

## THE ROMAN CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF PAPAL INFALLIBILITY: A RESPONSE TO MARK POWELL

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AFTER ALMOST A HALF CENTURY of ecumenical dialogue, the question of the papacy remains a major point of division. Progress on this front, however, has been made, especially in the wake of the invitation in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Ut unum sint* to begin "a patient and fraternal dialogue" concerning papal primacy.<sup>1</sup> While there is a growing consensus that the papacy will play a role for all churches in a future united church, there is as yet no common agreement on what that role will look like. Some questions concern church order, but the difficult ones relate to the faith—and there is no agreement about the relationship between faith and order. For the Catholic Church, notwithstanding Pope John Paul II's request to find a new way of exercising the primacy, the institution of the papacy is an essential element in Christian faith.

One point of particular difficulty is the doctrine of papal infallibility, declared at the First Vatican Council in 1870. The impact of this doctrine is characterized by a number of factors: the times in which it was formulated;

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<sup>1</sup> *Ut unum sint* no. 96, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html) (all URLs cited herein were accessed on December 16, 2012). Some of the fruits of this dialogue are evident in, for example, James F. Puglisi, ed., *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999); Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II's Encyclical Ut Unum Sint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Cardinal Walter Kasper, ed., *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (New York: Newman, 2006); James F. Puglisi, ed., *How Can the Petrine Ministry Be a Service to the Unity of the Universal Church?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

the respective roles of the majority and the minority at the council; its reception in the popular mind; the way the papacy has been exercised by successive popes; and the later influence of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>2</sup>

Mark Powell offers a valuable Free Church perspective on papal infallibility, seeing it in ways not readily obvious to Catholic theologians, and putting forward a positive proposal for a way it might be exercised in the future. He seeks a dialogue that will involve mutual listening to the benefit of both Catholics and conservative Protestants. His proposal has two major parts. The first is a reading of the definition of papal infallibility in *Pastor aeternus*, arguing that papal infallibility is there conceived as religious epistemology. This is a position that has become problematic for Powell, as has an equivalent Protestant doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This leads to the second part of his proposal, namely, that ecclesial authority and religious epistemology are best conceived of in terms of “canonical theism.”

In embarking on this dialogue I will proceed in two sections. First will be a consideration of *Pastor aeternus* in the light of Powell’s critique of it. Here I will argue that infallibility need not be understood in the terms of epistemic certainty that is the focus of Powell’s reading of the definition. This will pave the way for my second section, where I will consider his proposal regarding canonical theism. Here, while challenging Powell’s description of canonical theism, I will argue that a particular understanding of it offers possibilities for a renewed understanding of infallibility.

### INTERPRETING *PASTOR AETERNUS*

Powell acknowledges that the understanding of papal infallibility among Catholic theologians today differs significantly from that of people like Cardinal Henry Edward Manning and the Ultramontanes who prevailed at Vatican I. Nevertheless, today’s moderate position is stuck with the epistemic vocabulary and concepts provided by the Ultramontanes. According to Powell, the doctrine of infallibility was meant to provide epistemic certainty—“precise theological expression modeled after scientific and mathematical statements”—but today even those sciences are no longer considered to give absolute objectivity and certainty. The doctrine pronounced in *Pastor aeternus* is a child of its day, characterized by a particular epistemological framework, which is no longer credible. Today’s theologians, faced with new insights on traditional formulations of belief, struggle to arrive at adequate formulations. The epistemic certainty envisaged at Vatican I is no longer possible; more adequate ways of thinking about religious epistemology and ecclesial authority are needed.

<sup>2</sup> See J. M. R. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, trans. John de Satgé (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), esp. chap. 1, “The Pope—More than a Pope?”

The question I pose for Powell's consideration is whether he has left any scope for "retrieving" the Vatican I definition of papal infallibility. In other words, is his reading, with its emphasis on epistemic certainty, the only possible reading? Catholic theologians will be looking for a way to work with the definition and to consider how it might legitimately develop. This principle of doctrinal development is one that is acknowledged by the Catholic Church's magisterium. The 1973 document *Mysterium fidei*, from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, noted that it may happen that "some dogmatic truth is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression."<sup>3</sup> Tillard, relying on this document, draws the conclusion that dogmatic formulas give only an incomplete answer, and that a deeper understanding in a wider context may lead to a more complete and perfect expression of the truth. However, this does not mean that such formulas or definitions do not contain the truth, even if greater clarity can be arrived at.<sup>4</sup>

