

From the Catholic Encyclopedia

The "Definition" of a Dogma

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THE solemn definition of the dogma of Our Lady's Assumption into Heaven has aroused tremendous interest throughout the world. This interest was stimulated by newspaper headlines and stories, some of which, unfortunately, were inaccurate or at least misleading.

We read of "a new article of belief for Catholics" and of "the first infallible papal statement in nearly 100 years," and, if we do not take the trouble to inform ourselves correctly on this subject, we are quite likely to become badly confused or misled ourselves.

The first point for Catholics to remember at this time is the meaning of the word "definition" when it is used in the expression, "the solemn definition of Our Lady's Assumption." As it is used in ordinary conversation and writing in our country, the word "definition" usually signifies the description of a thing as it differs from others. Frequently it signifies the expression of the meaning of a word. A Church "definition," like that which the Holy Father will give of the dogma of Our Lady's Assumption, is something quite distinct from these definitions of things or of words.

The ecclesiastic meaning of this

term is more closely related to that of our English word, "definitive." Actually, the Church defines a doctrine or a dogma when she gives an irrevocable decision and thus, once and for all time, settles a question or a problem that concerns faith or morals. The Church defines a dogma when she declares that a certain truth has been revealed by God as something which all men are bound to accept with an act of divine faith.

Thus, on November 1, the Holy Father stated the doctrine of the Assumption, and then proclaimed the fact that this doctrine has been revealed by God as a part of that supernatural Christian message which the Catholic Church is commissioned to teach infallibly always. It is thus a dogma of the Church is defined.

OTHER INFALLIBLE TEACHINGS

It is important to remember, however, that the definition of a dogma is not the only infallible teaching act of the Catholic Church or of the visible head of the Church on earth. The teaching authority of the Church has been empowered by God to make infallibly accurate doctrinal decisions on matters not contained in the body of Christian revelation, but which are connected with that revelation so inti-

mately that misconceptions on these subjects would inevitably engender or occasion erroneous notions in the field of faith itself.

The Church can teach or define infallibly on matters of philosophy which are connected with the truths of divine faith. It can also teach or define infallibly when it states that some doctrine pertaining to faith or morals is certainly true, without, however, stating that this particular teaching has been revealed by God. It can and does teach infallibly also when it canonizes saints, when it makes a definitive declaration about what is known as a "dogmatic fact," and when it gives final approval to the constitutions of a religious order. In every one of these cases the Church is pronouncing on a subject on which a living and infallible teacher needs to be correctly informed if he is to accomplish his work on a matter of faith itself.

The Church uses both a positive and a negative method in making

infallible pronouncements or definitions. The definition of the dogma of the Assumption and the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX are examples of the positive approach. When this method is employed, a certain doctrine is brought forward and then declared to be something revealed by God, or at least something certainly true. When the negative approach is employed, a doctrine is brought forward and censured. When this rejected teaching is in contradiction of a truth contained in the deposit of Christian revelation, it is denounced as "heretical."

When, on the other hand, the re-proved teaching contradicts a proposition which the Church proposes as certainly true, but not precisely as revealed, the offending doctrine is stigmatized as "erroneous" or as "false." Thus a statement contradicting the dogma of papal infallibility is something which must be qualified as heretical.

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Modern Society

The reconstruction of modern society requires the organization of producers (using the term in its broad sense) in every field, in such a manner as to enable them to work democratically for their various special interests and for the common good of all.

The objective must be to transform the organizational basis of our society. Where men are now organized on a basis of their position in the labor market, they must be organized in the new age according to their functions in society.—WAGE EARNER, *November, 1950.*