

Infallibility in the Church – Blessing or Shackle?

Bill Toner, S.J.



Statue of St Peter, Vatican City

Some personal reflections

I have to confess at the outset that I have always had difficulties in relation to the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope. I was eleven years of age when the dogma of the Assumption of our Lady was promulgated in 1950. I think that triggered the beginning of my childhood doubts, though I cannot now put my finger exactly on the precise object of my earliest misgivings.

Even at that age I had a serious interest in religion and had some excellent teachers of the subject in the Christian Brothers school at which I received most of my early education. In about 1951 I joined a junior praesidium of the Legion of Mary where I was also strongly exposed to the belief held by many Catholics in the teaching of Mary as Mediatrix of All Graces. This view, that all the graces we received from God were mediated by Mary, became popular at the start of the 20th century and it was proposed by many bishops and others that it should also be proclaimed as a dogma of the Church. In the Legion of Mary there was great devotion to Mary as Mediatrix of All Graces and there was probably support for its definition as a dogma. Again, I felt uncomfortable about this prospect, as I was not convinced by the evidence for it.

I should say at this stage that I have great devotion to Our Lady. I still say the rosary every day, and on three days a week this includes the 'glorious mystery' of the Assumption of our Lady into Heaven. I have no problem with that, as I am quite certain that Mary is in an exalted place in heaven, but what exactly the proclamation of the dogma meant I was never quite sure.

At some stage too I realized that I was uncomfortable with the notion of the Popes 'infallibility'. Instead of a feeling of joy that the Assumption had been proclaimed as a dogma, I experienced rather a feeling of apprehension, a fear of some 'cosmic' mistake that a pope could make, or a dislike of something being imposed on me. I was also familiar enough with the Bible to be aware that the scriptural evidence for the Assumption was, to my inquisitive mind, rather thin, and that the dogma rested heavily only on the weight of Church tradition.

A related faith crisis in my childhood was the appearance in our house – I have no idea how it arrived there – of a popular commentary on the Bible. It was written by someone who would nowadays be called a 'New Age Creationist', who based the chronology of the Bible on the 42 'generations' listed in the New Testament. The author of the Bible commentary estimated the creation to have taken place about 6,000 years ago. But then, in 1950, when I was 11, I got a Christmas present of a book called *The Boy's World*, and which, in one article called 'Stories in Stones' spoke of events that had taken place millions of years ago, and of a primitive race of men who dwelt about 12,000 years ago. I confronted my mother with this discrepancy of dates and I remember that she became very upset and feared I was 'losing my faith'. As a matter of fact, 1950 was the year in which Pope Pius XII, in *Humani Generis*, stated for the first time that there was no intrinsic conflict between Christianity and the theory of evolution, though my mother would not have been aware of such developments in doctrine.

Turning to the present, it occurred to me recently that it is now fifty years since Fr. Hans Kung published *Infallible?: An Inquiry*, in which he argued that, contrary to the dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus* promulgated in 1870 by the First Vatican Council, the Pope is not infallible, even when, exercising the full authority of his office as Vicar of Christ on earth and Supreme Head of the Roman Catholic Church, he passes judgement on a matter of faith and morals. For his pains, Kung was stripped of his licence to teach as a Roman Catholic theologian. It has been a turbulent time since then in respect of debate about Church teaching and authority. There has been continuing debate, inevitably rather stifled, about the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* which led Kung to writing his book, but also about other 'neuralgic' topics such as homosexuality, the question of the possibility of ordaining women, clerical celibacy, admission of divorced persons to the Eucharist, and so on. Perhaps it is a good time

