

THE  
INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH  
*A COURSE OF LECTURES*

DELIVERED IN THE  
Divinity School of the University of Dublin

BY

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### III.

#### THE ARGUMENT IN A CIRCLE.

ON the last day I dwelt sufficiently on the vital importance in the Roman Catholic controversy of the question of the Infallibility of the Church. To-day it is our business to examine what proof of that doctrine can be offered. But there is a preliminary question whether it is in the nature of things possible that any proof *can* be given.

The craving for an infallible guide arises from men's consciousness of the weakness of their understanding. In temporal matters we are constrained to act on our own judgment. When we have important decisions to make we often feel ourselves in great doubt and perplexity, and some times the decision we ultimately make turns out to be wrong, and we have to pay the penalty in loss or other suffering. A loss, however, affecting only our temporal interests may be borne; but it seems intolerable to men that, when their eternal interests are at stake, any doubt or uncertainty should attend their decisions, and they look out for some guide who may be able to tell them, with infallible certainty, which is the right way. And yet it is easy to show that it is in the nature of things impossible to give men absolute security against error in any other way than by their being them selves made infallible; and I shall hereafter show you that when men profess faith in the Church's infallibility, they are, in real truth, professing faith in their own.

It is common with Roman Catholics to speak as if the use of private judgment and the infallibility of the Church were things opposed to each other. They are fond of contrasting the peace, and certainty, and assurance of him whose faith rests on the rock of an infallible Church, with the uncertainty of him whose belief rests only on the shifting sands of his own fallible judgment. But it must be remembered that our belief *must*, in the end, rest on an act of our own judgment, and can never attain any higher certainty than whatever that may be able to give us. We may talk about the right of private judgment, or the duty of private judgment, but a more important thing to insist on is the *necessity* of private judgment. We have the choice whether we shall exercise our private judgment in one act or in a great many; but exercise it in one way or another we must. We may either apply our private judgment separately to the different questions in controversy—Purgatory, Transubstantiation Invocation of Saints, and so forth—and come to our own conclusion on each; or we may apply our private judgment to the question whether the Church of Rome is infallible, and, if we decide that it is, take all our religious opinions thenceforward on trust from her. But it is clear that our certainty that any of the things she

teaches us is right cannot be greater than whatever certainty we have that our private judgment has decided the question rightly whether we ought to submit unreservedly to her teaching; and it will appear, before we have done, that this is at least as difficult a question as any in the controversy.

That submission to the Church of Rome rests ultimately on an act of private judgment is unmistakeably evident, when a Romanist tries (as he has no scruple in doing) to make a convert of you or any other member of our Church. What does he then ask you to do but to decide that the religion of your fathers is wrong; that the teachers and instructors of your childhood were all wrong; that the clergy to whom you have looked up as best able to guide you are all mistaken and have been leading you in a way which must end in your eternal destruction? Well, if you come to the conclusion to reject all the authority which you have revered from your childhood, is not that a most audacious exercise of private judgment? But suppose you come to the opposite conclusion, and decide on staying where you were, would not a Romanist have a right to laugh at you, if you said that you were not using your private judgment then; that to change one's religion indeed is an act of private judgment, but that one who continues in his father's religion is subject to none of the risks to which every exercise of private judgment is liable? Well, it is absurd to imagine that logic has one rule for Roman Catholics and another for us; that it would be an exercise of private judgment in them to change their religion, but none if they continue in what their religious teachers have told them. An act of our judgment must be the ultimate foundation of all our beliefs.

