

## Catholic Doctrine: Between Revelation and Theology

Last spring, when Father Imbelli proposed the possibility of this pre-convention seminar, I suggested that in view of the convention theme this year—the development of doctrine—a good topic might be the nature and status of doctrine. Differing theories of development, in our day, seem to rest on differing views about doctrine and its relationship to revelation and faith. Unless I am mistaken, the differences constitute a major fault line in contemporary Catholic theology. The communication of this ideological division to the body of the faithful through seminary professors, religious educators, and the media, runs the risk of producing a virtual schism within the church itself.

By doctrines I understand, for purposes of this paper, authoritative teachings of the Catholic church. The Code of Canon Law, as amended in the *motu proprio Ad Tuendam Fidem* (May 18, 1998),<sup>1</sup> recognizes three levels of doctrine that can be distinguished on the basis of Vatican II—the same three levels that are referred to in the Profession of Faith: doctrines infallibly taught as revealed by God; those infallibly taught as inseparably connected with revelation, and other authentic but noninfallible teachings more or less loosely connected with revelation. Corresponding to these three levels are three degrees of assent that are distinguished in the Profession of Faith: divine faith, firm and definitive assent, and religious submission of will and intellect.<sup>2</sup>

My primary intention this afternoon is to explore the controversies pertaining to Catholic doctrine on each of these three levels. In my concluding section I shall discuss the right of the pope to call for definitive assent to doctrines that are not as yet defined.

It is sometimes said that the area of revealed doctrine—my first category—presents no problem, and I would like to agree. But some prominent theologians, whose numbers are apparently growing, identify revelation as an ecstatic encounter with God that has no doctrinal content. Denying that there is any such thing as revealed doctrine, they refuse assent to any doctrine as a matter of faith.

---

<sup>1</sup>John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Ad tuendam fidem*, *Origins* 28 (July 16, 1998): 113-16.

<sup>2</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Profession of Faith and Oath of Fidelity," *Origins* 18 (March 16, 1989): 661, 663.

One author laments the alleged confusion whereby beliefs are given the status of faith and even masquerade as faith itself.<sup>3</sup> In this theory, he declares,

Beliefs naively appear as objectively true knowledge about reality. They may even be considered as information about transcendent reality. Since they are objectively true, and faith is an assent to them, faith itself becomes a form of ordinary knowledge, one that is based purely on extrinsic authority. Christian faith becomes objective knowledge that Christians possess and others do not, and the formulas of this knowledge must be preserved intact at all cost given their identity with faith itself. . . . Change a proposition, and faith itself is changed. Doubt about a proposition, because it is hesitancy or failure to assent, represents loss of faith because authority itself is called into question.<sup>4</sup>

This same author declares: "Revelation is not philosophical wisdom, not scientific knowledge, not knowledge of things or historical events, not historical knowledge, not propositional knowledge about God."<sup>5</sup> "Beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas," he writes several pages later, "are theological statements and as such cannot be simply identified with revelation. . . . There are no revealed doctrines as such, for revelation is personal encounter with a personal God and not an historically relative interpretation of that encounter in the form of an objective proposition."<sup>6</sup>

An alleged advantage of this ecstatic theory is that it removes any possibility of conflict between faith on the one hand and historical, scientific, or philosophical knowledge on the other, because it assigns faith and objective knowledge to different categories.<sup>7</sup> Are these theologians implying that our faith would not be affected if historians could prove that Jesus had never existed, if scientists could establish the eternity of the world, or if philosophers could demonstrate that the soul dies with the body? In the ecstatic theory of revelation I have been describing, all these issues would seem to be separable from faith.

In this brief paper I cannot begin to answer the arguments given in favor of the existentialist or Tillichian understanding of faith underlying the position just described. There are deep epistemological and metaphysical ramifications, which must here be left aside. It may be sufficient for present purposes to point out that the nondoctrinal position is irreconcilable with the Catholic tradition, recently reaffirmed in the Profession of Faith and the Code of Canon Law. More fundamentally, it runs against the entire tenor of Scripture, in which prophets, apostles, and Jesus himself claim that their utterances are to be accepted as the word of God. The earliest creeds confess the birth of Jesus *ex Maria Virgine* and his crucifixion *sub Pontio Pilato*. Professions of faith going all the way back to

---

<sup>3</sup>Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 35.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

patristic times require the acceptance of articles of the creed and dogmas as matters of Christian faith. In recent centuries dogmas of the church have frequently been proclaimed as "revealed truths" requiring the assent of faith (*DS* 3073, 3803, 3903).

