<u>The Charism of Providential Teaching</u>*

In a review last month of Hans Kung's book Infallible? I set aside what seemed to me the two most important issues for discussion in this article. They were (1) the difficulty of reconciling our present knowledge of the early Church with the claim that the Pope is infallible; (2) the philosophical problems involved in the concept of an infallible teaching authority.

1. <u>The Early Church</u>

The following points form part of the traditional Catholic doctrine on the infallibility of the pope and the college of bishops:-

(a) 'The bishops, who have been appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20.28) and are the successors of the Apostles, as true pastors tend and rule the flocks which have been entrusted to each' (Vatican I. Dz 3061);

(b) The Pope is the successor of St. Peter as Bishop of Rome and as the holder of primacy over the other bishops;

(c) The primacy and supreme teaching authority of the Pope have been recognised throughout the history of the Church (Vatican I, Dz 3056, 3065).

Now the history of the early Church casts doubt upon three points:

(a) It is a common opinion among scholars that it was relatively late in the history of the Church that the bishops were seen as successors to the Twelve. The Church elaborated the theory of the apostolic succession in order to resist the pressure of gnosticism: the true Church was recognisable, not by its secret teaching, but by its open rule of faith handed down from the apostles through an unbroken succession of bishops. But in the New Testament the Twelve seem to have a unique, eschatological position, which cannot be handed on to successors. In the words of H. von Campenhausen (1):

'The Twelve were formed in view of the coming kingdom of God, and they enter on their real duties only at the Last Day, when they are to "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel". It is in expectation of this hour, which is to exalt them to the supreme honour, that they regard it as their prime duty "not to depart from Jerusalem". They remain in the holy city of the chosen people as a sign proclaiming and representing the coming order and sovereignty of God.'

'It was, therefore, natural enough that at a later stage - and perhaps not only later - the twelve should have been regarded as already fulfilling this function of supreme judges and rulers in the primitive community itself. Their actual importance for the Church, however, was the product less of this eschatological promise than of the historical part which they had played in the story of its origins. For the Twelve were among the primary witnesses to the Resurrection of Christ.'

'Likewise, at the end of the century John the Divine sees in a vision the Twelve as the foundation-stones of the eternal city of God; the twelve gates of the city bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the foundation-stones on which they are erected are inscribed with 'the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. As witnesses to Jesus the Twelve have become the "foundation" of the Church, and this significance, which they had acquired for the very first generation of Christians, they retain to all eternity, corporately providing the solid base on which the whole structure rests.'

There is a further difficulty: it seems clear from the New Testament that at first many churches were not ruled by a bishop exerting sole rule. Philippi is ruled by 'bishops /note the plural_/ and deacons' (Phil 1.1 - or does he mean 'overseers and servants'?); Peter's Churches in Asia Minor apparently by elders (<u>presbuteroi</u>, 1 Pet 5.1). In connection with the church at Ephesus, Acts refers the words '<u>presbuteroi</u>' and '<u>episcopoi</u>' to the same persons (20.17.28). In the structure known to Clement of Rome and Hermas the rule of a church at the end of the first and the beginning of the second centuries was in the hands of 'leaders',

'bishops' or 'presbyters', and 'deacons'. However it is only in the Pastoral
Epistles (regarded by some as a second-century pastiche) and the second-century
letter of Ignatius that the three fold hierarchy of one bishop, presbyters and
deacons emerges.

(b) There are some hints that as late as the first half of the second
century there is no single ruling bishop at Rome either. Ignatius makes no
mention of the bishop when he writes to Rome, though he mentions the bishop
of each other church he writes to. Clement, as he appears in his 'First Epistle'
and Hermas (Vis ii. 4.2.), seems much more of a secretary writing on behalf of the
Church at Rome than the bishop who rules over the Roman Church and the whole
Church. It is true that succession-lists were compiled later, tracing the
succession from Peter down to the reigning Bishop of Rome, but a certain amount
of wishful thinking may have been needed to fill the gaps in them.

