



Quo Graviora

On The "Pragmatic Constitution"

Encyclical Of Pope Gregory XVI

October 4, 1833

To the Bishops of the Province of Upper Rhineland.

Venerable Brothers, Greetings and Apostolic Blessing.

As more serious ills threaten the Catholic Church from the heinous contrivances of its enemies, the popes who have been placed in the See of St. Peter should be so much the quicker in taking action to repel them. The popes have been delegated the supreme power of nourishing and directing the Church. Our predecessor Pius VIII clearly understood this. Many daring things were attempted -- and not in vain -- against the teaching of the Church and its divine authority in the ecclesiastical province of the Rhineland. As soon as he knew this, Pius VIII sent you a letter at the end of June, 1830, to arouse your pastoral concern, if it was indeed necessary. This letter urged you to protect the rights of the Church with every zeal, to watch over sound doctrine, and to show those who must act how to oppose with reason and justice those ideas harmful to the Church, ideas which you should zealously strive to have revoked. He was extremely concerned with the situation of those churches because of the immense scandal caused by the reforms. He requested an answer from you as soon as possible, either confirming his desires and soothing his grief or -- a possibility not to be entertained -- contrary to his will, so that he might take the required by the duty of his apostolic office

2. These exhortations and encouragements of so great a pope in such a serious matter should arouse you. This is appropriate for those who were called to share in the administration and defense of the Church. Moreover, what Our predecessor never thought of, and what would have certainly disturbed him very much if he were still alive, was reserved for Us to mourn. This is in spite of the fact that We have been appointed in his place with vastly inferior merits and have no desire to hold this position. We cannot say that a matter so opposed to the wishes of this Holy See had ceased. This See is thus generally unaware of whatever effort you have made among those leaders for the welfare of the Catholic religion and whatever result you have obtained. We still await more accurate reports, which

Pius VIII so greatly commended to you, though three years have elapsed. Nor in truth can We assume from this that you did not neglect your duty, that some salutary remedy had in brought at that time to the wounds inflicted on the Catholic Church. On the contrary, an occasion of sharper sorrow is in store for Us. Those matters are already ratified and in full force, to the detriment of the Church and against the agreements entered into between this Holy See and the united leaders. The Church is thus subjected to an unworthy slavery, having been violently deprived of the liberty which Christ gave it. What is more, its condition in those regions worsened because of new causes coming from everywhere, a condition which We (and you) may not contemplate. From that company of priests some men arose who say evil things. They shamelessly condemn that deluded (as they call it) regeneration and restoration of the reformers, thereby rashly enkindling this Apostolic See. They do this in order to draw followers and to deceive the unwary. Therefore, in whatever club they gather and hold meetings or discussions, they never hesitate to treat the Catholic Church, as they say, to reform it.

3. Many of the priests of the city of Offenburg openly showed this kind of blindness not long ago, according to F. L. Mersy, their dean, adviser, and leader. They no longer proposed, for the approval of the archbishop of Freiburg, various points of reform contrived in their meetings. In the individual rural chapters, they spread the same ideas and aroused a wicked conspiracy. Moreover, now and again, they produced a pamphlet with many additions and dared to print it under the bold title: "Are reforms necessary in the Catholic Church?" We wish that the priests of Offenburg gather together and publicly and openly demonstrate their devotion, and that others, both from the diocese of Freiburg and from the rest of the ecclesiastical provinces, might not trouble themselves over this! We wish that this very evil sedition of the reformers contain itself within the boundaries of that city! But We heard long ago and We very sorrowfully recall that this discontent has extended into almost all those regions, especially in the diocese of Rothenburg, and that it extended even outside the ecclesiastical province of the Rhineland.

4. You know, venerable brothers, on what erroneous principles the abovementioned men and their followers depend and where that desire which moves them to begin effecting a revolution in the Church has its origin. We do not think it superfluous to clarify many of those things and to explain them here. A false idea has for a long time grown stronger and spread widely through these regions. This idea is spread by an impious and absurd system of indifference toward religious matters which claims that the Christian religion can become perfect in time. While the patrons of such a false idea are afraid to adapt the shaky possibility of perfection to the truths of faith, they establish it in the external administration and discipline of the Church. Moreover, in order to bring about faith in their error, they wrongfully and deceitfully usurp the authority of Catholic theologians. These theologians propound here and there a distinction between the teaching and the discipline of the Church which underlies this change, that it will always stand firm and never be harmed by any alteration. Once this is established, they state categorically that there are many things in the discipline of the Church

in the present day, in its government, and in the form of its external worship which are not suited to the character of our time. These things, they say, should be changed, as they are harmful for the growth and prosperity of the Catholic religion, before the teaching of faith and morals suffers any harm from it. Therefore, showing a zeal for religion and showing themselves as an example of piety, they force reforms, conceive of changes, and pretend to renew the Church.

