

# On the Roman Pontiff

An extract from

St Robert Bellarmine, *De Romano Pontifice*, lib. II, cap. 30.

While it is true that St. Robert Bellarmine thought it impossible that a pope could ever lose the faith and hence the papacy, he considered this opinion not theologically certain. For this reason he proceeded to examine the question of what would happen were a pope to become a heretic. The following extract from his treatise on the papacy deals with this question. It should be noted that in the spirit of Christian humility we ought not to go against the mind of any Doctor of the Universal Church without very grave reasons (if ever). Hence it is preferable to hold that the manifest heretics John Paul II and Paul VI were never popes at all, being non-Catholics from before their "election" and thus not valid matter for the papacy to begin with. Please note that this translation was done by Mr. Jim Larrabee, who also provided the comments at the end.

"The fourth opinion is that of Cajetan, for whom (*de auctor. papae et con.*, cap. 20 et 21) the manifestly heretical Pope is not "ipso facto" deposed, but can and must be deposed by the Church. To my judgment, this opinion cannot be defended. For, in the first place, it is proven with arguments from authority and from reason that the manifest heretic is "ipso facto" deposed. The argument from authority is based on St. Paul (Titus, c. 3), who orders that the heretic be avoided after two warnings, that is, after showing himself to be manifestly obstinate - which means before any excommunication or judicial sentence. And this is what St. Jerome writes, adding that the other sinners are excluded from the Church by sentence of excommunication, but the heretics exile themselves and separate themselves by their own act from the body of Christ. Now, a Pope who remains Pope cannot be avoided, for how could we be required to avoid our own head? How can we separate ourselves from a member united to us?

"This principle is most certain. The non-Christian cannot in any way be Pope, as Cajetan himself admits (*ib. c. 26*). The reason for this is that he cannot be head of what he is not a member; now he who is not a Christian is not a member of the Church, and a manifest heretic is not a Christian, as is clearly taught by St. Cyprian (*lib. 4, epist. 2*), St. Athanasius (*Scr. 2 cont. Arian.*), St. Augustine (*lib. de great. Christ. cap. 20*), St. Jerome (*contra Lucifer.*) and others; therefore the manifest heretic cannot be Pope.

"To this Cajetan responds (*in Apol. pro tract. praedicto cap. 25 et in ipso tract. cap. 22*) that the heretic is not a Christian "simpliciter" [i.e. without qualification, or absolutely], but is one "secundum quid" [i.e. in a qualified or relative sense]. For, granted that two things constitute the Christian - the faith and the [baptismal] character - the heretic, having lost the faith, is still in some way united to the Church and is capable of jurisdiction; therefore, he is also Pope, but ought to be removed, since he is disposed, with ultimate disposition, to cease to be Pope: as the man who is still not dead but is "in extremis" [at the point of death].

"Against this: in the first place, if the heretic remained, "in actu" [actually], united to the Church in virtue of the character, he would never be able to be cut or separated from her "in actu", for the character is indelible. But there is no one who denies that some people may be separated "in actu" from the Church. Therefore, the character does not make the heretic be "in actu" in the Church, but is only a sign that he was in the Church and that he must return to her. Analogously, when a sheep wanders lost in the mountains, the mark impressed on it does not make it be in the fold, but indicates from which fold it had fled and to which fold it ought to be brought back. This truth has a confirmation in St. Thomas who says (*Summ. Theol. III, q. 8, a. 3*) that those who do not have the faith are not united "in actu" to Christ,

but only potentially - and St. Thomas here refers to the internal union, and not to the external which is produced by the confession of faith and visible signs. Therefore, as the character is something internal, and not external, according to St. Thomas the character alone does not unite a man, "in actu," to Christ.

"Further against the argument of Cajetan: either faith is a disposition necessary "simpliciter" for someone to be Pope, or it is only necessary for someone to be a good Pope ["ad bene esse," to exist well, to be good, as opposed to simply existing]. In the first hypothesis, in case this disposition be eliminated by the contrary disposition, which is heresy, the Pope immediately ceases to be Pope: for the form cannot maintain itself without the necessary dispositions. In the second hypothesis, the Pope cannot be deposed by reason of heresy, for otherwise he would also have to be deposed for ignorance, immorality, and other similar causes, which impede the knowledge, the morality, and the other dispositions necessary for him to be a good Pope ("ad bene esse papae"). In addition to this, Cajetan recognises (tract. praed., ca. 26) that the Pope cannot be deposed for the lack of dispositions necessary, not "simpliciter", but only "ad bene esse."

"To this, Cajetan responds that faith is a disposition necessary "simpliciter", but partial, and not total; and that, therefore, even if his faith disappears he can still continue being Pope, by reason of the other part of the disposition, the character, which still endures.

