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Infallibility and Church Authority

The Spirit's Gift to the Whole Church



By **Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.**

It's amazing how many people misunderstand the doctrine of infallibility and other questions of Church authority. One common misconception is that everything the pope says is infallible. Parish leaders tell me that the issue of infallibility still troubles many adults interested in becoming Catholics. As a teacher, I've run into serious misunderstandings from various people—from college freshmen to hospital administrators. The usual response to a careful explanation of infallibility or Church authority is: Why haven't we been told this before?

Discussions about infallibility are not limited to theologians or classrooms. My mother recently told me of a hot debate she

had with other senior-citizen members of her card club over the question of Church authority and dissent. This *Catholic Update*, then, will take a close look at the meaning of Church authority and infallibility and how these teachings fit into our everyday lives as followers of Christ.

The magisterium. The Catholic Church holds that the pope, and the bishops in union with the pope, enjoy teaching prerogatives of a unique kind. The pope and bishops are commissioned to teach authoritatively on faith and morals in a way no other teacher in the Church can claim to do. Catholic teaching holds that the supreme doctrinal authority in the Roman Catholic Church is all the bishops together with and under the pope. In ordinary usage in the contemporary Church this teaching authority is called the "magisterium." The guidance and pastoral concern of this teaching authority is a

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great gift to the Church. Aided by the Holy Spirit, the magisterium helps protect the Church from needless errors and wrong turns.

There remains widespread confusion, however, concerning the exact nature and role of the magisterium. We can find some clarity in this confusion by carefully considering these related topics: collegiality, infallibility, noninfallible teachings, the magisterium as listeners and conscience.

Collegiality

In its discussion of Church authority, Vatican II stressed that all the bishops (the college of bishops) share responsibility for the Church, not just the pope. The pope, however, is head of this college. Therefore, even when he acts separately (that is, not specifically commissioned by the rest of the bishops), he acts as the visible head of the Church—and indeed as head of the college of bishops. The concepts of “pope” and “college of bishops” are inseparable from each other. There is one supreme authority which can be expressed in two ways: 1) through a collegiate act (as in an ecumenical council, a worldwide gathering of bishops), or 2) through the act of the pope as head of the college (as in an encyclical letter).

Another distinction applies to these two expressions of the supreme teaching authority: the distinction between extraordinary and ordinary magisterium. The teaching authority is called “extraordinary” when referring to a solemn act of defining a dogma of faith—that is, an infallible pronouncement of some truth as divinely revealed for the sake of our salvation. In this context, “define” means giving a definitive judgment on a particular question. Either an ecumenical council or a pope can exercise extraordinary teaching authority. The most recent example of such a pronouncement is the teaching about the Assumption of Mary, which was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950. These are examples of infallible teachings by extraordinary magisterium.

Any other exercise of the teaching authority of the bishops or the pope is called “ordinary.” Examples of this ordinary teaching authority include the teachings of a local bishop, the pastoral letters of the bishops’ conference, the encyclical letters of the popes, and the documents of Vatican II (because the Council did not use its authority to define any new dogma of Catholic faith). Although these teachings are certainly authoritative, they do not as such fall under the category of infallible teaching.

At the risk of confusion—but actually for the sake of clarity—one more point must be made: The universal ordinary magisterium—that is, the teaching of all the bishops dispersed throughout the world with the pope—can proclaim doctrine infallibly. In other words, there can be cases of infallible teaching by ordinary magisterium. Vatican II described the necessary conditions: 1) the doctrine must be taught unanimously by all the bishops, 2) absolute assent on part of all the faithful must explicitly be called for. Examples of such teachings not solemnly defined but taught as divinely revealed include some of the basic articles of the Christian faith: for example, that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.

Infallibility

But what is infallibility? The heart of infallibility is this: The power of divine grace (not the human strength of its members) cannot allow the Church as a whole to fall away from the truth of God. Simply put, the presence of God will not allow the Church to self-destruct. Infallibility is a characteristic of the Church, vested in those who have supreme authority over the

whole Church. As stated above, this supreme authority is the college of bishops with the pope as head of the college.

Thus, infallibility is not a characteristic of the pope’s personal conduct or his private views. Even when Vatican I (1869-1870) defined papal infallibility, it did so in terms of the Church. Vatican I stated that when the pope defines a dogma of faith (often described as speaking “*ex cathedra*”—from the chair), he is gifted by the Holy Spirit with that infallibility with which God wished *the Church* to be endowed in defining a doctrine of faith or morals.

Vatican II reemphasized this point when it stated: “This infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining a doctrine of faith and morals is co-extensive with the deposit of divine revelation, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded. This is the infallibility which the Roman pontiff, the head of the college of bishops, enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith, he proclaims by a definitive act some doctrine of faith or morals.... The infallibility promised to the Church resides also in the body of bishops when that body exercises supreme teaching authority with the successor of Peter.”

