

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Origins of the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility

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Introduction

During the early 1970s, the centenary of the First Vatican Council was marked by the publication of two high-profile books which questioned the antiquity of the doctrine of papal infallibility. The original German edition of professor Hans Küng's *Infallible?: An Inquiry* was first published in 1970—exactly one hundred years after the suspension of Vatican I in 1870.¹ In dissenting from Pope Paul VI's prohibition of artificial contraception in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Küng concluded that this teaching met enough criteria to identify it as a definitive doctrine belonging to the ordinary and universal magisterium.² Küng came to understand that, in order to reject this teaching in a logically consistent manner, he would have to reject the dogma of papal infallibility itself.³ In order to do so, Küng appealed to a claim asserted by Ignaz von Döllinger (1799–1890), who suggested that the doctrine of papal infallibility was first articulated only in the thirteenth century by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).⁴

Writing under the pseudonym “Janus,” Döllinger argued that Thomas's idea of papal infallibility was inspired by a novel interpretation of a

¹ Hans Küng, *Infallible?: An Enquiry*, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Collins, 1971) [originally *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (Zürich: Benziger, 1970)].

² Küng, *Infallible?*, 47.

³ Küng, *Infallible?*, 52.

⁴ Küng, *Infallible?*, 95–98.

notorious ninth-century forgery, which was subsequently identified as the "False Decretals of Pseudo-Isidore."⁵ Given that Thomas had supposedly derived his ideas on papal infallibility from these fraudulent texts, Küng reckoned that this doctrine could be safely discarded as a relatively late theological construct.⁶ By way of *ressourcement*, Küng proposed that the Church hierarchy should return to the earlier concept of indefectibility, or "the perpetuity of the Church the in truth," as a more credible source of ecclesial authority. In doing so, Küng believed that the concept of indefectibility could account for occasional lapses in the doctrinal integrity of the teaching Church (*Ecclesia docens*), but that "despite all straying and wandering it ultimately keeps direction and carries onward the truth of Christ."⁷

The second of these books, issued by the noted Catholic historian Brian Tierney, went even further, and insinuated that the provenance of the doctrine of papal infallibility was of considerably less prestigious pedigree. Rather than initially crystallizing in the mind of the *Doctor Angelicus*, Tierney proposed that the doctrine of papal infallibility was first formulated in the condemned writings of Peter Olivi (1248–1298), as a defense of the heretical Spiritual Franciscans.⁸ Given the "questionable" origins of papal infallibility, Tierney maintained that the claims of Vatican I do not stand up to modern scrutiny, and as such, the Church hierarchy should be compelled to abandon this medieval fabrication:

The doctrine of papal infallibility no longer serves anyone's convenience—least of all the pope's. The papacy adopted the doctrine out of weakness. Perhaps one day the church will feel strong enough to renounce it.⁹

In order to forward his central hypothesis concerning the origins of papal infallibility, Tierney strenuously denied that this dogma had gradually evolved from an earlier doctrine which claimed that the successors of Peter would never deviate from the Catholic faith. In response to an article composed by Yves Congar on the origins of papal infallibility, Tierney later acknowledged that if it could be proven that St. Thomas Aquinas held to

⁵ Janus [Ignaz von Döllinger], *The Pope and the Council*, 2nd ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1869), 94–150.

⁶ Küng, *Infallible?*, 96.

⁷ Küng, *Infallible?*, 153.

⁸ Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility: 1150–1350* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

⁹ Tierney, *Origins*, 281.

such a position, he would be forced to retract the thesis proposed in his *Origins of Papal Infallibility*.

Donald Prudlo recently provided a major contribution to this debate by further demonstrating that the origins of the doctrine of papal infallibility can be attributed to Thomas, rather than Olivi.¹⁰ Both Congar and Prudlo established that Thomas was the originator of the doctrine of papal infallibility by clearly identifying two particular areas in which he asserted that a pope can teach infallibly acting alone, outside the approval of an ecumenical council—in the addition of the *Filioque* clause to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and in the canonization of saints. But even though Congar and Prudlo correctly identified these key loci in which Thomas advances the doctrine of papal infallibility, they did not successfully demonstrate exactly why Thomas thought that a pope could issue definitive judgments without securing the approval of a general Church council.

The primary reason Thomas thought that the pope could issue definitive judgments acting on his own initiative is due to his reception of a papalist tradition which held that the gift of never-failing faith described in Luke 22:32 was directly conferred upon Peter and his successors in the See of Rome. This particular nuance of the doctrine of indefectibility of the Church was specifically formulated in order to reject the idea that the Apostolic See (the *sedes*) should be separated from the individual occupants of the chair of Peter (the *sedens*). The distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* was first made during the prelude to the Great Schism of 1054, and was most likely employed by Patriarch Photius of Constantinople (r. 858–867 / 877–886) during the Photian Synod of 867, in order to justify his accusations of heresy against Pope Nicholas I (r. 858–867). The distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* subsequently found its way into medieval canon law, where it would serve as the basis of conciliar theory. If a Roman pontiff could potentially teach heresy in his capacity as teacher of the universal Church, then the pope would have to be assisted by an ecumenical council when defining doctrines which must be believed by the whole Church. By making a distinction between the Apostolic See and its individual occupants, the medieval canon lawyers thought they could uphold the doctrine which had already been defined in the *Formula of Hormisdas* (that the Catholic religion has always been preserved immaculate in the Apostolic See), while still allowing for the

¹⁰ See Donald Prudlo, *Certain Sainthood: Canonization and the Origins of Papal Infallibility in the Medieval Church* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

possibility that an individual successor of Peter could become a manifest heretic and teach heresy to the universal Church.

There is a wealth of evidence which suggests that Thomas had concluded that the traditional understanding of the benefits of Christ's prayer for Peter's faith had ruled out the possibility of a heretical pope. If a pope cannot publicly teach heresy because of the stability of the faith of Peter and his successors, then the Roman pontiff does not need the approval of an ecumenical council in order to define doctrines. By rejecting this distinction between the Apostolic See as a corporate entity (the *sedes*), over against the individual occupants of the apostolic seat (the *sedens*), Thomas was able to assert that Christ's prayer for Peter's faith in Luke 22:32 extended to protect each of his successors in the See of Rome. In attesting to the constant solidity of the faith of the successors of Peter in the exercise of the papal office, Thomas was able to go on to conclude that the pope can make an addition to the Creed acting on his own initiative, even when he does not have recourse to the guidance and affirmation of an ecumenical council.

This essay will first sketch out a brief history of the development of the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Apostolic See, before showing how the rejection of this tradition by Patriarch Photius ultimately concluded in the tragic circumstances of the Great Schism. It will then go on to show how Thomas went on to formulate the doctrine of papal infallibility largely in response to the *Filioque* controversy, in an attempt to further rapprochement with the Eastern Orthodox Church. We will then conclude by highlighting the importance of recovering the original context in which this doctrine was formulated as a means of strengthening ecumenical relations with Eastern Orthodoxy, in accordance with Thomas's original intention.

The Doctrine of the Indefectibility of the Petrine See in the Early Church

The distinction between the Apostolic See and the individual successors of Peter began to be made during the prelude to the Great Schism, in an attempt to explain the exact meaning of the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Petrine See as articulated in the *Formula of Hormisdas* and Pope Agatho's profession of faith. The condemnation of Pope Honorius I (r. 625–638) at the Third Council of Constantinople in 681 for teaching the heresy of monothelitism had caused a considerable amount of confusion concerning the exact meaning of the *Formula of Hormisdas*, which was centered on the claim that "Catholic faith has always been preserved

immaculate in the Apostolic See.”¹¹ Hormisdas had appealed to the indefectible faith of the See of Rome as his major claim to authority during an attempt to settle the Acacian Schism in 519. This doctrine, which claimed that the Catholic faith has always been preserved intact in the See of Peter, first began to be articulated after Pope Liberius (r. 352–366) was falsely accused of having subscribed to an Arian formula in order to secure his return from exile after he had been banished to Thrace by Emperor Constantius II.¹²

Writing shortly after the initial circulation of these allegations in 383, St. Ambrose of Milan (339–397) was one of the earliest ecclesiastical writers to discern that the true significance of Christ’s promise in Matt 16:16–18 meant that the very foundation of the Church rests on the stability of Peter’s faith. In his *De incarnationis Dominicae sacramento*, Ambrose proclaims that Peter’s perfect confession of faith in recognizing Christ as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16), had been rewarded with the promise that the gates of hell would never prevail over the rock-like strength of Peter’s faith. In equating the “gates of hell” with heretical doctrines, Ambrose rejected any suggestion that the Petrine See could be overwhelmed by the false teachings of Arianism, or indeed any other heresy:

Faith, then, is the foundation of the Church, for it was not said of Peter’s flesh, but of his faith, that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). But his confession of faith conquered hell. And this confession did not shut out one heresy, for, since the Church like a good ship is often buffeted by many waves, the foundation of the Church should prevail against all heresies.¹³

Ambrose’s famous protégé, St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), made a major contribution to the doctrine of the foundation of the Church on

¹¹ Pope Hormisdas, *Libellus Fidei*: “In Sede Apostolica immaculata est semper catholica servata religio” (Denzinger-Hünemann [DH] no. 363).

¹² Pope Pius IX condemned the false charges leveled against Pope Liberius in *Quartus Supra* (1873) §16.

¹³ St. Ambrose of Milan, *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento* 34: “Fides ergo est Ecclesiae fundamentum: non enim de carne Petri, sed de fide dictum est, quia portae mortis ei non praevalerunt: sed confessione non unam haeresim exclusit; nam cum Ecclesia multis tamquam bona navis fluctibus saepe tundatur, adversus omnes haereses debet valere Ecclesiae fundamentum” (*Patrologia Latina* [PL] 16, col. 827; in *The Sacrament of the Incarnation of Our Lord*, The Fathers of the Church 44 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963], 230–31).

the stability of Peter's faith in Matt 16:16 by combining its significance with a parallel passage found in Luke 22:32, concerning Christ's prayer that Peter's faith would never fail. In his *De correptione et gratia*, Augustine outlines his belief that Christ's prayer for Peter's unfailing faith in Luke 22:32 could not have been in vain:

Will you dare to say that even when Christ prayed that Peter's faith might not fail, it would still have failed if Peter had willed it to fail; that is, if he had been unwilling that it should continue even to the end? As if Peter could in any measure will otherwise than Christ had asked for him that he might will. For who does not know that Peter's faith would then have perished if that will by which he was faithful should fail, and that it would have continued if that same will should abide? But because the will is prepared by the Lord, Proverbs 8:35 therefore Christ's petition on his behalf could not be a vain petition. When, then, He prayed that his faith should not fail, what was it that he asked for, but that in his faith he should have a most free, strong, invincible, persevering will!¹⁴

This interpretation of Christ's prayer for Peter's faith in Matt 16:16 and Luke 22:32 would go on to provide the central basis for the doctrine of indefectibility as articulated in the *Formula of Hormisdas*. Augustine's combination of the Lukan and Matthean promises for Peter's faith would allow later theologians to tease out the full implications of this gift for the exercise of the Petrine primacy. If it was the entire Petrine succession that was conferred with the gift of an unfailing faith, rather than it being made solely for the final perseverance in faith of Peter himself, or for the faith of the universal Church, then Christ's prayer in Luke 22:32 is ultimately responsible for the ability of the successors of Peter to confirm the brethren in the faith by settling doctrinal disputes.

There is evidence in a letter to suggest that Augustine had intended

¹⁴ St. Augustine of Hippo, *De correptione et gratia* 17: "An audebis dicere etiam rogante Christo ne deficeret fides Petri, defecturam fuisse si Petrus eam deficere voluisset, hoc est, si eam usque in finem perseverare noluisse? Quasi aliud Petrus ullo modo vellet, quam pro illo Christus rogasset ut vellet. Nam quis ignorat, tunc fuisse perituram fidem Petri, si ea qua fidelis erat, voluntas ipsa deficeret; et permansuram, si eadem voluntas maneret? Sed quia praeparatur voluntas a Domino (Prov. viii, sec. LXX); ideo pro illo Christi non posset esse inanis oratio. Quando rogavit, nisi ut haberet in fide liberissimam, fortissimam, invictissimam, perseverantissimam voluntatem?" (PL 44, col. 926; trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1 [ed, Schaff] [NPNF1], vol. 5)

to extend Peter's gift of never-failing faith to apply to the entire Petrine succession, rather than being limited to Peter himself, by denying the possibility that any of his successors could be numbered among the Donatists:¹⁵

For if the lineal succession of bishops is to be taken into account, with how much more certainty and benefit to the Church do we reckon back till we reach Peter himself, to whom, as bearing in a figure the whole Church, the Lord said: "Upon this rock will I build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!" Matthew 16:18. The successor of Peter was Linus, and his successors in unbroken continuity were these:— Clement, Anacletus, Evaristus, Alexander, . . . and Siricius, whose successor is the present Bishop Anastasius. In this order of succession no Donatist bishop is found.¹⁶

Even though Augustine sees Peter as standing for a figurative representation of the universal Church, he goes on to deny that the faith of any of his successors could be corrupted by the errors of the Donatists. Therefore, Augustine clearly does not see the gift of never-failing faith as being strictly limited to the universal Church, since it also inheres in Peter and his successors. The fact that none of the Roman pontiffs had ever succumbed to Donatism assures St. Augustine of the erroneous nature of this doctrine, demonstrating his apparent conviction that Christ's promises to Peter meant that the gates of hell could never prevail against any of his successors. This important development would soon become the normative interpretation of Luke 22:32, and paved the way for the formal definition of the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Roman See, which found its fullest expression just over a century later, when it was authoritatively taught in the *Formula of Hormisdas*.

In his letter *Dat mihi*, addressed to Bishop Venerius of Milan around the year 401, Pope Anastasius I (r. 399–401) attempted to defend the

¹⁵ James O'Connor, *The Gift of Infallibility: The Official Relatio on Infallibility of Bishop Vincent Ferrer Gasser at Vatican Council I* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 31.

