INFALLIBILITY AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF ANGLICAN/ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE

The ecumenical discussions, particularly the bilateral dialogues, are helping Christians of all denominations to clarify and deepen their understanding of the knotty issues raised by the definition of papal infallibility. Yves Congar lists ecumenical dialogue as one of four factors which are permitting a new, more sophisticated reception of the First Vatican Council.[1] I would like to focus on the contributions to a discussion of infallibility which the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission is making, and then elaborate on what I believe is a further advance on the subject made this spring by the Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue in Canada (hereafter Canadian Dialogue), of which I am a member.

Upon recommendation of the Malta Report in 1968 that the Anglican and Roman Catholic communions work towards "unity by stages," the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (hereafter ARCIC) of theologians from the two communions was established to explore the possibility of overcoming the dogmatic differences that remained between Roman Catholics and Anglicans. After their work at Windsor on the Eucharist (*Eucharistic Doctrine*, 1971) and at Canterbury on ministry (*Ministry and Ordination*, 1973), in which they felt they reached substantial doctrinal agreement on these matters, they turned to the question of authority, publishing a statement on this after their Venice meeting (*Authority in the Church*, 1976).[2] In it they touched on several points which contributed to the discussion of infallibility, while frankly acknowledging that further work remained to be done in four areas: Petrine scriptural texts, *ius divinum* claims about the papacy, papal infallibility, and claims for the pope's universal immediate jurisdiction. The Commission expects to complete its work on these four areas this August (1980), and anticipates a statement that overcomes basic divisions in each area. My reflections will highlight what the statement on authority contributes to our understanding of infallibility, and then focus on some suggestions that the Canadian Dialogue hopes will be helpful for ARCIC's work.

After an initial affirmation of Christ as the source of all authority in the Church, the statement discusses the communication of Christ's authority to Christians and its manifestation in the Church through

[1] Yves Congar, "Bulletin d'ecclésiologie," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 60 (1976), 288.

[2] Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Three Agreed Statements* (London: SPCK and Catholic Truth Society, 1978). References to the statement *Authority in the Church* are taken from this edition; numbers refer to paragraphs within the statement.

particular gifts. It then focuses on the authority of the ordained, espe-
cially bishops, whose role in maintaining unity in the truth is examined at
both a local level and within the communion of churches throughout the
world. The statement suggests a dialectical relationship between concil-
iarity and primacy as the two means by which bishops exercise their
episcopē (translated "oversight"). Within a discussion of primacy, it
introduces the historical emergence of Rome's primacy; while lament-
ing abuses in exercise, it is able to evaluate positively the goal of the
Roman primacy: "Yet the primacy, rightly understood, implies that the
bishop of Rome exercises his oversight in order to guard and promote
the faithfulness of all the churches to Christ and one another."[3]

The word "infallibility" is not used in the statement except in the
section on unresolved problems. Nevertheless, a footnote in that sec-
tion explains that the sense of infallibility is seen in two earlier para-
graphs. In the first of those earlier paragraphs, the Commission discusses
the need "to make the relevance of the gospel plain to every genera-
tion."[4] This task involves the Church in translations or restatements of
the good news of salvation for all generations and cultures, translations
which must be "consonant with the apostolic witness recorded in the
Scriptures."[5] While noting the historically conditioned and limited na-
ture of such restatements and the possibility of their further restatement,
the document explains that the Church sometimes "has endorsed cer-
tain formulas as authentic expressions of its witness."[6] After this para-
graph the section continues by discussing conciliarity, and concludes by
emphasizing both the Church's need for effective means for resolving
conflict and the bishops' "special responsibility for promoting truth and
discerning error."[7] While those in authority may well err, the statement
continues, "we are confident that such failures cannot destroy the
Church's ability to proclaim the gospel and to show forth the Christian
life; for we believe that Christ will not desert his Church and that the
Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth. That is why the Church, in spite of
its failures, can be described as indefectible."[8]

Turning to conciliar and primatial authority, the statement then
makes one of its most controversial claims, in the second of the para-
graphs later referred to in the footnote on infallibility:

> In times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question, the
> Church can make judgments, consonant with Scripture, which are authorita-
> tive. When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on funda-
> mental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous. Through the Holy Spirit
> the Church commits itself to these judgments, recognizing that, being faith-
> ful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition, they are by the same Spirit
> protected from error.[9]

[3] *Authority in the Church*, 12.
[4] *Ibid.*, 15.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*, 18.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*, 19.