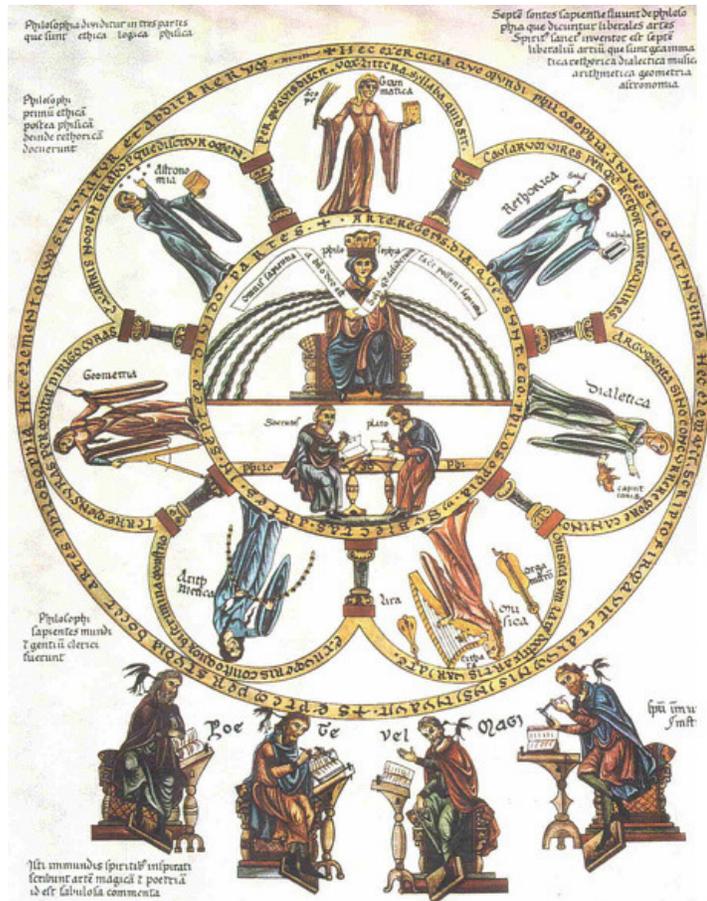
to revisit some of the issues raised by Kung, and to consider some other points on the dogma of 1870 not specifically explored by him.

Is the claim of infallibility a gift to the church?

In medieval times, theology was often described as ‘the queen of the sciences’. Although it is certainly a science, Catholic theology, is, uniquely, studied within a framework of principles and dogmas many of which are regarded as infallible and irrevocable. Other teachings, while not defined as infallible, are often described as ‘definitive’ or ‘authoritative’.

It is true that theology, commonly defined as ‘faith seeking understanding’, does not bear exact comparisons with other sciences. Nevertheless, if too many of its doctrines are regarded as ‘defined’ and immutable, it inevitably leads to lack of adaptation to a world where knowledge and culture are constantly developing and changing, and many areas of knowledge are intertwined. This is not to say that the basic principles of our faith should be open to constant re-examination just to put it on a par with other sciences. But is not possible for theology to live in an ivory tower, insulated from every other field of knowledge.

It must instead recognize its dependence on a vast range of other disciplines which are not only in a constant state of development and flux, such as linguistics and philology, history, philosophy, and the natural sciences, but are also subject to human error. The natural sciences have held many erroneous doctrines over the centuries. The theory of classic elements (air, earth, fire and water) composing all matter was not finally refuted until 1789 by Lavoisier, who also disposed of the ‘phlogiston’ theory of combustion. Newtonian physics survived unquestioned for over two centuries until Einstein exposed its limitations. But since



12th century representation of theology as regina scientiarum

the Enlightenment the natural sciences have adapted relatively quickly to new discoveries. They are now biased towards change and development, whereas, in some respects, Catholic teaching seems biased against it. Only recently Cardinal Rainer Woelki of Cologne insisted that women's ordination was not up for discussion: "We have Pope St. John Paul's clear and final 'no' to women's ordination, which Pope Francis has just once again confirmed. We are not free to say we will fundamentally review and reassess women's ordination and then vote on it". (The Tablet, 22 February 2020).

The trouble is that, inevitably, the Church, over the ages, has had, to change tack on many major teachings. Not all, and perhaps none, of these teachings were necessarily declared 'infallibly', but many were delivered with considerable solemnity, with no suggestion that they were revocable.

The following are some examples of such errors, and their later retractions:

- In 1616 the Inquisition declared heliocentrism (the theory that the earth moves around the sun) to be formally heretical. In 1633 the Inquisition tried Galileo, one of the main advocates of the theory, and found him "vehemently suspect of heresy" sentencing him to indefinite imprisonment. The general prohibition by the Church of books advocating heliocentrism was not dropped until 1758.
- In 1909 the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued a decree ratified by Pope Pius X that stated that the literal historical meaning of the first chapters of Genesis could not be doubted in regard to "the creation of all things by God at the beginning of time; the special creation of man; and the formation of the first woman from the first man". This position was not reversed until 1950, by Pope Pius XII in *Humani Generis*.
- The Second Council of the Lateran (1139 A.D.) prescribed that persons who take interest on a loan "be not admitted to the sacraments" and that if they do not retract their error, they should be refused a church burial. The Magisterium revoked this only in 1830.
- As late as 1866 the Congregation for Doctrine in Rome reiterated its traditional view that "slavery itself, considered as such in its essential nature, is not at all contrary to the natural law or God's law". This position was not finally retracted until 1888.
- The Council of Florence declared in 1442, under Pope Eugene IV: "The Holy Roman Church... firmly believes, professes and preaches that or no-one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but that they will go to the

‘the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels’... This doctrine was not clearly revoked until 1964 during Vatican II.