¹⁶ St. Augustine of Hippo, Epistle 53, no. 1.2: "Si enim ordo episcoporum sibi succedentium considerandus est, quanto certius et vere salubriter ab ipso Petro numeramus, cui totius Ecclesiae figuram gerenti Dominus ait: Super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam, et portae inferorum non vincent eam (Matth. xvi, 18). Petro enim successit Linus; Lino, Clemens; Clementi, Anacletus; Anacleto, Evaristus; Evaristo, Alexander . . . Siricio, Anastasius. In hoc ordine successionis nullus donatista episcopus invenitur" (PL 33, col. 196; trans. J. G. Cunningham, in *NPNF1*, vol. 1).

orthodoxy of Pope Liberius by appealing to the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Church.¹⁷ This was followed soon after by the Aquileian monk Tyrannius Rufinus (344–411), who cited Eph 5:27 as scriptural proof that the Roman church is always preserved against doctrinal corruption in his *Commentary on the Apostle's Creed*:

This is that holy Church which is without spot or wrinkle. For many others have gathered together Churches, as Marcion, and Valentinus, and Ebion, and Manichæus, and Arius, and all the other heretics. But those Churches are not without spot or wrinkle of unfaithfulness.¹⁸

Writing soon after this defense of Pope Liberius was advanced by Pope Anastasius and Rufinus, Pope Innocent I (r. 401–417) continued to maintain that the integrity of the faith of the Church was rooted in the continuous doctrinal orthodoxy of the Petrine See. Innocent had appealed to this aspect of the papal charism in order to shore up his authority over the bishops gathered in the synod of Carthage in 417. In doing so, Innocent compared Catholic doctrine being kept pristine in the See of Rome to the purity of an uncontaminated spring at its very source, through which all the other churches could be cleansed from the “filth” of heretical doctrines.¹⁹ This key cornerstone of the papal claims would eventually be articulated in its clearest form in a letter sent by Bishop Theodoret of

¹⁷ Pope Anastasius I, *Dat mihi*: “The Arian faction was not able to insinuate its defilements by any heretical deception, because our God, as we believe, made sure that this holy and immaculate faith was not contaminated by any blasphemous error of slanderous men” (DH no. 209).

¹⁸ Tyrannius Rufinus, *Commentary on the Apostle's Creed* 39: “Ista est ergo sancta Ecclesia, non habens maculam, aut rugam. Multi enim et alii Ecclesias congregaverunt, ut Marcion, et Valentinus, et Ebion et Manichæus, et Arius, et caeteri omnes haeretici. Sed illae Ecclesiae non sunt sine macula, vel ruga perfidae” (PL 21, col. 375; trans. W. H. Fremantle, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2 [ed. Schaff] [NPNF2], vol. 3).

¹⁹ Pope Innocent I, *In requirendis* (letter to the bishops of the Synod of Carthage): “Take this as an example, guarding with your sacerdotal office the practices of the Fathers, you resolve that [they] must not be trampled upon, because they made their decisions, not by human, but by divine judgment, so that they thought that nothing whatever, although it concerned separated and remote provinces, should be concluded unless it first came to the attention of this See, so that what was a just proclamation might be confirmed by the total authority of this See, and from this source (just as all waters proceed from their original font and through diverse regions of the whole world remain pure liquids of an uncorrupted source), the other Churches might assume what [they ought] to teach, whom they ought to wash, those whom the water worthy of clean bodies would shun as though defiled with filth incapable of being cleansed” (DH no. 217).

Cyrus to Pope St. Leo I in 449, which made the explicit declaration that the authority of the See of Peter resided in the fact that no bishop of Rome had ever taught heresy:²⁰

Wherefore, I beseech your sanctity, persuade the very sacred and holy archbishop to bid me hasten to your council. For that holy see has precedence over all churches in the world, for many reasons; and above all for this, that it is free from all taint of heresy, and that no bishop of heterodox opinion has ever sat upon its throne, but it has kept the grace of the apostles undefiled.²¹

The conviction that no bishop of Rome had ever taught heresy up to his time of writing was a certain sign for Theodoret that the Apostolic See was offered a special type of divine assistance which protected the successors of Peter against the contagion of doctrinal corruption.

Pope Leo himself similarly appealed to this particular aspect of the papal claims in order to bolster his own authority, by affirming that the “depravity of heretics” could never tarnish the Petrine foundation of the Church.²² Leo’s intuitive grasp of the full implications of this aspect of the

²⁰ Klaus Schatz, *Papal Primacy: From its Origins to the Present* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 118.

²¹ Theodoret of Cyrus, Letter 116: “Quam ob causam oro sanctitatem tuam, sanctissimo et beatissimo archiepiscopo persuadeat ut apostolica potestate utatur et ad Concilium vestrum advolare praecipat. Habet enim sanctissima illa sedes Ecclesiarum quae in toto sunt orbe principatum multis nominibus, atque hoc ante omnia, quod ab haeretica tabe immunis mansit, nec ullus contraria sentiens in illa sedit, sed apostolicam gratiam integram conservavit” (*Patrologia Graeca* [PG] 83, cols. 1323–26; trans. Blomfield Jackson, in *NPNF2*, vol. 3).

²² Pope St. Leo I, Sermon 3, no. 3: “For this, dearly-beloved, was gained by that confession, which, inspired in the Apostle’s heart by God the Father, transcended all the uncertainty of human opinions, and was endowed with the firmness of a rock, which no assaults could shake. For throughout the Church Peter daily says, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ and every tongue which confesses the Lord, accepts the instruction his voice conveys. This Faith conquers the devil, and breaks the bonds of his prisoners. It uproots us from this earth and plants us in heaven, and the gates of Hades cannot prevail against it. For with such solidity is it endowed by God that the depravity of heretics cannot mar it nor the unbelief of the heathen overcome it”—“Hoc enim obtinuit, dilectissimi, illa confessio, quae a Deo Patre apostolico inspirate cordi, omnia humanarum opinionum incerta transcendit, et firmitatem petrae, quae nullis impulsionebus quateretur, accepit. In universa namque Ecclesia, Tu es Christus Filius Dei vivi, quotidie Petrus dicit, et omnis lingua, quae confitetur Dominum, magisterio hujus vocis imbuatur. Haec fides diabolum vincit, et captivorum ejus vincula dissolvit. Haec erutos mundo inserit coelo, et portae inferi adversus eam praevalere non possunt.

papal claims would ultimately culminate in a readily identifiable *de facto* exercise of papal infallibility in his famous *Tome*, even before this doctrine was fully articulated several centuries later.²³ Pope Leo clearly considered his *Tome* to have definitively settled the monophysite controversy by affirming two natures in Christ, even before it was formally approved by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. It was this understanding of the significance of Christ's prayer for Peter's faith that would ultimately provide the logical basis of the *Formula of Hormisdas*, which is yet another example of the *de facto* exercise of the doctrine of papal infallibility during the course of the first millennium.

In an effort to end the Acacian Schism (484–519), Pope Hormisdas had composed a profession of faith in his *Libellus fidei*, which condemned the Christological errors of Nestorianism and monophysitism and anathematized Patriarch Acacius of Constantinople (r. 472–489). The preamble to *Libellus fidei* contains the famous formula which affirms that the Catholic religion is always preserved immaculate in the Apostolic See—which means that it alone was to be trusted as the sole guardian of the deposit of faith:

The beginning of salvation is to guard the rule of the right faith and to deviate in no way from the determinations of the Fathers. And because one cannot ignore the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ when he said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" [Matt 16:18], what was said has been borne out by actual results, for in the Apostolic See that Catholic faith has always been preserved immaculate.²⁴

The *Formula of Hormisdas* has immense significance for Catholic ecclesiology, in the fact that its central claim concerning the indefectibility of the Apostolic See was assented to by each of the Eastern bishops who were to be reunited with the Church of Rome in the wake of the Acacian Schism, even though this action took place outside of the immediate approval of an ecumenical council.

A key turning point in the reception of this doctrine took place during Constantinople III, which gave its unanimous assent to Pope Agatho's

Tanta enim divinitus soliditate munita est, ut eam neque haeretica umquam corrumpere pravitas, nec pagana potuerit superare perfidia" (*PL* 54, cols. 146–147; trans. Charles Lett Feltoe, in *NPNF2*, vol. 12).

²³ See for example, Luke Rivington, *The Roman Primacy: A.D. 431–451* (London: Longmans and Green, 1899), 269.

²⁴ Pope Hormisdas, *Libellus fidei* (DH no. 363).

profession of faith. However, it has long been noted that this conciliar affirmation of Agatho's dogmatic letter was also accompanied by the condemnation Pope Honorius for teaching the heresy of monothelitism. The incongruity of this unusual situation left an open question mark over the interpretation of this doctrine, which would ultimately let the distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* take root in the aftermath of the Photian Schism. Throughout the entire panorama of Church history, the case of Honorius is the sole instance of a Roman pontiff actually being anathemized for heresy at an ecumenical council. During the proceedings of the Constantinople III, Pope Agatho distanced himself from the condemnation of Honorius, and instead reminded the Council fathers of the central thrust of the *Formula of Hormisdas*—that the See of Rome has never been contaminated by any heretical doctrines, and never would be, right up to the end of time.²⁵ So, instead of approving the condemnation of Honorius for heresy, Pope Agatho reasserted the teachings of his

²⁵ Pope Agatho's letter to the Third Council of Constantinople: "For this is the rule of the true faith, which this spiritual mother of your most tranquil empire, the Apostolic Church of Christ, has both in prosperity and in adversity always held and defended with energy; which, it will be proved, by the grace of Almighty God, has never erred from the path of the apostolic tradition, nor has she been depraved by yielding to heretical innovations, but from the beginning she has received the Christian faith from her founders, the princes of the Apostles of Christ, and remains undefiled unto the end, according to the divine promise of the Lord and Saviour himself, which he uttered in the holy Gospels to the prince of his disciples: saying, 'Peter, Peter, behold, Satan has desired to have you, that he might sift you as wheat; but I have prayed for you, that (your) faith fail not.' And when you are converted, strengthen your brethren. Let your tranquil Clemency therefore consider, since it is the Lord and Saviour of all, whose faith it is, that promised that Peter's faith should not fail and exhorted him to strengthen his brethren, how it is known to all that the Apostolic pontiffs, the predecessors of my littleness, have always confidently done this very thing"—"Haec est enim verae fidei regula, quam et in prosperis, et in adversis vivaciter tenuit ac defendit haec spiritalis mater vestri tranquillissimi imperii, apostolica Christi Ecclesia: quae per Dei omnipotentis gratiam a tramite apostolicae traditionis nunquam errasse probabitur, nec haereticis novitatibus depravata succutuit, sed ut ab exordio fidei Christianae, percepit ab auctoribus suis apostolorum Christi principibus, illibata fine tenus permanet, secundum ipsius Domini Salvatoris divinam pollicitationem, quam suorum discipulorum principi in sacris Evangeliiis fatus est: Petre, Petre, inquires, ecce Satan expetivit ut cribraret vos, sicut qui cribrat triticum; ego autem pro te rogavi, ut non deficiat fides tua. Et iu aliquando conversus, confirma fratres tuos (Luc. XXII). Consideret itaque vestra tranquilla clementia, quouiam Dominus et Salvator omnium, cujus fides est, qui fidem Petri non defecturam promisit, confirmare eum fratres suos admonuit, quod apostolicos pontifices, meae exiguitatis praedecessores, confidenter fecisse semper" (PL 87, col. 1169; trans. Henry Percival in *NPNF2*, vol. 14).

predecessors concerning the indefectible nature of the See of Peter. By making this remarkable intervention, Agatho appears to have sided with Pope John IV's opinion that Pope Honorius had merely taught that Christ could not have two contrary wills—which was a completely orthodox position that was affirmed by the Council itself.²⁶

St. Maximus the Confessor (580–662), who is widely revered as one of the greatest Byzantine theologians, similarly refused to accept that Honorius had intended to affirm the monothelite doctrine, and appealed to the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Apostolic See as his primary means of defense:

All the churches of Christians everywhere have held the greatest Church there to be their sole base and foundation, since, on the one hand, it is in no way overcome by the gates of Hades according to the very promise of the Savior, but holds the keys of the orthodox confession and faith in Him, . . . and on the other hand, it shuts up and locks every heretical mouth the speaks unrighteousness against the Most High.²⁷

St. Maximus informs us that Pope John IV had first-hand knowledge of the true intended meaning of Pope Honorius's letter to Sergius, since his personal secretary, Abbot John Symponus, was also the secretary of Pope

²⁶ Constantinople III: "We likewise proclaim in him, according to the teaching of the holy Fathers, two natural volitions or wills and two natural actions, without division, without change, without separation, without confusion. The two natural wills are not—by any means—opposed to each other as the impious heretics assert; but his human will is compliant; it does not resist or oppose but rather submits to his divine and almighty will"—"Καὶ δύο φυσικὰ θελήσεις ἦτοι θελήματα ἐν αὐτῷ, καὶ δύο φυσικὰ ενεργείας, ἀδιαίρετως, ἀτρέπως, ἀμερίστως, ἀσυγχύτως κατὰ τὴν τῶν ἁγίων πατέρων διδασκαλίαν ὁσαύτως κηρύττομεν· καὶ δύο μὲν φυσικὰ θελήματα οὐκ ὑπεναντία, μὴ γένοιτο, καθὼς οἱ ἀσεβεῖς ἐφῆσαν αἰρετικοί, ἀλλ' ἐπόμενον τὸ ἀνθρώπινον αὐτοῦ θέλημα, καὶ μὴ ἀντίπιπτον, ἢ ἀντιπαλαῖον, μᾶλλον μὲν οὖν καὶ ὑποτασσόμενον τῷ θείῳ αὐτοῦ καὶ πανσθενεῖ θελήματι· ἔδει γὰρ τὸ τῆς σαρκὸς θέλημα κινηθῆναι, ὑποσταγῆναι δὲ τῷ θελήματι τῷ θεϊκῷ" (DH no. 556).

²⁷ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theologica et polemica*: "μόνην κρηπίδα καὶ θεμέλιον αἱ πᾶσαι πανταχοῦ τῶν Χριστιανῶν Ἐκκλησίαι, τὴν αὐτοῦθι μεγίστην ἐχτήσαντό τε καὶ ἔχοθσιν· ὡς οὐδαμῶς μὲν κατισχυομένην κατὰ τὴν αὐτὴν τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἐπαγγελίαν, ὑπὸ ἄδου πυλῶν· ἀλλ' ἔχοθσαν τὰς κλεῖς τῆς εἰς αὐτὸν ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως καὶ ὁμολογίας· . . . καὶ μόνην εὐσέδειαν· ἀποκλείσθαι δὲ καὶ ἐμφράττωσαν πᾶν αἰρετικὸν στόμα, λαλοῦν ἀδικίαν εἰς τὸ ὕψος" (PG 91, 72C–73A [col. 139]; trans. Alan Cooper, in *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 181).

Honorius, and had actually drafted the letter in question.²⁸ Therefore, while the unfortunate choice of wording used by Honorius could be misconstrued to assert that he had proposed that Christ possessed only the one divine will, the reality was that he actually affirmed the dyothelite doctrine that the incarnate Word had both a human will and a divine will. The imprecise language that Honorius used in his reply to Sergius was then exploited by Patriarch Pyrrhus of Constantinople in order to give the impression that he had actually endorsed monothelitism, and despite the defense offered by Pope John IV, this ultimately resulted in him being accused of heresy by the fathers of the Sixth Ecumenical Council.²⁹

The distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* provided a unique solution to this perplexing turn of events at Constantinople III, in that it had seemingly allowed for the possibility of a heretical pope, whilst also superficially retaining the previous tradition concerning the doctrinal integrity of the papal office. For those who clung to the original context in which this doctrine was formulated, there was a sharp realization that it was simply unfeasible to maintain the perpetual orthodoxy of the Petrine *munus* if a pope had publicly taught heresy in his public exercise of this very office. By rejecting this newly emerging distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens*, the papalist stream of tradition would provide fertile soil in which the doctrine of papal infallibility could naturally develop.

