

SEMINAR ON NINETEENTH CENTURY THEOLOGY

AUGUST HASLER AND PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

This seminar discussion on the book of August Hasler, *How the Pope Became Infallible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981), was organized and chaired by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (Catholic University of America, Washington, DC). It began with a brief presentation by Margaret O'Gara (St. Michael's College, Toronto). She suggested that Hasler's book was accurate in its general impression, but mistaken in some of its details. A summary of her presentation and the seminar discussion follows.

The book has two sections. The historical section recounts the manipulative tactics used by Pius IX—presented as authoritarian and mentally unbalanced—and by a small number of majority bishops at the First Vatican Council to ensure the passage and reception of the teaching on papal infallibility. From this analysis, Hasler concludes that the Council's actions were not free. In his theological section, Hasler argues the correctness of the minority's reasoning against papal infallibility, and concludes that the definition of papal infallibility is ideology, a doctrine with no adequate basis which in turn shields the magisterium from further criticism.

One strength of Hasler's presentation is the sympathetic and generally accurate picture he paints of the minority bishops. His book forces us to take seriously some of the unanswered questions which still surround the First Vatican Council by listening to the voices of the losers. Hasler also draws some helpful links between the definition of papal infallibility and the overly authoritarian and centralized exercise of papal primacy and teaching in the twentieth century, finding such examples of creeping infallibility as the Modernist crisis, the proclamation of the Assumption of Mary, and the treatment of Hans Küng.

In several areas, however, Hasler's study is weak. First, his polemical stance leads him to argue points without sufficient evidence. Despite his sympathy for the minority, he ends by suspecting them of bad faith where he might more correctly have found simply bad theology. Secondly, Hasler operates with a faulty understanding of the definition of papal infallibility; his univocal understanding of its meaning reveals his empiricist epistemology which denies the need for any interpretation of dogma. Hasler himself seems to ridicule the effort to interpret which the minority

bishops undertook. Finally, his understanding of history also manifests what Bernard Lonergan has called the ocular model of human knowing, in which facts are thought to speak for themselves. Again, he has ignored the role which interpretation plays even in historical study. This leads him to contrast history with dogma in too simple a way.

After the presentation on Hasler's book, seminar participants expressed their own views. Many believed that the Council had more freedom than Hasler acknowledged; others wondered whether his presentation of the minority bishops was a fair one. John Padberg (Weston School of Theology, Cambridge) argued that the definition which the Council had finally passed was more carefully limited in scope than Hasler acknowledged. John Ford (Catholic University of America, Washington, DC) presented evidence which showed the weakness of Hasler's use of historical sources. Ford argued that Hasler's perspective on the minority bishops was not always an accurate one. The seminar participants all seemed to agree that papal infallibility was often misunderstood and exaggerated, but many thought that Hasler's attack on it was badly executed.

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