In contrast to the vitality of the natural sciences, a kind of sclerosis has overtaken many areas of Catholic theology, particularly since the declaration of the infallibility of the pope in 1870. Catholic theology has by no means stood still, with great advances in biblical exegesis, and in the understanding of the nature of the Church and the sacraments, in transcendental method, and in God’s self-revelation. Nevertheless a distinct nervousness has set in, in the area of development of doctrine. While many, perhaps most, contemporary theologians do not accept that recent statements by popes on such areas as family planning or the ordination of women are infallible, many are slow to challenge or discuss them, partly out of respect for the pope, and partly for fear of being disciplined – this fear was very real during the papacies of John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

This nervousness is particularly so in relation to moral teaching, but occurs in other areas too, where science appears to come into conflict with traditional articles of faith. The Magisterium has become nervous of encouraging, or even allowing, discussion of various ‘neuralgic’ topics by theologians. Ironically, the declaration of 1870 seems to have made the Church fearful of delivering new dogmas; the dogma of the Assumption is the only one promulgated since then, when the reverse might have been expected. Pope John XXIII once remarked: “I am only infallible if I speak infallibly but I shall never do that, so I am not infallible”.

However, it is probably correct to say, as Jeffrey von Arx, S.J. suggests, that the biggest impact of Vatican I was not so much the declaration of infallibility as the establishment of the juridical position of the Pope as “ordinary and immediate” pastor of the universal church.¹ This, claims Arx, worked a revolution in the governance and structure of the church and represented a significant departure from earlier practice. In particular, it centralized authority in the Church

For instance, previously the pope had needed to work with local churches and rulers in the appointment of bishops, increasingly he would now appoint them directly. The veneration of the Pope grew up around Pius IX, ‘the prisoner of the Vatican’, but was transmitted to every pope subsequently until, in Arx’s words, it reached its apotheosis in the rock star status of St. John Paul II. This ‘exaltation’ gave individual popes a moral and spiritual authority unlike anything that had been seen before. The papacy became the initiator and definer of orthodox teaching, which it then imposed from above, and frequently. Discipline in the church was extended over national churches, religious orders, intellectual life and seminary training. Arx adds that Church leaders managed to convince others, and even themselves, that the

¹ In ‘How did Vatican I change the Church’, *America* magazine, 10 June 2015.

institution they had created was the church as it had always been from time immemorial.

In general, the doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope, taken in conjunction with this new understanding of his juridical position as “ordinary and immediate” pastor of the universal church, cannot be said to have given us a healthier, more vibrant Church, one in which the ordinary faithful would have a living experience of their “glorious freedom of the children of God” described in Romans 8:21.

If this is true it raises a couple of questions:

- Is the notion of infallibility, particularly papal infallibility, in regard to certain Church teachings, as well grounded as claimed?
- If not, could it be replaced by a less absolutist and more flexible model of teaching and authority?

How well grounded is the church teaching on infallibility?

The actual definition of *papal* infallibility reads as follows:

The Roman pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when exercising the office of pastor and teacher of all Christians, he defines with his supreme apostolic authority a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by all the universal Church, through the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining faith and morals: and therefore such definitions of the Roman pontiff are irreformable of themselves (and not from the consent of the Church) (DS 3074).