The Idea of Papal Heresy as a Pretext for the Great Schism

As Salvatore Vacca notes, Pope Leo the Great, in his letter to Patriarch Anatolius of Constantinople, had made a distinction between the office of a patriarchal see and its individual president.³⁰ However, the first time that

²⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Disputatio cum Pyrrho* (PG 91, 181–82 [col. 330]). See Paul Bottalla, *Pope Honorius: Before the Tribunal of Reason and History* (London: Burns and Oats, 1868), 60–61.

²⁹ See DH no. 551.

³⁰ Salvatore Vacca, *Prima sedes a nemine iudicatur: Genesis and historical development of the axiom up to the Decree of Gratian* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Rome, 1993), 134. See Pope Leo the Great, Epistle 106 (*Ad Anatolium episcopum*), ch. 5: “For the See is on a different footing to the holders of it; and each individual’s chief honour is his own integrity. And since that does not lose its proper worth in any place, how much more glorious must it be when placed in the magnificence of the city of Constantinople, where many priests may find both a defense of the Father’s canons and an example of uprightness in observing you?”—“Aliud enim sunt sedes, aliud praesidentibus; et magnus unicuique honor est integritas sua. Quae cum quibuslibet locis propria ornamenta non perdat, quanto magis in Constantinopolitanae Urbis

this distinction had been employed to allow for the idea of a heretical pope is found in the writings of Auxilius of Naples, who attempted to defend Pope Formosus (r. 891–896) in a series of writings composed between 908–911.

Formosus, who was a contemporary of Patriarch Photius of Constantinople, had been beset by number of power struggles in the wake of the Photian Schism (863–867), and made a number of political enemies in the Latin West. This would eventually result in the posthumous condemnation of Formosus by one of his successors, Pope Stephen VI (r. 896–897), during the notorious Cadaver Synod. As part of his defense of Pope Formosus, Auxilius acknowledges that there is a distinction to be made between the Pontifical See itself and its individual presidents, which could be used to circumvent the *Prima Sedes a nemine iudicatur* principle, so that an individual occupant of the Apostolic See can be judged in the case of heresy:

Holy Roman Church has primacy over the Churches, therefore she judges them all, but she herself is judged by no one. . . . Pontifical sees are one thing, their presidents another. . . . If the presidents deviate from the faith, we must not follow them; it is given that, when they begin to live against the Catholic faith and religion, in such cases we absolutely must not follow them.³¹

However, the context in which Auxilius was operating makes it highly unlikely that he was the originator of this conceptual separation of the Apostolic See from its various occupants, in order to allow for the judgment of a heretical pope. Given the fact that the charges against Formosus were political in nature, rather than for teaching doctrinal error, it was simply unnecessary for Auxilius to incorporate the possibility of papal heresy into his defense by making a distinction between the See and its occupants. This makes it far more likely that Auxilius was merely repeating an example he heard elsewhere. Auxilius introduces us to this particular usage of the

magnificentia potest esse gloriosa, si per observantiam tuam, et defensionem paterni canones, et exemplum probitatis multi habeant sacerdotes?" (PL 54, cols. 1001–9; trans. Charles Lett Feltoe in *NPNF2*, vol. 12).

³¹ Auxilius, *Infensor et defensor*: "Sancta Romana Ecclesia super Ecclesias orimatum tenet, ideoque iudicate omnes, et ipsa a nemine iudicatur. . . . Aliud sunt pontificales sedes, aliud praesidentes. . . . Praesidentes autem si deviaverint, per devia sequendi non sunt; hoc est, si contra fidem vel catholicam religionem agree coeperint, in talibus eos nequaquam sequi debemus" (PL 129, cols. 1088–89; trans. Vacca, *Prima sedes a nemine iudicatur*, 133).

sedes—sedens distinction during his attempt to defend Pope Formosus from the charges that were leveled against him during the Cadaver Synod in 897. Pope Stephen's pontificate had augured the beginning of the *saeculum obscurum*—the “dark age” of the papacy which continued throughout the course tenth century. This age, which is also referred to as the “pornocracy” (the rule of harlots) witnessed a rapid, almost unbroken succession of morally corrupt popes, who were installed as political puppets by a powerful Roman dynasty known as the Theophylacti. This time period, which has been aptly described as the “nadir of the papacy,”³² seriously compromised the prestige of the Petrine See in the eyes of the Eastern bishops, and is considered to have been a major aggravating factor contributing to the Great Schism itself.

Pope Stephen was furious that Formosus had sided with his political enemies during the course of his pontificate, and decided to condemn Formosus in a strikingly macabre show trial. Stephen ordered the corpse of the former Pope to be disinterred, dressed in papal vestments and seated on a throne in order to stand trial before the papal court. Stephen then had Formosus's acts as pope annulled, and declared that any ordinations conferred by him were canonically void. The corpse of Formosus was then stripped of its papal vestments, and the three fingers of his right hand which were used to confer papal blessings were severed, before his body was dumped into the Tiber. Given the fact that Stephen's actions were later upheld by Pope Sergius III (904–911), Auxilius was compelled to publish his defense of Formosus, in an attempt to have this posthumous condemnation overturned.³³

While Auxilius lacked any real motive in employing the distinction between the Apostolic See and its individual occupants in order to allow for the idea of papal heresy, Patriarch Photius of Constantinople certainly did have such motive. As a result of his attempted deposition by Pope Nicholas I, Photius decided to respond in kind by accusing the Roman Pontiff of teaching heresy concerning the double procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father “and the Son” (*Filioque*). Photius's immediate predecessor, St. Ignatius of Constantinople (798–877), had been forced to resign the patriarchate in 858 by Emperor Michael III. As one of the most renowned scholars of his generation, Photius was selected to replace Ignatius, and was rapidly elevated from lay status to become consecrated as

³² Will Durant, *The Age of Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 537.

³³ This posthumous condemnation of Formosus was later reversed by subsequent popes, due to the fact that it was politically motivated, rather than being concerned with the confession or praxis of the Catholic faith.

bishop over the course of just five days, in order to facilitate his ascension to the patriarchate. Pope Nicholas refused to recognize the removal of Ignatius, and convoked a synod in Rome in 863 in order to depose Photius. In order to stay in power, Photius's only viable course of action was to attempt to depose Nicholas himself, which could be achieved (even theoretically) only by fostering a charge of heresy against him. In order to do so, Photius would have to find a way to bypass the doctrine of the indefectibility of the See of Rome, which had already been unanimously accepted at Constantinople III.

The principle that "the First See is judged by no one" ("Prima Sedes a nemine iudicatur") was a long-standing axiom in the historical development of canon law, but the condemnation of Honorius had set a dangerous precedent, by exploiting a potential loophole wherein this principle could be circumvented. The case of Honorius provided a certain hypothetical procedure under which an individual incumbent of the First See could in fact be judged—for committing a transgression against the Catholic faith which amounted to the canonical censure of heresy. If Photius appealed to Pope Leo's distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens*, this would open up the possibility of circumventing the "Prima Sedes a nemine iudicatur" principle, in order to issue a judgment against a heretical pope. In doing so, Photius could also pay nominal lip service to the doctrine that the Catholic faith has always been preserved immaculate within the Petrine See. Photius is thus the most likely candidate for the origins of the use of the *sedes-sedens* distinction in order to allow for the idea of papal heresy, and several pieces of evidence can be marshalled in order to bolster this hypothesis.

The Eastern theologians had traditionally held to the doctrine of monopatristism, which maintained that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone. Photius singled out the attempts to interpolate the *Filioque* clause into the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as the perfect charge of heresy to level against Nicholas, and proceeded to condemn the doctrine of the double procession of the Holy Spirit as heretical during a synod he convoked at Constantinople in 867. In doing so, Photius formally announced the excommunication of Pope Nicholas and the entire Latin Church in communion with him. The acts of this synod are unfortunately lost to history, since they were publicly burned during the Fourth Council of Constantinople in 869–870, which was convoked in order to resolve Photius's schismatic act. The acts of Constantinople IV provide us with some insight into the contents of the Photian Synod, however. While this council acknowledged the precedent set by the condemnation of Honorius, it ruled that a pope could never be judged in the case of heresy by

an inferior, such as a bishop or patriarch, but only by the Roman pontiff himself.³⁴ So we know that Photius had appealed to the case of Honorius in order to find a way round the “*Prima Sedes a nemine iudicatur*” principle, which renders him as the most likely candidate as the originator of the *sedes–sedens* distinction cited by Auxilius. If Auxilius was aware of the contents of the Photian Synod from an inside source, this would explain his otherwise incongruous use of this distinction as part of his defense of Pope Formosus.

It is quite likely that Auxilius was familiar with the contents of the now lost canons of the Photian Synod of 867, which were burned during Constantinople IV, and that he derived his use of the *sedes–sedens* distinction from this immediate source. Auxilius was a follower of Formosus, having been ordained by the Pope himself in Rome. Formosus provides us with a direct link between Auxilius and the Photian Synod of 867, since he was directly involved in this affair. Formosus was serving as a papal legate to the Bulgarian court when the Photian Synod was first convened in 867, and it is almost certain that he personally attended these proceedings.³⁵ King Boris I of Bulgaria (r. 852–889) was heavily enmeshed in the Photian controversy, since he had recently converted to Christianity in the year 864, providing a major political coup for the Byzantine Empire. In the years leading up to the Photian Synod, from 864 to 866, Photius was personally involved in providing Boris with spiritual guidance and instructing him on how to establish an autocephalous church, in order to cement the Christianization of the Bulgarian Empire. William Monroe notes that Formosus was instructed to travel from Bulgaria to Constantinople by Pope Nicholas shortly before he died on November 13, 867.³⁶ As the serving papal legate to the king of Bulgaria, it would be almost unthinkable that Formosus would not have been in attendance at the Photian Synod, if he was actually present in Constantinople at the time it was being undertaken. Since we know that Auxilius had direct contact with Formosus, he is one of the few ecclesiastical writers operating in this time period with a concrete link to someone who personally attended the Photian Synod. This uniquely positions Auxilius as a potential witness of the exact line of argumentation that Photius was employing in order to justify his accusation of heresy against

³⁴ See Richard Price, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 869–70* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022).

³⁵ A detailed historical overview of the life and career of Pope Formosus has recently been conducted by William S. Monroe, “The Trials of Pope Formosus” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2021).

³⁶ Monroe, “Trials of Pope Formosus,” 57.

Pope Nicholas, since he could have easily heard it directly from the lips of Formosus himself.

Pope Nicholas composed a letter to King Boris, in order to respond to the accusations of heresy that were being directed against him by Photius, by denying that the See of Constantinople had any legitimate claim to apostolicity. Here, Pope Nicholas appealed to the long-standing tradition encapsulated by the Formula of Hormisdas and Pope Agatho's profession of faith—that it was only the See of Rome that has always remained untainted by any doctrinal error:

Blessed Peter, who lives and presides in his see, offers the truth of the faith to those who seek it. Indeed, the holy Roman Church has always been without spot or wrinkle because it was established by the man whose confession of faith was divinely approved.³⁷

The Indefectibility of the Petrine Succession

The introduction of this distinction between the Apostolic See and the individual holders of the apostolic office would compel later popes and theologians to add a particular nuance to this doctrine, by insisting that the gift of indefectibility was effective for Peter and each of his successors. So, rather than viewing the Petrine *munus* as some sort of separate corporate entity, there was a greater emphasis being placed on the effectiveness of this gift for the entire Petrine succession. As a means of defending himself against accusations of heresy brought against the Latin Church by the Eastern bishops during the prelude to the Great Schism, Pope Leo IX (r. 1049–1054) once again appealed to the historical claim that the faith of the Petrine See has never been subject to failure. In doing so, Leo added a new and decisively important nuance to this doctrine. In a letter addressed to the Patriarch Michael Cerularius of Constantinople (r. 1043–1059) and Archbishop Leo of Ohrid in 1053, Leo IX claimed that the gift of never-failing faith was directly conferred upon the successors of Peter, instead of being limited to the universal Church, or even the local Church of Rome:

But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not, and thou . . . confirm thy brethren (Luke 22). Therefore will anyone be so

³⁷ Pope Nicholas I, Epistle 99, ch. 106, trans. W. L. North from Ernest Perels, in *Monumenta Germaniae historica* [MGH], *Epistolae* vol. 6, pp. 568–600.

demented as to think empty in any respect the prayer of him, for whom to will something is to have it in his power? Was it not by the see of the prince of the apostles, that is, the Roman church, both through the same Peter and through his successors, that the fabrications of all the heretics have been reprobated, reviled, and overcome, and the hearts of the brothers confirmed in the faith of Peter, which has never failed up till now, nor will fail up to the end?³⁸

In making this theological precision, Leo allowed absolutely no room for a dichotomous contrast between the Apostolic See and the holders of the Petrine office.

This line of argumentation was continued by Pope Innocent III, who reinforced the significance of Leo's important distinction in his apostolic letter *Apostolicae Sedis Primatus*. In a reply to John Camaterus, the Patriarch of Constantinople, dated to November 12, 1199, Innocent cites Luke 22:32 as scriptural evidence that the faith of the successors of St. Peter would never falter. Here Innocent similarly makes the explicit claim that Christ prayer for Peter's faith was directly conferred to his successors in the See of Rome, rather than being offered for Peter alone or for the benefit of the universal Church:

The Lord confesses at the time of the Passion that he prayed for him: "I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" [Luke 22:32], by this manifestly indicating that his successors would never at any time deviate from the Catholic faith, but rather they would recall others and also strengthen the hesitant, thereby conceding him the power of strengthening others in such a way as to impose on others the necessity of obeying.³⁹

³⁸ Pope Leo IX, *Epistola ad Michaellem Constantinopolitanum archiepiscoporum*: "Ego autem rogavi pro te, ut non deficiat fides tua; et tu . . . confirma fratres tuos (Luc. 22). Erit ergo quisquam tantae dementiae qui orationem illius, cuius velle est posse, audeat in aliquo vacuum putare? Nonne a sede principis apostolorum, Romana videlicet ecclesia, tam per eundem Petrum quam per successores suos, reprobata et convicta, atque expugnata sunt omnium haereticorum commenta et fratrum corda in fide Petri, quae hactenus nec defecit, nec usque in finem deficiet, sunt confirmata?" (*Acta et Scripta quae de controversiis ecclesiae graecae et latinae saeculo undecimo composite extant*, ed. Cornelius Will [Leipzig: 1861], 68–69; cited and trans. D. L. d'Avray, "Origins of the Idea of Infallibility: A Rejoinder to Professor Tierney," *Catholic Historical Review* 67, no. 1 [1981]: 64).

