



CHURCH NEWS

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PAPAL INFALLIBILITY: ANCIENT TRADITION OR MODERN DOCTRINE?

Was papal infallibility always part of the Christian Faith?

Drawing principally from Michael Whelton's Two Paths:

Orthodoxy & Catholicism, we examine the historical development of the doctrine, the witness of the ancient Church, the case of Pope Honorius, and the controversy surrounding its definition at the First Vatican Council in 1870.

IN DEFENSE OF HIS HOLINESS PATRIARCH TIKHON

In this 2008 article, Hegumen Feofan defends His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon against accusations concerning the fall of the Russian monarchy and the revolutionary upheavals of 1917. He examines the Patriarch's struggle to preserve the Church amid Bolshevik persecution, Renovationism, and tremendous political pressure.

Hegumen Feofan presents Patriarch Tikhon's course as an effort to preserve the Church without surrendering its internal life to the control of the atheist state, contrasting his actions with the later course of Metropolitan Sergius.

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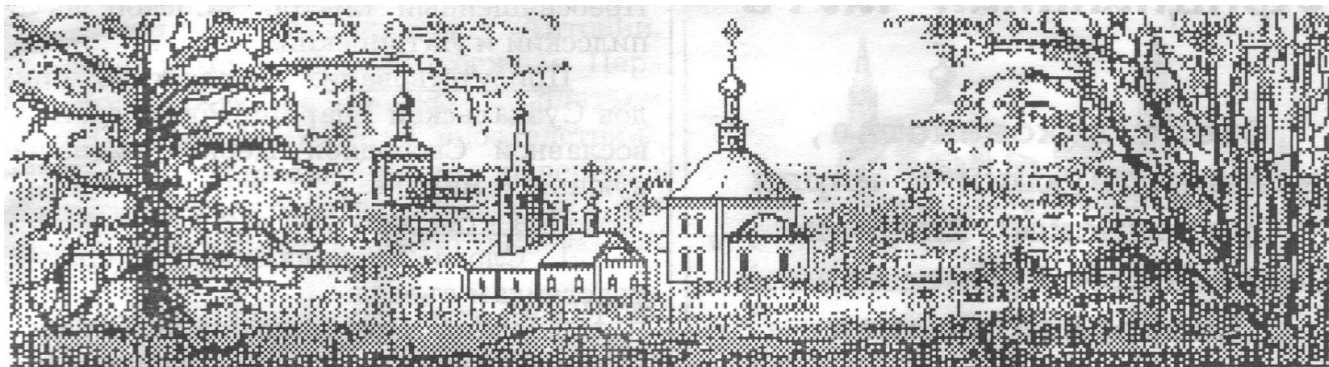
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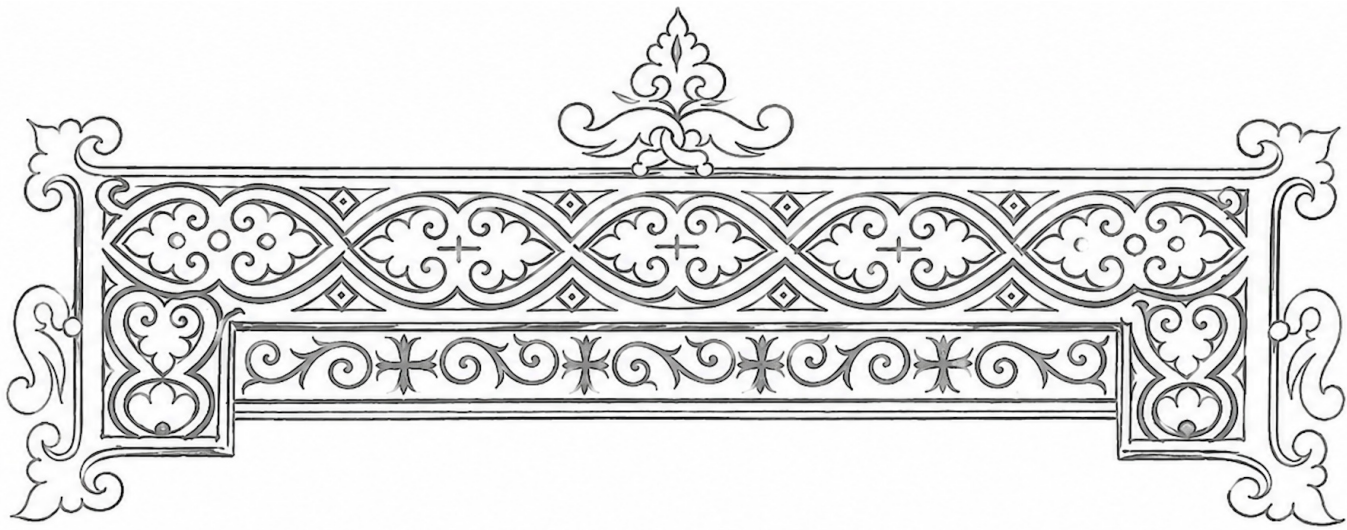
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PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

ANCIENT TRADITION OR MODERN DOCTRINE?

An Article Written by Seraphim Vasilievich

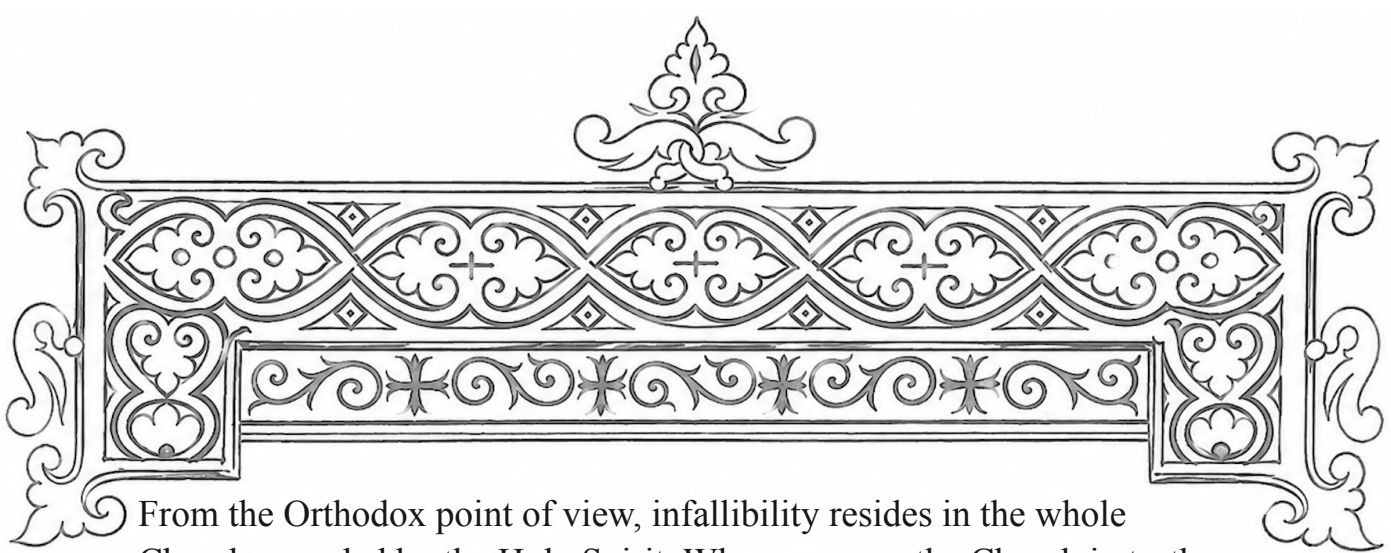
On July 18, 1870, the bishops assembled at the First Vatican Council in Rome voted on one of the most significant dogmatic definitions in the history of Western Christianity. The decree *Pastor Aeternus* declared that when the Bishop of Rome speaks *ex cathedra*, acting as pastor and teacher of all Christians, and defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Universal Church, he possesses that infallibility which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to possess through the promise of the Holy Spirit given to St. Peter. According to the Council, such definitions are irreformable of themselves, and not by virtue of the consent of the Church.

The question, however, is this: had Christians always believed such a principle? Was the dogma of 1870 a formal statement of a teaching believed since the time of Christ, taught by the Apostles, confessed by the Fathers, and held by the ancient Church? Or was it a development of theological opinion concerning the prerogatives of the Bishop of Rome, existing in the medieval West and becoming dogma in the nineteenth century?