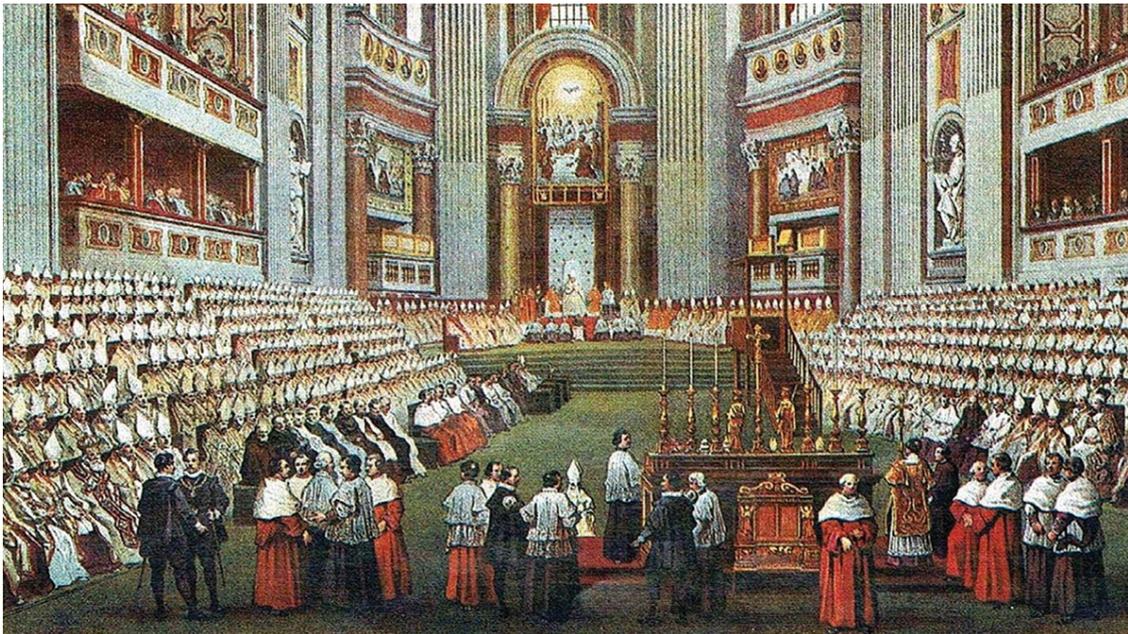
The defining of the teaching authority of the Pope in Vatican I cannot be regarded as a new doctrine, but rather a formal defining or clarification of the situation that already existed. *Pastor Aeternus* itself states that “any doctrine defined must be “conformable with Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Traditions”.

Thus no ‘new’ infallibility was created by *Pastor Aeternus*. Nor was the teaching authority of the Pope or Councils any greater after Vatican I than it was before it. This would imply that the Church was “pulling itself up by its own bootstraps”. If, as suggested above, the Church in its teaching before 1870 had been subject to many errors, involving, on different occasions, popes, councils, bishops and laity, then the 1870 declaration could go no further than reiterate the authoritative power of this teaching, “warts and all”. If the Council was attempting to *create* an infallibility greater than existed before, it must be considered to have been in error. It cannot be maintained that the formula of infallibility it was declaring could be applied

(retrospectively, as it were) to itself, unless such infallibility already existed. Johannes Bosseder comments:

Different from (this) tradition, the doctrine of the *infallibilitas papae* was defined in a way that extended the traditional understanding and added new sentences to the traditional belief. Karl Rahner ... speaks about the logical peculiarities of the dogma: “It is a proposition which... renders the *other* dogmatic propositions infallibly sure... The only proposition to which this does not apply is that concerning the infallibility of the doctrinal authority itself”. The infallibility of the pope cannot be based upon the infallibility of the pope... The dogma of the First Vatican Council is characterised by a strange logic: the non-infallible dogma of infallibility is guaranteeing new dogmatic propositions as infallibly true.²

Unfortunately, this does not seem to have been the understanding of the definition taken up by the Church, apart from the breakaway group now known as the Old Catholics and a few other bishops. The definition of Vatican I was seen not as just a routine reiteration of traditional doctrine, but a powerful riposte to the tide of anti-Catholicism that had swept across Europe in the wake of the French Revolution, and a challenge to the movements such as Gallicanism and Febronianism that were attempting to declare the Church subservient to the state. The definition of Vatican I was received, at least initially, with great enthusiasm by most catholic bishops, priests and laity.



The First Vatican Council

² In *How can the Petrine Ministry be a service to the unity of the Universal Church*, ed. Puglisi p.192

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there was some disquiet about the definition among the Council fathers. The official *relatio* or report on the first draft was given by Bishop Vincent Gasser on 11th July 1870. On the 13th July, this was voted on. The voting was 451 in favour; 88 against; and 62 seeking some amendment; Total 601. The final draft was voted on on 18th July, after the final phrase “*and not from the consent of the Church (non autem ex consensu ecclesiae)*” had been inserted at the last moment. The final vote was 433 in favour; 2 against; Total 435. Sixty of the fathers had left before the final vote, not wishing to be associated with the definition, particularly the added final phrase. The reason for the absence of others is not clear.

Even Bishop Gasser, in his *relatio* before the vote, seemed uneasy about possible misinterpretations of the proposed declaration. He stated, “...papal infallibility is in no sense absolute, because absolute infallibility belongs to God alone, the first and essential truth”. With regard to the ‘consent of the church’ (and Gasser wrote this before the final phrase was inserted) “we do not thereby separate the Pope from his ordained conjunction with the Church. For he is infallible only when as leader of all Christians, that is, as representing the universal Church, he judges and defines what is to be believed or rejected by all”.