³⁹ Pope Innocent III, *Apostolicae Sedis Primatus*: "Pro eo Dominus se orasse fatetur,

While the language used by Leo and Innocent III sounds increasingly similar to the central tenets of papal infallibility, it still lacks certain specifics which are necessary to identify this as a separate doctrine from the invincible faith of the Apostolic See in its own right.

It marks a major shift in the development of doctrine, however, since the focus was now shifted to eliminate the possibility that the Apostolic See could represent the Roman church as a corporate entity which is in some way detached from the individual Roman pontiffs—such as the Latin Church as a whole, or the pope teaching in unison with the college of cardinals. By equating the Apostolic See with the Church of Rome, the Decretists could go on to assert that it is only the faith of the entire Western Church which has never failed—a claim which ultimately provides the basis for conciliar theory. D. L. d'Avray provides an extremely insightful analysis of the particular nuances that Pope Innocent infers in the careful wording of his apostolic letter:

This explanation of Luke 22:32 clearly differs from both the two explanations which, according to Tierney, Huguccio “and his contemporaries” recognized as possible. Innocent’s claim is not for Peter alone. Does it then refer to the faith of the universal Church? Hardly, for the words are not “the Roman Church” but “his [Peter’s] successors.” This phrase also rules out the possibility that Innocent has in mind the indefectibility of the Roman Church in the sense of the faithful in the see of Rome. It would therefore seem that Innocent III, writing at the end of the twelfth century, assumed, like later theorists of papal authority, that Christ’s prayer for Peter was intended to guarantee the unfailing faith of Peter’s successors in the papacy.⁴⁰

This would thus explain how Innocent could assure that none of the successors of Peter would ever deviate from the faith when acting within their papal *munus*, while allowing for the possibility that, when acting outside of this office, the popes could potentially teach heresy. Of course,

inquiens in articulo passionis: “Ego pro te rogavi, Petre, ut non deficiat fides tua. Et tu aliquando conversus, confirma fratres tuos” [Lc 22:32], ex hoc innuens manifeste, quod successores ipsius a fide catholica nullo umquam tempore deviant, sed revocarent magis alios et confirmarent etiam haesitantes, per hoc sic ei confirmandi alios potestatem indulgent, ut aliis necessitatem imponeret obsequendi” (DH no. 775).

⁴⁰ D. L. d'Avray, “A Letter of Innocent III and the Idea of Papal Infallibility,” *Catholic Historical Review* 66, no. 3 (1980): 420.

since the full infallibility doctrine still had not been articulated at this stage, there is no suggestion that Innocent meant to imply that a Roman pontiff could never deviate from the faith only when defining doctrines *ex cathedra*. The separation of the papal teaching office into the exercise of an ordinary and extraordinary magisterium was a much later development which would be fully articulated only in the nineteenth century. Therefore, when Innocent asserts that the faith of the successors of Peter could never fail when acting in their office, he means what in today's parlance is identified as the ordinary exercise of the papal magisterium.⁴¹ As shall be argued below, it is from this basis that Thomas would go on to conclude that the pope is capable of issuing definitive judgments acting alone, outside the approval of an ecumenical council.

The understanding that the gift of indefectibility was specifically conferred upon the successors of Peter was preserved in the writings of St.

⁴¹ From a contemporary perspective, we know that the magisterium itself allows for the possibility of "deficiencies" in magisterial documents. For example, §24 of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith instruction *Donum Veritatis* states: "When it comes to the question of interventions in the prudential order, it could happen that some Magisterial documents might not be free from all deficiencies. Bishops and their advisors have not always taken into immediate consideration every aspect or the entire complexity of a question. But it would be contrary to the truth, if, proceeding from some particular cases, one were to conclude that the Church's Magisterium can be habitually mistaken in its prudential judgments, or that it does not enjoy divine assistance in the integral exercise of its mission." There is a need to distinguish between such deficiencies in the exercise of the magisterium, on the one hand, and a doctrinal error that meets the canonical censure of heresy as defined in the theological notes, on the other. The theological notes themselves inform us that there are other lesser censures for doctrinal errors that fall below the grade of heresy, such as a proposition which is "proximate to heresy" (*propositio haeresi proxima*)—which is the censure against a teaching which contradicts a definitive doctrine belonging to the secondary object of infallibility. It is only a teaching which contradicts a primary object of infallibility, such as a defined dogma, that technically meets the theological censure of a "heretical proposition" (*propositio haeretica*). Moreover, there are other lesser censures, such as a mere "false proposition" (*propositio falsa*), or a proposition which is temerarious or rash (*propositio temeraria*), or a proposition which is "offensive to pious ears" (*propositio piarum aurium offensiva*). It is perhaps best to think of the type of magisterial deficiencies described by *Donum Veritatis*, such as errors in the prudential order, as corresponding to these lesser censures described in the theological notes. Therefore, the claim that a pope can never deviate from the Catholic faith in the exercise of the ordinary magisterium does not mean that the Roman pontiff can never err when teaching in this authoritative yet non-definitive capacity. For an overview of the theological notes, see Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (Liverpool: Baronius, 2018), 10–12.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and St. Albertus Magnus. St. Thomas Aquinas thus arrived at his unique understanding of papal authority through his reception of this separate stream of tradition, which retained the original understanding of this doctrine. This stood in direct contrast to the nascent form of conciliar theory that was being expounded by the Decretists, as a result of their reception of the distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens*, which arose in the wake of the Photian Schism. It was this explicit rejection of the distinction between the See of Rome and its individual occupants which Thomas followed through to its inevitable logical conclusion. If the Roman pontiffs are personally protected against teaching heresy to the universal Church due to Christ's prayer for the stability of Peter's faith, then the pope held authority over ecumenical councils and could even make additions to the Creed while acting on his own initiative in order to resolve doctrinal disputes.

St. Thomas Aquinas on the Infallibility of Papal Canonizations

A general consensus has emerged among both modern Catholic theologians and historians that the doctrine of papal infallibility as we know it today was first articulated only in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Before this, there is no historical evidence of the idea that the pope was capable of infallibly defining dogmas when acting on his own initiative, outside the context of the conciliar process. The medieval theologians had widely agreed that the doctrinal integrity of the Church would be always be maintained in the true Catholic faith, but a conflict gradually emerged as to whether the ultimate source of this divine guarantee resided in the authority of a council or that of the pope. While the Decretists' speculations on the eventuality of a heretical pope laid down the logical basis of conciliar theory, a separate stream of tradition faithfully preserved the original sense in which the doctrine of indefectibility was first understood by the Church Fathers. This latter tradition, which was rooted in specific promises that Christ had made to Peter as the leader of the apostles, would eventually compel St. Thomas to conclude that the pope acting alone had the authority to make an addition to the Creed. The implications of Thomas's thought here is that the pope did not require the "consent of the Church" in the form of conciliar approval in making such judgments. As such, Thomas's view of Church authority meets several criteria which closely identify it with the exercise of papal infallibility as set forth by Vatican I—which is summarized by the formula that such judgments are

irreformable “in themselves, and not because of the consent of the Church” (“ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae”).

It is generally agreed that the doctrine of papal infallibility was first implicitly proposed in an elementary form in the writings of the Franciscan theologian St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–1274), who developed this understanding within the context of the canonizations of saints.⁴² Shortly thereafter, this doctrine was accorded a more systematic treatment by the Dominican master St. Thomas Aquinas, who sketched out its full implications in relation to the scope of papal authority. Thomas and Bonaventure both held chairs at the University of Paris as representatives of their respective religious orders, which were facing widespread antagonism from the secular masters. The two most influential mendicant orders—the Dominicans and the Franciscans, were granted papal mandate to hold chairs at the University of Paris in 1255, after the publication of Pope Alexander IV’s bull *Quasi Lignum Vitae*, but their presence on the faculty was met with active hostility. The secular masters at the university felt that their own influence was under increasing threat from this overreach of papal authority, and that they were being deprived of the unique privileges that were being extended towards the mendicants. This eventually erupted into an open revolt against the mendicants at the University of Paris, orchestrated by William of Saint-Amour.

In an attempt to prove the legitimacy of this unprecedented pontifical mandate of the mendicants, the leading theologians of these respective religious orders at the University of Paris sought to reinforce the authoritative weight of this endorsement through the articulation of the doctrine of papal infallibility. As Congar notes, the conflict between the mendicants and the secular masters at the University of Paris was essentially about the limits of papal power.⁴³ Thomas initially responded to the accusations of William of Saint-Amour in his work *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem* in 1256, by presenting a defense of the plenitude of power (*plenitudo potestatis*) of the pope when it came to undertaking disciplinary actions which lay outside the sphere of faith and morals.

As a means of bolstering the significance of this formal recognition of the Franciscan order, whilst simultaneously justifying the privileges extended towards the mendicant orders at the University of Paris, St. Bonaventure was the first mendicant theologian to begin to elaborate the case for the

⁴² See Prudlo, *Certain Sainthood*, 124–27.

⁴³ Yves Congar, “Aspects ecclésiologiques de la querelle entre mendiants et séculiers dans la seconde moitié du XIII^e siècle et le début du XIV^e,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 28 (1961): 35–151.

infallibility of papal canonizations. The rapid succession of canonizations of such towering figures as Francis, Dominic, Anthony of Padua, and Peter of Verona was considered to be the highest measure of papal approbation of the mendicant orders, and both Bonaventure and Thomas sought to establish the irrevocable status of these actions. In his opusculum *On the Poverty of Christ*, Bonaventure appealed to the doctrine of indefectibility to demonstrate the absolute veracity of papal canonizations, arguing that, if the pope could err on such a fundamental point, then the faith of the universal Church could fail, and the entire assembly of God's elect would be thus led into eternal perdition.⁴⁴ However, Bonaventure's thought on the infallibility of the canonizations of saints was a much more cursory understanding than that detailed in Thomas's exposition, who discerned several nuances which align his thought much more closely with the dogma that was defined at Vatican I.

The canonizations of saints had been exclusively reserved to the Apostolic See since the publication of the *Liber Extra* by Pope Gregory IX in 1234, but this had already been the de facto position of the Church since the late twelfth century. The canonization process provided a natural place of origin from which the doctrine of papal infallibility could develop, since this right was reserved solely to the pope acting alone, instead of requiring further affirmation at a conciliar level. Donald Prudlo notes that there are two major deficiencies in Bonaventure's line of argumentation which separate his ideas from the more sophisticated exposition proffered by Thomas—his lack of precision in delineating the boundaries of infallibility in regards to the doctrinal and disciplinary actions of the popes, and his failure to distinguish between the primary and secondary objects of infallibility.⁴⁵ In his *quodlibetal* questions composed during his first regency at Paris, sometime between 1256 and 1259, Thomas used the example of the canonization process in order to articulate how the teaching authority of the pope extends to matters of particular fact, which bear only a secondary relationship to the deposit of faith. Since this truly reflects the modern understanding of the nature and scope of papal infallibility, a majority

⁴⁴ St. Bonaventure, *Opuscula de Paupertate Christi*: "Quod universalis Ecclesia tota erravit et decepta fuit, et qui huiusmodi statum erroneum invenerunt et approbaverunt, omnes sunt damnati, quod est horribilissimum et incredibilissimum, quod Deus permetteret errare universaliter populum sanctum suum" (*Opera Omnia* [Quaracchi ed.], vol. 5). Unless a translation source is otherwise stated, for the Parisian Scholastics (Aquinas, Bonaventure, et al.), all English translation will be mine.

⁴⁵ Prudlo, *Certain Sainthood*, 126–27.

of contemporary academics see the true origins of this doctrine in the thought of St. Thomas.

The Basis of Conciliar Theory

The major catalyst which led Thomas to conclude that the pope acting alone had the authority to make an addition to the Creed was his absolute refusal to allow for the possibility that a pope could teach heresy to the universal Church.⁴⁶ The fact that St. Thomas never broached the topic of papal heresy throughout the entirety of his literary output remains a rather glaring omission. While Thomas was certainly aware of the Decretists' position on the possibility of a heretical pope, he never speculates about such an eventuality himself.⁴⁷ As Gregory Rocca states in regard to Thomas's implicit view of the question of papal heresy:

St. Thomas, to my knowledge, never speaks, even hypothetically, of a Pope being deposed or resigning his office. He does not recognize a juridical body that could sit in judgment on the Pope. Although he discusses heresy, apostasy, schism, and scandal, he never considers what might happen if a Pope were guilty of such offense.⁴⁸

Thomas's decidedly papalist view of Church authority can be largely attributed to his familiarity with a separate body of canon law which

⁴⁶ Although, as we will discuss later, it should be noted that Thomas was hesitant to ascribe the word *infallibilis* to any of the pope's teachings—even when he is making definitive judgments such as making an addition to the Creed. For Thomas, God alone is infallible. While Thomas rules out the possibility that a pope could publicly teach heresy to the universal Church, he is aware of the human limitations of the papacy, and consciously avoids using the language associated with infallibility when referring to the exercise of the papal magisterium. The lack of any division between an extraordinary and ordinary exercise of the papal magisterium at this stage in history requires a careful choice of wording on Thomas's part when referring to the teaching authority of the pope.

⁴⁷ Thomas clearly has a thorough knowledge of Gratian's work, as is evidenced by his frequent use of the *Decretum Gratiani* throughout his wider corpus. See Jörgen Vijgen, "Thomas Aquinas and Medieval Canon Law: Two Cases of Gratian's Influence in the *Summa theologiae*," *Ius Ecclesiae* 33 no. 1 (2021): 219–40. Furthermore, Congar notes that Gratian was the medieval equivalent of "Denzinger" ("St. Thomas Aquinas and the Infallibility of the Papal Magisterium (*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 10)," *Thomist* 38, no. 1 [1974]: 90). It would be almost unthinkable that Thomas was unaware of Gratian's canon *Si papa* and its significance for the scope of papal authority.