(c) Fathers like St. Cyprian did not hesitate to reject the teaching of the
Bishop of Rome, and to deny the papal primacy in theory and in practice.

If it is granted that these points are historically sound, they create
obvious difficulties to the doctrine of infallibility - above all to papal
infallibility, but the infallibility of the episcopal college does not escape
altogether.

Two possible solutions may be suggested. The first is that episcopacy and
papacy are necessary for the completeness of the Church, even though it was some
time before they achieved their full development. If this view is accepted, it
follows that the Church has no right to discard these offices once they have
developed.

There is, however, a more radical solution possible: that the liturgical,
pastoral and teaching powers, at present exercised by the pope and bishops, are
essential to the Church, but could in principle be exercised within a different
hierarchical structure. Edward Echlin pleads eloquently for a similar view (2):

'Clearly the papacy, as Pope Paul VI has acknowleged, is for many Christians
a stumbling block. However as theologians, both Catholic and reformed, are
recognizing that the triadic ministry developed at a very early date but is not
the only apostolic order the church has known, Catholic theologians are acknowledging
that at some future date a radical reordering of God's people could take place,
either by renewing a primitive order or by development of a wholly new order.
Would it not be possible therefore for Roman Catholics to recognize that the
continuous Petrine office itself developed at a very early date and that, while
a center of unity is necessary and that this center will be the bishop of Rome,
the continuity of the Papacy is an apostolic development, but a development none-
theless? In a concise study of the Petrine office in the New Testament Myles
Bourke argues that "... continuance of the apostolic office may indicate a contin-
uance of the office of the chief apostle. But there seems to be nothing said in
the New Testament which demands that continuance". Therefore, would it not be
possible for Catholics to profess the Roman primacy of service and love as a
historic reality which is not the only center of unity the church has known?
Would it not be possible and even necessary to profess that a monarchical model
for this office is no longer relevant in a center of unity?'

The Lutheran scholar Carl Braaten comes to a similar conclusion. He attacks
the traditional Protestant theory that the development of structures (such as the
monarchical episcopacy) was an early 'catholic' corruption of the purity of the
Gospel. On the contrary, he argues, these developments are not corruptions but
exemplify 'the amazing flexibility and versatility of the early communities to
adjust to new situations ... It is in the light of this daring freedom to create
new instrumentalities to serve her fragile unity and apostolicity that the
Protestant theologian ought to applaud the early development from the apostolic
to the postapostolic history of the church.' (3)

But, Braaten holds, Catholics also must revise their ecclesiology in the
light of early church history. They must 'acknowledge that what we have called
creative developments in second-century Christianity, what others have called

"catholicizing" or "hellenizing", were very early bolstered by historical fictions .. The need to strengthen the leadership in the church to cope with heresies and enthusiasms that broke out in the community was met by the development of the episcopal office, but the strength of this office was inflated by the historical fiction of a chain of succession that links up with Peter and the apostles.' (4) Braaten's conclusion is not that the Catholic Church should abandon those offices for which false historical origins have been invented, but that, though the offices are a legitimate development, 'all special status, every privileged position, all illusions of grandeur' should now be abandoned. (5)

An important difficulty must be faced here. Vatican I, in its canon on 'the perpetual primacy of blessed Peter in the Roman Pontiffs', taught that this papal primacy was 'instituted by Christ the Lord himself, i.e. by divine law (iure divino)' (Dz 3058). Similarly the divine institution of the episcopal office seems at first sight to be implied in the following chapter: '⟦ the bishops ⟧, who have been appointed by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 20.28) and are the successors of the Apostles' (Dz 3061). Now to say that these offices are of divine origin is to imply that they are not of human origin (iure ecclesiastico); and this in turn seems to rule out the possibility that these structures are the creation of the Church, however much in harmony with the Gospel.

