

Documents of Vatican I on Papal Primacy and Infallibility

The provided text is the full decree on the Primacy of Peter and the Infallibility of the Pope. The full text is taken from Denzinger's *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1954), pages 452 - 457.

Session IV (July 18, 1870) Dogmatic Constitution I on the Church of Christ

1821 “[The Institution and foundation of the Church]. “The eternal Pastor and Bishop of our souls” [I Pet. 2:25], in order to render the saving work of redemption perennial, willed to build a holy Church, in which, as in the house of the living God, all the faithful might be contained by the bond of one faith and charity. Therefore, before His glory was made manifest, “He asked the Father, not only for the Apostles but also for those who would believe through their word in Him, that all might be one, just as the Son Himself and the Father are one” [John 17:20 f.]. Thus, then, as He sent the apostles, whom He had selected from the world for Himself, as He himself had been sent by the Father [John 20:21], so in His Church He wished the pastors and the doctors to be “even to the consummation of the world” [Matt. 28:20]. But, that the episcopacy itself might be one and undivided, and that the entire multitude of the faithful through priests closely connected with one another might be preserved in the unity of faith and communion, placing the blessed Peter over the other apostles He established in him the perpetual principle and visible foundation of both unities, upon whose strength the eternal temple might be erected, and the sublimity of the Church to be raised to heaven might rise in the firmness of this faith.’ And, since the gates of hell, to overthrow the Church, if this were possible, arise from all sides with ever greater hatred against its divinely established foundation, We judge it to be necessary for the protection, safety, and increase of the Catholic flock, with the approbation of the Council, to set forth the doctrine on the institution, perpetuity, and nature of the Sacred Apostolic Primacy, in which the strength and solidarity of the whole Church consist, to be believed and held by all the faithful, according to the ancient and continual faith of the universal Church, and to proscribe and condemn the contrary errors, so pernicious to the Lord’s flock.

“Chap. 1. The Institution of Apostolic Primacy in Blessed Peter

“1822 [Against heretics and schismatics]. So we teach and declare that according to the testimonies of the Gospel the primacy of jurisdiction over the entire Church of God was promised and was conferred immediately and directly upon the blessed Apostle Peter by Christ the Lord. For the one Simon, to whom He had before said: “Thou shalt be called Cephas” [John 1:42], after he had given forth his confession with those words: “Thou art Christ, Son of the living God” [Matt. 16:16], the Lord spoke with these solemn words: “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar Jona; because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say to thee: That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it: and I shall give to thee the keys of the kingdom of

heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven” [Matt. 16:17ff.]. [against Richerius etc. (see n. 1503)]. And upon Simon Peter alone Jesus after His resurrection conferred the jurisdiction of the highest pastor and rector over his entire fold, saying: “Feed my lambs,” “Feed my sheep” [John 21:15 ff.]. To this teaching of Sacred Scriptures, so manifest as it has been always understood by the Catholic Church, are opposed openly the vicious opinions of those who perversely deny that the form of government in His Church was established by Christ the Lord; that to Peter alone, before the other apostles, whether individually or all together, was confided the true and proper primacy of jurisdiction by Christ; or, of those who affirm that the same primacy was not immediately and directly bestowed upon the blessed Peter himself, but upon the Church, and through this Church upon him as the minister of the Church herself.

“1823 [Canon]. If anyone then says that the blessed Apostle Peter was not established by the Lord Christ as the chief of all the apostles, and the visible head of the whole militant Church, or, that the same received great honor but did not receive from the same our Lord Jesus Christ directly and immediately the primacy in true and proper jurisdiction: let him be anathema. [Let’s remember that no orthodox Father of the Church ever said the above words in denial.]

“Chap. 2. The Perpetuity of the Primacy of Blessed Peter among the Roman Pontiffs

“1824 Moreover, what the Chief of pastors and the Great Pastor of sheep, the Lord Jesus, established in the blessed Apostle Peter for the perpetual salvation and perennial good of the Church, this by the same Author must endure always in the Church which was founded upon a rock and will endure firm until the end of the ages. Surely “no one has doubt, rather all ages have known that the holy and most blessed Peter, chief and head of the apostles and pillar of faith and foundation of the Catholic Church, received the keys of the kingdom from our Lord Jesus Christ [this is obvious since it is stated expressly in Scripture], the Savior and Redeemer of the human race; and he up to this time and always lives and presides and exercises judgment in his successors [as the Council of Chalcedon declared “Peter has spoken through Leo], the bishops of the holy See of Rome, which was founded by him and consecrated by his blood, [cf. Council of Ephesus, see n. 112]. Therefore, whoever succeeds Peter in this chair, he according to the institution of Christ himself, holds the primacy of Peter over the whole Church. “Therefore the disposition of truth remains, and blessed Peter persevering in the accepted fortitude of the rock does not abandon the guidance of the Church which he has received.” For this reason “it has always been necessary because of mightier pre-eminence for every church to come to the Church of Rome [as we have seen over and over again, at least for those who have actually read my book, Bill], that is those who are the faithful everywhere,” so that in this See, from

which the laws of “venerable communion” emanate over all, they as members associated in one head, coalesce into one bodily structure.

