

INFALLIBILITY: WHO WON THE DEBATE?

The centennial of the First Vatican Council was unexpectedly marked by the outbreak of a debate over its best-known teaching.¹ Infallibility had, of course, been the subject of contention during the century after its promulgation—but almost exclusively as a polemical issue between Catholics and other Christians. To be sure, historians occasionally reminded theologians that infallibility was a hotly debated topic at Vatican I;² but what tended to be remembered about the conciliar objections was the jejune pun about Bishop Edward Fitzgerald's negative vote: the bishop of Little Rock opposing the Petrine rock.³ Since all the opposition prelates eventually accepted the definition, Catholic theologians, after Vatican I and until the eve of Vatican II, usually paid little attention to the theological significance of the minority objections or the difficulties in conscience experienced by a number of Catholics.⁴

In retrospect, the apparently whole-hearted acceptance of infallibility in the decades between the Vatican councils is rather surprising, given the fact that in the early part of the nineteenth

¹Cf. J. Fichtner, "Papal Infallibility: A Century Later," *AER* [*The American Ecclesiastical Review*] 143 (October, 1970), 217-43; J. Ford, "Infallibility—From Vatican I to the Present," *JES* [*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*] 8 (Fall, 1971), 768-91; A. Houtepen, "A Hundred Years after Vatican I Some Light on the Concept of Infallibility," *Truth and Certainty/Concilium* 83 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), pp. 117-28.

²The classical history of Vatican I in English is C. Buter, *The Vatican Council* (London: Longmans, Green, 1930; re-issued edition, Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1962). A more recent account is given by R. Aubert, *Vatican I* (Paris: Éditions de l'Orante, 1964). Short historical summaries are given by J. Hennesey, "Vatican Council I," *NCE* [*New Catholic Encyclopedia*] 14, pp. 559-63; and E. Hales, "The First Vatican Council," *Councils and Assemblies*, ed. by G. Cuming and D. Baker (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), pp. 329-44. On the participation of various national hierarchies, cf. J. Hennesey, *The First Council of the Vatican: the American Experience* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963); F. Cwiekowski, *The English Bishops and the First Vatican Council* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1971); C. Beirne, "Latin American Bishops of the First Vatican Council, 1869-1870," *The Americas* 25 (1969), 265-80.

³As J. Hennesey, *First Council*, p. 281, observes, "what prompted Fitzgerald to vote 'no' at the public session has never been satisfactorily explained." S. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 826, notes Fitzgerald's opposition; however, the view that "Pope Pius IX convoked an ecumenical council in the Vatican to deal with the question of papal infallibility" (p. 826) oversimplifies the way that the topic was introduced into the work of the Council.

⁴Cf. J. Hughes, "Catholic Anti-Infallibilism," *AmpJ* [*The Ampleforth Journal*] 76, 2 (Summer, 1971), 44-54.

century ascription of infallibility to the pope was a "novel idea," at best a matter of theological opinion, and disputed opinion at that.⁵ Why did the doctrine of infallibility gain such rapid and widespread popularity that the majority of the bishops at Vatican I were persuaded its definition was necessary?⁶

The doctrine can be seen as emerging from a politically motivated ecclesiology that was pragmatically and theoretically committed to the dual goal of maintaining the freedom of the Church and of fostering its intramural unity and cohesiveness in the face of attempted incursions by civil authorities and the attacks of rival ideologies.⁷ Or, in a variant vein, the growing acceptance of infallibility can be seen as a reaction against the Erastian entanglements of a decadent Gallicanism, where the Church was subservient to the state, plus an idealized expectation of ecclesial renewal inspired by a universally revered spiritual leader.⁸ While such an expectation may seem improbable today, it should be remembered that Pius IX, in spite of the controversial decisions of his pontificate, enjoyed the affection of many of his contemporaries in a way that is reminiscent of John XXIII.⁹ If then we are surprised that infallibility can be seen as a doctrine of unity and renewal, we should notice how much theology—then and now—is influenced by current political and social factors.

Again in retrospect, the proclamation of infallibility at Vatican I was not exactly the victory that the more bludgeoning

⁵C. Langlois, "Die Unfehlbarkeit—eine neue Idee des 19. Jahrhunderts," *Fehlbar?, Eine Bilanz*, ed. by Hans Küng (Zurich-Einseideln-Cologne: Benziger Verlag, 1973), pp. 146-60; for a review of earlier discussions, cf. J. Pereira, "Fallible?" *Thought* 47 (Autumn, 1972), 362-414; an American case study is given by R. Ippolito, "Archbishop Kenrick of Baltimore: Preface to Infallibility?" *AER* 168 (May, 1974), 327-40.

