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Universal adherence to the legitimate Pope is not an opinion

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In a recent article published by *LifeSiteNews*, penned by Matthew McCusker, it is argued that the Church's universal peaceful adherence to the pope would not prove that Francis is the legitimate pope. According to the author, this theological thesis, which he admits

is supported by an ‘impressive number of Catholic theologians’, leads to a contradiction: ‘ On the one hand, UPA [universal peaceful adherence, ed.] gives infallible certainty that a man is truly the pope. On the other hand, a man who possesses UPA could, according to Billot and others, cease to be the pope'.

The author demonstrates correctly that the same theologians - the reference is in particular to Louis Billot - who advocate universal peaceable adherence as the decisive criterion for understanding who the pope is, admit, however, that the pope may cease to be the pope due to public heresy. One would then find oneself in the following apparent contradiction (we shall see why the adjective is used): that a pope who is ‘ consecrated’ as such by universal acceptance, would not actually be pope because he is a heretic; X would therefore be pope according to the first criterion and not pope considering the second.

In order to resolve the contradiction, the author believes we need to take a closer look at the meaning of universal pacific acceptance, which is based on considering the pope as the ‘living rule of faith’. McCusker states that there is in fact no universal adherence to Francis as the ‘living rule of faith’, which would indicate that there is therefore no universal peaceful adherence either. In support of this, the author reports the numerous occasions when part of the episcopate has opposed Francis’ teachings, concluding that it can be seen “with great clarity” that “Francis publicly departs from the rule of faith proposed by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church” and that “significant parts of the episcopate refuse to follow him as the ”living rule of faith”. By the bishops not following Pope Francis as the living rule of faith, universal peaceful acceptance would therefore be lacking.

Unfortunately, however, the author's considerations are full of inaccuracies and *non sequiturs*, which lead him to perceive a contradiction where none exists at all and to elaborate an explanation that completely misrepresents the meaning of universal peaceful adherence.

First point: universal peaceful adherence is not a thesis held by many theologians, but a dogmatic fact, as expressly recalled by the 1998 Doctrinal Note. I refer to several articles dedicated to the subject in order that the question under discussion is fully understood(here, here, here and here). At this point it suffices to recall the fact that it is from the universally agreed acceptance that the pope is a living rule of the faith, and not the other way around: if the election of X as pope is universally accepted, then X is to be followed as a living rule of the faith (we will explain what this means shortly), but the contrary does not apply. That is to say, if there are bishops who

later refuse to follow the pope as the living rule of faith, it does not mean that there is no universal peaceful acceptance, since the latter refers to the election, not to subsequent events. Otherwise it would be the case that any challenge to a pope's teaching would cast doubt on the legitimacy of his election.

Point two: the contradiction evoked by the author simply does not exist. Universal acceptance affirms, in fact, that a pope whose election is not contested by the bishops is the legitimate pope. And such universal peaceful acceptance dispels any possible doubt about alleged irregularities in the conclave or any doubt about his person. But it by no means affirms that he cannot subsequently fall into heresy. A pope can be universally recognised in the first sense, and then fall into heresy and cease to be pope. Where would the contradiction lie? In Aristotle's Gamma book of the *Metaphysics*, he articulated the principle of contradiction as follows: 'It is impossible for the same attribute, at the same time, to belong and not to belong to the same object and in the same respect'. In this case, the same attribute (being pope) is attributed to the same subject, but at different times.
With regard to the question of the heretical pope, even for St. Robert Bellarmine, the pope would only fall in to heresy when a (declarative, not coercive) judgement of the Church intervenes and not when he simply pronounces heresy and even less so if it is a doctrinal error.

Third point: the author equivocates on the pope as the living rule of faith. Yet he himself cites a text by the Rev. Sylvester Berry that would, if properly understood, have prevented this misunderstanding. Berry explains why the dogmatic fact of universal peaceable adherence is so important: if the Church could universally adhere to one who is not actually pope, then it would always be possible to question the legitimacy of this or that pope and thus also of the infallible or definitive teachings he has pronounced. Here are in fact the examples given by Berry: 'was the [First] Vatican Council truly ecumenical? Was Pius IX a legitimate pope? Was the election of Pius XI valid? Such questions must be decided with certainty before decrees issued by any council or pope can be accepted as infallibly true or binding on the Church' (italics ours). Put another way: I could question the infallible teachings of Vatican I or the Immaculate Conception by questioning the legitimacy of Cardinal Mastai Ferretti's election.

But it is clear that Berry is talking about infallible (or at least definitive) teachings, not any teaching of the pontiff. Following the pope as the 'living rule of faith' must be understood according to the broader teaching of the Magisterium's degrees of pronouncement, which McCusker forgets to do. In fact, the objections of some of the

bishops he referred to were not directed at infallible or definitive teachings of the pope (there are none, as yet, in this pontificate), but at teachings that are part of the authentic Magisterium or other non-Magisterial utterances. When one therefore resists the pope who errs, one does not at all cease to adhere to him as the 'living rule of faith', but one exercises a right/duty provided for by the very law of the Church, precisely because the pope is not committing a degree of magisterium that requires an adherence of theological faith, nor the firm and definitive assent to be given to definitive pronouncements.

The author presses on: 'The Catholic Church has in fact refused to adhere to the false rule of faith, as is seen in the number of Catholics at all levels in the Church - laity, bishops and cardinals - who have publicly rejected the heresies taught by Francis, whether in the amended Catechism, Amoris lætitia, or in other documents released with apparently official status'. But the point is not the 'official status' (what does that even mean?) of a document, but the magisterial degree of its assertions.

The author's conclusion is therefore completely erroneous and misleading. Let us consider it (the numbers are not present in the original text, but have been introduced to make the counter-argument more easily understandable): 'In summary, 1. If the Church peacefully and universally adheres to a man as pope, it adheres to him as its living rule of faith. 2. But the Church does not peacefully and universally adhere to Francis as its living rule of faith. The Church does not peacefully and universally adhere to Francis as pope. 3. Therefore, the argument of universal and peaceful adherence cannot be used to reach the conclusion that Francis is the pope'.

As to point 1, it has been seen that this adherence to the pope as a living rule of faith must be understood in the light of the Church's integral teaching on the degrees of pronouncement of the Magisterium, an aspect that the author unfortunately fails to consider. Point 2: there is not a single legitimate bishop who has contested the legitimacy of Francis's election, nor is there any bishop (Viganò is currently excommunicated) who believes that he is not pope; there are, if anything, bishops who contest assertions that are not infallible and not definitive, therefore pronounced by the pope not as a living rule of faith. Point 3: the argument of universal peaceful adherence fully retains its relevance and cogency. Nor can it be inferred that Francis is not pope for heresy, since the Church has not (as yet) made any declaratory judgement against him (which according to some authors would not even be possible or desirable).