

THE  
INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

*A COURSE OF LECTURES*

DELIVERED IN THE  
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## VIII.

### THE CHURCH'S SOURCES OF PROOF.

If we admit it as established that the Church is bound to give proofs of her doctrines, the next point in the controversy is what sources of proof are admissible. I think it was Dr. Hawkins, the late Provost of Oriel, who summed up our doctrine on this subject in the formula, The Church to teach, the Scriptures to prove.

The Church of England, in her Sixth Article, has laid down the principle of her method in the assertion that 'Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation,' so that whatever is incapable of Scripture proof, even if it may happen to be true, is not to be required of any man to be believed *as an article of faith*. A profession of belief in this principle of the sufficiency of Scripture is one of the pledges which our Church requires of every priest at his ordination. Nor is the principle merely asserted in one of the Articles; it runs through them all. Everything else, which might claim an independent authority, is made in the Articles to derive its authority from the Bible, and to be authoritative only so far as it agrees with the Bible. The most venerable of all traditions, the Creeds, are said (Art. viii.) to be received only because capable of Scripture proof. Every particular Church, and General Councils of the Church, are said (Arts. xix-xxi) to be liable to error; and their decisions are said to be binding only when it can be shown that they are taken out of Holy Scripture. Then, in the controversial Articles, one Roman doctrine after another is rejected as a human invention, because grounded upon no warrant of Holy Scripture. Thus you will see that the Sixth Article is not an isolated doctrine, but states the principle of the method which our Church employs in the establishment of all her doctrines.

Now, the Council of Trent, at the outset of its proceedings, equally proclaimed the principle of its method, in order (as it said) 'that all men might understand in what order and method this Synod is about to proceed, and what testimonies and authorities it chiefly intends to use for the information of doctrine and the establishment of morals in the Church.' The actual words of the decree of the Council of Trent are easily accessible to you, and I shall expect you to know them; suffice it here to remind you that its principle is, that the saving truth, communicated by Christ and His Apostles, is contained in the written books and in *unwritten traditions*, and that equal piety and reverence is to be given to the books of the Bible and to those traditions.

As Bellarmine states the matter, the rule of faith is the Word of God; but that word may be either written or unwritten. When we say unwritten, we do not mean that it is *nowhere* written, but only that it was not written down by its first announcers. To the first generation of Christians, the Gospel revelation was equally authoritative, whether it was announced to them by the Apostles'

spoken words or by their written letters; and so to every succeeding generation it makes no difference whether the Word of God which comes to them be written or unwritten.

In passing, I may just point out the transparent fallacy in this oft-repeated argument. Of course, if you certainly knew a communication to be the Word of God, your obligation to receive it is all the same, no matter how it came to you; but the manner in which it comes may make all the difference in the world, as to your power of knowing whether it be the Word of God or not. The early Christians, who received letters bearing the autographs of Peter or Paul, were not a whit more sure that they had got an Apostolic communication than those who, with their own ears, heard the Apostles speak; no doubt, rather less so of the two; but it is surely perfectly ludicrous to argue that, because the Apostles' spoken words were as good a means of knowing their sentiments as their written words, therefore what Leo XIII., after eighteen hundred years, tells us the Apostles taught is as good evidence to their doctrine as faithful transcripts of their own letters.

To return, however, the principle of the perfect equality of Scripture and tradition, as means of proving doctrine, runs through the decrees of the Council of Trent. Very frequently, indeed, when Scripture proof can be had, it is gladly cited; but tradition is freely used to supplement the silence of Scripture, or to interpret its obscurities. And indeed, in general, it is not easy to distinguish how much of the proof professes to be Scriptural, and how much traditional. Thus it was almost inevitable that the doctrine of the Articles of the Church of England and of the decrees of the Council of Trent should be different when the mode of judgment adopted by the two is so different; the one making Scripture alone its rule; the other, Scripture and tradition; and the latter, also, placing tradition on a perfect equality with Scripture, as a completely independent means of conveying a knowledge of what our Lord and His Apostles taught.

