

## Habemus Papam

The crowd gathered at St Peter's Square cheered at the announcement of a new Pope, 'Habemus papam!' Catholics around the world welcomed Pope Francis with joy. His friendly and humble personality endeared him with Catholic and non-Catholic people alike.

While we do not have any qualms about the *person* of the Pope, the issues that beset the *office* of the papacy continue unabated to this day. Is the Bishop of Rome the supreme head and focus of unity of all the churches? Is he the infallible teacher of divine truth?

Catholic dogma asserts that the Pope is the pastor of the universal church on earth, and that he has full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole church. Indeed the church of Jesus Christ is identified as the church governed by 'the successor of Peter' and the bishops in communion with him. Christians who do not acknowledge the Pope's authority over them are considered to be separated from the unity of the church.

Moreover, it is also claimed that the Pope is infallible when he speaks under certain conditions (termed 'ex cathedra'). He is said to be incapable of error in defining doctrines touching faith and morals.

Appeal is made to a limited number of proof texts, such as Matthew 16 and John 21, in defense of papal supremacy and infallibility. These Bible texts have been thoroughly debated over the centuries. I think that is fair to say that at best these verses do not really prove the papacy. Indeed the same scriptures were not interpreted by the early Church Fathers as evidence for the universal jurisdiction or infallibility of the Bishop of Rome. The early Christians knew nothing of the papal prerogatives which developed and evolved later on over the span of several centuries.

Is the papacy the uniting factor of Christianity? Christians should find and labour for spiritual unity in their common faith in Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, and in fervent brotherly love for one another. The papacy has been a cause of division. It is partly responsible for the deepest schism in Christianity, splitting the Catholic churches between the East and the West. The Catholics in the East were willing to recognise the primacy of honour of the bishop of Rome, but they would never submit to the Pope's novel claim of universal jurisdiction.

Papal infallibility is an even more recent teaching; it was unknown in the early church. Up to the eve of the First Vatican Council in the Nineteenth Century, which defined papal infallibility, a Roman Catholic catechism denied that it was a Catholic doctrine. Despite the evidence to the contrary presented by prominent Catholic historians, such as Von Dollinger, Vatican I did not only define papal infallibility as dogma but even asserted that it was always so received throughout church history.

Of more importance than the concept of infallibility is the actual teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, headed by the Pope, on the way of salvation. While I thank God for every good thing preserved by the Catholic Church, my heart is continually sorrowful and troubled by the human traditions that crept in over the centuries. Sadly the message has been so distorted that many fail to understand the good news of salvation by grace alone, through faith in Christ Jesus alone, and apart from the merits of our works.

The salvation of millions of souls is at stake. The ceremonies, rituals or the personality and style of the Pope are unimportant in comparison with the gospel. The single principle that marks any community or person, whether Pope or peasant, as genuinely Christian, is faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. All else is superfluous.