

Seat of Wisdom: Matthias Scheeben on the Theological Analogy Between the Immaculate Conception and Papal Infallibility*

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In the immediate aftermath of the definition of papal infallibility by the First Vatican Council in 1870, the German dogmatic theologian Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835–1888) published a seminal essay in which he attempts to draw a theological analogy between the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the infallibility of the pope, the two dogmas which had been defined during his lifetime.¹ In that essay, which has never been translated into English and is at once polemical and pastoral in tone, Scheeben seeks to defend the dogma of papal infallibility and explore its theological significance by placing it within the broader context of what he calls the *nexus mysteriorum*, that is, the organic interconnection of the supernatural mysteries of the Christian faith. This he does above all by linking it both historically and theologically to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which had also been defined under Pope Pius IX just sixteen years prior, in 1854.

For Scheeben, as we will see, the two dogmas taken together form a kind of diptych which enabled the Church to revindicate the supernaturality

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¹ See Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung des Dogmas von der Unfehlbarkeit des Papstes, besonders in seiner Beziehung auf die heutige Zeit,” *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* vol. 2 (1870): 505–47.

of the Christian faith against the forces of modernity—and especially of Enlightenment rationalism—that sought to undermine it. In the newly drawn portraits of the lowly Virgin, suffused and transformed by grace so as to preserve her from all stain of sin, and of the humble successor of Peter, assisted and supported by the Holy Spirit so as to preserve his official teaching from all stain of error, Scheeben glimpsed the hand of the divine Artist, who wished thus to illustrate the superiority of both grace over nature and faith over reason.

My aim in what follows is not only to make the profound insights of this still untranslated essay of Scheeben more widely known—since he is one of the greatest dogmatic theologians of the modern age, and certainly the greatest Mariologist of our times—but also to prompt us to reflect on the enduring significance that these two dogmas hold for both the Church and the world today. What message might the identity and mission of the Virgin Mary serve to communicate to a post-modern age in which the very definition and inherent value of human nature itself has come under dispute? How are Catholics today, just over 150 years after the definition of papal infallibility, rightly to understand the extent and limits of that dogma in an era when, for the first time in history, nearly every stray word of any pope can be instantly broadcast across the globe? These are just a few of the questions that I hope this examination of Scheeben's insights may help to elicit, even if it certainly will not and cannot provide a conclusive answer to them.

My reflections will unfold in three parts. First, I will offer a brief introduction of Matthias Scheeben, an overview his theological project, and a sketch of the historical context which occasioned the publication of his essay in 1870. Second, I will expound the content and principal theological insights of that essay itself. And finally, I will highlight and examine what I consider to be some of the most enduring contributions that Scheeben's essay can make to our own efforts to grasp the ongoing theological and spiritual significance of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the infallibility of the pope in the world of today.

Scheeben, Vatican I, and the Church in the Modern Age

Scheeben was born near Bonn in the German Rhineland in 1835, the son of a country blacksmith. Both brilliant and pious from a young age, at seventeen he was accepted as a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Cologne and was sent to Rome to complete dual doctorates in philosophy and theology at what was then known as the Roman College, today the Pontifical Gregorian University. Along with many other seminarians in

the Eternal City, the young Scheeben—not yet twenty years old—was personally present in St. Peter's Basilica on December 8, 1854, to hear Pope Pius IX moved to tears as he read aloud the bull, *Ineffabilis Deus*, which definitively proclaimed the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of the Catholic faith. The newly defined dogma captured Scheeben's imagination and served to place the immaculate Virgin at the forefront of his thought ever after. At the age of twenty-three he was ordained a priest in Rome and returned home. After less than a year as the chaplain of a girls' school, Scheeben was named a professor—first of moral theology, then of dogmatics—at the archdiocesan seminary of Cologne by Cardinal Johannes von Geissel. There he would remain for the next three decades, quietly engaged in the laborious work of teaching and writing, until his untimely death due to pneumonia in 1888. His *Nature and Grace* (1861), *The Mysteries of Christianity* (1865), and the monumental six-volume *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics* (1874–1887) were highly influential in the years preceding the Second Vatican Council, and are attracting renewed interest today.

Scheeben, then, came of age and lived his entire life during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, at a time when the Catholic Church was engaged in an epochal confrontation with the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment, and his thought clearly bears the marks of the age in which it was born.² In the eighteenth century, the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant had limited the scope of speculative reason and had effectively reduced metaphysics to epistemology, thereby rendering any belief in a positive historical revelation such as that in Christianity both incoherent and irrational. Since the only object of true and certain knowledge for the speculative reason is the a priori structure of human consciousness itself, “religion within the limits of reason alone” (as Kant famously called it) could be conceived only as a set of categorical imperatives for moral action based on the authority not of faith in a historical revelation, but of the universal dictates of the practical reason. The idealist philosophers who further developed Kant's thought in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, managed to rescue metaphysics by positing all of reality itself as the progressive self-expression of infinite reason, or the Absolute. But such post-Kantian idealism was no more compatible with supernatural faith in revealed religion than was Kantian

² The following paragraph borrows from material included in an article that was previously published in this journal: see Evan S. Koop, “On Scheeben's Place in Nineteenth-Century Theology and the Question of His Theological Method,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 21, no. 2 (2023): 471–508, at 475–76.

criticism itself. For, once the infinite reason that manifests itself through reality is identified with God, as suggested by Hegel, and made explicit by Schelling in his later thought, then the distinction between creature and Creator is lost and pantheism lies close at hand. Simply put, whereas with Kant faith is eclipsed by reason, with post-Kantian idealism grace is swallowed up by nature.

Such was the intellectual challenge which the Enlightenment had bequeathed to the Church in the modern age, and in many ways all the various forms of Catholic theology in the nineteenth century—including that of Scheeben—can be seen as attempts to answer this challenge. Pope Pius IX, in particular, after the violence unleashed by the short-lived Roman Republic in 1848 forced him to flee Rome in disguise and take refuge in nearby Gaetà, increasingly identified Enlightenment rationalism, naturalism, and liberalism as the principal menaces posed to the Catholic faith by the forces of secular modernity, since collectively they called into question the traditional Catholic account of the relationship between nature and grace, faith and reason, and Church and state. Pius's wholesale condemnation of these errors in his 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*—in which, among other things, he famously rejects the idea that “the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization”³—is well known. What is less well known is that Pius IX had originally intended to include the condemnation of these errors in his dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. As this would have made for a rather disjointed document (to put it mildly), he was wisely dissuaded from this purpose by his advisors. Nevertheless, even at the time of the definition of the Immaculate Conception, Pius had explicitly held up the Virgin Mary as the Church's answer to the errors of modernity:

The greatness of this privilege [i.e., Mary's Immaculate Conception] will be a powerful means of confuting those who deny that human nature was corrupted by the first sin and who exaggerate the forces of reason in order to deny or lessen the benefit of revelation. Finally, may the Blessed Virgin, who conquered and destroyed all heresies, uproot and destroy this dangerous error of rationalism, which in our unhappy times not only afflicts and torments civil society, but more deeply afflicts the Church.⁴

³ Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), §80.

⁴ Pope Pius IX, Allocution *Singulari Quadam Perfusi Laetitia* (1854), in *Papal*

It is therefore no surprise that Vatican I, which opened under Pius IX exactly fifteen years later, on December 8, 1869, explicitly sought to counter the errors of rationalism and naturalism⁵ by emphasizing the compatibility of faith and reason, clarifying the distinction between the natural and supernatural orders of human knowledge, and reasserting the supreme authority of the Church's magisterium in expounding and safeguarding the revealed truths of the deposit of faith.