These comments are important to consider for two reasons. First, they remind us that it is not sufficient simply to consider the definition of papal infallibility as it occurs in *Pastor aeternus*; there is a broader context in which the definition must be interpreted. This broader context includes both the definition's continuity with previous teaching on this matter and later developments—in this case, the perspective offered in Vatican II's *Lumen gentium*. Second, the comments alert us to the need for ongoing interpretation of infallible definitions themselves. In both of these aspects the idea of epistemic certainty would seem to be too narrow a framework through which to consider the definition in *Pastor aeternus*. Even if we concede that the language of the definition reflects a particular epistemology, largely determined by the majority at the council, it is not adequate to view it exclusively in this way. Councils of the church are always a delicate balancing act between various positions. At Vatican I there was also a minority position that was well known. While this position did not prevail, it is not totally absent from the council's decrees. Moreover, that position was given voice at Vatican II, such that each council is needed to interpret the other.

In looking for a broader context to interpret the Vatican I declaration, it is well to remember that the Fathers at the council did not consider themselves to be inventing any new dogma, and that they appealed to an ancient notion of infallibility. This would suggest that in itself the notion of infallibility should not be locked into the epistemology of a particular

<sup>3</sup> *Mysterium ecclesiae* no. 5, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19730705\\_mysterium-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html).

<sup>4</sup> Tillard, *Bishop of Rome* 67.

period of time. It is important to uncover such a broader framework in *Pastor aeternus*. This I will do in two steps: first a consideration of the text as a whole, then an examination of the specific declaration regarding papal infallibility.

*Pastor aeternus* is a dogmatic constitution on the church. It has four chapters preceded by an introduction. The definition of papal infallibility is found in chapter four. The introduction sets up the context, namely, the divine action and purpose. The primary concern is soteriological. Christ is the “eternal shepherd and guardian (*episcopus*) of our souls,” whose saving work is made permanent in the church.<sup>5</sup> Immediately, we see that the concern of the text is not explicitly epistemological, but rather theological and, in particular, soteriological. Further, the context where this saving work of redemption is permanently available is the church, which is “all the faithful linked by the bond of one faith and charity.” Therefore, the theological concern of the text is also ecclesiological. Although not stated explicitly, we can infer that the ecclesiological and soteriological concerns are closely linked. The logic of the argument is as follows: God desires that the saving work of redemption be permanently active in the world; therefore, God has built a church; shepherds and teachers are in the church to make permanently present the same saving work of redemption; this episcopal office should be one and undivided; moreover, the apostle Peter has been instituted as head over the apostles and the permanent principle of both faith and communion. The introduction concludes by stating that what is proposed relates to “the ancient and unchanging faith of the whole church.”

The introduction to *Pastor aeternus* gives the framework for interpreting what follows. Despite the fact that much of the interpretation has been juridical, it is possible to identify here a framework that is properly theological and includes a theology of salvation within the context of the church. This suggests that we can find a way of interpreting the definition of infallibility that is not primarily couched in terms of epistemic certainty. There is no doubt that the concern is for truth, but this is understood as a truth that leads to salvation.

For our purposes the central chapter of *Pastor aeternus* is chapter four. It opens with a reference to the apostolic primacy as including “the supreme power of teaching.” The infallibility of the pope will thus be presented as an act of teaching. The chapter concludes with the definition of papal infallibility. The major elements of this are well known: when the pope speaks *ex cathedra*, defining a doctrine concerning faith or morals, he possesses the

<sup>5</sup> I am using the English translation found in Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990).

infallibility that Christ willed for the church. Three points about this definition stand out immediately. First, the pope's declaration is *ex cathedra*: in other words, he is speaking precisely as the bishop of the Apostolic See. The constitution had explained in chapter two that Peter "lives and presides and exercises judgement in his successors the bishops of the holy Roman See, which he founded and consecrated with his blood." Our attention is drawn here not simply to the person of the pope, but to the fact that he is the bishop of Rome. It is essential that all churches be in agreement with the local church of Rome, as this is the church that ensures the continuity of the apostolic faith. Further, agreement with the Roman church leads to the communion of all the faithful in a "single body." The exercise of infallibility is thus an ecclesial act that arises from the particular place of the Roman church in God's plan.

