

Chapter 1

The Modern Church

A man jumped from the crowd—a knife shimmered. Count Rossi’s scream was loud, but brief. The pope’s friend and now political colleague was suddenly on the ground, dying, stabbed with a dagger in the neck as he ascended the assembly hall stairs to present his plan for a new constitutional order. Rossi had been warned. The anger was tangible ever since Pius IX had withdrawn the papal army from the First Italian War of Independence. Violence had broken out in the streets of Rome, and Count Rossi had been declared an enemy of the people. That’s why none of the Civic Guards who witnessed his murder in the courtyard made any attempt to arrest the killer. Whatever His Holiness might say, it was necessary to get him out of Rome. Thankfully, the King of the Two Sicilies had offered him refuge. Pius escaped to Gaeta, about seventy-five miles south, disguised as an ordinary priest.

Giving government addresses to a papal parliament was not something popes or their assistants were used to doing. For centuries popes had governed their territory as monarchs, gaining vital protection for the Church against hostile kings, dukes, and nations. But when Giovanni-Maria Mastai-Ferretti was elected Pope Pius IX in 1846, the world around him was moving toward parliamentary governments.

The world was changing fast, in ways both good and bad. The sobriquet “first modern pope” has been applied to various popes of the recent and not-so-recent past. Pius IX probably deserves it most, though he would have wanted it least. During his pontificate, Europe was utterly transformed.

In 1846, the Church had a predominantly European focus (though this was beginning to change); Europe was a patchwork of small states, many

of them with long traditions tying Catholicism to their government and nationhood, but also some with a recent record of anti-religious revolution.

France had been affectionately called “the eldest daughter of the Church.” During the French Revolution, however, many had become hostile to God; practicing Catholics were exterminated, and an actress dressed up as “the goddess Reason” was installed in Paris’s Cathedral of Notre Dame. While the anti-Christian fervor of revolutionary France was supposedly reversed with the Restoration of 1815–1830, aftershocks of the “revolution” were still echoing all over Europe when Pius IX was elected.

Besides nations tottering between old Catholic loyalties and the revolution, the Papal States added further complication. A more-than-millennium-old territorial jurisdiction in central Italy, the Papal States was governed temporally as well as spiritually by the pope. While its territory varied in size from its beginning in 754 until 1870, it had always included Rome, numerous surrounding cities, and stretched across Italy from sea to sea.

Liberalism and the Revolution

The political vocabulary of this era is inconsistent and confusing. The French Revolution was based on principles that are historically part of classical liberalism—liberty, equality, fraternity, and hallmarks of the “social contract”—but it turned violent, collectively oriented, and statist very quickly. Once France’s religious and political traditions were abruptly repudiated and consigned to a past that was deemed entirely evil, many leaders became convinced that everyone who disagreed must be eliminated as an “enemy of the people.” The quick descent to the Reign of Terror was noted all over Europe by Catholics as well as by those we might call political conservatives.

As pope, Pius had released many people imprisoned for dissent and initiated improvements in the prisons of the Papal States. He also ended a practice of mandating that Jews in Rome listen to a Catholic homily every week. Even with reforms that had European political salons talking about a “liberal pope,” the “revolution” had put down roots in the more

remote parts of the Papal States. By 1848 it had reached Rome, through the influence of Italian nationalist leaders such as Garibaldi and Mazzini. Garibaldi was a leader of a Masonic paramilitary force called the *Cara-binieri*. Mazzini was an intellectual who envisioned the pope named the “President of Italy.”

To be both pope and “president” of a united Italy would take the papacy’s temporal power further than Pius thought it should go. The Papal States were one thing; it would be something else to govern all the way from the southern Alps down to Sicily, not as political custodian of a spiritual patrimony, but as a political leader. Perhaps worse—it would have tied the papacy even more tightly to Italy than it already was. The papacy is, after all, universal. The pope is Patriarch of the West, Successor of St. Peter, Pontifex Maximus, Servant of the Servants of God, and Vicar of Christ. How could he, at the same time, be President of Italy?

