SUB-COMMISSION ON THE CHURCH AND AUTHORITY

PAPER III

Towards a Re-examination of the Concept of Infallibility

by

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1.   The late Austin Farrer, in his contribution to the book <u>Infallibility</u>
<u>in the Church</u>, criticised the notion of infallibility on epistemological grounds:
the evidence, particularly the historical evidence, cannot be available to the
Church so as to entitle it to make infallible factual pronouncements about
revelation.   An infallible Church would be an "infallible fact-factory". He
allowed, however, a sense in which the Church is infallible: she is led gradually
by the Holy Spirit towards the truth even though she has not the power to make
particular infallible utterances.   Farrer believed that this interpretation of
infallibility was in fact now held by "enlightened Latin theologians", but he
would prefer himself to call it "indefectibility".

2.   This paper endeavours to establish a conclusion very close to Farrer's.
The argument, however, is based not on epistemological but on logical grounds.

The concept of infallibility will be approached from two angles:

3.   (A) The dogmatic formulations of the Church, whether credal, conciliar
or papal, can be divided into those which are about facts of history (such as
"crucified, dead and buried"), and those which are not (such as "sitteth at the
right hand of God, the Almighty Father", or the Christological definition of
Chalcedon).   It is with this second kind of definition that this paper is
concerned in para. 3 - 5.

All words which are significant either apply to experience or are definable
by other words which apply to experience.   They are therefore inadequate for
describing the transcendent, which is outside experience.   It does not, however,
follow that propositions about God are meaningless.   In the traditional terminology
they are analogical: they tell us something about God in his relationships
with his creation and in comparison with it, but they do not tell us what he
is like in himself.   For example, when we say that God is good we mean that his
goodness is infinite; that it is the source of our goodness; that his goodness
is not something that he can put on or off, but is part of his nature; that it
leads him to treat us in particular ways.   But we have no idea what his goodness
is like apart from his creation.

The same is true even when the form of a proposition indicates that it
is concerned immediately with God's relations with his creation and not his
transcendent properties.   Examples of such propositions are statements about
the redemption, the causality of the sacraments, the eucharistic presence of Christ,
or the condition of human beings in the next world.   In so far as these particular
aspects of the relationship between God and man involve human experiences in
this world, language can express them as it can express other experiences; but
where the relationship is considered <u>a parte</u> Dei, language can only be analogical.

It is a characteristic of most, if not all, of these analogical propositions that they can be simultaneously affirmed and denied. An orthodox meaning can readily be attached to such propositions as "the sacraments do not contain grace", "Christ was a human as well as a divine person", "Christ is not really present in the Eucharist", "the theory of transubstantiation is false". For, as has been said, the words have been learnt in connection with experience and cannot describe the transcendental; to the extent to which these propositions necessarily fail to do justice to the transcendental they may validly be denied.

The question then arises: in what sense can they be said to be infallible if contradictory propositions are also true?

4.   (B) The second approach consists in examining ways in which the infallible meaning of an infallible proposition might be determined.

(a) From the meaning of the words as they are understood today. But this would imply a fundamentalist stance, which, like all fundamentalism, is basically relativistic, as the meanings of words change. Besides, this method is philosophically unsound: the meaning of a proposition is not determined by the meaning of the individual words, but vice versa.

(b) From the meaning the words had at the time when the statement was promulgated. This method avoids the "relativist" fallacy, but is still open to the philosophical objection expressed in the last sentence of para.4(B)(a). Besides, there have been councils where the bishops understood the words in different senses (e.g. homoousios at Nicaea).

(c) Not from the meaning of words, but from the ideas which the authors of the formulas were trying to express. But here again there is the objection that at Councils it does not always happen that all the bishops mean the same thing by the formulas promulgated. Even more decisive is the objection that the ideas themselves will be in terms of currently-accepted "myths", as, for example, the bishops at Trent conceived original sin in terms of a sin inherited from one Adam.