⁶The medieval antecedents of infallibility have been examined by B. Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150-1350* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972); the review of A. Stickler, *CHR* [*The Catholic Historical Review*] 60 (October, 1974), 427-41, prompted a notable exchange, *ibid.*, 61 (April, 1975), 265-79. Cf. B. Tierney, "Origins of Papal Infallibility," *JES* 8 (Fall, 1971), 841-64, and R. Manselli, "Le cas du pape hérétique vu à travers les courants spirituels du XIV^e siècle," *L'Infaillibilité, son aspect philosophique et théologique*, ed. by E. Castelli (Paris: Aubier, 1970), pp. 113-30.

⁷H. Pottmeyer, *Unfehlbarkeit und Souveränität: Die päpstliche Unfehlbarkeit im System der ultramontanen Ekklesiologie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1975); reviewed in *TS* [*Theological Studies*] 37 (March, 1976), 161-4.

⁸R. Costigan, "The Ecclesiological Dialectic," *Thought* 49 (June, 1974), 134-44; cf. J. Pereira, *Thought* 47 (Autumn, 1972), 373, who finds antecedents in sixteenth and seventeenth century Iberian theology.

⁹Cf. E. Hales, *Pio Nono* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1962).

Ultramontanes so fervently desired and worked so fervidly to obtain.¹⁰ In particular, Archbishop Manning, the "chief whip" of the majority at the council, may have been a bit disappointed with the moderate and restrictive terms of the final text, though this apparently did little to soften his view that the pope is infallible by himself in all legislative and judicial acts.¹¹ Unfortunately, Manning's tendency to maximalize infallibility seems to have been more influential in later theological presentations than the more moderate stance of his fellow-countryman and fellow-cardinal, Newman.¹²

It is frequently overlooked that at Vatican I there was a spectrum of interpretations of infallibility both among the bishops who approved *Pastor aeternus* and more emphatically among the absent bishops who subsequently subscribed to the constitution. Presumably the minority bishops found the conciliar text elastic enough so that they could in conscience ratify it post-factum; a rather anomalous confirmation of this may be found in the fact that the subscriptions demanded of some theology professors were sometimes more rigorously ultramontane than those proffered by some minority bishops.¹³

The existence of a spectrum of theological interpretations of infallibility among the bishops who approved or ratified *Pastor aeternus* is not merely a bit of historical trivia. First of all, it implies that no single interpretation of infallibility can claim to be exclusively normative; at the very least, a spectrum of legitimate in-

¹⁰The pro-infallibilist maneuvers of the staff of *Civiltà Cattolica* are recorded in the recently published journal of G. Franco (1824-1908), *Appunti storici sopra il Concilio Vaticano* (Rome: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1972); reviewed in *CHR* 61 (April, 1975), 307-8.

¹¹The designation is by W. Purdy, "Manning and the Vatican Council," *Manning: Anglican and Catholic*, ed. by J. Fitzsimons (London: Burns Oates, 1951), pp. 84-100; cf. R. Ippolito, "Archbishop Manning's Championship of Papal Infallibility 1867-1872," *AmpJ* 77, 1 (Summer, 1972), 31-9.

¹²While Newman's *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk* (1875) was apparently a refutation of Gladstone's *The Vatican Decrees in their bearing on Civil Allegiance* (1874), it simultaneously disavowed the maximalist interpretation of Manning and others. Cf. C. Dessain, "What Newman taught in Manning's Church," *Infallibility in the Church*, with A. Farrer et al. (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1968), pp. 59-80; J. Coulson, *Newman and the Common Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 148-56; J. Holmes, "Cardinal Newman and the First Vatican Council," *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum* 1 (1969), 374-98; M. Trevor, *Prophets and Guardians* (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1970), pp. 95-133.