Scheeben, no doubt inspired by the teachings of both the Pope and the Council, likewise believed that it was the primary duty of Catholic theology in the nineteenth century to "object chiefly and vigorously to rationalism, naturalism, and liberalism."⁶ Accordingly, he set himself to this purpose from the outset of his academic career. In his first published journal article in 1860, on "The Doctrine of the Supernatural," Scheeben defines rationalism as

the principal and fundamental evil of our time. . . . It is the endeavor of human reason to acknowledge no being other than that connected to man's nature, no knowledge other than that attainable

Teachings: Our Lady, trans. Daughters of St. Paul, selected and arranged by the Benedictine Monks of Solesmes (Boston: St. Paul, 1961), 83.

⁵ See First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* (1870): "Thereupon there came into being and spread far and wide throughout the world that doctrine of rationalism or naturalism, utterly opposed to the Christian religion, since this is of supernatural origin, which spares no effort to bring it about that Christ, who alone is our Lord and Savior, is shut out from the minds of people and the moral life of nations. Thus they would establish what they call the rule of simple reason or nature. The abandonment and rejection of the Christian religion, and the denial of God and his Christ, has plunged the minds of many into the abyss of pantheism, materialism and atheism, and the consequence is that they strive to destroy rational nature itself, to deny any criterion of what is right and just, and to overthrow the very foundations of human society. With this impiety spreading in every direction, it has come about, alas, that many even among the children of the Catholic Church have strayed from the path of genuine piety, and as the truth was gradually diluted in them, their Catholic sensibility was weakened. Led away by diverse and strange teachings and confusing nature and grace, human knowledge and divine faith, they are found to distort the genuine sense of the dogmas which Holy Mother Church holds and teachers, and to endanger the integrity and genuineness of the faith" (*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II* [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990], 804).

⁶ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics* [hereafter, *Dogmatics* in subsequent citations for all volumes], trans. Michael J. Miller, vol. 1.2 (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 1118. All citations of Scheeben's *Dogmatics*, from all volumes, refer to the paragraph number rather than the page.

by reason itself, nothing else as good for love and as a precept for action than that which is recognized by the reason and connected with the nature to which reason belongs.⁷

What rationalism is on the epistemological level becomes naturalism when transposed to the ontological level. Naturalism, Scheeben writes, “is the system according to which man is to seek in his nature alone both the measure of his destiny and his final end, as well as the law of his life and the power to achieve his perfection and happiness.”⁸ Liberalism, in turn, “is nothing more than the practical side of rationalism and naturalism, or the transferal of the principles of naturalism to social life.”⁹ It ultimately seeks, according to Scheeben, “the emancipation and secularization of the nature of the mind (of science), of the flesh, of marriage, of school, and of the state.”¹⁰ Where all of this leads is clear, at least to Scheeben:

Rationalism and naturalism leads to *pantheism*, in that it attributes to reason an all-embracing way of thinking, and to nature a being identical to the First Cause of all things. Thus, on the other hand, it leads to *materialism*, in that reason, freed from its upward pull and left to itself, throws itself entirely on visible and tangible reality as the only true being, and human nature, succumbing to its overpowering sensual drives, immerses itself totally in matter, finding in its enjoyment the only real good, in its power the only real strength. In both ways, it leads into the “*abyss of atheism*,” in which, along with God, man’s rational nature is swallowed up and buried. Thus it leads, by the logic of both principles and facts, from a religion without dogma to a morality without religion, from there to law without morality, and then to force without law, precisely by proclaiming the brutal violence of the masses, or the cunning of the party leaders who direct them, as a venerable right, as a moral and religious power, and as the highest inviolable dogma of modern society.¹¹

⁷ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Die Lehre von dem Übernatürlichen in ihrer Bedeutung für die christliche Wissenschaft und christliches Leben,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Josef Höfer, vol. 8, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Heribert Schaaf (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 18–19.

⁸ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Die dogmatische Constitution *de fide catholica*,” *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* vol. 2 (1870): 126.

⁹ Scheeben, “Die dogmatische Constitution,” 126.

¹⁰ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 525.

¹¹ Scheeben, “Die dogmatische Constitution,” 127–28.

Writing, as he was, years before Friedrich Nietzsche declared the death of God, and a half-century before the rise of National Socialism in his native Germany, Scheeben's ominous words carry the somber ring of a prescient but sadly unheeded warning.

In some sense, therefore, the whole of Scheeben's theological project may be seen as a negative reaction to what he saw as the errors of modernity, and to theological rationalism in particular. But it would not do justice to his theological genius if we were to understand him only in relation to that which he *opposed*, for in fact he was one of the most original and creative minds of his age. What, then, were some of the leading themes of his thought? Joseph Ratzinger, in a brief five-page essay published in 1988 on the centenary of Scheeben's death, very characteristically summarizes the whole of Scheeben's theology in four key concepts which, he says, "open the doors" to Scheeben's work for contemporary theologians: (1) mystery, (2) the supernatural, (3) the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the just, and finally, (4) his "bold advances in the field of Mariology: his attempt to explore more closely the connection between the pneumatological and the Marian mysteries."¹² As Ratzinger points out, this is not an accidental grouping of four disparate ideas. In reality, each of them touches upon the essential points of contact between God and his creation, serving to illuminate and clarify the mysterious dynamics of the encounter between human nature and divine grace in an age in which the relationship between the two had become confused and obscured. And these dynamics become the most personal, the most concrete, in the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, for Scheeben, "represents the living passive and active receptivity to regenerating grace."¹³ She is the privileged icon of a human person renewed by divine grace, the perfect type of the creature encountering, receiving, and cooperating with the supernatural works of God.

Given this background, it is not at all surprising that, during the debates surrounding the dogmatic definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I, Scheeben would discern an intimate spiritual connection between the figures of Mary and the pope, and would seek to draw a theological parallel between the way in which each of them manifests how God wishes to purify, protect, and supernaturally transfigure his Church through the action of the Holy Spirit.

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, "Geleitwort," in *M. J. Scheeben: Teologo cattolico d'ispirazione tomista*, Studi Tomistici 33 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), 13.

¹³ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*, trans. Michael J. Miller, vol. 5.2 (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 1525.

Scheeben's Analogy Between the Immaculate Conception and Papal Infallibility

As is well known, perhaps nowhere in the Church was the dogmatic definition of papal infallibility more fiercely opposed than in Germany, above all by the party led by Ignaz von Döllinger, the renowned Munich historical theologian who was widely held to be the greatest German Catholic scholar of his day. Already before Vatican I, in March of 1869, Döllinger had published *Der Papst und das Concil*, which first appeared as a series of articles in the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* under the pseudonym "Janus."¹⁴ Döllinger warned of an ecclesiological "catastrophe" if papal infallibility—which he considered a historical novelty—were to be foisted upon the Church.¹⁵ He feared above all that its definition as an article of faith would enshrine in the Church's life an arbitrary doctrinal authoritarianism that would effectively "cripple all intellectual effort and scholarly activity in the Catholic Church."¹⁶ *Der Papst und das Concil* caused an immediate sensation throughout Europe and so overshadowed the proceedings of Vatican I that the minority of bishops who opposed the definition of papal infallibility were often called simply "the Janus party."

Scheeben was one of the first German theologians to raise his voice publicly against Döllinger, which he did above all, beginning in 1870, through his editorship of the journal *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869*.¹⁷ (I say "editorship," when in fact it should be "authorship," since

¹⁴ For an extended discussion of the genesis, content, and reception of *Der Papst und das Concil*, see Thomas A. Howard, *The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Döllinger and the Quandary of the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 132–38.