Infallibility in the Tradition

It was noted above that *Pastor Aeternus* states that “any doctrine defined must be “conformable with Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Traditions”. The origins of the concept of ‘infallibility’ in Church teaching is uncertain, but there is no clear record of the expression being used in apostolic times.³ There was certainly a shared Christian belief in the ‘indefectibility’ of the Church. ‘Indefectibility’ meant that the Church would remain the institution of salvation, founded by Christ, until the end of the world. For many Christians this is a matter of faith, being based on many scripture passages, but particularly on the last words of St. Matthew’s Gospel: “I am with you always, to the close of the age”. However, indefectibly does not mean perfectly. Vatican II speaks of the ‘imperfect holiness’ of the Church.

It is generally agreed that Christian ‘revelation’ was complete at the end of the apostolic period, though that is not to say that the New Testament could exhaust the richness of the apostolic tradition. It is also accepted that what the apostles handed on could not be reduced to a series of propositions. What they witnessed to was their experience of the Word of God made flesh. Whatever the faithful can be called upon to believe as Word of God must be really contained (although not necessarily in explicit terms) in what the apostolic Church received and handed on.

³ I am indebted to Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* for much of this section.

By the end of the second century the magisterial role of bishops was generally recognized. For Greek bishop Irenaeus, writing about 185, the criterion of orthodox faith was agreement with the tradition handed down in the churches that had been founded by the apostles. Irenaeus saw the church of Rome as the pre-eminent witness to genuine apostolic tradition, because it was the one which had preserved the teaching of the greatest of the apostles, Peter and Paul. Irenaeus drew the conclusion that every church that claimed to follow the genuine apostolic tradition would have to be in agreement with the tradition handed down in Rome.

The understanding of the historical development of the concept of 'inerrancy' in the Church is rather confused by the fact that almost from the beginning there was an 'Eastern Church' and a 'Western Church', in full communion with one another until the Great Schism in 1054. Practically all the major doctrinal disputes in the first millennium were carried out in the East, and the 'ecumenical' councils by which they were all settled were also held in the East (e.g. Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon). The Greek word for 'ecumenical' meant 'universal' or 'the whole world'. Although few Western bishops actually attended most of these councils, the eastern bishops accepted that the agreement of Rome, and thus of the whole western church, was required.

In the case of three of the Councils (Ephesus in 431; Chalcedon in 451; and Constantinople III in 680) three common factors emerged. Sullivan explains:

The papal legates came to the council with instructions to insist on the council's acceptance of the papal decision, and in each case made strong statements of the papal authority to decide questions of faith for the whole Church.

The eastern bishops listened politely to the papal legates, but insisted on a full conciliar discussion of the issue, on the grounds that only the council could give the ultimate decision that represented the mind of the universal Church.

In each case the councils did decide in agreement with the papal teaching...

So, Sullivan concludes, there was a basic difference between Rome and the east on the question *why* the council should accept the papal teaching. The Roman view was that it should accept it because the pope, as successor to Peter, had received from Christ the authority to decide questions of faith for the universal Church. The eastern bishops were ready to accept the papal teaching when they were satisfied that it was consonant with Scripture and tradition.

In the case of the Second Council of Constantinople, in 553, the council, under the domination of the emperor Justinian, actually excommunicated Pope Vigilius for defying the council. Eventually the emperor, concerned about the unity of the Empire, persuaded the pope to come round to the council's view, which many in the

western church considered a betrayal. Sullivan comments: “The council could hardly have more strongly expressed its rejection of the papal claim to definitive teaching authority.” (op. cit., p. 69).

In the light of the conduct of these councils, it is certainly not easy to make the case that the infallibility of the pope, in the modern post-Vatican I sense, was part of church tradition, if we accept the view that Christian revelation was complete at the end of the apostolic period.

St. Augustine comments:

... even the earlier plenary councils are often corrected by later ones, if as a result of practical experience something that was closed is opened, something that was hidden becomes known. (*De baptismo contra Donatistas*)

In regard to the teaching authority of the Pope, (closely linked with the concept of his infallibility) the waters were muddied around the ninth century through a proliferation of forgeries, especially the Pseudo-Isodore Decretals. These were forgeries attributed to the bishops of Rome from the first centuries. These forgeries created the impression that the Church from the earliest times had already been ruled in detail by papal decrees. Unfortunately many of these were used in good faith by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Contra Errorum Graecorum* and were very influential.

Some authors state that infallibility was first attributed to the Pope in the 13th century, in the context of an internal dispute about poverty in the Franciscan Order.



