

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF  
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR THE SEVENTH-DAY  
ADVENTIST CHURCH IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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“This Vatican Council declares  
that the human person has a right to religious freedom.”

(Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae*, 8 December 1965)

Forty years have elapsed since the fathers of the Second Vatican Council proclaimed these historic words. At once they appear surprising: many popes of the nineteenth century condemned “the liberty of conscience,” including Gregory XVI, Pius IX, and Leo XIII. Likewise, instances of religious repression were at times permitted, and even encouraged by popes and councils (Albigensian Crusade, Spanish Inquisition, etc.).

Nowhere would surprise seem more apparent than among Seventh-day Adventists, who, following the (presumed) prophetic insights of Ellen White, presently assert that the Catholic Church will again repress non-Catholic religions (GC 581). Unfortunately, few Adventists have reviewed Vatican II’s articulation of the Catholic position; misconceptions abound.

Before one can truly understand the post-conciliar doctrine of Religious Liberty, a concise introduction to the pre-conciliar origins of the doctrine, and an appraisal of the modern teaching’s authority after 1960, are in order. This survey will then compare this information to the predictions made in the writings of Ellen White.

#### Pre-Conciliar Foundations of the Doctrine

Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Immortale Dei* (1885), addressed the question of religious toleration, noting that the suppression of error was not an absolute or unconditional moral imperative. While he affirms the Church’s traditional insistence that states must not regard all faiths equally (but should endorse and protect the Catholic faith), he adds,

but [the Church] does not, on that account, condemn those rulers who, for the sake of securing some great good or of hindering some great evil, allow patiently custom or usage to be a kind of sanction for each kind of religion having its place in the State. And, in fact, the Church is wont to take earnest heed that no one shall be forced

to embrace the Catholic faith against his will, for, as St. Augustine wisely reminds us, “Man cannot believe otherwise than of his own will.” (*ID* 36)

Leo’s response subordinates the value of repressing errors to other values: “securing some great good... hindering some great evil,” as each particular circumstance would dictate. Among these benefits, he notes that the toleration of error respects the moral limit of Christian evangelization: attempts to coerce the will. Quoting Augustine, Leo reminds his readers that men *cannot* be compelled to accept the Catholic faith against their will; further, they “*cannot* believe otherwise” than in accordance with their own will. The integrity of every man’s conscience, though confirmed in error, must be respected with “earnest heed.”

Leo’s witness to this established teaching of the Church allows us to more carefully interpret the condemnations of “Liberty of Conscience,” so prevalent among the popes of the Nineteenth Century (himself included). One might synthesize the Church’s position this way: no man has a natural right to choose error (a false liberty of conscience): they are bound morally to accept the truth. But, even if they choose error, men have the right to be respected in the decision they have made. All forms of coercion, pressure, or compulsion are excluded inasmuch as the human will must be exercised freely (the integrity of conscience). In this light, the statements of the Second Vatican Council seem less revolutionary, and finely consistent:

This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. (*Dignitatis Humanae* 2)

Attention must be paid to the primary reason why the Church protects the integrity of every man’s conscience (the “higher good” intrinsic in the respect of this freedom). The Church champions the defense of man’s free will not to protect man’s right to embrace error, but to protect man’s right to embrace truth. The positive end of this freedom is salvation itself: “Religious freedom, in turn... [is] necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God.” (*DH* 1)

This proposition excludes two forms of religious repression. On the one hand, it condemns direct attempts to oppose man’s embrace of Christianity (the persecution of Christians, the repression of Christian evangelization, etc.) On the other hand, it condemns (misguided) attempts to oppose man’s embrace of Christianity by condemning those actions that preclude man’s *free* embrace of Christianity.

Gregory X wrote in 1272, “that person who is known to have come to Christian baptism not freely, but unwillingly, is not believed to possess the Christian faith.” Vatican II agreed, “the act of faith is of its very

nature a free act... [Man] cannot give his adherence to God... [unless] he offers to God the reasonable and free submission of faith.” (*DH* 10) If indeed men *cannot* embrace the truth unless they are permitted to do so freely, any measure that excludes the freedom of the act thereby prevents the act itself. Therefore, even coercive measures with positive aims (encouraging conversion) are as adverse to the true promulgation of Christianity as those with negative aims (discouraging conversion). Ultimately, man’s freedom to embrace truth presupposes his ability to reject truth; the defense of the former *must* include a protection of the latter to be effective.