¹⁵ Ignaz von Döllinger, *Der Papst und das Concil*, iv, quoted in Howard, *The Pope*, 133.

¹⁶ Döllinger, *Der Papst*, xvii, quoted in Howard, *The Pope*, 133.

¹⁷ See Matthias Joseph Scheeben, "Der Papst und das Concil von Janus," *Der Katholik* 49, no. 2 (1869): 437–69; Scheeben, *Der Papst und seine neuesten Verleumder* (Frankfurt: Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1869); Scheeben, 'Die männliche That' und 'die unwiderleglichen Bemerkungen' des Herrn Professors von Döllinger: Ein freies Wort an die besonnenen und freisinnigen Männer Kölns und Deutschlands, 2nd ed. (Cologne: Rommerskirchen, 1870); Scheeben, *Neue Erwägungen über die Frage der päpstlichen Unfehlbarkeit aus den anerkannten historischen Werken Döllingers urkundlich zusammengestellt* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1870). Scheeben edited the three volumes of *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* that appeared in 1870–1871, and most scholars agree that nearly all the articles they contain were penned by Scheeben himself. From 1872, the journal appeared under the new title of *Periodische Blätter zur wissenschaftlichen Besprechung der großen religiösen Fragen der Gegenwart*, with Scheeben continuing to contribute many articles and serve as general editor until 1882. For more on Scheeben's

nearly all the articles in the journal were written by Scheeben himself.) Scheeben deeply deplored what he called the “journalistically disseminated theology” of Döllinger and the Janus party.¹⁸ By appealing to the opinion of the unbelieving public through articles in secular newspapers, they were, in Scheeben’s estimation, effectively casting the pearls of Catholic doctrine before swine (cf. Matt 7:6) and seeking to create what he called a “newspaper council.”¹⁹ Döllinger, Scheeben complained, “sends to the assembled Church Council his friendly warnings from the camp of its most furious enemies, to their great applause.”²⁰ Scheeben, on the other hand, sought to write “for all truly educated Catholics, i.e., for those who possess religious earnestness and intellectual power enough to understand and appreciate, with some reflection, the great questions of the present time.”²¹ He also warned his readers that, “in theology and history, there are quacks and swindlers just as much as in trade and commerce.”²²

Prior to Vatican I, Scheeben (like his contemporary, John Henry Newman) had in fact belonged to the party of the so-called “inopportunists,” who affirmed the truth of papal infallibility but did not believe the historical moment was opportune to dogmatically define it.²³ Once it

polemical writings during the controversy with Döllinger over the First Vatican Council, see Leo Scheffczyk, “Die Lehranschauungen M. J. Scheebens über das ökumenische Konzil,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 141 (1961): 129–73; Joseph Overath, “Der Kölner Dogmatiker Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835–1888) als Gegner der Unfehlbarkeitsschriften des Kirchenhistorikers Ignaz von Döllinger (1799–1890),” *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 43 (1980): 155–72; Overath, “Janus, Ein Febronius Redivivus? M. J. Scheeben zur Quellenlage einer Streitschrift gegen das Unfehlbarkeitsdogma,” in *Kirchengeschichte: Orientierungshilfen, Standpunkte, Impulse für heute* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1987), 147–64; Remigius Bäumer, “Matthias Joseph Scheeben in den kirchenpolitischen Auseinandersetzungen um das I. Vatikanum,” in *Geist und Kirche: Studien zur Theologie im Umfeld der beiden Vatikanischen Konzilien; Gedenkschrift für Heribert Schaaf*, ed. Herbert Hammans, Hermann-Josef Reudenbach, and Heino Sonnemans (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1991), 299–322.

¹⁸ Joseph Overath, “Matthias Joseph Scheeben als Seelsorger,” *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 17 (1988): 379.

¹⁹ Overath, “Matthias Joseph Scheeben als Seelsorger,” 379.

²⁰ Scheeben, *Die männliche That*, 11.

²¹ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Vorwort,” *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* vol. 2 (1870): 2.

²² Scheeben, *Der Papst und seine neuesten Verleumder*, 25.

²³ See Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Jörg über die Definition der päpstlichen Unfehlbarkeit,” *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* 2 (1870): 389: “We did not, as the reader will remember, number among those who longed for the definition in question [i.e., of papal infallibility]. We trembled before the eventuality; for our age is weak of will and proud of spirit, the moral plague of the liberal rhetoric has an epidemic effect

had been defined, however, Scheeben enthusiastically assented to it and passionately sought to defend the truth of the dogma against Döllinger and his allies. As part of those efforts, just after the close of the Council, Scheeben produced an astonishingly insightful article, running to almost two hundred pages and spanning two issues of *Das ökumenische Concil*, entitled “The Theological and Practical Significance of the Dogma of Papal Infallibility, Especially in its Relationship to the Present Time.”²⁴ In the article, Scheeben’s stated goal is to help his readers locate the proper place of the newly defined dogma within the broader structure of the revealed truths of the Christian faith:

We wish to show how the dogma [of papal infallibility], far from standing in contradiction to other Christian ideas, is instead most intimately intertwined with the entire organism of Christian truth, and how the light which it itself has received through the definition of the Council is simultaneously diffused over the remaining Christian truths, illuminating most brightly precisely those which it supposedly obscures, but which in fact are obscured by the ideas and principles of the modern *Zeitgeist*.²⁵

Accordingly, Scheeben divides his essay into four parts, in which he explores the relationship of the dogma of papal infallibility to (1) the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, (2) the supernatural essence of the Church, (3) the supernatural act of faith, and (4) the authentic notions of social authority, freedom, and civilizational progress. In what follows, we will examine only the first part of the article, in which Scheeben relates the infallibility of the pope to the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Scheeben presents the two dogmas defined under Pius IX as the two “most precious and immovable foundation stones of the supernatural kingdom of Christ and . . . the most beautiful trophies of his victory over hell.”²⁶ For the same reason, they are the two most powerful bulwarks

among the educated, and above all we had at heart the peace of the Church, especially in the German fatherland. But now that, for the first time in three hundred years, the highest authority established in the Church has spoken, then we know what we as Catholics have to do.”

²⁴ See Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung des Dogmas von der Unfehlbarkeit des Papstes, besonders in seiner Beziehung auf die heutige Zeit,” *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* vol. 2 (1870): 505–47; *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* vol. 3 (1871): 81–133, 212–63, 401–48.

²⁵ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 506.

