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“If Christ be not Raised”; If Peter was not the First Pope: Parallel Cases of Indispensable Doctrinal Foundations

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Abstract: The papacy is to Roman Catholicism what the resurrection of Jesus is to orthodox creedal Christianity. If the bodily resurrection of Christ did not really happen, there is no good reason to believe the doctrines that flow from it, such as incarnation and Trinity. Similarly, Roman Catholic claims about the ecclesial authority of the pope and the Church of Rome hinge on the historical claims about papacy, beginning with the claim that Christ appointed Peter the first pope, with a primacy of jurisdiction over the whole Church. Whereas there is excellent historical evidence in favor of the resurrection of Jesus, there is no comparable evidence in favor of traditional Roman claims about the papacy. To the contrary, the consensus of historians is that those claims are false. Roman claims that hinge on the unique authority of the papacy are accordingly undermined.

Key Words: resurrection, papacy, infallibility, Lampe, Duffy, Plantinga.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the papacy to Roman Catholicism. Rome’s distinctive authority claims and ecclesial identity hinge crucially on the claims that Christ made Peter the head of the church, and the bishops of Rome have succeeded him in this role. Indeed, as I shall argue below, the papacy is to Roman Catholicism what the resurrection of Jesus is to orthodox creedal Christianity.

Parallel Cases

The fact that the resurrection of Christ is utterly foundational to classic creedal Christianity is a familiar one. One way to bring this point into sharp focus is to consider the difference between what we can call the order of being and the order of knowing. By the order of being, I simply mean there is a certain logical priority in the relationship among central creedal convictions. In the order of being, Trinity is the aboriginal fact, the most fundamental reality from which everything else originates, and follows. The incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus comes later in the order of

being, and his atoning death on the cross is later still in the order of events. Finally, the resurrection of Jesus comes as the climax of the story of incarnation and redemption.

In the order of knowing, however, it is exactly the opposite. The resurrection was the explosive act of God that set in motion the definitive revelation of the extraordinary truths that followed from this singular event in human history. The resurrection was the decisive demonstration that the man Jesus was more than a mere human being. As remarkable as his miracles surely were, and as profound and authoritative as his teaching undoubtedly was, his unique identity as the Son of God was not fully disclosed until the resurrection. As Paul put it, Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4). The realization that it was the very Son of God who died on the cross and was resurrected led to the insight that the meaning of his death was to save us from our sins. And the truth that God is a Trinity was eventually understood and formally articulated as the apostles and church fathers reflected on the revelation that Jesus was the Son of God incarnate who was distinct from the Father (and the Holy Spirit), yet in some sense one with them. This is only a bare sketch of the unfolding revelation of the central doctrines that are most distinctive to orthodox Christianity, but the central point is clear: the essential doctrines of incarnation, atonement, and Trinity flow from the stunning event of the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus was raised from the dead, this event demanded a profound rethinking and a startling reformulation of the non-negotiable truth that God is one, and a surprising account of how he saves us from our sins.

All of this must be taken into account when we read Paul’s stark and pointed reflections on the resurrection in I Corinthians 15 and his insistence that it is utterly essential to the integrity of the Christian faith. In a series of counterfactual statements, Paul unflinchingly drives home the enormous consequences that would ensue if Christ were not raised. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (I Cor 15:17). There is no salvation from our sins in the death of Christ if he has not been raised. If Christ is not raised, Paul’s preaching has been in vain (v 14). If Christ has not been raised, rather than being blessed with the greatest of all gifts, we are most to be pitied (v 19). If Christ has not been raised, Christians are speaking falsely of God (v 15). They are ascribing things to him and insisting those things are of monumental importance, but in fact, they are falsehoods. If Christ has not been raised, Christians badly misrepresent God and what he has done to reveal himself when they proclaim incarnation, atonement and Trinity. The truths sketched above in the order of being depend completely on the truth and reality of the resurrection of Jesus as the pivotal truth that generates knowledge of these distinctive doctrinal claims.

Now let us turn to consider how claims about the papacy play a role in Roman Catholic theology that is analogous to the role of the resurrection of Jesus in orthodox Christianity. That is, the distinctive claims of Roman Catholicism depend on the

truth of papal claims in a way similar to the way core Christian doctrines such as incarnation and Trinity depend on the resurrection.

Roman Catholic claims about the papacy have undeniably played a central part in the issues that divide Roman Catholics not only from Protestants, but also the Eastern Orthodox. These points of contention are undoubtedly ecclesial broadly speaking, and reflect different views about the nature of the Church, but claims about the papacy are integral to these disputes. Rome views itself and Churches in communion with it as the only ones that have full Christian integrity in terms of doctrine and ecclesial authority. Other Christians and ecclesial communities are seen (at best) as “separated brethren” who remain out of communion with the one true Church. Consider the claim that the task of interpreting the word of God is the exclusive prerogative of the teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church.

‘The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.’ This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.¹

In the same vein, consider this claim: “‘It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others.’”² The Magisterium, again, is composed of those bishops in communion with the pope, the bishop of Rome. The claim that scripture and tradition cannot stand without the Magisterium obviously denies that integrity of any Church that seeks to follow the authority of Scripture, but rejects the claims of Rome and the authority of the pope.

The apex of Roman claims pertaining to papal authority was articulated in the doctrine of papal infallibility, which was dogmatized at Vatican I in 1870. This dogma, which is rejected by the Orthodox as well as Protestants, declares that when the pope speaks EX CATHEDRA in defining a doctrine of faith or morals “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.”³ Most famously, the pope has spoken EX CATHEDRA in defining the dogmas that the Virgin Mary was immaculately conceived and bodily assumed into heaven. Given the fact that Rome has defined

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second ed. par. 85. The sentences quoted in this paragraph come from the Vatican II document, *Dei Verbum*, par 10

2. *Catechism*, par. 95.

3. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/V1.HTM#6>, First Vatican Council, session 4, chap. 4.

these Marian doctrines with the highest degree of dogmatic authority possible, these doctrines are also emblematic of the sharp lines of division that separate Rome from the Orthodox as well as most Protestants.⁴ Indeed, it is worth noting that when pope Pius XII defined the dogma of the bodily assumption, he asserted that “if anyone, which God forbid, should dare willingly to deny or call into doubt that which we have defined, let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith.”⁵

Now let us delve into these matters more deeply by considering classic Roman claims about the grounds and nature of papal authority. In particular, I will quote at some length from the aforementioned First Vatican Council, where papal infallibility was formally defined. More specifically, I will quote from Session Four of this Council, which has the following heading: “First dogmatic constitution on the Church of Christ.” The definitive dogmatic authority of this material is further emphasized by the fact that each of the four chapters of Session 4 concludes with an anathema directed at those who deny the teaching that is promulgated. Examining these passages will make clear not only what Rome has traditionally claimed about the papacy, but also what is at stake in these claims.

1.1. We teach and declare that, according to the gospel evidence, a primacy of jurisdiction over the whole Church of God was immediately and directly promised to the blessed apostle Peter and conferred on him by Christ the lord.

1.3. And it was to Peter alone that Jesus, after his resurrection, confided the jurisdiction of Supreme Pastor and ruler of his whole fold, saying: Feed my lambs, feed my sheep.

1.4. To this absolutely manifest teaching of the Sacred Scriptures, as it has always been understood by the Catholic Church, are clearly opposed the distorted opinions of those who misrepresent the form of government which Christ the lord established in his Church and deny that Peter, in preference to the rest of the apostles, taken singly or collectively, was endowed by Christ with a true and proper primacy of jurisdiction.

1.6. Therefore, if anyone says that blessed Peter the apostle was not appointed by Christ the lord as prince of all the apostles and visible head of the whole Church militant; or that it was a primacy of honor only and not one of true and

4. The doctrine of Mary’s bodily assumption is affirmed by the Orthodox as an ecclesiastical conviction, but is not a dogma as it is in Rome. The Orthodox reject the doctrine of the immaculate conception.

5. http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html. Paragraphs 44-45.

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proper jurisdiction that he directly and immediately received from our lord Jesus Christ himself: let him be anathema.⁶

2.2. For no one can be in doubt, indeed it was known in every age that the holy and most blessed Peter, prince and head of the apostles, the pillar of faith and the foundation of the Catholic Church, received the keys of the kingdom from our lord Jesus Christ, the savior and redeemer of the human race, and that to this day and forever he lives and presides and exercises judgment in his successors the bishops of the Holy Roman See, which he founded and consecrated with his blood.

2.5. Therefore, if anyone says that it is not by the institution of Christ the lord himself (that is to say, by divine law) that blessed Peter should have perpetual successors in the primacy over the whole Church; or that the Roman Pontiff is not the successor of blessed Peter in this primacy: let him be anathema.⁷

3.2. Wherefore we teach and declare that, by divine ordinance, the Roman Church possesses a pre-eminence of ordinary power over every other Church, and that this jurisdictional power of the Roman Pontiff is both episcopal and immediate....

3.3. In this way, by unity with the Roman Pontiff in communion and in profession of the same faith, the Church of Christ becomes one flock under one Supreme Shepherd.

3.4. This is the teaching of the Catholic truth, and no one can depart from it without endangering his faith and salvation.⁸

This is only a small selection from similar passages in the preface and first three chapters of session four of the First Vatican Council leading up to the climactic chapter 4, which affirms and defines the doctrine of papal infallibility.

It is worth noting that the Second Vatican Council in its document "*Lumen Gentium*" reiterated the doctrine of infallibility for the "successor of Peter," and "the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful."⁹ This council also attempted to balance the claims of Vatican I by giving a stronger emphasis to collegial leadership for the whole council of bishops. But this effort was resisted by pope Paul VI, who thought the document had compromised papal authority, and he made an unusual move to rectify the matter. After the document had already passed the Council, he

6. First Vatican Council, session 4, chap. 1.

7. First Vatican Council, session 4, chap. 2.

8. First Vatican Council, session 4, chap. 3.

9. *The Documents of Vatican II: Vatican Translation* (St Pauls: Staten Island, NY, 2009), 39-40. (*Lumen Gentium*, 3.25)

inserted a “Note of Explanation” that asserted a stronger view of his own authority than the document seemed to affirm. Part of the Note reads as follows.

It is up to the judgment of the Supreme Pontiff, to whose care Christ’s whole flock has been entrusted, to determine, according to the needs of the Church as they change over the course of centuries, the way in which this care may be best exercised—whether in a personal or a collegial way. The Roman Pontiff, taking account of the Church’s welfare, proceeds according to his own discretion in arranging, promoting, and approving the exercise of collegial activity.

As Supreme Pastor of the Church, the Supreme Pontiff can always exercise his power at will, as his very office demands.¹⁰

I have quoted at length here to show both the substance of the classic Roman Catholic claims about the papacy, and also how strong these claims are. Both the substance and the strength of these claims show how much is riding on them for the distinctive claims of Roman Catholicism. These passages also enable us to see how Roman claims about the papacy are analogous to the role of the resurrection of Jesus in classic creedal orthodoxy. If these papal claims are not true, Rome’s distinctive claims founder and fail. So let us spell out some of the ways Roman claims about the papacy are analogous to the resurrection.

First, both claim that God has acted in certain definitive ways to reveal his truth to us for our salvation. God the Father acted in the resurrection by raising Jesus from the dead to vindicate him and demonstrate that he is his divine Son. In a similar fashion, the Roman claim is that God the Son acted to found the papacy by appointing Peter Prince of the apostles and visible head of the whole Church militant, immediately and directly promising him, and thereby conferring upon him, a primacy of jurisdiction over the whole church (1:1,6). Moreover, he instituted the papacy as a permanent office so that Peter should have perpetual successors with jurisdiction over the whole Church (2:5; 3:2). Notice also that Rome claims that its understanding of Christ’s words to Peter in this regard represents the “absolutely manifest teaching of the Sacred Scriptures” (1:4).