Giotto: Pope Innocent III confirms Rule of St Francis

The ‘Spiritual’ Franciscans argued that John XXII’s predecessors had declared the absolute poverty of Christ to be an article of faith and that therefore no pope could declare the contrary. Pope John denied that what the Roman pontiffs have once

defined in faith and morals stands so immutably that it is not permitted to a successor to revoke it. August Hasler wrote, “John XXII didn’t want to hear about his own infallibility”. In a papal bull in 1324, John condemned the Franciscan doctrine of papal infallibility as the work of the devil.

Nevertheless, in general, after the Great Schism of 1054, which had the effect of juridically separating most of the eastern Churches from the western Churches, one can detect in the west, a ‘creeping infallibility’, to borrow a phrase of Yves Congar from a later period,. This was almost inevitable without the moderating influence of the eastern Churches. Among those who made notable contributions advancing the belief in papal infallibility were the Carmelite bishop Guido Terreni, in 1330; Francis de Sales in 1596, and the Dominicans of the Roman College of St. Thomas in Rome. The belief became so entrenched that by 1854, Pope Pius IX felt confident enough to define the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, as a doctrine revealed by God, in accordance with the conditions of papal infallibility. However, Sullivan comments that in the five and a half centuries between 1330 and 1870 the doctrine cannot be said to have enjoyed peaceful possession of the field and one cannot talk of steady progress towards the position adopted in 1870.

Could the official church position on infallibility be reversed, and if so, should it be?

In view of the difficulties that have been pointed out in regard to the doctrine of papal infallibility, particularly the logical flaw regarding the infallibility of the Vatican I itself, there is little doubt that, if the teaching authority of the Church put its mind to it, it could find many reasons to declare that the definition of infallibility (like a number of other church teachings in the past) was a mistake.

Perhaps the main argument against the Catholic doctrine of infallibility is that it has proceeded to its current point in total disregard of the beliefs and opinions of the Orthodox Church of the east, the sister Church of the Catholic Church, from which it has been separated since 1054, through faults on both sides which are now openly acknowledged. After the failure of the final failed attempt at reconciliation in the Middle Ages, at the Council of 1274, the Catholic Church went its own way, in almost complete indifference to the Eastern Church. But a notable effort at reconciliation was made in 1998 by Pope John Paul II, who in 1998 spoke of “the full unity which our Lord demands from us... restoring our full communion so that the approaching third millennium of the Christian era may find the Church of God visibly united as she was before the great Schism”.

In relation to the task of reconciliation, Sullivan comments: “One thing seems clear: if the restoration of communion is going to depend on the explicit recognition

of the dogma of papal infallibility, the prospects of restored communion are rather remote”. Joseph Ratzinger commented in 1982, “Rome must not require more of the East than was formulated and lived during the first millennium” (quoted by Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 117).

But the teaching on infallibility is not only holding up union with the Orthodox Church. There is evidence that it is now seriously undermining the faith of ordinary Catholics, especially in the aftermath of *Humanae Vitae*. If we are to take Ratzinger’s comment above seriously, it would also not make sense, in the context of restoring unity between Churches of east and west, to impose on the west beliefs that have not been asked of orthodox Christians in the east.

Another question that has to be answered about Vatican I is the justification for including the question of the infallibility of the Pope in the Council. Traditionally the role of Church Councils was to settle a dispute. Early Councils confirmed such matters as the divinity of Christ, and the existence of two natures in Christ, in the face of ‘dissident’ theologians such as Arius and Nestorius. Dogmatic statements, intended to be binding on the faithful, were the outcome of these Councils.

Vatican I was convoked to deal with the contemporary problems of the rising influence of rationalism, liberalism, and materialism. Its purpose was, besides this, to define the Catholic doctrine concerning the Church of Christ. The original schema of the Council had not included a statement of papal infallibility. The inclusion of it during the Council was greatly championed by Pope Pius IX himself and his close associates, with the aim of bolstering the status of the pope. However there had been a strong campaign in favour of papal infallibility conducted by Catholic lay intellectuals, especially since 1819, with the publication of Joseph de Maistre’s *Du pape*. De Maistre “dismayed at what the Revolution had wrought, argued that an infallible papacy was the God-given institution that alone could stabilise society”⁴. The Pope himself saw this as opportune in the face of the ongoing military attacks on the Papal States which were part of the campaign to unify Italy. He was also concerned about the growing anticlerical criticism of the papacy. In fact Vatican I was brought to an abrupt end by the impending invasion of the army of the Kingdom of Italy. According to Richard McBrien, the majority of the bishops were not as much interested in a formal definition of papal infallibility as they were in strengthening papal authority and, because of this, were willing to accept the agenda of the ‘infallibilists’. Sullivan comments: “There is no denying the fact that non-theological factors played an important part in the development that led to the definition of papal infallibility in 1870”.

