

# THE GIFT OF INFALLIBILITY: REFLECTIONS TOWARD A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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**I**NFALLIBILITY IS not a very popular word these days. In our posttriumphant, God-is-alive-and-well-but-in-seclusion Church the reality seems as remote as the word is offensive. Yet infallibility is a facet of the Church's self-presentation before the world, one which the systematic ecclesiologist neglects only at the price of historical absurdity, if not personal intellectual dishonesty. Like it or not, many things are asserted about the gift of infallibility in the course of the Church's evolving discovery of herself. It is the task of the systematic theologian to evaluate these affirmations and, more importantly, to search out their ultimate intelligibility in the light of the totality of God's self-revelation to man. The present article represents a modest attempt to explore some of the elements which must be examined if the gift is to be situated properly within the total mystery of God's dealings with man. In the course of the article we will also touch on some methodological considerations which have wider ramifications for the whole of systematic theology.

## AHISTORICAL UNTHEOLOGY AND ITS FATAL CONSEQUENCES

Insofar as it is Christian, good systematic theology has its roots in sound history, of course. I hope I will be forgiven this truism, which is offered simply because the point has more than ordinary relevance in the case of the gift of infallibility. It would be hard to point to an area in Catholic theology in which the failure to do good historical theology has had more disastrous consequences than in the theology of infallibility. One need only look at the simplistic catechesis of papal infallibility which prevailed in the Church within a very short time after the close of Vatican I and compare it to the definition of the Council itself to confirm this assessment. The opponents of the definition had, as we know, predicted what would happen: if you define, even with all sorts of qualifications, that the pope can *sometimes* teach in an infallible manner, then it will be but a short time before people are saying that he *always* teaches infallibly, and indeed that this is because he *is* infallible. Whatever their merits as theologians, the opposition clearly won the battle of the prophets. But even the Church's failure to recapitulate faithfully in her catechesis the nuanced theology of infallibility represented by the conciliar definition may not have

been the most fateful error in the whole process; the woeful lack of historical theology on the part of the Council fathers themselves was even more catastrophic. A study of the Council speeches from the viewpoint of theological methodology reveals, in the vast majority of cases, a simple florilegium of texts from the great theologians who had developed the question of papal infallibility from the time of Juan de Turrecremata. Again and again lists of the defenders of papal infallibility are toted up and the paucity of adversaries pointed out, without—and here is the crucial loss—any attempt to *situate* the affirmation of infallibility within the total theology of those who were being called upon as witnesses to tradition. That Robert Bellarmine and Melchior Cano, and even Torquemada at a very early stage in the development, held for papal infallibility is beyond dispute; but that the fathers of the Council believed that by a mere catena of proof texts they could transmit the tradition and do full justice to the reality to which the theologians were bearing witness is a measure of the impoverished theology of their day. Indeed, it would not be farfetched to say that part of the sensation caused by the famed speech of Cardinal Guidi was due simply to the fact that he attempted an analysis of what the others were simply content to assert as an isolated datum: this was news, even apart from the qualifications to which his analysis led him.

All of which serves to remind us that we could repeat the same error. Indeed, a survey of the deluge of material occasioned by *Humanae vitae* would indicate that we have already done so. People on both sides of the issue have attempted to make their case by appeals to the text in *Lumen gentium* concerning the magisterium (no. 25), thereby in most instances falling victim to at least one, and perhaps both, of the methodological pitfalls: (1) the assumption that questions can be answered by a single section of the Constitution taken in isolation from its context within the total teaching of the Council; and (2) the assumption that even this restricted text itself can be correctly understood in isolation from the process by which it was arrived at. It is this kind of ahistorical fundamentalism which diminishes the magnificent achievement in collegial theologizing represented by the watershed event which was Vatican II.

These remarks concerning the dependence of systematics upon solid historical theology might seem to impose upon me an immense burden: that I present a complete history of the theology of infallibility before exploring its systematic implications. This is obviously out of the question and betrays an unreal view of the relationship between history and systematics. The historical data presented for systematic synthesis is always incomplete, and it is precisely the systematic impulse which

raises the new questions, which in turn urges us on to the new questioning of the historical data whereby we discover the inadequacies of our previous historical impressions. In this dialectical process one can only start with a given base of historical data and, while recognizing the limitations of the base both in terms of its content and one's own limited grasp of that limited content, hope by the process of systematic questioning and analysis both to integrate and enforce one's grasp of the base and at the same time to acquire a more reflex critical awareness of the limitations in one's original questioning of history.

#### CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL BASE: VATICAN II ON CHURCH

I would propose, then, as a very limited but contemporary historical base to explore the interrelationship between two elements of the historical given: Vatican II's presentation of the whole Church's role in continuing the prophetic mission of Christ (as presented in no. 12 of the Constitution on the Church) and its exposition of the teaching function of the episcopacy (in no. 25 of the same Constitution).<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that I will bypass the definition of Vatican I, but it seems valid to situate that historic event by viewing it in the light of the Church's subsequent insight into the full complexities of its meaning, which is evidenced in the treatment of the gift of infallibility in Vatican II. This stance may serve to illuminate another facet of historical theology: the Church must indeed continually return to her sources, but she does so *from a present life and experience which is itself informed by faith*, by the here-and-now presence of the Holy Spirit. To attempt to capture the bare meaning of Vatican I by pretending to prescind from the Church's present experience would mean doing something infinitely more fateful than merely locking oneself in an impossible hermeneutic circle; it would mean refusing the light of the Spirit as emanating from the Church's attempt to live out her own best affirmations of faith. If even as sheer history the attempt would be simply bad, it would be an outright betrayal in the case of historical theology.

#### *Whole Church and Prophetic Mission of Christ*

We turn, then, to Vatican II and *Lumen gentium*. And first to its treatment of the whole Church's participation in the prophetic mission of Christ (no. 12).

The position of this section within the whole document must be

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed treatment of the history of these texts, see my *The Text of Lumen Gentium: A Commentary on Its Genesis*, to be published this year by the Irish University Press in Dublin.

underscored at the outset. It is by now a commonplace to note that *Lumen gentium* took a radically decisive methodological step by laying as its foundation for the treatment of the Church the first two chapters on mystery and on the people of God, before treating of the hierarchy and its mission within that mystery and people.<sup>2</sup> It is a commonplace, indeed, but perhaps it is precisely for that reason that the significance of the step is frequently underestimated. What the Council was saying by this procedure is that the meaning and value of any distinction subsequently affirmed between subgroups within the Christian community, e.g., between hierarchy and laity (chapters 3 and 4) or between those summoned to the life of perfection in a nonpublic form and those for whom this call assumes a public dimension in the Church (chapters 5 and 6), must be determined by *reference to the common dignity and mission shared by the whole people* (chapters 1 and 2). Any interpretation of the distinct roles within the Church which in effect violates and negates this fundamental communality must be recognized as a distortion of the Church's true nature.

The principle underlying nos. 10-12 of the Constitution is that it is the whole people of God which is the locus of Christ's continued mission and activity in the world. Within that perspective it is recognized that we can distinguish the people's participation in the various functions of Christ in terms of different gifts possessed by the people. The people participate in Christ's prophetic office (no. 12) through their gifts in the order of faith, which can be quite properly distinguished, for purposes of theological clarity, from their gifts in the strictly liturgical-sacramental order. The *relatio* for this passage reminds us, however, that the proclamation of the gospel is viewed in Scripture as a priestly act and, therefore, in our zeal to distinguish the different functions of Christ and of the Church, the priestly and the prophetic, we must be very wary of separating them, and thus impoverishing our understanding of the Church's growth in faith, by making it a purely intellectual process separated from her growth in sanctity. One would wish that this caution had been heeded in the history of theologizing about the act of faith and in particular about the gift of infallibility. Be that as it may, it is the whole people which participates in this prophetic office, and the text indicates a priority in the process: the primary exercise of the Church's share in the prophetic mission of Christ is described in terms of a *life*, the witness of "a life of faith and charity." Thus from the very beginning we are presented with a vision of growth in faith which is set in a far broader context, rather than a purely in-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Yves Congar, O.P., "The Church: The People of God," *Concilium* 1 (Glen Rock, 1964) 11-14.

tellectualist, mentalist point of view. Lives based on faith and charity are to be the first way in which the people of God share in the prophetic office.

The Constitution then goes on in the second part of the paragraph to speak of the positive role that the entire people has to play even in the restricted area of the intellectual penetration of the mysteries of faith—therefore, in the growth in theological consciousness. An important aspect of the life of faith, though by no means its entirety, is the community's growth in the ability to thematize intellectually that which its members have grasped in an antecedent personal faith-commitment. And it is precisely this aspect which is localized within the total people of God.

The text brings us abruptly to the affirmation of infallibility:

The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. Jn 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.

For, by this sense of faith which is aroused and sustained by the spirit of truth, God's people accepts not the word of men but the very Word of God (cf. 1 Th 2:13). It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights, and applies it more thoroughly to life. All this it does under the lead of a sacred teaching authority to which it loyally defers.

Some points should be noted concerning the text. First, it is the *universitas fidelium*, the whole body of the faithful, which cannot err in belief. And we must not forget that the hierarchy do belong to the faithful; it would make an interesting psychological study to ask how the Church fell into the trap of using the word "faithful" for the laity. There is undoubtedly an unconscious position at work here that must be overcome by the conscious effort of all in the Church. At any rate, the text is at pains to spell out the meaning of the *universitas fidelium* when it adds "from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful," including, therefore, the totality of those who are gifted with faith.