The question at issue is often stated in the form, What is the rule of faith—Scripture alone, or Scripture and tradition? On this form of expression I may have a remark to make by-and-by: what I want now to point out is, that in the Roman Catholic controversy this question about the rule of faith is altogether subordinate to the question as to the judge of controversies, or in other words, the question as to the infallibility of the Church. The Church of England doctrine, as to the sufficiency of Scripture, has a real positive meaning to which there is nothing corresponding in the Roman doctrine about Scripture and tradition. Our Church accepts the obligation to give proof of her assertions, and she declares that Scripture is the source whence she draws her proofs. She declares that she does not consider that anything not contemned in Scripture is necessary for salvation to be believed; and, accordingly, she does not make it a condition of communion with her to believe in any doctrine for which she cannot give Scripture proof. Now, the belief of a Roman Catholic does not rest on Scripture and tradition in the same way that that of a

Protestant does on Scripture: his belief tests of the authority of the Church; he does not think about tradition, except when he wants a well-sounding word in controversy with a Protestant. His Church expects to be believed on her bare word; she does not condescend to offer proofs. What she says about tradition will be found to have only a negative meaning, namely, that her doctrines are not to be rejected because they are not to be found in Scripture, inasmuch as she has other ways of coming by them; but you would be grossly mistaken if you imagined that she meant to offer you any historical proof by uninspired testimony for the Apostolic origin of doctrines which are not to be found in Scripture. If that Church condescends to offer proofs of her doctrines, she claims to be the sole judge whether what she offers are proofs or not. If she presents a Scripture proof, she claims to be the sole interpreter of Scripture; and she requires you to believe, on her word, not only that the doctrine in question is true, but also that it is taught in the passage of Scripture which she alleges in support of it. Thus you see that the so-called Scripture proof is not a foundation on which your faith is to rest, but a new load to be laid on your faith. And it is just the same when she alleges tradition. If she asserts that she has received a doctrine by tradition, you are bound to believe that the doctrine has been continuously held in the Church from the first, even though there may not be a particle of historic evidence to justify the assertion.

In the same session of the Council of Trent in which was passed the decree setting tradition on a level with Scripture, it was also ordained that no one, leaning on his own understanding, shall dare, wresting Scripture to his own sense, to interpret it contrary to that sense which has been and is held by the Holy Mother Church, whose province it is to judge concerning the true sense and interpretation of Scripture, or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers. Accordingly, the Creed of Pius IV. requires all who subscribe to it to promise: 'I admit Holy Scripture according to that sense which has been and is held by Holy Mother Church, whose province it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of Scripture'; and, further, to say: 'Nor will I ever receive or interpret it except according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers,' The latter clause is a monstrous distortion of the words of the Council of Trent, and, if understood literally, amounts to a promise not to interpret Scripture at all, since, in the vast majority of cases where difference of opinion is possible, any one who waits to interpret until he gets a unanimous consent of the Fathers to guide him may wait till doomsday. The Vatican Council, the other day, in order to prevent misunderstanding of the meaning of this decree of Trent, renewed it in nearly the same words as those of the former Council.

If you look through the decrees of the Council of Trent, you will find illustrations in plenty of the use made of the Church's power of interpretation in finding Scripture proof not discoverable by man's unassisted powers. Thus, the decree concerning Extreme Unction recites the well-known words from the Epistle of James, and then adds: 'By which words (as the Church has learned from Apostolic tradition) the Apostle teaches the matter, the form, the proper

minister, and the effect of the Sacrament. For the Church has understood that the matter is oil blessed by the bishop; that the form is those words, “peristam unctionem, etc.”; and so on. Here we have a commentary of which there is not a trace in the text; and in this way evidently any passage of Scripture could be made to say anything the Church was pleased it should say.

I do not think any other proof is necessary of the modernness of the Roman rule of faith than the very complicated form which it assumes. I quote again from Milner’s *End of Controversy* what, after rejecting the two fallacious rules of faith, he puts forward as the true rule, namely, ‘the Word of God at large, whether written in the Bible or handed down from the Apostles in continual succession by the Catholic Church, and as it is understood and explained by the Church’; or, to speak more accurately, he says: ‘Besides their rule of faith, which is Scripture and tradition, Catholics acknowledge an unerring judge of controversy, or sure guide in all matters relating to religion, namely, the Church.’ Now, if Christians had begun with the notion that they had an infallible guide in the Church, they never would have said anything about Scripture or tradition. And this will test for us a second time whether the relation between the Church teachers and their flocks is fitly paralleled by that between a barrister and his clients, or between a physician and his patients. A sick man, when asked what advice he is using in order to get well, does not answer: Medical literature, as contained in such-and-such books, together with the instructions given orally in the Dublin Medical Schools, the whole as interpreted to me by Dr. so-and-so. A litigant does not tell us that he trusts for the conduct of his lawsuit to the statutes at large, together with the common law, as ascertained by the decisions of several successive judges, the whole as interpreted to him by such-and-such a barrister. In those cases we do not dream of going behind the barrister or physician to whose skill we commit ourselves, and we do not bestow a thought on the sources of his information. And so, if Christians had originally trusted to the Church as an infallible guide, they would never have talked about Scripture or tradition. It would have been enough for them to know that the Church had told them what to believe: whether she derived her knowledge from Scripture, or from tradition, or from immediate inspiration, would not have mattered to them in the slightest degree. But the true explanation why Roman Catholic controversialists state their rule of faith in this complicated form is, that Christians began by taking Scripture as their guide, and then, when practices were found current which could not be defended out of the Bible, tradition was invoked to supplement the deficiencies of Scripture. Last of all, when no proof could be made out either from Scripture or antiquity for Roman Catholic doctrines and practices, the authority of the Church was introduced to silence all objections. But still there was not courage to rest the fabric of belief on this modern foundation solely, and so the venerable names of Scripture and antiquity were still appealed to.