⁴ John W. O’Malley *When Bishops Meet*, p.137.

Thus, there is an argument that the definition of the dogma of 1870 fails the first test of any dogma, that is, its necessity. The theology of infallibility was not the subject of any notable ongoing dispute within the Church seeking resolution. As it turned out, about 20 per cent of the bishops opposed the proposed definition because, in their opinion, it departed from the ecclesiastical structure of the early Christian Church. However, this difference of opinion arose only when the declaration of papal infallibility was proposed.

From a study of the seven councils of the ancient Church recognized as ecumenical it can be observed that the purpose of each was to correct doctrinal errors or clarify disputed time when the basic Creeds of the Church were still taking shape. They were not convened to impose additional articles of belief on the faithful, or to make political statements.

Another problem with the 1870 dogma of infallibility is the weakness of the arguments presented for it. *Pastor Aeternus* itself had stated that any doctrine defined must be “conformable with Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Traditions”. As Kung points out, “It is immediately striking that in the whole chapter on infallibility, apart from an indirect quotation of Mt. 16:18⁵, Scripture is quoted only once: “I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered you in turn must strengthen your brothers” (Luke 2, 22). Sullivan comments, “To speak of a biblical basis for papal authority does not mean claiming that the New Testament texts usually cited in favour of papal primacy should convince any unprejudiced exegete of the truth of the Catholic position (op. cit., p. 75)... The texts are convincing, it would seem, only to those who are disposed to accept the doctrine (83)”.

In fact, on one occasion Pius IX seems to have regarded Scripture as almost irrelevant in the defining of doctrines, when he declared that the most noble task of theology was to show that the doctrines defined by the Church were contained in the sources of revelation. This was severely criticised by Joseph Ratzinger, before he became Pope. He stated that “the point of view which sees only Scripture as what is unclear, but the teaching office as what is clear, is a very limited one... (this) is to threaten the primacy of the sources...” (in his commentary on *Dei Verbum*, quoted by Sullivan, op. cit., p. 183).

With regard to the Apostolic Traditions, Sullivan comments:

It is sobering to recall the following facts: that explicit belief in the infallibility of ecumenical councils does not appear in Christian literature until the ninth century; that the infallibility of the pope has never been a matter of faith for the Christians of the Eastern Orthodox tradition; that explicit belief in the

⁵ “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it”.

infallibility of the pope appears in western Christianity only in the last quarter of the thirteenth century; and that the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope was much contested in the West from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century, and became universally accepted in the Roman Catholic Church only when it had been defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870. (op. cit., p. 82).

Another major difficulty, already alluded to, with the declaration of infallibility, is that infallibility has to do with competence as well as content. The difficulties raised in this connection by Rahner and Brosseder have been alluded to above. The problem here is what is called in mathematics a self-reference paradox. In Vatican I the Pope (as part of the Council) defined that the Pope is infallible when speaking *ex cathedra* on a matter of faith. But this definition could not logically include any prior infallibility of the Pope, which he would have required for the ‘infallible’ definition of his own infallibility. In fact, the degree of ‘inerrancy’ operative in the teaching of Vatican I cannot have been any greater than that which existed before it.

Another major problem with the claim of papal infallibility is that it has overflowed even beyond the boundaries delineated by Vatican I, not to speak of the centuries before that. In recent times many bishops and theologians of a conservative bent have argued in favour of infallibility of various utterances and statements of the pope, declaring such statements as being “no longer open for discussion” and therefore, by implication, infallible. This has been particularly true in relation to the encyclical *Humane Vitae* of Pope Paul VI. Infallibility has also, through much uniformed teaching of certain clergy, assumed an importance in the way many Catholics think and feel about their membership the Church. Sullivan sounds a note of caution:



Pope St Paul VI

The Second Vatican Council has urged Catholic theologians to ‘remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order of ‘hierarchy of truths...’. It is important... to note that the place of a doctrine in this ‘hierarchy of truths’ is not determined by whether it has been dogmatically defined or not... It would be gross misunderstanding to think that the certitude of our Catholic faith somehow depends on the infallibility of the pope. It would be an even grosser mistake to think that we put our hope of salvation in holding correct doctrine,

and that our assurance that we hold correct doctrine depends on papal infallibility. If this were the case, there would be some justice in the charge that we Catholics put our hope for salvation in the infallibility of the pope, rather than in the mercy of God. Actually, our belief in the infallibility of the pope is a fairly remote consequence of our foundational belief that Jesus is the Lord (op. cit., pp 117-8).