5. Truly such reformers use these principles. In addition, they disclose and propose them in many pamphlets, which they distribute especially in Germany. This is now very clear from the booklet printed in Offenburg. It is especially clear from those things which the aforementioned F. L. Mersy, head of the seditious meeting held there, imprudently compiled in his republication of the same book. While these men were shamefully straying in their thoughts, they proposed to fall upon the errors condemned by the Church in proposition 78 of the constitution *Auctorem fidei* (published by Our predecessor, Pius VI on August 28, 1794). They also attacked the pure doctrine which they say they want to keep safe and sound; either they do not understand the situation or craftily pretend not to understand it. While they contend that the entire exterior form of the Church can be changed indiscriminately, do they not subject to change even those items of discipline which have their basis in divine law and which are linked with the doctrine of faith in a close bond? Does not the law of the believer thus produce the law of the doer? Moreover, do they not try to make the Church human by taking away from the infallible and divine authority, by which divine will it is governed? And does it not produce the same effect to think that the present discipline of the Church rests on failures, obscurities, and other inconveniences of this kind? And to feign that this discipline contains many things which are not useless but which are against the safety of the Catholic religion? Why is it that private individuals appropriate for themselves the right which is proper only for the pope?

6. We will now discuss those sections of discipline which are in effect for the whole Church. Because they are free from ecclesiastical instruction, they can undergo change, but only by the pope, whom Christ placed over the entire Church to judge concerning the necessity of change for various reasons of circumstance. Thus, as St. Gelasius wrote: "Balance the decrees of the canons and consider the precepts of your predecessors, so that those things which the demands of the times require to be relaxed for the rebuilding of the churches may be moderated through careful consideration." It is tedious to detain you with a long speech, venerable brothers, about the false principles which the reformers depend on. They add rashness to error with the usual verbal license of such men, since they attack this Holy See as if it were too persistent in outdated customs and did not look deeply inside the character of our time. They accuse this See of becoming blind amid the light of new knowledge, and of hardly distinguishing those things which deal with the substance of religion from those which regard only the external form. They say that it feeds superstition, fosters abuses, and finally behaves as if it never looks after the interests of the Catholic Church in changing times. Where does all this lead? Actually, so that the most Holy See of Peter in which Jesus Christ placed the

foundation of His Church is hastened toward envy. Its divine authority is subjected to the hatred of the people, and the union of other churches with it is broken. The dissidents give up hope then that they would obtain what they want at this Apostolic See. They assert that the Church -- one nation, as they call it -- should be ruled by its own laws. From here they continue so as to grant free authority to revoke or abrogate the laws of the whole Church to each individual pastor, if the expediency of his diocese demands it. What then? Since they do not perceive any advantage among you, they try to free those same priests from the submission due to the bishops. They are not afraid to concede to the priests the right of administrating the dioceses. It is quite clear that these men, acting against the truth of faith, have overthrown the ecclesiastical hierarchy which was established by divine will and defined by the fathers of the Council of Trent. It is also clear that they want to return to the very errors in the propositions 6, 7, 8, and 9 proscribed by the aforesaid dogmatic constitution *Auctorem fidei*.

7. This appears to clearly concern those priests of Offenburg. The condemned doctrines are especially contained in the additions inserted in the re-edited pamphlet so that there is no room for doubt. It now seems a good idea to review individually some of the many other errors with which that pamphlet everywhere abounds. Here occur for the first time the objections of the promoters of the vile plot against clerical celibacy. They do not dare to openly criticize the law of celibacy, as others do; nonetheless, they chatter with daring equal only to their error! They want the priests who are not up to keeping the law of celibacy and whose mores are already so hopelessly corrupted to be moved to lay status, so that they might thus contract valid marriages within the Church. This is hardly in keeping with the intention of the fathers of the Council of Trent, which was explained in session 7, can. 9 concerning the sacraments in general as well as in session 23, chapter 4 and canon 4. It does not escape Us with what means they might try to distort the teaching of the Council of Trent.

8. They contend that according to the opinion of the Council of Trent, he who was once a priest cannot again become a layman by his own authority. He can do this only by the authority of the Church, and they understand by the word "Church" each bishop to whom they give the power to reduce priests to the lay state. Then they affirm that the character which is imprinted in the sacrament of Orders, which the Council said was indelible makes the sacrament of Orders unable to be repeated. It does not in the least, they say, forbid a priest to become a layman in the aforementioned manner. Finally, they hardly shrink from numbering that same character among the things recently agreed upon by the scholastics. Moreover, as they contrive such things, what else can they really do unless to wickedly scoff at and oppose the true meaning of the previously mentioned decrees of the Council of Trent and the whole Church concerning them, thereby piling error upon error?

