

Vatican I and the Papacy

6: The Question of Infallibility

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According to chapter 4 of “Pastor Aeternus” (the text on papal infallibility promulgated by Vatican I on July 18th, 1870), it is “that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals” that may, in certain circumstances, enable the bishop of Rome, in his capacity as successor of St Peter, to define a doctrine as to be held by the universal Church. What the Church has as a permanent endowment, built in structurally so to speak (*instruc-tam* in the original Latin), the successor of St Peter may on occasion have available to him, enabling or “powering” him (*pollere*). The problem of interpretation here lies not only in discerning in what sort of circumstances the bishop of Rome may thus be “enabled”, but in discovering the sense in which the Church herself is endowed with infallibility at all. Problematic as discerning a papal decision that enjoys infallibility may be, it is nothing to exploring the mystery of the Church’s infallibility.

It is a negative term, like so many others in theology. To be infallible is to be undeceiving and undeceivable, to possess immunity from either leading or being led into error. Christ and the Holy Spirit can neither deceive nor be deceived, and since the Church is, mystically and sacramentally, the body of Christ and the continuation of Pentecost, the Church is infallible. This is the faith shared by all Christians, Catholic and Orthodox. We may refer to the Confession of Dositheus, patriarch of Jerusalem, one of the principal Orthodox doctrinal statements since the seventh Ecumenical Council: “We believe the Catholic Church to be taught by the Holy Spirit ... and therefore we both believe and profess as true and undoubtedly certain, that it is impossible for the Catholic Church to err, or to be at all deceived, or ever to choose falsehood instead of truth”. But this conviction has to be reconciled with the plain facts of history, which show that in some churches, and for quite long periods, there have been erroneous beliefs and false teaching, or at any rate much hesitation and vacillation in choosing the truth.

It is simply a corollary of Catholic beliefs about the universal primacy which the bishop of Rome possesses as successor of St Peter that it includes “the supreme power of teaching”, *supremam quoque magisterii potestatem*: the duty and right, so we may para-

phrase it, of deciding, in the last resort, what is to be taught in the Church. After this (the opening statement of chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus") the text goes on to affirm that this conviction has always been held at Rome, that the long-standing practice of the Church confirms it, and that ecumenical councils have admitted it.

The three ecumenical councils which the text cites are not received as ecumenical by the Orthodox Church and never will be. The first affirmation of the primacy of Rome is taken from the acts of the Council of Constantinople, held in 869-70, principally to settle whether Ignatius or the deposed Photius should be patriarch there. This council did indeed declare itself to be the eighth ecumenical council; the papal legates were treated as the first among the bishops, and a clear statement of papal primacy was passed. But this council was never accepted as ecumenical in the east and now, more embarrassingly, as Francis Dvornik has shown, its decrees were all annulled, with the consent of the papal legates, at the council held in Constantinople a decade later, in 879-80, when Photius had been reinstated. Again the papal legates were accorded priority, but there was no declaration of papal prerogatives. Although calling itself "holy and ecumenical", and often mentioned as such by Byzantine writers, this "Photian" council has not been recognized as ecumenical in the Eastern Church at large. It was supposed until Dvornik's work that the West had at once repudiated this council; but it now appears that it was regarded as a true council, annulling its predecessor, until, at the close of the eleventh century, the acts of the council of 869-70 were dusted off and that council labelled the eighth Ecumenical Council, in a bid to reassert Roman supremacy over the Byzantine patriarch. Nobody today, Orthodox or Catholic, can be expected to feel bound by the decrees of the "Ignatian" council. On the other hand, some would hold today that the "Photian" council could now be recognized as ecumenical by Catholics and Orthodox, thus opening the way towards restoration of communion.

Although the Orthodox representatives consented to declarations of papal prerogatives both at Lyons (1274) and at Florence (1438-39), neither council was ever recognized in the Eastern Church. In an official letter in 1974, for the anniversary celebrations in Lyons, Paul VI referred to the council as "the sixth of the general synods of the West", and allowed that there was no possibility in 1274 for the Greeks to express themselves freely. Whether that initiative opens the way for Catholics to regard Trent and Vatican I as "general synods of the West", rather than as ecumenical councils in the full sense, and what effect that would have on the status of their decrees, is another matter. Despite what is commonly supposed there is no official list of ecumenical councils recognized by Rome; the standard list is the work of Robert Bellar-

mine. It is at least older, if no more venerable, than the standard list of true popes, which was compiled by one Angelo Mercati in 1947. But the point here is rather that the references quoted in all good faith at Vatican I must now be regarded as at best extremely shaky. If what the Holy See has always held concerning the infallible teaching of the Roman pontiff is to be communicated to the Orthodox Church the work of explaining and convincing is still to be done.

In the following paragraph of chapter 4 of "Pastor Aeternus" the functioning of the pastoral office of the pope is described in some detail: "Bishops of the whole world, sometimes individually, sometimes assembled in synod ... have referred to this apostolic see those dangers in particular which sprang up in matters of faith, that the losses of faith might be most effectually repaired where the faith cannot fail. And the bishops of Rome, according to the exigencies of times and circumstances, sometimes convoking general councils, or asking for the mind of the Church scattered throughout the world, sometimes by special assemblies, sometimes by using other means which divine providence supplied to help them, defined as to be held those things which, with the help of God, they had recognized as conformable with the sacred scriptures and apostolic traditions". The context of action by the pope is thus always envisaged in terms of his being approached by other bishops who find themselves unable to deal with some dissension or heresy. In this perspective the text goes on: "This gift of truth and never-failing faith, *hoc veritatis et fidei numquam deficientis charisma*, was conferred by God upon Peter and his successors in this chair, *in hac cathedra*, that they might perform their high office for the salvation of all: that the whole flock of Christ, kept away by them from the poisonous food of error, might be nourished with the pasture of heavenly doctrine; that, the occasion of schism being removed, the whole Church might be kept one, and, resting in its foundation, might stand firm against the gates of hell". Once again, the papal function of "defining" is set firmly in the context of saving the Church from error and of removing schism.