Unlike the religious indifferentism condemned by Gregory XVI and Pius IX (the false “liberty of conscience”), Catholic Christianity protects the free exercise of man’s conscience *and* affirms the reality and binding force of truth. Leo XIII reiterates the distinction between these two ideas of religious liberty in his encyclical *Libertas* (1888):

Another liberty is widely advocated, namely, liberty of conscience. If by this is meant that everyone may, as he chooses, worship God or not, it is sufficiently refuted by the arguments already adduced. But it may also be taken to mean that every man in the State may follow the will of God and, from a consciousness of duty and free from every obstacle, obey His commands. This, indeed, is true liberty, a liberty worthy of the sons of God, which nobly maintains the dignity of man... Christian liberty bears witness to the absolute and most just dominion of God over man, and to the chief and supreme duty of man toward God. (30)

Decades later, Pius XI would also witness to this distinction. After asserting the right of men to embrace salvation and evangelize others, he explains:

It was in consideration of this double right of souls that We lately declared Ourselves happy and proud to wage the good fight for the liberty of consciences. No indeed (as someone, perhaps inadvertently, has represented Us as saying) for “the liberty of conscience,” which is an equivocal expression too often distorted to mean the absolute independence of conscience and therefore an absurdity in reference to a soul created and redeemed by God. (*Non Abbiamo Bisogno* 40)

Pre-conciliar condemnations of the “liberty of conscience” were not blanket condemnations of all forms of religious liberty. A freedom of conscience inspired by a sense of moral responsibility had long been asserted and championed. In fact, the Council Fathers developed their teaching on religious liberty directly upon the Church’s ancient regard for the inviolability of the human conscience: calling renewed attention to this timeless conviction. (*DH* 9-12)

And yet, the Council grasped the demands of the doctrine more profoundly than previous generations: challenging established Christian practice in the process. For centuries, many Catholics (including leaders in Rome) had failed to equate persecution with coercion: Vatican II clarified this very issue. Applying the doctrine that no man should be coerced into faith more deeply than previous generations, the Council fathers authoritatively condemned all forms of religious persecution (including those once wrongly condoned by the Church) as innately coercive and opposed to the dignity of men. While upholding this timeless teaching of the Church, the Council rejected the inconsistent implementation of that teaching throughout Christian history:

In faithfulness therefore to the truth of the Gospel, the Church is following the way of Christ and the apostles when she recognizes and gives support to the principle of religious freedom as befitting the dignity of man and as being in accord with divine revelation... In the life of the People of God, as it has made its pilgrim way through the vicissitudes of human history, there has at times appeared a way of acting that was hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel or even opposed to it. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Church that no one is to be coerced into faith has always stood firm ...in the course of time men have come more widely to recognize their dignity as persons, and the conviction has grown stronger that the person in society is to be kept free from all manner of coercion in matters religious. (*Ibid.*, 12)

Under the guidance of John XXIII and Paul VI, the Church at once affirmed, clarified, and reformed its timeless commitment to true religious liberty: “continually [bringing] forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old.” (*Ibid.*, 1) Accordingly, one may speak of a “modern” teaching on religious liberty: a doctrinal development grounded in past teaching, but distinct in its precision (analogous to Trinitarian theology after the fourth century).

Earlier popes framed their positions on religious liberty in the light of intellectual liberalism (indifferentism, laicism), or the benefits of tolerance within a religiously diverse state. Beginning with John XXIII, the Church abandoned these reactionary approaches. The modern synthesis embraces the inviolate rights of human beings: a moral universal transcending the language of “tolerance.” Whereas the latter usually connotes a particularized concession, the former promotes eternal principles of relation “not conferred from outside but which arise from the person's very nature.” (John Paul II, Message: 1 January 1981)

This insight also gave the Church a definitive counterargument to a traditional thesis: “*error has no rights*” (so often used to defend religious persecution and repression). Error may have no rights, but human beings do. The former, an abstract concept, should be opposed; but one cannot offend the dignity of another's conscience in that pursuit.

