

ception of the Blessed Virgin*. When, therefore, this pious belief of the Church was finally promulgated as an article of faith, in the year 1854, it is evident that there was no new doctrine introduced into the Creed by this dogmatical Decree, as it had been previously held by the general concurrence of so many ages, and with the unanimous consent of all the Catholic Bishops in the world. In reply to the Pope's Encyclical Letter on the subject, issued nearly five years previously, answers were received from upwards of Six Hundred Bishops, every one of whom expressed his firm belief in the doctrine, while only *four* of them made any objection to its definition as an article of faith, and *fifty-two* others merely suggested the expediency of deferring the final decision of the Church to a future time.† It may be admitted, indeed, that, up to that period, the doctrine was, to a certain extent, an open question—its *abstract truth* was not affected by the definition of the Church—it was equally true *before*, as well as *after* it; but the *obligation to believe it* was not the same in both cases, because it had not previously been authoritatively proposed to the faithful, as an article of divine revelation. In pronouncing judgment on this, and all other questions of doctrine, the Catholic Church merely exercised the spiritual prerogative which is claimed by the Church of England, in the 20th Article, which declares that “the Church hath authority in controversies of faith”. And it is evident that this principle may be applied to several other articles of faith, which are generally held by Protestants as well as by Catholics. Take, for instance, the Canon of the New Testament. It is certain that, during the first four Centuries, there was no obligation on Christians to believe in the divine Inspiration

* Lutheri Postillæ, p. 360. (Ed. Argent. 1530.)

† Bp. Ullathorne on the Immaculate Conception, p. 165. (Ed. Balt. 1855.)