Second, in both cases it is claimed that these acts of God were performed in the context of human history and the effects were observable by human witnesses. God the Father did not raise Jesus in such a fashion that it was a closely guarded secret that no one knew or witnessed. It is noteworthy that Paul begins his discussion of the resurrection by citing the various appearances of the risen Jesus (I Cor15:3-8). His confidence that the risen Christ truly appeared to various witnesses, including himself, matches his insistence that our faith is not in vain. Similarly, the claim that Christ instituted the papacy in the fashion Rome teaches also strongly implies

10. *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 76. (*Lumen Gentium*, Appendix, 3,4)

that it would be clearly known by Peter, and presumably his successors, especially if the Roman interpretation represents "the absolutely manifest teaching of the Sacred Scriptures." Peter would presumably hand on to his successors what he had "immediately and directly" received so clearly from Christ, just as Paul carefully handed on what he had received (cf I Cor 15:3). Moreover, the claims of Rome entail that Peter had immediate and ongoing successors, men who existed in history and were known as the bishop of Rome by their contemporaries. Indeed, notice that the First Vatican Council insists that it "was known in every age" and cannot be doubted that Peter received the keys of the kingdom from Christ, and "that to this day and forever he lives and presides and exercises judgment in his successors the bishops of the Holy Roman See, which he founded and consecrated with his blood" (2:2).

It is important to emphasize that he claim that this "was known in every age" obviously refers to the Roman interpretation of Jesus' words about the keys of the kingdom and not the mere fact that Jesus spoke these words to Peter. For it is hardly a matter of controversy between Roman Catholicism and other Christian traditions that Jesus spoke these words. The issue is the correct interpretation of those words.

Third, given the claims made about both the resurrection and the papacy, our salvation is at stake in accepting or denying these claims. Faith in Christ for salvation essentially involves the belief that God raised him from the dead. Faith that he died for our sins hinges on the belief that he rose from the dead, and confessing that he is Lord hinges on believing that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9-10). Similarly, the document cited above repeatedly anathematizes those who deny its claims, and warns that no one can depart from its teaching about the status and authority of the pope "without endangering his faith and salvation" (3:4). In both cases, very strong claims are made about the vital importance of accepting the truth of what is proclaimed and the clear implications that follow.

Major Evidential Divide

Now then, with these similarities and analogies in mind, let us turn to consider a way in which the case of the resurrection and that of the papacy sharply diverge. In short, there is impressive historical evidence for the resurrection, but there is not such evidence for the Roman papal claims. My point here is a simple one, but one with far reaching implications. If the historical evidence is at odds with Roman papal claims, then Rome's distinctive claims for itself are undermined and lose credibility.

Of course, how one assesses the relevance of historical evidence depends on how much credence one gives evidence in general when assessing theological truth claims. Those who for various reasons place little stock in purported objective evidence may dismiss this negative historical evidence as utterly irrelevant. But for those with evidentialist inclinations, historical facts and considerations can hardly be waved off in this fashion.

So let us consider the issues before us in light of a very modest evidentialist standard, namely, one suggested by Pascal. First, consider this couplet in which Pascal indicates that revelation from God imposes obligations on us, but also that God has certain obligations to us not to mislead us in his revelation. “Men owe it to God to accept the religion he sends them. God owes it to men not to lead them into error.”¹¹ The claims involved in the Christian revelation are so monumentally important that Pascal repeatedly stresses that all rational persons must earnestly seek the truth until they find it. While he is under no illusion that reason is the ultimate source or measure of truth, he is also confident that reason is an essential guide that we must trust so far as it goes. While the truths of faith surpass reason and empirical evidence, God never requires us to go against clear deliverances of reason or empirical evidence in our quest for truth. He writes: “Faith certainly tells us what the senses do not, but not the contrary of what they see; it is above, not against them.”¹² More generally, he proposes the following as what we should expect as we consider the relevant evidence for Christianity: “But the evidence is such as to exceed, or at least equal, the evidence to the contrary, so that it cannot be reason that decides us against following it, and can therefore only be concupiscence and wickedness of heart.”¹³

Returning to our two cases, it is a happy fact for orthodox Christian belief that there is substantial evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. A robust belief in the bodily resurrection can be defended by rigorous critical scholarship. Indeed, the evidence arguably far surpasses Pascal’s minimal standard. Numerous first rank Biblical scholars, theologians, and philosophers have defended this claim, and there is no need to belabor this point. Of course, I do not mean to deny that there are numerous scholars on the other side who are more skeptical, or who strongly deny the resurrection. These issues are deeply contested to be sure. But the fact remains that there are many outstanding scholars who have brilliantly defended traditional claims about the resurrection and have argued that there is ample reason for doing so. Here I will simply cite a couple of interesting examples to illustrate the point.

Several years ago, Richard Swinburne employed probability theory to defend the resurrection. Taking all of what he took to be the relevant factors into account, Swinburne argued that the balance of probability heavily favored the resurrection. In fact, in a formalization of the argument, Swinburne contended that the resurrection had a probability of 0.97.¹⁴ More recently, Michael Licona has defended the resurrection by employing rigorous standards of evidence as employed by historians. Relying only on what he calls “historical bedrock” composed of facts that are a matter of consensus

11. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), no. 840.

12. *Pensees*, no. 185.

13. *Pensees*, no. 835.

14. Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2003), 204-216.

among almost all scholars, he concluded that "Jesus' resurrection is 'very certain,' a rendering higher on the spectrum of historical certainty than I had expected."¹⁵

When we turn to the Roman claims about the papacy, however, matters are altogether different. In brief, there is a strong scholarly consensus that the classic belief that Peter was the first pope is a pious myth, and indeed, there was not even a monarchical bishop in Rome—let alone anyone who was recognized as having jurisdiction over the entire Church—until sometime in the latter half of the second century, if not later. It must be stressed that this is not merely a consensus among Protestant and Eastern Orthodox scholars, but Roman Catholics as well. Given the importance of this claim, let us take a few minutes to document it.