²⁶ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 512.

erected by the Church to stem the rising tides of rationalism, naturalism, and liberalism. The Immaculate Conception is the morning star, and papal infallibility the evening star, which the Holy Spirit has raised in the firmament of the nineteenth century to scatter the infernal darkness unleashed by the Enlightenment.²⁷ The reason for this, Scheeben argues, is that “both dogmas reveal and assert the *supernatural character of Christianity and its order of grace*,” and serve to demonstrate the divine dignity and power of Christ precisely “at those points . . . from which he established and maintains his connection with the human race.”²⁸

Christians instinctively believe, Scheeben writes, that Christ’s supernatural dignity and power necessarily require that she in whose womb he took flesh “should be immaculate and pure in body and soul, utterly holy and glorious,” and that “his divine love toward her, the bride and mother he had chosen for himself from all eternity, compelled him to give her the richest abundance of supernatural grace as a dowry at her creation.”²⁹ In just the same way and for the same reasons, Christ’s divine dignity demands “that the *cathedra* of truth, upon which his teaching would be sustained, should never be desecrated by ungodly error,” and that “the head of the bride of Christ in her teaching, through which she effects the whole Church’s purity of faith, must be fashioned just as the Apostle would have the bride of Christ herself, ‘without spot or wrinkle or any such thing’ [Eph 5:27].”³⁰ Far from demeaning human reason or denigrating human nature, the two dogmas promise their true fulfillment and final perfection, since papal infallibility “points humanity toward the attainment of a supernatural divine wisdom, no less than the gracious conception of the mother of the new human race points it toward its calling to supernatural holiness and blessedness.”³¹

Scheeben reasons that it was precisely to counter the naturalistic and rationalistic pride of the modern age that God chose to define these two dogmas at this very time, for each in its own way demonstrates three key characteristics of the order of divine grace with respect to that of human nature: (1) its gratuity, (2) its power, and (3) its sovereignty over human nature.³² To show the *gratuity* of grace, God grants the Immaculate Conception to Mary, and the charism of infallibility to the pope, without

²⁷ See Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 510–11.

²⁸ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 512.

²⁹ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 513.

³⁰ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 513, 508.

³¹ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 517.

³² See Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 518–28.

regard to their personal merits, thus defeating the pride of nature and the pride of reason, respectively. "The pope," no less than Mary, "is all that he is only through unmerited grace, and lives only on the grace of God."³³ Next, the superior *power* of grace over nature is shown by the way in which God is able to preserve Mary free from sin, and the pope free from error, even in spite of the frailties of human nature. In the case of Mary, God shows the power of grace in that, "from the unfruitful wild thornbush of nature he caused the 'spiritual rose' to bloom," and so filled her being with supernatural grace "as if she had proceeded wholly new from the mouth of the Creator, animated and suffused with the breath of the Holy Spirit, like Eve on the day of creation."³⁴ For, "nowhere does grace so greatly show its power to penetrate nature to the root and heal it from the ground up as in the conception of the holy Virgin, who emerged from a stained trunk with all the freshness and beauty of the original grace of innocence."³⁵ The person of the pope, of course, is not so permeated by grace and preserved from sin as that of Mary. But, Scheeben argues, "precisely herein consists the miracle of grace, that in spite and in the midst of all these human stains and thorns, it preserves the gem of heavenly truth immaculate and inviolate in the official teaching of this person."³⁶ Third, against the spirit of modern liberalism, which promises a false liberation through unfettered personal license, Scheeben holds that both the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility serve to proclaim the *sovereignty and lordship* of Christ over human nature and reason. From the first moment of her existence, Mary was "completely taken into [Christ's] possession, in that he penetrated with his grace her whole nature, soul and body, from the highest height to the profoundest depth, and thus destined her to belong totally to him and to live totally for him alone."³⁷ Similarly, "Christ exercises his lordship over the thinking mind through the infallible teaching authority of the pope," which is thus revealed "as the shining symbol, as the throne and scepter of the lordship of Christ over the entirety of the nature of man, over mind and body, over his individual and social life."³⁸

Even as they make known the gratuity, power, and sovereignty of divine grace, however, the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility do not thereby serve to humiliate human nature, but rather to ennoble

³³ Scheeben, "Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung," 522.

³⁴ Scheeben, "Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung," 522–23.

³⁵ Scheeben, "Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung," 524.

³⁶ Scheeben, "Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung," 523.

³⁷ Scheeben, "Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung," 526.

³⁸ Scheeben, "Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung," 527–28.

it, calling all mankind to “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).³⁹ Far from demeaning humanity, they serve to encourage it:

Just as Mary was conceived in grace precisely for the reason that she was destined to become the mother of grace for the rest of humanity, so also the infallibility of the pope is only granted to him so that the rest of humanity should be led by God to an infallible knowledge and wisdom. It is one of the devil’s most malevolent tricks that he presents to men precisely that which God has instituted for their salvation, for their glorification and exaltation, as an insult to their dignity, as a deprivation and a cheating of their interests, and thus to transform the honey of divine gifts into a source of bitter envy and mean jealousy.⁴⁰

According to Scheeben, both dogmas together reveal the good news that humanity possesses a “twofold” spiritual mother in the order of grace, Mary and the Church. They are thus intended by God to awaken and preserve in Christian hearts “*the true, noble, childlike spirit*”—which is precisely why they are so vociferously contested by the proud spirit of modernity.⁴¹ Mary is shown to be the heavenly mother of mankind not only through her divine maternity, Scheeben argues, but above all in her Immaculate Conception, in which she appears “in the full splendor of the new Eve, as the bride and helpmate of the new Adam in the rebirth and beatitude of the new human race.”⁴² Through that singular privilege of grace, believers come to understand that Mary, “in contrast to the old Eve, preserved in a childlike spirit the treasure of heavenly wisdom that she received at her origin without giving ear to the whisperings of the serpent.”⁴³ She is thus their model and inspiration as the *virgo prudentissima*, who has defeated the cleverness of the serpent by “the simplicity of the dove” (see Matt 10:16).

How does papal infallibility, for its part, manifest the spiritual maternity of the Church? Here Scheeben reprises a theme which he had already touched upon in his earlier *Mysteries of Christianity* (and which I find to

³⁹ Cf. Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 529, 537–38.

⁴⁰ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 517–18.

⁴¹ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 531, 529; cf. 535–37.

⁴² Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 531.

⁴³ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 536. Scheeben may be referring here to a similar phrase from Irenaeus of Lyon (*Adversus haereses* 5.19.1, in *Sources Chrétiennes* [SC] 153:250).

be rather unconvincing), relating to what he sees as the *maternal dimension* of the priesthood:

Every Catholic knows that he is reborn to the life of the children of God in baptism through the power attached to the priesthood . . . and that therefore in the proper sense his true spiritual mother is not the whole of believers but the priesthood as generator and nourisher [*Zeugerin und Nährerin*].⁴⁴

What is true of all priests in general, Scheeben reasons, is especially true of the bishops, as “bearers” of what he calls “a supernatural maternity.” It is most fully true of the pope, in whom “the maternal, or paternal, doctrinal and teaching authority of the Church, or the episcopacy . . . is concentrated and represented.”⁴⁵ As a consequence, Scheeben says, “belief in the infallibility of our supreme father and teacher must awaken in our soul the vivid consciousness that she is a daughter of Light and a bride of eternal Wisdom,” thus filling believers with a salutary “virginal *modesty* and *chastity of mind*” that moves them to flee all error and take refuge under the protection of the divinely appointed guardian of their faith.⁴⁶

In the definition of these two dogmas during the nineteenth century, Scheeben thus spies the hand of divine providence, which has desired to exalt the immaculate Virgin and the immaculate Church in the face of the rationalistic and naturalistic pretensions of modernity. “Mary and the See of Peter,” Scheeben believes, “are therefore most intimately bound together in the plan of God and in the history of the Church.”⁴⁷ The two newly defined dogmas constitute for Scheeben nothing less than the fulfillment of the two scriptural prophecies “which contain the fundamental promises of [Christianity’s] survival and its triumph over hell and the world.” These are, namely, God’s promise to Adam and Eve that the woman, with and through her seed, would crush the serpent’s head (see Gen 3:15), and Christ’s promise to Peter that the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church (see Matt 16:18).⁴⁸ Indeed, Scheeben does not hesitate to declare that, in the coincidence of the two dogmatic definitions at this decisive moment of history, Mary “has crushed the ancient serpent anew by

⁴⁴ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 532. The reader will note the feminine gender of the two German nouns that conclude the sentence.

