

In the Gospel, Our Lord Jesus Christ taught “the truth shall make you free.” This is true in both the natural and the supernatural orders.

In the natural order it is easily demonstrated. When we know the truth that two plus two equals four, we are free from thousands of mathematical errors. When we know the way from Philadelphia to Baltimore, we are free from endless hours of being lost on the journey. When we’ve read the operating manual for our new computer, we are free from countless days of frustrating guesswork.

Likewise in the supernatural order, when we know the truth of Adam and Eve and original sin, we are free from the errors of the evolutionists. When we know the truth that Jesus Christ is God-Incarnate, we are free from following every false religious leader in history; past, present and future. When we know that Christ established only one Church, we are free from the seduction of man-made religions.

Hence, when we know the truth of what the Saints taught regarding resisting wayward Prelates, we are free from such errors as blind obedience and co-operation with unorthodoxy.

In times of great confusion, such as our own day, many Catholics are baffled on how to react. Some claim that we must obey our leaders no matter what, and that to voice the slightest disagreement with them is a manifestation of disrespect and disobedience. Not only is this way of thinking incorrect, it also paralyzes Catholics into inaction and heightens their confusion. What we hope to demonstrate is that, according to the Saints, and according to the consistent teaching of the Church, Catholics are bound to resist even prelates if they deviate from the unchanging doctrine and Tradition of the Catholic Church.

Many also believe that it is impossible for a Supreme Pontiff to deviate in any way from the straight and narrow. This is partially correct. The Holy Ghost will always protect a Pope from *defining* error as truth, for example, from teaching error in an *ex cathedra* pronouncement. (1) That is certain. But it is demonstrable from the teachings and writings of the Saints that even the highest authority in the Church may fail in his duty and may drift into deviations from Church Teaching.

When Pope St. Pius X condemned the Modernists in his encyclical *Pascendi*, he stated: “One of the primary obligations assigned by Christ to the office divinely committed to Us of feeding the Lord’s flock is that of guarding with the greatest vigilance the deposit of the faith delivered to the saints, rejecting profane novelties ...” Explaining the imperative of taking action against the innovators, Pius declared “We may no longer keep silent, lest we should seem to fail in our essential duty.” (2)

These words of Pope St. Pius X illustrate that it is possible for a pope to fail in his essential duty of safeguarding the purity of the faith.

In the Coronation Oath of the Pope, that had been instituted around the 9th Century, the Pope swears, “I vow to change nothing of the received tradition and nothing thereof I have found before me guarded by my God-pleasing predecessors, to encroach, to alter (change), or to permit any innovation therein.”

After enunciating a few specifics, the Pope swears: “If I should undertake to act in anything of contrary sense, or should permit that it be executed, Thou wilt not be merciful to me on the dreadful day of Divine Justice. Accordingly, without exclusion, we subject to severest excommunication anyone – be it ourselves or be it another – who would dare to undertake anything new in contradiction to this constituted evangelic tradition and the purity of the Orthodox Faith and the Christian Religion ...” (3)

This Oath, which had been sworn by Popes for thirteen centuries, is ample demonstration that it is possible for a Pope to institute or permit unlawful changes that are out of step with Church Tradition. If it were impossible for the Popes to deviate, then there would be no need for this severe Oath. This is also why our beloved Popes need our fervent prayers and daily sacrifices. Part of the Fatima Message tells us, “Pray a great deal for the Holy Father ...”

Within the “Mass of a Supreme Pontiff”, we pray to God, “Grant, we beseech Thee, that through the intercession of Blessed N. Your Supreme Pontiff, she [the Catholic Church] always remain in Thy truth, and be safe at all times under Thy protection.” (4)

Catholics never pray that the Blessed Trinity always remain a Trinity, because the essence of the Trinity can never change. Catholics never pray that God will allow the Blessed Mother to stay in Heaven, because it is impossible that Our Lady should ever be dismissed from Paradise. Yet Catholics do pray that the Pope will guide the Church to “always remain in Thy truth”. This demonstrates that it is possible for Church leaders to deviate from that Truth and from their duty, to the great detriment of countless souls.