When revolutionary forces gained power in Rome early in 1848, Pius could have relied on the power of Austria to rescue him and the Papal States. But he did not want to invite troops of a foreign nation to fire on “his” people, people for whom he had temporal as well as spiritual responsibility, people who might be rebelling against real injustices and not against God.

So he agreed that the Papal States should move toward parliamentary government. The goals of the revolutionary liberals went far beyond parliamentarianism and even against it, but as of 1848, setting up a parliament and holding elections for it was a liberal step, Pius IX thought, and was reasonable and nonthreatening to the Church.

That is what brought Count Rossi to the parliament in November 1848. Pius trusted Rossi and thought the people of Rome would also trust him, but their mood had changed in the two years Pius had been pope, notwithstanding his reforms. Evenings in the courtyard of the Quirinal Palace, when the newly elected pontiff had met with crowds who acclaimed him, now seemed distant. Many who had shared them expected this new pope would lend himself to the project most dear to the liberalism of that period: the unification of Italy. But despite his duties as monarch of the

Papal States, Pius saw his mission as almost purely spiritual. That is why he proposed not only a parliament but also a set of officials to run the secular side of papal government. At the head of these was Count Rossi. Thus we arrive where we began, in November 1848: with Pius IX's hopes for constitutional liberalism in the Papal States getting their throat cut in the person of Count Rossi.

By 1850 Pius was back in Rome, thanks to help from an unlikely source: not Austria, but France—now under the influence of a new president: Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the “Emperor,” Napoleon I. The nephew was not without ambition—he would shortly “crown” himself as Napoleon III. Surely conflict lay in the future between Napoleon III's empire and the Papal States. But for now, Louis-Napoleon remembered that as a bishop, the future Pius IX had been generous to him when he was taken prisoner in an uprising, so he returned the favor.

Restoration of the English Hierarchy

When Henry VIII made himself the head of the church in England in the 1530s, he took all the sees and bishoprics that the Catholic Church had founded, going back to St. Augustine of Canterbury in the sixth century. As a result, Canterbury was no longer the senior diocese of the Catholic Church in England, but rather that of a new church that no longer recognized the authority of the pope.

After three hundred years, two things had become clear: (1) between Catholic emancipation, Irish immigration as a result of the potato famine, and the wave of intellectual converts inspired by St. John Henry Newman, the Catholic population in Britain was growing; and (2) the Church of England was not about to apologize, or give back all those dioceses, cathedrals, and churches, any time soon.

Catholics in Britain had vicars apostolic instead of bishops. One of them, Fr. Nicholas Wiseman, visited Pope Pius in 1847 to promote the idea of a restored hierarchy. The pope agreed in principle, but in the midst of the other troubles going on in Rome, the idea did not make immediate headway.

Once he returned to Rome, Pius published a Bull of Restoration on September 30, 1850, and on October 7, Cardinal Wiseman issued his own pastoral letter, *From Out of the Flaminian Gate*. The English were not pleased. Since Pius's forced flight from Rome and the defeat of the (most recent) Roman Republic, many Italian nationalists had washed up in London with their version of current events. Instead of a reforming pontiff besieged by shabby revolutionaries, London society now saw underdog freedom fighters right out of their Latin textbooks, confronting that traditional English villain—the pope.

So Parliament enacted a law that made it a crime to do something that Pius had already decided *not* to do: duplicate the diocesan names of the Church of England. There would be no new Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury or London: those had both become Anglican titles. Westminster, however, was a name drenched in English political and religious history, but it had no diocese. The principal see of the restored English Catholic hierarchy could be called the Archdiocese of Westminster, with its Westminster Cathedral (near Victoria Station), and Cardinal Wiseman as archbishop.

The Immaculate Conception

Since at least the Middle Ages, Christians have believed in the Immaculate Conception, that is, that the Virgin Mary was preserved from original sin. By the nineteenth century, more and more bishops were requesting that it be defined as a dogma.