Whelton's *Two Paths* examines the question, which is best understood not through Orthodox polemics but through the writings of Roman Catholic bishops, historians, theologians, catechisms, and the documents of the First Vatican Council itself. The process was far from a simple reaffirmation in 1870 of a teaching that had never been questioned. Rather, what we see is a process of development, controversy, resistance, and finally dogmatic definition.

To begin, papal infallibility must be distinguished from the common caricature that Catholics believe the pope is always and in everything without error. Papal infallibility does not mean that the pope never sins, nor does it mean that every ordinary statement he makes is infallible. It concerns specific circumstances in which the pope, exercising his office as pastor and teacher of the Church, definitively proclaims a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Universal Church.

The Orthodox rejection of papal infallibility is not based on the idea that every casual statement or opinion of the pope is claimed to be infallible, but rests on much deeper grounds. Orthodoxy does not accept the claim that Christ established within the Church one bishop possessing the authority to define dogmatically a teaching that cannot be revised independently of the will of the Church.



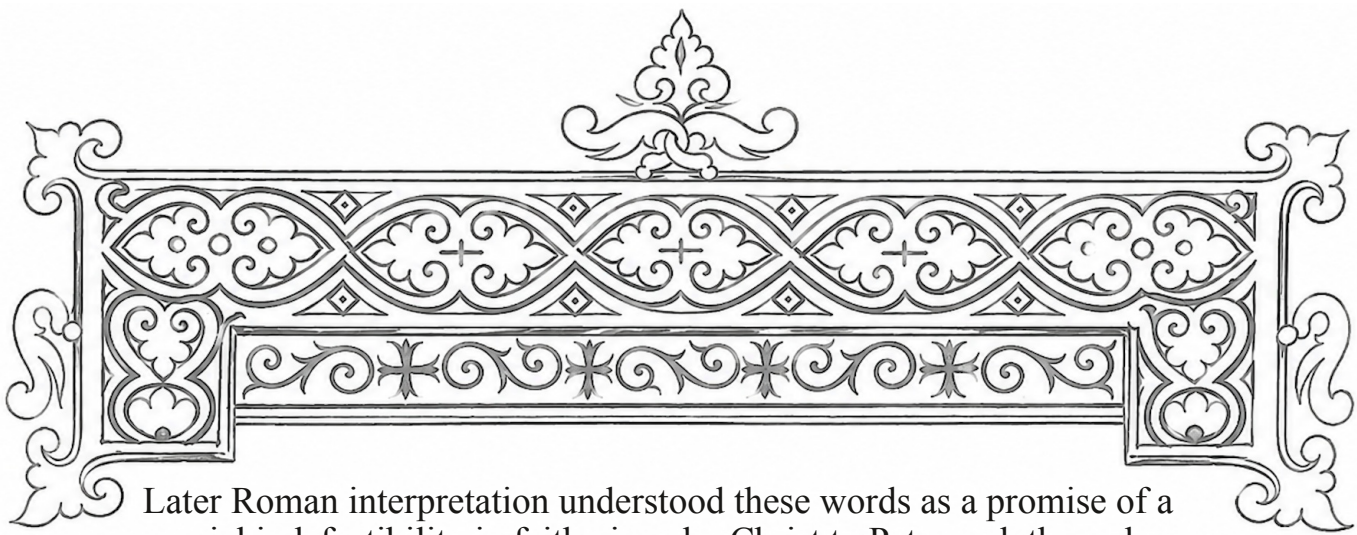
From the Orthodox point of view, infallibility resides in the whole Church, guarded by the Holy Spirit, Who preserves the Church in truth. Infallibility is given to the entire body of the Church, and according to the traditional Orthodox order, the Church expresses herself conciliarity, when bishops gather in Council, bear witness to the Apostolic Faith, and receive that which is recognized as the Faith handed down from previous ages. A bishop, and not only the Bishop of Rome, is not the master of this Faith, but its guardian.

Whelton begins his book with the famous teaching of St. Vincent of Lérins: the Catholic Faith is that which has been believed always, everywhere, and by all. This teaching is commonly expressed in three words: universality, antiquity, consent.

An Ecumenical Council has no right to create new revelation. Rather, its duty is to confess and define the Faith already given to the Church. For this reason, the Fathers of the ancient Councils appealed to the inheritance of the Apostles. The question before them was not, “What new teaching shall we create?” but, “What has the Church received?”

It is precisely for this reason that the historical foundation of the doctrine of papal infallibility becomes so important. If papal infallibility is a divinely revealed dogma, it must be found in the Tradition of the Church. One might expect that during intense theological controversies Christians would appeal to the doctrine of papal infallibility. One might expect the Fathers to preach about it, the Ecumenical Councils to recognize it, and disputed questions to be resolved by obtaining an infallible judgment from the Bishop of Rome. Yet, according to Whelton’s position, history does not support this expectation.

One of the biblical verses later used as an argument for papal infallibility is Christ’s statement to St. Peter in Luke 22:32: “But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.”



Later Roman interpretation understood these words as a promise of a special indefectibility in faith given by Christ to Peter and, through Peter, to the Bishops of Rome.

Whelton, however, points to a historical problem. The Fathers of the Church preached extensively on Holy Scripture and its individual passages. Yet, Whelton argues, in the patristic tradition these words of Christ were not understood as establishing a personal infallible papal teaching office. This absence matters: if Christ truly established one bishop as the infallible doctrinal teacher of the whole Church, it would hardly have been a minor matter in Christian ecclesiology.

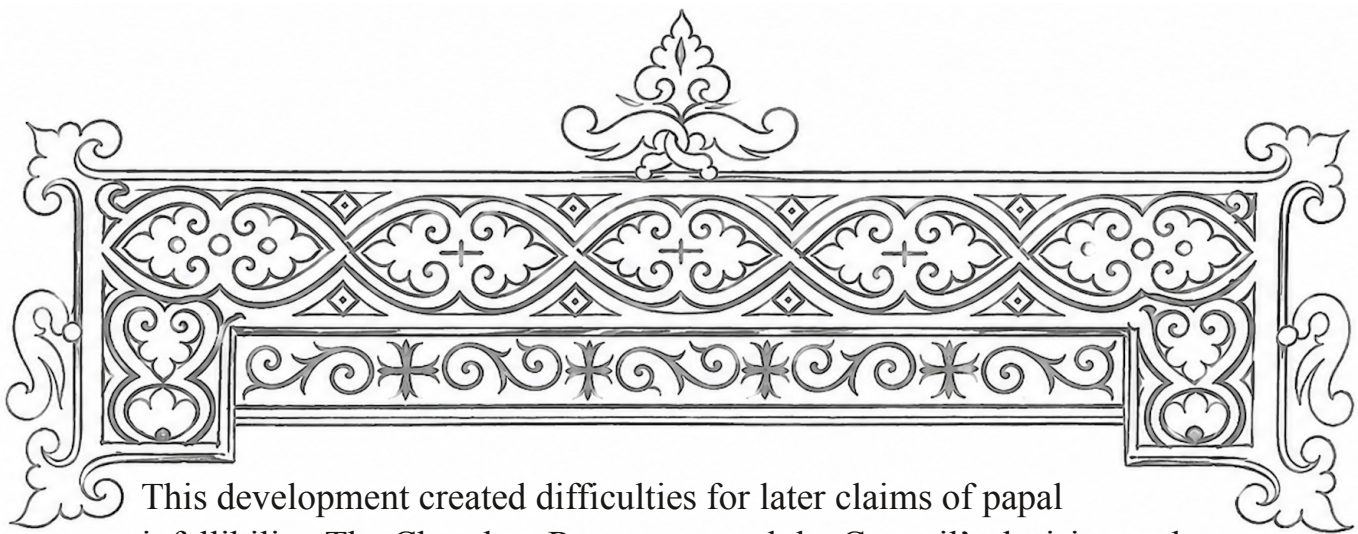
The Council of Chalcedon in 451 provides a good example in this respect. Pope St. Leo the Great wrote his famous Tome concerning the nature of Christ, and Orthodox Christians honor it because its teaching was recognized as Orthodox at the Council. Yet the significance of the process lies in what happened.

The bishops of the Council did not accept the papal document blindly on the grounds that an official doctrinal judgment from Rome could not be mistaken. Rather, they carefully examined the document, comparing it with the already existing dogma of the Faith and determining its agreement with the Creed and the teaching of the Fathers.

