

THEOLOGICAL THESES
ON THE AUTHORITY OF COUNCILS.
Under the direction of Moses Amyraut.
Presented by Isaac Cottier of Tours.

Thesis I.

Since the work of councils is concerned with the preservation of divine worship, the explanation of religious doctrines, and finally the administration of church governance, if in all these matters their condition were such that they could not err, there is no doubt that they would have supreme authority in the Church. For just as we attribute this to the Apostles, so that whatever they decree and determine, we regard as divine, because we are persuaded that they received from our Lord Jesus Christ such a rich and extraordinary abundance of the Holy Spirit that they could not err or be deceived in matters pertaining to religion. Similarly, it would follow that we should hold the same opinion concerning councils and regard their decrees as [Greek text] if they possessed that same gift, for it could not be separated from an abundance of the Spirit by which these ecclesiastical assemblies would be equal to the Apostles. However, since it is far from being certain concerning their infallibility—even regarding not only particular councils but also universal ones—Catholics themselves do not indiscriminately affirm that they are free from the danger of error. It seems, therefore, that it has not yet been settled to what extent and how highly their authority should be regarded by Christians. Thus, we must briefly consider, first, what Catholics think on this matter and what reasons they rely on, and secondly, what we ought to think.

II. Regarding the first point, Bellarmine, in his work "On Councils," Book II, Chapter 2, teaches that a distinction must be made between General and Particular Councils. Concerning General Councils, he asserts the following proposition as the most certain truth according to all Catholic doctors: that it is to be held by Catholic faith that General Councils confirmed by the supreme Pontiff cannot err, neither in faith nor in morals. He acknowledges, however, some disagreement among Catholics regarding Particular Councils. For, he says, the firmness of these councils almost entirely depends on the firmness of the Pontiff. Therefore, those who say that the Pontiff can err must consequently also admit that such councils can err. But since Bellarmine firmly holds that the Roman Pontiff is [Greek text] (although he does not defend this so strictly as to avoid saying many things in various places that do not agree with this opinion), he also considers himself obliged to affirm the following proposition: that Particular Councils confirmed by the supreme Pontiff cannot err in faith and morals. Chapter 5 of the same work. If we follow this opinion, there will be no difference in the authority of universal and particular councils. In any case, he endeavors to demonstrate the first proposition with many arguments, some derived from Scripture and others from reason. We shall examine the force and weight of both, but the testimonies from the writings of the Fathers will be omitted by us, lest our disputation grows beyond its intended scope.

III. As for the testimonies from Scripture, the first one he mentions is the [Greek text], "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18). However, the most astute Jesuit is very negligent and careless here. For if this passage is applied to councils [Greek text], it applies equally to all, both those approved and those not approved by the Roman Pontiff. Certainly, no mention of any Pontiff is made here, but only of two or three, whether they are bishops or others who gather in the name of the Lord. Furthermore, even if we were to concede that some mention of the Pontiff is made here, Bellarmine could draw nothing more from it than that councils convened by the authority of the Pontiff cannot err. For as we have seen elsewhere, he interprets "in my name" to mean "by my authority," which he argues was transmitted from Christ to Peter and from Peter to the Roman Pontiff. But certainly, there is a difference between convening a council and approving it. For councils may be convened by the Pontiff, which he might later not approve because they judged matters of religion contrary to his liking. Conversely, councils may be approved by the Pontiff which he did not convene, such as particular councils, in whose convocation he would scarcely argue that his authority is necessary. However, we will examine this passage more carefully elsewhere and explain what condition is implied by the words "gathered in my name," upon which Christ's promise of presence depends. For nothing is promised here except under a certain condition, which if fulfilled, all councils, whether particular or universal, whether approved or not by the Roman Pontiff, are equal in the gift of [Greek text]; if not fulfilled, all are equally subject to error.

IV. The second passage is John 16, "The Spirit of truth will teach you all truth." These words, since Bellarmine understood that we interpret them as being addressed to the Apostles, he added that they also pertain to the successors of the Apostles, because in Chapter 25 of the same Gospel, the Lord clearly testifies that the Holy Spirit would remain with the Apostles forever—that is, he says, with them and with their successors perpetually. Since bishops are the successors of the Apostles, if we believe him, and these successors, considered individually, do not possess that Spirit who leads into all truth, then either Christ's promise is in vain, or it is fulfilled in the guidance of councils, so that they cannot err. Thus, reasons the Jesuit. But we cut the nerve of his reasoning, since we have elsewhere interpreted the words [Greek text]. For they mean nothing other than "forever." However, "forever" refers not only to those things that have no end but also to those that will have an end, provided they last as long as those things continue about which they are spoken. Similarly, "perpetually" in Latin, and [Greek text] in Greek, are used to indicate continuous, uninterrupted duration, though not necessarily eternal. This usage is also very frequent in Hebrew with the word [Hebrew text] in this sense. Moreover, Bellarmine adds, "Since there is no higher chair in the Church through which God teaches us than the chair of the supreme Pontiff, with the consent of a general council, if even this chair can err when it teaches the whole Church, I do not know how Christ's promise, 'He will teach you all truth,' can be true." This argument is unworthy of so great a disputant. Why? If the chair of the Roman Pontiff is overturned, will the faith and authority of the Apostles collapse because of it?

