## Implications of Infallibility

## CAROLYN M. CRAFT \*

THE recent "Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church Against Certain Errors of the Present Day" 1 seems to require a thorough reinvestigation of the relationship between the Church, its magisterium, the Christian faith, and truth. The issue of papal infallibility is especially difficult to discuss because of the problem of definition. The three modern definitions — of Vatican I, of Vatican II, and of the "Declaration" — predicate infallibility of the Church and of its magisterium (when pronouncing solemnly and officially — ex cathedra — on matters of faith and morals), and predicate irrevocability to these solemn doctrinal and ethical decrees.<sup>2</sup> Although the concept of papal infallibility has a medieval history, it is only with the pronouncement of Vatican I that belief in this doctrine (as defined by that council and subsequently clarified by another council and a document from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) became de fide. References to "the doctrine of papal infallibility" are therefore to the composite dogma found in these three statements.

- \* Carolyn M. Craft is associate professor of English at Longwood College, Farmville. Virginia.
- <sup>1</sup> "Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church Against Certain Errors of the Present Day," ratified by Pope Paul VI and issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Rome, June 24, 1973. English translation, *National Catholic Reporter* (July 20, 1973), pp. 19-20. Hereafter cited as "Declaration" or (when the Latin original is referred to) "Declaratio." Numerical references to "Declaration" or "Declaratio" in the text are to the major sections of the text and to the page numbers found in the Latin original ("Declaratio circa Catholicam Doctrinam de Ecclesia Contra Nonnullos Errores Hodiernos Tuendam" published by Polyglot Press, a xerox of which was kindly furnished me by the National Catholic Office for Information).
- <sup>2</sup> According to Vatican I: "Romanum Pontificem, cum ex cathedra loquitur, id est, cum omnium Christianorum pastoris et doctoris munere fungens pro suprema sua Apostolica auctoritate doctrinam de fide vel moribus ab universa Ecclesia tenendam definit, per assistentiam divinam ipsi in beato Petro promissam, ea infallibilitate pollere, qua divinus Redemptor Ecclesiam suam in definienda doctrina de fide vel moribus instructam esse voluit; ideaoque eiusmodi Romani Pontificis definitiones ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae, irreformabiles esse." (Sessio IV, 18. Iul. 1870: Constitutio dogmatica I "Pastor aeternus" de Ecclesia Christi. Quoted from Henricus Denzinger et Adolfus Schönmetzer S. I., Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum, Editio XXXIV. Rome: Herder, 1967, # 3074.)

It is often difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain precisely which decrees qualify under the terms of these pronouncements. Leonard Swidler, in "The Ecumenical Problem Today: Papal Infallibility," cites several seemingly solemn and official doctrinal and moral pronouncements of popes and ecumenical councils which have been

According to Vatican II: "Haec autem infallibilitas, qua Divinus Redemptor Ecclesiam suam in definienda doctrina de fide vel moribus instructam esse voluit, tantum patet quantum divinae Revelationis patet depositum, sancte custodiendum et fideliter exponendum. Qua quidem infallibilitate Romanus Pontifex, Collegii Episcoporum Caput, vi muneris sui gaudet, quando, ut supremus omnium christifidelium pastor et doctor, qui fratres suos in fide confirmat (cf. Lc. 22, 32), doctrinam de fide vel moribus definitivo actu proclamat. Quare defintiones eius ex sese, et non ex consensu Ecclesiae, irreformabiles merito dicuntur, quippe quae sub assistentia Spiritus Sancti, ipsi in beato Petro promissa, prolatae sint, ideoque nulla indigeant aliorum approbatione, nec ullam ad aliud judicium appellationem patiantur. Tunc enim Romanus Pontifex non ut persona privata sententiam profert, sed ut universalis Ecclesiae magister supremus, in quo charisma infallibilitatis ipsius Ecclesiae singulariter inest, doctrinam fidei catholicae exponit vel tuetur. Infallibilitas Ecclesiae promissa in corpore Episcoporum quoque inest, quando supremum magisterium cum Petri Successore exercet. Istis autem definitionibus assensus Ecclesiae numquam deesse potest propter actionem eiusdem Spiritus Sancti, qua universus Christi grex in unitate fidei servatur et proficit." ("Constitutio Dogmatica de Ecclesia," Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II: Constitutiones Decreta Declarationes, I:25. 125-126. I quote from xeroxes kindly provided by the librarian of St. John Vianny Seminary, Richmond, Virginia from a two volume, leather bound copy without publication information but with an inscription saying that it is a gift to the Bishop of Richmond from Pope Paul VI. I have omitted footnote references within the text.)

According to the "Declaratio": "Iesus Christus autem Magisterium Pastorum, quibus munus commisit docendi Evangelium universo Populo suo totique familiae humanae, congruo infallibilitatis charismate circa res fidei et morum instructum esse voluit.... In munere autem suo adimplendo, Ecclesiae Pastores assistentia Spiritus Sancti gaudent, quae apicem suum attingit, quando Populum Dei tali modo erudiunt, ut, ex promissionibus Christi in Petro ceterisque Apostolis datis, doctrinam necessario immunem ab errore tradant.