⁴⁸ Gregory Rocca, "St. Thomas Aquinas on Papal Authority," *Angelicum* 62, no. 3 (1985): 475.

depended on the pontifical decretals as their major source of authority. In the medieval universities, the study of canon law had diverged into two separate schools of thought. The Decretalists, such as Bernard of Pavia (ca. 1150–1213) and Henry of Susa (ca. 1200–1271), looked almost exclusively to the papal decretals in their compilations on canon law. The Decretists, who counted esteemed canon lawyers such as Huguccio of Pisa (ca. 1140–1210) amongst their ranks, had largely depended upon Gratian's *Decretum* as their major source of authority. Since the Decretists were convinced that certain popes had lapsed into heresy in the past, they made a sharp distinction between the Apostolic See and the individual successors of Peter. In doing so, they believed that they could affirm that the faith of the See of Peter had never failed, while admitting that the faith of some of his individual successors had occasionally wavered during various periods in Church history. Since the case of Pope Honorius I (r. 625–638) was largely forgotten after the suppression of the *Liber diurnus Romanorum pontificum* in the eleventh century, the Decretists appealed to the case of Pope Anastasius II (r. 496–98) as their *locus classicus* for the question of papal heresy.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Gratian himself had erroneously appealed to the case of Pope Anastasius II in his canon *Si papa*, which attempted to provide a potential response for a heretical pope in canon law (*Concordantia discordantium canonum* I, d. 40, can. 6; trans. James M. Moynihan, *Papal Immunity and Liability in the Writings of the Medieval Canonists* [Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1961], 26). Tierney notes that the case of Pope Honorius was unknown to the medieval canonists, which is why they appealed to the case of Pope Anastasius II as an exemplar of papal heresy by way of substitute. See Tierney, (*Origins*, 33). There seems to have been a deliberate attempt to bury the case of Honorius after the events of the Great Schism, which would explain why measures were taken to suppress the *Liber Diurnus*. The details concerning the case of Honorius resurfaced only at the Council of Ferrera-Florence (1431–1449), after it was recalled by the Eastern Orthodox theologian Markos of Ephesus (1392–1445), who was present on the council floor. Markos had used this example in an attempt to refute Thomas's arguments for the pope being able to add the *Filioque* clause to the common Symbol outside of the approval of an ecumenical council. Arguing in defense of conciliarism, Cardinal Julian Cesarini (1398–1444) engaged in a debate with Juan de Torquemada concerning the potential deposition of a heretical pope by a council, citing the case of Honorius as a precedent. This was the first time this controversy had re-emerged in the historical record in the West after the eleventh century. See Christiaan Kappes, "Orthodox Reception of Ps.-Pope Sylvester I and Ps.-Symmachus's Canon: 'The First See is Judged by no Human Being': Byzantine Canon Law from Photios to Markos of Ephesus," in *Primacy and Synodality: Deepening Insights: Proceedings of the 23rd Congress of the Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches* [2017], ed. Péter Szabó (Nyíregyháza, Hungary: Saint Athanasius Institutie [Metropolitan Church sui iuris of Hungary], 2019).

If the pope acting alone could potentially teach heresy, then the major causes (*causae maiores*) which arise in the life of the Church could be possibility settled only within the context of a general or ecumenical council. As such, any judgments issued by the pope would need to attain the consent of the Church in the form of conciliar approval before they could achieve infallible status. This concept, which reached its zenith at the conclusion of the Western Schism during the Council of Constance (1414–1418), would go on to form the basis of conciliar theory. If the pope acting alone could potentially teach heresy, and a council had the power to depose a pope, then a general Church council enjoyed a greater level of authority than an individual Roman pontiff. In order to advance this notion of ecclesial authority, the Decretists made a distinction between the See of Peter (the *sedes*) and the individual occupants of the apostolic throne (the *sedens*). In doing so, they attempted to equate the Apostolic See, rather than the succession of Roman pontiffs, with the Roman church, or limit the acts of the Apostolic See to the pope acting in conjunction with the bishops or cardinals. In his commentary on Gratian's *Concordantia discordantium canonum* (the *Decretum Gratiani*), Huguccio maintained that it was only the universal Church that was protected against error in determining the major causes, and that Christ's prayer for Peter's faith was made *in personae Ecclesiae*, rather than for the successors of Peter in the See of Rome:⁵⁰

(The Apostolic Church) has never erred: There is an objection concerning Anastasius. But perhaps this (pope) came earlier. Or perhaps, and this is better, he speaks of the faith of the universal Church which has never erred. For although the Roman pope has sometimes erred this does not mean that the Roman church has, which is understood to be not he alone but all the faithful, for the church is the aggregate of the faithful; if it does not exist at Rome it exists in the regions of Gaul or wherever the faithful are. The church can indeed cease to be but this will never happen for it was said to Peter, and in the person of Peter to the universal church, "that your faith shall not fail."⁵¹

⁵⁰ For an overview of Huguccio's contribution to medieval canon law, see Wolfgang Müller, *Huguccio: The Life, Works, and Thought of a Twelfth-Century Jurist* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994).

⁵¹ Huguccio, *Summa decretorum* 24, q. 1, c. 9: "...nunquam errasse. Obicitur de anastasio, sed forte iste precessit vel forte, quod Melius est, loquitur de fide universalis ecclesie que nunquam deficit licet forte possit deficere. (Licet) enim papa romanus aliquando erraverit, non ideo ecclesia romana que non solus (papa) intelligitur set universi fideles, nam

This classic distinction advanced by the Decretists would go on to influence the thought of later conciliarists such as William of Ockham (1287–1347) and Jean Gerson (1363–1429), and ultimately provided the central basis of conciliar theory. If Christ's promises were made only for the universal Church, the pope would be required to obtain the prior consent of the entire community of faith within the context of an ecumenical council before he could render any infallible judgments. In order to reinforce this point, the Decretists were required to reject any interpretation of Luke 22:32 which suggested that Christ's prayer for Peter's faith extended to protect each of his successors in the See of Rome. As Tierney notes, Henry of Susa, also known as Hostiensis, had explicitly excluded the possibility that Peter's gift of never-failing faith was inherited by each of his successors in the Petrine ministry, since this would necessarily negate the possibility of papal heresy:

The one interpretation Hostiensis specifically excluded was one holding that all Peter's successors inherited Peter's unfailing faith. Indeed, Hostiensis's whole argument was based on an essential distinction between the possession of infallibility and the exercise of supreme jurisdiction. Christ's prayer did not guarantee that every future pope would remain true to the faith of Peter; but it did ensure that each pope would hold supreme jurisdiction in the church, including jurisdiction in the *causae fidei* unless and until he actually became a heretic.⁵²

The Decretists' explicit rejection of the possibility that the entire Petrine succession was conferred with the gift of never-failing faith is key to Tierney's argument that papal infallibility was only first articulated in the writings of Peter Olivi. In the same article, Tierney acknowledges that, if it could be proven that Thomas had departed from the Decretists' position by jettisoning the conceptual separation between the Petrine succession

ecclesia est aggregation fidelium ut de cons. dist. 1 ecclesia, que (esti) rome non sit, est tamen in partibus galiganis vel ubique fideles existent et ecclesia quidem potest desinere esse set nunquam contiget nam petro et in persona petri universe ecclesie dictum est 'ut non deficiet fides tua'" (MS Vat. Lat. 2230, fol. 251vb, cited and trans. Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility*, 37).

⁵² Brian Tierney, "A Scriptural Text in the Decretales and in St. Thomas: Canonistic Exegesis of Luke 22:32," *Studia Gratiana* 20 (1976): 371.

and the Apostolic See, then it would be much easier to identify the *Doctor Angelicus* as the originator of the doctrine of papal infallibility.⁵³

Tierney admits that, if it could be established that, in arguing that Christ's prayer for Peter's faith extends to protect each of his successors in the See of Rome, Thomas adhered to the above proposition which was rejected by Hostiensis, then he could be safely identified as the originator of the doctrine of papal infallibility. This is because it logically follows from this premise that each pope is thus gifted with a unique charism which enables him to issue definitive judgments acting alone, even when he does not have recourse to the affirmation of a conciliar decree. This is precisely the argument which Congar would go on to employ in order to bolster support for the prevailing consensus concerning the origins of papal infallibility in the writings of Thomas.

Thomas's Rejection of the Distinction Between the *Sedes* and the *Sedens*

Before Thomas's unique contribution towards the development of the doctrine of papal infallibility, a number of medieval theologians had already taken measures to distance themselves from the Decretists' distinction between the Roman church and the Roman pontiffs. This was done by insisting that the primacy was immediately conferred upon Peter and his line of apostolic succession in the See of Rome. In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke composed between 1264 and 1268, St. Albert the Great (1200–1280) witnesses to an alternative vein of tradition from that of the Decretists, wherein he retrieves the original conviction of the Church Fathers, who understood that that Christ's prayer for Peter's unflinching faith "was efficacious for the See of Peter and his successors."⁵⁴ The exact

⁵³ See Tierney, "Scriptural Text," 369: "Just as Christ conferred power not only on Peter but also on his successors, so too he prayed not only for Peter but for his successors; and Christ's prayer was certainly heard. This is perhaps the closest that any thirteenth century canonist came to asserting a doctrine of papal inerrancy. If Hostiensis had defended all these propositions and they had found general acceptance, we should be justified in seeing an evolution toward the later doctrine of papal infallibility in the works of the medieval canonists and of theologians like Thomas Aquinas whose theories of papal authority reflected the canonists' teachings. But the truth is just the opposite. Hostiensis immediately rejected as obviously untenable the argument he had put forward."

⁵⁴ St. Albert the Great, *In Lucam*, at 22:32 "Hoc argumentum efficax est pro sede Petri et successore ipsius, quod fides eius non finaliter deficiat" (cited in Congar, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Infallibility of the Papal Magisterium," 83n5).

wording of this particular phrase has important ramifications for the theology of the papacy, since it is specifically framed in order to eliminate the Decretists' attempt to bifurcate the Apostolic See from the individual successors of Peter. In claiming that Christ's prayer for Peter's faith was also effective for his successors in the Apostolic See, St. Albert was making a bold statement which stood in direct contradiction to the position of the Decretists. Albert's adherence to this separate stream of tradition was similarly championed by his famous protégé, the master of Aquino, whose decidedly papalist understanding of Catholic ecclesiology would go on to provide the basis for the theology of Vatican I.

Ulrich Horst observes how the Decretists' distinction between the Apostolic See and the individual holders of the apostolic office is completely absent in Thomas's ecclesiology:

The distinction, often used by the canonists, between the *sedes*, the see, and the *episcopus Romanus*, the Roman Pontiff, should not be overemphasised. Though we will come across it at a later time, it plays no role in Thomas's works.⁵⁵

Once we examine Thomas's writings on the theological significance of Christ's prayer for Peter's faith in closer detail, it is evident that he had discerned an inextricable link between the indefectibility of the universal Church and the public exercise of the Petrine ministry. In doing so, Thomas provided the core framework for the doctrine of papal infallibility, which was then further refined by Bishop Guido Terreni (ca. 1270–1342) at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The present article will attempt to demonstrate that Thomas had discerned that Peter's perfect confession of faith in Christ in Matt 16:16 was met in return with the promise that an indefectible faith would inhere in each of successors in perpetuity, so that they could continue to profess this perfect witness until the end of time. In modern terminology, the type of divine assistance that Thomas envisaged would prevent the pope from teaching heretical doctrines by way of his ordinary magisterium, rather than being strictly limited to the infallible definitions of the extraordinary magisterium or the definitive doctrines belonging to the ordinary and universal magisterium. Since the usage of these terms was properly introduced only during the course of the

⁵⁵ Ulrich Horst, *The Dominicans and the Pope: Papal Teaching Authority in the Medieval and Early Modern Thomist Tradition*, trans. James Mixon (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 16.

nineteenth century in the writings of Joseph Kleutgen, S.J. (1811–1883), such language was completely foreign to the medieval theologians.⁵⁶ St. Thomas used *magisterium* to refer to the teaching authority of the *magister* at university or the magisterium of a bishop, rather than the teaching authority of the pope. While Thomas did not use the modern theological terminology which is attached to the different functions of the magisterium, he did distinguish between the private and public teachings of the pope, as well as between his definitive and non-definitive modes of public discourse.

For Thomas, the solidity of the faith of the Roman church rests upon its apostolic foundation, which he believed had always been preserved intact precisely through the custodianship of the successors of Peter. Rather than being limited to the universal Church, Thomas held that the gift of indefectibility was directly conferred upon the Apostolic See, in return for Christ's prayer for Peter's faith. As such, the See of Rome was never disassociated from the Petrine succession in the thought of Thomas, which allowed him to situate the true source of Church authority in the judgments of the Roman pontiffs, rather than in those of an ecumenical council. Given that Thomas uses the distinction between the *sedes* and *sedens* in his discussion on sinful prelates in *Quodlibet* VIII, we know that he was fully aware of the line of argumentation used by the Decretists:

I answer that in a prelate we can consider two things, namely, his proper person and his dignity, according to which there is a certain public person. If therefore the prelate is bad, his person must not be honored because, since *honor is reverence exhibited to someone unto the testimony of virtue*, someone would proffer false testimony concerning him if he honored him by pretext of his own person, against that which is said in Exodus 20:16: *you shall not speak false testimony against your neighbor*. But as far as he is a public person, thus he bears the type and place not of himself, but of another, namely of Christ, in the Church, or of the whole republic, as in secular dignities. And thus his value is not computed according to his own person, but according to him whose place he possesses. (*Quodlibet* VIII, q. 4, a. 2, corp.)⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1983), 98.

⁵⁷ Trans. the Aquinas Institute online (aquinas.cc).

<PCON>Here, we can clearly see that Thomas dismisses the idea that the distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* can be used to detract from the dignity of the public office of a prelate—which gives us some insight into his thought on the possibility of a publicly heretical pope.

Besides St. Thomas and his mentor St. Albert the Great, some other prominent medieval theologians, such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and St. Bonaventure, had similarly associated the doctrine of indefectibility with the Petrine succession, rather than the universal Church. Writing in the early twelfth century, St. Bernard explains how the enduring faith of the Apostolic See has always supplied the central dynamic in the exercise of the primacy of the bishops of Rome:

The dangers and scandals which are coming to the surface in the Kingdom of God, especially those which touch the faith, ought to be referred to your Apostolic authority. For I judge it fitting that there most of all, the losses suffered by the faith should be repaired, where faith cannot suffer defect. This, truly, is the prerogative of your see. For to what other person [than Peter] has it ever been said “I have prayed for thee, Peter, that thy faith fail not”? . . . Therefore that which follows is required from the successor of Peter: “And when thou art converted strengthen thy brethren.”⁵⁸

While St. Bernard first mentions the indefectibility of the See of Peter, he goes on to apply this directly to the *person* it represents—the successor of Peter. It is this important nuance which the Decretists had understood as negating the possibility of papal heresy. Thomas’s rejection of the very distinction which allowed for the possibility of a heretical pope would ultimately lead him to conclude that the pope acting alone could publish a new edition of the Symbol. Even though the doctrine of papal infallibility was not fully articulated for another century, Bernard’s letter to Pope Innocent II demonstrated his conviction that the exercise of the Roman

⁵⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Tractatus contra errores Abaelardi* (letter to Pope Innocent II of 1140): “Oportet ad vestrum referri apostolatum pericula quaeque et scandala emergentia in regno Dei, ea praesertim quae de fide contingent. Dignum namque arbitror ibi potissimum resarciri damna fidei, ubi non possit fides sentire defectum. Haec quippe huius praerogativa Sedis. Cui enim alteri aliquando dictum est: Ego pro te rogavi, Petre, ut non deficiat fides tua? Ergo quod sequitur a Petri successore exigitur: Et tu aliquando, inquit conversus, confirma fratres tuos” (*Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais, vol. 8, pp. 17), in *Some Letters of Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux*, trans. Samuel J. Eales (London: John Hodges, 1904), 259.

primacy was directly dependent on the permanent fidelity of the Apostolic See to the truths of the Catholic faith. It was only during the thirteenth century that St. Thomas Aquinas took the logical implications of this doctrine to its inevitable conclusion, by articulating how this negative type of divine assistance was counter-balanced by a corresponding positive attribute which enabled the pope to define doctrines and issue authoritative judgments acting upon his own initiative, even without recourse to an ecumenical council.

