

Sense and Nonsense of Pius IX: The History, Meaning, and Triumph of Moderate Interpretations of Papal Infallibility

Aaron Milavec

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My purpose in writing is to offer ordinary Christians and experienced pastors a way of coming to grips with the heart-breaking divisions and monumental uncertainty and confusion that exist among our bishops and among our family members regarding the sense and nonsense being said about papal infallibility.

Protestants vigorously condemn this doctrine on the grounds that the faith of the church is declared in the bible and that, accordingly, everyone in the church, the pope included, is bound to submit their judgment to God's infallible judgment as expressed in that book. Many Protestants suppose that Catholics have taken the extreme and unorthodox position of upholding the pope's declarations as binding even if and when they find no warrant in the Sacred Scriptures.

Even Catholics themselves are mired in misunderstandings. . . .

For this reason, it is imperative to examine the history of the formulation of papal infallibility. I have undertaken, therefore, to write a brief narrative which explores the conduct of the bishops before, during, and after Vatican I against the backdrop of the social unrest of the nineteenth century. In order to focus and make manageable the vast amount of materials pertinent to this question, special attention shall be given to the activity of Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati during and after the council. During the council, we will thus discover how Archbishop Purcell, with his keen historical understanding and his dedication to the American form of government, was able to identify and neutralize exaggerations upheld by other bishops speaking in favor of infallibility at Vatican I. After the council, we will discover how Archbishop Purcell was able publically to defend a moderate view of papal infallibility against the exaggerations found among Protestants and Catholics alike. In this way, we shall find our way toward a clear and balance assessment of what is and what is not to be included in an informed assessment of papal infallibility. We shall have sorted out the sense from the nonsense.

My book ends with an examination of how Pope Francis is leading the Church toward implementing an understanding of papal authority that would make Archbishop Purcell proud.



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