

THE
INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

A COURSE OF LECTURES

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BY
GEORGE SALMON, D. D.

PROVOST OF TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN SOMETIME REGIUS PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

Author of
A Historical Introduction to the Study of the Books of the New Testament

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VI.

MILNER'S AXIOMS.—PART II.

IN the last lecture I tried to show that, if Milner's axiom were limited to an assertion about saving truth—that is to say, truth an explicit knowledge of which is necessary to salvation—it would be perfectly useless to one desirous to establish the necessity of an infallible guide: I wish now to show that, if Milner's axiom be asserted not only with regard to truths necessary to salvation, but also to truths highly important and useful, then the axiom is not true. There is an immense amount of knowledge, both secular and religious, highly important for man to possess, but for which God has not seen fit to provide certain never-failing means whereby men may attain to it, and consequently which, as a matter of fact, many men do fail of obtaining. I am the more particular in stating this, because I should be sorry if the previous discussion had led you to think that I represented the great bulk of God's Revelation as useless, and that I thought that, provided a man be made acquainted with that minimum of knowledge which is absolutely necessary to salvation, it is a matter of small importance whether any further knowledge be communicated to him. I hold the gaining of such knowledge to be of the very highest use and importance; but I say that all we know of God's dealings forbids us to take for granted that, because knowledge of any kind is of great value to man, God will make it impossible for him to fail to acquire it.

There is one piece of vitally important knowledge which Roman Catholics must own God has not given men never failing means for attaining: I mean the knowledge what is the true Church. They must own that the institution of an infallible Church has not prevented the world from being overrun with heresy. They do not number in their communion half of those who profess the name of Christ. We need only call to mind our own Church, with its important ramifications in Scotland, the Colonies, and America; the dissenting bodies in England and America; foreign Protestants in Scandinavia and Germany; the Greek Church in Russia, and other Eastern communities. We need not discuss how much of essential truth is preserved by each of these bodies. Their very existence shows that it is as hard to find the true Church as the true doctrine; for it would be grossly unfair to deny that there are among these different bodies many sincere inquirers after truth. In whatever else these Churches disagree they agree in denying that Rome has made out her claim to infallibility and supremacy. It is plain, then, that God has not endowed His Church with credentials so convincing as irresistibly to command men's assent; and, according to Roman theory, He works a stupendous miracle in vain. To guard Christians against error, He works a perpetual miracle in order to provide them with an infallible guide to truth, and yet He neglects to furnish that guide with sufficient proof of His infallibility. Nay, He allows that infallibility to be wielded by men who have made themselves so distrusted through deceit and imposture and other evil practices,

that a prejudice is excited against their pretensions. This one consideration is sufficient to overturn the *a priori* proof that there must be an infallible guide, because we want one, and because it seems incredible that God should leave us without means such as to secure our attainment of religious truth. The proof equally shows that such a guide ought to be able to produce unmistakable credentials; and the claims of one who has been rejected by half the Christian world are by that rejection disproved.

But we may further show in the case of secular knowledge how much there is very desirable for us to possess, which God has given us no certain means of attaining. Man is left in a variety of cases to act on his own responsibility and to the best of his fallible judgment; exposed to various dangers, and called on for the exercise of diligent care, which, in point of fact, very often is not exercised. No one who has read Butler's *Analogy* can be at a loss to expose the fallacy of inferring that because a thing seems to us desirable, God must therefore have constituted His world so that we shall be sure to have it. To quote one of his analogies, take the case of disease and the remedies for it. If we might have indulged our conjectures, we should have imagined that there would have been no such thing as disease in the world. But, at least, we might argue that, if God did, in His mercy, provide remedies for disease, these remedies would, to parody Milner's words, have been 'certain, never-failing, such, in short, as to free those who use them from ill-health of every kind'; and if a quack were to present himself, declaring that such were the remedies he was possessed of, and that we ought to acknowledge the justice of his pretensions without examination, because no one else claimed to have such remedies as we should have expected God to provide for us, while he alone spoke with confidence, and never admitted the possibility of his falling into error;—such a quack would have all the titles to our obedience that the Church of Rome has, according to the arguments of many of its advocates, who seem to think that we are bound to receive him who talks biggest and brags loudest, and will not own that he may sometimes make a mistake.

