Vatican I and the Papacy

5: Defining "defining"

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That ultimate responsibility for true Christian doctrine is included in the universal primacy which the bishop of Rome as successor of St Peter possesses in the universal Church is a claim that should surprise no one who is prepared to entertain the notion of a universal primacy in the first place. This is, at any rate, the burden of the famous chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus", the document in which Vatican I defined the infallible teaching of the bishop of Rome. What, with the approval of the Council, Pope Pius IX defined in the text that was promulgated on 18th July, 1870, as "dogma divinely revealed" runs as follows:

"The bishop of Rome, when he speaks ex cathedra, i.e. when, in discharge of the office of pastor and teacher of all Christians by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, is, by God's help promised to him in St Peter, possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed in defining a doctrine regarding faith or morals; and such definitions of the bishop of Rome are therefore of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, irreformable".

Assuming, then, that the bishop of Rome as successor of St Peter must in some sense be "the mouth of the Church and of the episcopate", and must thus be able on some occasions at least to give voice to the faith that all alike hold, what are the problems of interpretation that this text contains? The fact that these problems have often been raised before, and that, in trying to resolve them, we have little new to say, will not deter us from covering the ground once again. As we noted at the beginning of this series, reunion between Rome and the Orthodox Church is now on the agenda (if still, humanly at least, a remote prospect), and it is important for us to be clear about what we believe, and in particular about the extent of the revisability of popular beliefs, in the matter of the papal ministry.

The three principal problems in the text are as follows:

(1) what is meant by "defining" in this context?

(2) what is meant by the "infallibility" with which the Church is endowed and of which the bishop of Rome may on occasion be possessed?

(3) what is meant by a definition which is "irreformable, *ex sese non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae*"?

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The first thing to be clear about is that a definition, in this context, is not the form of words in which the precise nature of a thing, or meaning of a word, is stated—as it might be in philosophical argument, at least of an Aristotelian kind. To frame a definition, in the sense of setting forth the essence of a thing, or of declaring the exact meaning of a term, is not what is in question here. No Christian doctrine is susceptible to that kind of definition, whether by the bishop of Rome or any one else, possessed of whatever divine assistance he may be for the attempt.

On the other hand, it is not the case that any and every statement of doctrine constitutes such a papal definition. We have the texts of the speeches which Bishop Vincent Gasser made, on behalf of the *Deputatio de Fide*, in the days before the Council voted, and they are the best and the most authoritative guide to how chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus" was understood at the time when it was composed. On July 11th he spoke as follows:

"Not any and every presentation of a doctrine counts, even if the pope were discharging his office as supreme pastor and teacher. On the contrary, the intention must be explicit of defining a doctrine: of putting an end to wavering on some doctrinal matter by giving a definitive judgment, and by presenting the doctrine as binding on the universal Church" (Mansi, 52, 1225). In other words, as everybody knows, the pope has to let people know when he is making such a judgment; but what is less noticed is the assumption that Gasser makes that to define, in this context, is to put an end to wavering (*fluctuatio*).

Terminating such wavering on some doctrinal matter is explicitly distinguished from merely ordering the participants in some doctrinal controversy to desist, as Paul V had to do in 1607 to stop the quarrel over grace and free will between Jesuits and Dominicans, but without settling the argument one way or the other. As Gasser explained on July 16th: "It is not the mind of the *Deputatio de Fide* that the word be taken in the forensic sense, meaning no more than to put a stop to a controversy which has been raging about heresy or doctrine ... The word 'defines' here means that the pope pronounces his judgment (*sententia*) as regards the doctrine" (Mansi 52, 1316).

It is thus not a question of the pope's intervening to stop some controversy that is scandalizing the faithful or whatever. It is rather that he ends the argument by coming down on one side or the other; he settles the argument by pronouncing his own judgment.

