

COLUMNISTS

Infallibility is a complex doctrine

The Vatican's response a few months ago to an inquiry about women's ordination has generated some discussion in theological faculties not so much about the ordination issue as about the claim that the church's teaching on the matter is infallible. Having participated recently in one such symposium at the University of Notre Dame, I should like to share with my readers a slightly abbreviated version of the 10 points I proposed.

1. Infallibility, which means, literally, immunity from error, is a charism, or gift, of the Holy Spirit. More specifically, it is a negative charism, that is, it only guarantees that a particular teaching is not wrong. It does not insure that a particular teaching is an adequate or opportune expression of faith.

2. Ultimately, only God is infallible. Therefore, if infallibility is to be attributed to the church or to any individual or group of individuals in the church, it can only be done in a very restricted sense.

3. According to official Catholic teaching on infallibility, given at the First Vatican Council in 1870 and reaffirmed at the Second Vatican Council in 1964, papal infallibility is a participation in the infallibility of the whole church. It is the same infallibility as that "with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed" ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," n. 25).

4. The history of the doctrine of in-



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

fallibility before Vatican II is very complicated. The ancient formula, "Rome has never erred," gradually changed into "Rome cannot err." The legal maxim, "The first see is judged by no one," initially appeared in the sixth century and was only later interpreted to mean that the pope's teaching authority is supreme.

The notion of papal infallibility began to be solidified in the pontificate of St. Gregory VII toward the end of the 11th century, and took firm hold in Catholic theology during the Counter-Reformation period. It was solemnly proclaimed as a dogma of faith in 1870 by the First Vatican Council.

5. Vatican I placed certain restrictions on the exercise of papal infallibility: (1) The pope must be speaking formally as earthly head of the church (*ex cathedra*). (2) He must be speaking on a matter of faith or morals (not governance or dis-

cipline). (3) He must clearly intend to bind the whole church. Indeed, the revised Code of Canon Law (1983) stipulates that "No doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such" (can. 749.3).

6. Infallibility is not a personal prerogative of the pope. A pope is only infallible, according to Vatican I, when he is in the act of defining a dogma of faith or morals, under the conditions specified.

7. To say, as Vatican I does, that the definitions of popes are "irreformable by themselves and not by reason of the consent of the Church" does not mean that the pope is above the church. That language was added to the text in opposition to Gallicanism, which maintained that papal definitions did not go into effect unless and until they were subsequently ratified by the church. The official presenter of the dogma of papal infallibility at Vatican I, Bishop Vincenz Gasser, made it clear during the debate that the consent of the church can never be lacking to an infallible pronouncement.

8. Neither did Vatican I intend to say, in using the word "irreformable," that infallible teachings can never change. They are formulated in human language, are expressive of human concepts, and are historically conditioned ("*Mysterium Ecclesiae*," Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1973).

9. There are relatively few infallible

teachings of the church. However, the deposit of faith is not limited to such teachings. Most elements in the deposit of faith have never been solemnly defined, e.g., the teaching of Jesus that we must love our neighbor as we love ourselves and that we must love even our enemies and forgive those who injure us.

10. Vatican II indicated that the whole college of bishops, in communion with the pope, either when assembled in an ecumenical council or when dispersed throughout the world, can also exercise the charism of infallibility. The expression "ordinary universal magisterium" applies to the consensus of the whole episcopal college, when, in its ordinary teaching throughout the world, it proposes a point of doctrine as definitively to be held.

This type of infallible teaching has itself never been defined by the church. Moreover, it is exceedingly difficult to verify. How does one determine the existence of a true consensus of the whole college of bishops, not only their agreement on the teaching, but also their agreement that the teaching belongs to the deposit of faith?

That is a factual matter, and the burden of proof always lies with those who claim that a certain teaching is infallible by reason of the ordinary universal magisterium of the bishops.

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