

THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Vatican I's Teaching on Papal Infallibility: Nineteenth-Century Historical Context and Twenty-First-Century Relevance

How has Pastor Aeternus stood the test of time in the face of Vatican II, the great social leveling brought about by democracy and the mass media, and the severe erosion of confidence in hierarchical institutions, including the Catholic Church?

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I. *Pastor Aeternus* in Its Context

Historical documents emerge in circumstances that help us to understand them. But as circumstances change, it is fair to ask about the ongoing relevance of a document. Does it still have meaning for us? This is particularly so when a document is meant to bind us as Catholic believers, as would a document of an ecumenical council.

Pastor Aeternus, the “First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ,” is such a document. It was a response to a concrete set of circumstances that faced the Roman Catholic Church in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. It shaped the church decisively for almost a hundred years after its issuance and, arguably, still does today. Are the circumstances that made this document intelligible in its day still operative today? The prompt asks us to consider its ongoing relevance—has it “stood the test of time in the face of Vatican II, the great social leveling brought about by democracy and the mass media, and the severe erosion of confidence in hierarchical institutions, including the Catholic Church”?

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The most important circumstance in understanding *Pastor Aeternus* is the crisis that the Roman Catholic Church faced during and after the French Revolution. I have argued elsewhere that the French Revolution was a near-death experience for the church.¹ The passage of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy by the National Constituent Assembly on July 12, 1790, created a schism in the French church. It effectively nationalized the French church and severed its ties with the papacy. About half the French clergy and the great majority of the bishops refused to take the oath to the new regime, and the Civil Constitution was condemned by Pope Pius VI. The “non-juring” clergy and bishops were replaced, and new bishops were consecrated in the place of the bishops of the *ancien régime*. Non-juring clergy either fled or went underground, and as the revolution entered more radical phases, they were hunted down and imprisoned or guillotined. In the meanwhile, French revolutionary troops invaded Rome in 1796, dispersed the Roman curia, deposed the pope and declared a Roman Republic, and carried the pope off as a prisoner to France, where he died six weeks after his arrival there in August 1799. There were many who thought they were witnessing the end of the papacy as an institution.²

The election of Pius VI’s successor had to be held in Venice under Austrian protection because Rome remained occupied by revolutionary troops. Because no new cardinals had been appointed in some time, the conclave was at a historic low. Only thirty-five cardinals participated in the election of Pius VII.

It was Napoleon Bonaparte’s decision that the church could be useful to him in consolidating his regime that led him to recognize Pius’ election, permit his return to Rome, and regularize relations with the church in the Concordat of 1801. When the pope refused to endorse Napoleon’s war against Catholic Austria in 1809 on the grounds of neutrality, Napoleon annexed the papal states to the empire, and the pope was once again expelled from Rome and held as Napoleon’s prisoner.

And yet it was arguably out of the crucible of the revolutionary experience that the ultramontane church was born. Pius VI was the martyr, and Pius VII the hero of the church’s resistance to the revolution and all it stood for: the emergence in some quarters of the papal cult of personality that continues to our day. And ironically, it was the free hand that Napoleon gave the

¹ Jeffrey P. von Arx, SJ, “A Post-Traumatic Church,” *America: The Jesuit Review* (June 22–29, 2015), published online as “How Did Vatican I Change the Church,” <https://www.amicamagazine.org/issue/post-traumatic-church>.

² Roger Aubert, “The Catholic Church and the Revolution,” in *History of the Church*, eds. Hubert Jedin and John Dolan, vol. 7, *The Church Between Revolution and Restoration* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 46, 50.

pope in deposing and appointing bishops in France to end the schism that was an important step toward giving effect to powers that the papacy had long claimed but had rarely been able to exercise.³ The exercise of these powers implied an understanding of the office of the pope that would be explicated and defined in the dogmatic constitution *Pastor Aeternus* at the First Vatican Council as the “ordinary and immediate pastor” of the universal church, who could appoint and depose bishops and negotiate directly with governments over the heads of national hierarchies.