¹³For a case study of the German reactions to the Council's decisions, cf. the posthumous work of A. Franzen, *Die Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät Bonn im Streit um das Erste Vatikanische Konzil* (Cologne-Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1974).

terpretations must be acknowledged.¹⁴ Secondly, unless this interpretive spectrum is construed as being mechanically transferable, one must further allow for the possibility that the spectrum of legitimate interpretations today is definitely different from, and possibly quite broader than, that envisioned by those who officially approved *Pastor aeternus*.¹⁵

It hardly needs to be said that there was little appreciation of such a spectrum in Roman Catholic presentations of infallibility between the Vatican councils; infallibility was too touchy a subject to be examined critically. Theological manuals customarily presented infallibility as a given; and since theology was usually explanatory not exploratory, there was little incentive to probe the underlying premises on which the concept of infallibility presumably rests.¹⁶ At most, one finds an occasional expression of dissatisfaction with the negative character of the concept or a mild probing of its operative dimension.¹⁷

The announcement of the Second Vatican Council prompted renewed interest in previous councils in general and in Vatican I and infallibility in particular. While the treatment of infallibility at Vatican II—specifically, *Lumen gentium*'s ascription of infallibility to the episcopal college (#25)—is a linear descendent of its predecessor and not a major theological breakthrough, nonetheless, an important emphasis should be noted: the charism of infallibility can be actualized in the Church in various ways; thus, the question is not solely infallibility as papal, but more importantly, infallibility as ecclesial.¹⁸

In the post-conciliar period, both in view of the approaching centennial of Vatican I and in view of the emerging ecumenical conversations, where a century-long point of controversy could scarcely be ignored, infallibility became a topic of increasing im-

¹⁴For a variant analysis of the meanings of dogma and the differences between popes and councils as speakers, cf. G. O'Collins, *The Case Against Dogma* (New York/Paramus/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1975), pp. 83-5, 90-5; reviewed by A. Dulles, *TS* 37 (March, 1976), 147-9. Also, cf. P. Collins, "Vatican I and Doctrinal Development," *AER* 164 (April, 1971), 219-31.

¹⁵Cf. T. Ommen, "The Hermeneutic of Dogma," *TS* 35 (December, 1974), 605-31.

¹⁶A typical treatment is given by J. Salaverri in *Sacrae Theologiae Summa* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1955), I, pp. 690-712.

¹⁷For example, G. Mitchell, "Some Aspects of Infallibility," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 23 (1956), 380-92; F. Lawlor, "Infallibility," *NCE* 7, 496-7.

¹⁸J. Ford, "Infallibility: Primacy, Collegiality, Laity," *The Jurist* 30 (October, 1970), 435-46; W. Thompson, "*Sensus Fidelium* and Infallibility," *AER* 167 (September, 1973), 450-86.

portance in the English-speaking world.¹⁹ Thus, the theological discussion of infallibility was already underway when *Humanae vitae* and subsequently Küng's inquiry appeared.²⁰

As a clarion call to combat, Küng's *Infallible?* received a massive though highly diverse response, ranging from attacks on his Catholicity to applause at his courage.²¹ This diversity of reactions can be variously interpreted.²² Küng's inquiry was not only polemical in tone but far-reaching in its implications: biblical and historical, philosophical and sociological, ecclesiological and ecumenical. The fact that the response to Küng took up such a diversity of issues suggests that infallibility is really a "cross-cutting" problem which raises questions about the nature of revelation, the inspiration of Scripture, the meaning of tradition, the nature of doctrine and its development, historical methodology, epistemology and religious language, the structure and authority of the Church, the sociological identity of Catholics, and so on.

Since infallibility can be considered from a wide variety of viewpoints, it is a fascinating topic for theological discussion. Yet

¹⁹An indirect confirmation of the earlier neglect of infallibility on the part of English-writing theologians is found in the fact that the polyglot commemorative volume, *De Doctrina Concilii Vaticani Primi* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1969) does not have a single English contribution. Current bibliography is available in the annual issues of *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* (vol. 1ff., 1963ff.).

²⁰H. Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971). While *Humanae vitae* raises questions about church authority, many have criticized Küng for selecting the encyclical as his initial perspective.

²¹A comprehensive bibliography on the debate is given in *Fehlbar?*, pp. 515-24; Küng's personal appraisal of the debate and reply to his critics comprise pp. 305-493; *Fehlbar?* is reviewed in *JES* 12 (Winter, 1975), 98-101. A number of Küng's shorter replies have appeared in English: "Why I am staying in the Church," *America* 124 (March 20, 1971), 281-3; "What is the criterion for a critical theology?" *Commonweal* 94 (1971), 326-30; "Towards a Discussion of Infallibility," (with M. Löhrer) *Worship* 45 (1971), 273-89; "Infallibility Questioned," (with R. Murray) *The Month* 132 (October, 1971), 117-21; "Papal Fallibility: O Felix Error," *JES* 10 (Spring, 1973), 361-2; "A Short Balance-Sheet of the Debate on Infallibility," *Concilium* 83, 129-36. Küng's Edinburgh (1970) and Glasgow (1971) lectures (in English) are available on tape from Peter Okell Sound Features (Salford, Lancashire, England).