Thomas understood that the very nature of the universal Church as a *congregatio fidelium*—a community bound together by supernatural faith, means that the Mystical Body of Christ can never suffer any sort of doctrinal corruption. For Thomas, the promise that the gates of hell would never prevail against the Petrine foundation of the Church in Matt 16:18 was made in direct response to Christ's prayer for the stability of Peter's faith in Luke 22:32—which he understood to have been conferred directly upon each of his successors in the See of Rome. Building upon the established consensus that the universal Church can never err in a matter of faith, Thomas goes on to conclude from this basis that the never-failing faith of the Petrine succession means that the bishops of Rome must be able to act as an authoritative judge in matters of doctrinal dispute. The clear implication here is that divine providence would simply never allow a pope to teach heresy to the universal Church in his public capacity as Roman pontiff, because of the supernatural agency of this faith-based community, which is anointed and guided by the Holy Spirit. Even though Thomas does not employ the same terminology used at the Second Vatican Council, it is precisely the supernatural sense of the faith possessed by the entirety of the faithful (the *sensus fidei fidelium*) which enables the pope to issue authoritative judgments, since the faith of the universal Church can never be corrupted.⁵⁹

Thomas on the Indefectibility of the Universal Church

Congar elaborates on how, for Thomas, the logic of papal infallibility necessarily flows as a direct consequence of his understanding of the indefectibility of the Church as a collective whole, as well as the Apostolic See itself in particular:

⁵⁹ Thomas's idea of the *lumen fidei* ("the light of faith") is perhaps the closest equivalent to the modern doctrine of the *sensus fidei* that can be found in the Thomistic corpus.

The text of Lk 22:32: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail," was cited in favor of the indefectibility of the universal Church. But it was also, although rarely, cited in favor of the inerrancy of Peter and his successors. . . . The passage was thus very easy from the inerrancy or the indefectibility of *the Church* to the expression of the Church's faith by the universal and supreme public authority that presides over the Church. It is precisely this kind of passage that is found in St. Thomas.⁶⁰

Although Thomas refrains from using the term *infallibilis* to denote the type of teaching authority employed by the pope when making such judgments *sententialiter determinare*, Congar observes that his thought closely adheres to the doctrinal logic of papal infallibility. Congar notes that, when it comes to settling doctrinal disputes, Thomas first appeals to the authority of the Church, before going on to locate the source of this authority in the Roman pontiff—which clearly implies that the pope is capable of making infallible judgments:⁶¹

If the Pope has the power "to decide matters of faith authoritatively, so that they may be held by all with unshaken faith," then clearly the dogma of Vatican I necessarily follows. . . . Thus, it is legitimate to see, here in article 10, a first statement of what would soon become the theological idea, and, six centuries later, the dogma, of the infallibility of the Pontifical magisterium.⁶²

In chapter 1 of his 1264 opusculum *De rationibus fidei*, which was addressed to the cantor of Antioch, Thomas uses *fidei firmitatem* in relation to Peter's confession of faith in the divinity of Christ, once again attributing the stability of the Church's faith to the specific promises granted to Peter:

Blessed Peter the apostle received a promise from the Lord that on his confession of faith the Church would be founded and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. That the faith of the Church entrusted to him would hold out inviolate against these gates of hell, he addressed the faithful of Christ saying: "proclaim

⁶⁰ Congar, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Infallibility of the Papal Magisterium," 93.

⁶¹ Congar, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Infallibility of the Papal Magisterium," 94.

⁶² Congar, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Infallibility of the Papal Magisterium," 103.

the Lord Christ holy in your hearts” (1 Pet 3:15), that is, by firmness of faith. With this foundation established in our hearts we can be safe against any attacks or ridicule of unbelievers against our faith. Therefore Peter adds: “always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have.”⁶³

Here, Thomas grounds the indestructible nature of the faith of the Church in its Petrine foundation, through which it can withstand the various assaults which pour forth from the *portas inferorum*—which he equates elsewhere with the “mouths of heretics.”

This is developed even further in his commentary on Matt 16 (lec. 2 [nos. 1382–83]), where he similarly uses *firmitatem* in reference to the institution of the Church upon Peter’s perfect confession of faith:

And I came into the world for this, to found a church. “Behold I will lay a stone in the foundations of Zion, a tried stone, a corner stone, a precious stone, founded in the foundation” (Isa 28:16). This was signified by the stone which Jacob put beneath his head and oiled (Gen 28:18). This stone is Christ, and from this anointing all are called Christians; hence we are not only called Christians from Christ, but from the rock. For this reason, he specially imposes a name: “you are Peter,” from the rock which is Christ. Although, according to Augustine, it might seem that it was not imposed now, but from the beginning: “you will be called Cephas” (John 1:42). Or it can be said that it was promised then, and given here. As a sign of this thing, “upon this rock I will build my Church.” It is a property of the rock that it is placed in the foundation; also, that it gives firmness. Above, “everyone therefore who hears these my words, and does them, shall be likened to a wise man that built his house upon a rock” (Matt 7:24).⁶⁴

For Thomas, it is Jesus who is the true rock upon which the Church is established, as the messianic cornerstone described by the prophet Isaiah. Christ is the true head of the Mystical Body of Christ, with Peter and his successors in the Apostolic See being merely appointed as his temporal representatives. It is striking that Thomas connects the rock of the Church

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *De rationibus fidei*, ch. 1, trans. Joseph Kenny, “Reasons for the Faith against Muslim Objections,” *Islamochristiana* 22 (1996).

⁶⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Matt* 16, lec. 2, nos. 1382–83, trans. Jeremy Holmes (Steubenville, OH: Aquinas Institute and Emmaus Academic, 2013).

with Jacob's pillow-stone, which rests at the bottom of the ladder of ascent towards the vision of God, thus acting as a divine conduit between the heavenly and earthly spheres. This compliments Thomas's thought in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae* [ST], wherein he forcefully asserts that Christ alone is the true head of the Church, while admitting that the pope acts as head of the *Ecclesia militans* in a temporary and transient capacity, during the course of his earthly pilgrimage (ST III, q. 8, a. 6, corp.).

In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Thomas appeals to Eph 2:20 in order to provide a further link between the establishment of the Church upon the Petrine rock and the image of the Church as a household (*domus*) in his commentary on the Creed. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians similarly attributes the firmness of the Church's faith to the strength of its apostolic foundation, by employing the same metaphor utilized in Matt 16:18—that of *aedificio* found in the text of the Vulgate used by Thomas, or οἰκοδόμος in the original Koine—"structure" or "building."

At the same time, Eph 2 also incorporates several different elements unique to Pauline theology, which helps to inform Thomas's distinctively pneumatological understanding of the Church. It will be worth studying 2:20 in its broader context of verses 18–22, in order to flesh out Thomas's perception of how the apostolicity of the Church guarantees the solidity of its entire superstructure:

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

This highly evocative scriptural passage incorporates some of the most significant themes which Thomas employs to articulate his views on the indefectibility of the Church. By including the motifs of the Church as *domestici Dei*, as *templum sanctum*, and as *fundamentum apostolorum et prophetarum*,⁶⁵ this pericope alludes to the Pauline ecclesiology of the Mystical Body of Christ, as well as the nature of the procession of the Holy

⁶⁵ The text of the Vulgate used by Thomas in this instance accurately reflects the original Greek equivalents of οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ (household of God), ναὸν ἅγιον (holy temple), and θεμελίω τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν (foundation of the apostles and prophets).

Spirit within the economy of the triune Godhead. If the Holy Spirit abides with the Church, which is the very Temple which houses the Trinity itself, then the active presence of the Paraclete ensures that the *Ecclesia universalis* will always be preserved from error. For Thomas, this can happen only under the care and primacy of the successors of Peter, who were granted the specific assurance of a never-failing faith. Thomas thus uses the Creed to provide justification for his views on papal authority, linking the apostolicity of the Church with the rock-like “strength and firmness” which is derived from the stability of its Petrine foundation. Thomas’s conception of the indefectibility of the Church as being rooted in its apostolicity helps to explain why he would go on attribute this gift to the successors of Peter, rather than following the Decretists’ understanding of the Apostolic See as the community of faithful in Rome.

The Rock of the Church

Thomas believed that the promises concerning the invincibility of the Church in Matt 16:18 were made directly in return for Peter’s perfect confession of faith in Christ, which was inspired by way of a revelation from God the Father: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος). As such, Thomas was fully convinced that the apostolic faith handed down to the Church has always remained intact, because Christ had secured the foundations of the *Ecclesia universalis* upon a completely stable edifice—the faith of Peter. While the pope is subject to human frailty (like Peter himself), and can therefore fall into sin and vice, the faith of Peter and his successors will always be preserved against the assault of the “gates of hell.” For Thomas, Christ’s redesignation of Simon’s original name with the Aramaic word כִּפְּא (cepha; “rock”), was specifically intended to denote the qualities of strength and firmness in relation to Peter’s faith.

This helps to further reinforce the connection between the words *fortis et firma* and the solidity of the Christian faith in Thomas’s exposition on the fourth note of the Church in article 9 of his *Expositio super Symbolo Apostolorum*, since these attributes are inseparable components of the doctrine of apostolicity itself. As Congar observes:

Saint Thomas sees, in the scene of Caesarea Philippi, the announcement of the foundation of the Church on the profession of faith in Christ. Contrary to the Eastern Orthodox polemicists or Protestants, he finds nothing here which diminishes the privileges of Peter and

his successors. Rather he sees the promise, for the Church of Peter, a dazzling faith which is preserved from all error.⁶⁶

In his commentary on the Apostles' Creed, Thomas underscores his conviction that of all the churches which can lay claim to apostolic origin, it is only the Roman church which proved itself to be impervious to doctrinal error, because of Christ's prayer for Peter's faith:

Only the Church of Peter . . . always was firm in faith. But in other parts of the world either there is no faith or it is mixed with many errors. But the Church of Peter is vigorous in faith and immune from errors. Which is not to be wondered at, because the Lord said to Peter, "I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may not fail."⁶⁷

Viewed in isolation from Thomas's other writings on this subject, it could be argued that the above quote conforms to the Decretists' view of Christ's prayer for Peter's faith, which is limited to the universal Church in a more generic fashion, rather than being associated with the papacy itself. But, once we compare the commentary on the Creed with lectio 2 of Thomas's commentary on Matt 16, we can be doubly certain of his conviction that the gift of indefectibility won by Christ's prayer not only protects the Church of Peter, but also acts as a guarantor for Peter's personal *faith*:

And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And they will fight against you, and will not prevail (Jer 1:19). And who are the gates of hell? Heretics, because just as one enters into a house through a gate, so one enters into hell through these. Also tyrants, demons, sins. And although other churches can be reproached for heretics, yet the Roman church was not corrupted by heretics, because it was founded upon the rock. Hence there were heretics in Constantinople, and the apostles' labor was lost; only Peter's church remained inviolate. Hence, "but I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not" (Luke 22:32). And this does not only refer to Peter's church, but to Peter's faith, and to the whole western church. Hence I believe that those in the west owe more reverence to Peter than to the other apostles.

⁶⁶ Translation mine. See also Yves Congar, "L'Apostolicité de l'Eglise selon S. Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 44, no. 2 (1960): 215.

⁶⁷ Trans. Joseph Collins, *The Catechetical Instructions of St. Thomas* (New York: Wagner, 1939), 3–66.

Here, the distinction between the Apostolic See and its individual incumbents is rendered obsolete. For Thomas, the doctrinal stability of the Apostolic See in the Catholic faith automatically extends to ensure the general orthodoxy of the occupants of the apostolic seat when acting in their public capacity as pope. By attributing the enduring fidelity of the Roman church to Christ's prayer for Peter in Luke 22:32, Thomas thus strongly implies that the gift of never-failing faith was bestowed upon each of the successors of Peter in the See of Rome.

If Thomas interpreted Christ's prayer for Peter's faith to mean that a pope could never actually fall into manifest heresy or teach heresy to the universal Church, this would help to explain the total absence of any discussion on the possibility of papal heresy throughout the entire Thomistic corpus. As Horst observes concerning Thomas's views on the invincible faith of the See of Rome in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew:

He argued that although the heresies existed in other church[es]—Constantinople was the typical example—through the centuries the Church of Rome alone had kept its faith whole. In it, Christ's prayer (i.e. to Peter of unfailing faith) is fulfilled, and from it the true faith had spread to the entire Western Church. Yet here there is an important additional claim: that the faith remained whole was due not only to the Roman church, but also to the faith of St. Peter.⁶⁸

The *Filioque* Clause and the Scope of Papal Authority

From the very outset, Thomas realized the need to distinguish the primary objects of infallibility from the secondary objects which are used to defend and preserve the contents of the deposit of faith. In doing so, he proposed the necessity of a median category of definitive teachings based upon the doctrinal authority of the Church. By building upon his conviction that it was impossible for the Church to err in the sphere of faith and morals (see *ST* III, q. 83, a. 5, sc), Thomas perceived that this negative form of divine assistance provided by the Holy Spirit also facilitates a type of positive assistance, which allows the pope to issue infallible judgments when it comes to settling the *causae maiores*. If the faith of the successors of Peter could never fail in their function as teacher of the universal Church, it follows that they will always enjoy the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit

⁶⁸ Horst, *Dominicans and the Pope*, 18.

when it comes to settling doctrinal disputes. In the *ST*, Thomas goes on to further articulate his rationale on the relationship between the negative and positive assistance of the Holy Spirit in the function of the doctrinal authority of the Church:

The universal Church cannot err, since she is governed by the Holy Ghost, Who is the Spirit of truth: for such was Our Lord's promise to His disciples (John 16:13): "When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will teach you all truth." Now the symbol is published by the authority of the universal Church. Therefore it contains nothing defective. (*ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 9, sc)

In the next article, Thomas goes on to determine that the publication of a new edition of the Symbol belongs to the prerogative of the Roman pontiffs. The wider context here is spelled out in *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 10, obj. 2, which informs us about the Eastern Orthodox theologians' objection to the addition of the *Filioque* clause into the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which they argued was done by the pope acting alone, without the approval of an ecumenical council. The *Filioque* clause was first officially inserted into the Creed by Pope Benedict VIII (r. 1012–1024) in 1014, at the request of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry II (973–1024), and subsequently became part of the liturgy used in the Latin Rite.⁶⁹ Thomas notes that the Eastern Orthodox objection to this action was based on the anathema against the publication of a new edition of the Symbol contained in the acts of the Council of Ephesus (431).⁷⁰ Thomas responds that this prohibition was directed against private individuals, rather than forbidding any further additions to the Creed. According to Thomas, the publication of a new edition of the Symbol is sometimes necessary to combat the spread of new heresies (*ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 10, ad. 2). Moreover, since ecumenical councils can be convoked only under the authority and confirmation of the Roman pontiff, the authority to publish a new edition

⁶⁹ See Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113.