Infallibility does not mean that the Church will avoid all mistakes. The Church has certainly made its share of mistakes; history teaches that clearly. It does mean that the Church is not going to self-destruct, because the presence of the Spirit at work in the community will prevent this. This conviction, of course, cannot be proved; it is a statement of faith. This conviction, rooted in the experience of the Church and expressed in the Scriptures in Jesus’ promise to be with the Church, is validated again and again throughout the centuries in the life of the Christian community. The presence and action of the Spirit will not allow the Church as a whole to turn away from God!

Vatican I and Vatican II specified the conditions necessary for an expression of an infallible doctrinal pronouncement. Conditions for such a pronouncement are: 1) It must be a collegial act dealing with a revealed truth concerning faith or morals; 2) There must be an explicit call for absolute assent; 3) The pronouncement must be the unanimous teaching of all the bishops. Thus, infallibility means that the Holy Spirit so assists the magisterium that it only solemnly obliges the faithful to believe what is contained in God’s word. Vatican II’s document on revelation describes the magisterium’s role this way: “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God,



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whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed."

Infallibility guarantees the truth of the meaning of a statement, not the particular formulation of the meaning. Every formulation is limited to particular words, concepts, theological viewpoints. As times and cultures change, these particulars may need different formulations to express the central meaning. Given these severely limiting conditions for an infallible pronouncement, such pronouncements are very rare. Indeed, since Vatican I, there has been only one: the definition of Mary's Assumption (1950).

What, then, is to be said about other official statements, such as the documents of Vatican II and the papal encyclicals? Not too creatively, these documents are called noninfallible but authoritative teachings. They are not infallible declarations, yet they carry the weight of the magisterium. A proper understanding of noninfallible, authoritative teachings is absolutely essential for clarifying the confusion surrounding infallibility.

Noninfallible teachings

Noninfallible, authoritative teachings of the Church are presumed to be true. This presumption is based on the faith conviction that the Spirit is present in the magisterium, guiding it so that its teaching will be accurate. When an official teaching is given, the theoretically expected response of the Roman Catholic is: This is a true teaching.

Still, noninfallible teachings do not require blind acceptance. For you or me to respond properly to such a teaching with religious submission of will and of mind, certainly study, discussion, reflection and prayer are presupposed on our part. Such a response takes seriously the distinction between infallible and noninfallible teachings. Such a response also steers between two extremes: 1) an absolute, blind submission to authority (this approach seems to say that the reasons for the teaching really do not matter), or 2) the rejection of any unique teaching prerogative on the part of the magisterium (this approach judges the argument to be only as good as the reasons given). The proper response, then, finds the delicate blend both of individual reflection and of acceptance of the authoritative role of the magisterium.

Such a response also acknowledges—and here is where caution is especially needed—the possibility of error. This is part of the distinction between infallible and noninfallible teachings. However, if the magisterium is carefully doing its preparation for such noninfallible teachings, then such occasions of error should be very rare. To sum up then, even in noninfallible yet authoritative teachings, the presupposition of truth is in favor of the teaching.

An inconsistent ethic?

This is not to say that good Catholics may never genuinely question such noninfallible teachings. Such questioning occurred very publicly in the debate over birth control. At other times, the debate has centered on the Church's teaching about politics, economics and other social justice issues. For example, Paul VI's encyclical on the development of peoples was dismissed by some as warmed-over Marxism.

Another overview of infallibility

Infallibility does not mean impeccability—that is, freedom from sin. The pope goes to confession like anyone else. And he can be as wrong as anyone else about the weather, the future of the dollar and the outcome of the Rome-Milan soccer game.

What, then, is the infallibility Catholics claim for the pope? Let's take a look at history. We have this Spirit-guided group of people who can't wander too far off the track because Jesus has promised to remain with them and enlighten them by his Spirit. But they do manage, being human, to get picky or opinionated and back themselves into tight corners. Someone has to speak with enough authority to settle the argument, to respond to an error serious enough to throw the Church off the track....

Back in Jerusalem the primitive Church trusted the Apostles to come to some kind of agreement as to whether or not circumcision—a tremendously sacred law of the Jews—should be required of Gentile converts. Throughout history, the Bishop of Rome, usually with those of his brother bishops who could attend a Council, was trusted by the Church to settle things. The Reformation made the question of papal authority (not to mention infallibility) a burning issue. But it was not until the year 1870 that the doctrine of papal infallibility was finally defined.

—From Leonard Foley's *Believing In Jesus: A Popular Overview of the Catholic Faith* (St. Anthony Messenger Press)

However, not all of these controversies result merely from the casual rejection of the magisterium's authority. At the root of this debate and division, some scholars state, is an inconsistency in the way judgments about morality are made. The Church teachings seem to be using two different methods for making these judgments. One way emphasizes abstract principles and the answers of tradition. This way then stresses the need to obey these answers. Many of the teachings on sexuality and medical issues are arrived at by this method.