But analogy furnishes us with a still better answer to the Roman Catholic arguments about Infallibility. One simple test will expose the fallacy of any of these arguments. Substitute the word 'sin' for the word 'error,' and examine whether the argument will then lead to true conclusions. It is not only our own speculations that would lead us to think God would have provided means to banish sin from the world. The Scriptures would certainly, at first sight, lead us to conclude that it would at least be banished from the Church. There is not a single promise to the Church that does not speak even more distinctly of her members being led into the ways of holiness than into the way of truth. The name 'holy' is the distinctive title of the Church, 'saints' that of her members. She is described as 'a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing.' And it is true that the Church has done this great work in the world, that she has made a degree of holiness possible, which was not so before: and not only possible, but common; that being now ordinary among Christians which before had been only the attainment of some dis-

tinguished saints. But it is not true that this holiness is either perfect or universal. Roman Catholic historians themselves acknowledge the moral corruption which at times overspread the highest places of the Church, not excepting him whom they account its head. I will quote the well-known words with which Baronius begins his account of the tenth century: 'A new age begins, which, from its asperity and barrenness of good, has been wont to be called the Iron Age; from the deformity of its overflowing wickedness, the Leaden Age; and, from its paucity of writers, the Dark Age. Standing on the threshold of which, we have thought it necessary to premise something, lest the weak-minded should be scandalized if he should happen to behold the abomination of desolation in the Temple. . . . * The case is plainly such, that scarcely anyone can believe, nay, scarcely ever shall believe, unless he see it with his own eyes, and handle it with his own hands, what unworthy, foul, and deformed, yea, what execrable and abominable things the sacred Apostolic See, upon whose hinge the universal Catholic Church turns, has been compelled to suffer. O shame! O grief! how many monsters, horrible to be seen, were intruded by secular princes into that seat which is to be revered by angels; how many tragedies were consummated; with what filth was it her fate to be spattered, who was herself without spot or wrinkle; with what stench to be infected; with what loathsome impurities to be defiled, and by these to be blackened with perpetual infamy!' And, again, the same historian writes (*Ann.* 912): 'What was then the face of the Holy Roman Church! How most foul, when harlots, at once most powerful and most base, ruled at Rome, at whose will sees were changed, bishops were presented, and, what is horrible to hear and unutterable, pseudo-bishops, their paramours, were intruded into the See of St. Peter, who are enrolled in the catalogue of Roman pontiffs, only for the sake of marking the times!'

Thus, with respect to Christ's promises that the gates of hell should not prevail against His Church, that He would be with it always, even to the end of the world, and so forth, we see what they do *not* mean. We see that they contained no pledge that ungodliness should never assault His Church; that overflowing wickedness should not abound in her; nay, that monsters of impiety and immorality should not be seen sitting in her highest places. The question is, therefore, whether God hates error so

* In the passage which I here omit, Baronius turns it into an argument in favour of the Roman Church, that the fact that she survived a period, which, according to all human calculation, ought to have been fatal to her, proves that she must have been under Divine protection. He borrowed this paradox from Boccaccio, who had presented it in the shape of a tale about a Jew, who, being pressed to embrace Christianity, declared his intention of visiting Rome, and judging of the religion by the lives of Christ's Vicar, his cardinals and bishops. His Christian friends were horrified, knowing that the spectacle of sensuality, avarice, and simony which tainted all at Rome, from the least to the greatest, was better calculated to make a Christian turn Jew than a Jew become a Christian. But the Jewish visitor, on his return, presented himself for baptism, declaring himself convinced of the divinity of a religion which survived, notwithstanding that its chief ministers were doing their very best to destroy it. The popularity of this tale in pre-Reformation times shows that, if the Bishop of Rome was then believed to be a guide to truth, he was not imagined to be an example of moral purity.