A good place to begin is with the distinguished Roman Catholic papal historian Eamon Duffy (who served on the Pontifical Historical Commission) and his observation that "all modern discussion of the issues must now start from the exhaustive and persuasive analysis by Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, London 2003. This is a difficult read for the non-specialist, but it conveys as no other work does the extraordinary ferment of early Roman Christianity."¹⁶ Lampe's work is exhaustive in the sense that he studied every scrap of archaeological evidence as well as pertinent literary sources in his account of early Roman Christianity. We can hardly go into the details of this technical work here, but it is important to note Lampe's "fractionation" thesis, in which he shows that the early Roman church was composed of house churches in various districts that matched the layout of the city. "The fractionation in Rome favored a collegial presbyterial system of government and prevented for a long time, until the second half of the second century, the development of a monarchical episcopacy in the city."¹⁷ Lampe documents the significant fact that early Christian writers living in Rome or familiar with church life in Rome in the late first and early second century consistently describe the leadership there in terms of plural leaders, with no indication that there was a single leader who exercised the sort of authority claimed by later monarchical bishops.

Another facet of Lampe's work worth noting is his historical analysis of Irenaeus's famous list of Roman bishops,¹⁸ a passage popular apologists use to support Roman papal claims. Lampe argues that this list "is with highest probability a historical construction from the 180's, when the monarchical episcopacy developed in Rome."¹⁹

15. Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 619.

16. Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, fourth ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 469. Lampe is a Protestant scholar.

17. Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 397.

18. *Against Heresies*, 3.3.3.

19. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 406. For an excellent account of Lampe's argument, and a discussion of the larger issues, see the article by Brandon Addison: <http://www.calledto communion.com/2014/03/the-quest-for-the-historical-church-a-protestant-assessment/>

In other words, it anachronistically imports into earlier decades what was emerging in the 180's. If Lampe's historical and grammatical analysis of this list is correct, it has little value as a historical source for the contested issues about the papacy.

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that right at the outset of his authoritative book on the papacy, Duffy begins by sorting out the crucial distinction between legend and reliable history. After noting that legend filled in the details of Peter's later life where the New Testament, is silent, Duffy went on as follows:

Neither Peter nor Paul founded the Church at Rome, for there were Christians in the city before either of the Apostles set foot there. Nor can we assume, as Irenaeus did, that the Apostles established there a succession of bishops to carry on the work in the city, for all the indications are that there was no single bishop of Rome for almost a century after the deaths of the Apostles. In fact, wherever we turn, the solid outlines of the Petrine succession at Rome seem to blur and dissolve.²⁰

These are stark observations indeed in view of the strong claims of traditional papal theology and all that rides on those claims.

Duffy, however, is not an exception in this regard, but again, his claims here represent the consensus of critical historians.²¹ For one more example, consider the Roman Catholic papal historian Robert Eno, who sizes up the evidence as follows:

But the evidence available seems to point predominantly if not decisively in the direction of a collective leadership. Dogmatic a priori theses should not force us into presuming or requiring something that the evidence leans against.... This evidence (Clement, Hermas, Ignatius) points us in the direction of assuming that in the first century and into the second, there was no bishop of Rome in the usual sense given to that title.²²

We do not have space to look in detail at any of the three figures Eno mentions, but let us take a brief look at Ignatius.

Ignatius is interesting because the theme of episcopal leadership was such a prominent theme in his letters to various churches. In the seven letters we have, he made frequent mention of the bishop, and his authority, mentioning him by name in some cases. Consider, for instance, these typical passages from his letter to the Magnesians:

20. Duffy, *Saints and Sinners*, 2.

21. See also Allen Brent, "How Irenaeus Has Misled the Archaeologists," in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, eds Sara Parvis and Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 35-52. For a notable example of an Eastern Orthodox scholar, see John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For an example of a Roman Catholic who challenges the consensus, see David Albert Jones, "Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?" *New Blackfriars* 80, no 937 (1999), 128-143. For a critique of Jones, see Eamon Duffy, "Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?" *New Blackfriars* 80, no 940 (1999), 301-308.

22. Robert B. Eno, *The Rise of the Papacy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008; Originally Published by Michael Glazier, 1990), 26, 29. For a concise discussion of this evidence, see Duffy, "Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?" 303-308.

Inasmuch as I was found worthy to see you in the persons of Damas, your godly bishop, and your worthy presbyters Bassus and Apollonius, and my fellow servant, the deacon Zotion—may I enjoy his company, because he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the council of the presbyters as to the law of Jesus Christ....Be eager to do everything in godly harmony, the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the apostles and the deacons, who are especially dear to me, since they have been entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ...²³

So prevalent is the theme of the importance of the episcopacy and the authority of the bishop, and so often does he reiterate these points that it is no exaggeration to say he almost seems obsessed with these issues. There are over forty such passages referring to bishops scattered throughout these letters.

But here is what is interesting and telling for our concerns: all these references occur in just six of his seven letters. Such passages fail to appear in only one of his letters, namely, his letter to the Romans. Remarkably, in his letter to the church where the bishop of bishops, the visible head of the whole church is supposed to reside according to Rome, there is no mention of the bishop. Eno is not alone in finding it strange that there are no comparable passages in his letter to the Romans if Rome had a bishop. "But we have only silence, which leads many to conclude that Ignatius did not address such a person because the Roman community of the time had no such leader."²⁴ Indeed, this silence speaks volumes, especially when combined with the similar silence of other early Christian writers who were situated to comment on the presence of a bishop in Rome had there been one, but did not.²⁵

Now given the fact there has been a consensus along these lines among historians, including Roman Catholic historians, for some time now it is somewhat surprising that popular Roman Catholic apologetics often proceeds as if the claims of the First Vatican Council remain altogether intact. These apologists are either unaware of the state of scholarship in their own church, or they blithely ignore it, and assure their readers that traditional papal claims are the uncontroverted truth. For an example, consider these lines from Devin Rose: "The Church had a pope, a visible head, from the beginning. In fact, we know the names and approximate dates of all the popes, all the way back to the first century: Peter first, then Linus, Anacletus and Clement I."²⁶ The profound difference between the lines from Duffy, quote above, and those

23. "The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians," *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition, edited and translated by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 2:1, 6:1

24. Eno, *The Rise of the Papacy*, 27.

25. For a formalized version of an argument from silence that takes into account Clement, Hermas, Ignatius, and Justin Martyr, see Kenneth J. Collins and Jerry L. Walls, *Roman But Not Catholic: What Remains at Stake 500 Years After the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 244-251.