⁴⁵ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 533.

⁴⁶ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 535.

⁴⁷ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 543.

⁴⁸ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 543.

pressing the rock of Peter upon its head,” while the pope for his part has shown himself to be “the invincible companion of the woman who crushes the serpent.”⁴⁹

On the Theological Significance of Scheeben’s Essay

I would like to conclude by touching upon a few of what I see as the most important insights contained in Scheeben’s seminal essay on the theological and world-historical significance of the connection between the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility. At the same time, I would like to use those insights as a springboard from which to consider the ongoing role these two dogmas might play in the lives of believers today.

The first point that I would suggest we can take away from Scheeben’s essay is quite simple, but for that reason it is also rather easy to miss: The dogmas of the Catholic faith, and more precisely the circumstances which occasion the Church’s authoritative definition of those dogmas, have salvation-historical significance. That is to say, Scheeben was himself convinced, and would have us also be convinced, that the Church does not proceed to the definition of dogmas arbitrarily and at happenstance, but more clearly articulates and proposes (or re-proposes) for belief revealed truths precisely at those moments in history when they are most needed for the salvation of the world. God, in other words, is still at work in the world, and makes his voice heard through the magisterium of the Church in every age, so as to make known to straying humanity the saving truths of the Gospel. Shakespeare famously makes the tragic figure of Macbeth declare that life, and all of human history, is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”;⁵⁰ but the Christian who looks upon history—and in particular upon the history of the Church—with the eyes of supernatural faith, sees instead the intensely meaningful drama of sin and salvation that unfolds under the steady hand of divine providence.

The nineteenth century was the golden age of the so-called “philosophy of history,” in which thinkers such as Hegel and Karl Marx believed that, by applying the powers of reason to the apparently random vicissitudes of history, they could lay bare the fixed laws which guide its course—rational laws that were, in their own way, just as necessary, unvarying, and indeed

⁴⁹ Scheeben, “Die theologische und praktische Bedeutung,” 544.

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells et al., 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 992.

inexorable as the laws of nature itself. Scheeben, as we already established, vehemently rejected this purely rationalistic outlook. Nevertheless, even if he held the so-called “philosophy of history” to be an absurd illusion, this does not mean that he denied the possibility of an authentic *theo*-logy of history. To the contrary, although Scheeben freely acknowledged that reason alone is incapable of discovering any real meaning in history, he was deeply convinced that reason *enlightened by supernatural faith* is indeed capable of discerning the true significance of history in the light of divine revelation. This is because, in Scheeben’s view, all of creation must be understood as a kind of progressive realization of the divine ideas in time:

Because the world is produced by God, not blindly, but according to a plan conceived by him, it is the realization and the expression of a divine idea. And because in the final analysis it is directed not to the attainment of some utility but to the realization of a work that is good and beautiful in itself, [it is] an *artistic idea*. But because divine ideas can only be directed to the reproduction of the *ideal*, which is God himself, and because the world is destined for the external manifestation of the beauty and glory of God, the world as a whole must be a reflection of the beauty and glory of God.⁵¹

Although, on the surface, the beauty and order of the divine plan of creation is far more evident in the realm of nature than in that of history, and although the language of history may be far more difficult to decipher than that of nature, such that at first glance it appears utterly meaningless and hopelessly tragic, Scheeben was convinced that, underneath it all, the eyes of faith are able to glimpse the wise dispensation of God who ordains all things—even human freedom and rationality—to their appointed ends. What is necessary to gain this insight, Scheeben believed, was to view human history from the perspective of the Cross of Christ, “from whose height alone the view reaches backward to the cradle of our race and forward to the threshold of eternity.”⁵²

⁵¹ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*, trans. Michael J. Miller, vol. 3 (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 119. Scheeben elsewhere speaks of God’s creative idea for the supernatural destiny of humanity (§173), of all creation in general (§174), and of Christ himself (*Dogmatics*, 5.2:1378). Cf. Eugen Paul, *Denkweg und Denkform der Theologie von Matthias Joseph Scheeben*, Münchener theologische Studien: Systematische Abteilung 40 (Munich: Max Hueber, 1970), 316.

⁵² Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Gedanken über das christliche Auktoritätsprinzip und seine Bedeutung für unsere Zeit,” *Periodische Blätter zur wissenschaftlichen Besprechung*

And what is true of human history in general is especially true of the history of the Church, the bride and Mystical Body of Christ who was born from his pierced heart as he hung upon the Cross. For those believers with eyes to see, her course throughout time is not aimless, but is infallibly guided and directed by the Holy Spirit, who Christ promised would lead his disciples “into all truth” (John 16:13). Scheeben conceives of the Church’s tradition like a great river or stream that flows out from its source in divine revelation. As it runs through the course of history its path is determined and partially conditioned by the humanity of its principal protagonists, but it is also carefully channeled and conducted by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The dogmas and doctrines of the faith are like so many concrete expressions or “manifestations” of the original deposit of divine revelation, and are carried along within the stream of tradition throughout the ages, at some moments remaining hidden within the rush of the current, but at other times bubbling to the surface. It is the role of the Church’s magisterium in every age, according to Scheeben, to plumb the depths of the stream of tradition so as to bring to light and develop those truths of divine revelation which remained latent or implicit for a time, so that “they may be able to come again to the fore *freely* and *openly* under the animating breath of the Holy Spirit who hovers over the waters” (see Gen 1:2; Mark 1:10).⁵³

For Scheeben, then, the Word of God continuously echoes and reverberates over the immense waters of human history in the teachings of the Church (see Ps 29:3). Amidst the stormy seas of the nineteenth century, God moved his Church to speak the calming words of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception to clarify the proper relationship of human nature to divine grace, and the dogma of papal infallibility to set right the relationship between natural reason and supernatural faith. Whether or not we agree with Scheeben’s view of the providential timing of these dogmatic definitions, it should prompt us to ask: What word of truth might the Holy Spirit wish to speak through these dogmas to the Church and to the world of today? Here, of course, I can only offer a few personal opinions.

We live in what some have called a “post-truth world,” a world flooded by a cacophony of AI-generated content, alternative facts, and fake news, in which many people are beginning to lose confidence in their own ability to discern truth from falsehood and reality from fiction. Unlike the Age

der großen religiösen Fragen der Gegenwart 10 (1881): 10.

⁵³ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*, trans. Michael J. Miller, vol. 1.1 (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 312 (translation modified).

of Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which the unaided power of autonomous reason was believed to be the measure of all things, today more and more people have essentially despaired of their use of reason, and increasingly take refuge in tribalism, emotivism, self-assertion, and (at the limit) the violent will to power. Yet the human mind still hungers to know the truth—not just a set of disjointed facts, but the universal and inexhaustible Truth. In an age of such chaos, uncertainty, and instability as ours, might the infallibility of the Church’s magisterium and of the definitive and authoritative doctrinal pronouncements of the pope be more attractively presented to our contemporaries, not as an imposition upon their rights and freedom, but as a liberating source of certainty—or as the Apostle Paul calls it, as the living “pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim 3:15)—upon which we may securely build our lives?