"Against this argument: either the total disposition, constituted by the character and by faith, is necessary "simpliciter," or it is not, the partial disposition then being sufficient. In the first hypothesis, the faith disappearing there no longer remains the disposition "simpliciter" necessary, for the disposition "simpliciter" necessary was the total, and the total no longer exists. In the second hypothesis, the faith is only necessary "ad bene esse", and therefore its absence does not justify the deposition of the Pope. In addition to this, what finds itself in the ultimate disposition to death, immediately thereafter ceases to exist, without the intervention of any other external force, as is obvious; therefore, also the Pope heretic ceases to be Pope by himself, without any deposition.

"Finally, the Holy Fathers teach unanimously not only that heretics are outside of the Church, but also that they are "ipso facto" deprived of all ecclesiastical jurisdiction and dignity. St. Cyprian (lib. 2, epist. 6) says: 'We affirm that absolutely no heretic or schismatic has any power or right'; and he also teaches (lib. 2, epist. 1) that the heretics who return to the Church must be received as laymen, even though they have been formerly priests or bishops in the Church. St. Optatus (lib. 1 cont. Parmen.) teaches that heretics and schismatics cannot have the keys of the kingdom of heaven, nor bind nor loose. St. Ambrose (lib. 1 de poenit., ca. 2), St. Augustine (in Enchir., cap 65), St. Jerome (lib. cont. Lucifer.) teach the same.

"Pope St. Celestine I (epist. ad Jo. Antioch., which appears in Conc. Ephes., tom. I, cap. 19) wrote: 'It is evident that he [who has been excommunicated by Nestorius] has remained and remains in communion with us, and that we do not consider destituted [i.e. deprived of office, by judgment of Nestorius], anyone who has been excommunicated or deprived of his charge, either episcopal or clerical, by Bishop Nestorius or by the others who followed him, after they commenced preaching heresy. For he who had already shown himself as deserving to be excommunicated, could not excommunicate anyone by his sentence.'

"And in a letter to the clergy of Constantinople, Pope St. Celestine I says: 'The authority of Our Apostolic See has determined that the bishop, cleric, or simple Christian who had been deposed or excommunicated by Nestorius or his followers, after the latter began to preach heresy shall not be

considered deposed or excommunicated. For he who had defected from the faith with such preachings, cannot depose or remove anyone whatsoever.'

"St. Nicholas I (epist. ad Michael) repeats and confirms the same. Finally, St. Thomas also teaches (S. Theol., II-II, q. 39, a. 3) that schismatics immediately lose all jurisdiction, and that anything they try to do on the basis of any jurisdiction will be null.

"There is no basis for that which some respond to this: that these Fathers based themselves on ancient law, while nowadays, by decree of the Council of Constance, they alone lose their jurisdiction who are excommunicated by name or who assault clerics. This argument, I say, has no value at all, for those Fathers, in affirming that heretics lose jurisdiction, did not cite any human law, which furthermore perhaps did not exist in relation to the matter, but argued on the basis of the very nature of heresy. The Council of Constance only deals with the excommunicated, that is, those who have lost jurisdiction by sentence of the Church, while heretics already before being excommunicated are outside the Church and deprived of all jurisdiction. For they have already been condemned by their own sentence, as the Apostle teaches (Tit. 3:10-11), that is, they have been cut off from the body of the Church without excommunication, as St. Jerome affirms.

"Besides that, the second affirmation of Cajetan, that the Pope heretic can be truly and authoritatively deposed by the Church, is no less false than the first. For if the Church deposes the Pope against his will it is certainly above the Pope; however, Cajetan himself defends, in the same treatise, the contrary of this. Cajetan responds that the Church, in deposing the Pope, does not have authority over the Pope, but only over the link that unites the person to the pontificate. In the same way that the Church in uniting the pontificate to such a person, is not, because of this, above the Pontiff, so also the Church can separate the pontificate from such a person in case of heresy, without saying that it is above the Pope.

"But contrary to this it must be observed in the first place that, from the fact that the Pope deposes bishops, it is deduced that the Pope is above all the bishops, though the Pope on deposing a bishop does not destroy the episcopal jurisdiction, but only separates it from that person. In the second place, to depose anyone from the pontificate against the will of the deposed, is without doubt punishing him; however, to punish is proper to a superior or to a judge. In the third place, given that according to Cajetan and the other Thomists, in reality the whole and the parts taken as a whole are the same thing, he who has authority over the parts taken as a whole, being able to separate them one from another, has also authority over the whole itself which is constituted by those parts.