A second observation arises out of the history of the chapter: the text originally had said that this totality of people is "indefectible" in faith. This was changed. Indefectibility of faith would of itself only say that they will all continue to believe; it says nothing about the truth of what they believe. And so the text now reads "they cannot err in their belief." The *relatio* at this point sums up the theology very well: "The Church in which Christ lives on after the completion of His salvific work and which is led by the Holy Spirit to truth simply cannot deviate

from the way of salvation, and, therefore, in this sense is infallible. Although it does not perfectly comprehend the mystery, it is nonetheless preserved from error through the assistance of the Spirit and thus cannot be deceived."<sup>3</sup> The important thing here, of course, is to note that the continuing action of Christ and the Spirit is the ground of the Church's inerrancy. It is something we cannot stress enough, because our theologizing, I think, would sometimes lead people to believe that we base our faith on our acceptance of magisterial pronouncements in terms of authority, and indeed a purely natural kind of authority. We can note again that the doctrine of the infallibility of the Church in her teaching is only one aspect of our fundamental adherence to a broader reality, that is to say, a *way of salvation*, a form of life. It is a point that was made before, but I believe that the theology of infallibility would have had a much different history if it had always been kept in this context and not separated from life.

### *Analysis of the Corporate Gift*

Thirdly, the text goes on to make the beginnings of an analysis of this fact of the Church's inerrancy. The impossibility of error is described as a *property* of the people, something which belongs to the people as a whole. But the way in which this property is *manifested*, the way in which it comes to visibility, is in the expression of a universal consensus. Such a universal consensus, it would seem, is then to be understood as only the coming to visibility of something which was antecedently at work in the community. And the *means* by which this inerrant consensus is reached is the gift of supernatural discernment of faith which is present in the whole people. This gift in its turn has its origin in, is brought into existence and is sustained by, the Spirit of Truth Himself. Of course, this process is not to be understood as taking place in isolation from the magisterium. As befits a section concerned with a common gift of the people, however, we are left with only the vague "sub ductu" as a description of its role in the growth. (One could, indeed, show by an analysis of the rest of the Constitution that the Council views the Church as a collection of gifts which are present in the people *antecedent* to any initiative on the part of the hierarchy, but it would take us beyond the limits of the present article. Suffice it to say for now that you lead or guide something that is already in existence; the present text should not be taken to mean that all dogmatic growth begins from the hierarchy.) The text concludes by describing the *end* or teleology of the gift. Why does it exist? It exists not only for continued adherence to the Word which the Church has once received, but also for

<sup>3</sup> *Schema Constitutionis de ecclesia* (Rome, 1964) pp. 45-46.

a deeper *penetration* of the mystery and a fuller practical *application* of this faith in life, in the continuing concrete historical situations of the Church. The text clearly sees its function, not in terms of a static maintenance of a tradition once and for all given, but as involving growth, and in particular the ability to find new answers to new questions.

A few points which arose in the genesis of the text will show that we have not extended its meaning unfairly.

One of the fathers had proposed that the discernment of faith, the sense of faith, is to be spoken of, not for the reason that it has its origin in the Holy Spirit or that it is directly produced by God, but because it manifests a teaching of the magisterium. He put it this way: "Passive infallibility or infallibility in belief is caused by active infallibility. It is produced as an effect by a cause." In such a view the *sensus fidei*, the sense of faith in the faithful, is denied any active role in the Church's growth and becomes pure passivity. This view was rejected by the drafters of the Constitution and then by the Council in its adoption of the final text. From history we know that the great theologians in the post-Tridentine times who devoted their attention to this clearly taught first of all the infallibility of the faithful in belief. They had no difficulty at all in arguing from the infallibility of the faithful to the infallibility of the magisterium, by no means feeling this any derogation from the authority of the magisterium but precisely situating the gift far more soundly theologically. It is the whole Church which has received the gift of infallibility. And we can add also that they had no difficulty in asserting the fact that even the Roman Pontiff must take account of the consensus of belief on the part of the faithful in formulating his definitions. This was the common position of the theologians even from the time of Trent. Recent studies have also shown that we must be careful to limit the intent of Vatican I's famous phrase "*ex sese, non autem ex consensu ecclesiae*": the intention was simply to exclude juridically what was a fundamentally juridical position on the part of the Gallicans, that the infallible authority of definitions comes to them from some sort of subsequent approbation by the Church or at least from the *proof* that the Church had been consulted.<sup>4</sup> This leaves untouched the fundamentally theological position that such consultation must have taken place, although the individual member of the Church may not be able to put his finger on where it took place (as, indeed, the reasonableness of his assent does not demand this of him).