The paragraph continues by explaining that such statements do not add to the truth but clarify it, that only conciliar decrees which have thus clarified "central truths of salvation" possess binding authority, and that the bishops' involvement in such judgments shares "in a special gift of Christ to his Church."[10] The statement then turns to a discussion of the exercise of primacy and ends with a list of the four unresolved areas mentioned earlier.

In its work over the past two years, the Canadian Dialogue focused on the implications of the sentence, "When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous."[11] Goaded by the hesitations of evangelical Anglicans in our group, we began an attempt to study the doctrine of infallibility, and we emerged at last with an *Agreed Statement on Infallibility* in May, 1980 at our meeting in Toronto.[12] I will note briefly seven of its characteristics which I think should give us hints for our future discussions of infallibility.

First, the term "infallibility" is used analogically when applied to the Church. The statement begins by affirming God's infallibility, and then in a second paragraph it applies the term to the Church "in the analogical sense" to mean that "by God'grace, it will never deceive or err so gravely concerning the truths of the Gospel that the message of salvation is lost to humankind."[13] Only after it has thus clarified the sense in which "infallibility" is applied to the Church does the statement

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] The text of the May 8, 1980 *Agreed Statement on Infallibility* by the Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue in Canada follows (numbers refer to paragraphs within the statement.)

"1. God alone is essentially and inalienably infallible, incapable of deceiving or being deceived.

"2. The Church as a whole can be said to be infallible in the analogical sense that, by God's grace, it will never deceive or err so gravely concerning the truths of the Gospel that the message of salvation is lost to humankind. To speak of 'infallibility' in this sense is not to claim that either the institutions of the Church or even the majority of its members are immune to error. It is simply to assert that the Church can be confident in the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit, who will safeguard the faith and enable the Church to fulfill its mission. The Church puts its trust in God who will not allow it to fall totally away from the path of salvation.

"3. The truths of the Gospel thus 'infallibly' preserved enlighten the whole people of God. By virtue of their participation in the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ, all persons and institutions of the Church are called to express and preserve these truths in appropriate ways. However, we must recognize also a special sign of God's grace in preserving the Church from error at times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question: this sign occurs when the institutions which serve the universal fellowship (i.e., council and/or primate) are enabled to articulate these truths faithfully to Scripture and in a way that commends itself to the whole Church, thus equipping the Church to meet the challenge. Such pronouncements, by virtue of their foundation in Scripture and their appropriateness to the need of the time, give the first embodiment to a renewed agreement in the truth to which they summon the whole of the Church. The 'formal authority' of such pronouncements helps the Church to meet the threat of error and gives it confidence in proclaiming the Gospel: but it must always defer to the 'material authority' of Scripture, in fidelity to which the pronouncements were formulated."

[13] Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue in Canada, *Agreed Statement on Infallibility*, 2.

go on to discuss particular organs or institutions of the Church, such as councils. This analogical use of the term "infallibility" allays Protestant fears that the Church is claiming for itself what can only be claimed of God. It reminds Catholics that any discussion of the authority of particular church institutions should take place within the context of ecclesial infallibility. But it also reassures Catholics by finding a way that both sides can use the term "infallibility," so widely used in Catholic discussions on authority.

Second, infallibility as applied to the Church or its manifestation by a church institution is firmly and explicitly attributed to God's grace. In the second paragraph, the statement borrows from the spirit of the (U.S.) Lutheran/Roman Catholic statement on *Teaching Authority and Infallibility*,[14] asserting that Christians' affirmations about infallibility rest on confidence in the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit or their trust in God.

Third, the statement recognizes that "institutions of the Church or even the majority of its members" are not immune to error.[15] But, it explains, God will never allow the Church to "deceive or err so gravely concerning the truths of the Gospel that the message of salvation is lost to humankind."[16] This is what the statement means by "infallibility" when used to describe the Church. "To speak of 'infallibility' . . . is simply to assert that the Church can be confident in the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit, who will safeguard the faith and enable the Church to fulfill its mission."[17] This again reassures evangelical Anglicans, who saw in the ARCIC statement on authority a contradiction of article twenty-one of the Thirty-Nine Articles:"General councils . . . (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God) may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God."[18] But it clarifies the common Christian belief, emphasized in Catholic theology, that God, because of his desire to save all people, will not allow the Church totally to lose the truths of the gospel.