In the thirteenth century, the idea of Mary being “free from” original sin aroused controversy. Some argued that Mary had no need whatsoever of the redemption wrought by Christ. Other theologians objected, reasonably, that this would be an unsupported exception to Romans 3:23 (“since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”). But a more fully considered version of the Immaculate Conception was available: Mary, too, needed Christ's redemption, but God had granted her a share of it at the moment of her conception so that she would be an unstained passageway for Christ into the human world at the Incarnation.

God did not, of course, need a *physically* clean space: that's why he was born in a manger, not a palace. But to clear himself a space free from original sin? This was something fitting; it was also within God's power. Because God lives outside the limitations of time, the fruits of the Cross and Resurrection could be applied from eternity either before or after the events occurred in history.

Pius's and the Church's official definition and proclamation of the Immaculate Conception reads as follows:

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.¹

This declaration goes over the whole history of the doctrine.

On the Wrong Side of History: The Mortara Case

In 1858, there occurred an unjust act for which Pius IX was responsible—for which he took responsibility, but which he also believed was necessary and even good. A six-year-old boy, Edgardo Mortara, whose Jewish family lived within the Papal States, was taken from his family by papal marshals. This action was taken because the child had been surreptitiously baptized as an infant by the family's teenaged Catholic housekeeper when he had been sick and in danger of death.

According to Catholic teaching as interpreted by Pius in this case (and this is not a binding magisterial interpretation), Baptism gave Edgardo the right to a Catholic upbringing, and gave the Church—at least in the Papal States, where the Pope was political ruler as well as ecclesiastical leader—a duty to see that he got one.

Some negotiations ensued (or even preceded Edgardo's seizure, according to Edgardo's memoir, but there are grounds to believe he was mistaken on this point), in which the Papal side floated options that might have kept contact between Edgardo and his parents. But understandably, these options—such as sending Edgardo to a Jesuit school nearby—were not acceptable to his Jewish parents. It is also understandable that his parents were grief-stricken and viewed the boy's removal as an act of tyranny.

Pius took heavy criticism in the international press, but stood by his view that he could not do otherwise. He also made Edgardo his own godson and took a direct interest in his further upbringing, but this is as likely to be seen as exacerbating the situation as mitigating it.

Further facts—that Edgardo eventually became a priest, took the name “Pius,” and wrote a memoir in which he expressed great regard for Pius IX and desire to see him canonized—add further complications. But even when all the background is brought to bear, we must still consider this incident a stain on the character of an otherwise good pope.

Here is some of that background.

Forcibly or surreptitiously baptizing children against the wishes of their parents has always been against Church doctrine and policy, as far as records show. In fact, Catholics in the nineteenth century Papal States were discouraged from taking jobs in Jewish households, not (or not *only*) because of anti-Semitism, but to avoid temptations to carry out such baptisms as the Mortaras' young Catholic housekeeper had carried out on Edgardo.

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that children of non-Christians should not be baptized against the wishes of their parents because of parents' rights under natural law to raise their own children. Most observers, including most Catholic ones, agree that Pius's actions were contrary to Aquinas's teaching on this matter. This is not beyond dispute, however, because Aquinas did not discuss the specific case of a baptized child living in a non-Christian family.

Pius thought this case was different because Edgardo's baptism had not been a mere subterfuge to get around his parents' right to raise him

as they wished. Rather, it had been carried out when Edgardo, as a baby, had been very ill and near death. Yet he recovered, and the fact that he had been baptized eventually became known.

Before we wag our twenty-first century fingers, however, we should acknowledge that it is the approved practice of governments in the U.S. and western Europe to take children away from their parents when abuse or neglect is occurring in the home—and also, much more controversially, when abuse or neglect is merely suspected.

In other words, we cannot claim that we ourselves believe no child should ever be taken from his or her parents. Instead, we conclude that Pius did not have an adequate reason. Of course, people who don't believe in Catholicism or the efficacy of Baptism will believe Pius had no reason at all and therefore acted with extreme tyranny. Those who do believe in these things will mostly concur that he acted wrongly, but may mitigate his guilt to a greater or lesser extent.