This fact corresponds directly with a point made at the First Vatican Council by Bishop Joseph Karl Hefele, the distinguished Catholic historian who participated in the Council. The ancient bishops did not hear a papal doctrinal judgment with the understanding that their task was blind submission. They heard it and determined whether the document agreed with the Apostolic Faith. That distinction is crucial. Leo's teaching was confirmed not because he had spoken it, but because it was Orthodox.

Another historical test appears in the seventh century with Pope Honorius I and Monothelitism.

During the Monothelite controversy, Pope Honorius sent letters to Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople concerning the question of the wills of Christ. This eventually became a matter addressed by the Sixth Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 680–681. The Monothelite heresy was condemned, and so was Honorius, whose name was included among those anathematized.



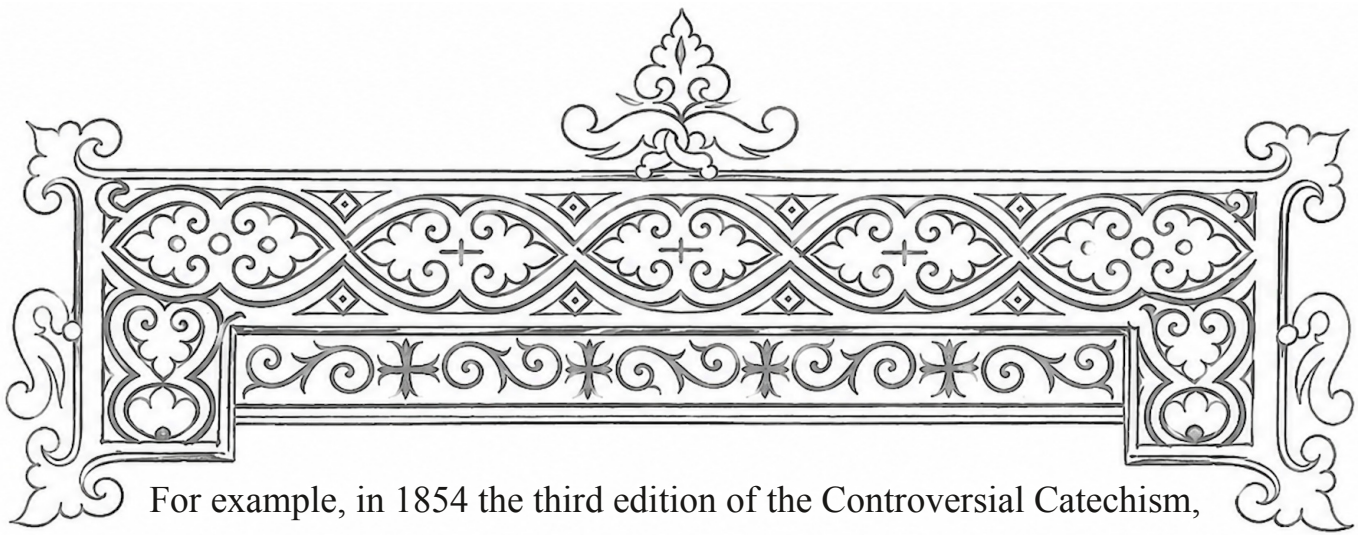
This development created difficulties for later claims of papal infallibility. The Church at Rome accepted the Council's decision and condemned Pope Honorius. The basis of this condemnation was Honorius's failure to preserve the purity of the Apostolic Faith. From the standpoint of Orthodox ecclesiology, there is nothing impossible about this, because a bishop can err, a patriarch can err, and even the Bishop of Rome can err. All bishops are judged according to the Apostolic Faith.

After papal infallibility was defined as dogma, Honorius became an inconvenient historical figure. Catholic theologians developed arguments explaining that Honorius had not fulfilled the conditions necessary for an *ex cathedra* definition. Whatever one makes of such explanations, the reaction of the ancient Church remains highly significant: the Sixth Ecumenical Council treated doctrinal error by a Bishop of Rome as an ecclesiological possibility.

This brings us to the central historical question raised in *Two Paths*. If the Church always held the doctrine of papal infallibility, where is the evidence for it?

Whelton's argument is that for many centuries the Church behaved quite differently. Doctrinal questions were settled through Councils. The Fathers did not treat one bishop as the independent and infallible doctrinal authority of the Church. The authority of Ecumenical Councils did not depend upon papal approval. Even the relationship between pope and council in medieval Western Christianity was filled with controversy. The doctrine of papal infallibility developed gradually.

Much of the most interesting evidence presented by Whelton comes not from remote antiquity but from the period immediately preceding the First Vatican Council.



For example, in 1854 the third edition of the *Controversial Catechism*, written by the Reverend Stephen Keenan, appeared in Britain. The work was an apologetic defense of the Roman Catholic Faith. Its authors had to answer the Protestant accusation that Catholics were required to believe in papal infallibility.

And here was the answer given only sixteen years before the events that followed. The catechism stated that “papal infallibility is no article of our Faith.”

The significance of this evidence is difficult to overstate. This was not some obscure medieval document discovered after centuries of neglect. This was 1854. The First Vatican Council would define papal infallibility as dogma in 1870.

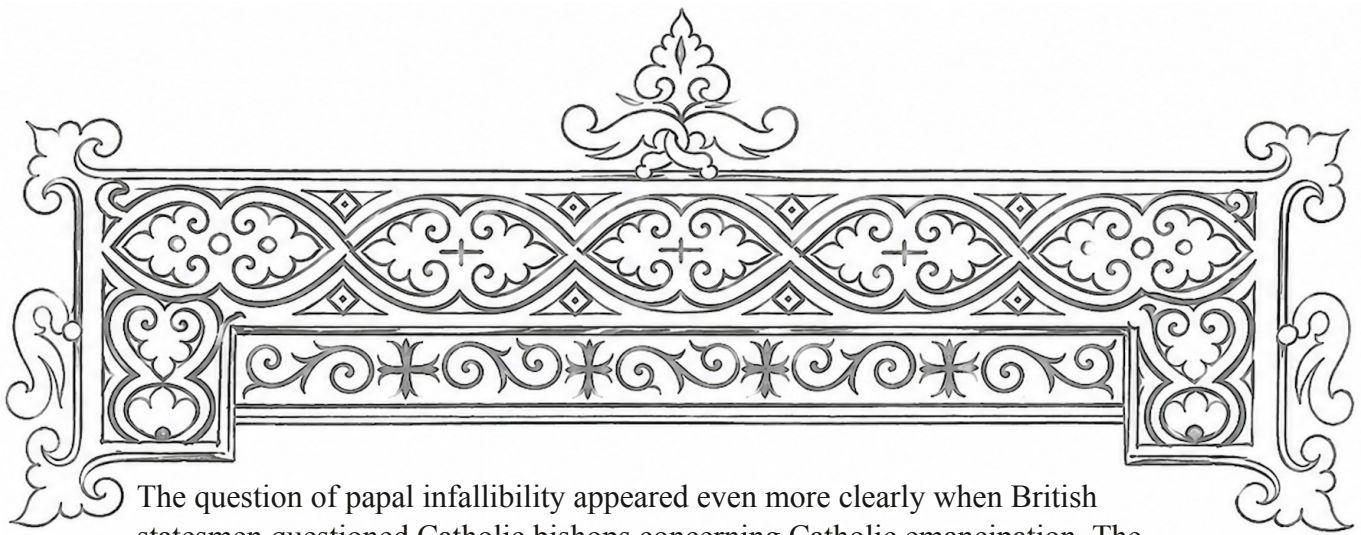
More importantly, Keenan’s catechism had received episcopal approval. Thus, there existed a position which could be rejected in an approved Catholic catechism as something Catholics were not required to believe, but which became a dogma of faith within the lifetime of the readers of that catechism.

Whelton uses this example to challenge the claim that the First Vatican Council merely formally defined what Catholics everywhere had recognized from antiquity.

Keenan was certainly not alone. Whelton presents documentary evidence from Catholics in Britain and Ireland showing that the doctrine of papal infallibility remained a matter of serious disagreement even in the nineteenth century.

In 1789, prominent English Catholics issued a declaration explicitly rejecting belief in any form of papal infallibility.

In 1822, Bishop Peter Baines stated that although some theologians held the doctrine of papal infallibility in certain cases, he did not believe Catholics in England or Ireland accepted the teaching.



The question of papal infallibility appeared even more clearly when British statesmen questioned Catholic bishops concerning Catholic emancipation. The bishops themselves described papal jurisdiction as limited.

Then, in 1826, thirty Irish Roman Catholic bishops issued a declaration according to which Catholics were not required to believe in papal infallibility.