"Quod quidem evenit, cum Episcopi per orbem dispersi, sed in communione cum Successore Petri docentes, in unam sententiam tamquam definitive tenendam conveniunt. Quod manifestius etiam habetur, et quando Episcopi actu collegiali — sicut in Conciliis Oecumenicis — una cum visibili eorum Capite, doctrinam tenendam definiunt, et quando Romanus Pontifex 'ex cathedra loquitur, id est, cum omnium christianorum Pastoris et Doctoris munere fungens, pro suprema sua apostolica auctoritate doctrinam de fide vel moribus ab universa Ecclesia tenendam definit.'" ("Declaratio," 3. 7-8. I have omitted footnote references within the text.)

A careful consideration of the *precise* meaning of these three statements is beyond the scope of the current paper — most, if not all, of my objections to the doctrine of infallibility will in my opinion be valid regardless of the precise interpretation. The context of these statements is important, as is the fact that Vatican II stresses the collegiality of the bishops. Karl Rahner

reversed. (Swidler cites the condemnation of "liberty, religion, conscience, and the press" by Popes Gregory XVI and Pius IX which was reserved by Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, the latter in conjunction with Vatican II; Vatican I versus the Council of Constance regarding the relative authority of pope and ecumenical council; and the well-known question of the heresy of Pope Honorius. Other examples, such as the condemnation of usury and the reversal of that condemnation, could be cited also.) 3 Hans Küng has deplored the seemingly infallible promulgation of Humanae Vitae: "The claim to infallibility in the Church is always present subliminally, even when not given formal expression." 4 In spite of the fact that Pope Paul never said the pronouncement was irrevocable, many of the magisterium attempted to require absolute religious assent to the moral judgments (condemning all artificial methods of birth control) contained therein. Karl Rahner has also deplored "the inclination in Rome tacitly but very effectively to surround propositions which are authentic teaching but not dogma with the halo of the infallible magisterium and to cover up errors made by the Roman magisterium during the last 150 years (as the statement of the German bishops' conference... honestly admits)." 5

Another similar problem with definition occurs when one asks what is meant by irrevocability: how much can a solemn teaching be modified or reinterpreted without being revoked? The answer to this question is far from clear. It often appears that modification is claimed merely to avoid recognition of fallibility. Recent discussion of infallibility has acknowledged that doctrinal definitions are historically conditioned in their language but not in their meaning. <sup>6</sup> And

maintains however that "Vatican II... did not intend to announce any new articles of faith" ("Mysterium Ecclesiae," trans. Edward Quinn, Cross Currents, 23 [Summer, 1973]: 184—a translation of Rahner's famous Stimmen der Zeit article. All subsequent references are to this translation.). It seems to me therefore possible to discuss the doctrine as a composite taken from all of these statements with emphasis upon the most recent because it ought to be presenting the unchanging doctrine within the framework of contemporary thought.

- <sup>3</sup> Leonard Swidler, "The Ecumenical Problem Today: Papal Infallibility," Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 8 (Fall, 1971): 755-759.
- <sup>4</sup> Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, trans. Edward Quinn (German ed. 1970; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company; Image Books, 1972), p. 26.
- <sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, "Mysterium Ecclesiae," trans. Edward Quinn, Cross Currents, 23 (Summer, 1973): 191. This article is a translation of Rahner's famous Stimmen der Zeit article. Subsequent references are to the translation.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, "Declaratio" states: "Ipse autem sensus formularum dogmaticarum semper verus ac secum constans in Ecclesia manet, etiam cum magis dilucidatur et plenius intellegitur" (5. 11).

yet the meaning of the doctrine is often unclear or debatable: what the magisterium and the theologians thought to be the meaning of the doctrine at the time of its promulgation may turn out not to be an essential part of the meaning at all (cf. the doctrine of original sin according to the Council of Trent <sup>7</sup> and current interpretations of that doctrine without ascribing to monogenesis). Avery Dulles points out that the meaning of the term "infallibility" is difficult to ascertain. Dulles believes that Küng and perhaps Vatican I used the term to mean "not simply truth, but rather propositional truth antecedently guaranteed by virtue of the office from which it emanates." <sup>8</sup> If infallibility is predicated to reside in the person of the pope rather than merely in the doctrinal propositions themselves, this problem seems to me to be even more acute: how can an infallible person fail to know what it is that he is irrevocably proclaiming?

Karl Rahner's famous article for Stimmen der Zeit in response both to the "Declaratio" and to Hans Küng's reply raises problems with the formulations of infallibility and irrevocability. Rahner says that "we see how difficult it is to establish exactly when such an 'incomplete,' historically conditioned formula — which must count as permanently true — ceases and a real error begins." 9 Rahner continues, "It continually occurs to me that neither side has said exactly what they mean by 'error' in dogmatic propositions." 10 This same difficulty seems to pervade other considerations of the problem. For example, Leonard Swidler suggests that the doctrine be interpreted as one of "indefectibility" rather than of "infallibility." 11 It seems that he uses "error" as a relative term when proposing "indefectibility" - what was "error" in one context might be "truth" in another, and vice versa. Swidler's "solution" to the problem of infallibility is unacceptable according to the "Declaratio." 12 The "Declaratio" does however indicate that some types of "error" will be or at least may be found in irrevocable statements of dogma, but the error contained therein must not be a necessary part of the doctrine or moral

- <sup>7</sup> Denzinger-Schönmetzer, # 1510-1523.
- <sup>8</sup> Avery Dulles, "Hans Küng's Infallible? An Inquiry: A Symposium; I. The Theological Issues," America, 124 (April 24, 1971): 427.
  - <sup>9</sup> Rahner, 195-196.
  - <sup>10</sup> Rahner, 197.
  - 11 Swidler, 763-767.
- "Ex iis quae dicta sunt de extensione et condicionibus infallibilitatis Populi Dei ac Magisterii Ecclesiae, consequitur nequaquam christifidelibus fas esse agnoscere in Ecclesia fundamentalem tantum, ut quidam contendunt, in vero permanentiam, quae componi possit cum erroribus passim diffusis in sententiis, quae Ecclesiae Magisterium definitive tenendas docet, aut in Populi Dei indubitanti consensu de rebus fidei et morum" ("Declaratio," 4. 9).

teaching being proclaimed. <sup>13</sup> Karl Rahner is certainly correct in asserting that the separation of the formula from the dogma is never complete and that there is the possibility of real error. <sup>14</sup> (I will discuss this point in more detail later.)