This would be, however, a false interpretation of the document. As Bishop d'Avanzo, the spokesman of the Deputatio de Fide, explained when discussing proposed amendments, the intention was to define the fact that it was of divine institution that Peter should have successors in the primacy, but the decree was so worded as to leave it open whether it was of divine institution that these successors should be the Bishops of Rome. The original Canon II had been expressed in words which appeared to give an affirmative answer to the latter point, but as this was not the intention of the framers, the wording was changed. (6) D'Avanzo granted that the view that the papacy could be transferred from Rome to another see was not tenable, as it was condemned in Article 35 of the Syllabus of Errors (Dz 2935). (7) But later in his speech he points out that this view, though in itself not tenable is not in fact excluded by the wording of the decree. (8)

With regard to the bishops, the Council's intention was not to discuss whether the episcopal office was of divine institution, nor even if the bishops received jurisdiction immediately from Christ or through the pope, but rather to discuss the bishops' right to the immediate exercise of their jurisdiction, as the Relator, Bishop Zinelli, made clear. (9) In fact the words that gave rise to the particular difficulty we are discussing, the statement that the bishops, 'have been appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20.28), and are the successors of the Apostles' is an insertion which was made into the draft at the request of one of the bishops. It was taken over from the Council of Trent (Dz 1768), and was described by Zinelli as 'not absolutely necessary', 'innocuous', 'according to the wishes of many of the Fathers, and against the wishes of none'. (10) It can hardly in that case carry any dogmatic weight in the context.

The conclusion, therefore, seems justified that Vatican I does not provide compelling reasons for abandoning the thesis that, while the Petrine and apostolic ministries are essential to the Church, the location of the Petrine ministry in the person of the Bishop of Rome and the apostolic ministry in the person of the bishops is not essential. A comparison with the sacraments is illuminating. It is the Church's doctrine that the seven sacraments were instituted by Christ, but it has still been possible for the Church to make many changes in the sacramental system. For example, confirmation serves a purpose now that is very different from its purpose in the early Church. Moreover, it was not until the twelfth century that the opinion that the sacraments numbered seven emerged clearly in the Church. Indeed, some theologians now hold that although the Eucharist was explicitly founded by Christ ('Do this in memory of me'), some at least of the other sacraments may not have been. Christ explicitly founded the Church to be the fundamental sacrament, endowed her with his own body and blood in the Eucharist, and left her to work out for herself the ways in which she should exercise her ministry of grace. But the sacraments can still be said to have been implicitly founded by Christ because the Church was founded by him to continue his own work and endowed with the Spirit by him, because the use of signs of grace was part of Christ's intention, and because the Church in working

out the sacramental system was imitating Christ's own ministry.

The ecumenical possibilities of this suggestion that the Petrine powers of the Bishop of Rome and the apostolic powers of the bishops might conceivably be located elsewhere has immensely important ecumenical implications. But it must also be borne in mind that some Anglican thinkers would still welcome the papacy as a focus of unity. The working document 'The Church and Authority' produced at the Venice meeting of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission speaks in these terms; under the heading 'The Anglican View of the Koinonia and of Authority in the Church' the document says:

'Any view of the papal authority likely to commend itself to Anglicans would have to make clear that a notion of "primacy of service" was central. Precise theological definition might well for many be less fundamental. It is unlikely that many Anglicans would be content with the 1870 definition as it has been expounded up to the present time in the Roman Catholic Church.

'Anglicans believe that the commandment given to Peter is inherited in a general sense by the whole Church (to which the power to bind and loose is entrusted by the Lord in Matt.18) and in a particular sense by every bishop of the ecclesia catholica. The Petrine duty of shepherding the flock is fulfilled by every act of the teaching ministry of the Church, whether exercised by individual bishops in their own dioceses, or by bishops in Council. As a bishop of the universal Church, the bishop of Rome certainly inherits this task, though not in such an exclusive sense that he possesses it as no other bishop or council of bishops can. When he is seen to speak with the voice of the universal Church, he speaks a truly Petrine utterance. But this function does not exclusively inhere in the office of bishop of Rome as such. Anglicans attach great importance to the Lord's commission (or commissions) to St. Peter; but they can not accept either explicit or implicit assumptions that the Petrine text of Matt. 16 can be transferred to the bishops of Rome, or that 'the Petrine office' and 'the Papacy' are virtually synonymous and interchangeable terms.