The case is the case as if an inexperienced woman now finds herself the inheritor of a landed estate. She may feel herself quite incompetent to decide on all the questions of dealing with tenants that must now arise, and she may very wisely entrust the management of her affairs to an agent or attorney. But it would be a delusion to imagine that she thereby escapes risk or responsibility. She has to exercise her judgment in the choice of an agent, and according as she has made that decision, wisely or not, her affairs prosper, or the reverse. A blind man does well in getting someone to lead him; but if he chooses a blind man to lead him, both fall into the ditch. And so in matters of religion. The most irreligious man, who resolves to neglect the whole subject, and never trouble his head about any religious question, surely by that resolve, whether formally or informally made, incurs a most serious responsibility. In like manner, neither does the man escape responsibility who equally puts the consideration of religious problems from his mind, because he is content to surrender his judgment to the guidance of some one else whom he believes to be wiser than himself. I do not see how a Roman Catholic advocate can help yielding the point that a

member of his Church does, in truth, exercise private judgment, once for all, in his decision to submit to the teaching of the Church.

But he might probably argue that the illustration I have used shows that this is the very wisest way to exercise private judgment. The lady of my illustration surely does the wisest thing, if she attempts no other way of dealing with her estate, than, after taking the best advice she can get, entrusting herself to a good agent. Do we not in every department of conduct submit our own judgment to that of skilled persons? If we are sick, or if a member of our family is so, we do not try to study the case out of medical books; we call in a physician of repute, and submit implicitly to his directions. If we go to sea, we leave the navigation of the vessel in the hands of the captain. If we have a difficult lawsuit, we do not try to conduct it ourselves; we take legal' advice, and permit our adviser to determine our course of action. Why should we think that the problems of religion are so simple, that skilled and unskilled persons are on a par, and that this is the only subject in the world in which a man is to be ashamed to submit his judgment to that of those who are wiser than himself?

This is by no means an uncommon line of argument for a Roman Catholic advocate to use; but if he does, it shows that he does not at all understand the nature of the claim to infallibility made on behalf of his Church, of which claim this argument is, in real truth, entirely subversive. For it would be absurd misrepresentation to suggest that any of us who insists on the necessity of private judgment thinks it a matter of indifference whether a man uses his judgment rightly. On the contrary, we think it every man's duty, who has to make a decision, to use every means in his power to guide his judgment rightly. Not the least of these means is the instruction and advice of people better informed than ourselves. I do not suppose that any different rule in this respect prevails in matters of religion and in other matters; or that theology is the only science in the world that can be known by the light of nature, and in which a man, who has given no thought to the subject, stands on a level with one who has. The illustrations we have used, then, justify clergyman in claiming deference for his opinion on theological subjects from a layman, just so far, and no more as he has given more and more prayerful study to those subjects than the layman has. It is just so in other cases. Why do we defer to the opinion of a barrister in matters of law, and to that of a physician in questions of medicine? Not because of their official position, but because of their superior acquaintance with the subject. We do not imagine that an idle young man, who has eaten his dinners, and got called to the Bar, becomes, by reason of his new dignity, qualified to conduct an important lawsuit, or that we may not without breach of modesty, prefer our own interpretation of an Act of Parliament to his. And so if you give no heed to theological study, the mere fact of your ordination

will not entitle you to claim deference for your opinion from members of your congregation, among whom you may easily find some better informed than yourself.

On what grounds, then, do those who insist on the infallibility of the Church of Rome claim deference for the authority of the Pope? Is it on the ground on which the illustrations we have used show that deference may rightly be claimed, namely, that superior knowledge which is the natural result of greater learning and deeper study? Clearly no such thing. The deference claimed is alleged to be due to the Pope's official position solely, and is demanded from the most learned and the most ignorant of his subjects equally. Now, on the principle that a man is likely to know more of a subject the more he has studied it, which of the two had a right to claim that his judgment deserved to be received with respect Von Dollinger, when he said that the doctrine of the Pope's personal infallibility was a mere novelty, unknown to the Church of former times; or Pius IX., when he declared that the Church had always held it? The one might be considered as entitled to speak on Church history with the authority of an expert; the other was an Italian ecclesiastic, of no reputation for learning, to whose opinion, on a question of Church history, if it were not for his official position, no one would dream of paying the slightest attention. You see, then, that the illustrations which have been appealed to are utterly destructive of the Papal claims. In truth, the ultra-Protestants and the ultra-Papists are in complete agreement in their contempt for theological and ecclesiastical learning, and in their resistance to that claim to deference for the opinion of the clergy, which is made precisely so far, and no more, as by diligent and prayerful study the clergy have learned to know more than those who are asked to defer to them. In the Roman Catholic Church, as much as in the wildest Protestant sect, learning must give way to ignorance and prejudice. Let a theological opinion commend itself to the superstitious and ignorant of the people; let the practices founded on it become prevalent; then let the Pope, who may be quite as superstitious and ignorant himself, give formal expression to it, and the learned have only the humiliating choice whether they will be turned out like Von Dollinger, or give an amazed and reluctant assent like Cardinal Newman.