After the problem of definition is dealt with, the concepts of infallibility and irrevocability still raise a number of questions which can be grouped around the following headings: ecumenical, philosophical, ecclesiastical, functional, ethical, and theological. This brief article cannot, of course, deal with any of these exhaustively. Some of these topics have received excellent treatment by other writers. <sup>15</sup> This article, nevertheless, will mention some of these because the entire collection of problems is more important than any smaller group of them.

The ecumenical questions are obvious and important. <sup>16</sup> While some sort of papal primacy might be palatable to non-Roman churches seeking union, it is almost certain that papal infallibility would not be. The concept of papal infallibility contained in the three modern definitions cited above is in itself rigid and does not admit of modifications, other than those of the circumstances or

- "Denique, etsi veritates, quas Ecclesia suis formulis dogmaticis reapse docere intendit, a mutabilibus alicuius temporis cogitationibus distinguuntur et sine iis exprimi possunt, nihilominus interdum fiere potest, ut illae veritates etiam a Sacro Magisterio proferantur verbis, quae huiusmodi cogitationum vestigia secumferant" ("Declaratio," 5. 10).
  - 14 Rahner, 195-196.
- <sup>15</sup> I am especially impressed by, and have cited in this essay, Küng (Infallible? An Inquiry; Structures of the Church), Dulles (The Survival of Dogma), Swidler ("The Ecumenical Problem Today: Papal Infallibility"), Rahner ("Mysterium Ecclesiae"), and Hughes ("Infallibility in Morals"). Although not cited in the text of this article, I am also impressed by Bishop Francis Simons (Infallibility and the Evidence [Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1968]), and Leonard Swidler (Freedom in the Church, Themes for Today Series, No. 3 [Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum-Standard, 1969]).
- 16 Swidler, "The Ecumenical Problem," opens with an excellent discussion of this point. If the problem is becoming less important, it is only because recent Roman Catholic talks with other church bodies have ignored or become less insistent about the issue. I find a difficulty in understanding how merger or union could take place without a careful discussion of the issue as long as the Catholic Church maintains that it is a dogma de fide and therefore necessary to be believed. The Statement issued by the official Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States on March 4, 1974 says in the "Introduction": "In discussing the papacy as a form of Ministry within the universal church we have limited ourselves to the question of papal primacy. No attempt has been made to enter into the problem of papal infallibility. While this issue must be faced in the discussions between our churches, we believe that this limitation of scope of our present discussion is justified...." I quote from the copy of the statement published in Ecumenical Trends, 3 (April, 1974): 2. Italics mine.

instances under which it may be invoked. (The meaning of papal infallibility may, of course, be clarified, but the doctrine itself is making absolutist claims in a limited number of circumstances.) This fact separates the doctrine of papal infallibility from most other de fide doctrines. Certainly ecumenical and practical considerations cannot determine the truth of a doctrine, but they can help determine the advisability of insisting upon it as de fide. These considerations can easily be related to the biblical injunction not to give scandal to one's brother; to insist upon eating meat sacrificed to idols (cf. Romans 14:13-15) in order to assert the truth that the meat is still a product of the divine creativity is perhaps equivalent to insisting upon unessential doctrines as a necessary part of the Christian faith. The Catholic Church should be very careful not to lay upon its separated brethren burdens too heavy to bear (Matthew 23:4).

Philosophically, the concept of infallibility raises epistemological difficulties. From the time of Boethius, Christian philosophy has recognized the fact that the mind of the knower conditions the mode according to which a thing is known. Thus a finite knower can know only finitely; certainly finite knowledge is also fallible knowledge. Modern philosophy acknowledges a radical gap between concept and reality. Linguistic philosophy is revealing the limits of language and, at the same time, the dependence of man's thought upon his language. If, even under very special circumstance, the pope or the bishops acting collegially are able to state an infallible doctrine (even though the doctrine may not be infallibly stated), how can the pope or the bishops know the doctrine to be infallible? Since they are finite knowers, how can they know the doctrine as infallible? And unless something is known as infallible (according to an infallible mode of knowing), how can it be known to be infallible or even irrevocable? Since the obvious answer to this question, according to those who believe the doctrine, will be that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church through its magisterium, the question of the mode of operation of the Holy Spirit is raised. Does the Holy Spirit operate in a manner which is not only beyond nature but also in contradiction to nature? Is grace then to be viewed as opposed to essential nature? If this opposition were true, the concepts of natural law, of original sin, of creation, and even of the Incarnation would need radical alteration. Certainly the pope possesses special graces for the guiding of the Church, but do these graces differ only in function or also in mode from those possessed by the faithful. (Certainly there are nonrational modes of knowing, but these are not modes of knowing doctrine.) 17