9. They shrink no less from sound doctrine in the things which they boldly propose concerning the power and use of indulgences. They propose either openly or through equivocations the idea that indulgences can hardly be referred to the

temporal pains of sin which remain and which must be expiated, either in this life or in the next. Up to the eleventh century, they explain there were no penalties other than the canonical ones which were to be removed by the Church. For the first time, at the time of the holy wars, the punishments which God imposed on the sinner were subjected to the power of the keys. Then, they continue, a great distortion of the Church's discipline emerged. The treasure established by the merits of Jesus Christ and the satisfactions of the saints, unknown to earlier centuries, was discovered by Pope Clement V. Finally, to make matters brief, the indulgences were used to that end only, in order to recall to mind the present penalties by the Church and the ancient canonical ones, and so to lead sinners to penance. Where can they go from there, unless to arouse the proscribed propositions 17 and 19 of Luther, 6 of Peter of Osma, 60 of Baius, and finally 40, 41, and 42 of the cited constitution *Auctorem fidei* and to restore shamelessly the hostile errors in them?

10. These men want to utterly reform the holy institution of sacramental penance. They insolently slander the Church and falsely accuse it of error, and their shamelessness should be deplored even more. They claim that the Church, by ordering annual confession, allowing indulgences as an added condition of fulfilling confession, and permitting private Eucharist and daily works of piety, has weakened that salutary tradition and subtracted from its power and efficacy. The Church is the pillar and foundation of truth -- all of which truth is taught by the Holy Spirit. Should the church be able to order, yield to, or permit those things which tend toward the destruction of souls and the disgrace and detriment of the sacrament instituted by Christ? Those proponents of new ideas who are eager to foster true piety in the people should consider that, with the frequency of the sacraments diminished or entirely eliminated, religion slowly languishes and finally perishes.

11. Venerable brothers, it would be too long to pursue the many erroneous ideas of the reformers concerning the stipend for Masses, which they conclude should be abolished. They object to the practice of offering several Masses for the same deceased, which they translate as being contrary to the Church's teaching on the infinite value of that same sacrifice of the new law. Nor do We want to discuss their errors concerning the new ritual written in the vernacular, which they want to have adapted more to the character of our times. We shall also pass over their ideas on holy societies, public prayers, and holy pilgrimages, which they disapprove in various ways. It should be enough to indicate that these ideas do not flow from any other corrupt source nor come from any other principles than those which were already solemnly condemned by the Church in the constitution *Auctorem fidei* cited several times, especially in propositions 30, 33, 66, and 78.

12. Venerable brothers, We are following a little more broadly the examples of Our predecessors in similar situations, as the cause of the apostolic duty seems to require. We resolved to discuss these things so that, with the errors of those men revealed, it might become known where the wicked passion for introducing

novelties into the Church might lead. As for the rest, it is enough to suggest that the bitterness of the times in which Catholicism now finds itself oppresses Us with many sorrows. We mourn the pure spouse of the immaculate lamb, Jesus Christ, for it is pillaged by the attack of internal and external enemies and by the evils which oppress it and reduce it to this disgraceful captivity. We deplore with unending tears what is done by children shamefully straying from the bosom of a loving mother and uttering lies about her.

13. May We not fail in spirit! May We not stifle Our apostolic voice in so serious a Catholic necessity! May We not allow the Lord's flock to be plundered and the sheep of Christ to be devoured by all the beasts of the field, while We put aside the strength, judgment, and virtue of the spirit of the Lord like dumb dogs unable to bark. Know therefore, venerable brothers, that We are prepared to endure anything which threatens Us. We shall not retreat until the Catholic Church is restored to the original freedom which totally belongs to its divine constitution and until the mouth of the slanderers is blocked up. We cannot do anything more than to arouse your constancy and virtue and to strongly exhort you to take up the cause of the Spirit of God and of the Church. You share in a part of the concern whose fulness is given to Us. It is your duty to protect the holy deposit of faith and sacred doctrine. It is your duty to drive every profane reform far away from the Church and to exert yourselves with your whole heart against those who try to infringe on the rights of this Holy See. Therefore, draw the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. Preach as the apostle Paul impresses upon you in the person of Timothy his disciple. Stand firm in good times and in bad. Denounce, beseech, rebuke in all patience and teaching. Nothing should deter you from throwing yourselves into every conflict for the glory of God, for the protection of the Church, and for the salvation of the souls entrusted to your care. Meditate on Him who endured a similar opposition from sinners. If you fear the daring of the wicked, remember that the decision is made concerning the strength of the episcopacy and the divine power of governing the Church. So it only remains for you to remember the serious duties of your office and the difficult judgment which hangs over everyone in authority. The overseers of the house of Israel should especially meditate for a while at the feet of the Lord. We trust then that you will be aroused with zeal to help the Catholic religion and to protect it from the impious snares of its enemies. In this zeal you may show even greater results than these of which We wrote. Fully resolute and refreshed in that faith, We lovingly impart the apostolic blessing to you and to the people entrusted to your faith, as a sign of every good thing.

Given at Rome, at St. Mary Major, under the ring of the fisherman, October 4, 1833, in the third year of Our Pontificate.