

## SEMINAR PAPER

### DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON THE INFALLIBILITY ISSUE

The purpose of this paper is to suggest new lines of approach to the infallibility issue. I shall first take up a number of methodological questions and propose answers which differ from those customarily assumed by researchers in the field of infallibility. I shall then indicate a number of substantive questions which may constitute targets for broader understanding of the nature of ecclesial infallibility in the future.

#### METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

*What kind of historical work does one do with regard to infallibility?* Up to now the answer has largely been that one analyzes the teaching of Vatican I,<sup>1</sup> or one examines the history of the doctrine up to and during the Council,<sup>2</sup> or one studies the early emergence of the explicit treatment of infallibility.<sup>3</sup> I suggest that a different kind of historical work is also necessary. My belief is that infallibility is the doctrine which thematizes the generic processes by which the Church arrives at certitude in belief. If one concedes this, then another way of studying historically the reality of infallibility emerges. One can study the concrete cases in which the Church arrived at certitude in its belief of individual doctrines with an eye toward discerning the elements common to these arrivals at certitude. In other words, one tries to construct a common doctrine on infallibility by generalizing from the individual instances in which infallibility was exercised. This procedure would be parallel to the procedure by which one constructs a theory of development of doctrine by attempting to generalize from individual instances of the process by which the various doctrines developed.

*Is history the only source for knowledge of infallibility?* Up to now the assumption of most theologians has been that history gives us the only access to the understanding of ecclesial infallibility.<sup>4</sup> While I do not

<sup>1</sup>Cuthbert Butler, *The Vatican Council*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930); Gustave Thils, *L'Infaillibilité Pontificale* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1969); Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>Franz Xaver Bantle, *Unfehlbarkeit der Kirche in Aufklärung und Romantik: Eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung für die Zeit der Wende vom 18. zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976); Josef Pottmeyer, *Unfehlbarkeit und Souveränität: Die päpstliche Unfehlbarkeit im System der ultramontanen Ekklesiologie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1975); August Hasler, *Pius IX (1846-1878), päpstliche Unfehlbarkeit und 1. Vatikanisches Konzil: Dogmatisierung und Durchsetzung einer Ideologie* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1977).

<sup>3</sup>Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150-1350* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

<sup>4</sup>To my knowledge my *Infallibility: The Crossroads of Doctrine* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977) is the only book-length attempt to treat infallibility from a

minimize the importance of historical work for the study of the question, I do not believe that historical texts are the only sources to be quarried. If infallibility is the process by which the Church arrives at certitude in belief or, alternatively, if it is the process by which irreformable doctrines are proclaimed, then it would seem that the elements of the process can be directly observed in the communal activity of understanding now taking place in the Church. The teaching on infallibility is not a doctrine about the content of a unique happening in the past; rather, it purports to represent an activity which is common to past, present, and future. As a process whose elements are still operative in the faith life of the Church, it should be subject to modern observation and analysis. The point I am making is that it is high time that we recognize the place of empirical study in the attempt to understand this and many another doctrine. Any teaching which purports to reflect contours of faith reality that are still in existence should be subject to the study of that faith reality and not just to the study of the texts that represent the experience of that reality in the past. Surely, if one can study a reality at second hand in a text, one should be able to study it at first hand in present faith experience.

*What kind of training is needed for the historian of infallibility?* Up to now the assumption seems to have been that the historian of Vatican I or of prior periods on the subject of infallibility needs to have only exegetical training. He or she must study the texts, must know the background of the terms used, must be acquainted with the historical forces producing the teaching, must be familiar with the various stages of the development of conciliar texts. I suggest that such training is necessary but not sufficient. I would claim that the historian of infallibility requires a further training. She or he needs to know not just the texts but also the reality referred to by those texts. She or he must become familiar with the processes by which groups come to certitude, with communal epistemology and cognitional theory.

Why is this necessary? Because in the treatment of any subject depicted in past documents, the first necessity binding the present interpreter is familiarity with the reality written up in the texts. Without that familiarity the interpreter will overlook key clues, miss the meaning of what is merely implicit or suggested, fail to note the omissions past authors unwittingly made. To illustrate, can one imagine a competent modern historian attempting to write a history of mathematics without first learning mathematics? Lacking a mathematical background, the historian may be able to recognize the symbols which occur frequently in the texts, but it is hardly likely that she or he will grasp the mental processes that the symbols were meant to convey. Again, can one imagine a researcher attempting to write a history of social forces at the time of the American Revolution without first learning the elements of sociology?

philosophical rather than an historical perspective. See, however, *L'Infaillibilité: Son Aspect Philosophique et Théologique*, ed. by Enrico Castelli (Paris: Aubier, 1970). This collection of articles by authors from around the world is still of great value.

In analogous fashion I propose that the present theologian needs to know as much as possible about the process by which persons in community come to understanding and certitude if she or he is to be capable of interpreting past texts with genuine comprehension. In fact, I believe that the main reason why a present interpreter can interpret Vatican I decrees or other infallibility texts is that, whether the interpreter knows it or not, she or he has acquired an informal knowledge of cognitional theory. A careful and precise training in that theory would assist the interpreter immensely.

#### SUBSTANTIVE QUESTIONS

Surprisingly, only a small percentage of the work on infallibility deals with the meaning of the doctrine in the life of the Church. Studies in the field—most of which are historical, as I have indicated—deal with the motives and activities that led to the infallibility teaching and not with the content of the doctrine and its connection with other doctrines and with the living of the Christian life. At least, this is the general rule.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, I suggest a few questions of a substantive nature which may be objects of future research.<sup>6</sup>

1. Dogma is said to be saving truth. In what sense is the dogma of infallibility a saving truth?

2. What connection do the conditions for the exercise of papal infallibility enunciated at Vatican I have to do with the very nature of that infallibility? Where did these conditions for the exercise of infallibility come from?

3. What is it, if anything, in the very nature of the papacy and the episcopacy which makes these the organs of the infallible magisterium of the Church?

4. Why have there been no cases of the exercise of infallibility in moral matters?

5. Vatican I spoke about irreformable definitions. Are all true doctrines irreformable? If not, under what conditions might some doctrines be reformed?

6. Vatican I and Vatican II assigned the exercise of the Church's infallible magisterium only to the pope or to the body of the bishops united with the pope. However, these councils did not deny that other persons under certain conditions might exercise infallibility in the Church. Is there anything in the nature of ecclesial infallibility which might indicate there could be other organs capable of exercising the infallibility which rests in the whole Church?

7. Are there permanent juridical conditions for the exercise of infallibility which are *not* also theological conditions?

<sup>5</sup>I have treated briefly the connection between the doctrine of infallibility and the Christian life in "Spirituality and Infallibility," *Spirituality Today* 31 (1979), 109-20.

<sup>6</sup>I am heartily in agreement with R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946) pp. 269-74, 278-82. Collingwood, following Lord Acton, believed that the scientific historian made progress by studying problems and questions rather than periods of history. With regard to infallibility I would adjust this to say that one should study questions rather than specific documents.

8. What is the connection between the doctrine of infallibility and the living of the Christian life?

Many other questions could be suggested. If such newer questions are not taken up and discussed, I believe that the infallibility debate will have little chance of making any progress.

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