

SEMINAR ON PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

An adequate history of the development of the idea of papal infallibility has not yet been written. In just the past decade, however, many articles and a few books have been published which do explore several aspects and periods of its history. We have, for example, the generally excellent essays included in volumes V and VI of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue entitled *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church* (1974) and *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church* (1980). Many of the essays included in these two volumes, especially in the most recent one on infallibility, concentrate either on the New Testament data (see also another product of this dialogue, *Peter in the New Testament*), or on the nineteenth century and in particular on the exegesis of the Vatican I texts. Thus we have the important studies, for example, by Gustave Thils, *L'infaillibilité pontificale* (1969), Josef Pottmeyer, *Unfehlbarkeit und Souveranität* (1975), and August Hasler's recent controversial book *Pius IX (1846-1878): päpstliche Unfehlbarkeit und I Vatikanische Konzil* (1978). More than anyone else, Yves Congar has explored the medieval ecclesiology and explained in particular the nature and functioning of papal authority. Except for Peter Chirico's book on infallibility, it would seem that the systematic theologians are for the most part waiting for the exegetical and historical waters to calm before attempting any full scale reinterpretations.

No study has shed more light on just when and how the pope came to be considered infallible than Brian Tierney's book on the *Origins of Papal Infallibility* (1972). Though Tierney's study spans only the years 1150-1350, the concept and use of the term infallibility had been around for centuries before. As the common statement of the most recent Lutheran/Catholic dialogue explains, the word "infallible" had been used previous to the thirteenth century to describe "God's truth, his revelation, the Church's normative teaching and in similar contexts" (par. 22). From the fourth century on it was commonly understood that the pope could make binding decisions on disputed questions of faith. From the time of the first councils in the fourth century, it was also commonly accepted that the See of Rome had never erred.

Tierney's study fills in a large gap in the history of the doctrine and therefore deserves careful study and evaluation. The first four chapters follow the thinking of the canonists and the theologians on the nature of papal teaching authority and their understanding of tradition and sovereignty. He concludes that the canonists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did not think that an infallible head was necessary to sustain the faith of the Church. They all knew well that a pope could fall

into heresy. Tierney presents the canonists as proponents of the "single source theory," that is, that only Scripture, and not Tradition separated from Scripture, could be a source of divine revelation.

In his study of the Franciscan theologians, and in particular Bonaventure and Peter Olivi, Tierney discovers emphases on the development of dogma, the possibility of non-scriptural revelation, and the authentication of new doctrine by the papacy; in a word, he discovers a "two source theory," which, in his judgment, is the presupposition of the modern theory of papal infallibility. While Bonaventure never quite reached the conclusion that the pope was infallible, Peter Olivi did in 1280 when in writing to protect the Order's recently acquired privileged status effected by Nicholas III's 1279 decree *Exiit*, he argued that papal decrees enacted to define the faith were irreformable. About forty years later the Spiritual Franciscans were faced with a pope, John XXII (1316-1334), who was not so well disposed to their doctrine of absolute poverty which had been enshrined in *Exiit*. Around 1322 they realized that John intended to revoke *Exiit* and began writing polemics and treatises that stressed the irrevocable character of papal decrees which had been defined through the key of knowledge. In the light of this historical background, papal infallibility was, according to Tierney, the novel creation of some Spiritual Franciscans interested, paradoxically, in limiting the powers of any pope who might change the decrees of previous popes. When John was told that he could not revoke *Exiit*, he rejected their idea as a "pestiferous doctrine," for he saw in it, according to Tierney, a limitation of his sovereignty. John saw it as a question of either sovereignty or infallibility, and opted for sovereignty. To quote Tierney, "John XXII strongly resented the imputation of infallibility to his office" (p. 171). Besides canonists, Tierney includes theologians among those who would automatically reject the notion of infallibility: "... the idea of papal infallibility was blankly unacceptable even to the most ardent defenders of the Roman See in the first decades of the fourteenth century. The idea was too novel, too radical, too sharply opposed to the juridical conception of papal sovereignty, too alien to the theological tradition of the Church to command support among respectable theologians" (p. 159). But before long John had come to see, according to Tierney, that there might be something in the Franciscan argument, and "through some uncharacteristic streak of caution or through sheer good luck (or bad luck)" (p. 171), left the door open so as to allow the novel idea enough respectability that curial theologians were soon able to reshape it to buttress the pope's power.