²²A number of reactions to Küng appeared in *Zum Problem Unfehlbarkeit*, ed. by K. Rahner (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna, 1971); reviewed by L. Scheffczyk, *Theology Digest* 21 (Summer, 1971), 158-61; other critical responses are given by W. Kasper, *Fehlbar?* pp. 74-89, and M. Löhrer, *ibid.*, pp. 90-101; the response of H. Halbfas, *ibid.*, pp. 69-73, is mainly polemic. Of particular interest are Rahner's views immediately prior to the debate: "Quelques considérations sur le concept d'infaillibilité dans la théologie catholique," *L'infaillibilité*, pp. 57-72. Also, cf. the reactions to *Infallible?* by G. Baum, G. Lindbeck, H. McSorley, R. McBrien, *The Infallibility Debate*, ed. by J. Kirvan (New York/Paramus/Toronto, 1971); reviewed in *JES* 9 (Winter, 1972), 151-4, and *AER* 166 (April, 1972), 250-4.

the very variety of such discussion makes the infallibility debate into a changing combination of sub-debates whose evaluation is thus a bit elusive.²³ What will be attempted here is a brief appraisal of five aspects of the debate: (1) hermeneutical analysis, (2) theological models, (3) systematic treatment, (4) philosophical investigation, and (5) ecumenical implications.²⁴

(1) Hermeneutical Analysis

Without precluding the need for investigating "infallibility" in other historical periods, it would seemingly be obvious that Vatican I, as the council issuing the definition, is a necessary point of departure for theological reflection on the doctrinal implications of infallibility. Moreover, it would seem obvious that the assumption that the teaching of *Pastor aeternus* is self-evident is as gratuitous as similar assumptions about Scripture. This is not to claim that interpretation can or should be restricted to a strictly historico-juridical assessment of text and proceedings.²⁵ Nonetheless, interpreters should consider the definition in its historical context as understood by its proponents and adherents as a basis for interpreting its contemporary meaning. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case.

For example, a considerable amount of discussion has been expended on "infallible propositions," in spite of the fact that *Pastor aeternus* does not use this terminology.²⁶ Given this fact, there is little justification for equating "infallible propositions" with the conciliar term "irreformable definitions."²⁷ Insofar as

²³ As B. Marthaler, "Infallibility at Large" (a review of *L'infaillibilité*), *Cross Currents* 21 (Fall, 1971), 482, observes, it would be a mistake to center the debate exclusively on Küng, thus allowing him to set the terms of the debate.

²⁴ For a Protestant appraisal, cf. J. Carey, "Infallibility Revisited," *Theology Today* 28 (January, 1972), 426-38. Also, cf. the review of anti-infallibilist theses (sc. infallibility as unfounded, unverified, undesirable, unnecessary, and impossible) of J. Pereira, *Thought* 47 (Autumn, 1972), 382-414.

²⁵ Among the most important studies of *Pastor aeternus* are G. Thils, *L'infaillibilité pontificale* (Gembloux: Éditions J. Duculot, 1969), reviewed by R. McBrien, *TS* 32 (June, 1971), 336-8; and U. Betti, *La costituzione dogmatica "Pastor Aeternus" del Concilio Vaticano I* (Rome: Antonianum, 1961), reviewed by G. DeJaifve, *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 85 (1962), 174-9.

²⁶ Cf. Küng's attacks on "infallible propositions" in *Infallible?*, pp. 143-56, and *Fehlbar?*, pp. 347-62.

²⁷ DS 3074/1839 (H. Denzinger-A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*; the alternate number is that of earlier editions). Cf. G. Thils, *L'infaillibilité pontificale*, pp. 157-75; G. DeJaifve, "Ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae," *Salesianum* 24 (1962), 283-95; reprinted in *De Doctrina* (n. 19 *supra*), pp. 506-20; trans. in *Eastern Churches Quarterly* 14 (1962), 360-78; also, cf. P. McGrath, "The Concept of Infallibility," *Concilium* 83, 65-76.

"irreformable" is a juridical term meaning "definitively settled," and "infallible" is a theological term meaning "immune from error" or "incapable of error," random interchange is not only denotationally incorrect but potentially confuses two different methodological approaches. Lastly, as far as the teaching of Vatican I is concerned, a rejection of "infallible propositions" does not necessitate a rejection of infallibility.