## Authority of the Doctrine

Although Vatican II declined proclaiming its teaching on religious liberty in an extraordinary manner (dogmatic definition), it did, in Ecumenical Council, authoritatively affirm the doctrine by an exercise of its ordinary magisterium:

The teaching authority of the Church, though not wishing to issue extraordinary dogmatic pronouncements [during the Council], has made thoroughly known its authoritative teaching on a number of questions which today weigh upon man's conscience and activity... ever preserving its own authority and force. (*Address of Pope Paul VI during the Last General Meeting of the Second Vatican Council, 7 Dec. 1965*)

Most importantly, the Church has repeatedly declared religious liberty an article of apostolic faith and morality: timeless, universal, and binding upon all Christians: “this doctrine of freedom has roots in divine revelation, and for this reason Christians are bound to respect it all the more conscientiously.” (*DH* 9) And again, “throughout the ages the Church has kept safe and handed on this doctrine received from the Master and from the apostles.” (*Ibid.*, 12) Thus, as a recognized facet of the Christian deposit of faith, its infallibility is guaranteed by the decrees of the First Vatican Council:

All those things are to be believed which are contained in the word of God as found in Scripture and tradition, and which are proposed by the Church as matters to be believed as divinely revealed, whether by her solemn judgment or in her ordinary and universal magisterium.” (Vatican I, 3:8; c.f. Paul VI: *Credo*)

That the pastoral intent of the Council does not undermine its doctrinal authority (with certain qualifications) is evident from an appendix to *Lumen Gentium*:

Taking conciliar custom into consideration and also the pastoral purpose of the present Council, the sacred Council defines as binding on the Church only those things in matters of faith and morals which it shall openly declare to be binding. (*LG*, Appendix: ‘*Notifications*’ Given by the Secretary General of the Council.)

The Council’s insistences that Christians “are bound to respect” religious liberty as a truth rooted in divine revelation (*DH* 9, 12), and that “individual men and social groups are bound by the moral law to have respect ...for the rights of others [to religious freedom]” (*Ibid.*, 7) conform to this requirement. The frequent and consistent repetitions of this mandate by

Rome's supreme magisterium in subsequent decades (as illustrated in this reader) reaffirm the doctrine's perpetual validity.

Finally, a clear distinction must be drawn between the official acts of the Church, and her eternal doctrine. In Catholic dogma, the Holy Spirit actively protects the universal teaching authority of the Church from every possibility of *proclaiming* error – a doctrine referred to as the infallibility of the Church (*LG* 25). Nonetheless, even councils and popes may (in rare cases) misapply Church teachings and make temporal decisions out of harmony with Christian truth (*DH* 25). Christendom's evolving attitude towards the use of torture (a legacy of ancient Roman law) aptly represents this distinction. The permissive stance of the medieval papacy (and councils) with regards to torture, however limited, was not protected from the possibility of misjudgment. The later moral clarification issued by Vatican II and the post-conciliar papacy (in their condemnation of all forms of torture, including those countenanced by the medieval Church is, on the other hand, protected from error (inasmuch as it is a doctrinal pronouncement on morals).

#### Ellen White in Review

Ellen White grounds her expectation of a future persecution upon the infallibility of the Church, which she assumes endorses the right of Catholics to persecute heretics:

The papal church will never relinquish her claim to infallibility. All that she has done in her persecution of those who reject her dogmas she holds to be right; and would she not repeat the same acts, should the opportunity be presented? (*GC* 564)

She repeats this argument twice more in the chapter, where persecution is alternately called “doctrine” or “principle” of the Church:

Every principle of the papacy that existed in past ages exists today. The doctrines devised in the darkest ages are still held. Let none deceive themselves. The papacy that Protestants are now so ready to honor is the same that ruled the world in the days of the Reformation, when men of God stood up, at the peril of their lives, to expose her iniquity..... Her spirit is no less cruel and despotic now than when she crushed out human liberty and slew the saints of the Most High.

...

And let it be remembered, it is the boast of Rome that she never changes. The principles of Gregory VII and Innocent III are still the principles of the Roman Catholic Church. And had she but the power, she would put them in practice with as much vigor now as in past centuries. (*GC* 571,581)

To support this contention, she cites the two encyclicals of Pius IX (*Quanta Cura*, *Syllabus of Errors*) that condemn “liberty of conscience.” However, we have already noted that those documents, while forbidding a liberal abuse of conscience, do not contradict the individual’s right to the integrity of conscience (affirmed by his immediate successor, Leo XIII).