These were Catholics living only forty-four years before the First Vatican Council. Thus, the question becomes unavoidable. How could a teaching be denied as obligatory Catholic belief in 1826 and then become a divinely revealed dogma in 1870?

To Whelton, this is clear proof of both maintaining an ancient universal belief and development of doctrine.

The nineteenth century saw the rise of a powerful movement within Roman Catholicism known as Ultramontanism. The term referred to those who looked “beyond the mountains,” meaning beyond the Alps toward Rome, and favored a strong centralization of authority in the papacy.

Ultramontane theologians increasingly emphasized papal supremacy and infallibility. Their influence grew under Pope Pius IX, whose long pontificate lasted from 1846 to 1878.

Pius IX strongly favored the definition of papal infallibility. The First Vatican Council was summoned in 1869, and the question soon became one of its most controversial issues.

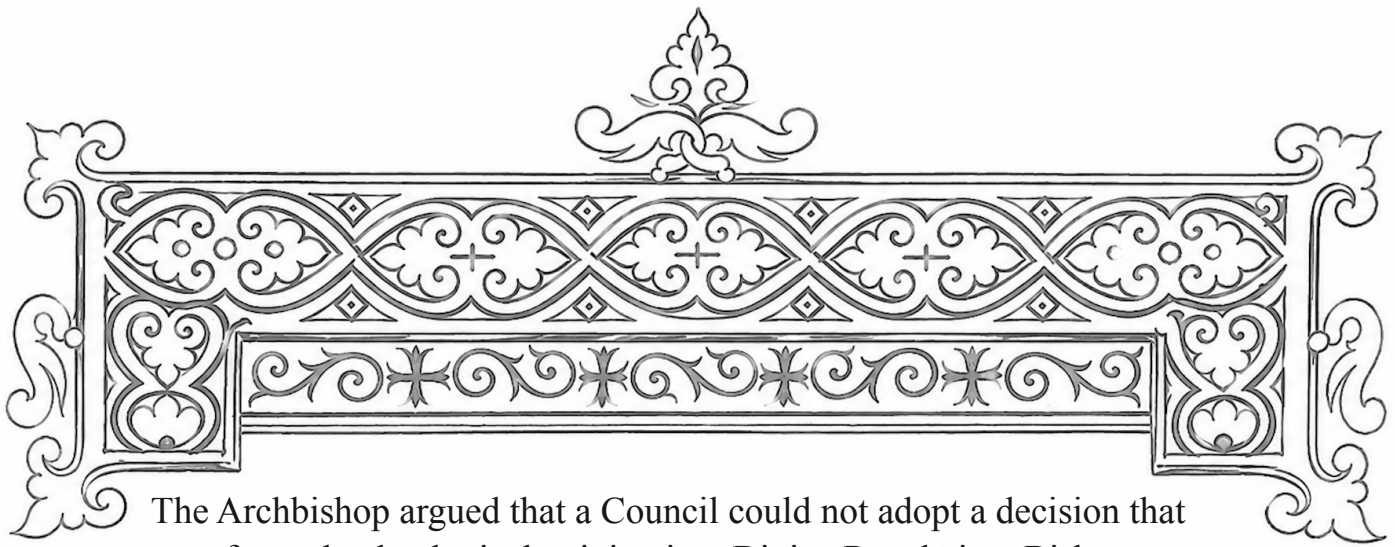
Opposition came not only from outside the Roman Catholic Church but from within the Council itself.

Among the most important opponents was Bishop Joseph Karl Hefele of Rottenburg, one of the greatest Catholic historians of the nineteenth century. Hefele knew the history of the ancient Councils extremely well, and that history presented serious difficulties for the proposed definition.

Hefele argued that the historical record could not easily be reconciled with the idea that the pope had always been regarded as an infallible doctrinal authority. The case of Pope Honorius naturally appeared again.

For Hefele, the problem was straightforward. Bishops were not masters capable of creating the Faith; they were witnesses to what had been handed down in the Church.

Resistance also existed outside Europe. One opponent was Peter Richard Kenrick, Archbishop of St. Louis. Kenrick wrote a lengthy speech against the proposed definition before the Council, and because it could not be delivered personally, the text was published. His reasoning went to the heart of the matter.



The Archbishop argued that a Council could not adopt a decision that transformed a theological opinion into Divine Revelation. Bishops are guardians of the deposit of Faith, not its owners. They possess no authority to add anything to that deposit.

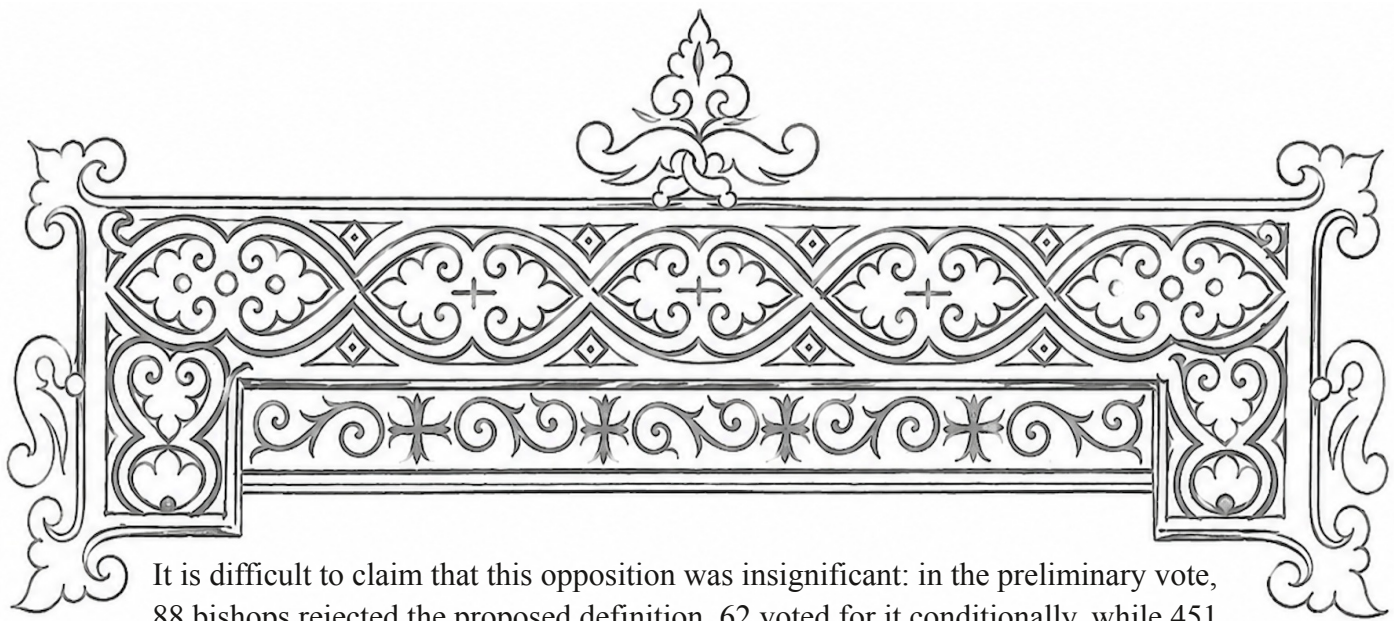
Kenrick further argued that papal infallibility had not always formed part of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. In support of this, the Archbishop pointed to the Irish seminary at Maynooth, where papal infallibility had traditionally not been taught as dogma and where the question had only been proposed for discussion in the nineteenth century. Thus, once again, an obvious chronological problem appears. If infallibility had been given by Christ to St. Peter and all subsequent popes, why were Catholic bishops, theologians, seminaries, and catechisms still debating it so late in Christian history?

Even John Henry Newman, later Cardinal Newman, viewed the proposed definition with serious anxiety. Newman was certainly no Orthodox polemicist. Yet he had reason to fear the difficulties Catholics would face in defending the definition as the First Vatican Council approached its decision.

This is how Whelton helps us understand what the situation actually was at the time: papal infallibility was not simply a proposition disputed by Protestants and Orthodox Christians outside Rome. Catholics themselves recognized the historical difficulties surrounding the question, and it produced intense controversy within the Roman Church itself.

Whelton gives considerable attention to those who opposed the definition proposed at the First Vatican Council. Among them were cardinals, archbishops, bishops, historians, theologians, and Catholic laymen who formed a substantial opposition.

Some challenged the biblical foundations, others appealed to the Fathers, others to the history of the Councils, and some argued that defining infallibility would create an insurmountable obstacle between Rome and the Eastern Church.