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> David Nicholls, "Authority and the Development of Doctrine," *Theology*, 63 (April, 1960): 136-143, discusses this epistemological problem from

Gerard J. Hughes, in a thought-provoking article entitled "Infallibility in Morals," raises another epistemological problem by stating that "whereas irreformability in dogma is the irreformability of truth, irreformability in morals can only be the irreformability proper to truth-as-far-as it goes." Hughes continues, "The thesis depends simply on the fact... that our factual knowledge at any given time is incomplete, and on the metaethical assumption that moral judgments are made in the light of factual knowledge." 18 From this consideration of the different nature of moral judgments and dogmas of faith, Hughes decides that "There is therefore less justification for using the dogma of infallibility in an authoritarian way in morals than there is in dogma." 19 Hughes' critique is excellent as far as it goes, but it seems to me that Hughes fails to consider the relative nature — because of the limitations of finite perceptions and finite language — of dogmas of faith themselves. Hughes' article is also valuable in clarifying the nature of what is infallibly taught. "Any truth whatsoever could be infallibly taught," 20 says Hughes. The fact that what is infallibly taught does not have to involve "some specially privileged kind of truth" 21 is often forgotten and brings us to the question, can any kind of truth be infallibly taught - or even infallibly held — by a human person? This question would seem to be one of epistemology rather than of doctrine, and thus the answer would be subject to the changing conceptions of the age which are not irrevocable, as the "Declaratio" has made clear. 22

These questions are made even more pressing because it is generally acknowledged that, in the words of Hans Küng, "no guidance of the Church is possible without the use of reason." If through "certain and permanent" mental illness, "the Roman pontiff *ipso facto* loses the pontifical jurisdiction," is it not possible that the Roman pontiff might also become only temporarily mentally ill and thus able to claim that he was speaking *ex cathedra* when in fact he

the point of view of Newman's theory of development of doctrine. What God reveals is not propositional truth, but himself, according to the developmentalists—a belief which leads to a sharp distinction between revelation and theological formulation (Nicholls, 136).

- <sup>18</sup> Gerard J. Hughes, "Infallibility in Morals," *Theological Studies*, 34 (September, 1973): 426.
  - 19 Hughes, 428.
  - <sup>20</sup> Hughes, 418.
  - <sup>21</sup> Hughes, 418.
  - <sup>22</sup> "Declaratio," 5. 10 quoted above in note 13.
- <sup>23</sup> Hans Küng, Structures of the Church, trans. Salvator Attansio (New York; Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964), p. 259. Hereafter cited as Structures.
- <sup>24</sup> F. X. Wernz and P. Vidal, *Ius Canonicum*, 3rd ed., P. Aguirre (Rome: 1943), II:516. Quoted from Küng, *Structures*, p. 258.

was not mentally competent to do so at that time? Being assured that the sanity of Boniface VII, Urban VI, and Paul IV has been questioned by canonists and theologians, <sup>25</sup> one might also wonder about the sanity of Pius IX during Vatican I. Would it not be possible that Pius IX was pathologically unbalanced concerning the idea of papal power, perhaps because of his own previous exile (1848) and the political situation which surrounded him during the Council itself?

The necessity of reason to guide the Church certainly implies that the Holy Spirit's action is not contrary to human nature. According to Piet Schoonenberg:

God realizes nature according to its own course and laws, but he does not intervene in it, he does not intercede, he does not take over the work of a worldly cause, he supersedes nothing, he eliminates nothing. This does not mean, however, that we must deny any new initiative on God's part.... As ruling, guiding person — but utterly transcendent and at the same time more immanent than I am in my own body — he rules and guides the "body" of the world and gives in it to each being the being and doing proper to that being as its own. God does not compete; on the contrary, everything he does he gives us to do. 26

Of miracles Schoonenberg writes, "The miracle is a special work of God, not because he eliminates earthly forces, but precisely because he enlists as many of them as possible as signs of the eternal life that he will give in the new heaven and the new earth." <sup>27</sup> The question of infallibility must be considered not in itself but in relationship to concepts of revelation, of grace, and of the function of human reason in religious knowledge.

Additional philosophical problems arise when the problem is shifted from the pope's or the ecumenical council's knowledge of an irrevocable doctrine to his communication of that knowledge. The problem of communication is important because if the pope merely knows something he is unable to communicate, it obviously cannot serve to guide the Church permanently—if for no other reason than that that pope will die. Furthermore if the doctrine of infallibility were altered or reinterpreted in such a way as to be restricted to the pope's knowledge, the alteration would certainly tend toward gnosticism. (While the definitions quoted in note two of this paper predicate infallibility of persons, it is only of persons performing

<sup>25</sup> Küng, Structures, pp. 258-259, n. 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Piet Schoonenberg, The Christ: A Study of the God-Man Relationship In the Whole of Creation and in Jesus Christ, trans. Della Couling (Dutch ed. 1969; New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), pp. 25-26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Schoonenberg, p. 25.

certain specific public acts.) The recent statement issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the "Declaratio") partially acknowledges the problem of communication when it declares that, "Finally, even though the truths which the Church intends to teach through her dogmatic formulas are distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given epoch and can be expressed without them, nevertheless it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the Sacred Magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions." 28 But if it is possible, as surely must be admitted by historical evidence, that the pope himself may be unaware of the exact dividing line between the unchangeable doctrine and "the changeable conceptions of a given epoch," would it not also be possible for the pope to think he was promulgating infallible doctrine (albeit merely in irrevocable terms) when in fact the actual content of the document was limited to "the changeable conceptions of a given epoch"? If the pope himself does not know the essential from the non-essential in the doctrine, perhaps the doctrine of infallibility merely means that all statements issued ex cathedra on matters of faith and morals have some truth in them. This statement is probably true but also meaningless. One could take a statement such as "The devil is good" and say that the statement does not assert the existence of the devil (thus it would not be "wrong" if there is no personal devil), but merely says that if he exists, he is good in some manner because existence itself is good.