There are a couple of other small points which offer suggestions for further reflection. The text speaks of the body of the faithful as a

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.-P. Torrell, O.P., *La théologie de l'épiscopat au premier concile du Vatican* (Paris, 1961).

whole "anointed as they are by the Holy One." The *relationes* provide no explanation of this phrase. What is its meaning here? The text is not saying explicitly, to be sure, that *because* they are anointed by the Spirit, this is the foundation of their participation in the Church's infallibility, but I think it would be difficult to show that this is not really the point of the phrase. If this is true, then the question of the meaning of this "anointing by the Holy Spirit" takes on very striking proportions. If this is a reference to baptism as the ground of the property of infallibility, then we must ask ourselves: How do non-Catholic Christians relate to this sense of the faith? In what sense does the theology of the Church profit by the theology of non-Catholic Christians? What do we have to learn from a Luther or a Calvin or a Tertullian, already on the way to heresy or schism or what have you? It is something we must consider.

In the next paragraph of no. 12 on the prophetic ministry of the Church, the Constitution speaks of the broader charismatic gifts of the people, and there are a few points which help to complete our picture of the sense of faith.

First, the freedom of the Spirit to give His gifts where He wills is emphasized, to balance an exaggerated, institutionalized view of the Church. Charismatic gifts are viewed as not necessarily extraordinary. The essence of charisms lies in the fact that gifts are given for the good of the community—whether the recipient happens to be a member of the hierarchy or not. Also, the finality of these gifts is treated: they are given to men of all ranks to equip them to renew the Church. Therefore, the prerogative of renewal, of reform in the Church, is certainly not a private preserve of the clergy or hierarchy.

### *Magisterium and Infallibility*

Now we turn our attention to the opposite pole of the problem, which is the description of the magisterium in the chapter on the hierarchy, in no. 25. The first paragraph<sup>5</sup> gives a description of the magisterial function in general and offers some general rules of thumb for our response to the magisterium. The second paragraph then moves on to a statement with regard to the infallibility which sometimes is present in magisterial pronouncements. Thirdly, the chapter goes on to affirm the identity of the gift of infallibility wherever it is found: it is the infallibility of the Church which is being exercised in various

<sup>5</sup> The paragraph structure of the Abbott-Gallagher edition of the documents varies from the original at this point. Abbott-Gallagher's paragraphs 1 and 2 constitute the first paragraph in the original; 3 is the second; 4 and 5 are the third; and 6 and 7 make up the fourth.



forms. And fourthly, there is an affirmation of the relationship between this fact and the gift of revelation.

I would simply want to spell out a few points here to set the tone for understanding the relationship between magisterium and the sense of faith in the faithful. To begin with, the bishops are described first as witnesses: this is simply recalling something frequently forgotten about Trent, that among the primary offices of the bishop the preaching of the Word was stressed. At the close of that first paragraph the response of the faithful is described as *religioso animi obsequio*, an assent based on religion, not as yet an assent of faith. Throughout this section, one of the things that becomes evident is the Council's desire to stress the *proportionate* response on the part of the faithful to the magisterial act. This is something that has, of course, been common doctrine of theology for years, but what is new in the present instance is that it is presented in a constitution which is intended as an act of proclamation to the faithful; the faithful, too, will have to learn to distinguish different levels of affirmation on the part of the magisterium. And some rules of thumb are given.

In the description at this point there is an element which is foreign to the context, or which at least called for some justification. The section is speaking of the bishops, and yet in the middle of the section there is a treatment of the authority of the pope, the Roman Pontiff. The question was raised: Why should we have another treatment of the authority of the pope in a section concerning the bishops? The *relatio* indicates that the noninfallible exercise of the magisterium on the part of the pope is best seen in the context of the magisterium of the whole episcopal college. And while reminding us that of course his pronouncements must be received with reverence, the text shows that our adherence is graded in proportion to the degree of the commitment *manifested* in his proclamation. This supposes an estimation on the part of the faithful, and we are given guidelines for that estimation: the character of the document, his continued repetition of the doctrine, his manner of speaking, the kind of language he uses. We must take seriously the fact that the pope is also a private theologian, and we have the whole body of good tradition on the fact that the pope is not always speaking as the head of the whole Church.

Finally, at this point, someone made the suggestion that in the description of the norms for understanding papal pronouncements there should be added a further clause speaking of the freedom that is left for further investigation. The response of the Commission is very interesting: "it is true there is freedom for further investigation, but it is

simply not necessary to put that into the text here."<sup>5a</sup> Therefore, even after the use of the rules of thumb leads to some sort of conclusion concerning the meaning and intention of magisterium, freedom for further investigation must always be allowed.