⁷⁰ Canon VII of the Council of Ephesus: "When these documents had been read out, the holy synod decreed the following. It is not permitted to produce or write or compose any other creed except the one which was defined by the holy fathers who were gathered together in the Holy Spirit at Nicaea"—"His igitur recitatis decrevit sancta synodus aliam fidem nulli licere proferre vel conscribere vel componere praeter illam quae definite est a sanctis patribus qui Nicaeam per spiritum sanctum conuenerunt" (trans. in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V* [London: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990], 65).

of the Symbol belongs to the pope alone. Given that the contents of the Creed are so tightly linked to the articles of faith in *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 6, corp., we can see that Thomas is clearly invoking the language of infallibility concerning the authority of the insertion of the *Filioque* clause into the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which was done outside of conciliar approval. So, even though he does not explicitly use the term *infallibilis* when referring to the authority of this papal action, as Congar is correct to note,⁷¹ in retrospect we can identify the true origins of the doctrine of papal infallibility within the internal logic that Thomas is employing here.

It is quite likely that Thomas was wary of ascribing the word *infallibilis* to this aspect of papal teaching authority, since he was aware that the pope was liable to err in other respects when acting in this capacity, since true infallibility belongs to God alone. Even though the graduation of authoritative Church teachings contained in the “theological notes” began to be articulated only in the fourteenth century, Thomas was fully aware of the human limitations of the papacy. It is evident that he acknowledged that the pope could err in other aspects corresponding to the lesser theological censures in his public teaching capacity, but he rules out the possibility that a Roman pontiff could compel the entire Church to embrace a heretical doctrine which would compromise human salvation. Since the Mystical Body of Christ is united as a *congregatio fidelium* through the infused theological virtues of faith and charity, and the universal Church can never be subject to failure in its confession of the Christian faith, we can therefore place our trust in the authority of the Creed:

The confession of faith is drawn up in a symbol in the person, as it were, of the whole Church, which is united together by faith. Now the faith of the Church is living faith; since such is the faith to be found in all those who are of the Church not only outwardly but also by merit. Hence the confession of faith is expressed in a symbol, in a manner that is in keeping with living faith, so that even if some of the faithful lack living faith, they should endeavor to acquire it. (*ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 9, ad 3)

By appealing to the perpetual fidelity of the universal Church as the main criterion for trusting in the authority of the Creed, Thomas goes on to argue that the successors of Peter are able to definitively settle doctrinal

⁷¹ Congar, “St. Thomas Aquinas and the Infallibility of the Papal Magisterium,” 100–103.

disputes through issuing an authoritative judgment (*sententialiter determinare*), which could then be accepted by all with unshakable faith (*inconcussa fide*):

A new edition of the symbol becomes necessary in order to set aside the errors that may arise. Consequently to publish a new edition of the symbol belongs to that authority which is empowered to decide matters of faith finally, so that they may be held by all with unshaken faith. Now this belongs to the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff, "to whom the more important and more difficult questions that arise in the Church are referred," as stated in the Decretals [dist. 17, can. 5]. Hence our Lord said to Peter whom he made Sovereign Pontiff (Luke 22:32): "I have prayed for thee," Peter, "that thy faith fail not, and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren." The reason of this is that there should be but one faith of the whole Church, according to 1 Corinthians 1:10: "That you all speak the same thing, and that there be no schisms among you": and this could not be secured unless any question of faith that may arise be decided by him who presides over the whole Church, so that the whole Church may hold firmly to his decision. Consequently it belongs to the sole authority of the Sovereign Pontiff to publish a new edition of the symbol, as do all other matters which concern the whole Church, such as to convoke a general council and so forth. (a. 10, corp.)

In *De potentia*, Thomas again alludes to the *ex sese* argument by highlighting the fact that, on some occasions, the chaos wrought by the onset of war makes it impossible for the bishops to assemble in council, in which case the pope acting alone has the full authority to make an addition to the Creed in order to combat the spread of heresy (q. 10, a. 4, ad 13). If divine providence spares the universal Church from falling into doctrinal error because of its imperishable nature as a community of faith, then it follows that this passive type of assistance can be harnessed in a more active capacity, which enables the pope to make authoritative judgments during times of doctrinal crisis. In this way, the successors of Peter can fulfill their mandate to strengthen and confirm the brethren in the Catholic faith. In the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], Thomas makes it clear that the unity of the Church depends on it being governed by a single head who will always teach the correct faith, and as such, God can never fail to supply the necessary means of meeting this essential end:

The unity of the Church requires that all the faithful be of one faith. Now, questions tend to arise about matters of faith, and the Church would be divided by differences of opinion unless its unity were safeguarded by the pronouncement of one. Therefore, in order to safeguard the unity of the Church, it is necessary that there be one who presides over the whole Church. Now Christ loved the Church and shed his blood for her; therefore, he did not fail her in her needs, seeing that it is said even of the Synagogue: "What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" (Isa 5:4). There can be no doubt, therefore, that Christ provided his Church with a head. (*SCG* ch. 76, no. 3)

Thomas's Use of the False Decretals of Pseudo-Isidore

In his *Catena aurea*, Thomas uses a similar quote from the Pseudo-Isidorian literature which also claims that the Petrine See has always been preserved inviolate against the stain of heresy.⁷² Thomas's use of Pseudo-Isidore for his defense of the papacy in texts such as the *Catena aurea* and *Contra errores Graecorum* proved to be somewhat controversial during the prelude to Vatican I. In an attempt to undermine the case for papal infallibility, Ignaz von Döllinger appealed to the fraudulent origins of the false decretals, which had already been previously exposed in the early seventeenth century by the French classical scholar David Blondel (1591–1655).⁷³ Modern scholarship has determined that the false decretals were composed during the ninth century at a location somewhere between Reims and Clairvaux in the Champagne region of France.⁷⁴ The false decretals are one of the most notorious forgeries that emerged during the early Middle Ages, and were compiled by either a single renegade scholar or a small cohort of researchers who had access to the monastery of Corbie, which housed one of the most renowned libraries in medieval Europe.⁷⁵ Writing

⁷² It is important to note that the *Catena aurea* is a collation of commentaries on the Gospels taken from the writings of various Church Fathers and contains very little of Thomas's own exegetical contributions. But through his very choice of selecting the particular texts included in the *Catena aurea*, we can be sure that Thomas had agreed with the theological opinions expressed therein.

⁷³ David Blondel, *Pseudo-Isidorus et Turrianus vapulantes* (Geneva: Pierre Chouët, 1628).

⁷⁴ See Schafer Williams, "Pseudo-Isidore from the Manuscripts," *Catholic Historical Review* 53, no. 1 (1967): 58–66. See also Eric Knibbs, "Ebo of Reims, Pseudo-Isidore, and the Date of the False Decretals," *Speculum* 92 (2017): 144–83.

⁷⁵ This was successfully established by Klaus Zechiel-Eckes in "Auf Pseudoisidors Spur, oder: Versuch einen dichten Schleier zu lüften," in *Fortschritt durch Fälschungen?*

under the pseudonym Isidore Mercator, the forger plagiarized material from legitimate historical sources in order to add an air of authenticity, and expertly wove them together with his own fabrications to form a vast corpus which influenced some of the greatest thinkers of the Middle Ages.⁷⁶ This material included numerous papal decretals which were attributed to the popes of the early Church, with the aim of bolstering support for the episcopate after King Louis the Pious (778–840) had deposed a number of French bishops in 835.

In his riposte against the ultramontane position written under the nom de plume “Janus,” Döllinger sought to establish that the doctrine of papal infallibility had originated in the writings of Thomas in the thirteenth century, rather than during the period of the early Church.⁷⁷ Döllinger believed that Thomas had formulated his ideas on papal infallibility from the “erroneous” presumption that the See of Rome was divinely protected against any sort of doctrinal corruption. If it could be proven that Thomas had derived this idea from the contents of the false decretals, Döllinger was convinced that this fatally undermined the doctrine of papal infallibility. If Pope Honorius was condemned for teaching heresy by Constantinople III, Döllinger believed that this case had totally falsified the claims found in the false decretals. By quoting Pseudo-Cyril of Alexandria in the *Catena aurea*, Thomas explicitly endorses its claim that the Apostolic See has never been tainted by the stain of heresy:

According to this promise of the Lord, the Apostolic Church of Peter remains pure and spotless from all leading into error, or heretical fraud, above all Heads and Bishops, and Primates of Churches and people, with its own Pontiffs, with most abundant faith, and the authority of Peter. And while other Churches have to blush for the error of some of their members, this reigns alone immovably established, enforcing silence, and stopping the mouths of all heretics.⁷⁸

Ursprung, Gestalt und Wirkungen der pseudoisidorischen Fälschungen, ed. Wilfried Hartmann and Gerhard Schmitz, *MGH Studien und Texte* 31 (Hannover: Hahnsche, 2002), 1–28.

⁷⁶ For an example of Pseudo-Isidore's inclusion of genuine papal decretals, see Eric Knibbs, “Pseudo-Isidore at the Field of Lies: *Divinis Praeceptis* (JE 2579) as an Authentic Decretal,” *Bulletin of Medieval Canon Law*, n.s. 29 (2011): 1–34.

⁷⁷ Janus (Ignaz von Döllinger), *The Pope and the Council* (London: Rivingtons, 1869), 86.

⁷⁸ *Catena aurea* Matt 16, lec. 3, in *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers by S. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. John Henry Parker, ed. J. Rivington (London: James Parker, 1874).

In his commentary on Matt 16:18 cited above, Thomas similarly equates the “gates of hell” with heretical doctrines, repeating the claim that the faith of the See of Rome has never suffered any sort of corruption. While all the other patriarchal sees had succumbed to heresy, or even proved to be the originators of heretical novelties, Pseudo-Isidore professed the belief that the Apostolic See has never failed to this effect. Given the suspect provenance of the false decretals, Döllinger was adamant that Thomas’s use of these writings proved that the doctrine of papal infallibility was founded upon the “flawed” premise that no occupant of the See of Rome has ever defected from the Catholic faith.

Hans Küng amplified this aspect of Döllinger’s critique as a means of dissenting to the doctrine of papal infallibility in the wake of the publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968:

There is no doubt that St Thomas Aquinas, basing himself in good faith on the forgeries, as we may assume, thus laid the foundations for the Vatican I doctrine of infallibility. . . . Even the Council of Trent, fearing a revival of conciliarism, did not dare make any decisions on these matters. But Cardinal Bellarmine reverted to the line of St Thomas Aquinas, Torquemada and Cajetan, and then in the nineteenth century, when the time had grown ripe for a definition of papal infallibility, became a crown witness for it, jointly with St Thomas.⁷⁹

Küng singles out chapters 32–35 of *Contra errores Graecorum* II as the most problematic text in question, due to its frequent usage of the false decretals in defense of the Petrine primacy. Thomas’s reliance upon the forgeries of Pseudo-Isidore during his formulation of the doctrine of papal infallibility remains controversial, and has unfortunately only helped to further strain ecumenical ties with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Döllinger believed that the case of Pope Honorius was certain proof of the spurious nature of the papal claims made in the writings of Pseudo-Isidore. He mistakenly opined that Pope Agatho was the originator of this doctrine, which was supposed to have been concocted in a vain effort to defend Honorius, and was then later recycled by the false decretals to suit the author’s own agenda.⁸⁰ For Döllinger, the fact that the fathers of the Sixth Ecumenical

⁷⁹ Küng, *Infallible?*, 97–98. See also Joseph F. Costanzo, *The Historical Credibility of Hans Küng: An Inquiry and Commentary* (North Quincy, MA: Christopher Publishing House, 1979).

⁸⁰ Janus, *Pope and the Council*, 93.

Council could immediately proceed to condemn Pope Honorius for the heresy of monothelitism was concrete proof that the See of Rome was devoid of the type of privilege that Agatho had expounded in his dogmatic letter.⁸¹ Döllinger centered his most important critique of the proposed solemn definition of papal infallibility on this basis.⁸² Various other figures of the anti-infallibilist movement followed his lead, focusing on the case of Pope Honorius as their primary means of objecting to the proposed solemn definition of papal infallibility.⁸³

Congar notes that, in some of the cases where Thomas cites the writings of Pseudo-Isidore, he could have appealed to other authentic texts in order to make the same point.⁸⁴ One such example is Thomas's citation of a decretal falsely attributed to Pope Pelagius II (r. 579–590) in question 18 of *Quodlibet* IV, which he used as proof that the *causae maiores* are reserved to the judgment of the Apostolic See alone. Congar points out that Thomas could have invoked Pope Innocent I's letter to St. Victricius of Rouen instead, since the forger had plagiarized parts of this text to formulate this section of the false decretals.⁸⁵ There is also some circumstantial evidence which suggests that Thomas subsequently developed suspicions about the authenticity of these texts, since he omits any reference to them in later works wherein it would be opportune to use them.⁸⁶ While Congar substantially agrees that papal infallibility was first articulated

⁸¹ Janus, *Pope and the Council*, 74–75.

⁸² It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a detailed discussion on the case of Pope Honorius. Needless to say, it was dismissed as “irrelevant” on the eve of the Council itself, since Paul Bottalla had already demonstrated at considerable length that Pope Honorius did not teach the monothelite heresy. Writing in 1868, Bottalla pointed out that, even though Honorius mentions the importance of professing “one will” in Christ, he goes on to qualify this by stating that his human will could never conflict with his divine will, since his human nature was not corrupted by concupiscence. In doing so, he admits the orthodox doctrine that Christ possesses both a human and a divine will (*Pope Honorius*, 45–80).