If, in the words of Avery Dulles, "An antiquated world view, presupposed but not formally taught in an earlier doctrinal formulation, should not be imposed as binding doctrine," is it not also true that an antiquated view of ecclesiastical organization, based upon obsolete social conditions of absolute monarchies and general lack of education, should also not be imposed? Indeed, Dulles says, "In Holy Scripture and in authoritative doctrinal statements, one should be alert for signs of social pathology and ideology." Was the excessive Romanism, together with the attempt to silence Gallican views, at the time of Vatican I perhaps a "social pathology"? If so, how much did this pathology influence the idea of infallibility and/or its promulgation? There are a number of ways to "demythologize" the doctrine of infallibility into meaninglessness, but it would be more honest to admit error. Perhaps all the statement of infallibility means, stripped of "the changeable conceptions of a given epoch" is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> "Declaration," 5. Latin text appears in note 13 above.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company; Image Books, 1973), p. 182. Hereafter cited as *Survival*.

<sup>30</sup> Dulles, Survival, pp. 186-187.

that the highest authority in the Church is not responsible to any higher authority (except that of God himself). This statement of meaning demythologizes both the concept of "Roman pontiff" and the concept of "infallibility."

Any doctrine of infallibility which predicates infallibility in a limited number of circumstances also raises important questions about the nature of truth. The idea of infallibility under very strictly regulated circumstances sets forth a narrow conception of truth truth seems to be isolated, separate and distinct truths bearing no necessary connection to each other. This idea of truth is, of course, contradicted by the text of the recent "Declaration." It says, "According to Catholic doctrine, the infallibility of the Church's Magisterium extends not only to the deposit of faith but also to those matters without which that deposit cannot be rightly preserved and expounded." 31 Was the faith then improperly "preserved and expounded" before papal infallibility was recognized? And is it possible to proclaim infallibly (even though the proclamation itself is not infallible but merely irreformable) one truth without having an infallible knowledge of all truth (n.b. the pope must use reason to guide the Church and presumably even to make inerrant pronouncements - something which Pius XII's careful research before proclaiming the doctrine of the Assumption would seem to substantiate)? Either the meaning of one doctrine is connected with the meaning of another, or it is not. If the former, the meaning of previously proclaimed doctrines could be dependent (and thus in some sense alterable) upon the meaning of doctrines yet to be discovered (through divine revelation, of course). The doctrine of infallibility does not take serious enough account of the possible development of doctrine in the future, while using this idea (of doctrinal development) to explain the necessity of past and present statements of "new" doctrines. In other words, just as Hughes claims "that moral principles are of their very nature time-bound; for some of the morally relevant considerations which would have to be included to make the principle more adequate will have to be described in terms which become available only at a later date," 32 even so it seems to me that dogmatic statements might also be time-bound. Discovery of new applications or new contents of the doctrine would alter the doctrine itself. For example, any doctrine of the completely human nature of Christ would be substantially altered by the doctrine of his divine nature.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> "Declaration," 3. Latin text: "Secundum autem catholicam doctrinam, infallibilitas Magisterii Ecclesiae non solum ad fidei depositum se extendit, set etiam ad ea, sine quibus hoc depositum rite nequit custodiri et exponi" ("Declaratio," 3. 8).

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, 425.

Is it not possible that he could have other natures of which we are as yet unaware which would alter our perception of his humanity and divinity? (If this idea seems unusual, think of the possible revelations that encounter with extra-terrestrial sentient life might produce.)

Not only does the concept of occasional infallibility yield a very patchwork idea of truth, but also it puts too much emphasis upon overt or covert statement. Just as there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission, even so there are possible doctrinal errors of omission which the concept of occasional infallibility does not deal with at all. An acknowledgement of this principle would, of course, also raise historical considerations again. For example, the question of Honorius I previously alluded to. Was his failure to take a stand against heresy in itself a heresy? Another example of the application of this consideration would be the relationship between Pius XII and Hitler's "final solution." If it can be shown that Pius XII knew about the "final solution" and refused to take a public stand against it, even when deportation was done under his window, cannot this be a failure to lead the Church? The action involved here is not only an ethical one (which becomes a question of sin and of objective and subjective guilt — but papal infallibility does not deny the possibility of papal sin), but also a doctrinal teaching about the role of the Church in the world (to protect herself rather than to imitate the sacrifice of her Lord) and about the meaning of brotherly love (a direct contradiction of the parable of the Good Samaritan). In other words, there are papal pronouncements ex cathedra (officially and most solemnly) on matters of faith and morals which are not couched in words but rather in the lack thereof: silence is at times (not always, of course) as much a speech as any verbal pronouncement.