The most critical juncture in Tierney's argument comes in the fifth chapter where he takes up the conflict between John XXII and the Spiritual Franciscans. Tierney acknowledges that his central theme is "the emergence of the doctrine of papal infallibility in the years around 1300" (p. 6). In 1324 John published a decree, *Quia quorundam mentes*, in which he explained how and why he was able to change, as he did through *Cum inter nonnullos* (1323), what his predecessor Nicholas III had declared concerning the nature of Franciscan poverty. In this im-

portant decree, the first full exploration of the nature and limits of papal teaching authority by a pope himself, John concentrated on, among other things, the difference between those things which he could and could not change. As a canonist he was aware of what he could not change, namely, "the precepts of the Old and New Testaments or the articles of faith or whatever is necessary for salvation or the general *status* of the Church"—a formula common to both canonists and theologians. In all other areas, John explained, he was sovereign, that is, he could revoke decrees of his predecessors or create new legislation.

Since in John's view the question of the Franciscan interpretation of the scope of the vow of poverty and the poverty of Christ was a matter of discipline and not a matter of faith, there was nothing to prevent him from revoking Nicholas' decree. In the light of this distinction between dogma and discipline, indeed a distinction not easy to draw and at that time often not clearly defined, the opposition Tierney posits between sovereignty and infallibility, an opposition that allows him to argue that before 1350 canonists could in no way countenance the idea of papal infallibility, becomes artificial. Historically the term sovereignty derived from the political realm and did not really apply to the theological realm of dogma, or more strictly speaking, to the articles of faith.

A careful study of *Quia quorundam mentes* leads to the conclusion that John, in opposing the Franciscan theory of papal infallibility (one which found in Tradition apart from Scripture a source of divine revelation and emphasized the formal authority of the one who defines), maintained a position that required decrees to be based on Scripture if they were to be considered irrevocable. It is interesting to note how often, especially during the late years of his pontificate when he embroiled himself in the Beatific Vision controversy, he pleaded that his position on the question, which he advanced in several sermons preached between 1331 and 1334, be criticized only on its merits: "non quis, sed quid" he often repeated. Roughly translated, he was telling his critics to forget that he was the pope and attend instead to the cogency of his arguments. He reminded them that the nature and time of entrance into the Beatific Vision was still an open question, that there had up to that time been no *determinatio ecclesiae*—still another indication that John knew well that certain decrees could be irrevocable.

The conviction of both the canonists and theologians of the medieval Church that the Roman See had never erred is also important. It is a concept that later would commonly be referred to as the infallibility of the whole Church. Pope John, and the late medieval Church in general, also stressed that all "determinationes ecclesiae" needed to be made "utens consilio, requirens adjutorium universalis ecclesiae," a formula which the minority at Vatican I strongly emphasized. Vatican II's stress on collegiality and the infallibility of the whole Church has more in common with John's understanding of his teaching authority than that ultramontanism which has dominated much of the Church's life and thought between the two Vatican Councils.

Ecclesial infallibility is, as Edward Schillebeeckx has recently noted, the "key to all the others." Had Tierney sufficiently developed

the role played in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by ecclesial infallibility (he mentions it only once, on page 154, but never develops it), and the way in which both canonists and theologians avoided the notion of "infallibilitas privata" when describing the magisterium of the pope, he would not be so prone to misinterpret the doctrine of papal infallibility as if it meant the setting up of the pope as a source of revelation separate from the Church and divorced from Scripture. Such an interpretation of the nature of papal infallibility was rejected not only by John XXII, but by the Fathers of Vatican I as well.

Even ecclesial infallibility, for that matter, ought itself to be set into the larger context of the nature and meaning of truth. Moreover, as Avery Dulles comments (see Lutheran/Catholic dialogue, Vol. VI, p. 95), the Church has never addressed itself thematically to the question of the nature of infallibility itself; Vatican I stated that the pope enjoys that infallibility with which Christ endowed the Church—without ever saying just what the infallibility of the whole Church was. These ideas stand in need of further exploration.

Hans Küng has described Tierney's study as a "contribution of great importance which fills the gap in my argumentation" against papal infallibility. Richard McBrien claimed that it provided the "scholarly underpinnings" for Küng's position on infallibility. In recounting the historical origins of papal infallibility, the Lutheran/Catholic common statement on "Teaching Authority and Infallibility" summarizes in paragraph 21 the thesis of Tierney as a part of its description of the doctrine's history. And although George Lindbeck does not think that Catholic identity could be maintained by simply dropping the idea of papal infallibility (as Küng and Tierney have suggested), he does see in Tierney's thesis "powerful arguments" that "must play an important role in any future serious consideration of the doctrine" (Vol. VI, p. 107).

There is therefore good reason to study carefully John XXII's important decree on papal teaching authority.¹ If I have disagreed in general with some of Tierney's description of Pope John's position, and in particular with his interpretation of John's 1324 decree on papal teaching authority, I think that Tierney's book on the *Origins of Papal Infallibility* illuminates in a way no one has done as well a heretofore unexplored chapter of the history of this doctrine.

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¹ A book length manuscript on John XXII and papal teaching authority is being prepared for publication. A more detailed article on Tierney's interpretation of John's position and 1324 decree will appear in a future issue of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.