If the church cannot teach divinely revealed truths in the name of God, it has been on the wrong course ever since its foundation. Everything heretofore taught as dogma must be reclassified as a matter of theological opinion, subject to debate and possible rejection.

For some Christians this reclassification might appear desirable, but for others of us, it is simply unthinkable within the framework of Catholic Christianity. We are convinced that in Jesus Christ we have a word from God that responds to inescapable human questions. Revelation informs us that God created the world, that he offers redemption through Jesus Christ, and that he calls us to eternal life. These propositions are not mere human opinions but articles of divine and Catholic faith.

Here, then, is the first and most fundamental divide—one that is by no means uncontroversial within the CTSA. Do we or do we not believe that there are revealed truths, identifiable as such on the infallible word of the church's magisterium?

The word "infallible" should not frighten us away. What we believe on the authority of revelation, mediated by Scripture and Tradition, must be infallibly transmitted. If God gives a revelation, he presumably intends it to endure in such a way that it can be recognized as his word by successive generations. As John Henry Newman argues in his *Essay on Development*, there is a parallel between creation and revelation. Just as the act of creation involves conservation, so the bestowal of revelation implies its preservation. Unless there were an organ or mechanism that could inerrantly distinguish between ideas belonging to revelation and ideas opposed to it, the revelation itself would soon be corrupted or perverted.<sup>8</sup> For Catholics that organ is the ecclesiastical magisterium, which is assisted (especially at its highest level) by what Vatican I called "the charism of truth and unfailing faith" (*DS* 3071).<sup>9</sup>

Although there may be legitimate discussions within the church about the conditions and limits of infallibility, the mandate of the hierarchical magisterium to call for divine and Catholic faith in its dogmatic teaching cannot itself be treated as questionable. The capacity of popes and councils to teach matters of faith with final authority holds a place among those truths that the church irreversibly teaches as having been revealed by God. It is evident that the definitions of the great councils and the dogmas proclaimed by recent popes

---

<sup>8</sup>John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, chap. 2, sec. 3 (Garden City NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1960) 109.

<sup>9</sup>Following Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 4.26.2), Vatican II in *Dei Verbum* 8 attributes to bishops a "sure charism of truth" (*charisma veritatis certum*).

belong to this first category. And so I repeat my question: Do we or do we not believe that there are revealed truths, identifiable as such on the infallible word of the church's magisterium?

The second category in *Ad Tuendam Fidem* consists of doctrines inseparably linked with revelation, because without them the revelation could not be faithfully expounded or defended. Some theologians defend this category as necessary and traditional. But others object that it is an unwarranted extension of infallibility. Bernard Sesboüé, for instance, describes it as an unprecedented "claim to a new domain for the exercise of the infallibility of the church."<sup>10</sup>

I see nothing new or unprecedented in this claim. Popes and councils in past centuries did not hesitate to place their full authority behind doctrines that were not formally revealed. When the Council of Vienne and the Fifth Lateran Council taught under pain of heresy that the intellectual soul is the form of the human body (*DS* 902 and 1440)<sup>11</sup> and when Leo XIII declared that Anglican ordinations were null and void (*DS* 3319), the magisterium implicitly asserted its capacity to pronounce definitively on matters not formally contained in the deposit of faith.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority opinion was that certain nonrevealed truths, including "dogmatic facts," constituted what was called the secondary or indirect object of infallibility. Vatican I took cognizance of this secondary object by speaking of the assistance given to the pope in defending and expounding the revelation (*DS* 3070), and by using the technical term *tenendam* rather than *credendam* in its definition of papal infallibility (*DS* 3074). As Bishop Vincenz Gasser explained in his *relatio* on behalf of the Doctrinal Commission (the *Deputatio de Fide*), the council's language meant that

---

<sup>10</sup>Bernard Sesboüé, "À propos du 'motu proprio' de Jean-Paul II *Ad tuendam Fidem*," *Études*, no. 3894 (October 1998): 357-67, at 359. Similar statements may be found in Richard McBrien, "Hammering the Liberals," *Tablet* (11 July 1998): 900-901, and in Ladislav Orsy, "Intelligent Fidelity: The Apostolic Letter *Ad tuendam fidem* and Its Roman Commentary Revisited," *Ceide: A Review from the Margins* (Ballina, Co. May, Ireland), vol. 2, no. 2 (November-December 1998): 29-31. McBrien and Orsy maintain that definitive statements about matters not contained in revelation are not protected by the charism of infallibility.

