

SOME NOTES ON INDEFECTIBILITY AND INFALLIBILITY

ARCIC's question to English ARC:

"Has the Anglican Church any doctrine of the indefectibility of the Church Militant?" (Lord Fisher) : "Some Anglicans want to question all claims to infallible authority, in Pope, or Bible, or Church " (English ARC members). What bearing has this on our discussions ?

After discussion, English ARC asked the Bishop of Barking and Fr R Stewart to prepare an answer to the two questions submitted by ARCIC. It is the answer to these two questions which we now submit on behalf of English ARC.

A. HAS THE ANGLICAN CHURCH ANY DOCTRINE OF THE INDEFECTIBILITY OF THE CHURCH MILITANT?

1. A difficulty arises in answering the question because the terms in which it is couched are foreign to Anglican thought. So far as Anglican/RC dialogue is concerned the issue is complicated by the different approaches to dogma which characterize our Churches. Anglicans would feel that the authority of a doctrine is not so much guaranteed by God a priori as rather recognized by the Church a posteriori, in retrospect. Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike believe in the perpetual guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that He will not suffer the Church to go astray.

Anglicans would say He would not suffer the Church to go astray without revealing the truth to faithful servants of God within the Church, through whom it can be set upon its proper course; the more truly 'catholic' the Church becomes, the better-proportioned will be her hold on truth at any given time. The notion of the development of doctrine which prevails in the Roman Catholic Church seems to require the assumption that this development has been infallibly guided.

Vatican II says: "This tradition which comes down from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in understanding in the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and the study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts, through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth" (Dei Verbum, 8). Thus the Roman Catholic would see development as, like any aspect of the Church's life, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; but he would speak of infallibility only when it came to a definitive intervention of the Magisterium discerning whether or not a particular development is authentic. (In the formation of such a judgement, the general sensus ecclesiae would play its part - cf B, sections 6-7 below. But although this general sensus and the work of 'faithful servants of God' play a part, this is "sub ductu sacri Magisterii" (cf Lumen Gentium 12)).

2. In relating the sufficiency of Scripture to "that end whereto it tendeth", Hooker applies a general principle, accepted in both Churches. All understanding of the Church and of qualities or gifts predicated of the Church or any of its members must be governed by "that end whereto it tendeth". Nothing can be claimed as any form of 'absolute' or 'independent' privilege. It is essential to remember this in any discussion of the authority of the Church, its fidelity to its origins, its perseverance in truth. All has to be seen in its ordering to the attainment of salvation, of which the visible Church is the 'sacrament' (Vatican II exemplifies this point in Lumen Gentium 18, Dei Verbum 10 etc).

3. Turning more precisely to the issue of Indefectibility, we would note that the Anglican Church only has doctrine 'of its own' in a very limited sense. What it does believe will be found in certain classical texts, viz., Scripture, the Ordinal, the Articles, the Prayer Book, the first (4 or 6) General Councils,

the Homilies and Canons of 1604, and the classical theologians, especially Hooker. Two further points need stressing: (a) A distinction has to be drawn between the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. (b) The word 'indefectible' itself only entered the language after the source-documents were written. In Roman Catholic usage too the actual term 'indefectible' is a tool of theologians and of text-books; the word does not occur in formal documents of the Magisterium (apart from the passing use of the adverb 'indefectibiliter' in Lumen Gentium 12 and 39). (1)

4. Classical Anglicanism would interpret indefectibility in the sense that "the Church of Christ which was from the beginning, is and continueth unto the end" (Hooker, Ec.Pol.III, 1.10). Likewise the Roman Catholic Church teaches that "by the power of the Holy Spirit the Church... has never ceased to be the sign of salvation on earth" (Gaudium et Spes 43) and that the People of God is a "lasting and sure sign of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race... an instrument for the redemption of all" (Lumen Gentium 9). This last text goes on to state that "the Church is strengthened by the power of God's grace promised to her by her Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not waver from perfect fidelity."

