

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR MCSORLEY—II

There are, of course, a great many things in Professor McSorley's paper with which I am in complete agreement, especially in the first part, where he discusses the limits of papal primacy. However, it would seem to make for a more interesting response if I focus on some points on which I disagree with him. These points occur in the second part of his paper, where he deals with the question of infallibility.

First of all, I would like to comment on his statement: "According to Vatican II's own understanding of the term, this is all the Roman Catholic Church contends can never happen to the Church by virtue of the infallibility with which the Spirit of Christ preserves the Church in its communication of the gospel: namely, it 'cannot completely fall away from the way of salvation.'"

My comment, briefly, is this: while infallibility certainly means that the Spirit so guides the Church that it "cannot completely fall away from the way of salvation," I doubt very much whether that is really *all* that the Fathers of Vatican II meant by the Church's infallibility.

I do not intend here to enter into the question whether that is all that the Church's infallibility might or even should be understood to mean, in the light of theological sources other than the documents of Vatican II. That is far too broad a question for a brief response like this. And, in any case, what is new in Professor McSorley's contribution to this question is precisely his contention that he has discovered what amounts to an "official definition" of the term infallibility in the documents of Vatican II, and that according to this definition, infallibility means nothing more than that the Church "cannot completely fall away from the way of salvation."

I hope I do not seem facetious if I say that the question at issue here could be put this way: where does Vatican II stand in the dispute between Hans Küng and Karl Rahner on the meaning of the Church's infallibility? If McSorley's interpretation is correct, it would seem that Hans Küng could invoke no less an authority than an "official definition" of the term infallibility in the documents of Vatican II in support

of his position. Such a startling eventuality certainly justifies taking a closer look at the text on which McSorley has based his interpretation of the mind of Vatican II.

The text is found in the official (as yet unpublished) *Relatio* which accompanied the 1964 revision of the schema *De ecclesia*. At this point, the Commission is explaining the reason for an amendment whereby the statement: *Ecclesia tota . . . in credendo indefectibilis est* was changed to read: *Universitas fidelium . . . in credendo falli nequit*. The explanation given is as follows: "In place of the phrase *in credendo indefectibilis est* is put the phrase *falli nequit*. Indefectibility pertains to perpetuity, infallibility to truth. The Church, in which Christ lives, having completed his work of salvation, and which is led by the Holy Spirit to the truth, cannot simply turn aside from the way of salvation, and therefore in this sense is infallible. Although it does not perfectly comprehend the mystery, nevertheless it is preserved from error by the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and hence it cannot err."¹

Concerning this text, I would call attention to the following points:

1) the significance of the amendment itself. The phrase: *in credendo indefectibilis est* is being dropped in favor of the phrase: *in credendo falli nequit*. If the amendment were the other way around, one might see some support for McSorley's interpretation. But what the Commission is saying is that "indefectible" is *not* the exact word here; it wants the text to say not merely that the whole Church is indefectible in its faith, but that it cannot err in its faith.

2) When the Commission goes on to say that "the Church cannot simply turn aside from the way of salvation, and therefore in this sense is infallible," this surely cannot be understood in a sense that would reduce infallibility to something merely equivalent to indefectibility: this would contradict the whole point of the amendment they are making in the text.

3) In any case, the immediately following sentence seems to give a decisive answer to the question whether this is *all* that infallibility means: for it states: "Although it does not perfectly comprehend the mystery, nevertheless it is preserved from error by the assistance of the

¹Schema Constitutionis De Ecclesia (1964), pp. 45-6.

Holy Spirit, and hence it cannot err." It is this sentence, it seems to me, that has every right to be described as Vatican II's own concept of infallibility.