Another point which raises interesting possibilities is the phrase used to describe the acceptance of infallible definitions: "Their definitions must then be adhered to with a submission of faith." Here there is question of definitions of the bishops in council. The final formulation is deceptively simple. We know that at one point in the development the text had read "they must be accepted with a sincere goodwill." This was changed to read "with the acceptance of faith." But the Commission points out that they do not speak here of *divine* faith, "with the acceptance of divine faith." And though it might seem to be a small point, I think it is worth keeping in the back of our minds, because the Commission makes this interesting remark: "The assent of faith admits of different grades according to the greater or lesser relationship of the truths defined to revelation." This concept is pregnant with possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of the response of faith: within the response of faith itself there is a variability measured by the proximity of the truth which is being defined to the explicit, central truths of revelation. The catechetical importance of this should be evident: it is important to make sure that the central truths are well grounded first, and then perhaps some of the questions which are "on the fringe" would fit in better proportion. To use an illustration, it seems to me that this could mean that our assent to the truth of the Assumption is different in modality from the assent that we give to the fact that Jesus is Lord and Redeemer, as a priori indeed it ought to be. It is simply not the same central proclaimed truth that the Lordship of Christ is, though both assents are within the realm of faith. The Commission noted that if the word "divine" faith had been used there, this would have seemed to close out such a gradation of response of faith.<sup>6</sup>

The third paragraph then provides a solid basis for an integration of

<sup>5a</sup> *Schema Constitutionis dogmaticae de ecclesia: Modi a patribus conciliaribus propositi a commissione doctrinali examinati. Caput III* (Rome, 1964) p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Schema Constitutionis de ecclesia*, pp. 96-97. Referring to the new formulation "fidei obsequio est adhaerendum," the official *relatio* remarks: "Loco antiquioris formulae (sc., 'sincero animo accipi debent') haec ponitur, quo melius urgeatur adhaesio definitionibus Concilii debita. Quae talis est, ut *sinceram animi adhaesionem superet*, quippe quae, ubi de definitionibus agitur, obsequium fidei penitus attingat: quod quidem fidei obsequium gradus diversos admittit iuxta maiorem vel minorem relationem veritatis definitae cum divina Revelatione. Ad hunc disparem adhaesionis gradum, adhibetur formula generica "fidei obsequio," non autem: "fidei *divinae* obsequio."

our understanding of the gift of infallibility. Both papal infallibility and that of the bishops in council are seen as manifestations of the infallibility of the *Church*: "This infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed . . . *this* is the infallibility which the Roman Pontiff enjoys . . . the infallibility promised to the Church resides *also* in the body of bishops." It is always the same gift, the infallibility of the whole Church, which is at issue. In the same context the pope is described as *magister ecclesiae*: it is because of his relationship to the Church, not because of a singular kind of isolated one-to-one relationship between him and God, that he enjoys at times the gift of infallibility.

The document then goes on to give us some important clarifications of the reasons for or analysis of the gift of infallibility. Why are definitions irreformable? Because of the assistance of the Holy Spirit. As I said before, we must stress and we must become more conscious in our own thinking that if we accept definitions as infallible, it is simply because of this belief. I think the non-Catholic Christian, if he had this point brought out much more clearly, would be able to see that even if he cannot accept our position the position is a position of faith, there is an internal consistency to it. Once you admit that the person believes these definitions are assisted by the Spirit, then of course the logic of accepting them becomes a little bit clearer, even if you cannot accept his reasons for affirming that they are so assisted.

Finally, an important point is made with regard to the assent of the Church to infallible pronouncements. It is the assistance of the Holy Spirit which guarantees also the assent of the Church. The reason why the assent of the Church will not be lacking is because the Spirit has always been at work in the community from the beginning, in the gift of the sense of faith to the whole community, preserving it and leading it; the Spirit has already been leading the whole Church to growth and, therefore, the act of definition is simply the culmination of an action which has begun long since in individual Christian hearts. This is the activity of the Spirit which is spoken of in no. 12. And a much more reasoned understanding of the gift of infallibility is supplied by the statements with regard to the means used by both pope and bishops to arrive at infallible definitions. They use means which are proportioned to the question being decided. The text uses the expression "*pro rei gravitate*," which should be translated "in proportion to their importance." This same point of view is indicated in describing the means employed: they are "*apta*," which means that the means are suited to the exigencies of the question, as the usage of these same terms by a

long line of Scholastic theologians shows us.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, what we are being guaranteed by the gift of infallibility is not simply the *truth* of what has been defined; as believing Christians I think we are being guaranteed more than that. We are being guaranteed that this has been arrived at in a reasonable human process.

These declarations from the Council constitute a limited historical base, but they do represent the Church's contemporary self-presentation and are the most ambitious attempt to formulate its experience of growth in the faith. A review of the material in *Dei verbum* would undoubtedly offer a much richer context for a fuller systematic reflection, but I do not believe that it would affect in any substantial way the focal point of our concern, which is the gift of inerrancy as possessed by the whole Church and manifested in various ways through different agents of the Church's self-expression.

#### SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATIONS

My systematic remarks will have a negative and a positive pole. First I would like to explore some of the false methodological steps which have prevented a fruitful theological understanding of the gift of infallibility. Then we can proceed to examine positively the relationship between this gift and other areas of Christian theology to see what mutual illumination they offer.

