

INDEFECTIBILITY

If the Church adhered to an anti-pope it would already be over

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In the [first article](#) dedicated to the study published by Fr. Giorgio M. Faré, the *Daily Compass* demonstrated how the historical references he quoted to argue that the Universal Peaceful Adherence (APU) was contradicted by facts deduced from Church

history, are incorrect. In the [second article](#), the APU was defended against the accusation of being contrary to canon law and the claim that, in any case, it would not apply to the present pontificate. In this article, we explain the profound meaning of this doctrine which the Church teaches to be definitive (dogmatic fact), to show what a possible denial of it would entail, and finally to dispel recurrent misunderstandings about its content.

Let us begin with the first point to which [an article](#) has already been dedicated and to which it is worth returning. What do we mean by APU? First of all, it is a truth connected with divine Revelation, to the point that it is to be held in a full and irrevocable manner; the link between the APU and Revelation is so close that the Church 'armour-plates' the former, teaching it definitively and considering it a dogmatic fact, in order to protect the latter. Put another way: if the former (which is not a dogma, but a dogmatic fact) were to fall, the latter (dogma) would also fall, as happens with all those truths necessarily connected to Revelation, whether they have a logical connection or a historical relationship with the latter.

The APU states, in extreme synthesis, that the universal Church's adhesion to X as pope is the infallible sign that he is indeed the pope. This adherence has two faces: one positive, which occurs in the fact that the elector is accepted by the cardinal electors, then by the episcopate and finally by the members of the Church; the other negative, in the sense that there is an absence of contestation of the election. That this does not have to be a mathematical unanimity is very clear to all the theologians who treat the matter.

Now, the key point of the APU is as follows: the universal acceptance of the bishops and faithful of a pope as legitimately elected is certain proof that he is pope. The reason lies in the fact that the Church, as a whole, cannot err in recognising its head, the Vicar of Christ. Cardinal Charles Journet explains: 'The universal peaceful acceptance of the Church currently uniting itself to the one elected as the head to whom it submits, is an act by which the Church commits its destiny. It is therefore an act that is in itself infallible, and is immediately recognisable as such'. Indeed, the Church possesses its note of infallibility in *docendo ed in credendo* (in teaching and believing) even on so-called dogmatic facts, which are closely connected to Revelation. If the Church could universally adhere to one who is not the true pope, it would follow that it would be wrong for it to adhere to one who is not its head, to submit to one who has no power of jurisdiction, and to believe a teaching, which could be definitive or even *ex cathedra*, erroneously.

The Jesuit Louis Billot, created cardinal by St. Pius X, explained that the universal peaceful adherence is intimately connected with Christ's twofold promise: 'The gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Mt 16:18) and 'Behold I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28:20); these are the two evangelical passages that establish the infallibility of the Church and its indefectibility. Thus Billot: 'Since the Church's adherence to a false Pontiff would be tantamount to its adherence to a false rule of faith, given that the Pope is the living rule of faith that the Church must follow and in fact always follows [...]', it is possible that there may be doubts about the legitimacy of the elected pope, just as it is possible that the period of the *sede vacante* may be prolonged longer than normal, while instead, by virtue of his promises, God 'cannot allow the whole Church to accept as pontiff one who is not truly and legitimately so. Therefore, when the pope is accepted by the Church and united to her as the head to the body, it is no longer permitted to raise doubts about a possible flaw in the election or the lack of a necessary condition for legitimacy' (*Tractatus De Ecclesia Christi, II*, 1909, p. 620).

This text - to which many others by various theologians could be added - gives substance to what the 1998 Doctrinal Note intended to express, teaching that the legitimacy of the pontiff accepted by the Church is a truth connected to Revelation and therefore to be held in a certain and definitive manner, whatever doubts might be raised. St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori was exactly along the same lines: 'It matters not that in past centuries any pontiff was illegitimately elected, or fraudulently intruded into the pontificate; it is enough that he was then accepted by the whole Church as pope, since by such acceptance he has already made himself legitimate and true pontiff. But if for some time he had not been truly universally accepted by the Church, then for that

time the papal see would be vacant' (*Verità della fede, in Opere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, VIII, Torino, 1880, p. 720).

Let us now see what universal pacific acceptance is not, to avoid misunderstandings and to further clarify. First of all, it is not the APU that 'makes the pope', as if it were a plebiscite of a political nature. The pope is invested with his authority directly by Jesus Christ: the cardinals nominate, the candidate accepts, but it is the Lord who gives him authority over the entire Church. The APU, on the other hand, is the manifestation that he is the pope, that is, it is the effect of the intervention of Jesus Christ who has given the Church a new successor to the Apostle Peter and his vicar. The APU is therefore not the cause of the pope's legitimacy, but the infallible sign, the certain effect of the cause, which is precisely the investiture by the Lord Jesus. Since we see the effect (universal peaceful acceptance) we are infallibly certain of the cause (legitimate pontiff).

Second point: the APU is not a sure sign that X is pope provided the election was legitimate, but is the effect of a valid election and that is all. And this is how it has also been transposed into canon law: any disputes about the eligibility of the elected person or canonical procedures fall before the APU. This in no way entails a conflict between law and theology, but puts them in the right order: the cardinals have the legal instruments to check that everything is done properly and, if necessary, to contest the election; but as soon as the Church, including the cardinal electors, accepts X as pope, the matter is closed: we have the effect, we therefore also have the cause.

Third misunderstanding: the APU does not tell me that the pope to whom the Church adheres will be a good pope, or even that he will exercise his role of being the rule of faith adequately. Still less does it imply that the pope will be rule of the faith in whatever way he expresses himself. All the theological criteria regarding the type of assent required for various pronouncements, according to the degree of each, remains intact. The APU therefore does not lead to a 'papist' attitude, whereby whatever the pope says or writes must be believed and executed.

Fourthly, it is objected that the APU is not a dogma, but a theological opinion. That the APU is not a dogma is crystal clear and yet it is not merely a theological opinion, but a dogmatic fact. This doctrine is held to be certain by all theologians and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, commenting on no less than the *Professio fidei*, has authoritatively placed it precisely among the dogmatic facts, to which certain and irrevocable consent is due. We have also seen ([here](#) and [here](#)) how it was included among the conditions set by Martin V for the readmission of repentant lollards and

hussites into the Church. Moreover, the fact remains that the denial of the APU would have devastating consequences for the infallibility of the Church, as explained above.