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A note on the term 'infallibility'

The technical theological meaning of 'infallibility' (and, to a lesser extent, of 'indefectibility') is unfortunately so different from everyday usage that the term, when used in theological discourse, requires careful definition if it is not to mislead.

When a theologian speaks of infallibility he means that divine gift by which, on special and necessarily rare occasions, a general council or (in Roman Catholic theology) the universal primate is endowed when making a judgement on a matter of importance to the life of the Church and by which that judgement is guaranteed to be free from error.

It is the person or persons making this judgement who can be said to be infallible, not the statements they produce. In Roman Catholic theology the judgement or decision of infallible authority are described as 'irreformable' (see below).

As we have explained, rigorous conditions attach to the exercise of such infallibility. It is the Holy Spirit, as Christ promised, who protects the Church from error on such occasions; but his action leaves undiminished the common human fallibility in all other matters with which all fathers of all Councils and all universal primates are afflicted. Infallibility is not the same as inerrancy, therefore. It is not a permanent protection from error (i.e. it is charism and not a 'habit') and implies no monopoly of truth. The divine grant of infallibility to otherwise fallible human beings in no way derogates from the fact that God alone is infallible in an absolute sense. On the contrary, it depends on and underlines that fact.

Infallibility is not a form of divine inspiration or 'illumination'. It does not remove the need for study, reflection, debate and consultation. Essentially it is the judgement itself which is protected from error by the Holy Spirit. The words in which it is expressed will be historically conditioned and may not always be the most apt. Furthermore, though the judgement is permanent and binding, and in that sense 'irreformable', it is not necessarily incapable of being re-stated in different or better terms and is not exhaustive. Rather, while irrevocably rejecting what is erroneous and making a definitive and divinely guaranteed decision to and for the Church it will open up riches and give new opportunities for reflection and study.

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