#### *Methodological Cul-de-sacs*

To one who surveys the theological manuals and catechetical materials in their treatment of infallibility, it seems quite clear that a primary methodological mistake has been committed by separating the act of infallible definition from the process by which it is reached. Definitions are traditionally treated as things existing in isolation, and if one looks to the Scholastic treatment before and after Trent, it is easy to see that this was not their mentality at all. The Scholastic theologians at that time had no difficulty at all in seeing that the pope is dependent upon others, even when they were defending papal infallibility very strongly. It was evident to them that the pope is dependent upon the whole Church throughout the process of arriving at an act of definition, even though his final authority in the final act does not come from the

<sup>7</sup> These two phrases have a long theological history behind them, and their meaning must be culled from the thought of the theologians who gradually chiseled them out as a sort of theological shorthand for a whole analysis of the ordered relationship of means to end within the process of infallible definition. Cf. my unpublished doctoral dissertation *Corporate Human Activity and Divine Assistance in the Process of Infallible Definition: The Leading Dominican Theologians from 1450 to 1560*, at the Gregorian University.

Church. To separate the act of definition from the whole process by which the defining agent (whether that be a pope or a council) and the people in mutual dependence grow toward the crystallization represented by that act is to distort the whole reality of the act. And in that process there is a clear necessity for interaction between the defining agent and the rest of the Church; there is a need for consultation of the Church. But even this is not saying enough, for the notion of consultation has itself been constricted in a most unrealistic manner. One could easily be left with the impression that consultation means simply that before an act of definition the pope (or bishops) should sit down and say "Now I'm going to make an important decision concerning the faith. I'd better call in so and so." In reality, the pope has been consulting the Church throughout his whole life as a Christian. After all, it was the Church that gave him the word of God in Scripture; it was the Church that taught him his catechism and formed him theologically in the seminary; it is the same faith-life of the whole Church that is operative in his personal life of prayer and discernment. The process of consultation of the Church is something which goes back deep into the roots of this man's life, just as it does with regard to all the bishops. Such a view does not pretend, of course, to provide an easy answer to the concrete realities of interaction on a specific issue; it is offered merely as a caution against a simplistic understanding of the nature of consultation. It is the latter which leads to the Gallican demand for proof that a specific act of consultation has taken place before assent can be given to a particular definition. The richer notion of consultation should not be used as an evasion of our responsibility to ask specific questions about specific forms of consultation with regard to particular magisterial pronouncements; on the other hand, it might act as a healthy restraint upon our sinful tendency to allow that basically good search to degenerate into a cynical refusal of the commitment of faith because our criteria for verification have not been met.

That this is a real issue is evidenced by the second confusion which has plagued the history of reflection on the gift of infallibility. This consists in the failure to distinguish the order of knowledge of the believer from that of the defining agent, whether the latter be pope or council. Two distinct questions are at stake here, and an answer to the first in no way closes the door to the second. The first question views the situation from the vantage point of the believer who is being summoned to assent to a particular definition. On this issue the Gallican response is to say "I want to see how this definition was arrived at, and when it is demonstrated to me (by the fact of the whole Church's ac-

ceptance) that it was reached in a reasonable manner, then I will accept it." The Church's answer at Vatican I and II in effect says that the faith, as well as the Church which calls us to it, is not that kind of beast. It summons the believer to confide in the assistance of the Spirit in a situation judged serious enough to warrant the extraordinary act which is definition. But this answer of itself says nothing about the epistemology of the definer, which is the second issue. The answer to the first question leaves the Church perfectly free to turn around and, viewing the question from the point of view of the definer, to declare that he (or they) must necessarily have taken the ordered means of arriving at the decision to define. That this process in turn cannot be reduced to the level of a bare deduction on the basis of logic should be evident from the complex nature of the investigation into the Church's witnessing tradition. It should be clear, at any rate, that the Church's answer to the first question should not be taken as committing the believer to the magical acceptance of oracles emanating from a source exempt from the demands of a reasonable faith.

A third methodological misstep recurs at times. It consists in framing the theology of the gift of infallibility in terms of absolute power, whether it be that of God or of the pope. The apologetic thrust becomes clear when the position is put in some such terms as these: "Why couldn't God simply take this man (or these men) and give him (or them) the clarity necessary for him (or them) to define a proposition all by himself (or themselves) without the assistance of the Church?" In this instance it is not one's answer which produces the distortion; the very placing of the question is itself already bad theology. It attempts to understand the gift of infallibility in abstraction from the whole ordered economy which we know God has established. It is asking a nontheological question because it is studying an unreal hypothesis. To speak in terms of God's absolute power ignores the fact that we know much of what God has willed to do, and we know that He has willed to save man in community and interdependence on one another.<sup>8</sup> One is reminded of the famous remark attributed to William Ward at the time of Vatican I; I presume he felt that he was perfectly in accord with Catholic doctrine in saying that he "should like a new papal bull with [his] *Times* at breakfast." Once one falls into the trap of thinking in terms of abstract possibilities and thus isolates the concept of infallible definition from the other truths of Catholic theology, I suppose one would be forced to accept this sort of thing, but it seems to be a poor substitute for the difficult intellectual task of theologizing about the gift of infallible definition in the real Incarnational economy. All of