Furthermore, we even have a very clear account of the sort of situation in which such a papal intervention would be necessary. As Gasser said, again in his key speech on July 11th, 1870: "The proper occasion for such a definition is when there have arisen

scandals concerning the faith in some part of the Church: disagreements and heresies which the local bishops are unable to deal with, either by individual action or even by a regional council, so that they are compelled to refer the matter to the Holy See; or if the bishops themselves have been seriously corrupted by error" (Mansi 52, 1213). The mind of the principal spokesman for the *Deputatio de Fide* could not be clearer. For him at least the kind of definitions which the pope might make infallibly are called for when doctrinal dissension goes beyond what local churches can deal with. No dissentient voices are recorded in the columns of Mansi at this point. The majority of the bishops cannot have been surprised by what Gasser said. His speech lasted four hours, and counts as the most authoritative commentary on chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus". There can be no doubt that, for Gasser, "definitions *de fide* were grave necessities, not devotional outpourings", as Newman thought (Letters, XXV, p. 17).

A great deal of trouble has been caused by the habit that Catholics and others have fallen into since 1870 of thinking that the pope could define as part of the Catholic faith any doctrine that came into his head one fine sunny morning. But the sort of papal intervention which would lead to the kind of definition in question here arises in the sort of circumstances which Gasser indicated. Obviously there could be no exhaustive account of such circumstances in advance. The whole point of chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus" is to express the claim of faith that Peter and his successors can call upon a certain "gift of truth and never-failing faith" (*charisma* is the word there for "gift")—"that they might perform their high office for the salvation of all; that the whole flock of Christ, kept away by them from the poisonous food of error, might be nourished with the pasture of heavenly doctrine; that, the occasion of schism being removed, the whole Church might be kept one, and, resting in its foundation, might stand firm against the gates of hell". That is not a forecast of the precise conditions in which this papal charism must be exercised, but it is a very clear indication of the *sort* of situations which Vatican I had in mind. Conciliar texts are never fully intelligible until we learn to read what they do not say; the blanks, or the erasures, are significant for the meaning of the final text. But in the case of the word "definition" we do not have to rely only on Bishop Gasser's speech; it is plain enough on the face of the text itself that there can be no "definition" according to the mind of Vatican I unless there is a scandalous crisis that demands papal intervention. Arguments over what papal statements are made, or have been made, in conditions that guarantee or involve "infallibility", or over what infallibility might mean at all, often take for granted a notion of "definition" which (to say the least) never came to the fore at

Vatican I. As Canon Sweeney has pointed out (*Clergy Review*, October 1971), papal definitions "belong only to times when the Church is sick, and torn by dissensions that cannot be cured by discussion and agreement. The Petrine prerogative is not a glory of the Church; it is a disagreeable necessity, like the skill of the surgeon".

There was once a time when theologians made lists of papal definitions that had been made in conditions that involved infallibility. Nowadays only two or three are quoted as instances: the definition of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX in 1854 and that of the Assumption by Pius XII in 1950, with the definition of papal infallibility itself being a possible third case, on the grounds that the definition was promulgated by Pius IX, "with the approval of the Sacred Council, *sacro approbante Concilio*" (certainly an unfortunate formula, used neither at Trent nor at Vatican II). But in my student days, twenty years ago, a much longer list was confidently offered. If we go back to Dublanchy's authoritative entry in the *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* (volume 7, columns 1638 to 1717), a volume which appeared in 1927, we find *thirteen* papal documents catalogued as being "usually, or usually enough, regarded as containing an infallible definition" (column 1703). In fact he mentions two cases only to reject them, but the fact that there is debate at all about the number of such definitions suggests that they do not constitute such a clear category as many Catholics and others often suppose.

It is worth examining Dublanchy's catalogue of infallible definitions. They may be divided into five categories.

In the first category come the two instances which Dublanchy notes in the period during which Rome and the Eastern Churches were still in communion. His first instance is the famous Tome of Leo: this is the letter written by Pope Leo the Great in the year 449, expounding the two-natures-in-one-person Christological doctrine of the Latin Church opposing in particular the teaching of the Byzantine monk Eutyches that the humanity of Christ was not consubstantial with ours. This letter was read at the Council of Chalcedon and acclaimed as the classic statement of the Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation: "Peter has spoken through Leo". This papal statement was accepted, however, not because it was papal but because the majority judged it to be true. The phrase "In two natures", which Leo had taken over from St Augustine, provoked a great deal of post-conciliar distress and was indeed largely the cause (anyway the pretext) for massive secession of eastern Christians. As a papal "definition" the Tome of Leo certainly did not terminate the controversy or secure ecclesiastical unity; it was, on the other hand, certainly called forth by a major doctrinal crisis.