It is difficult to claim that this opposition was insignificant: in the preliminary vote, 88 bishops rejected the proposed definition, 62 voted for it conditionally, while 451 bishops supported it without qualification.

Many of those who opposed the definition did not wish, in the end, to vote openly against the pope. In Whelton's view, what occurred demonstrated that the definition did not possess the kind of moral consensus characteristic of the ancient Ecumenical Councils.

Nevertheless, the definition passed.

The final vote took place on July 18, 1870. During the Council session, a severe thunderstorm broke over Rome. Lightning flashed around St. Peter's as the bishops voted. Supporters and opponents could interpret the day differently: some saw in it something resembling the thunder of Sinai, while others regarded it as an ominous sign. But far more important than the storm was the theology.

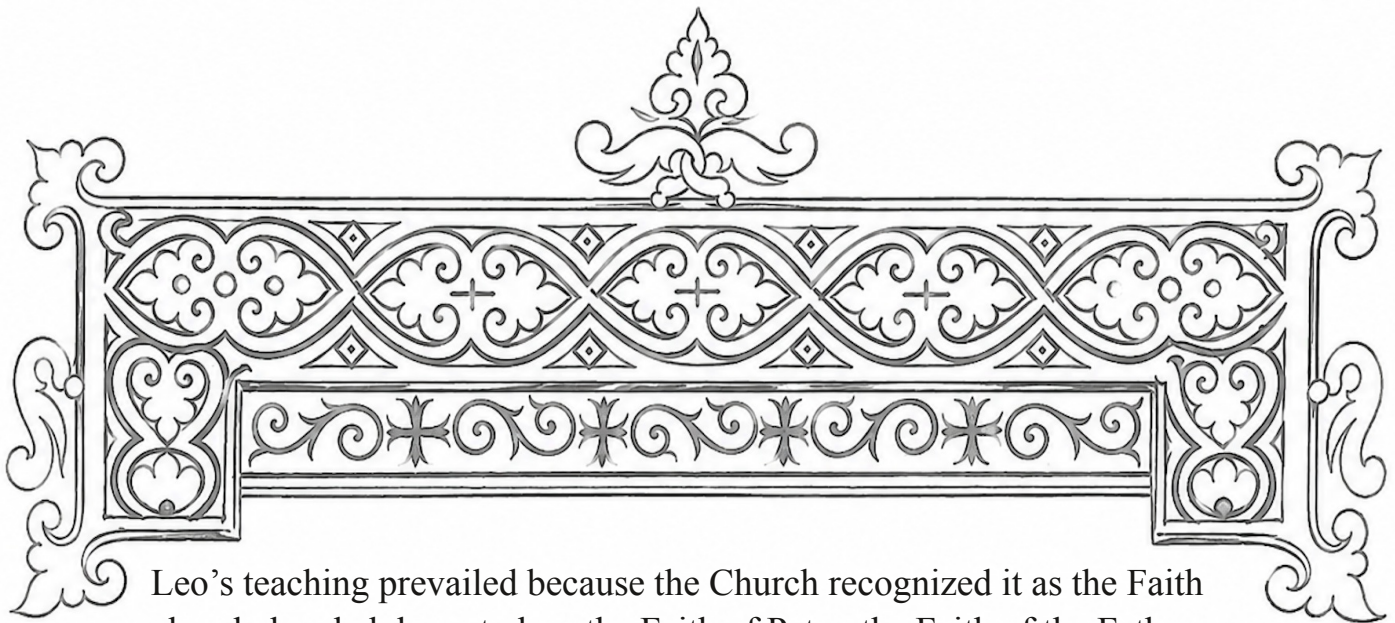
Pastor Aeternus came into force.

Under the terms set forth in the constitution, the Bishop of Rome was declared infallible when defining doctrine concerning faith or morals under the specified conditions. Importantly, such definitions were considered irreformable of themselves, not merely because they were subsequently accepted by the Church. Here the ecclesiological divergence between Rome and Orthodoxy was perhaps expressed most clearly.

The question of papal infallibility is not ultimately only about the pope. It concerns the Church as a whole and the question of whom Christ entrusted with responsibility for preserving and defining the Christian Faith.

Thus, the distinctive position in the Roman system, as formulated at the First Vatican Council, is that the pope, as successor of Peter, exercises a special and universal primacy. Under certain circumstances, the pope can definitively define doctrine concerning faith and morals, and those definitions do not require the subsequent consent of the Church in order to be final.

Orthodoxy follows a different path: a bishop is a guardian of the Faith, a patriarch is a guardian of the Faith, a Council is a guardian of the Faith. No one possesses authority to create new revelation. The bishops of the Church bear witness to the Apostolic Faith, and Councils are recognized because they confess that same Apostolic Faith, as Chalcedon demonstrated.



Leo's teaching prevailed because the Church recognized it as the Faith already handed down to her: the Faith of Peter, the Faith of the Fathers, the Faith of the Church. It was the Apostolic origin of the Faith that gave authority to the speaker.

Returning to our original question: is papal infallibility an ancient Christian tradition or a modern innovation? Michael Whelton's historical examination in *Two Paths* leads him to the latter conclusion.

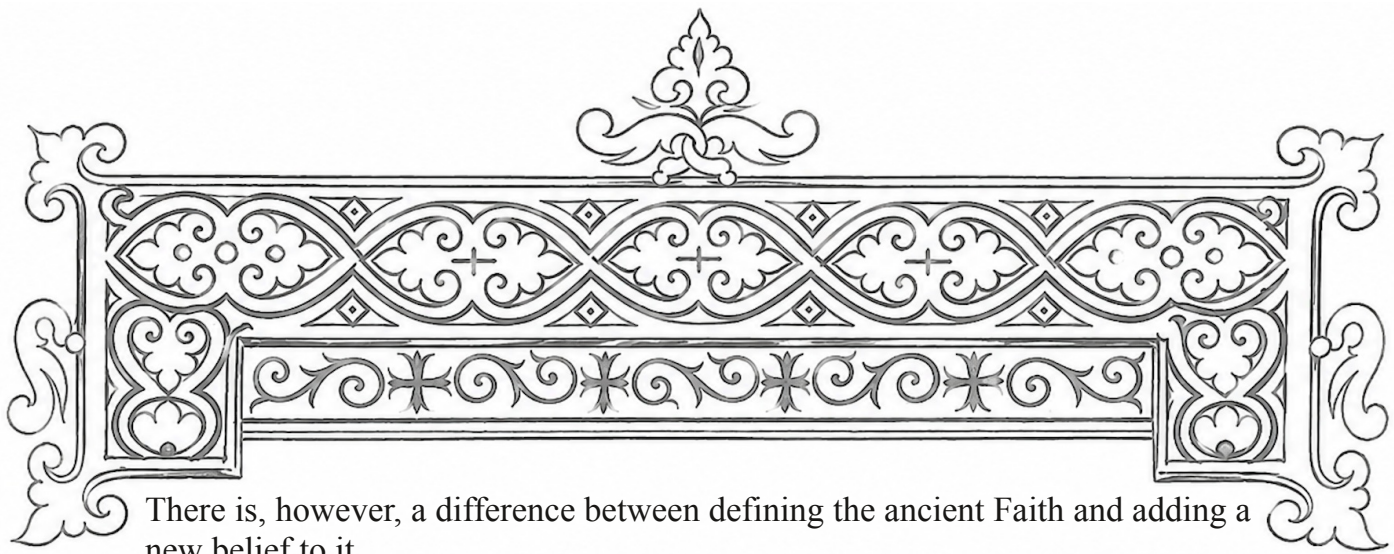
Whelton argues that the Fathers never taught this dogma when interpreting Holy Scripture. He points to the conciliar government of the ancient Church, to the examination of Pope Leo's teaching at Chalcedon, and to the condemnation of Pope Honorius. He turns to the centuries of debate in Western Christianity concerning the limits of papal authority. Most importantly, however, he points to the fact that Roman Catholics themselves rejected papal infallibility only decades before the First Vatican Council.

As late as 1854, an approved Catholic catechism could describe the doctrine of papal infallibility as a Protestant invention. Irish bishops in 1826 could reject the doctrine as something Catholics were not required to believe. Bishops attending the First Vatican Council could argue that the teaching lacked sufficient foundation in either Holy Scripture or Tradition.

Yet on July 18, 1870, it was proclaimed a dogma.

From the standpoint of an Orthodox Christian, this question cannot be resolved by appealing to the "development of doctrine."