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Lumen gentium*, no. 9.

which suggests a further observation on the nature of sound systematics: questions of possibility which are not necessitated by the actual data of revelation as grasped in the faith-life of the Church may be matter for curious philosophical speculation, but they are not the stuff of Christian theology. It may intrigue some ecclesiologist to ask what would happen to Christ's Church if the bomb were dropped and all of the hierarchy were destroyed, but I should think God felt He was giving us enough mystery to occupy us by presenting Himself to us in the world as it is.

### *Positive Enrichment from Other Areas of Theology*

Turning our attention from the methodological dead ends which have prevented a fruitful situating of the gift of infallibility, we may profitably explore some other areas of Catholic thought which can enrich our understanding of this gift.

A beginning might be made from the theology of providence. The Church has wrestled down through the ages with heresies which would distort the biblical revelation of God's way of dealing with men. Resisting the seduction of an ontologism which would negate the dignity of creatures out of a misdirected esteem for the First Cause, she has steadfastly maintained that God respects the nature of His creation and deals with men in accordance with their nature and dignity. But then we turn to ecclesiology and the gift of infallibility, and this hard-won patrimony is frequently squandered. Nor is this merely a question of some sort of natural theology being neglected, as bad as that is; specifically Christian revelation is at stake. The Church's understanding of God's providential dealings with men was developed within the framework of an economy shaped by God's promises and free interventions in history and must be valid even in the face of such interventions. There is a dialectical tension to be maintained here, and the great Scholastics never lost sight of that fact. As Cano and Bellarmine and others in the post-Tridentine era said when they spoke of papal infallibility: if God were to promise a farmer a harvest in the fall, He would not thereby relieve him of the obligation of sowing the grain and cultivating the field, and the same thing is true of the gift of infallibility. Because the Church has been given the gift of infallibility, the promise of infallible guidance, this by no means frees the human agents of the need to act and respond as human agents. We must restore the gift of infallibility to a whole economy of means-to-end. If God promises the end, He also promises the means, but this implies that suitable means will be taken and we simply cannot think of the end in isolation. Though one could not maintain that Vatican I formally teaches that the gift of infallibility

guarantees not only the truth of a definition but also that it will be arrived at in a humanly valid manner, its exclusion of inspiration or new revelation for the definer and its mention of the means supplied by divine providence ("aliis, quae divina suppeditabat providentia, adhibitis auxiliis"<sup>9</sup>) would seem to imply that in accepting a definition the believer is really assenting to the validity of the process by which the Church makes its way from the original data of faith to the contemporary formulation of the definition.

A similar view is suggested from the standpoint of the theology of grace. It has been traditional to speak of the healing function and the elevating function of grace, but the same grace, as the activity and effect of Christ who is always for man both Creator and Redeemer, involves both functions inseparably no matter how we distinguish them conceptually. This basic orientation is violated, however, when we consider the grace of infallibility, because this gift is frequently if unwittingly viewed as the elevation of an *unhealed* intellect in the Church. In such a view the act of infallible definition becomes a monstrosity. Does it not make more theological sense to see the process of development of dogmatic consciousness as the healing of those inadequacies and sinful failings of the human intellect which would otherwise lead it to attempt short cuts and blind itself to the complexities involved in thematically articulating the mysteries of faith? What we are guaranteed is that these sinful tendencies *were* resisted through the assistance of Christ's grace. That healing of our own darkness is a corporate process, as was the sin which caused the tendency to blindness in the first place.

A third approach would explore the interrelationships between the theology of infallibility and the Incarnational and Trinitarian structure of all grace. If all grace is Incarnational, a share in the mystery of Christ's life, then it would seem that the gift of the Spirit makes us, the Church as a whole, far more humanly authentic. This is not a process which bypasses all of the human facets by which any community grows in understanding. It will be Christian insofar as it mirrors the true humanity of Christ as well as His true divinity. The theology of infallibility is frequently in danger of what has been called ecclesiological monophysitism; that is to say, just as in the case of Christ the Church faced the problem of accepting His real humanity and leaving

<sup>9</sup> DS 3069. In Maier's report to the Council on behalf of the deputation on faith, the formal connection is quite explicit: "Etenim eo apprime spectat Spiritus sancti assistentia, qua sola Romanae sedis episcopi infallibiles dicuntur, ut eae omnes compleantur conditiones, quae requiruntur, ut ab ipsorum definitionibus circa determinatum suum obiectum omnis error excludatur" (Mansi 52, 22c).



it fully human even within the hypostatic union, so in the case of ecclesiology and its manifestation in the case of the gift of infallibility we must become more conscious of the demands of human integrity lest we unwittingly simply evacuate the human, all the human which has been divinized and raised to a new efficacy by Christ *while remaining fully human*.