V. The third passage from Acts, chapter 15, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," we have considered elsewhere. Bellarmine connects an astonishing reasoning from this: If that

Council, from which all other Councils derived their form, asserts that its decrees are decrees of the Holy Spirit, then other legitimate Councils, which prescribe rules of belief and conduct for the Universal Church, can assert the same. But first, what does it mean to "give form to other Councils"? Does it mean to set an example for the Church to imitate in subsequent centuries? A fine [Greek text], surely, since everything that is made to imitate an example must attain the perfection of the example in every respect. If the Apostles were present in the other Councils, the same could be said of them. But if the Councils consist only of bishops, then the authority of these bishops is as distant from that of the Apostles as the bishops are from the Apostles. Since that first Council gave form to all others, both those that have been approved and those that have not, if the argument drawn from sharing the form implies equality of authority in [Greek text] constituted by it, the approval of the Pontiff makes no distinction between Councils; all would possess the same authority. The subtle Cardinal adds that the Holy Spirit was present at the Council of Jerusalem because it was necessary for the preservation of the Church, but it has been equally necessary in other times, with new heresies arising, and will continue to be necessary. However, he is playing games here. For, as we have said elsewhere, the Council of Jerusalem was not absolutely necessary for instructing the Church while the Apostles were still living. And even if it had been necessary, it does not follow that there is the same necessity now for infallible Councils, since the religion has already been established and explained so clearly and perfectly in the writings of the Apostles. If the authority of Scripture itself, as well as its true interpretation, is called into question by heretics, do we think they will be any less doubtful about the authority and interpretation of Councils?

VI. In the second class of his testimonies, Bellarmine places these famous passages: "Upon this rock, I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16); also, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28); finally, "The pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3). All of which, we have shown elsewhere, are [Greek text] and useless. The first speaks properly about the resurrection. The second pertains only to the Apostles. The third, if it speaks about the Church, has nothing to do with the infallibility of Councils. Bellarmine narrates two things here. One is that the entire authority of the Church formally resides only in the Prelates, just as the vision of the body formally resides only in the head. Therefore, he says, it is the same thing for the Church to be unable to err in defining matters of faith, and for the bishops to be unable to err. But since each bishop can err individually, they cannot err when gathered together. The other point is that a General Council represents the Universal Church, and therefore has the consent of the Universal Church. Thus, if the Church cannot err, neither can a legitimate, approved Ecumenical Council err. But both these arguments are flimsy. The first because authority in defining matters of faith depends on the knowledge of the truth and the communication of the Spirit. Moreover, that Spirit is such that it is communicated in action to all the truly faithful, and therefore it resides formally in them, not in the bishops alone. Indeed, sometimes private individuals in the Church are more liberally endowed with it than those whom Bellarmine calls Prelates. And if only the Prelates are the seeing ones, like the head, then since these Prelates are often blinded by greed, ignorance, or

other similar vices, the whole Church would consist of the blind, leading each other into the ditch. The second argument is no less weak. For the Council can only represent the visible Church, and we have demonstrated elsewhere that the visible Church can sometimes fail. Therefore, it is possible for Councils to fail as well.

VII. Bellarmine referred the third class of his testimonies to those passages where, he says, it is proven that the Roman Pontiff cannot err. These include Christ's words to Peter, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32), and similar passages, by which he elsewhere believes he has demonstrated this point. But first, this passage does not apply to the matter at hand. For Christ foresaw that Peter's faith would be shaken very severely, even to the point that, driven by fear, he would deny his Lord. He attests that he foresaw, by his prayers—prompted by his intense and unchanging love for Peter—that Peter would not completely fall. And because he saw a certain [Greek text] of zeal in him, combined with some self-confidence that was not entirely commendable, Christ predicted this to him to humble him and teach him humility. But what does this have to do with the Roman Pontiffs? Moreover, the Catholic doctors themselves do not agree on the infallibility of the Roman Pontiffs. For while almost all of them certainly maintain that the Church is not subject to error, the sounder ones attribute this honor to Councils, not to the Pontiffs. Hence arises the controversy, not yet settled in the Roman Church, as to whether the superior authority lies with the Council or with the Roman Bishop. The Sorbonne has always sided with the Councils, as have most theologians in France who are less inclined toward the Papists. But monks, especially Jesuits, have devoted their minds and efforts to the Pontiffs. Bellarmine ought to teach his fellow countrymen before using such arguments against us. Finally, as we have observed elsewhere, he is not even consistent with himself. For when he lists suspicion of heresy in the Pontiff as one of the causes for convening a Council, how can someone be suspected of heresy who, according to so many passages of the New Testament, is [Greek text]?

VIII. Finally, Bellarmine sets the fourth class of testimonies from those places where bishops are said to be pastors, to be listened to as teachers, to be followed as guides. Such are: "He who hears you, hears me" (Luke 10), "Obey your leaders and submit to them" (Hebrews 13), and similar passages. But, leaving aside the first passage from Luke, which could refer to the Apostles themselves, to whom Christ was about to give such an abundant measure of the Spirit that they could not err and therefore were given supreme authority in the Church, does not Scripture everywhere command children to obey their parents and wives to submit to their husbands in all things (Ephesians 5:24; Colossians 3:20)? Does that mean we must also believe that neither parents nor husbands can err in those things in which their children's and wives' obedience consists? These commands are given universally (though nowhere are the faithful commanded to obey their pastors in all things), not to attribute to either husbands or parents or pastors something they do not possess, but to correct in children and the faithful the all-too-common tendency to neglect duty and obedience. For things that tend naturally in one direction must be bent toward the opposite to restore balance. Certainly, the words cited from Hebrews apply to all faithful people of all ages. But since they address the Hebrews in such a

way that they demand obedience from them, not toward a Universal Council, but toward their particular pastors, as is customary to speak, every particular Church should imitate this example. Thus, either nothing can be drawn from this to support the infallibility of universal councils, or infallibility must be attributed separately to each pastor.

IX. Bellarmine adds what he calls "natural reasoning," and presents it in four parts. The first he explains as follows: If General Councils could err, there would be no firm judgment in the Church by which controversies could be settled and unity in the Church preserved. For nothing is greater than a legitimate and approved General Council. The second: If the judgment of such councils were not infallible, all condemned heresies could justly be called into question. For Arius could claim that the Nicene Council erred, and others could say the same about other councils. The third: There would be no certainty about many books of Scripture, about which there was long doubt, until a Council declared the matter. The fourth: If all councils could err, it would follow that all councils have admitted intolerable error, and thus would be worthy of no honor. For it is intolerable to propose something as an article of faith for belief, when it is uncertain whether it is true or false. The chief councils, such as Nicene, Constantinopolitan, Ephesine, and Chalcedonian, have issued new creeds, or at least new statements, which they wanted to be regarded as articles of faith. Who would dare to say that these four councils contain intolerable error?

