also be injured by addition. Anything that seems like a move in the direction of Protestantism is promptly stopped; but the most extravagant statements in the opposite direction, though perhaps privately censured by the discreet, are not interfered with by authority. On all important subjects the truth is a mean between opposite errors. How then can those teachers possibly have the truth whose only care is to keep as far as they can from one particular form of error?

The most prevalent extravagance of Roman teaching at the present day is an exaggeration of the honour due to the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is represented, in many sermons and popular books of devotion, as almost a fourth Person of the Blessed Trinity, and as a sharer on nearly equal terms, with our Lord, in the work of our redemption. These extravagances are such as to shock one so little disposed to judge harshly of Roman doctrine as Dr. Pusey, and they formed the main subject of his book, *The Eirenicon*. We ask, is this teaching authorized? and no one can tell us. The infallible guide will not commit himself.

It might seem, however, that he has committed himself. One of the most active teachers of these new doctrines is St. Alphonso dei Liguori, who was canonized by the late Pope. Liguori's writings have been a mark for Protestant attack, not only on account of his Mariolatry, but also on account of his casuistry. For though in his work on Moral Theology he professes to hold the mean between extreme laity and extreme rigour, his decisions lean so much to the side of what we count laxity as very much to scandalize weak minds. Now, our first impression is that the Pope is fairly responsible for all Liguori's teaching, for before anyone can be canonized as a saint a most rigorous examination must be made whether his published writings contain anything objectionable. This examination was made in Liguori's case in the year 1803, when he was a candidate for beatification. All his works then came under the examination of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, who decreed that in all the writings of Alphonso dei Liguori, severely examined according to the discipline of the Apostolic See, there was found nothing worthy of censure. And there is testimony that this examination was made with particular severity; that his system of morality had been more than twenty times rigorously discussed by the Sacred Congregation; and that in all their decrees the Cardinals had agreed 'voce concordi, unanimi consensu, una voce, una mente.' Yet we are told that the infallible authority is no way committed to the doctrines of Liguori. Many respectable Roman Catholics do not hesitate to express their dislike both of his decisions on some questions of morality, and of his language concerning the Virgin Mary. Dr. Newman is among the number of those. While professing his incompetence to judge a saint,⁴ seeing that 'the spiritual man judgeth all things, and is himself judged of no man,' he gives his opinion that many things may be suitable for Italy which will not go down in England. The Saint's practical directions were given for Neapolitans, whom he knew, and we do not. With respect to the approbation implied in the decree of the Congregation of Rites, he says, 'Though common sense may determine that the line of prudence and

⁴ 'Letter to Dr. Pusey,' p. 103,

propriety has certainly been passed in the instance of certain statements about the Blessed Virgin, it is often not easy to prove the point legally, and in such cases authority, if it attempt to act, would be in the position which so often happens in our courts of law, where the commission of an offence is morally certain, but the Government prosecutor cannot find legal evidence sufficient to ensure conviction. It is wiser to leave these excesses to the gradual operation of public opinion, that is, to the opinion of educated and sober Catholics, and this seems to be the healthiest way of putting them down' (p. 112). I will postpone, until I have to speak of saint-worship, the discussion whether this attempt to release the Church of Rome from the responsibility of approving Liguori's doctrine is successful: my own opinion is that it is not. And since Dr. Newman wrote, a new difficulty has arisen in the way of relieving Roman Catholics from the responsibility of Liguori's extravagances; for Pius IX., who was himself a thorough Italian, and who did not understand how what is good for Italy should not be good for all the world, elevated Liguori to the rank of Doctor of the Church, that is to say, one of the great divines whose dicta have the highest authority. But for the present purpose we may accept Dr. Newman's account of the matter. If Dr. Newman misunderstands the teaching of the infallible guide whom he has accepted, it is only a stronger proof of what I am asserting, that that guide has an obstinate objection to speaking plainly. It appears, then, from Dr. Newman, that not only is the stamp of infallibility not put on the teaching of ordinary priests, but not even on that of canonized saints. It appears that there are current among Roman Catholic books of devotion which, in the opinion of many, are superstitious and scandalous, not to say blasphemous and idolatrous, and yet the infallible authority refuses to speak a word in condemnation; nay, gives what to most persons would seem approbation of the devotions in question.

(4) I have just alluded to the process of the canonization of saints. A necessary step in that process is, that proof should be given of miracles wrought by the person to be canonized. We are assured that the evidence for such miracles is subjected to the most rigorous examination, and that none are admitted without convincing proof. When such miracles have passed this test, when they are recited in the Pope's Bull of canonization, as the ground for the honour conferred, when they are inserted in the Breviary, by authority, for the devotional reading of priests, you might suppose then that the infallible authority was pledged to their truth as much as the credit of the New Testament is pledged to the miracles of the Gospels. Not in the least; Roman Catholics are free to accept or reject them as they please. We are told that the historical facts contained in the Breviary, though they merit more than ordinary credence, may

be subjected to fresh examination, and may be criticized by private scholars, provided it be done with moderation and respectfulness. In like manner the miracles recited in Bulls of canonization, though they may not be publicly impugned without indecency, yet do not bind a Roman Catholic to actual belief; and if a Protestant, hesitating to become a convert to Popery, should allege, as the ground of his hesitation, the number of lying legends proposed by the Church for his acceptance, he would be told that this is no obstacle at all, and that, as a Roman Catholic, he need not believe any of them.