<sup>11</sup>Francis A. Sullivan in his *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium* (New York: Paulist, 1996) calls the pronouncement of Lateran V "a dogma of the faith" (p. 78).

<sup>12</sup>Cardinal Ratzinger, in his Commentary on the Concluding Paragraphs of the Profession of Faith (*Origins* 28 [July 16, 1998]: 116-19, at 119) adduces Leo XIII's declaration on Anglican ordinations as an example of definitive doctrine not revealed but connected with revelation by historical necessity.

the pope, like the church itself, is infallible in teaching revealed truths and truths without which the deposit of faith could not be preserved and expounded.<sup>13</sup>

This same distinction appears in *LG* 25, which likewise uses the term *tenendam* and affirms the pope's infallibility in inviolably preserving and faithfully expounding doctrines of faith and morals. The official footnotes refer both to Vatican I and to the *relatio* of Bishop Gasser, which is more explicit than either council.<sup>14</sup> Under Paul VI, the CDF taught that "the infallibility of the Church's magisterium extends not only to the deposit of faith but also to those matters without which that deposit cannot rightly be preserved and expounded."<sup>15</sup>

How, then, can some conclude that the present pope was expanding the object of infallibility when he incorporated this second category into the Code of Canon Law? From the usage of Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium*, and from Cardinal Ratzinger's commentary on the Profession of Faith, it is clear that when the Profession of Faith and the amended Code speak in this context of what the church teaches "definitively," they mean what Vatican I would have called "irreformably."

The second category cannot be dismissed as an empty one. It includes truths either logically or historically connected with revelation. Under the first heading one could mention the capacity of the human mind to obtain certain knowledge about spiritual realities (such as God, the soul, and human freedom). The church must accordingly be able to reject philosophical systems such as sensism, materialism, and relativism, even though these systems are not referred to in Scripture or apostolic tradition.<sup>16</sup>

The link of nonrevealed truth with revelation may, secondly, be historical. Every assertion of Scripture and every dogma of the faith could be thrown into question if the faithful had no assurance about the channels through which these truths are mediated. The identification of canonical Scriptures, legitimate popes,

---

<sup>13</sup>Gasser, *Relatio* in Mansi, *Collectio Conciliorum Recentiorum* 52:1204-30, at 1226. For an accessible translation see James T. O'Connor, *The Gift of Infallibility* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1986) 76.

<sup>14</sup>The *relatio* of the Doctrinal Commission of July 1964 explains that the words *res fidei et morum docentes* were introduced into *LG* 25 lest it seem that the infallibility of the body of bishops was being restricted to matters being proposed as matters to be believed as divinely revealed. Furthermore, said the same *relatio*, the words *sancte custodiendum et fideliter exponendum* were introduced in the final text for the same reason. See *Lumen gentium synopsis historica*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Franca Magistretti (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1975) 458.

<sup>15</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Mysterium Fidei* §3 (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1973) 5-6.

<sup>16</sup>Similar examples are used by Gérard Philips in his authoritative commentary on *Lumen gentium*. See his *L'Église et son mystère au IIe Concile du Vatican* 1 (Paris: Desclée, 1967), 328. He adds that the council was content to affirm the basic principle and to leave open the discussion about the infallibility of various "dogmatic facts."

and legitimate councils is implied in the infallibility of the doctrines proclaimed in these sources. If the church could not infallibly vouch for the authority of its Scriptures, popes, and councils, her capacity to teach revealed doctrine infallibly would be vacuous.

It is true that there can be doubts about whether certain particular doctrines belong to this second category—the nonrevealed but infallible—but there are similar doubts about members of the first and third categories. The category itself is well established in authoritative Catholic teaching. If the pope had removed secondary objects of infallibility (the *tenenda*) from the sphere of obligatory and irreformable teaching, that would have been a startling innovation. Why, then, has his restatement of a widely accepted and commonly understood aspect of church teaching been met with such alarm?