Likewise, unlike the Age of Enlightenment, in which human nature was exalted as the pinnacle of creation, ours is an age in which the definition of human nature, and even the significance (or insignificance) of the human body itself as part of that nature, has been thrown into doubt. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of human sexuality, in which the revolution against traditional moral norms has become a rebellion against the normativity of bodily sex itself. As Ratzinger once observed:

Today’s anthropological program hinges more radically than ever before on “emancipation,” it seeks a freedom whose goal is to “be like God” (Gen 3:5). But the idea that we can be like God implies a detachment of man from his biological conditionality, from the “male and female he created them” [Gen 1:27]. This sexual difference is something that man, as a biological being, can never get rid of, something that marks man in the deepest center of his being. Yet it is regarded as a totally irrelevant triviality, as a constraint arising from historically fabricated “roles,” and is therefore consigned to the “purely biological realm,” which has nothing to do with man as such. Accordingly, this “purely biological” dimension is treated as a thing that man can manipulate at will because it lies beyond the scope of what counts as human and spiritual . . . [But] *when- ever biology is subtracted from humanity, humanity itself is negated.* Thus, the question of the legitimacy of maleness and of femaleness as such has high stakes: *nothing less than the reality of the creature.* Since the biological determinateness of humanity is least possible to

hide in motherhood, an emancipation that negates *bios* is a particular aggression against the woman. *It is the denial of her right to be a woman.*⁵⁴

Faced with such a situation, in which the dignity and value of the human body precisely in its sexual concreteness is systematically denied and effaced, what better response could the Church give than to re-propose to the men and women of today the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary? For she is the woman in whom, as Ratzinger states, “the ‘biological’ and the human are inseparable, . . . just as are the human and the ‘theological.’”⁵⁵ As the old saying goes, “The Flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary.”⁵⁶ In her divine motherhood, it is impossible to deny the fact that the human body, and femininity in particular, possesses a truly theological significance. And, just as her Immaculate Conception showed the sovereign power of divine grace over human nature in Scheeben’s age, so I would suggest that her humble *fiat*, her active consent and receptivity to God and his work in her, could serve to demonstrate—for an age which refuses to *receive* anything from God, including even a bodily nature, which it has not made or defined for itself—the great dignity and value of the human creature’s capacity to cooperate with the workings of redeeming grace.

Scheeben, then, teaches us that dogmas can and do have salvation-historical significance. He also teaches us that dogmas—indeed, all the supernatural mysteries of the Christian faith—are intimately intertwined with one another. In contemplating the meaning of one, we inevitably come to a deeper understanding of all the others. For, divine revelation does not consist of an inert block of disconnected truths, but of a virtually inexhaustible *nexus mysteriorum* that is as dynamic and endlessly fruitful as the Trinitarian life that is its origin and goal:

The mysteries which constitute the specific object of supernatural revelation are not merely *individual* truths situated beyond the natural order of things, but rather form *a magnificent order, a higher heavenly world, a mystical cosmos*, whose members are likewise vitally

⁵⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, “Thoughts on the Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety in Faith and Theology as a Whole,” in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary—The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 32–33 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ Ratzinger, “Thoughts on the Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety,” 31–32.

⁵⁶ A medieval axiom first found in Pseudo-Augustine, *De assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis* 5: “Caro enim Jesu caro est Mariae” (*Patrologia Latina* [PL] 40:1145).

interconnected, as they are built up in a corresponding manner above the natural order of things, and which therefore according to the Apostle is to be regarded as a masterpiece “of God’s manifold wisdom” (Eph 3:10).⁵⁷

In Scheeben’s seminal essay from 1870, he puts this conviction into practice by comparing two dogmas—the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility—that, apart from their historical coincidence, may have seemed to us at first to have little to do with one another. But in fact Scheeben has shown that they are profoundly related, as they both have to do with the way in which God’s grace works in his creatures—and especially in his privileged covenantal partners, Mary and the Church—to renew them from within, elevate them above their natural capabilities, and enable them to respond to him with a saving faith that is both pure and unshakeable.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest significance of Scheeben’s essay is that it represents his first sustained attempt at drawing the analogy between Mary and the Church in the supernatural order. One of the most lasting contributions that Scheeben bequeathed to modern Catholic theology was his recovery of this typological parallel between Mary and the Church, which had been so dear to the Church Fathers—like theirs, his Mariology is profoundly ecclesiological, and his ecclesiology is profoundly Mariological. He was convinced that the theological exploration of the supernatural prerogatives of Mary could serve as “a rich source of light for the doctrine of the Church in regard to her inner organism and supernatural being.”⁵⁸ This insight would be taken up by numerous twentieth-century theologians, and would ultimately be endorsed by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council in their choice to situate their treatment of the Virgin Mary *within* the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.⁵⁹

But Scheeben went further than merely to acknowledge an *extrinsic* resemblance between the mysteries of Mary and the Church. For him, the analogy between the two is based on an *intrinsic* connection of mutual dependence and reciprocal interpenetration that, in his later *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*, he would famously call a “perichoresis.” “Between

⁵⁷ Scheeben, *Dogmatics*, 1.1:33.

⁵⁸ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, “Vorrede Scheebens zum III. Band der *Dogmatik*, der darin mit dem dritten Hauptstück der Erlösungslehre begann,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6/1, ed. Carl Feckes (Freiburg: Herder, 1954), x–xiv.

⁵⁹ See Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964), ch. 8: “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church” (Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:891–98).

Mary's motherhood and the motherhood of the Church," Scheeben declares, "there is *such an intimate and comprehensive relationship* or rather *perichoresis*, i.e., intrinsic union and similarity, that each of the two can be recognized completely only in and with the other."⁶⁰ In both the Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers, Scheeben discerned that the image of the Church was intentionally drawn so as to resemble the image of Mary, and that "Mary is [the] model of the Church precisely because in her person the idea of the Church was realized originally and in the most perfect way."⁶¹ Mary did not just *foreshadow* or prepare the way for the Church; in her immaculate purity, in her faith-filled "yes" at Nazareth, in her virginal motherhood at Bethlehem, and in her prayerful consent to Christ's death on the Cross, the Church *herself* was already present and active, cooperating with Christ her Bridegroom to give birth to redeemed humanity. In this sense, the analogy between Mary and the Church is far stronger than the word "type," used in the biblical sense, could ever express. For, unlike the case of Moses with respect to Christ, for instance, Mary is *personally involved* in the mystery that is the Church, and the Church herself already exists and lives in Mary. When the Fathers speak of Mary as the "type of the Church,"⁶² Scheeben explains,

Mary herself is considered not merely somehow as a *prototype* [*Vorbild*], more precisely an *archetype* [*Urbild*] of the Church, but rather as an archetype organically united with the Church, embracing and representing the Church in itself as the root, and also working in and through the Church.⁶³

It was for this reason that Scheeben's favored image for expressing Mary's relationship to the Church was not that of a mere "type," but rather that of the *heart*:

Mary appears in the capacity of the heart of the Mystical Body of Christ, as the privileged seat of the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Head to animate the whole Body, as that member in which the whole life of the Head is most perfectly reflected and whose

⁶⁰ Scheeben, *Dogmatics*, 5.2:1819.

⁶¹ Scheeben, *Dogmatics*, 5.2:1612.

⁶² See Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam* 2.7, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson in *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2003), 44.

⁶³ Scheeben, *Dogmatics*, 5.2:1531 (translation modified).

functions cause and support in manifold ways the influence of the Head on the other members.⁶⁴

Just as one cannot speak of the body without also speaking of the heart, Scheeben reminds us that one cannot speak of the Church without simultaneously speaking of Mary. As the heart of the Mystical Body of Christ, Mary is revealed both as the pre-eminent member of the Church who constitutes its root and origin and as a hidden member immanent to the Body, a silent servant who can transmit to its other members only what she herself receives from the Head.

