INFALLIBILITY—TERMINOLOGY, TEXTUAL ANALYSIS, AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: A RESPONSE TO MARK POWELL

JOHN T. FORD

ALTHOUGH "INFALLIBILITY" is certainly one of the most neuralgic doctrines separating Roman Catholics and other Christians, official ecumenical dialogues have given the topic comparatively little attention.[1] Accordingly, Mark Powell's investigation of different interpretations of infallibility in his book *Papal Infallibility*[2] is a helpful contribution to the history of this doctrine. In the historical part of his book, Powell compared and contrasted four Roman Catholic interpretations of infallibility: two of these interpreters, Henry Edward Manning (1808–1892) and John Henry Newman (1801–1890) were contemporaries of the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), which defined the doctrine.[3] Manning, who attended the council and chaired the committee that prepared the definition, interpreted

JOHN T. FORD, C.S.C., received his ThD from the Gregorian University and is now professor of theology and religious studies at The Catholic University of America and editor of *Newman Studies Journal*. His areas of special interest include 19th-century theology, contemporary ecumenism, and Hispanic/Latino theology. His publications include *John Henry Newman: Spiritual Writings* (2012) and *Glossary of Theological Terms* (2006), as well as articles on American ecumenism, Hispanic/Latino theologies, and 19th-century Roman Catholic theology, particularly Vatican I and John Henry Newman. He is preparing an anthology of Newman's writings on education.

[1] The most detailed study of infallibility by an official bilateral dialogue is *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 6, ed. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978).

[2] Mark E. Powell, *Papal Infallibility: A Protestant Evaluation of an Ecumenical Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); see my review in *Catholic Historical Review* 96 (2009) 773–74; and my article "'Papal Infallibility' in Ecumenical Perspective," *Ecumenical Trends* 39.2 (February 2010) 1–5, 15 (17–21, 31).

[3] The First Vatican Council treated "the infallible magisterium of the Roman Pontiff" in the fourth chapter of *Pastor aeternus*, "First Dogmatic Constitution concerning the Church of Christ" (July 18, 1870); Vatican I prepared a "second constitution" (treating the church) which was never approved due to the termination of the council as a result of the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871). The Latin text of *Pastor aeternus* is available in H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* nos. 1821–40 (hereafter, Denzinger).

the conciliar teaching in a "maximal" manner, considering practically every papal pronouncement an exercise of infallibility. Newman, by contrast, advocated a "moderate" interpretation that considered the papal exercise of infallibility a rare occurrence, indeed a last resort, for settling theological controversies about the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.[4] Theological differences about the interpretation of infallibility continued in the 20th century, when Avery Dulles, like Newman, defended a "moderate" interpretation, while Hans Küng's "minimal" interpretation of infallibility, according to Powell, "is actually a rejection of papal infallibility."[5]

Powell's historical investigation is commendable, but his proposal for a new interpretation of "papal infallibility" that is better grounded philosophically and more acceptable ecumenically—while assuredly well-intentioned and much needed—falls short on at least three counts: terminology, textual analysis, and theological interpretation.[6] Powell, however, is not entirely at fault for these shortcomings: many Roman Catholic theologians, both past and present, in discussing infallibility sometimes have failed to be precise in their theological terminology, have neglected accurate textual analysis, and have interpreted "infallibility" without appropriate attention to what the two Vatican Councils actually stated.

TERMINOLOGY: INFALLIBILITY, INDEFECTIBILITY, INERRANCY

One of the often obvious—yet sometimes overlooked—questions about "infallibility" is: what does the term mean? In contrast to German, which has attempted—with mixed success—to translate *infallibilitas*, English and the major romance languages have simply transliterated the term.[7] As is the case with many transliterations, the theological complexities of the original term have frequently been lost. In the middle of the 20th century, for example, Roman Catholic treatments of "infallibility" customarily differentiated *infallibilitas facti* (*factual* immunity from error) from *infallibilitas juris* (*juridical* immunity from error); this *inherent* immunity ("the impossibility of erring") in turn could be either *external*—for example, as the result of the

---

[4] Powell, *Papal Infallibility* 49–83 (Manning), 84–122 (Newman). See my comparable evaluation of the positions of Manning and Newman: "Different Models of Infallibility?" in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 35 (1980) 217–33.

[5] Powell, *Papal Infallibility* 206; 123–62 (Dulles); 163–201 (Küng). See my comparable critique: "Küng on Infallibility," *Thomist* 35 (1971) 501–12.