This does not mean that the Faithful may arbitrarily judge their prelates:

- 1) A Catholic may never judge the undeclared interior motives of any individual, prelate or pontiff. Hence, even if a prelate is following the most liberal line of action, we may not judge his interior motives (unless he declares his motives openly). The prelate may truly believe that he is working for the good of the Church;

2) A Catholic may assess the actions of a prelate. The prelate is either in line with unchangeable Catholic Tradition or he is not. If the prelate's teaching, actions and commands are out of step with Tradition, then the prelate may be resisted, no matter how well-meaning he may be.

In resisting wayward prelates, Catholics are not espousing the arbitrary "follow your conscience" tenet of the liberals. Nor are Catholics indulging in the "private judgement" of Protestants. In resisting wayward prelates, Catholics are simply making a judgment based on the unchanging teaching and tradition of the Faith. It is a Divine, objective standard outside of themselves. Also, forming a balanced judgement on such a prelate does not amount to condemning him. Only God, who sees the heart, may judge a man's motives.

As mentioned earlier, Our Lord said that "the truth shall make you free." It is hoped that what follows serves to free Catholics from a false sense of "thou shalt not judge" and from a false sense of obedience. When our Lord warns "beware of wolves in sheep's clothing," He is commanding us to form a judgement.

Presented here is a collection of quotes from the Saints, Popes, and esteemed private doctors whose teachings have been sanctioned by the Catholic Church.(5) These quotes outline the proper line of action for Catholics in resisting wayward prelates who have lost their grip on orthodoxy.

In no way is this intended to incite Catholics to disrespectful rebellion. We are simply looking to these saints for guidance on how to think and act when faced with a great crisis of Faith even in the highest pinnacles of the Church.

**Saint Thomas Aquinas**, in many passages of his works, upholds the principle that the faithful can rebuke and admonish Prelates. For example: "There being an imminent danger for the faith, prelates must be questioned, even publicly, by their subjects. Thus, Saint Paul, who was a subject of Saint Peter, questioned him publicly on account of an imminent danger of scandal in a matter of Faith. And, as the Glosa of Saint Augustine puts it (Ad Galatas 2,14), 'Saint Peter himself gave the example to those who govern so that if sometime they stray from the right way, they will not reject a correction as unworthy even if it comes from their subjects'." (6)

Referring to the same episode, in which Saint Paul resisted Saint Peter 'to his face', Saint Thomas teaches: "The reprehension was just and useful, and the reason for it was not light: there was a danger for the preservation of evangelical truth ... The way it took place was appropriate; since it was public and manifest. For this reason, Saint Paul writes: I spoke to Cephas', that is, Peter, before everyone', since the simulation practiced by Saint Peter was

fraught with danger to everyone. In 1 Tim. 5:20, we read: Admonish those who sin before everyone.' This should be understood to refer to manifest sins, not hidden ones, since in these cases one should proceed according to the rules proper to fraternal correction." (7)

The Angelic Doctor also shows how this passage of the Scriptures contains teachings not only for Hierarchs but for the faithful as well: "To the Prelates [was given an example] of humility so that they do not refuse to accept reprehensions from their inferiors and subjects; and to the subjects, an example of zeal and liberty so they will not fear to correct their Prelates, above all when the crime is public and entails a danger for many." (8)

In his Comments on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, Saint Thomas teaches how respectfully correcting a Prelate who sins is a work of mercy all the greater as the Hierarch's position is higher: "Fraternal correction, being a spiritual alms, is a work of mercy. But mercy is due mainly to the Prelate since he runs the greatest danger. Hence Saint Augustine says in *Regula* (n. 11, PL 32, 1384): Have pity not only on yourselves, but on them as well', that is, on the Prelates among you who run a danger as high as the position they occupy.' Therefore, fraternal correction extends also to the Prelates.