The final point I would like to highlight regarding Scheeben's essay on the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility touches precisely upon this theme of how to properly conceive of Mary's relationship to the Church. And here we come to what I consider to be perhaps the weakest point of Scheeben's 1870 essay: namely, that whatever may be said of the analogy that exists between Mary and the Church as a whole (which, as with any analogy, implies both similarities and differences between the two), it is certainly the case that the same analogy *does not* and *cannot* apply so perfectly to Mary and the person of the pope. In his essay, Scheeben is at pains to argue that both the Immaculate Conception of Mary and papal infallibility demonstrate the power of God's grace to purify and protect the souls of the redeemed. This is true as far as it goes. But what Scheeben does not do with anything like the theological clarity that one would expect from him is to distinguish between the very different *kinds* of grace that God gives to Mary at her conception, to protect her from all stain of original sin, and to the pope when he is teaching definitively and authoritatively, to protect his pronouncements from all stain of error. When reading through Scheeben's extensive comparison of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility, one would almost be forgiven for concluding that each pope, upon his accession to the See of Peter, must receive a kind of new, habitual fullness of grace similar to that which was enjoyed by the Virgin Mary. But of course this is not, and never has been, Catholic teaching, and it certainly was not the teaching enunciated by the First Vatican Council.

In the years leading up to the Council, within the widespread and highly influential movement of ultramontanist, which advocated for the dogmatic definition of papal infallibility, there existed a much smaller party of "extreme infallibilists," who did in fact speak and act as if the pope

⁶⁴ Scheeben, *Dogmatics*, 5.2:1628.

were continually possessed of a special inspiration of the Holy Spirit that made of his every word an oracle of divine truth. This view was typified, for example by the French journalist Louis Veuillot, who maintained that, “when the pope thinks, it is God who is thinking in him,” and by the English writer William George Ward, a convert from Anglicanism, who once famously declared that he would like a new papal bull every morning with his *Times* at breakfast.⁶⁵ Yet, the dogma of papal infallibility, as it was ultimately formulated by Vatican I in the fourth chapter of the dogmatic constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, was far more theologically refined and limited in scope. The formula of the definition reads as follows:

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, irreformable.⁶⁶

The precise meaning of this definition was set forth for the Council fathers prior to their approval of it by Bishop Vincent Ferrer Gasser, who had been appointed to this task by the deputation *De Fide* that had prepared the final draft of the dogmatic constitution. Gasser’s *relatio* on the Council floor, which was delivered in Latin and lasted over four hours, is of decisive importance for understanding what the Council actually intended to say—and, perhaps more importantly, did *not* intend to say—when it promulgated the definition of papal infallibility.⁶⁷

In the course of his remarks, Gasser addresses three key adjectives which some bishops who cherished more extreme views of papal infallibility had hoped the Council would use to characterize the nature of the papal prerogative: namely, that the infallibility of the pope should be understood

⁶⁵ See Howard, *The Pope*, 122.

⁶⁶ First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Pastor Aeternus* (1870), ch. 4 (Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:816).

⁶⁷ See James T. O’Connor, “Introduction,” in *The Gift of Infallibility: The Official Relatio on Infallibility of Bishop Vincent Ferrer Gasser at Vatican Council I*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 8.

as (1) personal, (2) separate, and (3) absolute. Gasser notes that the final draft of the dogmatic constitution intentionally omits these three adjectives because they are inherently ambiguous and could lead to some serious misconceptions.

The infallibility of the Roman pontiff is indeed *personal*, Gasser explains, in the sense that it belongs individually “to each and every legitimate successor of Peter,” and not just to the Roman Church as a whole. It belongs, in other words, to the *sedens* (the one sitting on the chair) and not—as Gallicanism would have it—just to the *sedes* (the chair itself).⁶⁸ However, Gasser continues, the gift of infallibility “does *not* belong to the Roman Pontiff inasmuch as he is a private person, nor even inasmuch as he is a private teacher.” For that reason he clarifies, “We do not speak about personal infallibility, although we defend the infallibility of the person of the Roman Pontiff, not as an individual person but as the person of the Roman Pontiff or a public person, as head of the Church in his relation to the Church universal.”⁶⁹ In fact, it is not even the case that the pope is infallible *by virtue of the authority of the papacy*—for, since he is always pope, then it would follow that he is always infallible. Rather, “the divine assistance promised to him, by which he cannot err, he only enjoys as such when he really and actually exercises his duty as supreme judge and universal teacher of the Church in disputes about the faith.”⁷⁰ The gift of papal infallibility, in other words, is not a *habitual grace* that perpetually inheres in the soul of the pope, but a grace that takes the form of what the dogmatic constitution modestly calls a special “divine assistance” (*assistentia divina*) which is given to him in those moments—and *only* those moments—when he acts as the supreme teacher of the universal Church in matters of faith and morals. It is for this reason that the dogmatic constitution specifically refers to papal infallibility as a “charism of truth” (*charisma veritatis*),⁷¹ which Gasser pointedly explains, “does not come to [the Roman Pontiff] in the manner of inspiration or of revelation.”⁷²

The infallibility of the pope is *separate* in the sense that it is distinct from the infallibility of all the bishops when they teach as one with their earthly head. Thus it is not coterminous with what we today call the ordinary and

⁶⁸ Vincent Ferrer Gasser, “Relatio” (July 11, 1870), in O’Connor, *Gift of Infallibility*, 21–99, at 45. Scheeben explains the historical roots and the theological strengths and limitations of the distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* in *Dogmatics*, 1.1:502–6.

⁶⁹ Gasser, “Relatio,” 45–46.

⁷⁰ Gasser, “Relatio,” 46.

⁷¹ Vatican I, *Pastor Aeternus*, ch. 4 (Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:816).

⁷² Gasser, “Relatio,” 47.

universal magisterium of the Church, as it is a privilege uniquely granted by Christ to Peter and his successors. Nevertheless, Gasser swiftly adds, it would be erroneous to speak of papal infallibility as separate from the *Church*, since the pope exercises his infallible teaching office only *for* the Church, and when he represents the whole Church. Furthermore, it can never be separated from the consent of the Church (even if such consent must not be seen as a *condition* of its authentic exercise), because, according to the Savior's promise, such ecclesial consent will never in fact be fully lacking. One might as well seek to separate the building from the foundation that supports it as separate papal infallibility from the infallibility universal Church.⁷³

Finally, in what sense is papal infallibility *absolute*? Here Gasser dramatically summons the close attention of his listeners (which we may suspect was by now flagging somewhat):

Note well. It is asked in what sense the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff is absolute. I reply and openly admit: in no sense is pontifical infallibility absolute, because absolute infallibility belongs to God alone. . . . In reality, the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff is restricted by reason of the subject, that is when the Pope, constituted in the chair of Peter, the center of the Church, speaks as universal teacher and supreme judge; it is restricted by reason of the object, i.e., when treating of matters of faith and morals; and by reason of the act itself, i.e., when the Pope defines what must be believed or rejected by all the faithful.⁷⁴

To sum up, then, the grace of papal infallibility, as defined at Vatican I and authoritatively interpreted for the Council fathers by Bishop Gasser, is essentially a *charismatic* grace—what Scholastic theologians commonly refer to as a *gratia gratis data*, a “grace freely given.” This means that it is not granted to the pope for his personal benefit or sanctification, but for the sake of building up the Church by confirming and strengthening her faith, especially at those moments when it is threatening to waver. Furthermore, it is not a habitual grace, but a special form of divine assistance that is given to him when, *in act*, he exercises his office of supreme teacher and pastor of all the faithful to solemnly and authoritatively define matters of faith or

⁷³ See Gasser, “Relatio,” 46–48.