We can respond to this generally by saying that the doctrine of the infallibility of councils is proposed by Catholic doctors as an article of faith. However, articles of faith must be supported and contained by clear testimonies of Scripture, not by natural reasoning. Therefore, those natural reasons are not sufficient to compel us to accept an article of faith that no testimony of Scripture confirms. However, when we explain our view on the authority of councils, these points will be dissolved by us. Meanwhile, it is worth examining what role the approval and confirmation of the Pope plays in the infallibility of councils, since only those councils that are approved and confirmed by Popes are considered infallible.

X. Since councils are not confirmed by Popes until after they have been held and concluded, the proposition "Councils confirmed by the Roman Pontiff cannot err" must be understood in one of three senses. Either it means that the decrees of councils, whatever their nature, become true by such confirmation. Or, it means that the decrees of councils, though false in themselves and not changed in their nature by confirmation, must nonetheless be regarded as true after being approved by the Popes. Or finally, it means that the decrees of councils, which are already true in themselves and in agreement with the word of God, are only recognized as true once approved by the Popes, otherwise having no authority. We shall examine which of these senses the proposition can have. As for the first interpretation, I would be astonished if anyone would interpret the proposition in such a manner. For what? Do the doctrines of the Christian religion change color like a chameleon, taking their hue from the authority of the Roman Popes, so that before their approval they are false, but after being approved they are true and regarded as such? Just as the nature of wholesome food and poison is determined and cannot be altered by the judgment of Hippocrates or any other physician, so too is the nature of truth in

any science, always remaining the same regardless of what judgment is pronounced by philosophers or other men. It would be absurd to claim that a geometrical proposition, established by certain and evident demonstrations, could become false if some renowned mathematician judged it to be false. Therefore, since the truths of the Gospel are the most certain of all, and the lies opposed to them are the most false of all (such is the nature of these opposites), what power can there be in the judgment of the Pontiff to retroactively make these falsehoods true and convert truth into falsehood?

XI. The second interpretation is no less absurd. For if the decrees of the Council of Trent, for example, are false, they did not cease to be false after being confirmed by the Roman Pontiff. If the Pontiff commands me to accept them as true, he commands me to err. For certainly, anyone who accepts falsehood as truth errs. Moreover, since the error in the matters judged by the Council of Trent is presumed to be fatal, when the Pontiff commands me to err, he simultaneously commands me to bring about my own destruction. If, as Bellarmine argued above, God commanded private Christians to listen to and follow their pastors, since it is written, "Obey your leaders and submit to them," what happens when a good pastor or leader commands me to err and fall into destruction, and I cast myself headlong into death, believing I am obeying God's command? It would indeed be strange if those who obey God's commands perished, while life is promised to those who follow God's commands. Thus, to resolve this difficulty, we must say that while errors are indeed fatal by nature, the merit and dignity of the obedience rendered to the Roman Pontiff are such that in the matter of salvation, it prevails over the efficacy of false and destructive doctrines. But this seems implausible to us. For if the Roman Pontiff commanded me to drink poison, there would be no virtue in obedience to save me from death. Moreover, God commands me to believe the truth, not falsehood. Therefore, when the Pope commands me to believe falsehood instead of truth, whose authority should have more weight for me?

XII. There remains, therefore, the third interpretation, which the more moderate among the Catholics embrace. They explain it in this way: they say that the decrees of councils are like the decisions of supreme courts, in which judgments are issued for cases already decided, and they are commonly called "Arrests." Even if these decisions, made by the rest of the senate in the absence of the president, are just and fair, and worthy of being upheld by the litigating parties, it is customary that unless the president subscribes to them, they do not have the force of a judgment nor can they be executed. Thus, what these decisions are in themselves is not yet apparent, nor are they considered as such. Therefore, it is possible that the decrees of councils are indeed true, but they are not regarded as such, nor do they obtain any binding force in the Church until they are approved by the Pope. If this is the case, the proposition expressed in this way— "Councils approved by the Pope cannot err"—seems absurd. It would be more accurate to say, "Councils approved by the Pope have not erred." For "cannot err" negates the possibility of something that might happen in the future, while "have not erred" denies the quality of something that is viewed as past. The former implies that the Pope's approval has the power to prevent councils from erring, while the latter implies that the approval merely declares that no error has been made by the council. Furthermore, and this is of greater importance, those who

interpret this phrase in this way attribute more power to the Pope than they do to councils, which is contrary to what they seem to want to prove. For when it is the Pope's responsibility to examine whether the councils he approves have erred, does this not imply that they could have erred? Otherwise, this inquiry would be in vain. Likewise, since all councils need this approval, it is implied that all are susceptible to error. If this applies to all councils, how can infallibility apply to them? On the contrary, if after the Pope has approved the council, it must be regarded as free from any error, then it is necessary that the one who bears witness to this be himself free from the danger of error. But this is something they seem unwilling to admit.