The Church certainly develops the formulations of her teaching. The language of the Ecumenical Councils becomes more precise under the pressure of heresies and the necessity of clearly rejecting false teachings. But legitimate development merely expresses more clearly what was already contained in the Apostolic Faith; it does not transform into today's dogma what yesterday was merely a permissible opinion.



There is, however, a difference between defining the ancient Faith and adding a new belief to it.

The Orthodox Church therefore cannot accept the principle of papal infallibility because she rejects this understanding of the Church. For Orthodox Christians, it is impossible to believe that one bishop possesses infallible doctrinal authority independently of the consent of the Church if the ancient Church knew nothing of such a thing.

Orthodox Christians cannot regard as Apostolic something unknown to the Apostolic and patristic consciousness. Finally, Orthodox Christians cannot accept as the universal Faith of antiquity a teaching whose definition met resistance from educated Roman Catholic bishops in the nineteenth century. Orthodox Christians do not deny the existence of primacy in the ancient Church; the Bishop of Rome was the first patriarch of the ancient Church. Orthodoxy rejects, however, the understanding of this primacy as a universal monarchy.

Primacy is not universal monarchy. Honor is not absolute jurisdiction. And the first bishop is not an infallible bishop.

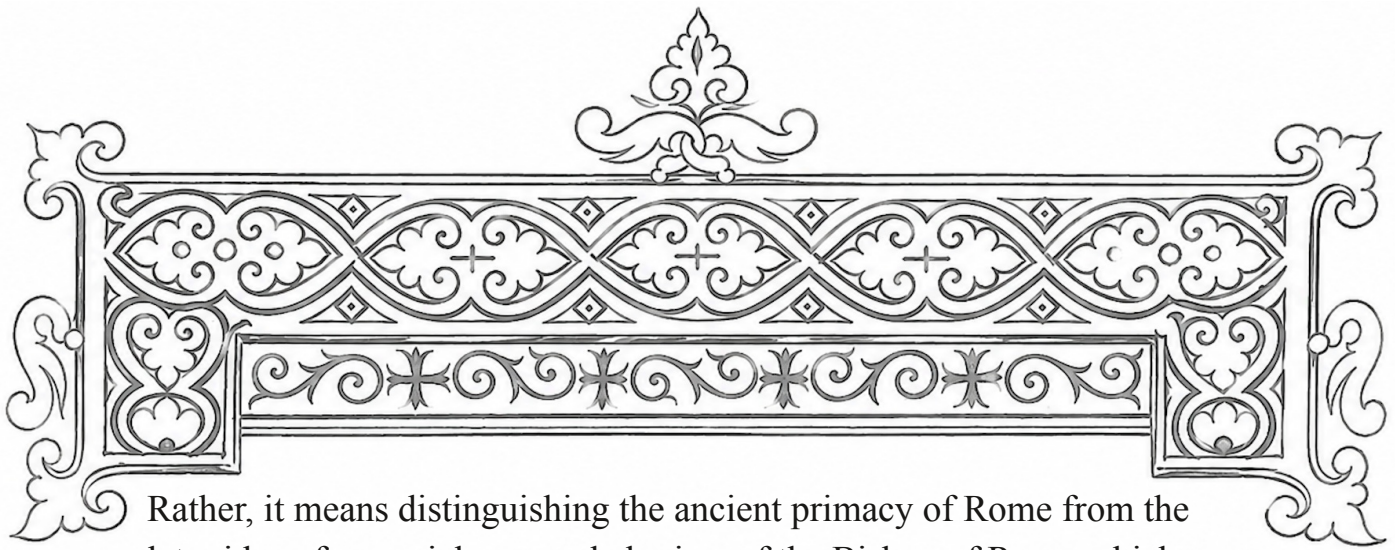
Thus, the history presented in *Two Paths* shows the difference between the Church of the first millennium, in which bishops gathered to resolve disputed doctrinal questions by appealing to Holy Scripture, the Fathers, and the Apostolic Faith, and the dogma formulated at the First Vatican Council in 1870.

According to the First Vatican Council, the Bishop of Rome, under certain circumstances, can issue doctrinal definitions that are irreformable of themselves. For Orthodoxy, here are two different paths.

If we are speaking about a teaching that was not known to the ancient Church as dogma, that was debated in the West for centuries, that was rejected by Roman Catholic bishops even in the era of the First Vatican Council, that was opposed by many of the most distinguished Catholic historians of the time, and that was finally defined only in 1870, then the Orthodox Christian must ask the following question: is this truly part of the Faith once delivered to the saints, or is it something else?

The witness of the ancient Church gives the Orthodox answer.

The Faith was not created by us. It must be received, preserved, confessed, and handed on to the next generation. To be Orthodox does not mean denying the importance of the ancient Roman See and its historical authority, nor does it mean denying the holiness of those ancient Bishops of Rome who faithfully preserved Orthodoxy.



Rather, it means distinguishing the ancient primacy of Rome from the later idea of a special personal charism of the Bishop of Rome which, under certain circumstances, enables him to issue irreformable doctrinal definitions for the whole Church.

This distinction makes the historical question before us even sharper. If papal infallibility is part of the Apostolic Faith, then its historical absence and the history of controversy surrounding the question require explanation. But if papal authority gradually developed in the medieval and modern West, culminating in a dogma defined in 1870, then the historical picture presented by Whelton becomes entirely understandable. The Orthodox Church continues to confess that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in truth. Yet in this understanding, the guardian of truth is not one individual bishop.

Rather, the Apostolic Faith is entrusted to the whole Church, which preserves it in her Apostolic Tradition, including Holy Scripture, the Fathers, the Councils, the episcopate, the sacramental life, and the martyric witness of the saints.

The question of papal infallibility must therefore be considered within the context of the broader disagreement between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism concerning the nature of the Church and where her authority resides.

The Orthodox answer to this question remains the same answer she has given throughout her conciliar life.

No bishop can stand above the Apostolic Faith; every bishop stands beneath it.

Truth lies not in novelty, not in power, and not in office, but in the Faith delivered to the saints.

(Primarily based on Michael Whelton, *Two Paths: Orthodoxy & Catholicism*, Chapters 7–9.)



WORD TO THE FAITHFUL

THE NATIVITY OF THE MOST HOLY THEOTOKOS

A sermon by Father Augustine on the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos and her example of faith, humility, and obedience.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Beloved in Christ, today the Holy Church rejoices with a joy that is both quiet and profound. Today we celebrate the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, the birth of the Virgin Mary, the first of the great feasts of the Church year, which begins in September.

It is not without meaning that the Church begins her year with the birth of the Mother of God, just as she concludes her liturgical year with the feast of her Dormition in August. At the beginning and at the end of her yearly cycle, the Church places before us the same holy and blessed Person: the Virgin Mary, the Daughter of Joachim and Anna, the Mother of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is not an accident of history. It is a revelation of the wisdom of God. The year begins with the birth of the One through whom salvation was to enter the world. The year ends with her falling asleep in the Lord and her translation into heavenly glory. Thus, the whole Church year is embraced by the Mother of God, from her cradle to her tomb, and from her tomb to her heavenly glorification.

What, then, does the Church teach us through this sacred ordering? She teaches us that the Christian life itself must begin and end with Christ, and that no human being has ever led us to Christ more perfectly than His Most Pure Mother.

The feast before us begins with sorrow transformed into joy. Saints and Righteous Joachim and Anna had grown old without children. In Israel, barrenness was regarded as a heavy misfortune and a source of humiliation. Yet they did not abandon hope. They did not become bitter toward God. They continued in prayer. Years passed. Then decades passed. And still they remained faithful.

St. John of Damascus teaches that God often delays His gifts not because He is indifferent, but because He is preparing something greater than we can imagine. The waiting of Joachim and Anna was not empty. It was filled with Divine purpose.

At last, the prayers of Joachim and Anna were heard. A child was born to the elderly couple, filling their hearts with consolation and thanksgiving. Yet the gift given to them was far greater than they could ever have imagined. The Daughter granted to them was destined to become the living Temple of God, the Ark of the New Covenant, the chosen Virgin through whom the Pre-eternal Word would take flesh.

What appeared to be the joyful birth of a long-awaited child was, in reality, the beginning of a mystery prepared by God before the ages, for the One born on that day was to become the Mother of the incarnate Lord and the joy of the whole world.

Therefore the Church sings: "Today is the beginning of our salvation." Today the gates through which the Lord will enter the world begin to open.