But, indeed, the theory that tradition is a rule of faith is quite untenable unless it be supplemented by the theory of the infallibility of the Church; for tradition is a rule which it is quite impossible for the individual to apply. There is no difficulty in an individual using Scripture as his rule of faith for he can learn without much difficulty what the statements of the Bible, on any subject, are, and on most subjects these statements are easy to be understood. But if it were certain that Apostolic traditions independent of the Bible existed, it is next to impossible for the individual to find them with any certainty. If he has to search for them in the writings of the Fathers, the canons of Councils, the decrees of Popes, the magnitude of the mass in which he has to search is enough to deter him from making the attempt.

Indeed, until our own time, the task would have been impossible. The Abbé Migne, in the prospectus to his edition of the Fathers, tells us, in capital letters, that, out of the innumerable works which constitute THE CATHOLIC TRADITION, he has formed one unique and admirable work, the materials which he had to gather being often fragments and small works without number, scattered here and there, and some of them unedited, drawn from books and manuscripts belonging to all places, all ages and languages, and now for the first time united in his library. It is certainly a great blessing to have the Catholic tradition presented in a compact and compendious form. And what is the size of this convenient compilation? The Latin Fathers form two hundred and twenty-two thick volumes; the Greek, one hundred and sixty-seven. But this is only Fathers: if you want the proceedings of Councils, the decrees of Popes, &c., *you* must search for them elsewhere. And then, when we search for Apostolic traditions in the writings of the Fathers, there is nothing to mark their Apostolic origin. We have no certain means, by our own ingenuity, of distinguishing true from false traditions: not one of the Fathers is recognized as singly a trustworthy guide: every one of them is admitted to have held *some* views which cannot be safely followed. Thus, the mere addition of tradition to the rule of faith makes it impossible for the individual to employ that rule; and the Romish doctrine about the rule of faith would be unintelligible unless it were supplemented by her doctrine concerning the infallibility of the Church, which, by her unerring instinct, is supposed to have the power of distinguishing true from false traditions, and which reports the results she arrives at for the instruction of the people. Thus you see it is quite a delusion to represent the system of the Roman Church as resting on trustworthy tradition. We are not permitted to apply a historical test to her teaching: on the contrary, the teaching of the Church of the present day is made the test of traditions. If any sayings of ancient writers are brought forward, as contravening that teaching, they are set aside as false traditions.

It would seem, then, that if I have already refuted the notion that the Church of Rome is infallible, I need hardly say anything about tradition. There is, however, just this question of fact to be settled: our Church accepts the condition of having to give proof of her doctrines; it is owned on all hands that

the New Testament is a trustworthy source of information as to the teaching of our Lord and His Apostles. The question is, Is there any trustworthy source *besides*? Now, I am willing to dismiss all *a priori* discussions, whether it is likely that God would commit the keeping of anything essential to our salvation to a vehicle so insecure, and so liable to be corrupted, as tradition; for it is dangerous to measure God's acts by our *a priori* notions what He was likely to do. And yet, the force of this argument is felt by Romanists themselves, who would not rely on a source of information so utterly precarious as tradition, if they did not suppose that they had a means of removing its insecurity in the Church, which, by its infallible instinct, discriminates true from false traditions. So, when the dream of infallibility is given up, tradition is reduced to its own uncertainty.

But, as I say, I dismiss all *a priori* arguments, neither shall I bring forward the statements of Scripture which bear witness to its own sufficiency, and which give us reason to believe that he who studies it in prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance will find in its pages all things necessary for his salvation. Such texts do not suffice to give us a logical victory over our opponents. We cannot speak too highly of the excellence of any one book of Scripture: I dare say that the Gospel of St. John alone contains all things needful for salvation; yet that does not prove that other inspired books were not written. Several of the texts that are cited to prove the sufficiency of Scripture primarily relate to the Old Testament; yet, excellent as that was, God gave the New besides; and, in like manner, if any New Testament text be cited, it may be asked, was the Canon closed at the time that text was written? If not, such a text does not prove that God may not have given a further revelation, or that that further revelation may not have been handed down by tradition.