XIII. In any case, there is a great difference between the decisions of supreme courts and the decrees of councils. The former, whatever their nature, establish some form of law, and even when a judge pronounces unjustly, he still administers law, to which people are obliged to submit. For since these rulings concern matters pertaining to this life, even if they are unjust, it is better for a private person to endure some injustice than for public order, which sustains the state, to be disrupted by refusal to obey. However, if the decrees of councils are by nature harmful to salvation, no one ought to obey them. For there is no order in the Church, nor any reverence for pastors, great enough to justify neglecting one's own salvation. Moreover, someone who obeys an unjust ruling because they respect the magistrate and do not wish to undermine public order, earns praise from people and renders obedience to God, who established earthly authorities. But someone who accepts false and destructive doctrines out of obedience to their pastors, sins against God, who willed His truth to be sacred to all. Furthermore, if the decisions of supreme courts lack authority without the president's signature, this is because it has been either so established by the prince who granted the court its jurisdiction, or at least by some law approved by the consensus of those involved, ensuring that the rulings of the court are proper and orderly. But where did Christ, who alone is the head of the Church, grant this power to the Roman Pope, [Greek text], to reconcile the canons of councils? As for the Universal Church, whose interest alone is the preservation or loss of the authority of councils, neither in the beginning nor in better times was anything like this established in favor of the Roman bishop. Nor, if things became corrupt in the Church, did the Pope acquire this by his own methods, or by the negligence and indifference of the other bishops. It is not right to continue something that began so poorly. Now let us consider what we ought to think about the authority of councils.

XIV. We have already said elsewhere that the words "gathered in the name of Christ" include a condition upon which the fulfillment of Christ's promise of His presence depends. We have explained elsewhere what that condition is. Bellarmine says that "in the name" means the same as "by the authority," because this phrase often seems to carry that meaning in the New Testament. Certainly, when we do something not by our own authority, but by another's, we are accustomed to invoke not our own name but the name of the one whose authority we rely on. We do not deny that this phrase may have that meaning here, for a council is not legitimate unless it is called by the authority of Christ. This happens when it is convened according to the law that He has established: namely, that disputes, whether private between two people or public among many, should be resolved and settled in such gatherings of pastors and the faithful. However, this

does not exhaust the condition's full meaning. For if that were the only requirement, whenever a council, whether universal or particular, was convened according to that law, it would be necessary for Christ to be present in the midst of it to guide it by His presence. But many councils have been convened in this manner—according to the law of the Church—yet they were subject to error. Therefore, there is something else to consider in this phrase.

XV. We also say that someone acts in the name of another when they act as the representative of the one who, being physically absent, has delegated them in their place. For example, a lower magistrate administers justice in the name of the supreme magistrate, and a governor rules a city or province in the name of the king, and an ambassador negotiates and administers affairs in the name of the one who sent them, and a procurator acts in the name of the one who appointed them, and a steward manages business in the name of their master. Similarly, everything that pastors and leaders of the Church do in the functions of their office, they do as representatives of Christ, who cannot be present in body in all parts of His Church, or even in one part, since He has been taken up into heaven, from where He will not return until the last day. For example, they preach the Gospel in the name of Christ. Hence Paul's words: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). And they administer the sacraments in the name of Jesus Christ, that is, as if He Himself were administering them through them. In the formula, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," the phrase has a different meaning. It declares, among other things, the object of our faith, which we testify that we embrace when we are baptized. But Christ is considered differently as the object of our faith, together with the Father and the Spirit, than He is considered as the minister of our salvation, to whom it belongs to procure it by all means. If He were physically present, He would distribute the sacraments to us Himself. Since He cannot do this in person, He has delegated the Apostles, evangelists, and ordinary pastors for this task, who act on His behalf in this respect. Finally, they govern the Church in the name of Christ, that is, as in His place. For since He is absent from us, and we are absent from Him, if a matter worthy of judgment arises, we cannot appeal to Him, as we would if He were present among us. Since this is impossible, He has entrusted the pastors and faithful of His Church, lawfully assembled, to take His place in this matter as far as possible.

XVI. Moreover, for someone acting in the name of another in this way, four main requirements must be met. The first is the selection of matters in which the person's actions are involved. Certainly, Christ did not entrust everything to the leaders of His Church, but only those things that pertain to its edification and fall within the realm of religion. Therefore, if a council assumes authority over matters that pertain to civil government or anything else outside the Church's jurisdiction, it errs, and it cannot be said to be gathered in the name of the Lord in that regard.

The second requirement is that the one delegated by another must assume not only the other person's role but also their attitude and intentions. This means they must be motivated in the same way as the one who delegated them would be if they were personally handling the

matter. Just as Christ, if He were still on earth and consulted by His faithful on doubtful or contentious matters, would not bring anger, envy, the desire to win, the lust for power, self-love, hatred, or any other such vicious emotion into the discussion, but would only consider the glory of God, the truth, justice, equity, and the edification of both the public and individuals. Similarly, those who sit in councils on His behalf and perform the duties of Church leadership should be constituted in the same manner. Otherwise, those who are driven by the perverse inclinations of the human mind bring their private interests into the matter, not the person of Christ or the role of a judge or leader delegated by Christ. And such people cannot be said to be gathered in the name of Christ.

XVII. The third requirement is that, just as someone delegated to handle a matter receives specific instructions on how to manage it and is not allowed to deviate from them, so too the leaders of the Church have been given precise guidelines for handling the matters entrusted to them. If they depart from these guidelines, they stray beyond the bounds of their office and take on more authority than was granted to them by the Redeemer. We are not unaware that some delegates are sometimes sent with more flexible instructions, allowing them to make decisions as circumstances arise, following their own prudence. But this is done either in matters of minimal importance, or because the one who sends them does not possess enough wisdom to foresee all possible occurrences, or because the delegate is considered to be so prudent and experienced that they are hardly likely to err, or because obstacles like distance or time constraints prevent consulting with those who issued the delegation. However, Christ, with infinite wisdom, has fully foreseen and ordained everything necessary for His Church at all times. The leaders He appointed after the Apostles and Apostolic men are mostly people of far less wisdom and are prone to many errors, making it unsafe to entrust such a great responsibility to them without providing detailed instructions on how to manage it. The matters themselves are of the utmost importance: namely, the worship of God, the nature of which is discussed in councils; the truth of the Gospel, around which controversies arise; and the governance of the Church, which ensures its edification. Therefore, nothing was left to the discretion of such people, except perhaps in lesser matters of governance, where adjustments might be made based on varying circumstances.