(d) From the overt intentions of the authors of the formula. Dogmatic definitions are rarely, if ever, made for their own sake. They normally perform a function: nearly always the refutation of a heresy, sometimes perhaps the clarification of an already accepted belief, or the provision of a convenient declaration of faith for a new or a reconciled Christian. In many instances, therefore, one can determine the meaning of a formula by referring to the earlier formula that is being rejected or clarified. Thus the safest way of determining the meaning of transubstantiation in the decrees of Trent is to examine the rival theories in refutation of which the bishops were using this term. (Method (d) is in complete contradiction of the presuppositions adopted by those who would say that the reasons alleged by the promulgators for a dogma they are promulgating are not the object of belief: on the contrary, the meaning of the dogmatic formulation is determined by the reasons alleged.)

Solution (d) is the most adequate of the four so far considered, but it has its deficiencies. Is it always evident what heresy a proposition was intended to clarify, or what heresy to refute? May not dogmatic formulations,

like the scriptures, have a _sensus plenior_? If so, may not the _sensus plenior_
which the Church later reads into the definition under the guidance of the Holy
Spirit, be a part, and perhaps the most important part, of the infallible meaning
of the formula?   (Examples that can be quoted are the _homoousion_ of Nicaea,
and perhaps the recent Marian dogmas, which overtly were definitions of Mary's
privileges, but more importantly are illustrations of the efficacy of the Redemption.)

5.   Perhaps a different approach should be made to the question of the infallible
meaning of a dogmatic formula, in the light of the considerations of paras. 3 and 4.

Solution (d) sought the meaning of a formula in the other formulas it was
designed to clarify or refute.   But eventually one has to get beyond words;   even
the words of the New Testament are, though inspired, human attempts to explain the
ineffable.   Revelation is ultimately not words but the Word.   Dogmatic formulas
are attempts to put into inadequate words the practical, personal meaning of that
Word for mankind.   They are attempts to clarify, make relevant and preserve from
distortion man's personal, non-propositional relationship with this Person.   The
lex credendi at the propositional level is for the sake of the _lex orandi_ (or
rather the _lex amandi_), which is deeper than any proposition.

For example, the Church rejected the formula of the two persons in Christ
because it undermined the Christian's relationship with his Redeemer, making it
illogical for him to turn to the human Christ for his redemption.   Similarly
transubstantiation was defined at Trent, not for theoretical reasons, but because
it was thought that no other formula could safeguard the Christian's relationship
to his Lord in the Eucharist.

It follows that the correspondence theory of truth is inadequate to account
for the truth of many dogmatic formulas.   They are infallible, not in the sense
that they correspond to the facts about God (for often, as has been said, the
opposite proposition would also be true), but in the sense that they infallibly
fulfil the _practical_ purpose of protecting the Church from the errors associated
with the contrary formulas - errors which are ultimately not theoretical, but
entail aberrations in the Christian's personal relationship with Christ.   Where
no heresy is concerned the formula may fulfil the function of assuring the Church
that the personal relationship with Christ her members have been seeking is sound.
The formulas therefore are _helpful_ or _providential_ rather than factually _correct_.

If it is accepted that the infallibly true meaning of a dogmatic formulation
is the fact that it provided helpful guidance to the Church to enable her to
preserve an undistorted relationship with Christ, this meaning does not depend
upon the ideas or the overt intentions of the authors of the proposition.   The
Holy Spirit may use a dogma to guide the Church in a way which the authors had
not envisaged; and it is this quality of providing right guidance that constitutes
infallible truth.

6.   The main argument of this paper concludes at this point.   It may, however,
be well to say something about the "historical" dogmatic formulas spoken of at
the beginning of para. 3.

Perhaps not all definitions which appear to be about historical facts really are so. The function of such a definition may be, not to define an historical fact, but to clarify an aspect of the basic, non-propositional revelation in terms of a "myth". Belief in the literal truth of some historical facts is necessary for our right relationship with Christ; such facts are the Incarnation and death of Christ, and, I would add, his bodily resurrection. But unless belief in an apparently historical fact is necessary for this right relationship, it is hard to see how such a "fact" can be part of revelation or the subject of a dogmatic formulation, except as a myth used to express some ulterior truth. Possibly the dogma of the Assumption should be interpreted in this way: its infallible meaning is not historical, but lies in the guidance it gives to the Christian in forming the right relationship with Christ, perhaps in connection with the share of the Christian, and even the Christian's body, in the effects of Christ's Resurrection.