The papacy continued to feel itself under threat during the whole nineteenth century: not just from the heirs of the revolution represented by anti-clerical liberal regimes, but also from conservative Catholic restoration governments who sought to redomesticate the church under a Gallican yoke, and by nationalist movements in Italy and Germany. Indeed, the greatest threat that the papacy believed it confronted in this period was from the Risorgimento, the movement toward Italian unification, because that movement would eventually deprive the papacy of control of the papal states (i.e., the temporal power). It is difficult for us to understand the significance of the temporal power for the nineteenth-century papacy. The political control of the papal states was considered to be essential for the free functioning of the pope in his governance of the church and for the standing of the Holy See as a sovereign actor in international affairs. For the pope and the Roman Curia to be subject to a national government, especially a secularizing liberal government as these were emerging in the nineteenth century, was simply inconceivable. The declaration of a new Roman Republic during the revolutions of 1848, the subsequent flight of the recently elected pope, Pius IX, and the brutal repression necessary to restore papal rule on the bayonets of foreign armies were traumatic for the pope and for many Catholics.⁴

It is against this background of the progressive loss of the Papal States to the Italian kingdom, especially after 1860, that we can understand the apocalyptic sense of threat to the church and Christianity that is the context for the summoning of the Vatican Council and for the dynamic that operated at the council itself. If the church were still under existential threat, as it had been at the time of the French Revolution, it could look, as it had then, to its deepest core and essence: “over the mountains” (*ultramontanus*), to the papacy and the person of the pope, as the guarantor of its unity and the assurance of its

³ See Jeffrey P. von Arx, “The Root of the China-Vatican Agreement: Napoleon,” *America: The Jesuit Review* (September 24, 2018), <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/09/24/root-china-vatican-agreement-napoleon>.

⁴ See David I. Kertzer, *The Pope Who Would Be King: The Exile of Pius IX and the Emergence of Modern Europe* (New York: Random House, 2018).

survival. And if the popes were to be deprived of the Papal States as the instrumentality of their governance of the church and their engagement with the civil powers, the papacy had its own divinely assured resources, with which it could preserve the integrity of the church and defy the hostile powers of this world. The encyclical *Quanta Cura* with the accompanying *Syllabus of Errors* issued by Pius IX in 1864 was the manifesto of this defiance.

John O'Malley traces the trajectory from the definition of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 as a kind of tryout for papal infallibility, to the *Syllabus* ten years later, to the decision to summon the council in 1868.⁵ In each step, Pius IX found strong backing from ultramontane forces within the church, not just among the bishops, but from clergy, religious (especially the Jesuits!), laity, and the Catholic press, who saw the strong assertion of papal authority as the necessary response to the crisis the church faced.

The original agenda of the council contained six headings, but because of the pressure of time (the threat of war between France and Prussia that hung over the council), only two were taken up: "Faith and Revelation" and "The Hierarchical Structure of the Church, Its Infallibility and Papal Primacy." And when the second document on the structure of the church was debated in the months immediately before the outbreak of the war, only one chapter of fifteen was considered, that on papal primacy, to which the infallibility of the pope was attached. O'Malley demonstrates how despite opposition to the definition of infallibility by a minority, its passage was inevitable, given the conviction of the majority of the council fathers that the definition was really the *raison d'être* of the council.⁶

Pastor Aeternus is most famous for the decree on papal infallibility,⁷ which resolved the issue of the infallibility of the pope versus a council at the extreme, with the definitions of the pope infallible of themselves, not from

⁵ John O'Malley, "The Eve of the Council," in *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 96–132.

⁶ O'Malley, "Infallibility," in *Vatican I*, 180–224.

⁷ "Therefore, faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, to the glory of God our savior, for the exaltation of the Catholic religion and for the salvation of the Christian people, with the approval of the Sacred Council, we teach and define as a divinely revealed dogma that when the Roman Pontiff speaks EX CATHEDRA, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. Therefore, such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the Church, irrefragable." Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ (hereafter *Pastor Aeternus*), "On the Infallible Teaching Authority of the Roman Pontiff," paragraph 9. All

the consent of the church.⁸ But the infallibility of the pope has been invoked only once since 1870, when Pius XII defined the Assumption of Mary in 1950.⁹ Rather, it was the establishment of the juridical position of the pope as the ordinary and immediate pastor of the universal church, of which his infallibility was a part, that worked a revolution in the governance and structure of the church that is with us still today, even considering Vatican II.¹⁰

It was not just the governance and structure of the church that was changed by *Pastor Aeternus*, but almost every other aspect of church life: the functioning of the magisterium, intellectual life and seminary training, devotional life, the relationship between the papacy and national churches and religious orders, Catholic social action and political engagement, along with the missions.¹¹

quotations from *Pastor Aeternus* in this essay are from <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>.