Thus, when Cardinal Perronius says somewhere that Scripture was given to the Church as "letters of credence" and as "free instructions," not only does he err (as we have demonstrated elsewhere), but he also makes himself almost ridiculous. For who has ever seen letters of credence of such great length, containing so many precepts so carefully written?

XVIII. Finally, the fourth point is something we have already touched on elsewhere, concerning the need to consult the one from whom the delegate received their instructions. For surely, nothing regarding the establishment of divine worship or the judgment of Gospel truth can ever be raised or disputed that is not sufficiently declared in Sacred Scripture, provided that we approach its reading with a mind free from all emotions and unprejudiced by the sophistries of heretics. But our minds are naturally clouded, and our emotions are greatly corrupted. To make matters worse, the tricks of schemers further distort the Scriptures and entangle the truth in difficulties, making it sometimes appear very hard to explain. Therefore, the leaders of the

Church, whether in their ordinary duties or especially when assembled in a council, must turn to Christ, their Lord, so that in perplexing and difficult situations, they may be timely aided by the power of His Spirit. Since He is in heaven and can only be approached through prayer, in councils, if anywhere, prayers must be continuously offered—prayers that are pure and sincere, as the Apostle says [Greek text], unmixed with any human corruption. For the corruption in our souls is so pervasive that even our prayers are tainted by its remnants. Indeed, we sometimes call upon God to take sides with us and urge His Spirit and providence as if they ought to serve our desires. Therefore, it is all too easy to deceive oneself unless we carefully examine our hearts.

XIX. These are the main principles contained in the formula "gathered in the name of Christ," which, if diligently applied in ecclesiastical assemblies, would ensure that, as Christ promised, He would be present among them by the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit. Thus, if there were any council about which it could be certain that none of the things we have mentioned were neglected, then it could also be certainly and undoubtedly pronounced that this council neither has erred nor could err, given these conditions. For when councils fall into error, it is not because Christ has failed to fulfill His promise, but because the condition upon which His promise depended has not been fulfilled. However, here two things are equally undoubtable. First, since it is nowhere promised in Sacred Scripture that these conditions will always be met in councils, and since humans are naturally prone to the vices that hinder such conditions, it follows that all councils are subject to the neglect of these conditions and, therefore, to the danger of error, which is inevitable unless the condition is fulfilled. Second, even if all these conditions were carefully and properly fulfilled by a council, because no one can be certain or have full knowledge of this (for who but God alone can search the depths of the heart?), it follows that it cannot be known for certain whether a council has erred or not, even if it has been confirmed by the Roman Pontiff. Thus, the authority of councils is not as great as some would have us believe, nor can it be ascribed to them without considerable uncertainty. Therefore, let us now take a closer look at what kind and degree of authority councils do possess.

XX. There are two areas of knowledge relevant to councils: religion itself and the governance or discipline of the Church. Regarding religion, it consists of two parts: doctrine and worship. Worship arises from doctrine, and the same judgment must apply to both. Some aspects of both are necessary for salvation, while others contribute greatly to the purity and perfection of religion but are not essential to salvation. When controversies arise in the Church concerning matters necessary for salvation, since these matters are clearly explained in Sacred Scripture so that all the faithful can understand and judge them, if a council judges contrary to what is taught in Scripture, its authority in these matters is and ought to be null in the eyes of the faithful. For it is far better to obey God than men, and we must value our salvation more highly than the authority of any human. Therefore, in decrees of councils concerning matters necessary for salvation, all individual believers must use their own judgment, lest anything contrary to the purity and truth of religion be imposed on them by human authority. For in the lawful assemblies of democracies, the senates of aristocratic republics, and the diets of empires (if they are lawfully conducted), there is some authority, and indeed, far greater in its own domain than the authority

that councils ought to possess. However, if they prescribe anything contrary to natural justice and right, and what is inherently moral, their authority in such cases must be resisted. Similarly, there is no more natural reason in each citizen to distinguish between right and wrong than there is in each believer to distinguish what is necessary for salvation from what is harmful to it.

XXI. When councils judge in accordance with Scripture, they hold a notable authority, which is twofold. First, the truth of God is such that it needs no human approval; it stands on its own and requires nothing from us. However, human nature is such that we find reassurance when our own judgment is confirmed by the judgment of others, especially if those others are considered good and wise. There is, in our minds, a certain natural weakness by which, even when we grasp something and base it on clear reasoning, we still hesitate and waver, especially when our conviction is shaken by the disagreement or contradiction of others, particularly when they have a great reputation for virtue or authority. Thus, it requires both intellectual strength and a clear knowledge of the truth, along with some greatness of spirit, to withstand such opposition. On the other hand, when the testimony of councils supports the knowledge of the truth, it takes deeper root in the soul and adheres more firmly.

Secondly, even if there were no such effect, the fact that these truths are delivered by those who hold a public office in the Church adds some weight to them regarding the reverence due to true worship and doctrine. For example, if a private person or a young man exhorts another to virtue under the guise of honesty, there is no doubt that the mere idea of goodness should move and strongly encourage the person. For such an idea, on its own, is worthy of drawing human minds to itself, even without other supports. However, the same exhortations coming from a father carry considerably more majesty and authority, owing to the position that parenthood bestows. Certainly, those who teach and manage Church matters in councils are called fathers for this reason.

XXII. With regard to matters that are not absolutely necessary for salvation, there are two things we must observe. First, the less clearly something is taught in Scripture compared to what is necessary, the more authority councils should be granted by those subject to their guidance. For when a private individual brings nothing to the judgment of such matters except the measure of grace and understanding they have received from God, unless they happen to have conferred with another private person or a particular pastor, it is likely that those who come together for the purpose of careful examination and mutual consultation, bringing many perspectives, penetrate more deeply into an understanding of these matters. Additionally, even though God listens to the prayers of private individuals who diligently study these things in order to comprehend the truth, it is proper to believe that the united prayers of many are more effective, especially since Christ promised His presence in a special way to those who gather in His name.