Dublanchy's other example from the early period is the letter

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which Pope Agatho sent to the Emperor Constantine IV (Pognatus) in the year 680 explaining what a synod he had held in Rome had decided about the question of the two wills in Christ (the Monothelite controversy). The emperor called a council (subsequently recognized as the Sixth Ecumenical Council), of bishops from the patriarchates of Constantinople and Antioch, and the papal envoys played a dominant role in its deliberations. There is no doubt that Agatho's letter was one of the doctrinal norms of this Council, but the evidence does not suggest that it was regarded as the only one. This, of course, was the Council at which Pope Honorius I was declared a heretic, on the basis of two letters on the Monothelite controversy which seem every bit as official as many of the papal pronouncements on Dublanchy's list (he was certainly not writing as a "private theologian", as the get-out offered at Vatican I suggests).

These are in fact the only significant papal contributions to the making of Christian doctrine in response to the major Trinitarian and Christological controversies with which the first seven ecumenical councils were concerned. We now pass to the Middle Ages and to the three instances of infallible papal decisions which Dublanchy spots in this period.

The first comes in the bull "Unam Sanctam" which Boniface VIII issued in 1302 as part of his great political struggle with the King of France. The closing declaration at least is infallible, so Dublanchy says: "we declare, state, and define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation for every human creature to be subject to the pope of Rome". This marks the zenith of papal claims; everything since then has been a long retreat. Could any one imagine today that Christians, or any one else, not in communion with the pope, are ipso facto damned? Would any theologian now regard such an utterance as a proper occasion for invoking papal infallibility? (Please don't all speak at once.)

The second allegedly infallible definition in this period is the pronouncement by Benedict XII in 1336 that the souls of the just who have no faults to expiate enjoy the beatific vision immediately after death. The nature and conditions of the vision of God in heaven were a matter of intense theological dispute in the medieval schools and, before his election, Benedict XII, one of the few popes with any reputation or competence as a "private theologian", had taken part in the controversies in Paris (he was an Avignon pope). That his judgment on this point has become Catholic doctrine certainly suggests that Benedict XII had found a good formula. It may be doubted, on the other hand, whether the controversy reached far outside the schools, or whether it was much of a threat to the unity of the Church. But on a matter that touched upon questions about death, sanctity, purgatory, and

eschatology in general, it may well be that the pope's decision saved many of the faithful from even worse confusion on such questions than seems to have prevailed in the later Middle Ages.

Dublanchy next mentions the bull "Exsurge Domine" issued by Leo X in 1520, excommunicating Martin Luther and condemning 41 propositions attributed to him. There were only two major catastrophes in the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages and since one of these was the simultaneous existence of two (and for a time three) popes, during the forty years from 1378 to 1417, it is not surprising that the promises to St Peter had little bearing on the solution of the problem. In the case of Lutheranism, however, no pope could have remained inactive, although Leo X did his best to do so. Son of Lorenzo de' Medici he personified Renaissance humanism. At home really only in Florence, he could never have fathomed the objections that the pious miner's son from Saxony had to German money from the sale of indulgences being used to pay for beautiful buildings, art, music, old books, and so on in Rome. He liked hunting, and liked going to Mass and sometimes even celebrated himself. It does not seem likely that Leo X, although very intelligent and well educated, ever had a serious theological thought in his head. But when pressure through the usual channels (a word with the superior general of the Augustinian Hermits), and certain diplomatic moves, failed to silence Luther, and once his duty was pointed out to him by the Emperor, Leo X issued his condemnation of Luther's doctrines. It is not denying that, to a Catholic mind, there is something wrong with some aspects of Lutheranism, to say that "Exsurge Domine" is far too much of a ragbag to be the definitive papal statement on the matter.