A second example is found in Vatican I's ambiguity in describing the subject matter that comes under the purview of infallibility: *doctrina de fide vel moribus ab universa Ecclesia tenenda*.²⁸ Apparently dissatisfied with elastic terminology, later theologians have felt justified in being more specific, though in diverse ways. Formerly, theological manuals presented rather lengthy treatments on so-called "secondary objects of infallibility," that at least implicitly extended the ambit of infallibility in ways that Vatican I did not.²⁹ More recently, the trend has been in the opposite direction, as in the generic exclusion of all moral statements from the scope of infallibility.³⁰ Since the expression, *de fide vel moribus*, may mean, among other things, "belief and observance," perhaps the conciliar teaching should simply be accepted as indecisive. After all, is there any need to force a council posthumously to decide what it neglected or refused to decide in the first place?

These examples, which unfortunately are not isolated, indicate that the infallibility debate has sometimes been side-tracked into pseudo-issues, at least as far as official church teaching is concerned;³¹ moreover, "what is missing in the infallibility debate is an explicit confrontation with the hermeneutical problem."³²

²⁸DS 3074/1839. Cf. G. Thils, *L'infaillibilité pontificale*, pp. 234-46; M. Bévenot, "'Faith and Morals' in the Councils of Trent and Vatican I," *HeyJ* [*The Heythrop Journal*] 3 (1962), 15-30; W. Levada, "'Faith and Morals': The Object of Infallibility," *Infallible Church Magisterium and the Natural Law* (Rome: excerpta ex dissertatione, Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1971), pp. 13-71; J. Coventry, *Christian Truth* (New York/Paramus: Paulist Press, 1975), pp. 69-62, p. 74, n. 6.

²⁹For example, J. Salaverri, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, devotes more space to the "secondary objects" (pp. 729-47) than to the primary (pp. 723-9).

³⁰G. Hughes, "Infallibility in Morals," *TS* 34 (September, 1973), 415-28, whose thesis was challenged by B. Tierney, *TS* 35 (September, 1974), 507-17.

³¹Cf. G. Sweeney, "The Forgotten Council," *The Clergy Review* 56 (October, 1971), 738-54; G. Thils, "Truth and Verification at Vatican I," *Concilium* 83, 27-34.

³²T. Ommen, *TS* 35 (December, 1974), 630; cf. R. Marlé, "Dogme infaillible et herméneutique," *L'infaillibilité* cf. n. 6), pp. 305-12.

(2) *Theological Models*

Undergirding most of the discussion of infallibility—both in theological manuals and in the current debate—are divergent models that are similar in their common emphasis on authority.

While one is initially tempted to conjecture that this linking of authority and infallibility is a legacy of the medieval papacy,³³ the apparent origin is Maistre's equation of infallibility in the spiritual order with sovereignty in the temporal order: as sovereignty implies absolute temporal authority, so infallibility implies absolute spiritual authority.³⁴ Adding the fact that nineteenth century canonical theory frequently construed magisterium as a subordinate aspect of jurisdiction, the result is a tidy thesis: the absolute power of jurisdiction entails the absolute power of teaching.³⁵

In effect, the subordination of magisterium to jurisdiction tends to treat teaching as a process of giving definitive answers in a way comparable to a judicial process of rendering decisions. Such a view of magisterium is obviously at odds with any educational theory that envisions teaching as part of a continuing process of searching for truth, which is hardly a decision-making process where issues can be decided without the possibility of further appeal. This alignment of teaching and decision-making seems to have produced a number of textual inconsistencies at Vatican I, where the debated issue of the canonical relationship between magisterium and jurisdiction was not theoretically resolved.

For example, *Pastor aeternus* insists on the one hand that the papal magisterium presupposes the assent of the Church,³⁶ while on the other hand it asserts that decisions of the papal magisterium under infallibility do not require the consent of the Church.³⁷ It would be facile to see the requisite *assensus* and the rejected *consensus* as mutually contradictory; it would be even easier to

³³In fact, medieval popes rejected the doctrine of infallibility as a restriction of their authority; cf. B. Tierney, *JES* 8 (1971), 841-64.

³⁴H. Pottmeyer, *Unfehlbarkeit und Souveränität* (cf. n. 7), pp. 61-73 (on Joseph de Maistre) and pp. 388-409 (on the newly emerging concept of sovereignty).

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 115-81 (on nineteenth century German canonical theory) and pp. 364-88 (on the relationship of *ordo*, *jurisdictio* and *magisterium*).

³⁶DS 3069/1836. Cf. T. Caffrey, "Consensus and Infallibility: the Mind of Vatican I," *The Downside Review* 88 (1970), 107-31.