Second, the more authority the faithful grant to councils in these matters, the more authority councils must assume for themselves. First, because the less clearly something is taught in Scripture, the less precisely it can or should be defined by councils. For from where would they draw the light needed for such definitions, if not from Sacred Scripture? If Scripture speaks less clearly about non-necessary matters, how could these be defined as clearly as those that are

necessary? Furthermore, since these matters are not necessary for salvation, they should not be taught as if they were. For if God has not taken away the hope of salvation from those who err in such matters out of ignorance or thoughtlessness, is it right for men to claim authority over the salvation of others by denying them hope if they do not embrace these things? Therefore, people should be taught as much as possible, but where teaching is not successful, they do not seem to be subject to coercion.

XXIII. Here, the Christian prudence and [Greek text] of the Apostles must be imitated. Even in the early Church, there were certain disputes that caused discord among the faithful. In matters that seemed important for salvation and religion, errors were sharply attacked, and the truth of the Gospel was not allowed to be corrupted or contaminated. Examples of this can be found in the letters to the Romans and the Galatians, where the topic of justification is discussed. Some wanted to base it solely on works, or to combine works with faith. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians, the topic of the resurrection of the body and other matters of similar or nearly equal importance are addressed. Finally, in the letter to the Colossians, the topic is the worship of God, and in the letter to the Hebrews, the nature and efficacy of sacrifices are discussed.

In other, less significant matters, the Apostles encouraged mutual tolerance among the faithful. While they saw it as desirable that all should agree, they also taught that it was less hopeful to expect this and that no one should be condemned by their brothers for such differences. The Apostle says, "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them" (Romans 14:1-3). And again, "All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained" (Philippians 3:15-16). And there are many other similar passages.

XXIV. However, some distinction must be made here. A doctrine that is not absolutely necessary for salvation is called such in two ways. Either it is true but of such a nature that we can do without it without jeopardizing salvation, or it is false but of such a nature that one can still hold onto it along with the hope of salvation. There are two considerations for both cases. Either we consider them strictly in themselves, or we consider them as proposed or promulgated at a certain time, by certain persons, and under certain circumstances. In the case of true doctrine, if it was less known before (for false doctrines, though not necessary for salvation, sometimes prevail in true churches), the duty of councils is to carefully investigate its nature by first consulting the churches, then by comparing and examining the opinions of the churches among themselves. After this, and once the truth is discovered, great caution must be exercised in its propagation, so as to avoid causing disturbances. The council should certainly use its authority to spread the truth, but it should do so through persuasion, not by using force or excessive severity if there are people in the Church who refuse to accept it. For it is not lawful to exert excessive power over Christians, even in matters of good. Here, the prudence of parents should be imitated.

Parents, when dealing with young children who have not yet fully developed reason, may command good things somewhat strictly, just as reason commands appetite. However, when children reach adulthood and are capable of judgment, parents persuade them with reason, and if they cannot change their minds, they wait until experience and maturity bring about what force would only provoke into disobedience.

For the Christian Church is now mature, and if there is any error in doctrine, we must wait patiently for God to give greater illumination rather than harshly pressing the matter.

XXV. When councils judge false doctrines, they either reject them as they should or accept and confirm them, as we have said that councils are liable to error. Two things must be carefully observed regarding the doctrines rejected by councils. First, that they not be pronounced more grievous than they truly are when considered in themselves. For while it is one thing to condemn a true doctrine as false and quite another to harshly condemn a false but trivial doctrine as though it were serious, neither is just. It is no more just to severely punish a trivial and almost excusable offense than it is for a judge to impose harsh penalties on minor crimes. Therefore, the seriousness of the error must be carefully considered so that the severity of the condemnation matches the nature of the issue.

Second, the council must consider the people defending the false doctrine. If they are few and can be restrained without causing unrest, the council can exercise its authority to prevent the spread of the evil in the Church. However, if the doctrine has spread widely and has affected the minds of many, especially distinguished men, then councils should follow the example of wise parents. For when strife arises in a large family and threatens to divide it, parents, to maintain unity, often refrain from making any pronouncements, lest they risk losing their authority or allowing the family to split into factions. It is better sometimes to conceal the truth and tolerate a minor falsehood for the sake of unity than to exacerbate the situation and alienate those whom we should preserve. And this approach should not be burdensome or difficult for councils since it is employed by the most powerful monarchs in governing their empires. Monarchs often overlook certain matters to prevent public unrest and even issue edicts commanding mutual tolerance when great dissent arises. If two opposing religions can be tolerated in one kingdom for the sake of peace, why should two opinions, which differ only slightly within one religion, not be tolerated for the same reason?

XXVI. Nor should we make too much of the risk of scandal arising from differences in opinion. First of all, there has never been a time in the Church so blessed that such things did not occur. The Greek Fathers disagreed with the Latins on certain points; even among the Latins themselves, there was not always harmony. The Church once tolerated the sharp disputes between Jerome and Augustine, and even today, we read their writings where they contend without causing any harm to our faith. It is also not surprising that what happens in religion is similar to what occurs in other matters, where everyone knows that disagreements arise. For example, physicians agree on certain fundamental aphorisms, which are the foundation of their science, but they differ on lesser matters. There is great agreement among jurists on certain fundamental rules of law, as well as on principal laws and constitutions, from which the body of

jurisprudence is composed. However, even they disagree on other matters related to the same discipline. Even mathematicians, whose science is considered the most certain and precise, cannot avoid disagreement on various problems. This is because not all truth is equally self-evident, so that even the most sharp-minded and attentive intellect can grasp it fully. Moreover, not all people have the same strength of intellect or natural talent, nor are they equally endowed with the same measure of grace to perceive everything that is presented to them for understanding.