What Catholics have always feared in Lutheran doctrine is the danger of a certain pessimism and quietism that might go with what appears to be the playing down of the human will. It is thus fascinating to find that the next four allegedly infallible definitions on Dublanchy's list all have to do with precisely this neo-Augustinian current in so much modern Catholic spirituality, with the pessimism flowing into Jansenism and the quietism into Molinos, Fénelon, Madame Guyon and others. In 1653 propositions of Cornelius Jansen were condemned by Innocent X. In 1687, after the nuns he directed "began to refuse to recite their office and go to confession, discarded their rosaries and holy pictures, and generally disturbed discipline in their houses" (Cross and Livingstone), Miguel de Molinos was condemned by Innocent XI. In 1699, culling propositions from the works of Fénelon, quietism was again condemned by (this time) Innocent XII. Finally, in 1713, it was the turn again of Jansenism, with the condemnation of Pasquier Quesnel by Clement XI. The notion that human nature

is utterly corrupt (Jansenism) and the practice of abandoning the will as a form of religious mysticism (quietism) are plainly deviations from Catholic doctrine, with subtle and ramifying consequences in spirituality. There seems no doubt that these repeated interventions by Rome represent the protest of sound Catholic tradition against dottiness which, if it did not split the Church, certainly caused havoc in seminaries and convents and, from there, distorted people's ideas about eschatology and spirituality (signs of which may sometimes still be recognized in the confessional).

The tenth item on Dublanchy's list is the condemnation by Pius VI in 1794 of some eighty-five propositions drawn from the acts of the Synod of Pistoia. This was a diocesan council held in 1786 in Tuscany. Amid some important suggestions for church reform, it reaffirmed the basic principles of Jansenism as well as those of Gallicanism (originally the doctrine that the French Church at least enjoyed more or less complete freedom from the authority of the pope and by analogy that the pope had little or no role in the life of any great national church). Pius VI was outraged by the spread to Tuscany of the ecclesiastical policies of the Emperor of Austria; even Catholic monarchs were now trying to make the local church subject to the state. But the French Church itself was soon subject to the will of Napoleon Bonaparte, and in 1798 the pope had to leave Rome to become a captive of the French. He died in their custody in 1799, the moment that marks the nadir of papal fortunes in modern times (Boniface VIII, despite the bull "Unam Sanctam", died in all but similar circumstances in 1303). But with his refusal to countenance the dreary doctrines of Jansenism, and with his desire to protect local churches from subjection to the secular power, Pius VI was certainly voicing fundamental principles of the Catholic faith.

That leaves us with two more categories of infallible definitions according to Dublanchy's catalogue.

Dublanchy refers to the once standard study of papal decisions published in 1907 by L. Choupin S.J. in which it is recorded that "many theologians and canonists would happily add the celebrated encyclical *Quanta cura* of Pius IX", i.e. to the list of infallible papal pronouncements. Dublanchy notes that by his time (1927) this encyclical, to which the famous Syllabus of Errors was attached, was no longer regarded as infallible. From its appearance in 1864 this document lay, for fifty or sixty years, uneasily on the minds of many Catholics, and was often held up for ridicule by others, as an example of papal infallibility. For the most part it only repeats what any pope, or any Catholic, would have said on many matters of the day; as Derek Holmes points out (*The Triumph of the Holy See*, p. 146), "It was hardly surprising that the Pope should have denounced the opinions that God was

merely nature, that human reason was the sole arbiter of truth and falsehood, good and evil, that all religious truths were derived from human reason, that Christianity contradicted reason or that revelation hindered the perfection of man, that biblical miracles were poetic fictions and Christ himself was a myth". But the document also treated religious toleration and free speech as un-Catholic, and forbade Catholics to dispute the compatibility of the pope's temporal with his spiritual rule. It was also wrong to say that the Church should not use force. Incomprehensible as it may seem today, such views were being presented with papal authority seventy years ago.