Second, when the pope speaks infallibly, he is speaking on a matter of faith or morals. This introduces the important point that the purpose of the infallible statement is to safeguard faith and salvation. Appealing to the Fourth Council of Constantinople, *Pastor aeternus* notes that "the first condition of salvation is to maintain the rule of the true faith." Likewise, referring to the Second Council of Lyons, the definition notes that the duty of the church is to defend the faith, "so if any questions arise concerning the faith, it is by her [the church's] judgement that they must be settled." Throughout the history of the church, doctrines have been defined. These are those teachings that the church "knew to be in keeping with sacred Scripture and the apostolic traditions." It was not that something new was created. Rather, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the "deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles" (i.e., revelation) was guarded and faithfully expounded. The exercise of infallibility, insofar as it is an ecclesial act, has a quite specific focus, namely, what has been revealed.<sup>6</sup>

Third, the infallibility exercised by the pope was willed by Christ for the church. This point expands the earlier point that the exercise of infallibility is an ecclesial act. There is a connection between the infallibility of the pope and the infallibility of the church. This suggests that further reflection on the infallibility of the church may help us deepen our understanding of the infallibility exercised by the pope; this, however, is beyond the scope of my response.

<sup>6</sup> The limits of infallibility remain a doctrinal and theological question. Developments in recent years, both in *Lumen gentium* and in later statements of the magisterium, would seem to have broadened the scope of infallibility far beyond *Pastor aeternus*. Powell notes this development, especially in the extraordinary universal magisterium. For a clear exposition of these developments see Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., "Developments in Teaching Authority since Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012) 570–89.

### POWELL'S CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSAL

Powell's constructive proposal seeks to move away from "epistemic doctrines like papal infallibility and biblical inerrancy" in favor of a loose ecumenical unity grounded in particular beliefs, garnered from the canonical heritage of the undivided church. This heritage offers a basic vision of God and what God has done for our salvation.

An initial reading of Powell's proposal should find a great deal of resonance among Catholic theologians, since it calls for historical consciousness, which is a feature of modern Catholic theology. However, Powell's sense of the canonical heritage involves a negative judgment about the Catholic understanding of that heritage. While on the surface there would seem to be a close connection between the Catholic understanding of tradition and canonical theism, for the proponents of canonical theism this is not the case. William Abraham, whose insights Powell follows, states succinctly the difference between the two:

On the surface, commitment to canonical theism appears to involve a turn to Roman Catholicism and a move away from Protestantism. This is false. Both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism work with a radically epistemic conception of canon; and they restrict canon to scripture. Magisterial Protestantism tries to work with the canon of scripture alone. Roman Catholicism adds tradition, the magisterium, and papal infallibility understood in epistemic terms as the means whereby the meaning of the canon is to be rightly understood. Hence epistemology rather than soteriology is primary in the conception and reception of canon in both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.<sup>7</sup>

This would seem to be a particularly 19th- or early 20th-century view of Roman Catholicism.

Among theologians more broadly—Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant—the canonical heritage of the church is found preeminently in the rich church life of the first millennium and is not limited to doctrinal definitions. The vision of the unity of the church of the first millennium is considered as a kind of model for the unity we seek today.<sup>8</sup> The unity of this period was always more than doctrinal unity, and is better expressed as a unity in faith. It was expressed above all in the liturgical and worship life

<sup>7</sup> William J. Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 1–10, at 4.

<sup>8</sup> This can be regarded as the official position of the Catholic Church and its vision of unity. See *Ut unum sint* no. 55: "In its historical survey the Council Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* has in mind the unity which, in spite of everything, was experienced in the first millennium and in a certain sense now serves as a kind of model."

of the church, in its piety and spiritual traditions, in a variety of theological traditions, as well as in local legislation. This era was characterized by a diversity of local churches, organically united.<sup>9</sup>

For Catholic theologians the idea that the unity of the church would be “a loose ecumenical unity” does not sit well with the vision of unity found in the canonical tradition. The Catholic Church speaks of an “organic unity.” I suspect that Powell wants to avoid a vision of the church as monolithic and to leave room for diversity. That is a vision I share. From the Catholic side, the vision of unity is not uniformity. On the contrary, the catholicity of the church, properly understood, requires that there be diverse expressions of the mystery of the faith; no single expression can contain or communicate this great mystery. Such diversity is found in the New Testament and is characteristic of the church of the first millennium. The canonical tradition also shows us that the unity of the church requires vigilance, lest the diversity become division. In this sense, the church was born ecumenical. There were many instruments of unity, most notably the celebration of the Eucharist, but also conciliar and synodical gatherings. The theological framework for speaking about these instruments of unity is ecclesiology. This in turn means that we must be speaking about salvation, as I indicated above.

