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Christ has promised that he will not abandon his Church and that the Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth. We believe that he is faithful to his promise. It is therefore our conviction that, in its mission to proclaim the gospel, the Church has the obligation and the competence to make declarations in matters of faith. This involves the whole people of God. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, which is offered to all believers, some of the faithful may perceive certain aspects of the saving truth more clearly than others. At times this causes conflict and debate in which customs, accepted positions, beliefs, formulations and practices may be shown to be inadequate, mistaken, or even inconsistent with the gospel. In both our traditions, the bishops have the special responsibility for promoting truth and discerning error, but the exercise of this responsibility requires the interaction of the bishops and the people.

There is a day to day exercise of this responsibility which concerns the daily teaching of the faith and the ordering of life in the Christian community. The proper interaction of the people and the bishops is a safeguard of Christian life and fidelity. Nonetheless, there is no automatic guarantee that those who have a specific responsibility in the community will be free from errors of judgment, will not tolerate abuses and will not distort the truth. This is equally true of the response of the community. Despite the absence of such guarantee, we believe that Christ will not abandon his Church, and therefore we have confidence that such failures will not destroy the Church's ability to proclaim the gospel and to show forth the Christian life. Thus the Church, in spite of

its failures, can be described as indefectible.

There are occasions in the life of the Church when a special exercise of episcopal responsibility is required. In times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question bishops meet in council and their collective decisions possess a unique authority. Not every conciliar decree has this quality but those which deal with fundamental matters of faith commit the Church irrevocably and are binding upon the faithful. This unique authority springs from the Holy Spirit who protects their decision from error when collectively and solemnly they formulate the faith of the Church in obedience to the Gospel. Their formulations, though not exhaustive, exclude what is erroneous and clarify the Church's understanding of the truth but do not add to it. In the exercise of their solemn responsibility the bishops share in that gift which Roman Catholic theology terms 'infallibility'.