In support of this interpretation of what Vatican II means by infallibility, I should like to cite another text from the official *Relatio*. It is part of the Commission's explanation of the key text of the Constitution on the subject of infallibility, namely, the section of No. 25 beginning with the words: *Haec autem infallibilitas*.² The text of the *Relatio* which I shall cite is the explanation of the following sentence of the Constitution: "To the resultant definitions the assent of the Church can never be wanting, on account of the activity of that same Holy Spirit, whereby the whole flock of Christ is preserved and progresses in unity of faith." The *Relatio* comments on this text as follows: "The assent of the Church to such definitions can never be wanting, because of the Holy Spirit, by whose assistance the definitions are immune from error, and by whose action the whole flock of Christ adheres to them and progresses in faith. This is true of definitions whether promulgated by the Pope or by the episcopal college with him, so that the definitions of a Council are also irreformable of themselves, and do not need the approbation of the people, as some in the East mistakenly hold, but rather they carry with them and express the consent of the whole community."³ I shall comment briefly on two points in this *Relatio*.

First, the action of the Holy Spirit in assuring the assent of the faithful to the definitions of popes and councils is seen as presupposing the action of the same Spirit in making sure that the definitions to which the faithful are called upon to assent are not erroneous. This seems to me another clear indication of the way the Theological Commission understood the term infallible.

My second observation has to do with the question of the relationship between the infallibility of a definition and the consent of the whole community to it. McSorley quotes from this same *Relatio* which I have just cited, when he speaks of "the important *relatio* at Vatican II which advances the doctrinal state of the question by affirming that 'papal and conciliar definitions do not require the approbation [jurid-

²*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by W. Abbott, pp. 48-9.

³*Schema Constitutionis De Ecclesia* (1964), p. 98.

ical?] of the people . . . but carry with them and express the consent of the whole community.”

For my part, I think there is grave reason to doubt that when the Commission said that the definitions of popes and councils “carry with them and express the consent of the whole community,” it meant to say that such definitions must express the consent of all Christians, Protestant and Orthodox as well as Catholic. There is surely no doubt that the Fathers of Vatican II recognized the Vatican I definition of papal primacy as an infallible definition, even though they knew perfectly well that it expressed the consent of only the Roman Catholic community. Hence it is quite obvious that it is precisely and only this community which the Commission had in mind when it spoke of the consent of the whole community. And indeed, this must also be the sense in which the text of the Constitution itself in this place says that the “assent of *the Church* cannot be wanting to such definitions,” and that “*the whole flock of Christ* adheres to them.” There are numerous instances where Vatican II uses such terms as “the whole Church,” the “whole people of God,” “all the faithful,” where the context makes it obvious that it can only be the Catholic community that is meant by these terms.

I do not mean to say that we cannot go beyond the point of ecumenical progress reached at Vatican II in these matters. But I do think it is important to know just how far Vatican II did go, and at what point we go beyond it. I am convinced that we have not yet realized all the implications of Vatican II's recognition of the ecclesial value of the non-Catholic Christian communities. This recognition undoubtedly raises questions regarding the full ecumenicity of the councils held in the West since the Great Schism. Obviously, a council which truly represented and received the consent of the Protestant and Orthodox Churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church would be more fully ecumenical than one which represented and received the consent of the Roman Catholic Church alone. But I do not think that this would justify the conclusion that Trent and Vatican I were not ecumenical councils at all, or that their solemn dogmatic statements have no claim to infallibility. On this point I think that the key statement of Vatican II is the following: “The infallibility which was promised to the Church resides also in the body of bishops, when it

exercises its supreme teaching authority along with the Successor of Peter."⁴

It is difficult to establish *a priori* what conditions must be fulfilled for a council to be ecumenical enough for its doctrinal decisions to be definitive and infallible. I would say, in the light of the text just quoted, that for Vatican II it must be such a council as rightly can be described as "the body of bishops exercising supreme teaching authority along with the Successor of Peter." It seems quite consistent with such a view for the Fathers of Vatican II to have looked on Trent and Vatican I as ecumenical councils, and to have accepted their dogmatic definitions as infallible.

At the same time, one can agree with Louis Bouyer that doctrinal decisions taken in the absence of a considerable portion of the episcopate representing an important theological tradition, even if they satisfy the requirements for infallibility, are still likely to call for clarifications or complements that would not have been needed if the council making such decisions had been more fully ecumenical in the first place.⁵

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⁴*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, No. 25.

⁵See his Excursus: "Quels conciles sont oecumeniques?" in *L'Eglise de Dieu, Corps du Christ, et Temple de l'Esprit* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), pp. 678-9.