'The original text of the statement on the papacy by Lambeth 1968 contained these words. "Within the whole College of Bishops and in oecumenical councils it is evident that there must be a president whose office involves a personal concern for the affairs of the whole Church. This president might most fittingly be the occupant of the historic See of Rome." The text then went on to suggest that a Papacy so understood would be regarded as "having a primacy of love, implying both honour and service, in a renewed and reunited Church." Even though these words, as they stand, were not included in the final text of the Lambeth 1968 Statement, many Anglicans would argue that they do represent something like a moderate Anglican view on the role of the Papacy in a reunited Church. ..... If there are substantial Anglican hesitations about the papacy as such, it would not be unreasonable to say that these generally have far more to do with the actual exercise of papal authority (at various periods in history) than with the papacy itself or the subtleties of definition.'

2. Philosophical difficulties

Kung argues that propositions are much too weak to carry the burden of infallibility: words cannot convey our full thought, their meaning changes, they can be used as slogans to discourage thought, and so on. I believe that this argument can be stated much more cogently than this, and shall attempt to do so.

The trouble about calling certain propositions 'infallibly true' is not that one is claiming too much for them, but that one is not claiming enough. For almost any religious proposition has an element of truth . In Karl Rahner's words:

'In the last hundred years we have reached a situation in which a new definition can no longer be false. For in a new definition the range of legitimate interpretation is so wide that there can no longer be any error involved.' (11)

It is necessary to devote some time to illuminating this startling proposition.

Language is a defective means of conveying knowledge of God. Not many years ago philosophers of language used to say that for a word to be meaningful we must be able to define it by pointing to the thing or fact it represents (by 'ostensive' definition, as it was called) or by the use of other words which are ultimately capable of ostensive definition. Since Wittgenstein and Chomsky that theory has begun to creak, but the basic principle still remains sound: we learn the meaning of words from experience, and if words are not related to experience ('cashable', as the analysts of language like to say), they are meaningless - like algebraic equations which we cannot solve for lack of sufficient data.

How then can the transcendent God be described in words? He is infinite, unchanging, necessary being, whereas our language develops from our experience of limited, changing, contingent being. Of course, when we use words which ascribe to God particular ways of treating his creatures, there is no special linguistic problem, provided the treatment concerned is open to experience. For example, when I say God is good, part of what I mean is that the particular joys and sufferings that come my way form part of the pattern of God's providence, and are for the advantage of myself and others. But we are also saying something about God's personal 'Character': that he is concerned for our good, that he loves us. Here we are reaching out beyond our experience. For though by extrapolation from our own thoughts, emotions and desires we can gain some idea of the inner experience of another human being whom we call 'good', God's inner life is beyond our conceiving. Our experiences are time-conditioned, subject to ethical norms, involve us in the need to choose between incompatible values; God is changeless, self-justifying, completely fulfilled.

The same is true when we speak of God's 'power'. We can experience the effects of God's power in the universe, but we have no idea what God's power is like as an inherent quality. We know power as the overcoming of obstacles, something that is released in particular bursts or a steady stream of energy; God's power knows no obstacles, and its output involves no change in himself.

What we do, then, when we predicate qualities of God is to ascribe to him particular effects which are in principle observable, and to apply to him the qualities which we apply to human beings (or other creatures) who produce similar effects. (Of course, to say that God 'produces', 'effects' or 'causes' something is already to extrapolate a concept derived from experience into the timeless, changeless, inconceivable state of God). A good man treats others in the same way that God treats us; therefore we call God 'good'. But what his goodness is in itself remains hidden from us.