"Furthermore, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, it says that God imposed on each one duties toward his neighbor.' Now, a Prelate is our neighbor. Therefore, we must correct him when he sins ... Some say that fraternal correction does not extend to the Prelates either because man should not raise his voice against Heaven, or because the Prelates are easily scandalized if corrected by their subjects. However, this does not happen, since when they sin, the Prelates do not represent Heaven and, therefore, must be corrected. And those who correct them charitably do not raise their voices against them, but in their favor, since the admonishment is for their own sake. ... For this reason, according to other [authors], the precept of fraternal correction extends also to the Prelates, so that they may be corrected by their subjects." (9)

In addition to Saint Thomas Aquinas, other prominent Saints and Doctors have also pronounced on the right and duty of the faithful to resist, in grave circumstances. For example:

**Saint Augustine** thus comments on the episode of Saint Paul's public resistance to Saint Peter:

"Peter accepted with holy and pious humility the useful observation Saint Paul had made, inspired by the freedom of love, thus leaving for posterity a rare example for them not to despise being corrected by their inferiors whenever they

have strayed from the right way.” (10)

**Fr. Francisco de Vitoria, OP:**

“Caietano, in the same work defending the superiority of the Pope over the Council, says in chap. 27: ‘Therefore, a Pope must be resisted who publicly destroys the Church, for example, by refusing to give ecclesiastical benefits other than money or in exchange for services; and with all obedience and respect, the possession of such benefits must be denied to those who bought them.’ And Silvestre (Prierias), in the entry Pope, 4, asks: ‘What should be done when the Pope, because of his bad customs, destroys the Church?’ And in 15: ‘What should be done if the Pope wanted, without reason, to abrogate Positive Law?’ To which he answers: ‘He would certainly sin; he should neither be permitted to act in such fashion nor should he be obeyed in what was evil; but he should be resisted with a courteous reprehension.’

“Consequently, if he wished to give away the whole treasure of the Church or the patrimony of Saint Peter to his relatives, if he wanted to destroy the Church or the like, he should not be permitted to act in that fashion, but one would be obliged to resist him. The reason for this is that he does not have the power to destroy; therefore, if there is evidence that he is doing it, it is licit to resist him. The result of all this is that if the Pope destroys the Church by his orders and acts, he can be resisted and the execution of his mandates prevented ...

“Second proof of the thesis. By Natural Law it is licit to repel violence with violence. Now then, with such orders and dispensations the Pope exerts violence, since he acts against the Law, as we have proven. Therefore, it is licit to resist him. As Caietano observes, we do not affirm all this in the sense that someone could have competence to judge the Pope or have authority over him, but meaning that it is licit to defend oneself. Indeed, anyone has the right to resist an unjust act, to try to prevent it and to defend himself.” (11)

**Fr. Francisco Suarez, SJ:**

“If [the Pope] gives an order contrary to good customs, he should not be obeyed; if he attempts to do something manifestly opposed to justice and the common good, it will be licit to resist him; if he attacks by force, by force he can be

repelled, with a moderation appropriate to a just defense.” (12)

**Saint Robert Bellarmine**, the great paladin of the Counter-Reformation, maintains:

“Just as it is licit to resist the Pontiff that aggresses the body, it is also licit to resist the one who aggresses the souls or who disturbs civil order, or, above all, who attempts to destroy the Church. I say that it is licit to resist him by not doing what he orders and preventing his will from being executed; it is not licit, however, to judge, punish or depose him, since these are acts proper to a superior.” (13)

**Fr. Cornelius a Lapide, SJ**, shows that Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose, Saint Bede, Saint Anselm and other Fathers teach that Saint Paul resisted Saint Peter publicly “so that the public scandal given by Saint Peter was amended by a likewise public reprehension.” (14)