⁸ The Latin of the final phrase of the definition is: “ideoque eiusmodi Romani Pontificis definitiones ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae irreformabiles esse.” “*Non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae*” was proposed as an addition to the existing text by ultramontane bishops in the last days of the council to refute explicitly the claims of Gallicanism that before being recognized as infallible, a definition needs to be subsequently juridically ratified by the church. The pope insisted on its inclusion. See O’Malley, “Infallibility,” in *Vatican I*, 218. For discussions of infallibility before, during and after the council, see Richard Costigan, SJ, *The Consensus of the Church and Papal Infallibility* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press: 2019); Kevin Keating, *Papal Teaching in the Age of Infallibility: 1870 to the Present* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018); and John Joy, *Cathedra Veritatis: On the Extension of Papal Infallibility* (Howell, MI: Cruachan Hill Press, 2012).

⁹ But see the discussion of “creeping infallibility”: the idea that things that are taught consistently across time by the magisterium, like the illicitness of artificial contraception or the impossibility of the ordination of women, are effectively infallible. See John Allen, “A Long-Simmering Tension over ‘Creeping Infallibility,’” *National Catholic Reporter* (May 9, 2011), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/long-simmering-tension-over-creeping-infallibility>; George Wilson, “It’s Nothing Personal,” *Commonweal* (February 4, 2016), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/its-nothing-personal>; and Jessica M. Murdoch, “Creeping Infallibility: *Amoris Laetitia* and Magisterial Authority,” *First Things* (September 27, 2016), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/09/creeping-infallibility>.

¹⁰ “Wherefore we teach and declare that, by divine ordinance, the Roman Church possesses a pre-eminence of ordinary power over every other Church, and that this jurisdictional power of the Roman Pontiff is both episcopal and immediate. Both clergy and faithful, of whatever rite and dignity, both singly and collectively, are bound to submit to this power by the duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, and this not only in matters concerning faith and morals, but also in those which regard the discipline and government of the Church throughout the world.” *Pastor Aeternus*, “On the Power and Character of the Primacy of the Roman Pontiff,” paragraph 2.

¹¹ See von Arx, “A Post-Traumatic Church.”

Certainly, *Pastor Aeternus* enabled the church to confront the ongoing hostility of anticlerical regimes, including the Italian kingdom after it seized Rome in 1870, with greater unity, cohesion, and sense of purpose than it had ever possessed. It enabled the church to face down and crush what the papacy perceived to be threats to orthodoxy like modernism. It witnessed and helped to direct the efflorescence of religious practice and devotional life among the faithful, the dramatic growth in vocations, the numbers of (especially of women's) religious congregations, and the vast missionary outreach to every continent.¹² In one of the great ironies of history, the outcome of the church's near-death experience at the beginning of the century was the emergence of an organization at the end of the century that was incomparably stronger, more united (and more monolithic), with a more triumphalist sense of its own institutional identity than it had ever possessed. *Pastor Aeternus* was arguably the decisive document in articulating and directing this development.

If the ultramontane church emerged triumphant from the crucible of existential threat that confronted it through the nineteenth century, are the circumstances that produced that church and a document like *Pastor Aeternus* still present today? St. John Paul II, I believe, would have thought so: the twin threats of communism and unbridled capitalism, uncontrolled, if not, indeed, facilitated by liberal democracy, required a strong and unified voice from the church and its leadership, and he exercised it. So, too, did the threat to Christian values posed by a consumerist, hedonistic, eroticized, and antilife secular culture. And is Francis, despite a very different agenda from John Paul's (but just as adept in his use of the media), using any less the position, prestige, and power of the papacy to confront the crises—of ecology, of refugees, of inequality—that he believes threaten the mission of the church today? Even the sexual abuse crisis, so often laid at the feet of clericalism, has, paradoxically enough, resulted in incessant calls for action from the papacy. We are still a hierarchical church with the pope at the top.

Vatican II enhanced the dimension of collegiality in the church's self-understanding, but it is still a question whether Vatican II changed in any way the "constitution" of the church as a papal monarchy as this is spelled out in *Pastor Aeternus*. Whether or not one thinks *Pastor Aeternus* has, in this regard, stood the test of time depends on whether one thinks the circumstances that contributed to its existence still exist today.

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¹² See Emmett Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution," in *Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (Catholic University of America Press: Washington, 1976), 1244–76.