Interestingly, the governments that officially condemned Pius at the time did not have clean hands. Britain, for instance, had no qualms about an alliance with the Ottoman Empire as a counterweight to the growing and feared power of Russia. At that time, it was Ottoman policy and practice to take children from Christian families and raise them as Muslims and as ultra-loyal guards to the Sultan, called Janissaries, or else to castrate them and raise them as court eunuchs.

In other words, shining a light equally into Pius's world and our own rips away the soothing illusion that we have things basically on track and certain isolated, terrible injustices need only be protested when they are committed by an authority that is already considered a defendant at the bar of history, such as the papacy.

But if we consider these things in order to mitigate Pius's guilt, we also have to ask: was there a consistent policy within the Papal States of taking custody of baptized children from parents who were unlikely to give them a Catholic upbringing? The (rare) Protestants in the Papal States? Notorious Catholic parents? As far as we know there was not. So

the deeper question arises: were Jews targeted? But if they were, why was there only one Mortara case? (No one has claimed to have found others.)

These questions will remain unanswered. We may, however, gain a few takeaways from the Mortara case:

- Even saints and blesseds do bad things.
- The papacy's loss of temporal jurisdiction over a large territory in 1870 may have been a good thing, even though it was not seen that way by Pius IX or later popes.
- The Church teaches that all parents—not only Catholic or other Christian parents—have a right under natural law to raise their children and direct their upbringing. That is as it should be.

Error? It's in the Syllabus

By the time Pius IX felt ready to issue a compendium of warnings, the idea was not new. It was first proposed in 1849, during Pius's exile in Gaeta, by the future Pope Leo XIII. *The Syllabus of Errors* covers a variety of propositions that were coming into vogue at the time, ideas that threatened the Catholic Church and faith. Despite the *Syllabus's* reputation in pop history as the high-water mark of papal arrogance and ignorance, Pius includes some things that are hard to understand because we lack the context in which they were first delivered.

Many of the condemnations seem to stress one word when it's another word that carries the freight. Consider number 15: "Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true." How can that be an "error"? Because the operative word is "reason," not "free to embrace and profess." Reason is on a high pedestal, up there with revelation, in Catholic theology, but the two have to work together. Revelation without reason gives you "fideism," the error of believing without having the slightest idea why. But reason without revelation leaves us incapable of seeing—and acting on—the most important things, which are revealed.

Some of the errors can and should be proclaimed as such today, even more than in Pius IX's time. Numbers 33 and 44 foresee and condemn attempts by the state to dictate to the Church even in matters of the Church's doctrine. Number 33 says it is an error to believe that the power to direct the teaching of theological questions *does not* belong exclusively to the Church. Who was saying otherwise? Chancellor Bismarck was doing so in the parts of Germany he controlled. He was preparing an anti-Catholic policy known as the *Kulturkampf*, or the Culture Wars (perhaps the first use of the term in history). In 1863, Munich, the capital of heavily Catholic Bavaria, was not yet united with Prussia, where Bismarck was chancellor. In fact, it was negotiating with Austria for a (Catholic) alliance against (Protestant) Prussia. But Bavarians could not but be aware of Bismarck's ominous preoccupation with Catholicism as a rival for state power.)

The most famous and most derided part of the *Syllabus* is its last error listed, number 80. This one says it is an error to maintain that "the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization." The thrust of this was to distinguish true from false civilization, to remind people of the Church's contributions to the former, and then to state the obvious: if "progress" and "civilization" are defined as the active de-Christianization of society, the world is going to find the pope among its opposition. Number 80 is the *Syllabus* error most often read out to students for kicks and giggles. Yet as we look back from where we are today, it may be the one that needs no defense at all.

Vatican I

There had been no ecumenical council since Trent in the sixteenth century. Then a council bishop might expect to be away from his diocese for years. Travel from very far away was largely impossible. But Pius had been smart to reverse Gregory XVI's prohibition on railroads in the Papal States, and in the 1860s, many could travel by train and get to Rome in a reasonable period of time. In the late 1860s, Pius IX became convinced

that the time had come to take a doctrine already generally accepted within the Church—the infallibility of the pope on matters of faith and morals—and make it the subject of a conciliar definition.

