

Causa Finita Est?

With the declaration of the doctrine of papal infallibility at the closing session of the First Vatican Council in 1870, a new condition of faith was to be imposed on all Catholics. As far as the ultramontanists were concerned, the question that stirred men's hearts within the church for centuries past was now settled--in their favor. "The Pope had spoken" indeed, but the cause was by no means ended. In fact, the real struggle was now taking shape.

There were able and learned members of the Roman Catholic Church to whom it was impossible to reconcile the new dogma with what they had always believed. The Catholic consciousness of early ages presented a theory out of which papal infallibility could never legitimately grow. The primitive theory, as the Councils of the Church made plain, placed final authority in the ecumenical council of all the bishops of the entire church and the transference of this authority from the entire body of the church to one individual was no true Catholic development at all, but a dislocation of the original constitution of the Church.

If most of the Bishops were coerced or threatened by official intimidation to accept the new belief, there were others that officialdom could not touch nor frighten. Several Bishops refused to publish the new dogma within their diocese. In America, Archbishop Kenrick of St. Louis, whose speech against the new dogma was suppressed in Council, expressed the unspoken feelings of many of the bishops in the following memorable sentence. "Notwithstanding my submission, I shall never teach the doctrine of Papal Infallibility so as to argue from Scripture or tradition in its support, and shall leave to others to explain its compatibility with the facts of ecclesiastical history to which I referred in my reply. As long as I may be permitted to remain in my present station I shall confine myself to administrative functions which I can do the more easily without attracting attention, as for some years past I have seldom preached."

But once again if Bishops were to prove as "timorous as women" in the face of official displeasure, then it remained for theologians and scholars to defend the faith. Such men as von Shulte, Reinkens, Lord Acton, von Dollinger and other distinguished scholars of northern Europe continued in outspoken and fearless opposition to the new Faith of the Roman curia.

A revulsion to the new dogma arose like a swift tide amongst lay-folk and clergy throughout northern Europe where the Roman doctrine had to be enforced, if at all, with persecution where Episcopal persuasion proved fruitless.

In Bavaria public agitation rose high and priests refused to accept or publish the new Vatican decrees in their parishes. As early as three weeks after the close of the Council more than a thousand Rhenish Roman Catholics at Konigwinter, Germany, united in the declaration that "they did not accept the decrees in regard to the absolute power and personal infallibility of the pope but rejected them as contradicting the traditional faith of the Church."

Shortly before this, forty-three professors and teachers of the University of Munich, not members of the theological faculty, drew up a similar declaration, and this was followed in April 1871 by the "Munich Museum" address with eighteen thousand signers, which went to the government, its purpose being "to prevent the adoption in church and school of the new dogma and to revise the relations of church and state."

These lay-folk looked to brave men for leadership who now came to the front in the struggle for the restoration of the ancient faith. In Germany Professors Michelis, Reinkens and von Schulte, to whom were added, from Switzerland, Munsinger and Herzog, arose to champion the cause. The problem they faced was an enormous one. The Roman Church had not only cut itself in two but it had also cut one part off from tradition and the Scriptures.