

2018 Addition to the *Revised Basic Course Manual*, Lesson 5 By Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke

On page 46 of your *Revised Basic Course Manual*, insert the following explanation of the fullness of power of the Roman Pontiff after the third paragraph which begins, “The Church has, from Her earliest days, recognized the Bishop of Rome....”:

The Fullness of Power (*Plenitudo Potestatis*) of the Roman Pontiff

The term, “fullness of power” (*plenitudo potestatis*), to describe the power of the Roman Pontiff was first used by Pope Saint Leo the Great in 446. In his Letter 14, while he affirms that the Roman Pontiff and the Bishops have, in common, the solicitude for the good of the universal Church, he declares that only the Roman Pontiff exercises the *fullness of power*, in order that the unity of the universal Church may be efficaciously safeguarded and promoted. The term is found extensively in treatises on papal authority, especially in the classical works of Canon Law. Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment is found in the work of Cardinal Henry of Susa, called Hostiensis, an illustrious canonist of the 13th century. An excellent study of the matter is: J. A. Watt, “The Use of the Term ‘Plenitudo Potestatis’ by Hostiensis,” in Stephen Ryan Joseph Kuttner, ed. *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Medieval Canon Law*, Boston College, 12-16 August 1963 (Città del Vaticano: S. Congregatio de Seminariis et Studiorum Universitatibus, 1965), pp. 161-187.

By the fullness of his office, the Roman Pontiff acts to safeguard and promote the constant teaching and discipline of the Church. By the fullness of power he dispenses from an existing law or supplies for a defect in the existing law – either because it is not being observed or because it is inadequate to actual circumstances – in order that the end of the Church, as established by Christ, be attained. It is a power to be used with great caution, in order to sustain and fortify the constitution of the Church and not, in any way, to undermine that constitution. It is not a form of *absolute power*, in the sense of the absolutism of a dictator or tyrant. It is absolute in the sense that it provides everything necessary for the Roman Pontiff to protect the teaching and discipline of the Church. It has nothing to do with revolution in the Church or with any form of arbitrary action on the part of the Roman Pontiff.

The Council of Trent, the First Vatican Council, and the Second Vatican Council have all taught about the power of the Roman Pontiff in the same sense. Thus, we read in no. 18 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, “On the Church,” of the Second Vatican Council:

This sacred synod, following in the steps of the First Vatican Council, teaches and declares with it that Jesus Christ, the eternal pastor, set up the holy Church by entrusting the apostles with their mission as he himself had been sent by the Father (cf. Jn. 20:21). He willed that their successors, the bishops namely, should be the shepherds in his church until the end of the world. In order that the episcopate itself, however, might be one and undivided he put Peter at the head of the other apostles, and in him he set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and of communion.

It is clear that the fullness of power given by Christ Himself to the Roman Pontiff is not some human authority or constitutional power, and that, therefore, it is only exercised in obedience to Christ.

Since the Roman Pontiff remains a human being, he is subject to sin and heresy or to acts which foster sin and heresy. If he takes any action which is sinful or heretical or fosters sin and heresy, it does not enjoy the authority of his fullness of power and is to be corrected by the faithful, in general, and, in a particular way, by the Bishops. In the classical treatises, it is foreseen, even as history also attests, that the Roman Pontiff can fall into heresy or into the abandonment of his primary duty of safeguarding and promoting the unity of the faith, of worship and of discipline. Since the First See is not judged by anyone (cf. CIC, canon 1404), what is to be done in such a case?

The Gospel and canonical tradition teach a two-fold process: first, the correction of the presumed error or abandonment of duty should be made directly to the Roman Pontiff; and, second, if he continues to err or does not respond, the matter should be declared publicly for the sake of all the faithful. According to the natural law, right reason demands that individual be governed according to the rule of law (*regula iuris*) and, in the contrary case, provides that the individual can make recourse against actions which violate the state of law. Christ Himself teaches the way of fraternal correction, which applies to all of the members of His Mystical Body (cf. *Matthew* 18:15-17). His teaching is put into practice in the fraternal correction of Saint Peter, carried out by Saint Paul, when Saint Peter did not want to recognize the freedom of Christians from certain ritual laws of the Jewish faith (*Galatians* 2:11-21). Finally, canon 212 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* provides for the faithful the directive regarding the correction of pastors, including the Supreme Pastor.