A fourth point would be to develop the relationship of the theology of infallibility to a sacramental notion of the Church. If the Church is presented as "a kind of sacrament" in the opening number of *Lumen gentium*, then this notion ought to have its implications for the Church's developing consciousness. I would suggest that the act of infallible definition, whether it be in a council or on the part of a pope, could be described as the sacrament of the healing of the collective consciousness of the Church. Besides monophysitism, ecclesiological Apollinarism must also be avoided: the Church must have a human soul and intellect just as Christ did, and these need intrinsic healing. In other words, if the Church is a sacrament, should it not manifest at times the healing of the wound which sin brought to the human intellect precisely in the social order of knowledge? Just as any sacrament is simply the coming to visibility of a process which has been personal and internal (e.g., the sacrament of penance is the visible manifestation of an internal conversion), so from time to time the internal invisible action of the Spirit in healing the corporate intellect of the Church breaks out into a sacramental act of visibility. And if this is true, then this sacramentalization should embrace all the ways by which a human community grows in understanding. It is a community which is being healed and therefore all the media by which any community grows in self-definition are going to be operative in the Church as well. This means that not merely the logic of the word is going to have its effect in the Church's growing dogmatic consciousness, but all the verbal, nonverbal, affective, and unconscious factors which are at work in the people who contribute to the process. Indeed, even all the sinful passions and pressure tactics which a person or group of persons may use to bear witness to what they believe are going to be used by the Holy Spirit to achieve His work. This has something to say for our understanding of the conciliar process, commissions and the like. Tactics are frequently employed which we might question in a purely intellectualist world. We feel that definitions should be the result of a "clean" process (and indeed the Church must always be striving to purify the ritual by which the sacramentalization is expressed), but it would be naive to think that a Church so affected by sin in all other areas will not be equally beset by intellectual sins. If God loved man with an ir-

revocable and all-conquering love "while we were yet sinners," why should this not be equally true in the face of man's love for darkness and error?

#### AN ECUMENICAL DIMENSION

The reincorporation of the gift of infallibility into the Christian understanding of the divine economy has serious ecumenical dimensions. The Roman Catholic Christian rightly objects to the Protestant who considers the pope as merely an individual instance of the species "man" and rejects the claim of papal infallibility on that basis. This, the Catholic says, is an abstraction: the whole reality includes the divine promise. But if all that we include in our understanding of infallibility is a bare promise of inerrancy, are we not guilty of an equally distorting abstraction? Only the imbedding of this promised gift in the whole economy of salvation effected by Christ can convey the reality of the gift. That economy is social and so are the gifts by which it is achieved. We should not burden the consciences of those who are ready to receive divine truth through a hierarchical Church with the unnecessary baggage of belief in an oracle separated from the rest of the Church. For all the fact that papal infallibility is a dogma of faith, the theology which tries to understand the dogma and to situate the mystery must give attention to the divine intention which motivates the gift, and this means elaborating the role of the rest of the Church in the process. If, as the fathers of Vatican I and II maintain, the infallibility of the Church, of a council, and of the pope are fundamentally the same, this must be because the mystery to which we are assenting in accepting the dogma is the mystery of God's power to use fallible human instruments, and while respecting the laws of their human functioning to achieve unfailingly His own Self-communication.

A final consideration suggests itself and brings us back to where we began in *Lumen gentium*. The problem of our times is not to come up with a satisfactory theory for understanding the development of dogma, if that be taken to mean a purely intellectual process. The deeper theological issue lies in what we have traditionally called the discernment of spirits, not as a phenomenon to be sorted out rationally but as a process to be entered into prayerfully. The Spirit of truth promised to the Church is also and inseparably the Spirit of holiness. We can distinguish His functions within the Church, but we separate them only at the cost of destroying the reality of the Church herself. For too long the notion of "consensus of theologians" or "consensus of the Fathers" has been reduced to head-counting. We must never forget that one of the criteria for acclaiming a theologian as a Father of the Church was his

holiness; that the theological tradition down through the ages spoke of the sense of the faithful as being *pious*, one rooted in sound devotion; and that what we have been concerned with in our reflections is described in the Epistle of Jude, and in the Council text, as "the faith which was once for all delivered to the *saints*." The faith of the faithful, whether they be popes, bishops, priests, or laity, is manifested above all by the witness of holy lives, and the ability unerringly to interpret that witness will be given only to a Church open to the Spirit in prayer. For only that kind of Church could receive it as a gift.