³⁷DS 3074/1839; the specific reason for rejecting *consensus* was its Gallican sense of subsequent ratification, as in the Fourth Gallican Article of 1682; cf. G. Thils, *L'infaillibilité pontificale*, pp. 157-75; G. Dejaifve, *Salesianum* 24 (1962), 283-95, as in n. 27, *supra*.

ignore one (usually the *assensus*) in favor of the other. However, another approach is to see a juxtaposition of terms that are derived from different perspectives and amalgamated when they should be differentiated: an *assensus ecclesiae* is theologically required, while a *consensus ecclesiae*, in the sense of post-definitional ratification, is juridically rejected.

A second instance in *Pastor aeternus* where this non-differentiated amalgamation seems to exist is in the contrast between its theological description of infallibility as "divine assistance" and its juridical specification of the actualized form of this assistance in "irreformable decisions."³⁸ These two examples suggest that at times *Pastor aeternus* is speaking two languages simultaneously, by inadequately differentiating its theological and canonical perspectives.

A similar mixing of metaphors continues to hamper the current debate. The most obvious instance is to blame infallibility for any, if not every, abuse of authority in the Church; this simply reverses the equally detrimental temptation to cloak every act of church authority with the halo of infallibility. Another instance is the tendency for theologians to speak of church teaching in such semi-judicial terms as "doctrinal decisions," "ultimately binding sentences," or the "irreformability of dogma." If it is doubtful that either the presence or absence of infallibility will be helpful in correcting ecclesiastical abuses, it seems questionable whether a theology of infallibility or a theology of magisterium will really be aided by the continued use of juridical models of authority. At the very least, the relationship between authority and infallibility needs to be critically re-examined.

(3) Systematic Treatment

Theological presentations of infallibility seem to be conditioned by several limiting factors. First, the conciliar definitions are more functional than analytical, more canonical than theological; they are descriptions of how and when infallibility may be exercised, not specifications of what infallibility really is. Secondly, theological manuals accepted infallibility as a premise for further deductions, not as a starting-point for probing underlying suppositions. Thirdly, in addition to spurious or pejorative connotations (such as "sinless" or "doctrinaire") plus the fact that

³⁸ *Ibid.*

"infallibility" can only be approximated in some languages,³⁹ the standard definitions of infallibility—"immunity from error" or "incapability of error"—are only partially successful in indicating what infallibility really is and how it is distinguished from other similar but different realities.

These limitations seem to have hampered the discussion of infallibility in several ways.⁴⁰ First, a negative definition can be used as a notional category without any real reference and so may be predicated in ways that are notionally consistent but really meaningless or misleading.⁴¹ For example, is the statement—"the pope is infallible"—at best a case of improper predication, but also quite likely misleading? Or does the expression, "a priori infallible propositions," have any real meaning? These two samples suggest a more general need for greater attention to how and why "infallibility" is employed in theological discourse.⁴²

Secondly, definitional imprecision makes it difficult to judge the adequacy of alternative expressions or the feasibility of reconceptualizations.⁴³ Specifically, do terms such as "indefectibility" or "remaining in the truth" have basically the same meaning as "infallibility"? If so, the debate is reduced to a question of terminology; if not, then what are the specific differences?

Thirdly, definitional vagueness has made theological dialogue with Scripture and tradition a bit frustrating. In contrast to the theological manuals that found multitudinous evidence for infallibility in Scripture and tradition, the more recent trend is to discard "infallibility" as not appearing in Scripture and as having a rather checkered career in the history of theology. Yet neither an acritical recognition of proof-texts nor a verbal reductionism seems particularly helpful. For a more effective dialogue with Scripture and the sources of tradition, systematic theology needs to be more specific about the topic of conversation.⁴⁴

³⁹While English and other languages simply transliterate *infallibilitas*, some try to translate; while *Unfehlbarkeit* is the standard German translation, it is not entirely satisfactory; it may be more than coincidental that the recent debate arose in a German context where the need for replacements seems more acute.

⁴⁰Cf. P. McGrath, *Concilium* 83, 65-76; J. Coventry, *Christian Truth*, pp. 80-5.

⁴¹On the application of linguistic philosophy to doctrinal statements, cf. G. Hallett, *Darkness and Light* (New York/Paramus/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1975).

⁴²Cf. S. Beggiani, "The Place and Object of Infallibility," *Thought* 48 (Summer, 1973), 256-65; R. Murray, "Who and what is infallible?" *Infallibility in the Church*, pp. 24-46.