[The above paragraph is taken almost word for word from the Council of Ephesus in 431, St. Leo the Great (died 461), St. Irenaeus in 180, and St. Ambrose (339-397). The words of Vatican I incorporate the explicit language of the Fathers from the patristic age. The authority recognized and defined by Vatican I is the same authority exercised by the bishops of Rome from the beginning, appealed to by the churches, and defined by the councils. This exercise of authority can be seen in the first writing from Rome outside the New Testament: The Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, which Lightfoot calls “the first step toward Papal domination” (see *Upon this Rock*, 128). Not only the first step, but the reflection of Vatican I in the first century.]

“1825 [Canon]. If anyone then says that it is not from the institution of Christ the Lord Himself, or by divine right that the blessed Peter has perpetual successors in the primacy over the universal Church, or that the Roman Pontiff is not the successor of blessed Peter in the same primacy, let him be anathema [Let’s remember that no Father ever denied this. Remember, Bill admits in his e-mail that no Father ever denied that Peter had a primacy or that the primacy was successive].

“Chap. 3. The Power and Manner of the Primacy of the Roman Pontiff

“1826 [Assertion of primacy]. Therefore, relying on the clear testimonies of Sacred Scripture, and adhering to the eloquent and manifest decisions not only of Our predecessors, the Roman Pontiffs, but also of the general Councils, We renew the definition of the Ecumenical Council of Florence, by which all the faithful of Christ most believe “that the Apostolic See and the Roman Pontiff hold primacy over the whole world, and that the Pontiff of Rome himself is the successor of the blessed Peter, the chief of the apostles, and is the true vicar of Christ and head of the whole Church and faith, and teacher of all Christians; and that to him was handed down in blessed Peter, by our Lord Jesus Christ, full power to feed, rule, and guide the universal Church, just as is also contained in the records of the ecumenical Councils and in the sacred canons” [see n. 694].

“1827 [Consequences denied by innovators]. Furthermore We teach and declare that the Roman Church, by the disposition of the Lord, holds the sovereignty of ordinary power over all others, and that this power of jurisdiction on the part of the Roman Pontiff, which is truly episcopal, is immediate; and with respect to this the pastors and the faithful of whatever rite and dignity, both as separate individuals and all together, are bound by the duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, not only in things which pertain to faith and morals, but also in those which pertain to the discipline and government of the Church [which is] spread over the whole world,

so that the Church of Christ, protected not only by the Roman Pontiff, but by the unity of communion as well as of the profession of the same faith is one flock under the one highest shepherd. This is the doctrine of Catholic truth from which no one can deviate and keep his faith and salvation.

“1828 [The jurisdiction of the Roman Pontiff and of the bishops]. This power of the Supreme Pontiff is so far from interfering with that power of ordinary and immediate episcopal jurisdiction by which the bishops, who, “placed by the Holy Spirit” [cf. Acts 20:28], have succeeded to the places of the apostles, as true shepherds individually feed and rule the individual flocks assigned to them, that the same (power) is asserted, confirmed, and vindicated by the supreme and universal shepherd, according to the statement of Gregory the Great: “My honor is the universal honor of the Church. My honor is the solid vigor of my brothers. Then am I truly honored, when the honor due to each and everyone is not denied.”*

“1829 [Free communication with all the faithful]. Furthermore, it follows that from that supreme power of the Roman Pontiff of ruling the universal Church, the same has the right in the exercise of this duty of his office of communicating freely with the pastors and flocks of the whole Church, so that the same can be taught and guided by him in the way of salvation. Therefore, We condemn and disapprove the opinions of those who say that this communication of the supreme head with pastors and flocks can lawfully be checked, or who make this so submissive to secular power that they contend that whatever is established by the Apostolic See or its authority for the government of the Church has no force or value unless confirmed by an order of the secular power [Placitum regium, see n. 1847].

“1830 [Recourse to the Roman Pontiff as the supreme judge]. And since the Roman Pontiff is at the head of the universal Church by the divine right of apostolic primacy, We teach and declare also that he is the supreme judge of the faithful [cf. n. 1500], and that in all cases pertaining to ecclesiastical examination recourse can be had to his judgment [cf. n. 466]; moreover, that the judgment of the Apostolic See, whose authority is not surpassed, is to be disclaimed by no one, nor is anyone permitted to pass judgment on its judgment [cf. n. 330 ff.]. Therefore, they stray from the straight path of truth who affirm that it is permitted to appeal from the judgments of the Roman Pontiffs to an ecumenical Council, as to an authority higher than the Roman Pontiff.