[6] There are a number of other points of difference regarding, for example, dogma and doctrine, ordinary magisterium, etc., that would need much more space to consider.

[7] *Infallibilitas* is commonly translated into German as *Unfehlbarkeit*; however, other translations, such as *Letzverbindlichkeit*, have been proposed; in the romance languages, see: *infaillibilité*, *infallibilità*, *infalibilidad*, *infalibilidade*, etc.

assistance of the Holy Spirit—or *internal* as possessed by an individual: in the case of God, infallibility is essential to the divine nature; however, God on occasion may give select people the gift of infallibility for specific purposes, as in the case of both biblical inspiration and papal/conciliar exercises of infallibility.[8] Unfortunately the complexities of Roman Catholic treatments of "infallibility" that were commonplace prior to Vatican II are rarely discussed today.

Among many terminological misunderstandings is the failure to distinguish between "infallibility" and "indefectibility."[9] Succinctly stated, *infallibility* refers to the divine assistance given by Christ to the church to teach specific doctrines without error;[10] *indefectibility* refers to the divine assistance given to the church to remain fundamentally faithful to the teachings of Christ. Accordingly, *indefectibility* means that "there can be no wholesale departure from the teaching of Christ,"[11] even though various leaders and/or various populations in the church may sometimes go astray. Thus, "indefectibility" refers to the *generic* divine assistance that the church will remain basically faithful to the teachings of Christ over the long run, while "infallibility" refers to the *specific* divine assistance for the church to teach particular fundamental doctrines without basic error.

Moreover, although Powell has linked "infallibility" with "inerrancy," it seems more appropriate to parallel "infallibility" (the gift to teach doctrine without error) and "inspiration" (the gift to record revelation without error). Inspiration results in "inerrancy," which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes as "the attribute of the books of Scripture whereby they faithfully and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to have confided through the Sacred

---

[8] See Michaele Nicolau and Ioachim Salaverri, *Sacrae theologiae summa*, 4 vols. (Madrid : Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1955) 1:no. 505: "*Infallibilitas* enim est, in genere, immunitas ab errore, quae distingui solet duplex: a) *infallibilitas facti*, seu mera inerrantia, est simplex factum immunitas ab errore; b) *infallibilitas juris* est impossibilitas errandi, quae dupliciter dari potest; alia *extrinseca* cuius causa est subiecto externa, ut assistentia Spiritus Sancti; alia *intrinseca*, cuius causa est subiecto interna, quae vicissim duplicis generis esse dicitur: altera *essentialis*, cuius causa ipsa rei essentia, prout est infallibilitas Dei; altera vero *accidentalis*, cuius causa est interna qualitas accidentalis rei, qualis est infallibilitas auctoris a Deo inspirati" (emphases original).

[9] For example, one widespread misunderstanding is equating "infallibility" with "impeccability"—"immunity from sin" in fact and/or the "impossibility of sinning" in theory. If infallibility is equated with "impeccability," however, "papal infallibility" is evidently impossible because no pope is sinless.

[10] "Magisterium" is another imported theological term with multiple meanings. Among other possible meanings, it can refer to the teaching authority of the church or to those who possess that teaching authority.

[11] M. E. Williams, "Indefectibility," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7:429.

Scripture."[12] Accordingly, "inerrancy" (the result of inspiration) seems to parallel "irreformability," the result of an exercise of infallibility—a topic I consider later.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In addition to the fact that many recent discussions about "infallibility" have paid insufficient attention to terminology, some discussions—including Powell's—have paid more attention to comparing interpretations of "papal infallibility" than to analyzing the council's actual teaching about infallibility. Yet in any truly theological discussion of infallibility, one must ask: what precisely did the First Vatican Council teach?[13]

Surprisingly, many Roman Catholic theologians have failed to notice that Vatican I did not use the term "papal infallibility." Unfortunately this term was employed not only by Manning, Newman, Dulles, and Küng, but also by countless other Roman Catholic theologians, presumably as a terminological shortcut, to describe the teaching Vatican I. It is hardly surprising then that Powell, as well as numerous others, have used the term "papal infallibility" to describe the official terminology of the council. Such is simply *not* the case; the council deliberately avoided using "papal infallibility" lest infallibility be understood as a personal prerogative of the pope.[14]

Many commentators have also failed to notice that Vatican I did not define *what* infallibility *is*; rather the council described *how* infallibility *is to be exercised*.[15] According to the council, infallibility is given by Christ to the church as a gift that the pope is empowered to exercise under

---

[12] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000) 883.