⁷⁴ Gasser, “Relatio,” 49.

morals.⁷⁵ Of course, apart from such extraordinary definitive acts, he also teaches infallibly as part of the ordinary and universal magisterium—that is, when joined to the whole body of bishops dispersed throughout the world as their visible head—but in this case the infallibility is really that of the Church as a whole.

All of these refinements, distinctions, and limitations—of which Scheeben himself was fully aware, as he amply demonstrates in his extensive treatment of papal infallibility in the first volume of his *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*—must be kept firmly in mind by Catholics today perhaps more than ever before. For, as much as the dogma of papal infallibility is a true source of solace for Catholics, assuring them of the truth and certainty of their faith in an era of confusion and skepticism, it can also sometimes become an unnecessary source of anxiety and bewilderment in an age in which it is now actually possible to know nearly every single word that the pope happens to utter at almost any hour of the day or night. I say an “unnecessary” source of anxiety because, from everything we have just considered, it should now be obvious to us that a papal tweet generated by an anonymous Vatican staffer, for example, is not an exercise of papal infallibility. An impromptu papal phone call to a private citizen to discuss matters of conscience is not an exercise of papal infallibility. A papal press conference held in an airplane is not an exercise of papal infallibility. And—not to put too fine a point on it—an ambiguously worded footnote in a post-synodal apostolic exhortation is not an exercise of papal infallibility. To put it somewhat more comically, Catholics need not and must not act like Rex Mottram, that memorably vacuous character from Evelyn Waugh’s great masterpiece, *Brideshead Revisited*. While Rex is taking instruction from Fr. Mowbray in order to convert to the Catholic

⁷⁵ Scheeben, for his part, helpfully explains that the charism of papal infallibility may be considered “habitual” in the sense that it is habitually attached to the *authority* of the pope, though not in the sense of being a habitual grace of his *person*: “This indeceivability is attached to the authority of the pope *habitually* also, namely insofar as that nature of this authority demands and entails that it can never be employed to assert an error. This is to say, on the one hand, that this indeceivability can and must be regarded *not merely* as an actual but *also* as an *habitual* characteristic—not in the form of a natural, acquired, or infused *habitus* (= condition or quality of the *person*), but rather in the form of a *supernatural cooperation of the Author of the authority itself*: this cooperation is habitually and essentially connected with the authority of the person and operates *according to a constant and unchangeable law*. This is to say, on the other hand, that the *actual* indeceivability or the indeceivability of the relevant acts themselves is *only the operation, effect, and appearance of the habitual indeceivability* of the authority, and that the latter therefore is [the] inmost principle, basis, and core of the first” (*Dogmatics*, 1.1:503).

faith, the priest tests him by asking, “Supposing the Pope looked up and saw a cloud and said, ‘It’s going to rain.’ Would that be bound to happen?” “Oh, yes, Father,” Rex replies. “But supposing it didn’t?” asks the priest. Rex thinks for a moment and then says, “I suppose it would be sort of raining spiritually, only we were too sinful to see it.”⁷⁶ The dogma of papal infallibility is not of the kind to oblige faithful Catholics to engage in mental gymnastics such as these.

Now, to return to the analogy with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The proper understanding of papal infallibility as a charism of truth, granted by an actual divine assistance, which negatively protects a pope from solemnly and authoritatively teaching error, contrasts sharply with the nature of the grace of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. Unlike the grace given to the pope, Our Lady’s grace (as Scheeben himself points out in his *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*) is not a mere charismatic grace, as if it were solely given in view of “an *office* [i.e., divine motherhood] to be exercised for the benefit of others.”⁷⁷ Rather, it is precisely a *gratia sanctificans* or *gratum faciens*—that is, a sanctifying grace that makes Mary utterly holy and pleasing to God. It is not granted to her just so that she could do something for us; rather, it is granted to her *for her own sake*, solely because God loved her from all eternity, desired her for his own, and wished to lavish his gifts upon her.

Moreover, the grace of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception is not merely a negative protection against original sin and all actual sins; it is instead a positive and habitual *fullness* of the divine life that is poured into her soul. As John Henry Newman once pointed out, Protestants (and not a few Catholics) generally seem to think of original sin as having a kind of *positive* existence, like “a disease, a radical change of nature,”⁷⁸ an evil having some concrete presence in the soul. Catholic teaching, on the other hand, understands it rather as precisely the *absence* of some good that was once present in the soul, “the *deprivation* of that supernatural unmerited grace which Adam and Eve had on their first formation.”⁷⁹ Being conceived in original sin means coming into existence without the gift of grace;⁸⁰ to say

⁷⁶ See Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2020), 220–23.

⁷⁷ Scheeben, *Dogmatics*, 5.2:1609.

⁷⁸ John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D., on Occasion of His Recent Eirenicon of 1864*, in *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans and Green, 1865), 48.

⁷⁹ Newman, *Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey*, 48.

⁸⁰ Cf. Marie-Joseph Nicolas, “The Meaning of the Immaculate Conception in the

that Mary was conceived *without* original sin is therefore nothing more or less than to negate a negation. It is simply that “she never came under the original curse” which consisted in the loss of grace.⁸¹ Mary Immaculate is, as Newman memorably expresses himself, “a daughter of Eve unfallen.”⁸² That which, due to the sin of Adam and Eve, has been denied to every one of their descendants since the fall, was, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, freely granted to Mary from the very first moment of her existence, through the merits of her divine Son, which God foresaw.⁸³

Thus, the grace of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, far from distancing her from us, instead draws her all the more intimately close to us. For, although that fullness of grace was granted to her as a unique privilege for her own benefit, she also received it *for us*—not only in the sense that she was to become the mother of the Savior of the world, but also in the sense that, in the divine plan of human salvation, her transfiguration by redeeming grace was to be the icon, the archetype, and the first-fruits of *our own transfiguration* by grace. And this is most certainly good news for every Christian believer. For, however unlikely it may be that any given disciple will ever receive that special divine assistance which protects the pope from officially teaching error, it is most certainly true that *every* disciple is called and destined by God to receive a share—each in his or her own measure—of that same sanctifying grace which filled Our Lady’s soul in such an overflowing fullness, thus coming to resemble her who so perfectly resembled her divine Son. I will leave the last word to Scheeben:

By grace we are in a wonderful manner rendered similar to the mother of God. . . . By the reception of grace we imitate in ourselves the maternity of Mary. The same Holy Spirit that descended into the womb of Mary to endow her with a holy fertility, also descends into our souls to beget in a spiritual manner the Son of God. As the Blessed Virgin, by lending a willing ear to the word of the angel and by fulfilling the will of the heavenly Father, was made the mother of the Son of God in the flesh and in spirit, so must our souls give birth spiritually to the Son of God by faithfully receiving the Word

Perspectives of St. Thomas,” in *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, ed. Edward Dennis O’Connor (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 331.

⁸¹ Newman, *Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey*, 48.

⁸² Newman, *Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey*, 47.

⁸³ See Pope Pius IX, Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), in *Papal Teachings: Our Lady*, 61–82, at 80.

of God, and by corresponding to the command of God, who will give us his grace. . . . Must not we, in thanksgiving for the similar grace that God has given us, intone the same hymn with Mary and exclaim: “My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior . . . because he that is mighty hath done great things in me” (Luke 1:46–49)?⁸⁴ N.V

⁸⁴ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace*, trans. Patrick Shaughnessy (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2023), 59–60.