Likewise, the authority of that teaching enunciated by the Church’s ordinary and universal magisterium at the Second Vatican Council excludes her contention that the right of Catholics to persecute is protected by the Church’s “claim to infallibility.” To the contrary, the modern Catholic articulation of the integrity of conscience does carry a perpetual moral authority. Furthermore, the modern Catholic Church has condemned all past instances of Church-endorsed persecution, hardly revealing that “all that she has done in her persecution of those who reject her dogmas she holds to be right.”

However, many Adventists note that White does predict a time in which Catholics would issue apologies (however insincere) for past instances of persecution (probably attributable not so much to the Vatican itself, as much as to the American “defenders of the papacy,” GC 563):

The Roman Church now presents a fair front to the world, covering with apologies her record of horrible cruelties. She has clothed herself in Christlike garments; but she is unchanged. (GC 571)

Two observations are in order in this regard. First, modern Catholic apologies *follow* the doctrinal proclamations of Vatican II; thus, an objective observer notes that they genuinely reflect modern Catholic theology. They are not, therefore, the superficial claims of an “unchanged” power.

Secondly, Ellen White elaborates on the nature of these apologies earlier in the chapter:

The defenders of the papacy declare that the church has been maligned, and the Protestant world are inclined to accept the statement. Many urge that it is unjust to judge the church of today by the abominations and absurdities that marked her reign during the centuries of ignorance and darkness. They excuse her horrible cruelty as the result of the barbarism of the times and plead that the influence of modern civilization has changed her sentiments. (GC 563)

Apparently, the superficiality of these apologies follows their lack of humble repentance, revealed in the propensity to excuse past persecutions. However, such superficiality does not characterize modern papal apologies, which refuse to admit excuses so to “exonerate the Church”:

Many factors frequently converged to create assumptions that justified intolerance and fostered an emotional climate from which only great spirits, truly free and filled with God, were in some way able to break free. Yet the consideration of mitigating factors does not

exonerate the Church from the obligation to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face, preventing her from fully mirroring the image of her crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and of humble meekness. From these painful moments of the past a lesson can be drawn for the future, leading all Christians to adhere fully to the sublime principle stated by the Council: “The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins over the mind with both gentleness and power.” (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adviente* 35)

An honest, objective reading of papal apologies reveals that the only remaining “insincerity” is that shared by the opponents of the Church, who (by refusing to thoughtfully engage the Church’s writings) continue to malign and misrepresent her character.

Among those past deeds Rome allegedly “holds to be right” and will repeat should opportunity be afforded her is torture (GC 564). White notes that “in the days of Rome’s supremacy there were instruments of torture to compel assent to her doctrines” (GC 569; cf. 619). Here again, White “prophetically” charges that Rome will always maintain the legitimacy of a practice it, in fact, finally condemned. One need only read the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which condemns all past instances of the use of torture, *including* even those once committed by “the Pastors of the Church,” that is, the popes and bishops:

In times past, cruel practices were commonly used by legitimate governments to maintain law and order, often without protest from the Pastors of the Church, who themselves adopted in their own tribunals the prescriptions of Roman law concerning torture.... In recent times it has become evident that these cruel practices were neither necessary for public order, nor in conformity with the legitimate rights of the human person. On the contrary, these practices led to ones even more degrading. It is necessary to work for their abolition. We must pray for the victims and their tormentors. (CCC 2298; cf. 2258-2262, 2297)

In the light of the above paragraph, is it right to claim that the Church believe “all she has done in her persecution of those who reject her dogmas... [was] right”? In fact, the Catholic Church believes that there are *no* circumstances which justify recourse either to torture or coercion. The following statements from *Veritatis Splendor* (an encyclical of John Paul II), reflecting the sentiments of Vatican II, are certain in this regard:

Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature “incapable of being ordered” to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church’s moral tradi-

tion, have been termed “intrinsically evil” (*intrinsece malum*): they are such *always and per se*, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances. Consequently, without in the least denying the influence on morality exercised by circumstances and especially by intentions, the Church teaches that “there exist acts which *per se* and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object.” (1) The Second Vatican Council itself, in discussing the respect due to the human person, gives a number of examples of such acts: “Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity... all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the Creator.” (2)