Ordinarily, the Church celebrates the heavenly births of the saints, that is, the days of their repose. Yet only three earthly births are celebrated as great feasts: the Nativity of Christ, the Nativity of St. John the Forerunner, and the Nativity of the Mother of God. Why? Because from the very beginning, the hand of God rested upon these lives in a special way.

St. Athanasius the Great teaches that throughout the Old Testament, God was preparing mankind for the coming of His Son. The prophets preached, the patriarchs obeyed, kings ruled, and righteous men and women struggled in holiness. The whole history of salvation was moving toward one moment: the Incarnation.

For the Incarnation to take place, there had to be One who would freely answer the call of God. There had to be One whose heart would be entirely given to Him. There had to be One who would say, "Be it unto me according to thy word."

Therefore, the birth of the Virgin Mary is the flowering of centuries of Divine preparation. The Fathers often call the Mother of God the New Eve. The first Eve listened to the voice of disobedience. The New Eve listened to the voice of God. The first Eve stretched out her hand toward the forbidden fruit. The New Eve surrendered her whole life to the Divine will.

St. Irenaeus teaches that the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience.

This is why the Church honors her so highly. We do not worship her, for we worship the Holy Trinity alone. But we honor her because God first honored her. We call her blessed because through her the Savior entered the world. As St. Elizabeth cried out, "Blessed art thou among women." So the Church continues to call her blessed throughout all generations.



Beloved, it is beautiful to reflect that the Church year begins with her Nativity and ends with her Dormition. On the day of her Nativity, we see an Infant held in the arms of Joachim and Anna. On the day of her Dormition, we see Christ receiving her soul into heavenly glory. At the beginning she receives life. At the end she enters eternal life. Between these two feasts stretches a life of perfect faithfulness.

St. John Maximovitch teaches that the whole life of the Mother of God was a continual offering of love and obedience to God. She sought neither earthly honor nor human glory. The Holy Gospels preserve only a few of her words, yet her entire life speaks more eloquently than many sermons.

In her shine the beauty of humility, the strength of obedience, the purity of a heart wholly dedicated to God, and the perfect love that casts out all fear. Therefore, the Church continually places her before us as a living example of holiness, calling us to follow the same blessed path which she walked with such faithfulness and which ultimately leads us to Christ, her Son and our God.

The Nativity teaches us that God prepares souls through patience and faith. The Dormition teaches us that those who live for God do not die, but pass into life. The beginning and the end are joined together by holiness.

Beloved, the modern world is restless. People seek peace, but find anxiety. They seek satisfaction, but remain unsatisfied. They seek freedom, but often become slaves to passions and distractions. The Mother of God teaches another path. St. Theophan the Recluse says that the path to God begins when the heart becomes attentive to His voice.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov reminds us that humility is the foundation of every virtue. In the Mother of God we see perfect humility. Although she is exalted above all creation, she called herself the Handmaid of the Lord. Although she was chosen above all women, she sought no glory for herself. Although she is crowned as Queen of Heaven, she continually directs our gaze away from herself and toward Christ.

Today, beloved, we stand at the beginning of a new Church year. The world measures time by calendars and seasons. The Church sanctifies time. She places before us feasts, fasts, saints, and sacred memories so that with each passing year we may draw closer to God.

And what better Guide could we have than the Mother of God? St. John of Kronstadt often called upon the faithful to flee beneath her protection in every sorrow and temptation. As a loving mother intercedes for her children, so the Most Holy Theotokos intercedes for all who with faith seek her help.

Beloved, today's feast shines with quiet joy. An elderly couple receives a child. The child becomes a Maiden. The Maiden becomes the Mother of God. The Mother of God becomes the joy of the whole world. Her Nativity marks the beginning of our salvation. Her Dormition reveals the fulfillment of that salvation. And between these two feasts stands a life offered entirely to God. May we learn humility from her. May we follow her obedience. May we flee to her prayers. And may this new Church year become for each of us a year of deeper repentance, stronger faith, greater love, and closer communion with Christ.

Through the prayers of the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, may the Lord grant us a blessed beginning, a holy course, and a peaceful end, that we may glorify the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

NEWS FROM RUSSIA

CONSECRATION OF THE CHAPEL OF ST. ALEXANDER NEVSKY



On September 1/14, 2026, His Eminence Theodore, Metropolitan of Suzdal and Vladimir, First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church, consecrated the chapel in honor of the Holy Right-Believing Grand Prince Alexander Nevsky in the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul at the Synodal Metochion in the settlement of Sovetka, Rostov Region.









FROM THE PAGES OF THE PAST

From the ROAG Archive

IN DEFENSE OF HIS HOLINESS PATRIARCH TIKHON

Hegumen Feofan • Suzdal, December 2008

Hegumen Feofan examines Patriarch Tikhon's struggle to preserve the Russian Church amid revolution, persecution, and schism.

The question of the Russian Orthodox Church's relationship to the monarchy during the revolutionary events of 1917 has long been a subject of controversy. Among the accusations made against the Russian hierarchy is the claim that Patriarch Tikhon and other hierarchs betrayed the Orthodox monarchy and accommodated themselves to the revolutionary government.

Hegumen Feofan responds to these accusations by examining the actual circumstances in which the Russian Church found herself. He emphasizes that the monarchy, although deeply connected with the history of Orthodox Russia, is not in itself a dogma of the Orthodox Faith. The mission of the Church cannot simply be identified with a particular political system. The events of 1917 placed the hierarchy in an extraordinarily difficult position. Emperor Nicholas II abdicated the throne, the former state order collapsed, and the Church was forced to continue her life under rapidly changing governments. The restoration of the Patriarchate and the election of Patriarch Tikhon took place amid these upheavals.

The situation became even more severe after the Bolsheviks seized power. The new government openly turned against the Church. Church property was confiscated, clergy and faithful were persecuted, and the authorities increasingly attempted to interfere in Church life. Patriarch Tikhon did not remain silent in the face of these attacks. In 1918, he condemned the violence and bloodshed taking place in Russia and called upon the faithful not to participate in such crimes. His opposition to the Bolsheviks brought him into direct conflict with the new government.

Yet the persecution of the Church created a problem far more complicated than simply issuing public statements against the government. The Patriarch bore responsibility for preserving the very life of the Church. Every decision had to be made at a time when bishops and priests were being arrested, churches were being seized, and the state was seeking ways either to destroy the hierarchy or bring it under its control.

Another serious danger arose in the form of the Renovationist movement. With the support of the Soviet authorities, the Renovationists attempted to replace the canonical hierarchy and establish control over the Russian Church. Patriarch Tikhon therefore faced enemies both outside and within the visible structures of Russian Church life.



Under these circumstances, Patriarch Tikhon sometimes made concessions to the Soviet authorities. Hegumen Feofan does not deny this. On the contrary, he argues that these actions must be understood in the context of persecution and distinguished from a surrender of the Church's internal freedom.

This distinction becomes especially important when comparing Patriarch Tikhon with the later course of Metropolitan Sergius. Feofan argues that Tikhon's concessions did not mean accepting state domination over the Church or turning the Church into an instrument of Soviet policy.

Even under enormous pressure, Patriarch Tikhon sought to preserve the canonical order and dogmatic integrity of the Russian Church. His actions were aimed at preventing the authorities and the Renovationists from destroying the canonical hierarchy while at the same time allowing the Church to continue her sacramental and spiritual life.

Therefore, the Patriarch's position cannot be judged as though he were acting freely under ordinary circumstances. He governed the Church at a time when she was experiencing revolutionary chaos, confiscation of property, arrests, executions, schism, and direct interference by the atheist state.

For this reason, Feofan rejects the attempt to portray Patriarch Tikhon's actions simply as betrayal or capitulation. Whatever concessions were made must be considered together with the boundaries the Patriarch maintained and his continuing resistance to the Soviet state's attempts to establish control over the internal life of the Church.

The central question was not whether Patriarch Tikhon could preserve the political system of Imperial Russia after that system had already collapsed. The question was whether the Russian Church could preserve her faith, hierarchy, canonical order, and spiritual independence under a government seeking to subordinate or destroy her.

Hegumen Feofan's conclusion is that Patriarch Tikhon succeeded in preserving precisely this. Despite persecution and enormous political pressure, the Patriarch did not abandon the canonical and dogmatic integrity of the Church. Therefore, his course cannot be identified with the later ecclesiastical policy associated with Metropolitan Sergius.