Anglican doctrine does not contend that any particular Church will always remain true and perfect in its witness to the Gospel. In particular Churches (including Rome) the evil is ever mingled with the good (Articles XIX, XXI, XXVI: Homily 28, part 2 etc). Nevertheless particular Churches truly represent the Mystical Body of Christ in a particular place in spite of their corruption and unworthiness.

Roman Catholic doctrine too asserts the indefectibility of the universal Church and makes no claims for any 'particular' Church. But it must be remembered that, in this context, our two Churches can use 'particular' in differing senses - not least because of their different understandings of where the unique Church of Christ 'subsists'.

5. Thus the Anglican doctrine appears to be that God's grace and His promises in Jesus Christ are indefectible and that there will always be a true Church. But no particular or visible Church should fancy itself perfect and in no need of reform. "We hope therefore that to reform ourselves if at any time we have done amiss, is not to sever ourselves from the Church we were of before. In the Church we were and are still" (Hooker). To make the visible Church indefectible is to make the error of those who thought Israel's temple inviolable. Institutions rise and fall, but the true Church goes on. The term 'indefectible' seems to impart something akin to logical certainty into the empirical realm and the English have ever thought that a logical error fraught with moral dangers.

Roman Catholic doctrine too would stress that the assertion of the Church's indefectibility is above all an assertion of God's fidelity: the "efficax Dei assistentia" will never be lacking to His Church. Roman Catholics would not understand the assertion of indefectibility as an assertion of the total perfection of the Church: for instance, Vatican II calls frequently for reform, and Gaudium et Spes (43) says bluntly: "... it does not escape the Church how great a distance lies between the message she offers and the human failings of those to whom the Gospel is entrusted." To assert the indefectibility of the Church

(1) The First Vatican Council prepared, but was never able to vote on, a canon on indefectibility: "Si quis dixerit Ecclesiam... depravari posse ita ut aliquando esse desinat, vel certe a prima sua constitutione degeneret, anathema sit" (Schema Refrmatum de Ecclesia, can.14, Mansi 53: 317).

is not to deny the 'semper reformanda'. But this is not to make the visible Church wholly relative. Here too we return to our respective understandings of how the one Church 'subsists in' a visible body. For the Roman Catholic it is not enough to assert the indefectibility simply of an 'invisible' Church.

By adapting Gaudium et Spes 43 we can summarise Roman Catholic doctrine on indefectibility: "By the power of the Holy Spirit the visible Church can never cease to be the sign of salvation on earth, despite the human failings of those to whom the Gospel is entrusted."

B. SOME ANGLICANS WANT TO QUESTION ALL CLAIMS TO INFALLIBLE AUTHORITY, IN POPE OR BIBLE OR CHURCH. WHAT BEARING HAS THIS ON OUR DISCUSSION?

1. The first question that needs answering is how far this contention is true of the total Anglican approach. If it were the opinion of an unrepresentative few, it could safely be ignored. But if it is something deep-rooted in Anglicanism, then clearly it will have a far-reaching influence on the course of our discussions. For in one Church holds a doctrine and the other simply does not, the possibilities of arriving at a joint statement expressing the positive teaching of both Churches in the matter are, to say the least, remote!
2. But the polarisation is not so complete as that. Chillingworth says: "That there shall always be a Church infallible in fundamentals; we easily grant, for it comes to no more than this, that there shall always be a Church." Here, in the opinion of English ARC, is a starting point, a first level of agreement between Anglican and Roman Catholic.
3. At the same time, the quotation is a warning against too readily assuming that in using the word 'infallible' we are necessarily talking about the same thing. The word needs careful comment and delimitation, and no small part of the value of our discussions at this point may lie in the effort to bring clarification here. It must be asked to what extent normal Anglican reactions to the term are conditioned by rejection of the 'excesses' it is thought to imply both (a) in Roman Catholic usage, especially since 1870, and (b) in claims made by some extreme fundamentalists regarding the literal infallibility of Scripture.
4. Nevertheless the general tenor of Anglican thought is hostile to the idea of infallibility. A long Anglican tradition has rejected the infallibilities of Rome and Geneva alike. English thought distinguishes the realm of logic from the realm of fact and is unhappy when terms from the former realm are transferred to the latter. In any notion of development Anglicans would want to distinguish very carefully between the organic and the logical. The organic development of an acorn into an oak is not to be confused with the logical explicitation of a dogma!