The atmosphere of those far-off days is recalled more poignantly by Dublanchy's scrupulous paragraph on the encyclical "Pascendi" and the Holy Office decree "Lamentabili", both issued in 1907, as part of the attempt by Pius X and Cardinal Merry del Val to stamp out "modernism". From the outset, so Dublanchy tells us, these pronouncements were the subject of contradictory judgments. Some theologians saw them as examples of infallible teaching; others, like Choupin, regarded the encyclical's teaching as being as close as the pope could come to making an infallible statement without actually doing so. As Eric John pointed out (*New Blackfriars*, December 1967, p. 119): "Those theologians who spend their time grading papal pronouncements in order as they approach infallibility are confusing themselves and us". Yes, but for the first half of this century the game of grading papal pronouncements was often a necessary confusion to save faith and sanity.

Finally we reach the bull "Ineffabilis Deus" of 1854, in which Pius IX defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Since Dublanchy's day we should have to add the definition of the dogma of the Assumption of Our Lady. We thus have the only two papal definitions which the majority of theologians would quote today, and the only two mentioned as creating "special difficulties" in the Anglican-Roman Catholic Statement on Authority (Venice, 1976). How do these two definitions fit in with the expectations written into the text of chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus"?

To repeat, the papal definitions which Vatican I had in mind have to do with the exercise of a *charisma veritatis* "that the whole flock of Christ, kept away by them (the popes) from the poisonous food of error, might be nourished with heavenly doctrine; that, the occasion of schism being removed, the whole Church might be kept one, and, resting in its foundation, might stand firm against the gates of hell" ("Pastor Aeternus", chap. 4).

As far as the definition of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is concerned, there is a history of controversy dat-

ing back to the twelfth century (there is a valuable article on the doctrine by J. P. Kenny S.J. in *The Clergy Review*, December 1978). That Mary is All-holy, *Panagia*, is part of the faith of the Holy Catholic and Orthodox Church from as early as we have any evidence of either thought or devotion about the matter. Her birthday was being honoured liturgically in Jerusalem in the mid-fifth century. By the eleventh century, and in England of all places, in the Ecclesia Anglicana then (the only doctrinal contribution it ever made to the Catholic faith), the belief had become articulate that she was filled with the Holy Spirit from her mother's womb. The doctrine was opposed by such great theologians as Bernard of Clairvaux, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. The theological disputes involved questions about human generation and original sin and, not surprisingly, became complex. If, for example, as many theologians held, sexual intercourse (even in marriage) was inevitably sinful, and necessarily transmitted sin to any offspring, how could Mary be "immaculately" conceived? It was Duns Scotus, who lectured as much in Cambridge and Oxford as he did in Paris and Cologne (between 1297 and his death in 1308), who found the theological formula for saying that, although conceived "immaculate", Mary is still one of the redeemed. By the middle of the fifteenth century it was possible for Sixtus IV to sanction the doctrine with a proper Mass and Office (formerly superior-general of the Franciscans, he was "a passable theologian", according to Cross and Livingstone, best remembered however for founding the Sistine Choir, building the Sistine Chapel, and going in for nepotism and financial mismanagement on a large scale). In the mid-seventeenth century, to stop the argument, the Holy Office tried to get Innocent X to make a pronouncement. In fact, however, by this time, what had long since established itself among faithful and clergy alike was being opposed only by Dominicans.

At no time could any one have thought that the controversy was any threat to the unity of the Church. For most of the time the popes were far more concerned with Lutheranism and then Jansenism: bitter and catastrophic dissensions within the Church which the local bishops were plainly unable to settle and which called for precisely the kind of papal intervention that Gasser at least had in mind in 1870. But since the definition of 1854 was always in the background at Vatican I, and there was after all a controversy of sorts, even though it was confined to theological circles and arcane enough in detail, it may be that the definition of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception counts as a definition in the Vatican I sense, but at best it is a marginal case, and I share Canon Sweeney's doubts (*Clergy Review*, October 1971).

