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The Pope, Infallibility & Obedience

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Since the Orthodox Roman Catholic Movement (ORCM) is thoroughly Roman Catholic, it follows that we believe and profess in its entirety the traditional teaching of the Church concerning the Papacy, including the primacy and infallibility of the Roman Pontiff. Nor is there anything in our literature which would imply otherwise. Nonetheless, it seems that there are some traditional Catholics who, while claiming to agree quite fully with the stand we take and the goals we pursue, hesitate to align themselves with us because of some degree of uncertainty they have about our position in relation to Pope Paul VI. For the record, then, permit me to attempt to lay at rest these uncertainties in as simple and concise a manner as I can.

It is the position of the ORCM that Pope Paul VI is a legitimate pontiff, duly elected to the exalted office he occupies as the successor to Saint Peter in the See of Rome. Consequently, we believe that he possesses the primacy both of orders and jurisdiction in the Church as well as the power of infallibility. Were he ever to speak infallibly, then, we would accept such a pronouncement humbly, unhesitatingly, totally. We accept, too, any and all of his teachings which are in harmony with the Sacred Traditions of our divine faith. In a word, our position on the subject of the Papacy and Pope Paul VI is in complete conformity with the mind and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. The foregoing is written, I should note, by one who is vividly aware both of the tragedy that has befallen our beloved Church during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI and of the Vatican's efforts, which I personally deplore, at détente and collaboration with atheistic Communism.

As regards the proper attitude of traditional Catholics towards Church authority in general and the Pope in particular, two items appear to cause much of the prevailing confusion, papal infallibility and the obligation of obedience. As regards the first, many traditional Catholics, as I see it, tend to associate the concept of infallibility with that of impeccability, that is, faultlessness or sinlessness. The

Pope as the Vicar of Christ has the power to speak infallibly and, if and when he does, as, for example, the declaration of the Dogma of the Assumption in 1950, a Roman Catholic is bound to accept such a pronouncement wholeheartedly. However, infallible declarations are very rare and are restricted by most stringent conditions.

Impeccability, on the other hand, has no connection with infallibility. Papal infallibility does not imply or include papal impeccability. In other words, a pontiff's moral deficiencies, erroneous judgments, political observations, etc. have nothing to do with infallibility, and it is here, I think, where some traditional Catholics confuse these two concepts. They seem to have the false notion that the Pope can say or do no wrong because he is the Pope. They appear to consider his every observation or pronouncement as almost infallible. Such is the impression I have gotten. If it be correct, then these Catholics have a concept of infallibility which is at odds with the teaching of the Church. Again, the Pope has the power of infallibility and, in the rare instances in which he exercises that power, he is incapable of error. In other matters, except when his teaching is in conformity with Sacred Tradition, he can be wrong because he is not impeccable.

A second cause of considerable confusion among many traditional Catholics involves the obligation of obedience to Church authority, an obligation incumbent upon all who are members of the Roman Catholic Church. But does this obligation allow no exceptions? Is it so all-inclusive as to be, in effect, a blind obedience? Must a Catholic obey Church authority in all circumstances regardless of the nature of what he may be commanded? Of course not. The Church has never taught this. Such teaching would be unjust and irrational. While the point seems to be so obvious as to be unnecessary to mention it, yet it has to be stated today because "the innovators and destroyers within the Church are using the obedience of the faithful as a weapon to destroy the Church."

What, then, is the obligation of Roman Catholics in this matter? Simply put, Church authority must be obeyed when what that authority orders or commands is in harmony with Sacred Tradition. If it is in conflict with Tradition, then there is no obligation to obey. Such is our surest guide through the turmoil and chaos that besets our beloved Church in this our day. ". . .hold fast to the traditions which you have received." (II Thessalonians, 2:15)

Hopefully, this article provides a sufficient, though brief, answer to those who say or imply that an organization such as the ORCM is "bordering on schism." How, pray tell, is this possible since we fully subscribe to the doctrine of the Church on the Papacy, and all we are trying to do is to preserve the True Mass, the traditional Sacraments, orthodox catechetics, in a word, the entirety of our God-given faith? That it is even seriously suggested that total fidelity to Sacred Tradition may be "bordering on schism" is but one more proof, if such proof were needed, that we are living in a very upside-down world indeed!

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