[13] *Pastor aeternus*: "Romanum Pontificem, cum ex cathedra loquitur, id est, [1] cum omnium Christianorum pastoris et doctoris munere fungens [2] pro suprema sua Apolostolica auctoritate [3] doctrinam de fide vel moribus ab universa Ecclesia tenendam definit, [4] per assistentiam divinam ipsi in beato PETRO promissam, [5] ea infallibilitate pollere, qua divinus Redemptor Ecclesiam suam [6] in definienda doctrina de fide vel moribus instructam esse voluit; [7] ideoque eiusmodi Romani Pontificis definitiones ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae, irreformabiles esse" (Denzinger no. 1839). The numbers in square brackets have been added to facilitate subsequent reference to specific phrases.

[14] During the discussion of infallibility at Vatican I, the title of chapter 4 of *Pastor aeternus* was changed from "De Romani Pontificis infallibilitate" to "De Romani Pontificis infallibili magisterio."

[15] Although the absence of a definition of "infallibility" may seem surprising, Vatican I (*Dei Filius*, chap. 2, April 24, 1870) discussed "revealed truths" without providing a definition of "revelation"; an English translation of *Dei Filius* is available at http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/v1.htm. All URLS cited herein were accessed on December 2, 2012.

specific conditions.[16] Thus, the council specified the conditions that are necessary: *if* "the pope is to exercise that infallibility with which Christ endowed the Church" [5], then the Roman pontiff [1] must act as "pastor and teacher of all Christians," [2] must "exercise supreme apostolic authority," and [4] must rely on "the divine assistance promised to Peter."[17]

These conditions serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, if a pope wants to exercise infallibility, then he must fulfill *all* these conditions; omission of one or other condition, for whatever reason, would imply that a particular papal teaching is not being taught under infallibility, however important the doctrine might be otherwise.[18] On the other hand, the explicit fulfillment of all these conditions indicates that a pope has intentionally exercised the gift of infallibility in teaching a specific doctrine. Thus, instead of providing a *theological* definition of *what* infallibility is, Vatican I provided a list of *canonical* criteria for the dual purpose of both ensuring and verifying that a pope has duly exercised infallibility.[19]

According to a strict application of these criteria, there has been only one *papal* exercise of infallibility since the First Vatican Council: *Munificentissimus Deus*, the proclamation of the Assumption of Mary by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950.[20] Nonetheless, many Roman Catholic theologians consider *Ineffabilis Deus*, the proclamation of the Immaculate

---

[16] *Pastor aeternus*: "Romanum Pontificem . . . [5] ea infallibilitate pollere, qua divinus Redemptor Ecclesiam suam [6] . . . instructam esse voluit" (Denzinger no. 1839); accordingly, it is inexact and potentially misleading to claim that Vatican I taught that "the pope is infallible" or to speak of an "infallible pope." Although Vatican I did not provide a definition of "infallibility," the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* described "infallibility" as "the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church whereby the pastors of the Church, the pope and the bishops in union with him, can definitively proclaim a doctrine of faith or morals for the belief of the faithful" (883).

[17] The numbers in square brackets refer to the specific phrases of *Pastor aeternus*, cited in n. 13 above. These conditions were abbreviated in the 1983 Code of Canon Law: "Infallibilitate in magisterio, vi muneris sui gaudet Summus Pontifex quando ut supremus omnium christifidelium Pastor et Doctor, cuius est fratres suos in fide confirmare, doctrinam de fide vel de moribus tenendam definitivo actus proclamat" (c. 749, § 1), http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/latin/documents/cic_liberIII_lt.html#TITULUS_I.

[18] For example, most Roman Catholic theologians do not consider the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968) of Pope Paul VI to be an exercise of infallibility, since not all of the specified conditions were met.

[19] The implications of such verification are succinctly indicated by the 1983 Code of Canon Law: "No doctrine is understood as defined infallibly unless this is manifestly evident" (c. 749, § 3: Infallibiliter definita nulla intellegitur doctrina, nisi id manifesto constiterit); ET at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/__P2H.HTM).

[20] ET of *Munificentissimus Deus* at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus_en.html.