The third category in *Ad Tuendam Fidem* consists of authoritative teaching that is proposed without any claim to infallibility. The response to such teaching is neither Catholic faith nor definitive assent, but what Vatican II called “religious *obsequium* of will and intellect.” I here use the Latin term because theologians disagree about how to translate it. Some, such as Francis A. Sullivan, insist that it means “submission.”<sup>17</sup> If so, the canon imposes an obligation per se to accept these doctrines. Other interpreters, such as James A. Coriden<sup>18</sup> and Ladislav Orsy,<sup>19</sup> prefer to translate *obsequium* as “respect.” On their view, it would be necessary to treat the teaching respectfully, but there would be no obligation to assent if the teaching were deemed unpersuasive.

I am not sure that either “submission” or “respect” catches the exact nuances of the Latin term. For an authoritative interpretation I look to the CDF *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, which maintains that “the willingness to submit loyally to the teaching of the magisterium” on such matters must be the rule (24).<sup>20</sup> “This kind of response cannot be simply exterior and disciplinary, but must be understood within the logic of faith and under the impulse of obedience to the faith” (23). In exceptional cases, the CDF acknowledges, theologians or other believers might find themselves unable to overcome their difficulties and thus unable to give a sincere assent to a specific teaching. In such cases they should remain open to a deeper examination of the question with a view to arriving at assent. This attitude, as explained by the CDF, would seem to fulfill the concept of the *obsequium* required by the Code of Canon Law.

---

<sup>17</sup>Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 159.

<sup>18</sup>James A. Coriden in *The Code of Canon Law: Text and Commentary* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 548 (with reference to canons 752 and 753).

<sup>19</sup>Ladislav Orsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1987) 82-89.

<sup>20</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” *Origins* 20 (July 5, 1990): 117-26.

The attitude of *obsequium*, therefore, would prevent the dismissal of noninfallible authentic teaching as if it were a mere opinion favored by ecclesiastical bureaucrats. Such teaching is Catholic doctrine, and to depart from it is true dissent.

Does the theologian have a right to dissent, and indeed to dissent publicly, from teaching on this third level, on the ground that it is not infallible or irreversible? This is a third zone of disagreement. The problem is not so much about individual cases of dissent as about a general climate in which dissent from noninfallible doctrine is considered courageous, authentic, and forward looking, while submission is viewed as cowardly, hypocritical, and retrograde.

Under what conditions, then, should a theologian publicly manifest difficulties or dissent? It is difficult to draw up a set of rules, but an observation on attitude may be in order. Love for the church, esteem for its leadership, and concern for its unity will make expressions of dissent rare, reluctant, and respectful.

We theologians need to examine the intellectual and pastoral fruitfulness of some of the more aggressive patterns that are manifesting themselves in our profession today. Can anything justify the actions of those who go to the extremes of organized resistance, recruiting a constituency, calling press conferences, publishing paid advertisements, soliciting signatures to petitions, and setting themselves up as a kind of alternative magisterium?

It has become common to speak of public dissent as though it were as desirable and normal in the church as in civil society. But this line of reasoning obscures the distinctiveness of the church, which is a community of faith that lives by means of common acceptance of doctrines authoritatively mediated. Unlike political officeholders, the hierarchical leaders of the church are assisted with charisms of office enabling them to teach authoritatively in the name of Christ. Public dissent, besides undermining the particular teaching from which one dissents, inevitably brings a measure of discredit on the magisterium and thereby weakens the Church as a community of faith and witness.<sup>21</sup> It sows confusion among the laity, whose trust in the pastors has been shaken.

A fourth area of controversy may now be mentioned. The pope unquestionably has the power to express the consensus of the whole college of bishops. But can he do so without demonstrating that the bishops unanimously agree? Pope John Paul II has on two occasions asserted the definitive and obligatory character of teachings of the universal episcopate, and thus in effect invoked infallibility without recourse to his own power to speak *ex cathedra*. No previous pope, to my knowledge, has done this.

The two examples I have in mind are the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, on the reservation of priestly orders to men, and the encyclical

---

<sup>21</sup>For the reasons just stated I have some reservations about Richard A. McCormick, "The Church and Dissent: How Vatican II Ushered in a New Way of Thinking," *Commonweal* 125 (February 27, 1998): 15-20.

*Evangelium vitae*, which insists on the grave immorality of directly taking innocent human life and of directly committing abortion or euthanasia. In both these documents the language is very strong, but the precise formalities of a dogmatic definition are lacking.