The relationship between the church and the mystery of salvation was elaborated in Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.<sup>10</sup> This meant a significant change of perspective from what had prevailed for almost a millennium. The ecclesiology of the second millennium was characterized by a focus on the church-society. It was predominantly juridical and was concerned with correct practice governed by correct teaching. This is in contrast to the church of the first millennium, which was predominantly understood as sacrament in the broad sense of that term: the church was a spiritual communion, an effective sign of salvation in Christ. In this ecclesiology, the Eucharist was at the center as the sacrament of salvation. In the celebration of the Eucharist the church

<sup>9</sup> See *Lumen gentium* no. 23 (in Tanner, *Decrees*): “By divine providence it has come about that various churches, founded in various places by the apostles and by their successors, have in the course of time become joined together into several groups, organically united, which, while maintaining the unity of faith and the unique divine constitution of the universal church, enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical usage and their own theological and spiritual patrimony.” For a helpful discussion on this statement, see O. Rousseau, “Divina autem Providentia . . . Histoire d’une phrase de Vatican II,” in *Ecclesia a Spiritu Sancto edocta: Lumen gentium* 53; *Mélanges théologiques, hommage à Mgr Gérard Philips* (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1970) 281–89.

<sup>10</sup> See esp., chap. 1, “The Mystery of the Church.”

“taught” this mystery of salvation. Ecclesial authority was located here: the truth of the Eucharist being celebrated could be recognized by the episcopal authority associated with it. Of course, I am speaking of episcopal authority as primarily sacramental rather than juridical.<sup>11</sup> The declaration in *Lumen gentium* that “the church is in Christ as a sacrament (*veluti sacramentum*) or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity” marks an official return to a sacramental ecclesiology.<sup>12</sup> As these words indicate, salvation is the focus of the church’s mission.

The definition of papal infallibility given at Vatican I sits squarely within a juridical ecclesiology. It is understandable, then, that Powell reads it as belonging to the arena of epistemology rather than soteriology. It could be argued that such a conception is the logical outcome of the trajectory that was set in the eleventh century when the juridical took precedence over the sacramental. This amounted to a shift in the way infallibility had been traditionally understood. Rahner notes that in ancient times infallibility “related to the possession of the reality of salvation in the church as handed down and possessed in faith.”<sup>13</sup> A further consequence of the Vatican I definition was that there was now an emphasis on the infallibility of the pope rather than on the infallibility of the church. This too is a product of the dominance of a juridical ecclesiology in the second millennium. The earlier tradition, brought to life at Vatican II, situates the pope within the faith of the church. Congar expresses it this way: “bound to the church by faith, he is also dependent on the faith of the church.”<sup>14</sup> This opens up a new way of understanding the papacy and of the pope’s exercise of infallibility.

## CONCLUSION

There is something profoundly true in Powell’s basic thesis concerning both the limits of infallible papal statements as offering epistemic certainty and the necessity to locate them within a discourse and experience of salvation. For this reason he has made a useful contribution to the theological

<sup>11</sup> I am relying on the insights of Yves Congar for this perspective on the shift from a sacramental to a juridical ecclesiology. See Yves Congar, *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, ed. and intro. Bernard Lauret, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 41–44. For a more detailed discussion from Congar’s earlier work see his “Ecclesia ab Abel,” in *Abhandlungen über Theologie und Kirche*, Festschrift for Karl Adam, ed. Marcel Reding (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1952) 79–108.

<sup>12</sup> *Lumen gentium* no.1.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Rahner, “On the Concept of Infallibility in Catholic Theology,” *Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World*, Theological Investigations 14, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1976) 66–84, at 69.

<sup>14</sup> Congar, *Fifty Years* 51.



dialogue. In this response I have sought to sharpen the focus by bringing the scholarship of Catholic theologians to some of the arguments that underlie his basic thesis. While I call into question some of his basic assumptions, I am confident that consideration of the canonical heritage of the church, albeit understood somewhat differently from Powell's understanding, offers a fruitful way of continuing the dialogue.