26. Devin Rose, *The Protestant's Dilemma: How the Reformation's Shocking Consequences Point to the Truth of Catholicism* (San Diego: Catholic Answers Press, 2014), 35.

of Rose are quite striking. What a serious historian acknowledges to be simply false is trotted out as the simple uncontroversial truth by a popular apologist.²⁷

It is worth noting here that popular Roman apologists are reminiscent of young earth creationists who continue to assert that the earth is only ten thousand years old in the face of the massive scientific evidence that it is much older, evidence which is acknowledged by leading Christian physicists and cosmologists, as well as other scientists. Popular apologists who continue to assert traditional papal history in the face of the best scholarship of their own church are doing the same sort of thing.

But perhaps there is more going on than simple disregard for serious scholarship in such popular apologetics. Perhaps what we see reflected in Rose's breezy reiteration of traditional papal claims is a stark recognition of what is at stake in those traditional claims and the implications that follow if those claims are given up.²⁸ If Rome's distinctive claims to be the one true church do indeed hinge essentially upon the truth of its traditional papal theology and the related historical claims, then to give up that theology and history is to give up those distinctive claims to be the one true church. And if those claims are given up, the motivation and mission for popular Roman Catholic apologetics is lost.

In any case, the main point here is that whereas there is arguably excellent historical evidence in favor of the resurrection of Jesus that far surpasses Pascal's modest evidentialist standards, the historical evidence in favor of traditional papal claims falls far short of Pascal's standards. Indeed, it is worse, for the historical evidence, starting with the "historical bedrock" excavated by Lampe, counts strongly against Rome's claims. And for those committed to Rome's distinctive claims to ecclesial authority, this appears to pose a serious difficulty.

Saving the Hypothesis?

Now then, what sort of moves are available to Roman Catholics who are apprised of the consensus of historians within their own church, but want to maintain Rome's distinctive ecclesial claims, and the papal theology that underwrites those claims? I will mention four.

One obvious move to make is to simply insist that the consensus of critical historians is irrelevant. Even Pascal's modest evidentialist principles should be

27. Popular Roman apologists who continue to assert traditional papal history in the face of the best scholarship of their own church are reminiscent of young earth apologists who continue to assert that the earth is only ten thousand years old in the face of the best scientific evidence acknowledged by leading Christian physicists and cosmologists, which strongly demonstrates otherwise.

28. Cf. Duffy's comment on David Albert Jones, and his attempt to defend the traditional view (cited in note 21): "I suspect that he feels that Catholic orthodoxy and church order will be compromised if it turns out that after all there was not pope in first century Rome." (Duffy, "Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?" 308).

rejected. The essential claim is that Christ “immediately and directly” conferred on Peter and his successors jurisdiction over the whole church, and that this “was known in every age,” not that there is objective historical evidence for these claims. There was a visible head of the church from the beginning even if he was invisible to history for some time. Indeed, the truth of these claims is perfectly compatible with the historical evidence pointing “predominantly if not decisively” (as Eno put it) in another direction altogether. There are possible scenarios we can imagine in which these claims are true, even if this requires us to construe the available evidence in a way that is at odds with the conclusions historians think most probable. Perhaps among the multiple bishops in early Rome, one always had preeminence, and it was he who was Peter’s successor even if he is never identified as such by writers such as Ignatius, Clement and Hermas.

Duffy addresses this sort of appeal in his response to Fr David Albert Jones, who acknowledges that Clement says nothing to indicate that there was a mono-episcopate in Rome, but insists that this possibility is not excluded, and strictly speaking is compatible with the evidence. In reply, Duffy observes that “Fr Jones’s valiant insistence that nevertheless, Clement *might* have been the presiding bishop of Rome, which he then modulates into the claim that it is just as likely as not that he was, looks like historical fideism, assertion unencumbered by the need for evidence.”²⁹ The view Duffy is criticizing here represents a classic dogmatic approach to the matter. Consider this description of such an approach:

In dealing with these claims we are passing along the border line between history and dogmatic theology. The primacy of Peter and his appointment by Christ to succeed Him as head of the Church are accepted by the Catholic Church as the indubitable word of inspired Gospel, in its only possible meaning. That Peter went to Rome and founded there his See is just as definitively what is termed in Catholic theology a dogmatic fact. This has been defined by an eminent Catholic theologian as ‘historical fact so intimately connected with some great Catholic truths that it would be believed even if time and accident had destroyed all of the original evidence therefor.’³⁰

So long as the standard is possibility, or an appeal to what *might be true*, or to a “dogmatic fact” lacking any sort of evidence to which we have access, this sort of move can provide an ever elusive sort of option. It does come with certain costs, however. First, it may be an *ad hoc* appeal that one would not otherwise rely on. It will be awkward, to say the least, for those who make this move to appeal to objective historical evidence when it supports their beliefs (as in say, the resurrection), unless they have some principled reason why they trust history in some cases but not others. Second, and far more serious, it is deeply counterintuitive that truths as important as traditional

29. Duffy, “Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?” 305.

30. James Shotwell Thompson and Louise Ropes Loomis, *The See of Peter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), xxiii-xxiv.

papal claims with so much riding on them must be believed in the face of considerable counterevidence. Recall that those who reject these claims are anathematized and their salvation is said to be in jeopardy. This is rather jarring conclusion to swallow, to put it mildly. Would a good God, let alone a perfectly loving God, require us to believe something on pain of damnation that even the best Christian historians, including Roman Catholic historians, judge to be highly improbable? But again, for those not troubled by these implications, this remains an option.

Next, it might be suggested that papal doctrine required time to develop in a fashion similar the incarnation and the Trinity. In view of this, it should not be surprising that there was not a monarchical bishop in Rome until the late second century. While the appeal to doctrinal development is a natural one for Roman Catholics who must defend infallible dogmas first given formal definition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is doubtful that the appeal can be made for its traditional papal claims.