The council would be held at the Vatican: it was by far the safest place, even though the Kingdom of Italy was ready to close in on the city if ever, and as soon as, French troops were withdrawn. This meant it would be the Vatican Council, though today we are likely to call it Vatican I. That no ecumenical council² had ever before been held at the Vatican may seem surprising, but remember that the St. Peter's we think of wasn't completed until 1626. Councils held in Rome took place at St. John Lateran, the "pope's cathedral" and seat as bishop of Rome. Still, Vatican I was the Church's first truly global council. Bishops attended from all over the world and from every continent.

Very few Catholic leaders did *not* already believe in such infallibility. The split of opinion, both at the council and outside it, was between advocates of a doctrinal proclamation (Infallibists) and those who argued that such a definition would be "inopportune" (the Inopportunist).

In retrospect it is easy to suspect the Inopportunist of being secret deniers of papal infallibility. After all, what made 1869 so particularly "inopportune"? What would "opportune" look like? Some Inopportunist, however, were Catholics of extreme fervor and intellectual integrity who put forth a good argument: John Henry Newman for instance. He wrote to his bishop, "When has [the] definition of doctrine *de fide* been a luxury of devotion and not a stern painful necessity?"³ He was as Infallibist as anyone, he maintained, but his point was that if there are other good Catholics who aren't sure about infallibility, why burden their consciences if not strictly necessary?

Certainly, the Church would have survived without the definition of the Immaculate Conception and without the *Syllabus of Errors*. But then the world would have gone hurtling along its secularizing ways without the Catholic Church there to signal relief and propose an alternative. We've already seen why Pius IX was, without wanting to be, the "first modern pope": not because he asked modernity what it wanted and then

made the Church conform, but because, in the face of rapid and not always wholesome change, he did the radical opposite, and did it often.

Vatican I enacted two documents before it adjourned because of the advancing Italian army. Its first constitution was *Dei Filius* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*). It is noteworthy for declaring, at the conciliar level, that the existence of a creator-God, separate from his creation, can be known by reason alone. These definitions were important because a crisis of faith was sweeping Europe, and some Catholic theologians were trying to meet it on the subjective, experiential ground advocated by Protestants. The council then turned to *Pastor Aeternus*, the First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, in which we find the solemn definitional declaration on papal infallibility.

At the council, speeches were given on both sides. The Infallibilists always had the majority. The very fact that the Inopportunist spoke out freely is taken by some anti-Catholics as proof *against* infallibility. The council voted for *Pastor Aeternus*, including this language:

8. But since in this very age when the salutary effectiveness of the apostolic office is most especially needed, not a few are to be found who disparage its authority, we judge it absolutely necessary to affirm solemnly the prerogative which the only-begotten Son of God was pleased to attach to the supreme pastoral office.

9. Therefore, faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith . . . we teach and define as a divinely revealed dogma that when the Roman Pontiff speaks EX CATHEDRA, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. Therefore, such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the Church, irreformable.²⁴

Most bishops were delighted. Most of the Inopportunist managed both to stand their ground for a decent interval and then to declare fealty.

Up Close and Personal:

ST. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

St. John Henry Newman, canonized in 2019, was a prolific writer and the most influential English-speaking theologian of the nineteenth century. Born in London in 1801, Newman spent the first half of his life as an Anglican and the second as a Catholic. As an Anglican priest, Newman served as the vicar of Saint Mary's University Church at Oxford and was drawn to the rich and solemn high-church liturgical tradition of Anglicanism. Consequently, he became an active force in what is commonly called the Oxford Movement, whose members emphasized the importance of the Church Fathers as teachers as well as the continuity of the faith across the centuries. He would later say that "to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."