We may also have another truth in mind when we use words to describe God: that this unimaginable quality that we attribute to God is the source of the human quality that we describe by the same name. God, and perhaps more specifically the second Person of the Trinity, can be called good or just, because our goodness and justice is a participation in his, meaning by this Platonic expression that he brings it into being as an image of himself, in whom the quality exists, in the scholastic phrase, 'in a more eminent way'. But what this quality raised to an infinite degree is like, is beyond our experience.

There has been a constant tradition in the Church, going right back to the Greek Fathers, which stresses the fact that God is unknowable. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, in the fourth century wrote:

'it is impossible to present accurately the God that is above understanding; even though one were a Paul, who was initiated in ineffable things in paradise, even though he heard unspeakable words, the ideas about God remain ineffable . . . for the divine nature surpasses every apprehensive faculty of the mind' (12)

'in this consists the true knowledge of him who is sought and in this his true vision, that he cannot be seen, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by its incomprehensibility as by a darkness!(1

The Pseudo-Dionysius in the following century wrote even more emphatically:

'The superessential Indefinite transcends the essences, the unity that is beyond mind surpasses the minds; and the One that is beyond reasoning cannot be reflected on by any discursive reason, the Good that is above words is inexpressible in words, a Unity unifying all unity, superessential Essence, Mind unintelligible and Word unutterable; without reason, intelligence and name, not having being according to that of any beings; being, it is true, the cause of being to all things, yet itself non-being, because above all being' (14)

Thus to know God we have to refuse to attribute to him any human concepts: it is more accurate to speak of him as non-being than as being. This way of knowing God was called 'negative (apophatic) theology'.

It does not, of course, follow from this that speech about God has no meaning; rather that its meaning is analogical. Philosophers have various theories about the type of analogy involved. What is perhaps the most common explanation draws on the notion of proportionality: what the human quality is to a man, the divine quality is to God. As God transcends language, so too the quality remains transcendent, but the proportion itself has meaning for us. Arithmetical proportion illustrates the point. If it is given that x is to y as 9 is to 5, we know the proportion of x to y even though x and y themselves remain unknown.

Religious language can also be called symbolical. A symbol stands for or points to something beyond itself. When we use language symbolically to refer to God, we use words which are cashable in terms of experience to point to one who is beyond experience, and to say something that cannot be said literally. The Bishop of Durham, Ian Ramsey, has set the fashion of describing this symbolical way of referring to God as the use of models.

'...Theologians have far too often supposed, and mistakenly, that the most generalized doctrines were most free from all contamination (as it would have been judged) with metaphor, or as I would say, models. But none of us must ever despise the models whence our theological discourse is hewn, for without these we have no way to the cosmic disclosure and no way back to relevance. Without its models, theology will always run the risk of being no more than word-spinning. There is a theological sophistication which, as Mr. Heaton remarks is "pitiful self-deception". He continues: "Metaphor — more metaphor — is all we have to help us understand God, no matter how discreetly we try to disguise the fact by thinning out a selection of images into pseudo-philosophical 'doctrines'. The 'fatherhood' of God, the 'Kingship' of God, the 'love' of God, the 'wrath' of God and the rest remain metaphorical because they were and still are attached at some point to human experience. They would be incomprehensible (and therefore useless) if they were not." Only when we remember that will our preaching "become at once more personal, more imaginative and more intelligible" He concludes: "At the moment, it really does seem that we are all desperately afraid of leaving the well-trodden path of theological jargon and of claiming that measure of imaginative freedom which all the great preachers from Amos to St. Paul assumed - not as a right, but as a pastoral necessity."'(15)

What has been said about language which attempts to describe God is also relevant to language which is immediately concerned with God's relations with his creatures. 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 men involve human experiences in this world, language can express them just as it can express other experiences. But when the statements say something about God as he is in himself they can only be analogical.