The second method is quite different. It starts with an understanding of the human person which is based on the key ideas and images of the Bible. It also emphasizes the need to be open to input from contemporary sciences and calls for personal and communal responsibility. Many of the social teachings are arrived at by this method.

This second way better embodies Vatican II's directive that all dimensions which constitute human well-being be included in judging the morality of human action. Yet the first model also continues to be stressed, in part leading to debate and for some people making the presupposition of truth more difficult.

Official teachers as learners

It is our human experience that good teachers are also good listeners. Moreover, they come to the classroom well-prepared. The same is true of the magisterium which, like any teacher, must carefully do its homework. Being official teachers demands being official learners as well. The Spirit's presence which guides the magisterium is a gift. But the Spirit is present in other people and events also! The magisterium must therefore make every effort to listen and to learn from as many sources as possible: not only Scripture and tradition, but also theologians, psychologists, sociologists, physicians and just plain people (the "sensus fidelium"—the sense of the faithful).

The faithful have a 'sense' about God's truth

Just as the Spirit infallibly guides the magisterium so that it doesn't propose teachings that would lead the whole Church into error, so there is a flipside to the infallibility coin: The faithful, as a whole, have an instinct or "sense" about when a teaching is—or is not—in harmony with the true faith. This special sense or "consensus of the faithful," known in Latin as the *sensus fidelium*, is one of the ways the Spirit protects God's people from error.

Vatican II described this aspect of the Church when it taught: "The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. I John 2:20, 27), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when, 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,' it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #12).

Such openness acknowledges that the Spirit is teaching in the experience of experts and of ordinary folks alike. Vatican II expressed this conviction well in *The Church in the Modern World*: "The Church requires special help, particularly in our day, when things are changing very rapidly and the ways of thinking are exceedingly various. She must rely on those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers. With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage."

Because most of the magisterium's teachings fall under the noninfallible category, there is a possibility of error. All too easily dissent is interpreted in purely negative ways and equated with the hostile rejection of authority. Such suspicion is an overreaction, for properly expressed and respectful dissent can, in the long run, help refine and enrich the teaching. Dissent helps insure that official teaching will not be expressed in incomplete or erroneous ways. Indeed, such dissent may be necessary for the health of the Church.

Conscience

We must remember that noninfallible, authoritative teachings carry much weight and are presumed to be true. Thus they play an important role in the formation of conscience. Conscience is often a loaded word. How easy to proclaim: "I must follow my conscience"! Yet conscience—our ability to judge right and wrong behavior—is a complex reality. In the difficult process of forming our consciences, we must search for the truth: Is this act good or evil?

This search involves reflection upon basic sources of information in the Church: Scripture and tradition. It includes

the wisdom of the ages as expressed in law. It looks for contemporary insights from sciences of all kinds. It takes personal experience seriously. Of course, as indicated above, official Church teaching (including noninfallible, authoritative statements) has a privileged role here. (For a more detailed analysis of conscience, see my October 1983 *Catholic Update*, "Birth Control and the Conscientious Catholic." That *Update* also serves as a careful study of a noninfallible teaching.)

As Catholics, we should take noninfallible Church teachings very seriously in forming our consciences. As indicated above, noninfallible Church teaching is expressed in different forms: in papal letters and documents of councils, but also in local letters and directives, such as the American bishops' pastoral letters on war and peace and on the economy. These latter statements do not claim to have the same weight as the documents of Vatican II. Yet they do represent the collective teaching of the bishops of the United States and so participate in the official teaching. Accordingly, individuals must take this teaching seriously in the formation of conscience.

Because human beings are more than computers or subjects to be programmed, such teachings must be seen as privileged sources of guidance—not merely programs for uniformity. A proper understanding of noninfallible Church teaching and of conscience focuses attention on mature, personal responsibility in making moral decisions. As a human being created in God's image, the individual has the right and responsibility to experience, to reflect, to pray and to decide. We are expected to use all our God-given gifts in coming to a decision.

A middle path

This emphasis on mature responsibility seeks a middle path which is not easy to follow. On the one hand, it demands much more than the blind following of a law. Such a mechanical response robs the individual of personal responsibility and involvement and can merely provide a false security blanket. On the other hand, the middle position also takes a stand against the casual rejection of Church teaching and recognizes the need to search for the truth and to listen to the wisdom of authority.

Our growing understanding of Church authority, infallibility and conscience is an example of renewal in today's Church. At the same time we see more clearly the value of the Church's guidance, we also see more clearly God's call for our responsible participation. Topics of concern range from the very intimate (birth control) to the global (nuclear war). Some people seek to escape responsibility and want others to make all the decisions; others would foolishly like to eliminate authority altogether. But the middle path of mature responsibility rejects both extremes and accepts the call and the demands of intelligent, informed participation.

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