With regard to intrinsically evil acts... Pope Paul VI teaches: “Though it is true that sometimes it is lawful to tolerate a lesser moral evil in order to avoid a greater evil or in order to promote a greater good, it is never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come of it (cf. *Rom 3:8*)—in other words, to intend directly something which of its very nature contradicts the moral order, and which must therefore be judged unworthy of man, even though the intention is to protect or promote the welfare of an individual, of a family or of society in general.” (3)

The above sentiments are especially indicting to those who maintain the inspiration of Ellen White’s writings. White does not simply claim that Rome will return to the practice of coercion and torture; she believes that Rome perpetually maintains their legitimacy. The issue, then, is that Ellen White grounded her argument on an invalid assumption: namely, that the allegedly infallible Roman Church would never rescind her teaching on the validity of religious persecution.

This claim reasons from the false premise that even the Church in White’s day infallibly maintained the legitimacy of coercion. Instead, White misunderstood contemporary papal materials: failing to grasp the limits of the phrase “liberty of conscience” as used by Pius IX—a misunderstanding later corrected by the Catholic Church’s doctrinal authority. These later clarifications (issued by the same office whose alleged infallibility she relies on in constructing her argument) then wholly contradict her claim: proclaiming man’s immunity from coercion in matters religious, and condemning all forms of torture as intrinsically evil. Can the Adventist Church, then, honestly submit the views of Ellen White in *The Great Controversy* (among other works) as inspired?

## Implications

At this juncture, it is important for Adventists to prayerfully review the enormous implications of the above statements. The repentance of the Church in the last forty years has satisfied all of the following conditions:

1. Definitively condemned all instances of religious persecution, including those once sanctioned by the Church (1960-2000s).
2. Clarified its doctrinal stance on the integrity of every human conscience. (1960s).
3. Apologized for the sins of the past (even those committed by her own pastors), without citing mitigating factors or excuses (1990-2000s).
4. Where feasible, even naming specific incidents (1990s: e.g., regarding the execution of John Hus [John Paul II, General Audience, 17 Dec 1999]).
5. Extended full religious liberty to confessional minorities in Catholic countries (1960s), and worked to secure that right in other nations.
6. Condemned torture as an intrinsically immoral act (1960s-1990s).

Adventists should ask, what is lacking in the actions taken by the Catholic Church to correct their record of persecution? If Adventists were to demand a reform of the Papacy on these very critical issues, would not the repentance manifest itself in the fulfillment of the above six actions? What more could possibly be expected of the Church? Would Adventists prefer an unrepentant Vatican to salvage their historic eschatology? Do Adventist prefer mistrust and division to Christian unity (cf. Jn 17:11)?

Perhaps more poignantly: at what point does a heritage of mistrust towards the Catholic Church (such as characterizes Adventism) breed an unforgiving spirit? If the corporate repentance of Catholics is complete and sincere, does not the Adventist unwillingness to thoughtfully engage (and at last, accept) that apology amount to a sin against God (2 Tim 3:3)? Are not the persistent and groundless counterclaims leveled by Rome's critics (that the Catholic apologies are "deceptive") simply a legacy of the historic mistrust that must presently be overcome?

Furthermore, the above evidence confirms that modern Adventist conceptions of Catholic theology (on the question of religious liberty) are, in fact, misrepresentations. The act of continuing to circulate these ideas (e.g., in Church-sponsored evangelistic efforts) amounts to nothing short of willful sin, excluded by the commandment, "thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (Ex. 20:16; KJV), in this case, Catholics. Again, at what point does the need to protect a theological heritage incline an entire denomination to falsity?

The Catholic Church has honestly engaged its troubled past; sadly,

Adventists refuse to engage their unexpected present. We now live in an age when the Roman Church has freely (and unreservedly) articulated a permanent endorsement of religious liberty, sought forgiveness for her past sins, and amended her activities in the world. Not only did Ellen White fail to anticipate this turn of events, she grounded her claims in *Great Controversy* on the assumption that such events *could* never occur. Forty years after Vatican II, it is time for Adventists to respond in a spirit of reconciliation to the Catholic Church, the first step on a long, arduous road to unity.