Conception by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854, a papal exercise of infallibility.[21] While there is no doubt that *Ineffabilis Deus* was a dogmatic pronouncement, it was not, strictly speaking, a *papal* exercise of infallibility but a *synodal* exercise of infallibility since the proclamation was made by the pope in synod.[22] Although the prelates at Vatican I acknowledged that infallibility had been previously exercised by various popes, the council did not provide a list of such teachings; accordingly, theologians differ about which papal teachings prior to Vatican I should be considered *papal* exercises of infallibility.[23]

Indefectibility and Irreformability

The preceding observations may strike some readers as theological hair-splitting, but there is ample precedent for such distinctions in the history of Christian doctrine; for example, in the christological controversy about *homoousios* and *homoiousios*, an *iota* made a major doctrinal difference. There are similar subtleties in the teaching of Vatican I. In any case, granted that a pope can exercise infallibility, what is the result? Unless the church—pope or college of bishops—can definitively decide a doctrinal question, there is little rationale for infallibility. As already mentioned, the gift of *indefectibility* is intended to keep the church generally on course; the gift of *infallibility* is necessary if the church is to provide authoritative definitions of specific doctrines.[24]

Vatican I described the result of a papal exercise of infallibility in *canonical* terms: "definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the church, irreformable" [7] (see above, n. 13). The council's choice of the word "irreformable" was linked to the council's desire to reject Gallicanism once and for all.[25] Unfortunately, this anti-Gallican background has escaped the notice of many critics, who have raised two pseudo-problems: first, some critics consider papal definitions as arbitrary teachings by the pope that do not need the consent of the church; however, this was not what Vatican I meant by "irreformable"; rather, the council

---

[21] ET of *Ineffabilis Deus* at http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ineff.htm.

[22] See James Hennesey, S.J. "A Prelude to Vatican I: American Bishops and the Definition of the Immaculate Conception," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964) 409–19.

[23] In regard to "identifying defined dogmas in papal documents," see Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium* (New York: Paulist, 1996) 80–92.

[24] Powell seemingly sees no need for the church to teach specific doctrines under infallibility; however, ignoring the results (the dogmatic teachings) of an exercise of infallibility effectively reduces infallibility to indefectibility.

[25] See Richard F. Costigan, S.J., *The Consensus of the Church and Papal Infallibility: A Study in the Background of Vatican I* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005).

rejected the Gallican insistence on subjecting papal decisions to approval by the French government; moreover, *Pastor aeternus* emphasized that the pope, in making doctrinal decisions, needs to consult the church; thus, infallibility was understood as a charism that the pope exercises in and for the church.[26]

Second, some critics have alleged that "irreformable definitions" are philosophically impossible and theologically untenable: philosophically, because all statements are historically conditioned; theologically, because doctrinal statements are always subject to future doctrinal development. Again, such objections fail to recognize that Vatican I was not using "irreformable" in a philosophical or theological sense, but in a *canonical* sense, where "irreformable" means "juridically final," that is, "not subject to a further court of appeal."[27] Such a canonical understanding of "irreformable" is evidently congruent with the anti-Gallican stance of the council, which insisted that the definitions of the infallible papal magisterium do not need further approbation, since the pope is speaking definitively in and for the church. The widespread failure to appreciate both the anti-Gallican background and the canonical meaning of "irreformable definitions" has resulted in numerous misunderstandings about Vatican I's teaching on infallibility. Simultaneously, one can acknowledge a theological parallelism between "irreformability" and "inerrancy": the former claims that a specific doctrine genuinely represents the teaching of Christ; the latter claims that Scripture teaches salvific truth without error.

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Although some contemporaries of the First Vatican Council, such as Manning, viewed the council's description of the papal exercise of infallibility as providing the ultimate agency for a clear and immediate resolution of all doctrinal questions, the Second Vatican Council amplified the doctrine of its predecessor by teaching that the bishops of the world can also teach infallibly:

Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly whenever, even though dispersed through the world, but still maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter, and authentically teaching matters of faith and

---

[26] *Pastor aeternus* (Denzinger no. 1836) discussed how the pope has customarily consulted the church. Vatican I, however, did not stipulate any precise requirements for such consultation, although the prelates at Vatican I were aware that Pope Pius IX had consulted the bishops of the world prior to his definition of the Immaculate Conception.