XXVII. What's more, even a single person does not always agree with themselves, but sometimes holds two opposing opinions in their mind without recognizing the contradiction. If the situation called for it, we could provide indisputable testimonies from the writings of some of the most eminent theologians to this effect. This happens either because of the natural weakness of the human intellect, which does not perceive the contradiction between two opinions, or because they were carried away by some passion or zeal and, in heated disputes, became inconsistent with themselves. Or, fluctuating between various opposing considerations, they yielded first to one opinion, then to another, as different ideas of things pushed them in opposite directions. If we are not greatly offended by such inconsistency in one individual, why should we be scandalized when the same thing happens between two theologians, as they contend over certain points of religion?

Finally, when there is a risk of schism, it is far better to tolerate parties differing on matters that are not necessary for salvation than to make any definitive decision that might alienate one side. In mutual tolerance and Christian charity, there is only one evil, namely, the difference of opinions. But in condemnation and alienation of one side, not only is this evil of division not eliminated, but it often increases. Furthermore, two additional evils arise: on the one hand, the pain of condemnation; on the other, the insolence of victory, which inflames and exacerbates the minds of those involved, causing love to either be completely extinguished or greatly diminished. While parties tolerated one another, they were able to refrain from both private and public disputes, preventing the issue from spreading into the public domain. But once the judgments of councils and the schisms arising from them take hold, all restraints are broken, and the opposing parties clash with great force, spreading the harm and scandal far and wide.

XXVIII. In matters that are false but nonetheless approved and confirmed by councils, it is essential to carefully distinguish between the authority councils possess when judging the nature of things themselves and the authority they have in governing the Church for its edification. In the former case, a council that confirms a falsehood loses its authority, for that authority was granted by our Lord Jesus Christ not to suppress the truth but to propagate and defend it with all its strength. Therefore, no deference is due to a council in this respect, and if the truth, grounded in clear reasoning, has become evident to anyone, they must hold fast to that truth devoutly, regardless of what may be decreed by men.

In the latter case, the matter requires great caution. On the one hand, it is harsh and unjust for truth to be suppressed by the misguided judgments of councils. On the other hand, it is dangerous to completely dissolve the authority of such councils. The authority of councils should

be held in such high regard that we must defend it, even at the risk of reputation, fortune, or life itself. This authority is so necessary that without it, a significant calamity could befall religion and the Church. However, the difficulty can be resolved with a distinction. As we have said before, it is a beautiful and beneficial practice for churches not to accept the decrees of councils regarding important matters—such as doctrines of religion—until they have consulted with other synods and local churches, allowing each to contribute to the clarification of the truth.

Since the authority of councils is neither absolute nor nonexistent, two things must be observed. First, that an appeal from one synod to another, better informed and assisted by the judgment of synods and local churches, should be allowed to correct any errors made by the former, so that the truth may not suffer harm. Second, that while the synod to which the appeal is made convenes, nothing should be disturbed in the Church, lest the authority of councils be unduly weakened. The responsibility for avoiding disturbances lies with the synods and local churches, which are better positioned to understand the circumstances of events, persons, and times within their own jurisdictions than those far removed from them. Councils should not take offense at this process of review, for if their decisions were rightly made and conformed to the truth, they will shine brighter like gold the more thoroughly they are examined. But if they were wrong, would it be fair to allow Christ's truth to be violated and the entire Church to remain in danger of error just to avoid acknowledging that a few fallible men have erred? We believe no one is unaware of how widely errors can spread throughout the Church once they have been confirmed by the authority of councils over a long period.

XXIX. After such an appeal and careful examination by synods and local churches, if the error is further confirmed, the course of action becomes clear. The Church's edification and the salvation of souls must be diligently and supremely pursued. If the council's erroneous decree is followed, it should not be done to share in its error (since clear and distinct knowledge of the truth should always prevail in our minds), but rather to prevent its error from being propagated within the Church. Indeed, the Church will be deprived of the truth, which is buried under prejudice, but it will not lose salvation because, as we have already established, that truth is not absolutely necessary for salvation. However, if we refuse to follow the council and, in defense of the truth, divide the Church or provoke notable disturbances, there is a danger that charity, without which salvation cannot be attained, will be neglected.

Furthermore, in all things, each person must carefully consider what their duty requires. As long as there is any reasonable hope of vindicating the truth while also preserving the common good of the Church, we should prioritize the Church's dignity. But when the situation has reached the point where it is clear and certain that nothing can be achieved in defense of the truth—whether due to deeply entrenched prejudices, the authority of erroneous councils, or the lack of defenders—our duty does not demand that we continue striving in vain. Instead, our responsibility calls for us to avoid unnecessary condemnation, prevent the calamity that might befall us, and leave the matter to God's providence, who sometimes allows His truth to struggle but never permits it to perish entirely or be permanently exiled.

XXX. From the arguments thus presented, it is clear what should be thought of the first objection raised by Bellarmine, which he based on natural reason. In matters not absolutely necessary for salvation, the decrees of councils can be firm, whether they have judged rightly or have erred in their judgment, and the unity of the Church and the concord of the faithful can easily be preserved. However, in matters on which the hope of salvation depends, if councils err, their judgments should not remain firm, and unity or concord should not be maintained with those who follow such councils.

The second of Bellarmine's arguments is easily refuted. Heresies that were once condemned by councils and refuted by the authority of the Divine Word cannot rightly be called into question. Otherwise, the truth of God, as recorded in the Scriptures, would also be in doubt. These heresies are not rejected by us because they were condemned by councils but because they contradict Scripture and are clearly refuted by its testimony. If Bellarmine believes that the only way to suppress the audacity of heretics, who attempt to revive long-buried heresies, is by the infallibility of councils—if this idea were universally accepted—he is deluding himself. First, the audacity of heretics cannot be suppressed by something that can itself be considered heretical or could support the most vile heresies if, as often happens, they are confirmed by a council approved by the Pope. Moreover, those same heretics who sought to revive ancient heresies would also call into question the authority of councils, and thus, their audacity would not be curbed any more effectively by established councils than by non-established ones. For if we cannot persuade them of what is true—what is unquestionably true and clearly taught in Scripture—regarding the condemnable nature of those ancient heresies, how could we persuade them that such councils are infallible when that is not true nor derived from Scripture?