While many are said to have read their way into Catholicism, Newman wrote his way into the Church and became Catholic in 1845. His conversion was highly controversial, and he lost many friendships and professional relationships over it. He was ordained a Catholic priest two years later. Though he believed in papal infallibility, Newman voiced reservations about Pius IX promulgating the dogma in 1870. Pope Leo XIII recognized Newman's great contributions to the status of the Church in England and appointed him to the College of Cardinals in 1879, even though he was neither a bishop nor a resident of Rome.

A New Fall of Rome?

Between July and September of 1870, Prussia's invasion of France (by which Bismarck would end up unifying Germany) forced Napoleon III to withdraw his forces from Rome. On September 20, the armies of the Kingdom of Italy—that growing political entity that had been built out of the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont—invaded and put an end to the Papal States. The council adjourned, theoretically planning to reconvene at some point. That the Council Fathers were not hindered in their departure was one sign that the Kingdom of Italy did not plan to annihilate the papacy. Out of concern for appearances, some sort of respect, or by divine intervention, the kingdom's policy toward the pope and the Vatican was conciliatory.

But this did not extend to all of papal Rome. Churches, monasteries, and convents were closed. Taking Rome as its new capital, Italy needed an appropriate palace for its government headquarters. It chose the Quirinal Palace, which was then home to many elderly monks and nuns. In addition, priests who ventured into Rome outside the Vatican were subject to daily hostility, sometimes from “demonstrators” whom the new government could not control—or didn't want to.

The papacy's right to territory had just been extinguished for the first time in over a millennium, and an outcome that Pius had devoted much of his pontificate to trying to prevent had just happened. Unless the kingdom killed him, his next move was not obvious—except for one thing: keep running the Church.

The kingdom steered a middle course: not only generosity and protection—by its army and police if necessary—toward the pope and the sites important to the governance of the Church (e.g., St. John Lateran as well as the Vatican) but also (as we have just seen) aggressive secularization elsewhere in the city.

The government enacted a significant statute in 1871—the Law of Guarantees. By this it restrained itself from attacking the pope, the Vatican, or other papally significant sites, and also offered the pope substantial

financial recompense for the losses he incurred in the taking of what had been his city. Pius refused the money and did not recognize the Law of Guarantees. If this seems arrogant, consider that what government gives, government can take away. Pius was not going to treat the powers and immunities that were his by right as if they were gifts from the king of Italy.

Pro- and Anti-Pope

In 1874 a large Catholic crowd gathered in St. Peter's to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the declaration on the Immaculate Conception. The problem with large gatherings anywhere in post-papal, newly royal Italy was that they usually turned into demonstrations. This one did, with cries of "Long live the pope-king!" So the next day, about three hundred secularists invaded the Vatican. In keeping with its promises under the Law of Guarantees, Italy sent in some gentlemen with large rifles and bayonets who persuaded the demonstrators to desist and disperse. Outside of legally protected terrain, however, the government rarely interfered with anti-papal violence.

In Germany, Bismarck's Kulturkampf took a toll on the Church. As he saw it, North Prussian Protestantism was a necessary social unifying force for his newly united empire. So on went the church closings, the monastic expulsions, the defenses of Church teachers who openly defied the Vatican on infallibility, the denial to bishops of the right to occupy their sees, and so forth. When the government began jailing bishops, the pace and size of Catholic demonstrations picked up, especially in German Poland. Bismarck figured out this was a losing game and began unwinding the anti-Church measures, blaming them on advisers. Throughout this, Pius IX maintained an intense war of words with Germany; whether this helped the Church there or not is unclear, but Bismarck did slow down the Kulturkampf while Pius was still alive.

A King and a Pope Close an Era

After so many years representing opposing visions for an ideal Europe, King Victor Emmanuel II and Pope Pius IX died in early 1878. The king went first. He had been excommunicated, but Pius encouraged the priest attending him to hear his confession. Victor Emmanuel expressed sorrow for having caused grief to the Church, and filial loyalty to the pope. He received absolution, extreme unction, and viaticum, amid a candlelight gathering of senior courtiers.