very much more than He hates sin, that He has taken precautions against the entrance of the one which He has not seen fit to use in order to guard against the other. We hold that what He has done in both cases is strikingly parallel. First, His great gift to His people, that of the Holy Spirit, is equally their safeguard against sin and against error. He is equally the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Holiness. It is His office to inform our understandings, by taking of the things of Christ and showing them to us; and to direct our wills, and make them conformed to that of Christ. And the means He uses for both ends are the same. The Scriptures are equally guides to truth and to holiness. They make us wise unto salvation. They are ‘a light unto our feet, and a lamp unto our paths.’ ‘Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word.’ And the Church also is used by the Holy Ghost, both as a witness and guardian of Christian truth and an instructor in Christian morality. She has been called (and we shall afterwards see what good claim she has to the title) the ‘pillar and ground of the truth.’ And she has certainly been in the world a preacher of righteousness. And yet the use of all these means has not banished either sin or error from the world. Even those ‘who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit,’ are still not impeccable. Signs of human frailty betray themselves in the conduct of men whom we must own to be good men—not merely good with natural amiability, but really sanctified by the Spirit of God. And those who have so been guided are no more infallible than they are impeccable. In proportion, indeed, as they live close to God, and seek by prayer for the Spirit’s guidance, so will their spiritual discernment increase. He makes them whose will it is to do His will to know of the doctrine whether it be of Him. But yet, as their holiness falls short of perfection, so also does their knowledge. ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves’; and if we say that we have no error, we deceive ourselves no less. And since not only may individuals fall into sin, but, as is owned in the extract I have read from Baronius, ungodliness may overspread the Church widely; so we see no reason to doubt that not only individuals may err, but Christians collectively, or large bodies of them may make doctrinal mistakes. The analogy I have been insisting on between the understanding and the will, and the operation of God’s Spirit on both, is of the utmost importance in this controversy.

One great advantage of considering the difficulty of the existence of error in the Church in connexion with the great problem of the existence of evil in the world is that, while there is no reason in either case for doubting as to the matter of fact—the existence of the evil complained of—whatever considerations are available in the one case for mitigating the difficulty, and reconciling the evil which we see with the goodness of God are available also in the other.

Take, first, the physical evil which exists in the world. Great part of human suffering arises from an insufficient supply of the natural wants of food and warmth. God could, if He had pleased, have either created us without these wants or with a never-failing supply for them. If we ask why He has not done so, and why He has left it possible that men should

perish of cold and famine, as thousands of our fellow-creatures have done, though we cannot completely solve the question, we can, at least, see this, that with God our comfort is subordinate to our education. It is the struggle to obtain a supply for these natural wants which has drawn forth the energies of man's nature. As Virgil tells us, the Father of all did not wish the way of sustenance to be too easy, '*curis acuens mortalia corda.*' And, in point of fact, the human race has been singularly unprogressive in those tropical regions where there is little demand on man's energies; and the greatest advances in civilization have been made in the sterner climates, where the conflict with nature has early elicited the employment of man's full powers.

So, likewise, with regard to secular knowledge. God might have provided us from the first with a knowledge of all things needful; but actually He has withheld a knowledge of much that is necessary for the safety and comfort of life. Many of the most useful parts of our present knowledge were long unknown to the world, and were reserved to stimulate and reward the pursuit of the successful inquirer. Our need of knowledge and our desire for it have been the means which God has used to develop in us all those faculties which have the discovery of truth for their object. And, as if to show how much less important in His eyes it is that we should possess knowledge than that we should be trained to seek for it, He has annexed a pleasure to the discovery of truth, distinct from, and higher than, that which attends its possession. I fear there is none of you who can have found in his study of geometry, or hydrostatics, or natural philosophy, such pleasure as Pythagoras is said to have felt at the discovery of the forty-seventh proposition of the First Book of Euclid; or Archimedes, when he rushed from the bath shouting out his eureka; or Newton, when his trembling hands could scarce complete the calculation which proved that it was the same force which keeps the moon in her orbit that draws an apple to the ground. Thus God, both with regard to body and mind, has dealt with us in such a way as if it were more important in His eyes that we should be trained to seek for the supply of needful wants than that we should actually obtain it: at least, while He stimulates us to the search, and rewards us if successful, He has not exempted us from the risk of failure.