I must not part with this illustration without pointing out that the kind of deference to his authority which the most learned divine may claim is of a different nature from that which the captain of a ship may demand from his passengers, or a physician from his patients. The passengers do not go into a ship to learn navigation, but to be carried to their journey's end the quickest way: a physician's patients want to be cured of their disease, and not to be taught medical science. If in the Christian, as in many heathen systems, the art of propitiating the divinities was a special craft known to

the priesthood alone, then the analogy would subsist, and we ought to trouble ourselves no more about the secrets of the art by which the priesthood gain *for* us the Divine favour, than a passenger on shipboard troubles himself about lunar observations and the nautical almanac. But the promise to Christ's Church was, '*All thy people shall be taught of God.*' In the Christian system religious knowledge is not the secret of one profession, but the privilege and the duty of all the people; and the duty of the clergy is to *teach* those committed to their care. It follows at once that the relation between them and their flocks is not that between a physician and his patients, but rather that between the physician and the class of students to whom he is teaching medical science. From the members of such a class he *is* entitled to the deference to which his superior knowledge gives him a right. His students would make no progress if they were indocile to their instructor, if they were captious and conceited; full of the belief that they had already knowledge enough, and that the old woman's remedies which their grandmothers or aunts had taught them could not be improved on by the highest medical Science. And yet the instructor must be a bad one, or his pupils of mean capacity, if they do not arrive at a point when their beliefs rest on a better foundation than their teacher's word; when they are able to verify for themselves the things which they at first accepted from him with meekness and docility; when they feel that they may, without breach of modesty, criticise what he has told them, and perhaps improve on it.

I have thought it important, when speaking about private judgment, to make it plain that we do not recommend rash judgment, or independence of the teaching of others, or exclude deference to the authority of persons better informed than ourselves, or the use of any of the means which prudent persons employ in order to guide their judgment rightly.

But I must bring you back to the point with which I commenced, namely, that it is absurd for Roman Catholics to disparage private judgment, or make light of the kind of certainty we can obtain by its means, since their belief, as well as ours, must ultimately rest on an act of their private judgment, and can have no higher certainty than whatever that is capable of yielding. If they use their private judgment on no other question, they must use it on the question, Are we bound to submit implicitly to the authority of the Church of Rome? The result is, that absolute certainty can only be had on the terms of being infallible one's self. A man may say, 'I am absolutely certain that I am right in my religious opinions, because I believe what the Pope believes, and he is absolutely certain not to believe wrong.' But then comes the question, 'How come you to be absolutely certain that the Pope is absolutely certain not to believe wrong?'

It is not possible to answer this question without being guilty of the logical fallacy of arguing in a circle. For example, a common way of an-