In Feofan's view, Patriarch Tikhon's actions must ultimately be judged according to his responsibility as First Hierarch of the persecuted Russian Church. He stood at the head of the Church during one of the darkest periods of Russian history and struggled to preserve what had been entrusted to him while everything around him was collapsing.

Hegumen Feofan

Suzdal, December 2008

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SAINT OF THE MONTH

ST. SERGIUS OF RADONEZH

St. Sergius of Radonezh, one of the greatest monastic saints of the Russian Church, was born around 1314 near Rostov. His parents, Saints Cyril and Maria, were devout Orthodox Christians who raised their children in the fear of God. At Holy Baptism, the future saint received the name Bartholomew.

As a child, Bartholomew had great difficulty with his studies. Although his brothers learned easily, reading was especially difficult for him, and he grieved that he could not understand Holy Scripture as he desired. According to his Life, one day, while searching for lost horses, he encountered a mysterious monk beneath an oak tree and asked him to pray that God would grant him understanding. The monk blessed him and gave him a piece of prosphora. From that time, Bartholomew was able to read and understand what had previously been beyond him. This experience strengthened the young man's desire to dedicate himself entirely to God.

Even in his youth, Bartholomew showed extraordinary devotion to prayer and fasting. While other children occupied themselves with ordinary amusements, his heart turned increasingly toward the monastic life. After his family moved to Radonezh, and his parents later embraced monasticism and reposed, Bartholomew was able to follow the calling he had carried within himself since childhood.

Together with his elder brother Stephen, he withdrew into the forests near Radonezh. There the brothers built a small cell and a wooden church dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Life in the wilderness was difficult and solitary, and in time Stephen departed for a monastery in Moscow. Bartholomew remained alone, choosing the silence and austerity of life in the forest.

At about twenty-three years of age, he received the monastic tonsure and was given the name Sergius.

For some time, St. Sergius lived completely alone. His life consisted of prayer, fasting, manual labor, and constant struggle against temptations. The forest surrounding him was filled with wild animals, yet the saint gradually became known for his gentleness even toward them. His Life tells of a bear that regularly came to his dwelling. Instead of driving the animal away, Sergius shared his small supply of bread with it, sometimes giving the bear his own portion when there was not enough bread for both.

St. Sergius sought solitude, but holiness has an inconvenient tendency to attract people. In time, other men began coming into the forest, asking permission to live under his guidance. Cells were built around his little church, and gradually a monastic brotherhood arose. This humble community became the foundation of the Holy Trinity Monastery, later known throughout Russia as the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius.

Although St. Sergius was chosen as abbot, he did not conduct himself like a worldly ruler. He personally served the brethren, labored with his own hands, carried water, baked bread, sewed clothing, and undertook the humblest tasks of the monastery. His authority was based not on demanding obedience, but on first demonstrating it himself by example. Under his leadership, the monastery adopted the cenobitic rule, under which the monks held property in common and lived as one brotherhood. St. Sergius taught that monasticism requires humility, obedience, prayer, labor, and love. His example inspired the founding of many monasteries, and his disciples spread the monastic tradition into other regions of the Russian land.

The saint lived during one of the most difficult periods of Russian history. The Russian principalities were divided among themselves while simultaneously remaining under the domination of the Mongol-Tatar Horde. St. Sergius was respected not only among monks, but also among princes and ordinary people, who came to him seeking prayers and spiritual counsel.

His name became especially associated with Grand Prince Dimitri of Moscow before the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380. According to tradition, Prince Dimitri came to St. Sergius seeking his blessing before marching against the forces of Mamai. The saint encouraged the prince and prayed for him and the Russian warriors. The Russian victory at Kulikovo Field became one of the defining events of medieval Russian history, and St. Sergius came to be venerated as a spiritual intercessor for the Russian land.

Yet his greatness was not based on political influence or earthly power. Above all, he remained a monk whose entire life was centered on Christ.

Tradition relates several miraculous events that occurred during his lifetime. Most importantly, however, St. Sergius was granted profound spiritual gifts while remaining deeply humble. He sought neither glory nor honors and repeatedly avoided elevation within the Church hierarchy. When Metropolitan Alexius wished St. Sergius to become his successor to the Metropolitan See of Moscow, the saint refused, preferring his monastery and his monastic calling.

September 25 (Old Style) / October 8 (New Style)

His devotion to the Holy Trinity stood at the very center of his spiritual life. The monastery he founded was dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and his disciples inherited this devotion. The great iconographer St. Andrei Rublev later painted his famous icon of the Holy Trinity for this monastery and in memory of St. Sergius. After decades of prayer, labor, and spiritual guidance, St. Sergius foresaw the approach of his repose. He gathered the brethren and gave them his final instructions, calling upon them to preserve the Orthodox Faith, maintain unity, remain pure in soul and body, practice humility, and show love for one another.

St. Sergius peacefully reposed in the Lord on September 25, 1392, having received the Holy Mysteries. He was about seventy-eight years old.

His influence did not end with his earthly life. His disciples spread throughout Russia, founding monasteries and carrying with them the spiritual tradition they had received from their elder. The monastery that began with a wooden church in a secluded forest became one of the greatest spiritual centers of Russian Orthodoxy. The Life of St. Sergius teaches us that true greatness begins with humility. He sought obscurity, but gained spiritual children. He avoided worldly honors, but became venerated throughout the Russian land. He desired nothing but prayer and communion with God, yet through his hidden life he influenced many generations of Orthodox Christians.

His example remains especially powerful because the virtues by which he lived are necessary in every age: prayer amid distraction, unity amid division, humility amid pride, and unwavering faith in God in times of uncertainty.

Holy Venerable Father Sergius of Radonezh, pray to God for us!



LOOKING AHEAD: NOVEMBER

MAJOR FEASTS & COMMEMORATIONS

October 26 (Old Style) / November 8 (New Style)

Holy Great Martyr Demetrius of Thessalonica

November 8 (Old Style) / November 21 (New Style)

Synaxis of the Archangel Michael and the Other Bodiless Powers of Heaven

SELECTED SAINTS & COMMEMORATIONS

October 21 / November 3

Venerable Hilarion the Great

One of the great ancient fathers of monasticism.

October 22 / November 4

Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Abercius

Bishop of Hierapolis and defender of the Apostolic Faith.

October 23 / November 5

Holy Apostle James, Brother of the Lord

First Bishop of Jerusalem and author of the Epistle of James.

October 24 / November 6

Martyr Arethas and Those Who Suffered with Him

October 26 / November 8

Great Martyr Demetrius of Thessalonica

October 28 / November 10

Venerable Job of Pochaev

Abbot, ascetic, and defender of Orthodoxy.

October 31 / November 13

Hieromartyr John Kochurov

Russian missionary priest and one of the first clergy of the Russian Church to suffer martyrdom during the revolutionary period.

November 1 / November 14

Holy Unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian

Wonderworkers and physicians who healed without payment.

November 4 / November 17

Venerable Joannicius the Great

November 6 / November 19

St. Paul the Confessor, Archbishop of Constantinople

November 8 / November 21

Synaxis of the Archangel Michael and the Other Bodiless Powers of Heaven

November 11 / November 24

Great Martyr Menas

Together with the Martyrs Victor and Vincent.

November 12 / November 25
St. John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria
November 13 / November 26
St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople
One of the Three Holy Hierarchs and author of the Divine Liturgy bearing his name.
November 14 / November 27
Holy Apostle Philip
November 15 / November 28
Venerable Paisius Velichkovsky
Great elder and renewer of Orthodox monastic and patristic spirituality.
November 16 / November 29
Holy Apostle and Evangelist Matthew
November 17 / November 30
St. Gregory the Wonderworker
Venerable Nikon of Radonezh, disciple and successor of St. Sergius.

FASTING

Wednesdays and Fridays
The usual weekly fast throughout November.
November 15 (Old Style) / November 28 (New Style)
Beginning of the Nativity Fast
The forty-day fast in preparation for the Nativity of Christ.



CHURCH NEWS

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH

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SHARE THE LIFE OF YOUR PARISH

Church News accepts submissions from hierarchs, clergy, parishes, and missions of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church from around the world. We especially encourage our communities abroad to help us share the life of the Church with the faithful in other countries.

Please send parish and mission news, photographs from services and celebrations of Church feasts, sermons, articles and spiritual writings, historical documents and photographs, announcements, and other materials about the life of your Church community to:

churchnewsroac@gmail.com

Through these contributions, Church News seeks to strengthen the connections between our communities and preserve a record of the life and ministry of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church throughout the world.

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