Later on, a Lapide argues that “superiors can be, with humble charity, reprehended by their inferiors in the defense of truth”; that is what Saint Augustine (Epistula 19), Saint Cyprian, Saint Gregory, Saint Thomas and others cited above declare about this passage (Gal. 2:11). They clearly teach that Saint Peter, being a superior, was reprehended by Saint Paul. With good reason, therefore, Saint Gregory said (Homilia 18 in Ezechielem): ‘Peter kept quiet so that, being first in the apostolic hierarchy, he would also be first in humility.’ And Saint Augustine wrote (Epistula 19 ad Hieronymum): ‘By teaching that superiors should not refuse to be reprehended by inferiors, Saint Peter gave posterity an example more rare and holier than that of Saint Paul as he taught that in the defense of truth and with charity, inferiors may have the audacity to resist superiors without fear.’” (15)

**Pope Innocent III** explains that a pope can fall into heresy:

“The Roman Pontiff has no superior but God. Who, therefore, (should a pope ‘lose his savor’) could cast him out or trample him underfoot – Since of the pope it is said ‘gather thy flock into thy fold’. Truly, he should not flatter himself about his power, nor should he rashly glory in his honor and high estate, because the less he is judged by man, the more he is judged by God.

“Still the less can the Roman Pontiff glory because he can be judged by men, or rather, can be shown to be already judged, if for example he should wither away into heresy; because he who does not believe is already judged.”

Pope Innocent III went on to explain, "In such a case it should be said of him: 'If the salt should lose its savor, it is good for nothing but to be cast out and trampled underfoot by men'." (16)

**Dom Prosper Guéranger, Abbot of Solesmes**, notes:

"When the shepherd turns into a wolf, it behooves the flock to defend itself in the first place. Doctrine normally flows from the bishops down to the faithful people, and subjects should not judge their chiefs. But, in the treasure of Revelation, there are certain points that every Christian necessarily knows and must obligatorily defend." (17)

**Francisco Xavier Wernz and Pedro Vidal**, theologians at the beginning of the 20th Century, citing Suarez, admit the licitness of resisting a bad Pope:

"The just means to be employed against a bad Pope are, according to Suarez (*Defensio Fidei Catholicae*, lib. IV, cap. 6, nn. 17-18), a more abundant help from the grace of God, the special protection of one's Guardian Angel, the prayer of the Universal Church admonishment or fraternal correction in private or even in public, as well as the legitimate self-defense against aggression, whether physical or moral." (18)

**Juan Cardinal de Torquemada** (1388-1468) was a revered medieval theologian responsible for the formulation of the doctrines that were defined at the Council of Florence. Cardinal Torquemada teaches: "Were the Pope to command anything against Holy Scriptures, or the articles of faith, or the truth of the sacraments, or the commands of the natural or divine law, he ought not to be obeyed, but in such commands he is to be disregarded. Citing the doctrine of Pope Innocent III, Cardinal Torquemada further teaches: "Thus it is that Pope Innocent III states (*De Consuetudine*) that it is necessary to obey the Pope in all things as long as he, himself, does not go against the universal customs of the Church, but should he go against the universal customs of the Church, "he need not be followed ..." [on these points]. (19)

**Antonio Peinador, CMF**, a contemporary Spanish theologian, adopts the sentences of those who preceded him: "' Also a subject may be obliged to fraternally correct his superior' (*Summa theologiae*, II.II, q.33, a.4). For also a superior can be spiritually indigent, and nothing prevents him from being liberated from such indigence by his subjects.