⁴³Cf. B. Lee, "Küng, Vatican on Infallibility," *National Catholic Reporter* 12, 9 (December 19, 1975), 6-7.

⁴⁴Cf. the provocative studies of A. Jaubert, "Unfehlbar? Beobachtungen zur

These limitations suggest some areas for additional investigation. First, there is a need to discuss thoroughly the reality presumably denoted by "infallibility." To date, this reality has been variously described as assistance or guidance, as gift or charism, as mystery or indwelling presence and so on.⁴⁵ Yet these identifications have more the merit of suggestions than the value of in-depth expositions.

Secondly, while it has been customary to distinguish infallibility from both revelation and inspiration, more needs to be done to assess their similarities.⁴⁶ Insofar as revelation, inspiration, and infallibility are all concerned with God's mysterious communication through fallible human agents, the similarities seem worth investigating particularly in light of recent developments in the theology of revelation and inspiration.

Thirdly, infallibility should be discussed in an ecclesiological context broader than the papacy. On the one hand, it would seem profitable to examine infallibility in terms of an ecclesial interaction between pope, episcopal college, and laity.⁴⁷ Also, it would seem profitable to consider infallibility in terms of different ecclesiological models, where its meaning would presumably vary from one model to the next.⁴⁸

To generalize, the debate has shown that the theology of infallibility lacks both depth and creativity in answering the basic question: what is infallibility?

(4) *Philosophical Investigation*

Given the historical relativity of human knowledge—to say nothing of the history of the human propensity to error—infallibility is apparently not an issue, but simply an impossibility.

Yet an a priori exclusion of infallibility is incongruously tantamount to an exercise of infallibility; perhaps philosophical examination should not be foreclosed peremptorily. In fact, there are at least two contexts where infallibility-claims appear, inevitably

Sprache des Neuen Testaments," *Fehlbar?*, pp. 105-13; and P. De Vooght, "Les dimensions réelles de l'infailibilité papale," *L'infailibilité*, pp. 131-58.

⁴⁵For a sample list, cf. J. Ford, *JES* 8 (1971), 785-6.

⁴⁶The consistent contrast between infallibility and revelation or inspiration may have originally been intended to counteract popular misconceptions of infallibility, such as portraying the pope as an oracle.

⁴⁷Cf. W. Thompson, *AER* 167 (September, 1973), 450-86.

⁴⁸A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1974), pp. 168, 172.

and unavoidably. First, if and when a person assents absolutely, the mind apparently accepts some truth-claim that is presented, at least implicitly and partially, as immune from error; thus, in assenting absolutely, and in the context of religious experience in particular, the mind seems to be acknowledging some type of infallibility-claim.⁴⁹

A second phenomenon is the general claim of any and every religion to "immunity from error" in regard to "those central propositions which are essential to its identity and without which it would not be itself."⁵⁰ Apparently, no religion can do without some species of infallibility, though this may be neither explicitly claimed nor precisely recognized.⁵¹

In addition to examining such factual instances where infallibility-claims are apparently operative, it would also seem profitable to analyze the divergent understandings of "truth" and "certitude" in different philosophical approaches and systems.⁵² Such comparative analysis should prove helpful in understanding how and why "infallibility" apparently ranges from "meaningful" to "meaningless" in different contexts and why "infallibility" is seemingly necessary in some systems, while excluded in others.⁵³ More specifically, philosophical analysis might enable us to judge whether infallibility is really so rooted in the nineteenth century quest for objective truth and positivistic certitude that it belongs in a museum of anachronisms.⁵⁴

(5) *Ecumenical Implications*

If nothing else has been achieved by the current debate, it has at least converted what was previously a perennial point of

⁴⁹Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, "A Theological Reflection," *Concilium* 83, 77-94; E. Benz, "Vision et infaillibilité," *L'infaillibilité* (cf. n. 6), pp. 163-84; E. Agazzi, "Foi dans le Verbe ou foi dans la proposition?" *ibid.*, pp. 283-94; R. Panikkar, "Le sujet de l'infaillibilité," *ibid.*, pp. 423-45; J. Lotz, "Problématique du 'semel verum—semper verum,'" *ibid.*, pp. 455-69.

⁵⁰G. Lindbeck, *The Infallibility Debate*, p. 117.

⁵¹Cf. the various approaches of K. Kerényi, "Problèmes sur la Pythia," *L'infaillibilité*, pp. 323-7; L. Alonso-Schökel, "L'infaillibilité de l'oracle prophétique," *ibid.*, pp. 495-503; G. Anawati, "Le problème de l'infaillibilité dans la pensée musulmane," *ibid.*, pp. 505-14.