[27] Accordingly, some German-speaking theologians prefer to interpret "irreformable" as *letzverbindlich* (juridically final).

morals, they are in agreement on one position as definitively to be held. This is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church, whose definitions must be adhered to with the submission of faith.[28]

Theologically speaking, Vatican II recognized that the gift of "infallibility" may be exercised not only by the pope but also collectively by bishops in communion with the pope. Insofar as both councils used *canonical* language, the development from Vatican I to Vatican II is basically an *intracontextual* doctrinal development. One might then ask whether it is possible to have *transcontextual* developments of the doctrine of infallibility?[29]

In the specific case of infallibility, how can the original conciliar teaching that was couched in canonical terms be restated in a new philosophical-theological context? One can recall two attempts three decades ago at translating the doctrine of infallibility into modern theological perspectives: Peter Chirico attempted a Rahnerian interpretation of infallibility,[30] while Terry Tekippe and colleagues attempted a Lonerganian interpretation.[31] Although they afforded creative theological insights, both endeavors were victimized by a basic methodological flaw: the proposed interpretations bore little resemblance to the conciliar text that they were presumably translating. Instead of transcontextualizing the conciliar teaching on infallibility from its canonical language to a new philosophical-theological perspective, the authors provided reflections on what "infallibility" might mean in a new context, but without adequate analysis of the original conciliar teaching.

The formidable challenge in transcontextualization is to translate an idea that has significance in one context in such a way that the idea will have a comparable meaning in a quite different context. This was the translation challenge that Chirico and Tekippe faced and failed; their failure was due not to the fact that they did not know Rahner and Lonergan, but to the fact that they did not carefully analyze and recontextualize the original conciliar

---

[28] Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium* no. 25, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[29] A prominent example of *transcontextual* development of doctrine is found in the transcontextualization of Christianity from the Greek-speaking world to the Latin-speaking world, although, unfortunately, many tensions, both ecclesial and theological, remain between the churches and theologies of the East and those of the West. The 21st century is experiencing the need for new *transcontextual* developments of doctrine from Enlightenment-related theological expressions to expressions relevant to the postmodern world.

[30] Peter Chirico, *Infallibility: The Crossroads of Doctrine* (Kansas City, KS: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983).

[31] Terry J. Tekippe, ed., *Papal Infallibility: An Application of Lonergan's Method* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983).

teaching into Rahnerian and Lonerganian perspectives. This methodological flaw reappears in Powell's "creative proposal"; he fails to show precisely how his proposal transcontextualizes the original conciliar texts. Accordingly, in order to be theologically convincing and ecumenically persuasive, Powell needs to show how his proposed interpretation is compatible with the teaching of the two Vatican councils—similar to the way that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification showed the compatibility of Lutheran teaching and Tridentine doctrine.[32] Without establishing similar compatibility, Powell's proposal remains speculatively creative and theologically interesting, but hermeneutically arbitrary and irrelevant to official ecumenical dialogue.

Infallibility and Christian Unity

Powell has suggested that Christian unity can be achieved without the specific acceptance of infallibility. A similar proposal was advanced a quarter-century ago by Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner.[33] Their proposal attracted a significant amount of ecumenical enthusiasm but gained little acceptance in official Roman Catholic circles. While there was no doubt about the good intentions of the Fries-Rahner proposal, the crucial ecumenical issue is whether unity must be based on doctrinal consensus. Similarly, there is no problem with Powell's proposal for unity if infallibility is understood as indefectibility; however, there is a fundamental problem, if one agrees with Carl Peter that "differences about infallibility" are "too significant to be brushed aside as inconsequential."[34]

Taking Powell at his word that he wants to make an ecumenical contribution to the discussion about infallibility, it must be emphasized that he needs to use theological terminology with precision and to be attentive to the canonical context of conciliar statements; in particular, "infallibility" and "indefectibility" are simply not interchangeable terms; in addition, his claim that Vatican I made a "proposal in religious epistemology" needs to be substantiated, not merely asserted. Second, he needs to be attentive to the conciliar teaching about infallibility, not simply to secondary interpretations that have not always carefully exegeted the official texts. Third, he

---

[32] ET of the Declaration at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

[33] Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches—An Actual Possibility*, trans. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress; New York: Paulist, 1985).

[34] See John T. Ford, "Differences about Infallibility . . . Too Significant to Be Brushed aside as Inconsequential," in *Church and Theology: Essays in Memory of Carl J. Peter*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1995) 111–60.

needs to show how the philosophical-theological language of foundationalism really translates the canonical language of *Pastor aeternus* and *Lumen gentium*; just as it is customary in biblical studies to parallel the translation and the original text, so too, new theological interpretations of infallibility need to be systematically correlated with the original conciliar definitions; otherwise, such interpretations are conjectural at best.

Last but not least, one must certainly agree with Powell that the "complex and subtle" topic of "infallibility" definitely demands "patient and fraternal" ecumenical discussion. His writings should then serve as a reminder to Roman Catholic theologians that they need to be precise in their use of terminology, careful in their analysis of conciliar texts, and thoughtful in their theological interpretations in order for discussions about "infallibility" to be ecumenically fruitful.