Nevertheless, ‘in the correction in which subjects reprehend their prelates, they must act in a proper manner, that is, without insolence and harshness but with meekness and reverence’ (ad 2).”(20)

**St. Vincent of Lerins said:**

“What then should a Catholic do if some portion of the Church detaches itself from communion of the universal Faith? What choice can he make if some new contagion attempts to poison, no longer a small part of the Church, but the whole Church at once, then his great concern will be to attach himself to antiquity which can no longer be led astray by any lying novelty.” (21)

**St. Thomas Aquinas taught:**

“Hold firmly that your faith is identical with that of the ancients. Deny this and you dissolve the unity of the Church.”(22)

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Notes:

1. The last solemn ex cathedra definition of a reigning Pope was the Dogma of the Assumption in 1950 by Pope Pius XII
2. Pascendi, 1.
3. Liber Diurnus Romanorum Pontificum, P.L.105, S 54.
4. Translation from the St. Joseph’s Missal, Catholic Book Publishing Company, New York, 1957, Mass for Common of One or More Supreme Pontiffs.
5. I am indebted for many of the quotes to the book In the Murky Waters of Vatican II by Atila Sinke Guimaraes, Maeta Publications, 1997.
6. Summa theologiae, Taurini/Romae: Marietti, 1948, II.II, q.33, a.4.
7. Super Epistulas S. Pauli, Ad Galatas, 2, 11-14, lec. III, Taurini/Romae: Marietti, 1953, nn. 83f.
8. Ibid., n. 77.
9. IV Sententiarum, d.19, q.2, a.2.
10. Epistula 82, n. 22, in PL 33, 285f.
11. Obras de Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid: BAC, 1960, pp. 486f.
12. De Fide, disp. X, sec. VI, n. 16, in Opera omnia, Paris: Vivés, 1958, vol. XII, in A. V.

- XAVIER DA SILVEIRA, *La nouvelle Messe de Paul VI: Qu'en penser?*, Chir,-en-Montreuil: Diffusion de la Pens,e Française, 1975, pp. 323f.
13. De Romano Pontifice, lib. II, chap. 29, in *Opera omnia*, Neapoli/Panormi/Paris: Pedone Lauriel, 1871, vol. I, p. 418.
14. *Commentaria in Scripturam Sacram*, Ad Galatas 2:11, Paris: Ludovicus Vivès, 1876, vol. XVIII, p. 528.
15. Ibid.
16. Innocent III, Sermo 4, taken from *A Theological Vindication of Roman Catholic Traditionalism*, Father Paul Kramer, Manila, 1995, p. 78.
17. *L'ann,e liturgique - Le temps de la septuagesime*, Tours: Maison Mame, 1932, pp. 340f.
18. *Ius canonicum*, Rome: Aedes Universitatis Gregoriana, 1927, vol. II, p. 436.
- 19/ Sources: *Summa de ecclesia* (Venice: M. Tranmezius, 1561). Lib. II, c. 49, p. 163B. The English translation of this statement of Juan de Torquemada is found in Patrick Granfield, *The Papacy in Transition* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 171. And in Father Paul Kramer, *A Theological Vindication of Roman Catholic Traditionalism*, 2nd ed. (Kerala, India), p. 29.
20. *Cursus brevior Theologiae Moralis*, Madrid: Cocusa, 1946, vol. I, p. 287.
210. St. Vincent of Lerins + ca. 445. a.d., taken from *A Theological Vindication of Roman Catholic Traditionalism*, Fr. Kramer, p. 78-79.
22. Taken from *A Theological Vindication of Roman Catholic Traditionalism*, p. 79. More details about the circumstances in which it is licit for the faithful to resist their Prelates can be found in F. SUAREZ, *De legibus* lib. IX, chap. XX, nn.19-29; *Defensio Fidei Catholicae*, lib. IV, chap. VI nn. 14-18; Anacletus REIFFENSTUEL, *Theologia Moralis*, Venice Bortoli, 1704, tract. IV, d. Vi, q.5, nn. 51-54, pp. 162f., Joannes Petrus GURY - Antonius BALLERINI, *Compendium Theologiae Moralis*, vol. I pp. 222-227; Camillus MAZELLA, *De Religione et Ecclesia*, pp. 747f Teofilo URDANOZ, *Commentaire sur les Reflecciones teologicas de Francisco Vitoria*, Rome: Tip. Polygl., 1880, pp. 426-429, in A. V. XAVIER DA SILVEIRA, *La nouvelle Messe*.

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