⁵²Cf. X. Tilliette, "La Vérité de Galilée, la Vérité de Giordano Bruno," *L'infaillibilité*, pp. 257-66; A. DeWaelhens, "Réflexions philosophiques sur l'infaillibilité," *ibid.*, pp. 399-407.

⁵³G. Hallett, *Darkness and Light*; E. Grassi, "L'infaillibilité: un problème philosophique," *L'infaillibilité*, pp. 329-55.

⁵⁴Cf. "On Infallibility," *AmpJ* 76, 1 (Summer, 1971), 1-7.

polemic into a conversational topic as "the ecumenical problem today."⁵⁵

While discussion of infallibility is easier in one sense, it inevitably encounters an ambiguity that is traceable to the place of infallibility in various "hierarchies of truths."⁵⁶ For example, in terms of a hierarchy ranking doctrines according to their centrality in the Christian mystery or their necessity as a means of salvation, infallibility is clearly in a lower echelon. However, in terms of a hierarchy ranking doctrines according to their importance for ecclesial self-identity or personal religious commitment, infallibility may move into the front row.

If this "floating value" appears to complicate ecumenical dialogue, there are at least two practical advantages. First, given the spectrum of contemporary Catholic interpretations, many non-Catholic Christians are quite likely to find points of convergence, at least with some Catholics. Yet it seems inappropriate to consider infallibility as a one-directional problem; if Catholics need to explain infallibility in meaningful ways, non-Catholics should presumably be asked how "infallibility surrogates" may operate in their churches' teaching, theology, and popular symbolism.⁵⁷

Secondly, the thematic components that ecumenical dialogue on infallibility needs to consider can be envisaged on different levels; for instance, dogmatically, infallibility expresses the promise of Christ to guide the Church through the Holy Spirit; theologically, infallibility specifies the actualization of Christ's promise through designated ministries within the Church, particularly though not exclusively, the Petrine ministry and the episcopal ministry; symbolically, infallibility is a meaningful, yet highly contextualized, expression of the Church's continuing quest for the truth of the gospel. Presumably, these (or similar)⁵⁸ components could be incorporated into projected consensus-statements in a

⁵⁵Cf. L. Swidler, "The Ecumenical Problem Today: Papal Infallibility," *JES* 8 (Fall, 1971), 751-67.

⁵⁶R. Brown, *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York/Paramus: Paulist Press, 1975), pp. 84-5; cf. G. Tavard, "Hierarchia Veritatum," *TS* 32 (June, 1971), 278-89.

⁵⁷Cf. the remark on the Protestant counterpart, "the primacy and the infallibility of the book," by J. Smylie, "American Protestants Interpret Vatican Council I," *Church History* 38 (December, 1969), 473.

⁵⁸For a variant listing, cf. K.-H. Ohlig, *Why We Need the Pope* (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1975), p. 136; unfortunately, some of the other historical and theological interpretations of this work seem questionable.

variety of ways according to the exigencies of particular bilateral conversations.

In over-view, the multi-faceted character of the present debate implies that it can be evaluated from a variety of perspectives—and with a divergence of judgments as well. The single judgment on which all might agree is that the recent debate, like its predecessor at the time of Vatican I, has been marked by its fair share of exaggerations and animosity, which have at least served to draw attention to issues.

As one of Vatican I's achievements was the fact that it established a set of criteria that enable us to say, for example, that the *Syllabus*, *Lamentabili*, and *Humanae vitae* do not fall under the aegis of infallibility, so a similar type of restraining effect seems to be emerging in the present debate; a modest success will have been achieved if there is an excision of dubious expressions such as "infallible propositions" from standard theological vocabulary.

A further lesson can be derived from Vatican I: that debate left a number of problems unresolved; these have re-emerged with added strength after a century's hibernation. It would be unfortunate if the issues raised in the current debate are simply forgotten with the waning of polemics. Perhaps the real challenge, and potentially the real achievement, of the present debate is still in the future: it remains to be seen how creative theology will be in presenting infallibility—or what today is called "infallibility"—as part of the mystery of Christ's promised guidance of the Church.

Perhaps the most important lesson that can be learned from comparison with Vatican I is found in the recognition of a spectrum of legitimate interpretations of infallibility. In one sense, the current debate is a broadening of the spectrum; in another sense, it is a test-case for the viable utilization of contrasting, and at times conflicting, methodologies in theology. Thus, the broader issue is the viability of a theological pluralism that is genuinely catholic.

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