1831 [Canon]. If anyone thus speaks, that the Roman Pontiff has only the office of inspection or direction, but not the full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the universal Church, not only in things which pertain to faith and morals, but also in those which pertain to the discipline and government of the Church spread over the whole world; or, that he possesses only the more important parts, but not the whole plenitude of this supreme power; or that this power of his is not ordinary and

immediate, or over the churches altogether and individually, and over the pastors and the faithful altogether and individually: let him be anathema.

“Chap. 4. The Infallible “Magisterium” of the Roman Pontiff

“1832 [Arguments from public documents]. Moreover, that by the very apostolic primacy which the Roman Pontiff as the successor of Peter, the chief of the Apostles, holds over the universal Church, the supreme power of the magisterium is also comprehended, this Holy See has always held, the whole experience of the Church approves, and the ecumenical Councils themselves, especially those in which the Last convened with the West in a union of faith and charity, have declared.

“1833 For the fathers of the fourth council of Constantinople, adhering to the ways of the former ones, published this solemn profession: “Our first salvation is to guard the rule of right faith [. . .]. And since the sentiment of our Lord Jesus Christ cannot be passed over when He says: ‘Thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church’ [Matt. 16:18], these words which were spoken are proven true by actual results, since in the Apostolic See the Catholic religion has always been preserved untainted, and holy doctrine celebrated. Desiring, then, least of all to be separated from the faith and teaching of this [Apostolic See], We hope that We may deserve to be in the one communion which the Apostolic See proclaims, in which the solidarity of the Christian religion is whole and true”

“1834 [cf. n. 171 f.]. Moreover, with the approval of the second council of Lyons, the Greeks have professed, “that the Holy Roman Church holds the highest and the full primacy and pre-eminence over the universal Catholic Church, which it truthfully and humbly professes it has received with plenitude of power from the Lord Himself in blessed Peter, the chief or head of the Apostles, of whom the Roman Pontiff is the successor; and, just as it is bound above others to defend the truth of

“1835 faith, so, too, if any questions arise about faith, they should be defined by its judgment” [cf. n. 466]. Finally, the Council of Florence has defined: “That the Roman Pontiff is the true vicar of Christ and head of the whole Church and the father and teacher of all Christians; and to it in the blessed Peter has been handed down by the Lord Jesus Christ the full power of feeding, ruling, and guiding the universal Church” [see n. 694].

“1836 [Argument from the assent of the Church]. To satisfy this pastoral duty, our predecessors always gave tireless attention that the saving doctrine of Christ be spread among all the peoples of the earth, and with equal care they watched that, wherever it was received, it was preserved sound and pure. Therefore, the bishops of the whole world, now individually, now gathered in Synods, following a long custom of the churches and the formula of the ancient rule, referred to this Holy See those

dangers particularly which emerged in the affairs of faith, that there especially the damages to faith might be repaired where faith cannot experience a failure. The Roman Pontiffs, moreover, according as the condition of the times and affairs advised, sometimes by calling ecumenical Councils or by examining the opinion of the Church spread throughout the world; sometimes by particular synods, sometimes by employing other helps which divine Providence supplied, have defined that those matters must be held which with God's help they have recognized as in agreement with Sacred Scripture and apostolic tradition. For, the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter that by His revelation they might disclose new doctrine, but that by His help they might guard sacredly the revelation transmitted through the apostles and the deposit of faith, and might faithfully set it forth. Indeed, all the venerable fathers have embraced their apostolic doctrine, and the holy orthodox Doctors have venerated and followed it, knowing full well that the See of St. Peter always remains unimpaired by any error, according to the divine promise of our Lord the Savior made to the chief of His disciples: "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren" [Luke 22:32].

"1837 So, this gift of truth and a never failing faith was divinely conferred upon Peter and his successors in this chair, that they might administer their high duty for the salvation of all; that the entire flock of Christ, turned away by them from the poisonous food of error, might be nourished on the sustenance of heavenly doctrine, that with the occasion of schism removed the whole Church might be saved as one, and relying on her foundation might stay firm against the gates of hell.

"1838 [Definition of infallibility]. But since in this very age, in which the salutary efficacy of the apostolic duty is especially required, not a few are found who disparage its authority, We deem it most necessary to assert solemnly the prerogative which the Only-begotten Son of God deigned to enjoin with the highest pastoral office.

"1839 And so We, adhering faithfully to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, to the glory of God, our Savior, the elevation of the Catholic religion and the salvation of Christian peoples, with the approbation of the sacred Council, teach and explain that the dogma has been divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when carrying out the duty of the pastor and teacher of all Christians by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, through the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, operates with that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer wished that His church be instructed in defining doctrine on faith and morals; and so such definitions of the Roman Pontiff from himself, but not from the consensus of the Church, are unalterable.

“1840 [Canon]. But if anyone presumes to contradict this definition of Ours, which may God forbid: let him be anathema [sounds just like St. Clement of Rome in 96 AD!].”