I am not supposing an imaginary case. Something of the kind occurred in the case of Mr. Ffoulkes, whose name is, no doubt, familiar to you. He tells us of one miraculous story in particular, which we are so uncandid as to reject without examination, and which he subjected to careful investigation. You have all, I dare say, heard the story of the holy house at Loretto. The Virgin Mary's house at Nazareth, when the land fell into the possession of unbelievers, and worshippers could no longer resort to it, was carried by the angels across the seas on the 9th May, 1291 (for I like to be exact), and after taking three temporary resting-places, finally sealed down at Loretto in the year 1295. There, on the credit of so great a miracle, it attracted many pilgrims, and was by them enriched with abundant gifts. Several Popes pledged their credit to the truth of the story, and rewarded pious visitors with indulgences. I possess a history of the holy house, written by Tursellinus, a Jesuit, and printed at Loretto itself in 1837, from which I find that the story is proved by such irrefragable evidence that '*de ea ambigere aut dubitare sit nefas,*' and that no one can doubt it who is not prepared to deny the power and providence of God, and to remove all faith in the testimony of man. Mr. Ffoulkes, whose turn of mind was such that he seemed to find it as hard as the holy house itself to find a resting-place, either among Protestants or Roman Catholics, neither accepted this story without inquiry, as might a thorough-going Roman Catholic, nor rejected it without inquiry, as might a thorough-going Protestant. He took the trouble of going both to Loretto and to Nazareth, and making laborious investigations on the spot; and the result of his inquiry was, that he came back thoroughly convinced of the fictitious character of the Santa Casa, notwithstanding the privileges bestowed by so many Popes. On stating this conviction to the excellent French priest who had received him into the Roman communion his only reply was, '*there are many things in the Breviary which I do not believe myself.*'

(5) There is one particular class of miraculous story, however, which deserves special attention on account of the uses that are made of it—I mean alleged divine revelations. On this authority rest a number of new facts and new doctrines. As an example of new facts, I cannot give you a better instance than

the history of one of the most popular saints on the Continent at the present day, Saint Philumena. This saint suffered martyrdom, in the Diocletian persecution, on the 10th August, 286—a date on which I might comment, if the story deserved comment. For excellent reasons this saint was unheard of until quite lately. We learn from the authorized history of her life, that a good Neapolitan priest had carried home some bones out of the Roman catacombs, and was much distressed that his valuable relics should be anonymous. He was relieved from his embarrassment by a pious nun in his congregation, who in a dream had revealed to her the name of the saint and her whole history. I am sorry that I have not time to repeat the story to you; but it is a tissue of such ludicrous absurdities and impossibilities, that it would be breaking a butterfly on the wheel to prove its falsity; and one would think it could not deceive anyone that was not absolutely a child in respect of critical perception.⁵ Yet this history has been circulated by thousands on the continent;⁶ and a few years ago, Mr. Duffy, on the quays, published an edition for the instruction of Irish Roman Catholics. This history ascribes the wonderful popularity which St. Philumena undoubtedly obtained, to the number of miracles which she works, and in which she out-does the oldest saint in the calendar. Yet you will take notice that the evidence of her existence is, that some sixteen centuries after her supposed date a nun dreamed about her a story quite irreconcilable with historic possibilities. This one example will enable you to judge whether it is true that if a priest teaches his people falsehood, his bishop will call him to account, and that if the bishop neglect his duty, the Pope will interfere. This romance of Philumena has been circulated as truth, with the approbation of the highest ecclesiastical authorities.⁷ The subject of modern revelations, as a foundation for new

⁵ The scholarship of the narrator of the story may be judged of from the fact that the word 'Philumena' is interpreted to mean 'Friend of Light.'

⁶ My authority is a French life of the saint: *La vie et les miracles de Saints Philomène surnommée la thaumaturge du xixe siècle. Ouvrage traduit de l'Italien.* The preface elates that the work was made on the invitation of a venerable prelate, and it bears the *imprimatur* of the Bishop of Lausanne, who, after the example of a great number of his colleagues in the Episcopate, thinks fit to second the designs of Divine Providence by recommending to his flock the devotion to the holy miracle-worker, Philumena, virgin and martyr, persuaded that it will produce in his diocese, as elsewhere, abundant fruits of sanctification.' The preface claims that the devotion has the sanction of two Popes—Leo XII., who proclaimed the great saint, and Gregory XVI., who blessed one of her images.

⁷ In obedience to a decree of Pope Urban VIII., these authorities express themselves with a certain reserve; but they give their approbation to the circulation among their people of works teaching them to act as if the whole story contained nothing but undoubted facts. Here is a specimen of the prayers they are taught to address to a being as imaginary as Desdemona or Ophelia: 'Vierge fidèle et glorieuse Martyre, ayez pitié de moi; exercez at sur mon âme at sur mon corps le ministère de salut dont Dieu vous a jugée digne; mieux de moi vous connaissez la multitude et la diversité de mes besoins: me voici à vos pieds, plein de misère et d'espérance, je

doctrines, is so important, that I will not enter on it now, but keep it for the next day.

sollicite votre charité: ô grande Sainte ! exaucez-moi, bénissez-moi, daignez faire agréer à mon Dieu l'humble supplique que je vous présente. Oui j'en ai la ferme confiance, par vos mérites, par vos ignominies, par vos douleurs, par votre mort, unies aux mérites de la mort et de la passion de JESUS-CHRIST, j'obtiendrai ce que je vous demande,' &c. The work from which I cite gives in conclusion the music of a hymn, the chorus of which is, À Philomène offrons nos vœux; tout est soumis à sa puissance.

Since the above was in type, passing through Reims, I saw a notice in the Cathedral that a novena in honour of St. Philumena was to commence on the Sunday after my visit.