I think it much better, then, instead of running away from this ghost of tradition which Roman Catholic controversialists dress up to frighten us with, to walk up to it, and pull it to pieces, when it is found to be a mere bogey. You say that you have other evidence as to the teaching of our Lord and His Apostles as trustworthy as the Books of the New Testament. Well, produce your evidence, and let us see what it is worth. When the question is looked at in this way it will be found that the appeal to tradition by Roman Catholics means no more than this: that there are doctrines taught by the Church of Rome which, it must be acknowledged, cannot be found in Scripture, and which she is unwilling to own that she invented, or to pretend that they were made known to her by a new revelation. It remains, then, that she must have received them by tradition. But the baselines of this pretence appears when we come to look into the testimony of antiquity with respect to each of the peculiar doctrines of Romanism. For tradition is a thing which must be the purer the further we trace it back. The Church may get a new revelation, but cannot get a new tradition. We know, from the confession of Bishop Milner and others, that fifty years ago the Roman Church knew nothing certain, either by Scripture or tradition, as to whether or not the Virgin Mary was conceived without sin. Well, then, it

is clear that if that Church has attained to certainty on this subject since, it was not by tradition she attained it. In like manner, when Augustine hears the idea suggested that, as the sins of good men cause them suffering in this world, so they may also to a certain degree in the next, he says that he will not venture to say that nothing of the kind can occur, for perhaps it may.\* Well, if the idea of purgatory had not got beyond a 'perhaps' at the beginning of the fifth century, we are safe in saying that it was not by tradition that the later Church arrived at certainty on the subject; for, if the Church had had any tradition in the time of Augustine, that great Father could not have helped knowing it. And so I might reason with respect to several other doctrines. Tradition, as it were, hangs by a chain from the Apostolic Church, and when one part of the chain snaps, down comes all that is below it. When once it is proved that the Church at any period was ignorant of a doctrine, there can be no pretence that the Church, at any subsequent period derived its knowledge of that doctrine *from Apostolic tradition*.

Indeed the Church of Rome finds this word 'tradition' so convenient, as accounting for the origin of doctrines, whose Apostolic descent can be proved in no other way, that she is unwilling to deprive herself of the power, involving though it does a contradiction in terms, of finding out new traditions. I quoted Bellarmine, as teaching that in calling one part of the Word of God 'unwritten,' he does not mean that it is nowhere written, but only that it was not written down by its first authors. Yet, if you ask how late are we to go down: when did someone or other of the Fathers complete the task of committing all these traditions to writing? you can get no distinct answer. The Roman authorities will not even pledge themselves that every tradition of the Church is committed to writing at this moment; and with good reason, for if they once closed the account it might be an inconvenient check to new developments.

If I am asked, then, why I do not appeal to traditions, independent of Scripture, as evidence of the true Christian doctrine, I am content to answer, Because I see no historical evidence that there are any such trustworthy traditions. Roman Catholics say, You receive the New Testament on the authority of tradition; why do you not receive other things which come to us on the same authority? I answer, that I am willing to receive anything else that comes on the same authority. Produce me as strong testimony in favour of any doctrine not contained in Scripture, as that which proves the Books of the New Testament to have been written by the Apostles, or by their contemporary fellow-labourers, and I will receive it. But, the fact is, the evidence on which we believe that the Epistle to the Galatians was written by St. Paul is far stronger than that on which we believe the *Aeneid* to have been the work of Virgil; but, for any saying or action, or doctrine of our Lord, not contained in the Bible, there really is not as much evidence as the editor of a respectable newspaper requires before he admits an announcement into his columns. Indeed, when we

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\* *De Civ. Dei*, xxi. 26.

search for the early history of the Christian Church it is remarkable what a break occurs after the New Testament history, and before we come to other trustworthy records of much historical value. In the age which immediately succeeded the Apostles there were but few writers, and what remains to us of their compositions adds, I may say, nothing to what the New Testament has told us. When we come lower down the remains of antiquity increase, but there is a singular absence of trustworthy traditional information. I am disposed to account for this break by the rapid diffusion of the Gospel over distant countries; for distance of place is as great an obstacle to the propagation of a tradition as distance of time. But certain it is that the early Christian writers appear to have drawn their knowledge of the facts of the Gospel history solely from the New Testament, like ourselves, and to have been as much at a loss as we, when difficulties occurred, such as tradition might have been expected to explain.