Christian belief and Christian faith are all too often equated with intellectual statement or intellectual assent. The doctrine of infallibility by implication helps to promulgate this fallacy. It also puts the emphasis upon intellectual conformity on certain basic issues of faith and morality in the Church—an emphasis which would, I think, be hard to justify from the New Testament. The Christian faith is primarily belief in a person, rather than belief about a person.<sup>33</sup>

Is there a higher form of truth available to the Church Militant than the truth of Scripture? Does Scripture contain the type of infallible pronouncements contained in papal ex cathedra documents? If not, why not? In dealing with Scripture, scholars are revealing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> David Nicholls' article, "Authority and the Development of Doctrine," shows how ironically this theological idea has been put to the service of infallibility.

more and more that we must be content with tentative judgments—not even the text itself is completely establishable (including some portions, such as the end of Mark's Gospel, which are very important for establishing doctrines considered essential to the Christian faith). Beyond the text, there remain problems of form criticism, of the influence of the age (e.g., how much of the biblical view about the role of women is essential, and how much is a product of the time?), of the subsequent Hellenization of the Hebraic original (e.g., how much of both cultural vehicles was deliberate divine choice and how much the mere necessity that there be some cultural vehicle?), and of doctrinal interpretation from the recorded message which is seldom stated in doctrinal terms. If Scripture itself is not infallible in any meaningful way, is it not inappropriate to expect any other Christian document to be? Gregory Baum's comparison of biblical and papal infallibility is significant:

The style of teaching adopted by the Holy See reminds one very much of the teaching of the Biblical Commission at the beginning of this century. At that time it was the inerrancy of the Scriptures that was in question.... Can the church survive without an inerrant Bible? Can people trust in the gospel and lean on God's mercy and goodness if the Bible is not a book that by special divine intervention is preserved form error? The highest magisterium at that time thought that for the sake of the Christian faith, it had to defend the inerrancy of Scripture.... The earlier history regarding the inerrancy of Scripture suggests that in the present situation the church will also come to regard her own life and history as the locus of divine truth, as the place where the authentic interpretations of the Scriptures are to be found, but not in a manner that is structurally guaranteed. 34

The question of truth also raises the problem of validity. One of the obvious problems with infallibility is that it must be self-validating if it is to be believed: it is impossible from a fallible stance to prove infallibility. If, according to Carl J. Peter, "The ultimate validation of truth-claims for Christian faith is in the future, when the substance of things hoped for in the present will be seen face to face," 35 the question of infallibility is again in an unique category. The doctrine of infallibility deals with an issue which is exclusively the concern of the Church Militant. If Christian truth-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Gregory Baum, "Defensive defense," National Catholic Reporter (August 3, 1973), p. 8. A very interesting protestant discussion of the problem of scriptural fallibility is to be found in Dewey M. Beegle, Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1973), a revision of Beegle's earlier The Inspiration of Scripture (1963). The 1973 edition is substantially enlarged and revised to be more positive in outlook.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Carl J. Peter, "Dimensions of *Jus Divinum* in Roman Catholic Theology," *Theological Studies*, 34 (1973): 246-47.

claims can only be validated in the Church Triumphant (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, in the Church Expectant), how will infallibility be validated? It seems unreasonable to me to expect the validity of truth-claims in the Church Triumphant to be a matter of reason or of propositions (the whole concept of the Beatific Vision would contradict that — and even more so when the proposition concerned something "past"), and yet the object of infallibility is the essence (not the cultural vehicle) of propositions. In other words, is there not a gap between doctrine (however well-defined) and the reality which it attempts to convey? And is not this gap sufficient to cause some fallibility in the doctrine which will be recognized in the Church Triumphant? Avery Dulles faults Leslie Dewart's stand on infallibility because, "it is essential for Christianity to insist on the reality of the events to which the creeds, confessions, and dogmas make reference." 36 But does Dulles' own position take into adequate consideration the illusory nature of human perceptions of time and of history? From an eternal viewpoint, how valid are historical statements? This remark is not at all meant to deny the truth of creeds, confessions, and dogmas, but only to state that their truth is a relative truth, relative to our finite and fallible means of attempting to conceive or explain reality.

Dulles' objections raise further questions concerning the nature of the truths of the Christian faith. Are the truths of the Christian faith capable of inerrant definition? Is Christian doctrine an absolute, or does it point beyond itself to a greater truth? It seems to me that ultimate truth is ineffable, not dogmatic or capable of infallible or irreformable definition. One of the problems with the doctrine of infallibility is that it does not point beyond itself to the hidden God, as the great doctrines of Christianity (Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption, etc.) attempt to do. Too often Christian philosophy and theology, especially in the West, have forgotten the negative way of the mystic. The way of denial is a necessary complement to the way of affirmation, because denial points out the fact that truth is always greater than the human mind can contain. The way of denial prevents the idolizing of human ideas of truth. Vladimir Lossky's discussion of Dionysius' (or Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's) theology stresses the importance of apophaticism. "Dionysius distinguishes two possible theological ways. One — that of cataphatic or positive theology - proceeds by affirmations; the other - apophatic or negative theology — by negations. The first leads us to some knowledge of God, but is an imperfect way. The perfect way, the only way which is fitting in regard to God, who is of His very nature unknowable, is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Dulles, Survival, p. 201.

the second — which leads us finally to total ignorance. All knowledge has as its object that which is. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which is. If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him. It is by unknowing (ἀγνωσία) that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge." 37 The credibility of the Christian faith and of the Church should not be located so exclusively in the rational and the dogmatic that mystery and human limitation are obscured. The belief in absolute doctrinal certainty — even if limited in scope can be a manifestation of pride, traditionally considered the chief of the seven deadly sins. In my opinion all Christian doctrine states only a relative truth: the very nebulousness of most doctrines (which leave open questions such as the meaning of the fatherhood of God the Father, or of the Body of Christ, or of hypostatic union) proclaims the imperfection of human concepts. The doctrine of infallibility is, by contrast, suspiciously explicit. 38