XXXI. The third objection is easily dismissed. Almost all the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments were accepted as divine without controversy in the Church long before any councils were held. Therefore, they were known by means other than the authority of councils. As for those books over which some doubt remained for a time, when councils pronounced on them, they did so by presenting reasons drawn from the matter itself, demonstrating that these books were canonical. Those reasons may have been such that private believers could not have recognized or understood them without assistance. But once those councils made those reasons clear and brought them to light, individual believers were then able to perceive them and recognize them as true. Thus, their faith in the divine nature of these writings does not rest on the authority of councils but on the evidence of the truth. Or, if the authority of councils adds something to the evidence of the truth, it is the same authority we described earlier, which belongs to councils that rightly judge religious matters. In our correct judgments, we take pleasure in the agreement of others, especially when they are good and wise. And when those in higher positions—whether by office or other dignified status—offer things for us to believe, even though those things are intrinsically worthy of our attention and affection, they carry a certain additional weight and more easily win their way into our hearts. This matter has been discussed in greater detail in the Theses on the Testimony of the Spirit and elsewhere.

XXXII. The fourth argument is unworthy of a man as astute as Bellarmine. For surely the councils that delivered the Church's creeds, in which the articles of faith are contained, did not propose those articles as if they had created them, relying solely on human authority. If they had done so, they would indeed have fallen into intolerable error, for they would have arrogated to themselves what belongs only to God: the right to rule over human consciences. Rather, they simply indicated that they had gathered those articles from Scripture, as true, certain, and supported by clear testimony, and that those who wished to be regarded as true and orthodox Christians ought to embrace them. And when they led the faithful to agree with them in believing and confessing those articles as true, they did not achieve this by their own authority but by the evident truth to which each person's conscience consents. However, in recent centuries, a custom has developed in the Church whereby councils have taken it upon themselves not only to teach but also to compel belief. Instead of gently persuading human minds with the force of argument, they have overpowered them with authority, issuing anathemas without a fair hearing, terrifying them with threats, and, in a manner more befitting tyrants than rulers of Christ's Church, imposing their will arrogantly and without restraint. Such behavior is contrary to the spirit of Christ and reeks of its adversary. In matters of faith, only the authority of God should prevail, unless something is drawn from the reverence with which the faithful regard councils that take no more upon themselves than what is proper and carry out their duties according to God's prescription.

XXXIII. It remains, then, to consider the authority of councils in establishing and administering the governance of the Church. There is little to say on this subject, as the power of the Church has been discussed more fully elsewhere. We will simply note that it is essential to distinguish between what councils should rightfully assume as their duty and what individual believers must do if councils overstep their office.

Regarding the first matter, councils must keep three things in mind. First, as Peter says, the "[Greek text]" of Jesus Christ. Christ did not give the pastors of His Church the power to dominate it, as supreme magistrates rule over their subjects. Instead, they are to exercise a legitimate and moderate authority, focusing primarily on setting an example in every good thing for the entire flock.

Second, as we have often repeated from Paul, they must diligently ensure that everything in the Church is done "[Greek text]." The Christian Church, which once lived under the legal tutelage of the Old Testament, is now grown and has been liberated from that servitude (as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a servant, Gal. 4:1). Therefore, it should not be burdened with an excess of ceremonies or bound by strict laws beyond the spirit of the Gospel. Rather, it should be treated as parents treat their adult children, who are capable of counsel. These parents do not drag their children but lead them to obedience, not compelling them with authority but encouraging them to pursue virtue willingly. Having removed harsh and burdensome guardians, they allow their children to follow a somewhat looser discipline.

XXXIV. As for the second point, regarding matters of Church governance, these are external things and, as such, are by nature indifferent. Since these things are indifferent, they can

be accepted by everyone without harm to their conscience, as long as they remain within appropriate limits. Therefore, the faithful must carefully observe two things in this matter:

First, whether in matters concerning the worship of God and the doctrines of religion, the pastors under whose governance they live fulfill their duties in such a way that salvation can be attained under their guidance. Indeed, many things must be patiently endured, even if they impose somewhat heavier burdens than they should in governance. For example, if parents' discipline and child-rearing methods are a bit harsher or more severe than necessary, their authority should not be immediately cast off, as long as they are shaping their children toward virtue and providing what is necessary for their lives.

Second, they must ensure that, under the guise of governance, nothing is introduced into the Church that would undermine the true religion. For example, at first, all pastors were of the same rank, but bishops were appointed among them to avoid dissensions, and this was tolerable up to a point. Among the bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, and primates, as well as patriarchs, were established under the pretext of maintaining order and for the sake of some degree of magnificence. Thus, a flaw in governance grew, but at that time, it still did not seem to threaten the essence of religion. Among the patriarchs, the Roman bishop was elevated, standing above the others in a certain dignified position. If this had been all, the flaw, though considerable and a threat to the Church's liberty, had not yet entirely extinguished it, as long as the Roman pontiff confined himself to this limited prerogative.

But when he began to assert himself as the monarch of the Church, and this was granted to him not by some flatterers but by nearly all, so that he came to be regarded as the head of the Church, this was no longer tolerable. Not only was the form of the Church's governance fundamentally altered, but religion itself was profoundly undermined. This is a matter that must be demonstrated carefully in a particular discussion. Meanwhile, may honor, praise, and glory be to Almighty God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—forever and ever. Amen.