John Paul II's mode of procedure in issuing these teachings has given rise to some concern. Theologians known as moderates have wondered whether he is entitled to claim that the bishops are in agreement without giving convincing evidence that a full consensus exists. His declaration that the college of bishops agrees, they maintain, since it is itself fallible, may not be a suitable means of ending the discussion and bringing about the desired unanimity in the church.<sup>22</sup>

Although I recognize the concern, I see the pope's action in the two cases mentioned as the result of a responsible process that sought to address two significant and critical issues in the church. His actions are wholly in line with his office as supreme pastor and teacher of the faith. Let me explain.<sup>23</sup>

In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* John Paul II was responding to a crisis in which there was an imminent threat that some bishops might attempt ordinations of women, thereby exposing the sacrament to invalidity. The bishops had had an opportunity to express their views on the ordination of women when a draft of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, asserting that women could not be ordained, was circulated for their comments. Two months before issuing *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, moreover, the pope is reported to have held a consultation with some twenty heads of episcopal conferences from different parts of the world. Thus there was a collegial dimension to his decision.

In *Evangelium vitae* the pope recalls that, after being asked by the cardinals at the extraordinary consistory of April 1991 to speak out on the inviolability of human life, he wrote personally to all the bishops of the world to seek their input. Their responses, he says, bore witness to a unanimous desire to support the Holy See in this initiative. Thus the encyclical, he says, is "the fruit of the cooperation of the episcopate of every country of the world" (EV 5).

It should also be noted that in the teachings in question the pope bases his doctrine not only on the consensus of the episcopate today but on Scripture, tradition, and the previous teaching of the magisterium. It is hard to see what would have been accomplished by a formal polling of all the bishops. The pope unquestionably spoke for a large majority, probably as great as that which obtains for other doctrines commonly regarded as matters of faith by reason of

---

<sup>22</sup>I have in mind especially the article of Hermann-Josef Pottmeyer, "Fallibly Infallible? A New Form of Papal Teaching" in the April 1999 issue of *Stimmen der Zeit*, summarized by James S. Torrens, "A New Form of Papal Teaching?" *America* 180 (April 3, 1999): 19-20.

<sup>23</sup>In this concluding section I summarize, all too briefly, what I wrote in *John Paul II and the Teaching Authority of the Church: Like a Sentinel*, Twentieth Nash Lecture (Regina, Saskatchewan: Campion College, 1997).

the ordinary and universal magisterium—for example, the perpetual virginity of Mary. The consensus of the episcopal college, in or outside of ecumenical councils, has never been seen as requiring mathematical unanimity.

At stake in these discussions is the nature of the Petrine office. The pope's commission as "supreme shepherd" is not simply to be a mouthpiece of the episcopate but to "confirm the brethren" (Luke 22:32; cf. *LG* 25). He is not only a member of the college of bishops; he is its effective head. Thanks to the special charisms of his office, he can play a unique role in shaping and formulating the consensus. Just as Peter exercised leadership in expressing the faith of the Twelve (Matt. 16:16), so the successor of Peter can exercise primacy even when he speaks for the college of bishops.

These irreversible teachings, since they lack the seal of an *ex cathedra* proclamation or a conciliar decree, are not formally defined. But the highest doctrinal office of the church declares them to be irreversibly binding. To treat them as false or debatable within the church is therefore to dissent. The obligation to assent does not infringe on the freedom of Catholic theologians, because that freedom is a right to understand and elucidate, not to contest, the settled doctrine of the church. If some theologians are dissatisfied with the supporting arguments, they are free to express their difficulties in a prudent and respectful manner. But they should recognize the binding character of the doctrines themselves, which demand not only *obsequium religiosum* but firm and definitive assent. In their speech and writing they should try to help the faithful to assent likewise.

A great advantage of the Catholic church in comparison with other Christian bodies is its possession of a living teaching office that can authoritatively settle matters under dispute, thus protecting the integrity of the faith, the validity of the sacraments, and the unity of the church itself. Theologians, I believe, should gratefully acknowledge this benefit rather than treat it as an unwelcome burden.

The theological fault lines to which I have called attention affect all three levels of Catholic doctrine—revealed truths, truths inseparably bound up with revelation, and truths authoritatively taught as contributing to the better understanding of revelation. Eager that the whole multitude of believers be united in a communion of faith and love, and that dissension be overcome, theologians should energetically strive to heal the existing rifts and prevent them from leading to practical schism in the church. At this critical juncture of history, union among believers must be the concern not only of popes and bishops, but of theologians as well.

AVERY DULLES  
Fordham University  
Bronx, New York