Here Roman Catholics would disagree: they do not view development of doctrine as simply "the logical explicitation of a dogma" (although, earlier this century there were theological schools that came very close to this position - cf Marin-Sola, La Evolucion Homogenea del Dogma Catolico, 1923). The Roman Catholic understanding of development is that evidenced in the quotation already made from Dei Verbum 8 (cf A, para 1 above), which approximates more to the organic model just instanced. The 'logical' process has its part when (whether before or after the Magisterium definitively discerns the genuineness of a development) the coherence of the development with the original deposit of faith is established. (2)

(2) The issue of infallibility should not be restricted solely to the field of development. In Roman Catholic teaching the scope of infallibility (itself really a particular manifestation of indefectibility) is simply and solely with regard to "traditam per Apostolos revelationem seu fidei depositum" (Vatican I, DS 3070: see also letter of German Bishops formally approved by Pius IX, 1875, DS 3116: Lumen Gentium 25: Mysterium Ecclesiae 3).

5. All that the Anglican formularies say is that we can be sure of the 'sufficiency' of Scripture to secure its end, i.e. salvation. We raise the question whether this very Anglican concept of sufficiency could not usefully be applied not only to the Bible but also to the Pope. In the case of the Bible, Hooker had related the sufficiency of Scripture to "that end whereto it tendeth", viz. the attainment of salvation. For Anglicans this need does not include the need for infallibility, whether vested in Pope, episcopate or Councils. They would see the absence of such infallibility as part of the situation of the pilgrim Church. The need for certainty can be itself misguided, and they would see a need to distinguish the false desire for objective certainty which can only be satisfied by belief in authority wrongly understood from the trusting certainty of faith, which consists of the total committal of one's own existence in an act of trust. But all this is compatible with a deep sense of the sufficiency of the divine guidance to keep the Church on course.
6. A Roman Catholic would heartily agree that a study of the positive concept of sufficiency would be of utmost value. But he would hope that such a study would not be restricted exclusively to the Papal office. For Roman Catholics do not view papal infallibility in isolation from the general infallibility of the Church, and in particular from that of the magisterium of the world-wide episcopate. The Pope enjoys that infallibility "qua Divinus Redemptor Ecclesiam suam in definienda doctrina de fide vel moribus instructam esse voluit" (Vatican I DS 3074; Vatican II, Lumen Gentium 25). For this reason they would like to see included a consideration of the infallibility in credendo of the Church as a whole. The concept of sensus fidei expressed in Lumen Gentium 12 seems to correspond closely to much that Anglicans would say regarding the testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti.
7. In Lumen Gentium's statement on the sensus fidei, this sensus is seen as linked with the Magisterium, "sub ductu sacri Magisterii", which resides in the whole episcopal college in communion with its head, the Bishop of Rome. "Although individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility", the bishops as a college "can nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly" (Lumen Gentium 25) (a) in their universal ordinary magisterium when they definitively teach matters of faith and morals, and (b) in their solemn magisterium when they gather in Council as "teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church" (l.c.; see also Vatican I DS 3011; Mysterium Ecclesiae 2-3.)
8. At first sight this concept of the infallibility of the universal episcopate may seem far removed from any expressed Anglican viewpoint, if not actually to put paid to hopes of agreement here. But we feel that progress and convergence are possible if, as well as exploring the notion of sufficiency more fully, ARCIC also draws out the implications of the idea of fidelity so strongly voiced in its Canterbury Statement on Ministry and Ordination. That Statement asserts (a) that bishops are "representatives of their Churches in fidelity to the teaching and mission of the Apostles" (para 16), and (b) that the very notion of episkope (for which the ordained man receives a God-given 'sufficiency') includes a responsibility for "fidelity to the apostolic faith, its embodiment in the life of the Church today, and its transmission to the Church of tomorrow" (para 9).
9. It is only in the light of the magisterium of the whole episcopate that the particular, and crucial, question of Papal infallibility can usefully be discussed. This paper is not the occasion to go more fully into this matter, since our aim is simply to offer reflections on the questions put by ARCIC -- and a more fundamental consideration of the Pope's headship of the episcopal college is logically prior to a precise discussion of his teaching authority. However, one or two specific comments seem called for, since they really relate to the whole issue of infallibility, in whomsoever it is vested.