First, what is at stake here are purported factual claims about history which underwrite the distinctive Roman papal and ecclesial claims, namely that Peter was “immediately and directly” given universal jurisdiction over the church by promise from Christ, and that his successors also had this role. It was allegedly to “Peter alone” that Jesus “confided the jurisdiction” saying “Feed my lambs, feed my sheep.”³¹

For traditional papal theology to be underwritten, it must have a secure foundation in these claims about Peter and his successors. If the claims just cited are true, we have very strong reason to think Peter and his successors (and probably the other apostles as well), understood these essential claims from the outset, and that it did not take several decades to develop this understanding. This is all the more likely if it is true that the Roman Petrine doctrine is the “absolutely manifest teaching of the Sacred Scriptures, as it has always been understood by the Catholic Church” and that “it was known in every age that the holy and most blessed Peter...received the keys of the kingdom from our lord Jesus Christ...and that to this day and forever he lives and presides and exercises judgment in his successors the bishops of the Holy Roman See.” In short, these claims seem clearly to insist that the fundamental elements of papal doctrine were clear from the outset rather than only emerging or developing gradually over time. The classic papal theology of Vatican I rests on robust historical claims, not on the far more modest notion of more recent vintage that the papacy of the first several decades was present only in “embryonic” form.

Now it is worth noting that the claim the Roman Petrine doctrine is the “absolutely manifest teaching of Sacred Scriptures” is, of course, a hermeneutical claim, and not a historical one. But the claim that “it was known in every age” that Peter and his successors had the distinct role and authority Rome claims they had is a historical claim, and one that it is reasonable to think would be confirmed by the historical record. Here is a preliminary question worth pondering in light of this

31. This is, of course, a reference to John 21:15-17.

claim: why is there no affirmation or even reference to Peter's extraordinary authority in the Epistles of Peter?³² If he received directly and immediately from Christ the sort of authority Rome claims, why does Peter not invoke, or at least mention his unique role? He merely identifies himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, or an apostle and a servant of Christ, and he goes on his first epistle to address the elders as a fellow elder (I Peter 1:1; 5:1; 2 Peter 1:1).

The fact that he does not invoke any special kind of authority is all the more noteworthy when we consider that Paul, by contrast, repeatedly underscores his distinctive commission from Christ to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and the authority that entailed (Acts 9:15; Romans 11:13-14; 15:15-16; Galatians 1:15-17; 2:6-10; Ephesians 3:7-9). Surely it is surprising that Peter, who allegedly had a far more important commission, never records that fact.³³ It is in Galatians, incidentally, where Paul informs us that he withstood Peter when Peter was acting in a way that was contrary to the gospel (Galatians 2:11-14). A few verses previous to this report, Paul notes that "he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles" (Galatians 2:8). Paul's understanding of Peter's role as apostle to the circumcised parallel to his role as apostle to the Gentiles hardly suggests that he thinks Peter was given jurisdiction over the whole church. He does point out that James, Peter and John (in that order) are acknowledged as pillars, but again, does not single out Peter in any way.

But here is another historical fact that must be noted, and one that is hard to square with the traditional claims of Rome. The first known appeal to the classic texts in Matthew by a bishop of Rome to support his unique authority was not until the middle of the third century by Stephen. He invoked this text in a dispute over rebaptism with Cyprian, an African bishop, and Firmilian, a Greek bishop. But what is even more telling is that these bishops neither yielded to his authority, nor did they accept his appeal to the authority of Peter. Indeed, according to Eno, "we must note as well that Firmilian not only does not accept the claim, he seems never to have heard of it before."³⁴ This is rather surprising if the claims of the First Vatican Council that we have been examining are true. One would have expected that the fundamental claims of the Petrine theory would be have been reasonably well known, at least among bishops, and not disputed as a novel claim.³⁵

32. The authorship of the Epistles of Peter is, of course, controversial, especially 2 Peter.

33. It might be suggested that Peter never invoked his special authority due to his humility. But this objection is based on a misunderstanding of humility. True humility owns God's calling and aspires to live up to it and to fulfill it, not to hide it or downplay it.

34. Eno, *Rise of the Papacy*, 64.

35. Likewise, early Patristic interpretation of John 21 does not support the Roman claim that their interpretation of this text is the "absolutely manifest teaching of Sacred Scripture." See David Bradshaw, "Giving Honor to Whom Honor is Due: A Reply to Michael Root," in *The Gospel of John: Theological-Ecumenical Readings*, ed. Charles Raith (Eugene: OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 239-250.

Doctrinal development as represented in the classic creeds was a matter of giving a more exact definition to beliefs that had been very much in evidence for centuries. Long before Nicea and Chalcedon, Christians had already been affirming their belief that Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, that he was Lord, that he was the Son of God, and so on. The extraordinary substance of classic Christology, the “raw material,” was already heartily affirmed and its meaning was discussed and debated long before Nicea and Chalcedon provided philosophically precise language to express these convictions.

The papacy emerging in later centuries was not a similar case of doctrinal development because there was no similar affirmation all along of the substance of the classical Petrine theology as traditional Roman papal theology claims. It is not the case that all along reasonably informed Christians believed that Peter and his successors had been given authority over the whole church directly and immediately from Christ, even if the precise details of what that meant still needed to be worked out. In short, we do not have the same sort of robust body of raw material supporting the papacy that would be necessary to make the case that it is a doctrinal development that parallels classic Christology.

There is one more reason why the late second century emergence of the episcopacy in Rome is not a case of doctrinal development analogous to Christology. And that is the simple fact that traditional papal theology is not conceptually challenging and difficult in anything remotely like the way Trinity and Incarnation are. Indeed, these doctrines are extremely difficult and have proved challenging to some of the greatest minds in human history down to the present day. It is hardly surprising that it would take some time reflecting on the fundamental data of biblical revelation to articulate these doctrines with some degree of precision. By contrast, there is nothing particularly difficult in traditional papal theology. If the traditional claims of Rome are true, there is no reason the fundamental elements of papal theory should not have been understood and affirmed all along, at least in Rome and among bishops and other leaders.