Belief in the Assumption of the Mother of God is part of the

common inheritance of all Catholic and Orthodox Christians (there is one valuable article on the doctrine by J. P. Kenny in *The Clergy Review*, August 1978, and another by John Saward, in *Sobornost*, Summer 1977). There has never been any controversy about the doctrine. In the wake of the definition of the Immaculate Conception many of the faithful and clergy got it into their heads that a doctrine which everybody believed could somehow become more true, if the pope were to proclaim it to be true. In 1863 Queen Isabella II of Spain, prompted by her confessor, Archbishop Antonio M. Claret, wrote to Pius IX asking him to define the doctrine of the Assumption. In his reply the pope said that the Assumption was a consequence of the Immaculate Conception but that the time for defining it had not yet arrived. It is clear that he was firmly in the grip of *Konklusionstheologie*, and thought that one doctrine after another could be made "certain" by a process of "definition". It is not at all the concept of definition written into the text of "Pastor Aeternus". During Vatican I there was a good deal of agitation for lifting the doctrine to the dignity of a defined dogma, to use the sort of language that was current in some circles. We are back again in the weird universe in which truths can become somehow more true, or anyway more certain, if they cease to be merely doctrines and become dogmas. It is the grading game again.

In fact 187 of the bishops at Vatican I signed petitions to have the doctrine of the Assumption proclaimed a dogma. The largest petition, which carried 113 signatures, was got up by an English Jesuit, Hunter by name. But some bishops refused to sign, on the grounds that a belief which was so deeply rooted in the tradition of the Church had no need to be "defined", thereby showing that they at least shared Bishop Gasser's concept of defining. In fact nothing came of these petitions at the Council, although it would have been interesting to see how, with Gasser's speeches fresh in their minds, the bishops would have squared a proclamation of the doctrine with the notion that a papal definition is called for to deal with a crisis.

After a lull petitions began to pour into Rome from all over the world from 1880 onwards asking for Our Lady to be honoured by having the doctrine of her Assumption "defined" (in this other sense). Finally, in 1946, Pius XII sent a letter round the bishops of the world asking them to tell him what devotion the laity and clergy entrusted to their guidance showed to the Assumption, and what they would feel about a dogmatic definition. In 1950 the pope reported that "in an admirable and almost unanimous chorus there has come to us from the entire world the voices of the clergy and people expressing the same faith and asking the same thing as supremely desired by all". And in November of that year he sol-

emnly declared the doctrine to be a dogma of the Catholic Church.

Definitions, as Newman said, are grave necessities, not devotional outpourings. A substantial number of the bishops at Vatican I certainly thought that devotional outpourings might properly lead to a papal definition. But the text of chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus", even apart from Bishop Gasser's exposition of it before it was accepted, contains no suggestion that this sort of clarification of the instinctive devotion of the faithful might be either the normal or even a possible definition. On the contrary, the text directs us to think in terms of a decision or a judgment which settles a dispute that gravely threatens the unity of the Church and the purity of the faith.

A pope, of course, like any other preacher, is at liberty to proclaim what Catholics believe; but true doctrine becomes no more certain because the pope preaches it. It may well be opportune and important that some particular doctrine should be emphasized at some particular time. John Saward makes a good case for a solemn proclamation of the doctrine of the Assumption in 1950. But to proclaim as solemnly as you like what nobody is contesting is one thing; to define a doctrine, in the sense of settling a dispute that is shaking some part of the Church, is another matter altogether. To voice the faith of the Church in the eschatological destiny of Our Lady is one thing; but there were no circumstances in which this pronouncement could have been a definition in the Vatican I sense of the term.

To question whether the two Marian dogmas are definitions in the Vatican I sense, and thus whether they engaged the "gift of truth" in any special way, is of course not to question the truth of the doctrines themselves. On the contrary, it is precisely because the doctrine of the Assumption was not being contested at all that it could not be the subject of a definition in the proper sense.

Popes too have evidently not always read the small print of Vatican I. Pius XII himself made half a dozen declarations of much greater doctrinal importance than the proclamation of 1950, most of which were interventions called forth by quite serious controversies. But was it perhaps because Paul VI *had* read chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus" from beginning to end that he shrank from venturing an ex cathedra judgment in 1968 in circumstances which have certainly divided the Church? What is the infallibility with which the Church is endowed, and of which, on such an occasion, the bishop of Rome might be possessed?

(To be continued)

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