swering is by producing texts of Scripture such as ‘Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church,’ and such like. Now before we can use these texts to prove the Church’s infallibility, private judgment must decide that the books cited are the Word of God, and private judgment must interpret the texts brought forward; and if private judgment can be trusted to do this, it would seem that it might be trusted to decide other questions too. But there is no point on which Roman advocates are fonder of insisting than that it is from the Church that we receive the Bible; that without her guidance we could have no certainty’ about the canon of Scripture; and still more, that without the Church’s guidance we are incompetent to find the true meaning of Scripture. Now, certainly, those texts which are alleged to prove the Church’s infallibility are not so plain and clear that no rational man can doubt their meaning. On the contrary, there are no texts in the Sacred Volume about which controversy has raged more fiercely. I suppose there is no text on which the Fathers have given greater variety of interpretation than that which I just mentioned, ‘Thou art Peter’: and we have to go down far indeed, before we find one who discovered the Bishop of Rome in it. As a matter of fact, it is certain that more than half of those who profess to acknowledge the authority of the Bible are unable to find in it any proof of Roman infallibility. It remains, then, for a Roman Catholic to say, ‘I know that I understand these texts rightly, because the Church, which cannot err, has taught me that this is their true meaning,’ and then they are clearly in a vicious circle. They say, ‘The Church is infallible, because the Scriptures testify that she is so, and the Scriptures testify this because the Church infallibly declares that such is their meaning.’

We find ourselves in the same circle if we try to prove the Church’s infallibility by antiquity, sayings of the Fathers, by reason, or in any other way. For the advocates of the Church of Rome have constantly maintained that, on religious questions, nothing but the Church’s authority can give us certainty. Well, when we are trying to prove the Church’s authority, we shall be guilty of a logical fallacy if we assume the thing to be proved. Unless, then, we are building a fabric in the air, our proof of the Church’s infallibility must rest on something else; and if we arrive at a certain result, it follows that *without* the Church’s help it is possible for us to arrive at not only true, but absolutely certain, results in our investigation of one of the most difficult of religious questions. All the attempts of Roman Catholic controversialists to show the helplessness of men without the Church make it impossible to have any confidence in their success in finding the Church.

Great efforts have been made by Roman Catholic divines to clear their mode of procedure from the charge of logical fallacy, but in the nature of things such efforts must be hope less. A clever mathematician described the problem of perpetual motion, about which so many crazy speculators have

busied themselves, as the problem to enable a man to lift himself from the ground by the waistband of his own breeches. And this is precisely the kind of problem which men set themselves when they hope to discover some absolute security against the possibility of going wrong in their judgments. Unless God directly bestows miraculously this privilege on themselves, they must be exposed to risk of error in their judgment that somebody else possesses this privilege. In point of fact, I believe that in the Roman Church, when ever faith in her is more than that indolent uninquiring assent which men give to the opinions in which they were brought up, and which it has not occurred to them to doubt, it rests on an implied persuasion that God has miraculously bestowed on them the privilege of knowing that the Church is infallible. Whether such a persuasion is an adequate foundation of faith will be considered afterwards, when I come to discuss the value of faith resting on a supposed motion of God's Spirit communicated to the individual.

Since this lecture was delivered, a Roman Catholic bishop (Clifford) has attempted, in an article in the *Fortnightly Review* (January, 1887), to meet the difficulty here raised. The statement which he professes to answer is: 'The Church bases its authority on the remarkable words, "Thou art Peter," &c. The authority of the words, "Thou art Peter," rests the Divine authority of the New Testament. But the authority of the New Testament, in turn, rests on the authority of the Church, which derives its authority from the book We call this process, in other matters, arguing in a circle.' Bishop Clifford replies: The argument here set forth is an argument in a circle, no doubt; but it is not the line of argument which the Church adopts in proving against unbelievers her Divine origin and mission. He then proceeds to state the latter line of argument in a form, of which what follows is a summary:—

(a) She appeals, in the first instance, to the writings of the New Testament, using them, not as inspired books, but as the genuine works of contemporary writers, in the same way as she appeals to Tacitus, Seneca, or other trustworthy authorities. In this way it is established, by purely historical evidence, that there was such a person as Christ; that He founded a Society, which received the names of the Christian and the Catholic Church; that, that Society has continued to exist through successive generations to the present day, and that the Church is that Society.