⁸³ See Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church from the Original Documents*, vol. 5, *A.D. 626 to the Close of the Second Council of Nicaea, A.D. 787*, trans. William Clark (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896), 185. See also Peter le Page Renouf, *The Condemnation of Pope Honorius* (London: Longmans and Green, 1868).

⁸⁴ See Congar, “St Thomas Aquinas and the Infallibility of the Papal Magisterium,” 97. In this instance, Congar is referring to Thomas's citation of “Pope Pelagius,” which was in reality produced by the same forger behind the false decretals.

⁸⁵ Letter of Pope Innocent I to St. Victricius of Rouen (*PL* 20, cols. 469–81).

⁸⁶ See M.-B. Crowe, “St Thomas and the Greeks: Reflections on an Argument in Hans Küng's *Infallible?*,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1972): 267–68.

only by Thomas in the thirteenth century, he acknowledges that the belief concerning the incorruptible faith of the See of Rome pre-existed this doctrine by several centuries:

The teaching work that the Pope was specifically granted was more of a religious nature, due to Rome as the place of the martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul. Peter was the faith, Paul the proclaimer of the faith. It was gladly agreed that the Roman Church had never erred in faith. It was a model, being the Church of Peter, the first to profess his faith in Christ and thus set an example. . . .

But this was not an admission of what we wrongly call papal infallibility, or, more exactly, the infallibility of the judgments that he can make in his final authority as universal and supreme pastor. Doctrinal pronouncements by popes were sometimes disputed.⁸⁷

And so, Thomas's use of the false decretals as a witness to the doctrine that the Apostolic See has never deviated from the Catholic faith is largely irrelevant, since this same claim was made in various legitimate sources which were then in turn plagiarized by Pseudo-Isidore. In fact, when Pope Agatho's dogmatic letter was read aloud to the fathers of Constantinople III, this doctrine enjoyed the unanimous assent of all present, who responded with the words: "Peter has spoken through Agatho [per Agathonem Petrus loquebatur]."⁸⁸ This was because Pope Hormisdas had already appealed to the belief that the See of Rome had never been polluted by doctrinal error in order to resolve the Acacian Schism in 519, which was similarly given the universal approval of the Eastern bishops.⁸⁹ The idea that the See of Rome was immune against the contagion of heresy gradually solidified into a universally recognized doctrine by the sixth century, and could scarcely be overturned by the fathers of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. In a letter addressed to the Emperor Mauritius, Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590–610) used a near identical argument to the one found in the writings of Pseudo-Isidore. Pope Gregory demanded that the patriarch of

⁸⁷ Yves Congar, *L'Écclésiologie du Haut Moyen Âge. De Saint Grégoire le Grand à la désunion entre Byzance et Rome* (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 159–60.

⁸⁸ Constantinople III, *The Proshphneticus to the Emperor, Sacrosancta concilia ad Regiam editionem exacta*, bk. 7, ed. Philip. Labbei; Gabriel Cossartii (Venice: Sebastianum Coleti and Jo. Baptistam Albrizzi q. Hieron, 1728–1733), col. 1090.

⁸⁹ In an effort to end the Acacian Schism, Pope Hormisdas had composed a profession of faith in his *Libellus fidei*, which condemned the Christological errors of Nestorianism and monophysitism and anathematized Acacius. The preamble to his *Libellus*

Constantinople should refrain from laying claim to the title of “Ecumenical Patriarch” (or “universal bishop”), since several of the bishops of Constantinople had been public heretics, and even counted the heresiarchs Macedonius and Nestorius amongst their number.⁹⁰ We have already noted how Tyrannus Rufinus advanced a similar argument in using Eph 5:27 as scriptural proof that the Roman church is preserved against doctrinal corruption in his *Commentarius in Symbolum Apostolorum*, where he employs the same line of argumentation found in the Pseudo-Isidorian literature. St. Augustine of Hippo also clearly associated the gift of indefectibility with the entire Petrine succession—since he observed that no bishop of Rome could be numbered among the Donatists.

The idea that the Apostolic See of Rome would always remain pure in faith was no unique innovation of Pseudo-Isidore, but stems from an authentic tradition of the early Church. This tradition was called into question by the Eastern bishops only after the condemnation of Honorius, and seeded the ground for the events of the Great Schism by inferring that the gift of indefectibility was bestowed only upon the universal Church, rather than the successors of Peter. It was Thomas’s reception of this ancient tradition of the early Church, over the distinction between the *sedes* and *sedens*, that enabled him to go on to articulate the doctrine of papal infallibility.

fidei contains the famous formula which affirms that the Catholic religion is always preserved immaculate in the Apostolic See—which means that it alone was to be trusted to be the sole guardian of the deposit of faith: “Prima salus est rectae fidei regulam custodire et a constitutis Patrum nullatenus deviare. Et quia non potest Domini nostril Iesu Christi praetermitti sententia dicentis: ‘Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam’ [Matt 16:18], haec, quae dicta sunt, rerum probantur effectibus, quia in Sede Apostolica immaculata est semper catholica servata religio”—“The beginning of salvation is to guard the rule of the right faith and to deviate in no way from the determinations of the Fathers. And because one cannot ignore the words of our Lord Jesus Christ when he said, ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church’ [Matt 16: 18], what was said has been borne out by actual results, for in the Apostolic See that Catholic faith has always been preserved immaculate” (DH no. 363).

⁹⁰ See Pope St. Gregory the Great, Epistle 5, no. 37, and Epistle 7, no. 24, in *The Letters of Gregory the Great: Books 1–4*, ed. and trans. John R. C. Martyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004). See also George Demacopoulos, “Gregory the Great and the Sixth-Century Dispute over the Ecumenical Title,” *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2009): 600–621.

Thomas's Distinction Between the Pope as Private and Public Theologian

As we have already noted above, Tierney had admitted that, if it could be established that St. Thomas Aquinas interpreted Christ's prayer for Peter's faith as also being effective for his successors in the See of Rome, then he would be forced to retract his thesis that Peter Olivi was the originator of the doctrine of papal infallibility. *Quodlibet* IX is an important witness in this respect, where Thomas makes an explicit distinction between the Roman pontiff acting in his capacity as a private theologian and his office as teacher of the universal Church. He then goes on to deny that a pope could teach a heretical proposition when acting in this latter capacity, while allowing for the possibility of doctrinal error when we "only consider the people themselves." This is where Thomas makes an explicit rejection of the distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* in relation to the public exercise of the Petrine ministry. For Thomas, the pope could hold to heretical beliefs in a private capacity, but he could never extend any doctrinal errors to be believed by the whole Church in any binding capacity, since the universal Church can never err in a matter of faith or morals.⁹¹ This means that the faithful can place its trust in the authoritative judgments of the Roman pontiff, since the Holy Spirit will intervene in order to prevent the *Ecclesia universalis* from accepting false doctrine:

⁹¹ Thomas obviously never refers to the third level of assent (*obsequium religiosum*) owed towards the ordinary magisterium, since this is a much later development. But Thomas excludes the possibility of the pope teaching heresy when acting in his capacity as public teacher, because the faith of the entire Church is at stake. Since the Holy Spirit guides the Church to avoid error about things that are necessary for salvation, the Paraclete prevents the pope from teaching heresy in his capacity as teacher of the universal Church. For Thomas, it is necessary to obey the public teachings of the pope, which for him would be "binding" in a certain sense, but he does not clearly distinguish between definitive and non-definitive teachings as requiring different levels of assent, which is, again, a fairly recent development. He also does not clearly distinguish between heresy and the lower censures in the theological notes, since this was first articulated only in the following centuries. From our modern perspective, we know that it is possible for theologians to dissent from certain non-definitive teachings of the ordinary Magisterium which they believe to be false. Therefore, we know that the "binding" capacity of the pope's non-definitive teachings is of a much lower level of assent. It is "binding" to the extent that the ordinary lay faithful are due to offer a "respectful silence" to such teachings, but not to the extent that such teachings can never be called into question.

I say, it is possible for those with authority in the Church to err in their judgments about anything you like, provided that we only consider the people themselves. But if we consider divine providence, it is certainly impossible for the universal Church to err in judgments about matters of faith. For the Holy Spirit guides the Church to avoid error about things necessary for salvation. As Christ promised in John 16: when the Spirit comes, he will teach you all truth. Hence, we should hold more firmly to the pope's judgment than to the opinion of any wise people about the scriptures, since it is for the pope to make determinations about the faith, which he professes with his judgments.⁹²

In making a distinction between the possibility of a pope holding heretical beliefs in his capacity as a private theologian, over against the idea of a pope being protected against heresy by way of his public ministry, Thomas had anticipated the one of the main arguments which St. Robert Bellarmine would later employ against the idea of a heretical pope: "The Pope is the Teacher and Shepherd of the whole Church, thus, the whole Church is so bound to hear and follow him that if he would err, the whole Church would err."⁹³ Bellarmine spells out the full implications behind Thomas's reasoning here: since it is impossible for the entire Church to err in a matter of belief, divine providence would simply never allow a pope to bind the universal Church to a damnable error. As such, it logically follows that God would never allow for the entire Church to be bound to a heretical proposition when it comes to determining the *causae maiores*, which thus enables the popes to make infallible judgments in order to settle any doctrinal disputes that may arise in times of crisis—even when acting alone.⁹⁴ In rejecting the possibility that a privately heretical pope could

⁹² *Quodlibet* IX, q. 8, corp., in *Thomas Aquinas's Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. Turner Nevitt and Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 126.

⁹³ St. Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus hujus temporis Haereticos: De Romano Pontifice*, bk. 4, ch. III: "Pontifex est doctor et pastor totius Ecclesiae: ergo tota Ecclesia illum audire et sequi tenetur: ergo si ille erret, tota Ecclesia errabit" (trans. Ryan Grant in *On the Roman Pontiff*, vol. 2 [Post Falls, ID: Mediatrix, 2016], 162).

⁹⁴ Francisco Suárez would similarly go on to conclude that, if the pope could teach heresy in his public capacity qua Roman pontiff, then his faith could also fail when teaching *ex cathedra*: "Ex dictis in superiori capite, probabum relinquitur fidem Petri, ac subinde esse fidem catholicam, a qua sedes illa deficere nequit. Possumus autem ipso rerum eventui, et Patrum traditione, eandem veritatem et promissionem confirmare. Nam si Apostolica Sedes in hoc speciale privilegium non haberet, aliquando in fide defecisset,

extend his doctrinal error in his public capacity as pope, Thomas discounts the idea that the distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens* allows for the possibility of papal error when it comes to determining definitive judgments which must be believed by the whole Church.

Conclusion

By focusing on the relatively late development of papal infallibility in the writings of Thomas, Döllinger's critique reinforces the fact that this concept was a doctrinal evolution which emerged from the much earlier tradition which maintained that the Catholic faith could never suffer any defect in the See of Rome. Before the thirteenth century, theologians had largely conceived of the inerrancy of the Church and papal authority in the passive mode of indefectibility. This is why the case of Pope Honorius became the primary linchpin for Döllinger's argument during the prelude to Vatican I. In recognizing that the Church Fathers made no such distinction between the *sedes* and the *sedens*, Cardinal Henry Manning appears to be correct in responding that the doctrine of papal infallibility was at the very least implicitly recognized during the first millennium, through acknowledging "the perpetual stability or indefectibility of the Faith in the See and Successor of Peter."⁹⁵ There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that this understanding of papal authority was exercised on a *de facto* basis during times of doctrinal crisis, grounded in the belief that the See of Peter will always remain impervious to heresy. Even though the doctrine of papal infallibility was not fully articulated until the thirteenth century, it was common practice to bring the *causae maiores* before the judgment of the Apostolic See during the period of the early Church, so that, in the words of St. Bernard, "the losses suffered by the faith should be repaired, where faith cannot suffer defect."

By following Popes Leo IX and Innocent III in rejecting the false distinction between the See of Rome and the individual successors of Peter, St. Thomas Aquinas was able to articulate the full ramifications of the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Petrine See for the scope of papal authority. Thomas's reception of this tradition led him to distinguish

etiam ex cathedra docens, vel haeresim aliquam approbasset, sicut in aliis ecclesiis etiam ab Apostolis inchoates accidisse videmus . . ." Francisco Suárez (*Defensio Fidei Catholicae Adversus Anglicanae Sectae Errores*, ch. 6, no. 1, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 24 [Paris: Vivès, 1858], 25).

⁹⁵ Henry Manning, *The Oecumenical Council and the Infallibility of the Roman Pontiff* (London: Longmans and Green, 1869), 93fn1.

between the pope acting as a private theologian, over against his public office as Roman pontiff. If the gift of never-failing faith was directly bestowed upon each occupant of the Petrine See when exercising their public teaching office, rather than solely upon the *Ecclesia universalis* in a more general sense, it logically follows that the pope is able to make infallible judgments *ex sese*, without securing the consent of the Church by way of conciliar approval.

Thomas's understanding that the successors of Peter could never deviate from the Catholic faith in the exercise of their public teaching office explains why he never considered the possibility of a heretical pope. Since the eventuality of a pope who publicly teaches heresy would ultimately result in the *communio fidelium* suffering doctrinal corruption, it stands to reason that the preservation of the faith of the Church necessarily involves the steadfast orthodoxy of its visible head. The doctrines of the indefectibility of the Apostolic See and papal infallibility are thus two sides of the same theological coin, distinguished by their passive and active attributes.

In recognizing that the Roman pontiff acting alone has the authority to make an addition to the Creed, it takes no great leap of the imagination to conclude that Thomas fully accepted that the pope had the ability to set forth definitive judgments in certain exceptional circumstances. Even if Thomas was reluctant to apply the word *infallibilis* to such judgments issued by the pope, we can surely identify the origins of the doctrine of the infallibility of the Roman pontiffs as emerging from his unique contribution to Catholic ecclesiology.

Since Catholic theologians now generally recognize that papal infallibility was first articulated only in the thirteenth century, we need to be cognizant of this fact in any further attempt at rapprochement with the Eastern Orthodox Church on this decisive issue. The first millennium of Christian unity was directly predicated on the mutual recognition of the perpetual doctrinal stability of the Petrine See by both the Eastern and Western members of the Church. Once this doctrine was called into question after the condemnation of Honorius, the Byzantine emperors viewed this as an opportunity to wrest political leverage from Rome, which was then cemented during the course of the Photian Schism. Even though this schism was resolved within the lifetime of Photius himself, who was eventually reconciled with Rome, the damage wrought by the idea of papal heresy would eventually resurface during the Great Schism, and has taken root until the present day. The issue of the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Petrine See still awaits further resolution if we are to have any hope of a future conciliation with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Given the fact that

the Eastern bishops assented to this doctrine at Constantinople III, which is still recognized as infallible by the Eastern Orthodox Church, we need to strive to recover the original context in which this doctrine was formulated, in order to help pave the way for a renewed period of Church unity.

N.V.