Pius died a month later at the age of eighty-five. He was buried at first at the Vatican, but his will requested burial in a church just outside the gates of Rome, one originally built by Constantine. Gangs of “demonstrators” attacked the cortege as it was crossing the very first bridge over the Tiber and almost threw the casket into the river. The government intervened, and the cortege reached its destination. The government did well for its international reputation in this case, because even in countries that did not care for the papacy, street toughs shouting revolutionary slogans and attempting to desecrate a corpse were even less popular.

Pius IX did not respond perfectly to all of the challenges he faced; no pope could have. This is why the Church teaches that popes, though infallible in their formal, solemn teaching on faith and morals, are not beyond error in every decision. While he eschewed the temporal power of the papacy and lost the Papal States, he strengthened the pope’s spiritual leadership and his role as pastor of the universal Church.

YOU BE THE JUDGE:

Wasn't the declaration of papal infallibility just a power grab?

All opponents (and some friends!) of the infallibility definition saw it as self-aggrandizement by the pope. A little thought, though, may make us wonder why this was so. In fact, infallibility was and is a *restraint* on the papacy as an institution.

In Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, we are treated to a scene in which a pious Jesuit who works a lot with potential converts reports back to the equally pious Lady Marchmain about his strange failures with Rex Mottram. Mottram is a politician whose real problem as a convert is that he doesn't want to be a Catholic—he just wants cardinals in red robes at his wedding. He doesn't take the doctrine he's learning seriously—and he seems not to think anyone else does either. To Mottram it's just a matter of rote answers; he cares about pleasing Fr. Mowbray, because that means the instruction ordeal will be over sooner, but getting catechetical questions right as matters of *fact* is the furthest thing from his mind. (All quotations from Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown & Co., 1944, repr. 2012, p. 221.)

One day, Fr. Mowbray tells us, they were talking about papal power, and he asked Rex, "Supposing the Pope looked up and saw a cloud and said 'It's going to rain,' would that be bound to happen?"

Rex: "Oh yes, Father!"

Father was not prepared for this depth of ignorant sycophancy, so he moved the obvious next piece on the board—obvious to everyone but Rex, that is.

"But supposing it didn't?"

We don't need to explore how Rex digs himself deeper into the hole he's already in. The point is, *everyone knows* that papal infallibility does not extend to predicting or decreeing the weather.

Or do they? To scan the reactions of certain terrified European statesmen in the wake of *Pastor Aeternus*, one would think they took infallibility to be just the sort of wizardly omniscience, or even power over physical reality, that Rex pretends to think it is. Even worse, if they didn't think it was that, they expected their Catholic citizens would think it was, and doubt their own ability as statesmen to make their work keep up with that of the wizard.

But many critics missed the even bigger picture. Not only does papal infallibility not extend to all sorts of matters, but also it actually limits, not to say annihilates, papal power in those areas to which it does extend, once it has been used.

Consider Pius IX's 1854 decree on the Immaculate Conception. It meets all the criteria of infallibility in *Pastor Aeternus*. What *now* is the power of a later pope with regard to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception? *Absolutely none*. It has been defined—infallibly—down to the last detail that might pertain to it.

It's a principle of all republics with lawmaking bodies (e.g. Britain's Parliament and our Congress) that one Parliament or Congress cannot bind future ones. Congress makes a law, the president signs it, and it's a law. Then there's an election, there's a sweeping change of party control, and the next Congress overturns that law, and the new president signs the bill that overturns it. The former law is gone. No parliament can, with any binding effect, forbid its successors (the one after later elections) from changing the law. It can't even forbid *itself* from changing the law, should its mind change before the next election. Legislative bodies (chosen by the people) are free and powerful.

Papal infallibility is not like that. An infallible pronouncement by a pope, on a question within the scope of infallibility, closes the possibility of change on that question *forever*. That is quite

a constraint on a future pope who wants to reopen it. Pius IX and Vatican I declared a power of the papacy—and also a concomitant and severe limit on that power. The papacy does not work like parliaments, or congresses, or other merely human institutions.