(b) Still using the New Testament writings only as historical records, she establishes the fact of the miracles of Christ, and especially the fact of the Resurrection. Thence she infers that Christ is God. In confirmation of His Divinity, and of the truth of His mission, she appeals to the manner in which His prophecies concerning the Church and the Jewish nation have been fulfilled; to the wonderful spread of the Gospel; to the constancy of



the martyrs; to the great change for good that the preaching of the Gospel has wrought among men; and to the testimony which the Church herself has borne, through so many generations, to the belief which has been held in the truth of His miracles.

(c) Christ having been proved to be God, His words must be Divine, and therefore infallibly true. But it is on record that He spoke the words, 'Thou art Peter,' &c.; 'As the Father has sent me, I also send you' (John xx. 21); 'Going, teach all nations: . . . behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world' (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20). These being God's words, the Church, to which they relate, is a Divine institution, and has authority from God.

(d) This Church, founded by God, with a mission from God to teach all nations, and armed with a Divine promise that God will be with her to the consummation of the world, cannot err in her teaching; she is, by God's appointment, infallible.

Such, in substance, is Bishop Clifford's reply; but, in offering it, he wholly misconceives the exigencies of his position. He brings out the infallibility of the Church as the result of a long line of argument. This doctrine, which is wanted for the foundation of the building, is with him the coping-stone of the structure; or, to state the matter more correctly, it is the last storey of a house of cards. For the whole argument is full of disputable points. Thus, in the last clause of paragraph (a), 'and the Church is that society,' he, no doubt, by 'the Church' means the Church of Rome, to the exclusion, for example, of the Anglican Church and of the Eastern; but it need not be said what room for controversy there is on that point. In paragraph (d) there is a tremendous jump in the assumption that to prove the Divine institution of the Church is enough to prove its infallibility. For with regard to the State, we are told, 'the powers that be are ordained of God,' yet it does not follow that 'the powers that be' can never issue unjust commands.

But this is not the time to examine the goodness of Bishop Clifford's arguments; that will come under discussion at a later stage: what we are now concerned with is whether such a proof as is here offered us makes any pretence of being adequate to the necessities of the case. What is wanted is a proof which will induce us to accept without doubting the teaching of the Church. Now, you cannot submit without doubting to a doubtful authority. It would be ridiculous, for instance, to say, You must accept without the least doubt the assertions of the Church of Rome, because it is an even chance that she may be infallible. What degree of assurance, then, is such an argument as Bishop Clifford's calculated to afford? You cannot have more assurance of the truth of the conclusion of a long line of argument than whatever assurance you have of the truth of every premises, and of the correctness of every inference, used in the argument. If

doubt attaches to any one step in the argument, that doubt will attach to the conclusion: if doubt attaches to more steps than one, the conclusion is affected by multiplied doubt.

Now, Bishop Clifford cannot possibly imagine that the steps of his argument are free from doubt. The line of argument is, in its general features, the same as that employed by Protestants, which Roman Catholic advocates are fond of saying is not sufficient to warrant certainty of belief without the testimony of an infallible Church. But if Bishop Clifford's account of the matter is right, Protestants have ten times as much certainty as Roman Catholics. For the arguments by which the former establish their faith are accepted as good and valid by the latter, to the foundation of whose system they are indispensable. But the arguments necessary to establish the points in the system of Roman Catholics which are peculiar to them are such that nobody but them selves can see any cogency in them.

Bishop Clifford was probably aware of the weakness of the proof he offers; for he is careful to say that this is only the line of argument which the Church offers to unbelievers. But Logic has not one rule for believers, another for unbelievers. If the proof which the Church tenders to unbelievers is not satisfactory, she does not mend matters by saying, Oh, you will be fully satisfied if you will only take my word for everything. This is much the same as if one, seeking a place with you as a servant, brought you a recommendation which you did not think satisfactory, and then thought to make it all right by writing his own name on the back of it. However, I remember that this line of defence was taken up long ago by Dr. Newman, and I believe it is as plausible as any that can be adopted. He frankly owned the impossibility of making out any proof of her claims which will be felt as demonstratively convincing by one who has not already submitted to her. He taught that one must not expect certainty in the highest sense before conversion. 'Faith must make a venture, and is rewarded by sight.' The claims of the Church shine, as it were, by their own light. She conies and calls on you, in the name of GOD to bow down before her. And though, perhaps, you can give no reason logically unassailable for submitting to her, yet, after you have submitted, you find that you have done well. You find in her bosom rest, peace, freedom from doubt; and you are sure that she who has bestowed these gifts upon you must be divine.