Sullivan also argues in favour of what he calls ‘the more common opinion’ of Catholic moralists, that “particular norms of natural law are not the object of papal infallibility”. He quotes Daniel Maguire’s statement that it is not the function of the moral magisterium to apply the moral vision of the Gospel to complex natural law questions, which, according to Sullivan, we arrive at through shared reflection, not metaphysical certitude. Moreover Sullivan maintains that it is the more common opinion of Catholic moralists today that the concrete norms of the natural law do not admit of irreversible determination. (op. cit., pp 137-150 *passim*). Sullivan also quotes Bishop Vincent Gasser, who delivered the *relatio* in Vatican I that “principles of morals can be other merely philosophical principles of natural morality, which do not in every respect pertain to the deposit of faith” (op. cit. 140).

One issue with the doctrine of papal infallibility (possibly the one that affected me most strongly during my youth) is that to most people of the present day, whether Catholic or not, it is, to modern observers, a most unattractive doctrine, and one that stretches credulity even among believers. A charitable interpretation is that the Pope is guided by the Holy Spirit when he makes declarations regarding the faith, under certain defined conditions. But given the fact that some popes were not exactly saints, it can also open up a vision of the pope as some kind of magician who could manipulate God into making true whatever the pope wanted to make true. Kung speaks of “the Roman craving for dogmatic definitions” (op. cit., p. 150). Did Bishop Gasser have this in mind when he stated in the *relatio* in Vatican I, “...papal infallibility is in no sense absolute, because absolute infallibility belongs to God alone, the first and essential truth”. The trouble is that many Catholics, including even a number of bishops, seem to have been led to believe that papal infallibility is absolute, following the old mantra of the western Church: “Rome has spoken; the matter is finished”.

The other unattractive aspect of the doctrine is that it seems to aspire to close down part of our minds, so that we can no longer think about certain possibilities, with matters becoming “no longer open for discussion”. This seems to run contrary to human nature. The fewer things we are allowed to think about, the less human we become. This is not to say that we cannot decide freely, with the help of God’s grace, to have faith in a person, such as Jesus Christ, and in what he teaches. But as St Thomas More said, “God made us for our intelligence, that we might serve him in the tangle

of our minds”, and we must be able to leave room for that. Sullivan remarks: “interior assent to a proposition is not an act of the free will, but a judgement of mind... The mind cannot assent to a proposition unless it can accept it as true... and authority cannot *make* a proposition to be true”. (op. cit., p. 165).

Finally it has been observed that the doctrine of papal infallibility can create a mindset whereby the Church is caught in a dilemma of either arriving at a doctrinal decision which is ultimately binding or being simply silent. Sullivan discusses the argument of two influential contemporary theologians, John C. Ford and Germain Grisez, who argued (as interpreted by Sullivan) that if the magisterium speaks in a definitive way about something, it must necessarily be the case that what they speak about is a proper object of infallible teaching. Sullivan comments: If their arguments were valid it would mean that the Church could not declare any mode of conduct gravely wrong unless it were prepared to make an irreversible judgement in the matter. (op. cit., pp 142-148 *passim*). This harkens back to a point made earlier that the Church has become fearful of proclaiming new dogmas, and the comments of Pope John XXIII about his own (non-) infallibility.

It would be a great step forward if the doctrine of papal infallibility as defined in Vatican I could be put behind us, and its place taken by a renewed understanding of the *indefectibility* of the Church as outlined above. Church teaching could then take on a lighter touch, and the points of difference between Catholic and Orthodox would dissolve into something more permeable. A solid body of belief, as existed in the Creeds and which continued to be clarified up to the Second Council of Nicea in 787, would become the bedrock of all Christians. Other more local beliefs and practices which do not threaten the basic teaching of salvation in Christ could well be accommodated, without alteration. The *filioque*⁶ doctrine is often seen as an intractable difference. However, although it was a source of great controversy between east and west for several hundred years, it was not a source of existential disunity in the Church and was not a contributing cause to the Schism of 1054.

In the other direction, the eastern Church would presumably be willing to recognize the special position of the pope, as it did right up to the time of the Schism. Other matters could also be a matter of personal belief, or local practice.

A Church united in this spirit would be different Church, but perhaps a gentler one, with a hierarchy more interested in leadership than in authority.

⁶ The controversy as to whether, within the Trinity, the procession of the Holy Spirit is from the Father alone, or also from the Son (filioque=and the son).