The problem of validation is closely associated with the concept of the Church Militant. Vatican II stressed the pilgrim character of the Church Militant. This pilgrim character is, it seems to me, closely connected to another idea, that of provisionality. In the words of Walter Kasper, "The Church lives precisely through the proclamation of its own provisionality. In the interim dogmas can be stations on the way, but they cannot be the goal." <sup>39</sup> If the role of dogma, again quoting Kasper, is "to maintain openness and to prevent heretical constriction and induration," <sup>40</sup> is that role fulfilled by concepts of infallibility? The role of dogma points to another peculiarity of recent infallible papal pronouncements: their gratuity. Unlike most earlier pronouncements of Christian doctrine, there was no necessity (in terms of a rampant heresy to be combatted) for the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, and papal infallibility. Indeed, the effect of the infallibility doctrine was not to preserve

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge, Eng.: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1957), p. 25. This book was first published as *Essai sur la Théologie Mystique de l'Église d'Orient* (Paris, 1944). The translation is "by a small group of members of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Serguis."

This paragraph has been added because Walter J. Burghardt, S. J. kindly read the manuscript and raised some objections which I have attempted to answer. I have made several other minor changes in the manuscript as a result of his suggestions, for which I am very grateful.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Walter Kasper, "Geschichtlichkeit der Dogmen?" Stimmen der Zeit, 179 (1967): 409. Quoted from Dulles, Survival, p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted from Dulles, Survival, p. 206.

the unity of the Church, but to disunify it further (by the Old Catholic schism). Brian Tierney has called attention to the medieval beginnings of the doctrine of infallibility in an attempt at limitation of papal power (so that no pope could revoke his predecessors). <sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, papal infallibility was not proclaimed a *de fide* doctrine until the nineteenth century. It is this proclamation which seems to me to be totally gratuitous.

Is there any reason for the doctrine of infallibility? In other words, what is its function and does it fulfill that function? Its function is presumably to unify the Church, to protect the Church from error, and to provide security concerning the truths of the Christian faith. <sup>42</sup> Both at the time of its *de fide* proclamation (with the Old Catholic schism) and now (with the ecumenical problems the doctrine causes), it certainly cannot be said that the doctrine is unifying the Church. (A failure to unify does not, of course, prove lack of truth, but it *does* prove lack of serving its function.) Most recently the doctrine has become a divisive force among faithful Roman Catholics themselves. The doctrine fails to protect the Church from error for a number of reasons. The doctrine issues no guarantee that all major doctrinal and moral errors will be revealed by pope or council, errors of omission are still possible. The doctrine provides no assurance that the infallible doctrines will be correctly interpreted by those

- <sup>41</sup> Brian Tierney, Origins of Papal Infallibility: 1150-1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty, and Tradition in the Middle Ages, Studies in the History of Christian Though, ed. Heiko A. Oberman, Vol. VI (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972). I am indebted to the reader provided by Anglican Theological Review for calling my attention to this fascinating book as well as to the Swidler and Nicholls articles previously cited.
- <sup>42</sup> The purpose and function of papal infallibility varies, as Brian Tierney's study (see note 41, above) indicates. The modern alleged function seems to be what I have claimed. Support for this statement is found both in numerous sermons and other "popular theology" with which I have come in contact and, more importantly, in the dogmatic statements themselves. Vatican I states, "Hoc igitur veritatis et fidei numquam deficientis charisma Petro eiusque in hac cathedra successoribus divinitus collatum est, ut excelso suo munere in omnium salutem fungerentur, ut universus Christi grex per eos ab erroris venenosa esca aversus, caelestis doctrinae pabulo nutriretur, ut, sublata schismatis occasione, Ecclesia tota una conservaretur, atque suo fundamento innixa, firma adversus inferi portas consisteret" (Denzinger-Schönmetzer, # 3071). Vatican II explicitly states that it confirms these teachings of Vatican I ("Const. Dogm. de Ecclesia," 18. 112-113). And the "Declaratio" states, "Praesens Declaratio neque spectavit neque spectare debebat, ut investigatione de fundamentis nostrae fidei comprobaret divinam Revelationem commissam esse Ecclesiae, per quam deinceps incorrupte in mundo servaretur. Sed hoc dogma, a quo fides catholica exordium sumit, in memoriam revocatum est una cum aliis veritatibus ad mysterium Ecclesiae pertinentibus, ut in hodierna mentium perturbatione clare appareat quaenam sit fides doctrinaque christifidelibus amplectenda" (p. 15).

exercising the ordinary teaching office of the Church, or even that their interpretation will actually reach the faithful with the meaning they intend. Ecclesiastical history reveals repeatedly the great discrepancy between what the Church officially teaches and what actually gets through to the majority of her faithful, even in matters closely affecting everyday life (e.g., the idea of indulgences in the Middle Ages, or even today the frequent identification of "sin" totally with crime, matters of Mass attendance, and matters of sex). A doctrine is not false because it is misunderstood — but misunderstanding leaves the Church still in error. The doctrine by implication seems to equate the highest and most official levels of the magisterium with the Church as a whole — the necessary preservation of the Church from error is fulfilled by preserving this small and select segment from error on its most official occasions. And anyone, from the pope on down, can confuse the essential doctrine with the concepts of the age through which the doctrine is expressed.