Now analogical statements begin to be used like literal ones when the image loses its symbolical function and could be replaced by a literal statement. For example when we call someone a swine, we can define literally what we mean by the phrase, and in such cases we can easily determine the truth or falsehood of the phrase. But as long as the words continue to operate symbolically we are unable to give precise literal criteria for the truth or falsehood of the statement, and it is more helpful to speak of the symbol as apt or inept, enlightening or confusing.

For example, if I say a friend of mine is a horse, you might call the phrase true if you agreed with the reasons, based on his character, which I can give for saying this. If you agree with the reasons but do not think the qualities particularly horse-like you would say the image was confusing or not apt, or 'That's no reason for calling him a horse.'

Similarly when we make an analogical statement about God, its truth will depend on the reasons we can give. To take the example of goodness again, we call a human being 'good' if he unselfishly wants what is truly the best for another; I deduce from experience that God treats us in this way, therefore,he may truly be called 'good'. Again, we call God 'intelligent' because he plans and brings about the origin and development of the universe. But it is not enough that a true reason can be alleged. It is also necessary to allege that the reason is not only true, but also valid. This is the equivalent of saying of a metaphor that it is apt. If you called God angry, and gave us your reason his hatred of sin and his punishment of sinners in the next life, I might reply, 'I agree with what you say, but I don't think that is a good reason for calling God "angry". I might think that anger suggests weakness and loss of self-control too strongly to be a suitable word to apply to God. But rather than say, 'it is not true that God is angry', I would be expressing my thought more clearly if I said, 'If that's what you mean, I concede that it's true'. In other words, we might call even an inept theological expression true if a true reason were given for it.

It follows from this that we could make analogical statements about God that were mutually contradictory <u>in logical form</u>, but could both be true. 'God is angry' and 'God is not angry' could both be true, and not because we mean something different by the word 'angry' in the two instances, but because we could be aware of both the suitability and the unsuitability of applying the concept even analogically to God.

What is objectionable about most if not all 'heretical' statements, is not that the reasons alleged for them are totally false, but that the analogical formulation chosen was seen by the Church to be unsuitable, likely to give a false impression. For example, the analogical proposition that there are two persons in Christ is true, because the reason that might be alleged is true, namely the completeness of the humanity and divinity. But the formulation is inept, because it suggests Jesus is simply God's instrument in redemption, and that Jesus should not be adored. Rahner, therefore, does not seem to be exaggerating wildly when he suggests that almost any doctrinal formulation will be true.

There is another reason why it is unsatisfactory to think of infallibility as the guaranteed power of making true dogmatic statements. A collection of words arranged in the form of a sentence is not in itself true or false: its truth or falsity depends on the meaning we attach to the words. But how are we to arrive at the meaning whose truth is guaranteed? Let us consider the possibilities:

(a) The infallible meaning is the 'plain sense' of the words as they are understood today. But this is simply a form of fundamentalism, which like all fundamentalism implies that truth is relative, as the meaning of the words varies from age to age.

(b) From the meaning of the words at the time the doctrine was formulated. But in some instances, at least, the bishops who promulgated a doctrine at a council did not all put the same interpretation on the words. It is notorious, for example, that at Nicaea the bishops did not all interpret the word 'consubstantial' (<u>homoousios</u>)in the same way. An even more decisive objection to this explanation is that it is anti-historical. The theologians of an age inevitably think in terms of the presuppositions or 'myths' of their age. The formulators of a doctrine are no exception. They cast their essential doctrine in terms of those presuppositions and myths, <u>which they believe to be true</u>. It is perhaps only later ages which can separate basic infallible doctrine from fallible presupposition – separating, for example the doctrine of original sin defined at Trent from the myth of the descent of the whole race from one Adam.

(c) From the <u>practical</u> intentions of the formulators, in so far as we can discover them. 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 reconciled Christian. In many instances, therefore, one can determine the meaning of a formula by referring to an earlier formula that is being rejected or clarified. For example, the safest way of determining the meaning of transubstantiation in the decree of Trent is to examine the rival theories that the bishops there were rebutting. (In advocating this method of interpretation, one would be rejecting the commonly-held theory that the reasons alleged by the promulgators of a dogma are not the object of belief. One would be saying on the contrary that the meaning of a dogmatic formulation is determined not so much by the words as by the reasons adduced.)