For instance, as to a fact so little likely to be forgotten as the number of years our Saviour lived on earth, and the duration of His ministry, we find very opposite statements in early Christian writers, who we should have supposed had the means of being better informed. Clement of Alexandria makes the whole duration of our Lord's ministry but one year;\* and so some early writers understood the words 'the acceptable year of our Lord'; while Irenaeus (II. xxii.) states, on the authority not merely of John viii. 57, but of persons who claimed to have received St. John's oral teaching, that our Saviour passed through all the stages of human life from infancy to old age. There is a like discrepancy as to a fact which one would think tradition might have preserved the personal appearance of our Saviour.† Opposite opinions were held, but plainly I think, held not on the evidence of traditional testimony, but on no better grounds than those on which we might ourselves discuss the question; the one side understanding literally the prophetic texts, 'He hath no form or comeliness, and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him; His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men;' the other side, yielding to that natural feeling which still leads painters to give to the features of our Blessed Lord all of dignity and grace that they are capable of expressing. There are difficulties in the New Testament on which tradition might be expected to throw light, such as the double genealogies of St. Matthew and St. Luke, and yet it gives no information worthy of reliance.‡ Such a question as whether St. Matthew wrote in

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\* *Strom.* i. 21, p. 407. See also v. 6, p. 658. Clement is followed by Origen (*De Princ.* iv. 5).

† On this subject see the interesting essay appended to Rigault's Cyprian, *De Pulchritudine Corporis D. N. Jesu Christi.*

‡ At the beginning of the third century Africanus endeavoured to collect in Palestine traditions on the subject. Few traditions have stronger external claims to respect than his account of the matter (see Routh, *Roll. Sac.* II. 228), but I cannot feel that any confidence can be placed in it.

Hebrew or Greek appears to be not absolutely settled by tradition.\* Again, some difficulties of textual criticism would be solved if we could assume that more editions of the Gospel than one were published. But no uninspired writer is early enough to know anything about the first publication of the Gospels.

Many like examples can be given. Hermas appears to have been recognized as a prophet at Rome, and his book, called 'The Shepherd,' was admitted to the public reading of many churches. Yet even in Rome itself in less than a hundred years it was quite forgotten who this Hermas was, while in foreign Churches the wildest guesses were made on the subject. The Roman Church does not even give a unanimous account as to the names and order of its first bishops. The Epistle of Clement gained much celebrity; but what order this Clement held in the series of Roman bishops is disputed to this day. The subscriptions to St. Paul's epistles are not earlier than the fourth century; but we might naturally think that Euthalius, to whom they are ascribed, would embody in them all the earlier traditions which he could collect; yet these subscriptions are, in one or two cases, quite erroneous, and are in no case regarded as of any authority. In the third century learned men appear to have been in the same position as ourselves when called on to reconcile the prevalent tradition, that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews with the absence of his name and the difference of style from his acknowledged letters. They appear to have tried to solve the question by sagacious conjecture, but to have been quite without historical testimony. The curiosity of Christians eagerly thirsted for more information about the deeds and sayings of our Lord than the New Testament supplies; and the want, so generally felt, compilers of Apocryphal Gospels tried to satisfy. Some of them are very early, and, if there had been any additional facts available, they would, no doubt, have worked them into their productions. But the fictitious character of these Gospels is betrayed by their entire unlikeness to the genuine histories of our Saviour; nor do I suppose that there is now any learned man who attaches the least credence to the legends which they contain. There is no saying of our Lord, outside of the New Testament, for which there is more respectable testimony, than for that saying about the Millennium which I quoted from Papias last Term,† and which is calculated to destroy all faith in uninspired tradition.

The simple answer, then, to the question, why we do not use traditions as well as Scripture in the proof of Christian doctrine, is that we do not know of any trustworthy enough; and what we have seen of the failure of tradition proves to us that there were good reasons why God should have granted us in Scripture a more secure channel for conveying Christian truth. But if it is alleged that it can be established by uninspired testimony that any doctrine not contained in Scripture is part of the Christian scheme, let the evidence be produced, and we are willing to consider it. I need not discuss the abstract proba-

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\* See my *Introduction to the New Testament*, Lect. x.

† Irenæus, v.33. See my *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 226.

bility whether it is reasonable to expect that such testimony can be forthcoming, because I believe as a matter of fact, that, in no case, has any such been produced.