"The example of the electors, who have the power to designate a certain person for the pontificate, without however having power over the Pope, given by Cajetan, is also destitute of value. For when something is being made, the action is exercised over the matter of the future thing, and not over the composite, which does not yet exist, but when a thing is destroyed, the action is exercised over the composite, as becomes patent on consideration of the things of nature. Therefore, on creating the Pontiff, the Cardinals do not exercise their authority over the Pontiff for he does not yet exist, but over the matter, that is, over the person who by the election becomes disposed to receive the pontificate from God. But if they deposed the Pontiff, they would necessarily exercise authority over the composite, that is, over the person endowed with the pontifical power, that is, over the Pontiff.

"Therefore, the true opinion is the fifth, according to which the Pope who is manifestly a heretic ceases by himself to be Pope and head, in the same way as he ceases to be a Christian and a member of the body of the Church; and for this reason he can be judged and punished by the Church. This is the opinion of all the ancient Fathers, who teach that manifest heretics immediately lose all jurisdiction, and

outstandingly that of St. Cyprian (lib. 4, epist. 2) who speaks as follows of Novatian, who was Pope [i.e. antipope] in the schism which occurred during the pontificate of St. Cornelius: 'He would not be able to retain the episcopate [i.e. of Rome], and, if he was made bishop before, he separated himself from the body of those who were, like him, bishops, and from the unity of the Church.'

According to what St. Cyprian affirms in this passage, even had Novatian been the true and legitimate Pope, he would have automatically fallen from the pontificate, if he separated himself from the Church.

"This is the opinion of great recent doctors, as John Driedo (lib. 4 de Script. et dogmat. Eccles., cap. 2, par. 2, sent. 2), who teaches that only they separate themselves from the Church who are expelled, like the excommunicated, and those who depart by themselves from her or oppose her, as heretics and schismatics. And in his seventh affirmation, he maintains that in those who turn away from the Church, there remains absolutely no spiritual power over those who are in the Church. Melchior Cano says the same (lib. 4 de loc., cap. 2), teaching that heretics are neither parts nor members of the Church, and that it cannot even be conceived that anyone could be head and Pope, without being member and part (cap. ult. ad argument. 12). And he teaches in the same place, in plain words, that occult heretics are still of the Church, they are parts and members, and that therefore the Pope who is an occult heretic is still Pope. This is also the opinion of the other authors whom we cite in book I De Ecclesia.

"The foundation of this argument is that the manifest heretic is not in any way a member of the Church, that is, neither spiritually nor corporally, which signifies that he is not such by internal union nor by external union. For even bad Catholics [i.e. who are not heretics] are united and are members, spiritually by faith, corporally by confession of faith and by participation in the visible sacraments; the occult heretics are united and are members although only by external union; on the contrary, the good catechumens belong to the Church only by an internal union, not by the external; but manifest heretics do not pertain in any manner, as we have already proved."

Comments by Jim Larrabee: As to the case of Liberius, which Bellarmine treats in book IV, chapter IX at considerable length, he is there concerned not to prove that Liberius was not deposed, and lawfully deposed (both of which he fully admits), but that the Liberius case does not argue against infallibility, nor was Liberius personally a heretic. This involves various distinctions which people now are failing to make, but are evident to any theologian. Perhaps I could quote this at length in future, but for now, let it be said that, while Liberius resisted heresy both before and after the period of his lapse and deposition (and that is what the quote from a later Pope undoubtedly refers to), he failed to do so for a given time. During this time the Roman clergy "deposed" him, i.e. they considered the papacy to be vacant, and accepted St. Felix as Pope.

For example (Bellarmine): "In addition, unless we are to admit that Liberius defected for a time from constancy in defending the Faith, we are compelled to exclude Felix II, who held the pontificate while Liberius was alive, from the number of the Popes: but the Catholic Church venerates this very Felix as Pope and martyr. However this may be, Liberius neither taught heresy, nor was a heretic, but only sinned by external act [emphasis in original Latin], as did St. Marcellinus, and unless I am mistaken, sinned less than St. Marcellinus." (lib. IV, c. 9, no. 5)

Further, after explaining that Felix was for a time an antipope, he continues (no. 15): "Then two years later came the lapse of Liberius, of which we have spoken above. Then indeed the Roman clergy, stripping Liberius of his pontifical dignity, went over to Felix, whom they knew [then] to be a Catholic. From that time, Felix began to be the true Pontiff. For although Liberius was not a heretic, nevertheless he was considered one, on account of the peace he made with the Arians, and by that presumption the

pontificate could rightly [merito] be taken from him: for men are not bound, or able to read hearts; but when they see that someone is a heretic by his external works, they judge him to be a heretic pure and simple [simpliciter], and condemn him as a heretic.