The third of these possibilities is the most adequate of those so far considered, but it has its deficiencies. For it is not always evident with sufficient precision what belief a doctrine was intended to clarify, or what heresy to refute. This might be said, for example, concerning the Assumption. Again, the theory seems to exclude the possibility that dogmatic foundations, like scripture, may have a <u>sensus plenior</u>, that is, a meaning which was not explicitly intended by the authors, but which the Church later reads into the words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If, on the other hand, dogmas may be said to have such a <u>sensus plenior</u>, this later interpretation of the words may be part, and even the most important part, of the infallible meaning of the original statement. For example, the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were intended at the time as definitions of Mary's privileges, but they are now often reinterpreted as statements of Christian anthropology or soteriology as exemplified in Mary.

The argument, then, has reached this point: to say that a dogmatic statement is true is so trivial that to regard infallibility as the power to avoid error in dogmatic definitions is to empty it of almost all its content. Moreover, since there is no safe way of arriving at the meaning of the proposition whose truth is guaranteed, infallibility is reduced to the power to bring down from on high formulas whose truth is guaranteed but unknown. The time has come to explore a different approach.

The object of faith is ultimately not ideas or words, but the Word, Christ, Catholic thinking at times has intellectualized faith too much, although the New Testament, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas concur in teaching that faith is basically not an intellectual exercise but a personal relationship with God. John Coventry puts the point clearly:

'Faith is primarily in Christ, and not in doctrines; in God presenting himself for recognition as a person, and not in any series of statements or propositions, which we are asked to believe.' However, 'In faith there must be some (not necessarily perfect) understanding of what God is telling us; there must be an intellectual element of comprehension, some grasp of <u>doctrine</u>, i.e. what God is teaching or revealing.' (16)

In other words, faith is ultimately a living personal relationship with God through Christ. But to relate to a person, that is to say to love him, I need to know him. Natural theology apart, I know him through his revelation, which comes to me in the form of propositions about him. Now dogmatic formulas are therefore essentially attempts to clarify , make relevant and preserve from distortion man's personal, now propositional relationship with this Person. The <u>lex credendi</u>, the acceptance of dogmas, is for the sake of <u>lex orandi</u> (or rather the <u>lex amandi</u>), which is deeper than any propositions.

For example, the Church rejected the Nestorian 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. In fact heresies have always been regarded, not merely as factual errors, but as impieties, blasphemies, which under-

mine the Christian's proper relationship with God in Christ.

The essential purpose, then, of dogmas is not intellectual, not to present _facts_ about God, but to fulfil the _practical_ purpose of protecting the Church from the errors associated with the contrary teaching. As I have tried to show, the contrary heresies may well themselves be true. What the Church has found objectionable about them is that they produce aberrations in the Christian's personal relationship with Christ. There are of course, instances in which a dogmatic definition (e.g. the Assumption) was not made in order to counter a heresy. Here the purpose is to confirm the Church in a particular way of seeking the basic relationship with Christ.

Karl Rahner argues along similar lines.

'Every exercise of an infallible teaching authority is partly a regulation of language, whether this function is consciously recognized or not. This is true not only because this authority is centred upon a believing community, intends to formulate the common profession of faith, and derives from and is supported by the common faith of the Church as a whole; and not only because from the very beginning it has necessarily a sociological aspect, since in every instance faith and community are mutually involved. But in addition the exercise of teaching authority must involve the regulation of language because by its very nature the truth to be taught _can_ be expressed only in **in**adequate, analogous concepts. These, unlike univocal concepts which can be sharply defined and immediately verified from experience, permit alternative concepts, which do not necessarily deny the truth of a proposition under investigation, but remain unexpressed, or at least not expressed in the same way as the defined proposition. Perhaps indeed they _should_ not be expressed at all _in this way_. Concepts like 'person', 'nature', 'sin' and 'original sin', 'transubstantiation', 'glorification of the body' even 'infallibility', etc., are necessary as analogical, though not clearly enough defined, concepts in such a way that the contrary statement is not necessarily false, provided that it is not proposed simply as a negation, the formal contradictory of the other statement, but as a statement intended to make a positive assertion.'