Now, assuredly we do not deny that an alleged revelation may powerfully commend itself by internal evidence. He who has received such a revelation on its external proofs may find additional reason for trusting it in the consistency of its doctrines with each other, their reasonableness, their holiness, their adaptation to the wants of his nature. Such arguments as these go to make up great part of the grounds of the conviction we all feel that the Bible comes from God. But this rational conviction can be felt by

no member of a Church claiming to be infallible. For her first principle is, that her teaching shall be subjected to no criticism. A disciple of the Church of Rome is bound to crush down every doubt as sinful must reject every attempt to test the teaching of his Church by reason or Scripture or antiquity, consequently, her teaching can never receive any subsequent verification. The certainty of her disciples can never rise higher than it was the first moment they submitted to her. The pretence of subsequent verification really presents us with a *petitio principii* in the most outrageous form. 'You must believe everything I say,' demands the Pope. 'Why should we?' we inquire. 'Well, perhaps I cannot give any quite convincing reason; but just try it. If you trust me with doubt or hesitation, I make no promise; but if you really believe everything I say, you will find, that you *will* believe everything I say.' It follows, then, that all the Church of Rome can promise is what any guide can promise who insists on blindfolding his passengers. 'Trust yourselves implicitly to me, and you shall thenceforward feel no doubt or Perplexity; you shall never *see* any reason to make you think that I am leading you wrong. Whatever may be the difficulties or dangers in the path, you shall never perceive any of them.' It requires no Divine commission to be able to promise freedom from doubt on such terms as these. I could promise as much to any of you. I could tell you all 'If you never use your understanding, it will never lead you wrong. If you never inquire, you will never be perplexed. If you take all your opinions on trust from others, you will be free from all the painful uncertainty that attends the task of forming opinions for yourselves.' No; if you wish to make sure that the Church of Rome is a trustworthy guide, you must examine her claims before you submit to her. For, as her present rulers teach, he who once puts himself under her guidance abandons all means of verification of her doctrines, and has no power of detecting error, should any exist.

This argument of Dr. Newman's was revived some little time ago by Mr. Mallock. He had been in the habit of publishing articles in magazines, in which he criticised other people's beliefs and disbelief's so freely that it was hard to know what he believed or did not believe himself. At last he published an essay, of which the gist was that Romanism alone could make head against infidelity; that all attempts to defend Christianity by argument must end in failure; but that a religion which demands submission without proof may hold its ground for ever. For a time, I grant; but certainly only for a time. Was ever the cause of Christianity so treacherously defended? If infamous charges were made against my character, perhaps there are some of you who might think well enough of me to disbelieve them without examination. But suppose anyone were to defend me after this fashion: Dr. Salmon says he is a good man, and I earnestly pray you to take his own word for it; for if you permit yourself to inquire into the charges against

him, you will be forced to come to an unfavourable conclusion about him, which would be so very uncomfortable for you to hold, that it will be a great deal wiser for you to make no inquiry.' Do you think I should be grateful for such a defence as that? or that I could regard the maker of it as other than an enemy who scarcely took the trouble to disguise his malignity? If this be the best that can be said for the Church of Rome, the peace of mind which she offers is just that which might be offered by the directors of some Glasgow Bank, who had made away with their customers' money, but hoped that by bold speaking they might carry on their business prosperously, and prevent their accounts being looked into.

Recently an attempt has been made to place the system of Roman Catholic belief on a more scientific foundation. Of this I shall speak in the next lecture.