Fourth, at the heart of the statement stands the repeated emphasis that infallibility refers to this gospel-preserving function with which God assists his Church, and to nothing more. This is brought out in the "so gravely" of the phrase, "it will never deceive or err so gravely concerning the truths of the Gospel that the message of salvation is lost to humankind."[19] It is brought out again in the third paragraph when the institutional manifestations of the Church's infallibility are understood to occur only when the gospel seems to be in grave danger, i.e., "at

[14] Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 6 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), pp. 11-68.

[15] Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue in Canada, 2.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] The Thirty-Nine Articles are available in John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1963), pp. 266-81.

[19] Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue in Canada, 2.

times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question."[20] The statement, then, envisions infallibility's exercise by institutions only in reference to truths central for salvation, and only in circumstances when such truths are genuinely endangered. The example used often during our discussion was the Council of Nicea.

Fifth, the statement affirms that all individuals and institutions in the Church are called to express and preserve the saving truths which God infallibly preserves in the Church. But it recognizes that at times certain institutions can give a "special sign of God's grace in preserving the Church from error" because their particular ministry is to "serve the universal fellowship."[21] These institutions are identified as "council and/or primate," using the terminology of the ARCIC statement on authority. When sometimes they are enabled, by God's grace, to "articulate these truths [of the gospel] faithfully to Scripture and in a way that commends itself to the whole Church," their pronouncements "give the first embodiment to a renewed agreement in the truth to which they summon the whole of the Church."[22] To serve Protestant concerns, the statement avoids calling primates or councils infallible; it rather describes their successful articulation of the truths of the gospel as "a special sign of God's grace in preserving the Church from error,"[23] a manifestation of the Church's infallibility. It also avoids attributing to a pope or council *a priori* any guaranteed power to reach such statements whenever they speak. At the same time, it preserves the Catholic emphases on the real exercise of the Church's infallibility at certain times through its institutions, and on the importance played by their authoritative pronouncements at those times in safeguarding the gospel from being completely lost.

Sixth, the statement firmly shows recent Catholic commitments to avoid a two-source theory. It relates infallibility to pronouncements only when they "articulate these truths [of the gospel] faithfully to Scripture" or with "foundation in Scripture and . . . appropriateness to the need of the time."[24] The scriptural emphasis is underlined in the last line, when it states, "The 'formal authority' of such pronouncements helps the Church to meet the threat of error and gives it confidence in proclaiming the Gospel: but it must always defer to the 'material authority' of Scripture, in fidelity to which the pronouncements were formulated."[25]

Finally, in closing, I want to note one additional contribution which this Canadian statement makes. George Tavard mentions the importance of a serious response to the work of ARCIC, with judgments on whether their statements truly represent the mind of the two communions.[26] Among Roman Catholics, he notes, such response has been fairly

[20] *Ibid.*, 3.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] George H. Tavard, "The Anglican/Roman Catholic Agreed Statements and Their Reception," *Theological Studies* 41 (1980), 74.

slow, and it seems to have been mainly the work of those Roman
Catholics on bilateral committees such as the Canadian Dialogue.[27] He
attributes this in part to the nonparliamentary decision-making process
of the Roman Catholic communion. I think that this places a greater
responsibility on Roman Catholic theologians involved in national bilat-
eral dialogues, as well as those teaching on Roman Catholic faculties of
theology, to try, along with their ecumenical partners, to respond for-
mally to the work of ARCIC and to other ecumenical statements. The
Canadian Dialogue's statement on infallibility has been one attempt to
do this, an attempt that has shown us the truth of Hans-Georg
Gadamer's remark: "To reach an understanding with one's partner in a
dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the success-
ful assertion of one's own point of view, but a transformation into a
communion, in which we do not remain what we were."[28]

<div align="right">

MARGARET O'GARA
St. Michael's College
Toronto

</div>

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[28] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975),
p. 341.