There are two additional problems with identifying infallibly taught doctrine. First there is the possibility of an heretical pope. If it be true, as F. X. Wernz and P. Vidal claim, that "By heresy notoriously and openly manifested, the Roman pontiff, if he lapses into this, is ipso facto deprived of his juridicial power and without previous condemnation of the Church," 43 is it not theoretically possible at least to have an heretical pope deprived (ipso facto) of juridicial power but, prior to "condemnation of the Church," issuing ex cathedra (without the power of doing so, even though this lack of power has not been recognized) pronouncements on matters of faith and morals? Thus the Church has no absolute guarantee that the issuer of irrevocable pronouncements is not himself out of communion with the Church in reality, though not in appearance, and thus unable to issue such pronouncements. If God has not guaranteed to his Church that the holder of papal office shall not lapse into public heresy, is it very likely that he has guaranteed the inerrancy of public ex cathedra pronouncements on matters of faith and morals? Second, there is again the problem of identifying the infallibly taught doctrine, a problem discussed earlier in this paper. Thus, far from fulfilling its function of granting security concerning the truths of the Christian faith, the doctrine does nothing of the kind; it merely places the uncertainty in many other places.

The entire seeking for security in human pronouncements may well be the setting up of security as a god, the worshipping of intellectual security at the expense of recognizing the fact that true security must be sought in God alone, not in ideas or pronounce-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Ius Canonicum, II: 517. Quoted from Küng, Structures, p. 260.

ments about him. Could not the entire idea of infallible teaching or of inerrant doctrines also be seen as a golden calf, a search for the quasi-visible and the quasi-tangible rather than for the hidden God who reveals himself through mystery? The central doctrines of the Christian faith are quite properly called "mysteries," a concept which seems to proclaim the limitedness of human understanding and love in a way diametrically opposed to concepts of even quite limited infallibility. If the doctrine of infallibility is unable to fulfill its function, and if it is in its essence opposed to other doctrines, would not the "principle of logical simplicity" dictate its omision?

The fact that infallibility is frequently and implicitly used when it should not be (e.g., early attempts at enforcing compliance with the birth control teachings of Humanae Vitae) raises ethical questions. One of the most important is the respect for the individual conscience. The Church has carefully defined the difference between formal sin and material sin and the genuine possibility of invincible ignorance, and yet the Church frequently neglects these theological teachings when it desires conformity upon some issue. The Church has also all too often preferred ignorant compliance (i.e., superstition) to intelligent disagreement. The danger of heresy has frequently been overemphasized at the expense of true maturity. Infallibility only provides another weapon to increase the fear of failure to conform. the fear of struggling with doctrinal issues for oneself, the fear of sincere questioning of doctrinal and ethical teaching. The Church investigates controversial books, but does it investigate (or in former times "Index") books which are inane repetitions of "orthodox" doctrine? This attitude seems similar to preferring to keep people in a childish state of amorality rather than educating them, because knowledge will at times lead them into genuine immorality, but also at times into genuine morality.

The relationship of the doctrine of infallibility to the doctrines of free will, of the Incarnation (why was God's supreme revelation of himself not a statement but an event, a person, an experience?), of the status of the Church Militant, of grace and of the sacrament of Holy Orders, of the relationship of the magisterium to the Church at large, of revelation, of the role of human reason in faith, and of the working of miracles needs careful consideration and investigation. The doctrine of infallibility's relationship to the heresy of gnosticism and of seeking security apart from God himself should also be honestly investigated. If the doctrine is in grave danger of misleading, it should be rejected at least as not necessarily de fide. If the doctrine is dependent upon monarchical conceptions of the Church, it ought to be rejected. If the doctrine serves no necessary function but serves negative ones (e.g., through creating ecumenical

problems), it ought to be rejected. Finally, if the doctrine hinders the development of mature, thinking, committed Christians, it ought to be rejected.

## John Dunne's Mythical Journey: A Contemporary Exodus

GARY J. BOELHOWER \*

Man, by his very nature, is a teller-of-stories. In his quest to achieve and preserve a sense of personal identity, primitive man told stories that placed his life within an ultimate context. The descendants of Abraham, as well, told the story of God's relationship with man, describing the ultimately sacred context of their human experience. Acknowledging the mystery of God's eternal reality and the revelation of himself within the dimension of man's time and history, man has often faced the serious business of telling stories. Myths and stories have always been profoundly significant to the life of faith. This is no less true in our own time, although it has been largely forgotten. John S. Dunne is the most creative and original of the new narrative theologians. He has been instrumental in rediscovering the tremendous import of myths and stories to the life of faith. His work of telling stories and interpreting myths is especially valuable in our time when theological concepts often seem abstract and unreal to many people. My intention, then, is to survey briefly the richness of insight in John Dunne's works, concentrating on an analysis of myth in The Way of All the Earth.

Modern man seeks to know how God is relevant to his search for meaning. Dunne refuses to give a facile answer; rather, he searches out the basic questions which men ask; he crawls behind the eyes of the men who ask them and travels the terrain of the times in which they lived. He is an explorer of significant lives, theologizing from a background of philosophy, history, literature and biography. This approach touches modern man where he lives, as he attempts to become what he is.

<sup>\*</sup> Gary J. Boelhower is a graduate student in the Theology Department at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.