A third suggestion, similar to the idea of development, is that perhaps papal theology can be justified on other grounds than a literal claim that Christ instituted the papacy immediately and directly by conferring authority on Peter and his immediate successors. Even if history undermines these traditional claims and warrants for papal authority, perhaps the actual history of how the papacy emerged can provide suitable material to justify it. In the conclusion of Eno’s book, he writes as follows:

The history of the Papacy in antiquity can be divided into two periods. The first is that before the time of Damascus, the period in which the documentary evidence, especially that concerning Roman sources, is very sketchy and episodic. The texts and historical cases surveyed and evaluated are subject to a variety of interpretations, some of which, to be sure, are more likely than others. Yet there is enough evidence of a Roman consciousness of its

authority to show that the later firm and steady claims did not arise *ex nihilo* after 366. Non Roman attitudes are another matter.³⁶

In view of this, one might appeal to “a Roman consciousness of its authority” even as one recognizes that the texts and cases to support this are “subject to a variety of interpretations.” Eventually, Rome came to make unequivocal claims for its unique authority, and to justify those claims by insisting that Christ bestowed upon Peter and his successors authority over the whole church, even if the historical evidence is at odds with those claims. Is this enough to sustain traditional Roman papal authority?

Well, the mere fact that Rome had a certain “consciousness of its authority” is hardly enough to warrant that authority or to legitimize it. The question remains what is the source and warrant for this sense of authority?

These questions are particularly pertinent when we consider the “non Roman attitudes” that Eno mentions. Roman claims to authority have not in fact been a source of unity in the church as they are supposed to be, but quite the opposite. Indeed, the claims of Rome to have authority over the whole church have been a point of contention with the Orthodox for centuries before it was an issue for Protestants, and the papacy remains a point of contention to this day. While the Orthodox have acknowledged a “primacy of honor” to the Roman See, they reject the Roman claims to papal authority. (Recall that the First Vatican Council anathematized those who hold the Orthodox view of Roman primacy; 1:6).

A notable emblem of the historic conflict between Rome and the Orthodox is the famous Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon, which acknowledged Constantinople as the New Rome when it became the capital of the empire. The rationale for this is particularly interesting:

For the Fathers rightly granted privileges to the throne of old Rome, because it was the imperial city. And the One Hundred and Fifty most religious Bishops, actuated by the same consideration, gave equal privileges to the most holy throne of New Rome, judging justly that the city which is honored with the Sovereignty and the Senate, and enjoys equal privileges with old imperial Rome should in ecclesiastical matters also be magnified as she is, and rank next after her...³⁷

This canon was rejected by Rome, but the point remains that it shows that the Fathers of Chalcedon judged that Roman authority rested in no small part on the fact that it had been the capital city, not on an irrevocable conferral of authority by Christ. To what extent these political realities shaped Rome’s “consciousness of its authority” is debatable, but for these early Fathers, Rome’s authority was in no small part due to political factors.

36. Eno, *Rise of the Papacy*, 147.

37. Cited by Clark Carlton, *The Truth: What Every Roman Catholic Should Know About the Orthodox Church* (Salisbury, MA: Regina, 1999), 117.

When we consider the larger history of the papacy, with its ever growing bid for secular power, and the moral and spiritual corruption that often attended those bids for power, it is even more difficult to sanctify Rome's "consciousness of its authority" as warranted by God.³⁸ Indeed, it appears to be very much an unholy grasping for power and political control, as both Orthodox and Protestant critics have argued.

The deeper problem with trying to vindicate papal claims in this fashion, however, is that it is a rather radical break with the traditional claims of the First Vatican Council. Consider again the analogy with the resurrection. In particular, consider how liberal theologians explain how faith in Jesus's resurrection actually emerged. Here, for instance is how Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx thinks this happened:

May it not be that Simon Peter—and indeed the Twelve—arrived via their concrete experience of forgiveness after Jesus' death, encountered as grace and discussed among themselves (as they remembered Jesus' sayings about, among other things, the gracious God) at the "evidence for belief": the Lord is alive? He renews for them the offer of salvation; this they experience in their own conversion; he must therefore be alive.³⁹

According to Schillebeeckx, faith in the resurrection was not generated by actual appearances of Jesus after his death, nor by an empty tomb, as traditional biblical scholars contend. Rather, it was produced by a conversion experience in which the disciples were gathered together, and felt that they were forgiven by Jesus for their cowardice when he was crucified. If they were forgiven by Christ, they inferred that he must therefore be alive. The stories about the appearances and the empty tomb only came later.

It is important to stress how much of a radical reversal this sort of approach represents. In short, it is not the case that actual appearances of a bodily resurrected Jesus, along with an empty tomb, are what actually generated belief in his resurrection—rather, experiences of forgiveness generated the belief that he was alive, and later, the stories of the appearances and the empty tomb.

Now Schillebeeckx's views are hardly the consensus of critical scholars. But now let us suppose they were. Let us suppose that there was a strong consensus among scholars of all stripes that Jesus did not in fact appear to the disciples after his death, nor did they actually witness an empty tomb. Rather, belief in the resurrection was entirely generated as Schillebeeckx suggests, by a conversion experience in which the disciples felt themselves forgiven. Moreover, let us suppose that only late in the second century did anyone claim that Jesus had actually appeared bodily to

38. See Collins and Walls, *Roman But Not Catholic*, 220-243.

39. *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 391.

the disciples, and that the tomb was empty.⁴⁰ And only centuries later was there any sort of clear theology of resurrection based on appearances of Jesus and an empty tomb. Given this sort of scenario, would it not undermine rational confidence that the resurrection as traditionally understood really did happen? And would it not make it highly doubtful that this rather amorphous account of resurrection could provide warrant for the traditional doctrines such as Incarnation and Trinity that are premised upon it?

Likewise, it is dubious that historically “sketchy” accounts of how papal theology arose out of Rome’s sense of its own authority can support the strong claims that have traditionally been made for papal authority. If the robust historical claims that have traditionally supported papal theology emerged out of that theology rather than producing it, we have a radical reversal similar to that represented in Schillebeeckx’s account of the resurrection.