And God has dealt with us in the same way in things that pertain to the perfection of our moral nature. If we are perplexed why He should not have excluded from His world the possibility of sin and vice, at least we can see that the virtue which has been braced and strengthened by conflict with temptation, and victory over it, is a thing of much higher order than the virtue which consists in the absence of temptation. And here, too, we perceive that God trains us and disciplines us for the higher excellence, even at the terrible risk which attends failure. Now, can it be made an objection to Revelation that it represents the Almighty as pursuing the same course with respect to religious truth that He has adopted in every other kind of truth; or, rather, were it other wise, would there not be a presumption that such a revelation did not proceed from the Author of nature? God has made the very importance of religious truth, not a reason for re-

leasing us from all pains of investigation, but a motive to stimulate us more intensely to discipline ourselves in that candid, truth-loving frame of mind in which alone the search for truth is likely to be successful. How prejudicial an effect a contrary dispensation might have had on all our mental faculties, we have a striking proof in the different progress of mind in Protestant and Roman Catholic countries since the Reformation. And there is reason to infer that, when a Church sets up a claim for infallibility, the mischief done is not merely that such a Church can teach false doctrine without detection, but that even if a Church professing itself infallible actually did not teach a single doctrine that was not perfectly true, the religious condition of its members might be inferior to that of the members of our Church as much, and in the same way, as the civilization of a South Sea Islander is inferior to that of a European.

We can see what a benumbing effect the doctrine of infallibility has on the intellects of Roman Catholics by the absence at present of religious disputes in that communion. They boast of this as a perfection; but it is, in truth, a sign of deadness, a sign of the indifference of all to the subjects in question. Why is it that the question of the Immaculate Conception, which convulsed the Christian world four centuries ago, was disposed of by Pius IX. with scarcely a murmur? It was because the people did not care about the matter. The superstitious were glad to pay a compliment to the great object of their veneration, but whether what they asserted was true, I suppose hardly ten lay Roman Catholics in Europe ever troubled their heads. And if the question brought before the Vatican Council had been of a purely spiritual nature, had the bishops been only required to affirm such a doctrine as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary—that is to say, to assert a historical fact without a particle of evidence—I do not think many would have rebelled. It was because the doctrine of the Pope's personal Infallibility had bearings on the practical business of this world; because its assertion was supposed to be intended for the preservation or recovery of the Pope's temporal sovereignty; because the claim would enable him to interfere with more effect on questions of toleration, civil liberty, marriage, and education, that so much difficulty was made about conceding it.

I cannot help quoting words written by Mr. Maskell, one of the early Oxford defectors, on the occasion of the decree of the Vatican Council. They express his natural indignation at seeing his whole Church rush blindfold into acquiescence in a decision which he knew to be false; but he does not seem to have reflected that the state of mind which can acquiesce so indifferently in any decision of authority, is the natural result of that belief in the need of an infallible guide which led himself astray. He says: 'There are numbers of people who take on trust, without consideration, what they are asked to believe in matters of religion; some from habit and want of discipline in their education; some from a dislike of trouble; some from what they pretend to be a proper subjection to their teachers, thus trying to throw upon others a responsibility for which themselves will have to answer to God hereafter; some from sheer carelessness and want of interest; some, once more, because they do not comprehend

what is involved in their assent. To call such an assent faith, is utterly to miscall it. There is very little faith in it. A state of mind which can admit so readily of additions to its creed would be very likely not long to withstand a demand to change it altogether.'

This extract truly describes the practical effect of stunting men's intelligence, in the hope of making their faith livelier. The faith generated by such a process is found not to be worthy of the name. If any human system were to propose to keep men virtuous, by keeping them always in the state of childhood, and never permitting them to govern their own conduct, such a system would be plainly opposed to the course which the Author of nature has preferred. Equally opposed to His method is any system which proposes to preserve men from error by keeping them in the state of childhood, and by giving them truths to be received on authority without inquiry. And it is opposed not only to the course of nature, but to the commands of Scripture, which enjoins us to be 'ready to give every man a reason of the hope that is in us': 'in malice, indeed, to be children, but in understanding to be men.'

A Romanist, as I have said, must acknowledge that the existence of an infallible Church does not exclude error from the world, for more than half of those who call themselves Christians unfortunately cannot be convinced of the claims of that Church on their allegiance. But, while the existence of error remains as distressing a problem to the Romanist as to us, he is deprived of the compensation which we fitted in the improved condition of those who have honestly sought for truth and been successful. The problem is the same to him as that of the existence of sin in the world would be to us, if, while all the vice in the world remained the same, we could find nowhere examples of any higher kind of virtue than that which consists in the absence of temptation.