When the teaching authority pronounces a definition, 'one concept is brought by the definition into the foreground of the Church's consciousness of faith and of her teaching, the other remains in the background. An inevitable and essential aspect of the infallible teaching authority is precisely the right in a believing and teaching community to propose a regulation of language (which in itself could have been different) without determining the question of truth' (17)

At this point a difficulty must be faced. Vatican I declared that the pope's _ex-cathedra_ definitions were 'irreformable' (Dz 3074): how can this be so if many other formulations would be true?

There is not time to go into this point fully here: it must suffice to refer the reader to the discussion of Gustav Thils in his thorough study of the decree entitled _L'Infaillibilite Pontificate_. His conclusion is as follows:

'In brief, what is irreformable is the "_sententia definitiva_", the doctrinal judgment to which the magisterium commits ... its supreme authority' (18)

The term irreformable must not, then, be interpreted in such a way as to remove the possibility of any development of dogmas. The restatement of a dogma in defferent terms must be possible. Dogmas are irreformable in the sense that the Church can never subsequently declare them false, and must always continue to affirm that aspect of the non-propositional basic relationship with God which the original definition was meant to safeguard.

The conclusions of this article are two. First, the Church needs to consider whether the 'Petrine' and 'apostolic' offices, which are essential to the Church, _might_ be exercised in the future by others apart from the Bishop of Rome and the college of Bishops, as they seem to have been in the early Church. Secondly, infallibility which is the Holy Spirit's guarantee that the teaching authority in the Church will remain faithful to Christ's revelation, and which is capable of being exercised at recognisable moments, means the power to choose among the

many possible true statements of belief the one which the Church needs at that time in order to preserve it in the right personal relationship with God through Christ. It is a charism given the Church to produce teaching that is not so much true as providential.

E. J. Yarnold, S. J.

Notes

1. H. Von Campenhausen, _Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power_, pp.16-17.

2. E. Echlin, S.J., _Unity Without Absorption_, an unpublished MS which the author has kindly allowed me to quote.

3. 'The Episcopate and the Petrine Office' in _Spirit, Faith and Church_, by W. Pannenberg, A. Dulles, S.J. and C. Braaten, pp.92-3.

4. _Ibid._ p.94.

5. _Ibid._ p.95.

6. _Coll. Lac._ vii.464-6.

7. _Ibid._ 465. In fact the condemned proposition spoke only of the transfer of the papacy from the Roman bishop and city to another bishop and city by a general council or the consent of all peoples which would have put any pope in danger of deposition by politicians. D'Avanzo does not therefore seem justified in ruling out, on the grounds of this condemnation, the possibility that the identification of the successor of Peter with the Bishop of Rome was merely _iure ecclesiastico._

8. _Ibid._ 466 bc.

9. _Ibid._ 359 b.

10. _Ibid._ 359 d.

11. '100 Jahre Unfehlbarkeitsdogma' in _Stimmen der Zeit_, July 1970, p.29

12. _Cant._ 3, 820 CD (Migne) translated in H, Graef, _The Light and the Rainbow_, pp.149-50.

13. _Vita Mos._, 376D-377A (Migne); Graef p.157.

14. _On the Divine Names_, 1.1; Graef p.167.

15. I. T. Ramsey, 'Talking about God' in _Words about God_ (ed. Ramsey), pp.216-17.

16. _The Theology of Faith_, pp.9,13.

17. _Op. cit._ pp.27-8.

18. p.161.