10. It seems to Anglicans that it is not necessary that the Pope should enunciate eternal truth in some form henceforth incorrigible: rather he speaks for now, ad hoc et pro his temporibus. In fact the Roman Catholic Church is not so concerned with the precise propositional form of dogmatic statements as this 'objection' might suggest. Although no one can escape the difficult philosophical problems raised by the relationship between 'content' and 'form' in a statement, Roman Catholic claims to 'irreformability' refer to the truth defined rather than to the wording of a definition. Thus Mysterium Ecclesiae 5 has a good deal to say about the historical conditioning of any doctrinal expression, however solemn, and adds: "The dogmatic formulas of the Church's Magisterium were from the very beginning suitable for communicating revealed truth and as they are they remain for ever suitable for communicating this truth to those who interpret them correctly. But it does not follow that every one of these formulas has been or always will be suitable to the same extent." In this sense there can be a certain fallibilitas Ecclesiae: thus Rahner can assert that the language of a definition may be 'contaminated' by the world image of the men who pronounce it.

11. Anglicans who can see the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the 'sufficiency' of Holy Scripture may yet find in the concepts of sufficiency and fidelity a way to understand what their Roman Catholic brethren find so essential and so helpful in their assertion of Papal infallibility.

12. A word should be added about an aspect of authority that has its bearing on the issue of infallibility. It may be helpful to emphasise the link between 'authority' and 'authenticity' which is implicit in the Greek word exousia. To Anglicans the doctrine of infallibility, as they understand the RC Church to present it, appears to savour more of potestas than of auctoritas: to them there seems to be something wrong when authority acquires a 'military hue'. Real authority is 'consentient witness'. Reason and conscience cannot be treated like private soldiers. But this is not to lessen the authority of the Church. So Bishop Creighton could say: "We must not confuse the right of every individual to his own opinion with the duty of an institution to mean something." In the last resort the belief of the individual must depend on those faculties for the discovery and recognition of truth with which God has endowed him. No one can shift the personal responsibility for faith onto the shoulders of others.

Roman Catholics can grant that some of the language that is almost inevitable when one speaks of authority tends to have a martial or a juridical ring about it; but here is a problem largely of linguistic usage, not incapable of solution. After all, "it is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free" (Vatican II, Decl. on Religious Freedom 10). Thus Roman Catholics see the infallible proposal of a doctrine, when need arises, not as an assault upon faith or upon human freedom, but as an appeal to the free exercise of faith. For to define infallibly is, in effect, to say "This is the doctrine of Christ" - and to invite free assent to Him.

13. Two things have to be held together and each given its proper weight. The first is the authority of the Church as representing the widest possible truth and making its appeal by its experienced authenticity, its sufficiency, its apostolic fidelity. The other is the duty of the individual to strive for the truth with every power he possesses, including his position as member of a Church that has authority to teach. The guidance of the Holy Spirit, whether it comes through Scripture or the Church, can be assured to safeguard both these points - for both our Churches are assured that "the Spirit will lead you into all truth".

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