In the same vein, consider the views of the distinguished Roman Catholic New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, who agrees with the consensus of scholars that Peter was not the first pope, that the episcopacy in Rome did not emerge until the second century, and indeed that the episcopacy in general was not founded by the historical Christ.⁴¹ Brown defends the episcopacy (including, presumably the papacy), however, as established by Christ “in the nuanced sense that the episcopate gradually emerged in a Church that stemmed from Christ and that this emergence was (in the eyes of faith) guided by the Holy Spirit.” Brown insists that it does not detract from the dignity of bishops to trace the “appearance of the episcopate more directly to the Holy Spirit than to the historical Jesus.”⁴²

Again, robust claims about objective events that are visible to the “eyes of history” are replaced by a much more subjective gradual emergence ascribed to the guidance of the Holy Spirit visible only to “the eyes of faith.”

The fourth and final strategy for saving the papal hypothesis that I will mention here is one that might be inspired by Alvin Plantinga’s account of warranted Christian belief. Plantinga argues, of course, for an account of faith that is “a belief-producing process or activity, like perception or memory.”⁴³ As such, when faith is produced in the right way, it leads to knowledge just as our other faculties do when functioning properly. The aim of faith is to allow us to know a particularly important set of truths, namely, what God has graciously done to provide for our salvation. In order to do this, Plantinga contends that God first arranged for the production of scripture, the inspired set of books of which he is the primary author. But our knowledge of the truth of Scripture does not depend on us and our critical reading skills. Rather,

40. Schillebeeckx, of course, does not claim that these reports were that late.

41. Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999; Previously published by The Missionary Society of St. Paul, 1970), 51-54; 72-73.

42. *Priest and Bishop*, 73.

43. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 256.

this knowledge is ultimately due to the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, who witnesses to our hearts and minds to convince us of the truth of the gospel:

We read Scripture, or something presenting scriptural teaching, or hear the gospel preached....What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying, 'Yes, that's right, that's the truth of the matter; this is indeed the word of the Lord.' I read, 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself'; I think: 'Right; that's true; God really was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself!'⁴⁴

When we find ourselves believing the gospel in response to the witness of the Holy Spirit in this fashion, this counts as knowledge just as much as our memory and perceptual beliefs do when these faculties are functioning properly. Indeed, Plantinga emphasizes that faith produced in this way is warranted "even if I don't know of and cannot make a good historical case for the reliability of the biblical writers or for what they teach. I *don't* need a good historical case for the truth of the central teachings of the gospel to be warranted in accepting them."⁴⁵

Here the defender of traditional Roman papal theology may appeal to Plantinga's model of warranted Christian belief to support his convictions. He may say that when he reads Matthew 16, he finds himself believing traditional Roman claims about Peter and his successors. Maybe he even finds those claims compelling. He admits he has no good historical case for these views, but insists he does not need such a case. He believes the Holy Spirit has witnessed to him that traditional Roman papal claims are true, and he is altogether warranted in holding that belief, and even insisting he knows it is true.⁴⁶

Now the first thing to notice here is that Plantinga's "extended" model of warranted Christian belief is only extended to "the central teachings of the gospel," the beliefs that are "common to the great creeds of the main branches of the Christian church."⁴⁷ It makes no claims about controversial doctrines that divide the various

44. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 250.

45. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 259.

46. A similar move to defend papal doctrine was made several years ago by Cardinal Alfons Stickler, in response to Brian Tierney's erudite historical argument that the doctrine of papal infallibility was invented in the thirteenth century during a debate on the place of poverty in the Franciscan tradition. Stickler responded to Tierney as follows: "Theology deals with revealed data, and all scholarly research in *theology*, therefore, must begin with the acceptance of a valid revelation even when it exceeds rational verifications, and it must accept as its own scientific criteria not only the written revealed truths but also their cognitive development and their binding definitions through the living magisterium supported by a tradition which is likewise under the guidance of a higher revealed light. If, therefore, a historian sets up criteria of research, with the results derived therefrom, of a purely rational nature, he is not a historian of theology." Cited by William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998), 79. The similarity here is that Stickler appeals to the authority of the magisterium, "under the guidance of higher revealed light" to warrant papal doctrine.

47. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, vii.

Christian denominations and traditions. So it is doubtful that Plantinga would endorse stretching it to form an "extra-extended Plantinga/Papal" model for settling denominational disputes.

But setting this worry aside, there is a deeper problem for such an attempt to employ Plantinga's model to this issue. Here it is. While Plantinga insists that belief in the central truths of the gospel can be warranted even if there is no good historical case for the reliability of the gospels, this does not mean that there can be warrant in the face of any and all sorts of historical evidence. Warrant does not require a positive historical case, but a sufficiently strong negative case has the potential to undermine warrant:

Isn't it clearly possible that historians should discover facts that put Christian belief into serious question, count heavily against it? Well, maybe so....The Christian faith is a historical faith, in the sense that it essentially depends on what in fact did happen: 'And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile' (I Corinthians 15:17). And it could certainly happen that by the exercise of reason we come up with powerful evidence against something we take or took to be a deliverance of the faith....Then Christians would have a problem, a sort of conflict between faith and reason.⁴⁸

And this would be a serious problem indeed if we assume that our divinely given belief forming faculties, functioning properly and at their best, should deliver beliefs that are mutually compatible. If our reasoning faculty when properly functioning led us to believe that a historical claim was very probably or almost certainly false, it would be quite a conundrum if that claim was a foundational belief of the deliverances of faith.

Plantinga concludes his discussion of this matter in a rather open-ended way as he ponders what the appropriate response would be if he were actually faced with such powerful negative evidence. After mentioning several possibilities, he acknowledges that does not know which, if any, of those possibilities he should choose. But what is clear is that he does not think such evidence could simply be waved off, or defeated by taking the deliverances of faith as properly basic beliefs.

But what Plantinga raises as a mere hypothetical possibility for Christian faith appears to be an actual dilemma for conservative Roman Catholics who affirm traditional papal doctrine. The bottom line here is that the strong claims that Rome makes for herself require sufficient warrant if those claims are to be taken as true. The robust claims of traditional papal doctrine have purported to provide that warrant. The dilemma is posed by the fact that there is very strong evidence that the historical claims that have traditionally underwritten papal theology and Rome's distinctive claims to authority are simply false. And if they are false, Rome's traditional papal theology and distinctive claims to ecclesial authority are accordingly undermined and should also be rejected as false.

48. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 420-421.