The "prerogative which the only-begotten Son of God vouchsafed to conjoin with the supreme pastoral office", so chapter 4 continues, is, in famous words, that "when speaking *ex cathedra*, i.e. when exercising the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, the bishop of Rome defines, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine regarding faith or morals, to be held by the universal Church, and on such an occasion he is, by the divine help promised to him in St Peter, possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals; and defini-

tions of this kind by the bishop of Rome are therefore irreformable, of themselves and not from the consent of the Church, *ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae irreformabiles*".

It is best to clear up misunderstandings about the concluding phrase before we go any further. The reader cannot be blamed if he assumes that these words mean what they say. The phrase seems to mean that papal judgments may indeed be issued independently of the other bishops and of the Church, and that such judgments are never open to revision in any sense.

The most authoritative interpretation of the phrase occurs in the Vatican II text "Lumen Gentium" (par. 25): "His definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly styled irreformable, for, being pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised him in St Peter, they do not need the approval of anybody else nor do they allow any appeal to some other judgment. For in such a case the bishop of Rome is not pronouncing judgment as a private person but, as the ultimate teacher of the universal Church, in whom the charism of the Church's own infallibility is individually present, he is expounding or defending a doctrine of the Catholic faith". Thus, if it is allowed at all that the Petrine ministry as universal pastor exists in the first place, and if it is further conceded that such a ministry cannot be without some ultimate responsibility for true doctrine in the Church, then it follows that a "charismatic" decision by the pope, in virtue of the infallibility of the Church herself which is, on such an occasion, concentrated singularly in him, as *universalis Ecclesiae magister supremus*, is already a final judgment: it makes no sense to say that such a decision "in the Holy Spirit", and in virtue of the Church's own infallibility, needs or requires "approbation", say by the other bishops, or that it may be subject to appeal to some other judge, say to the judgment of a council. This does not mean that such decisions are irreformable in the sense that they could never be improved, clarified, expanded, developed, or placed in such a new perspective that they would look so different that it would make sense, sometimes at least, to say, that they had been "revised". If in such a decision the pope has made a true judgment in the Spirit of truth which protects the Church herself, then episcopal or conciliar validation or confirmation is simply superfluous.

Behind this text lies a complex history of conflict between popes and councils, and an even more complicated history of conflict between upholders of papal supremacy and adherents of conciliarism. The problem originated in the closing decades of the fourteenth century. After 1378, when there was a pope in Rome and a pope in Avignon and no other way of deciding which was the true successor of St Peter people soon began to realize that

nothing but the authority of a general council could adjudicate. In the end the Great Schism of the Western Church ended when Martin V was elected pope in November 1417; but the general council (of Constance) which made his election possible, and thus established the present line of legitimate popes, had been convoked by one pope whom it immediately deposed, had negotiated the abdication of the Roman pope on condition that he was allowed to “convoke” the council, and deposed the third (Avignon) pope, eventually creating a space of three months when there was no pope at all but only the general council in session. Theological historians debate where the ultimate authority lay; but to the ordinary eye it certainly looks as if the general council sorted out the problem of the three claimants and thus in any straightforward sense of the word had “supreme authority” in the Western Church at this point.

By the eighteenth century, however, the adherents of conciliarism had given way to upholders of what was variously labelled Gallicanism, Febronianism and the like. That is to say, those who thought that in some situations at least the authority of the pope needed to be legitimated by the authority of a general council (what else in fact happened at Constance) had given way to emperors and ecclesiastics who sought to reduce to the minimum papal rights vis-à-vis national churches and national episcopal assemblies. The text of the Fourth Gallican Article of 1682 states precisely that the pope’s judgment in doctrinal controversies is irrefragable only when covered with the consent of the Church, *nec tamen irrefragabile esse iudicium nisi Ecclesiae consensus accesserit*. But the phrase “consensus Ecclesiae” here means some formal and public ratification of the pope’s judgment by an episcopal or conciliar assembly. This is being ruled out by the text of “Pastor Aeternus” simply because, if the papal decision is indeed a charismatic judgment passed with the help of the Spirit of truth, it cannot stand in need of any approval by any episcopal conference or similar assembly. For one thing, approval by this or that national episcopal conference cannot be necessary for the truth of the judgment because it might be that the judgment was called for in the first place because of heresy or schism among these bishops.

At bottom, it is a question of the relationship between the prophetic and the institutional in the Church. A bishop, in his diocese, need not always be the last member of the local church from whom prophetic discernment may be expected! What chapter 4 of “Pastor Aeternus” is claiming, in the end, is that the bishop of Rome, as successor of St Peter, may on occasion be called on to make a judgment in the Holy Spirit which is a charismatic discernment of the truth. The ability to distinguish true spirits from false may be given on occasion, even to the pope, as a mani-

festation of the Spirit for the common good (cf I Corinthians 12: 7ff). The Petrine homeostatic mechanism in the Church may, on occasion, deliver a “Pauline” judgment. For that matter, from Irenaeus onwards, the martyrdom of Paul there was quite as significant as that of Peter in generating the prerogatives of the see of Rome. Far from quenching the Spirit, the papacy as an institution may at times be the privileged organ of the only manifestation of the Spirit that is for the common good. But the paradox of the jargon here is that such a papal judgment, although irreformable *ex sese*, and thus requiring no *consensus Ecclesiae* in the sense of formal episcopal or synodical approval, could not exist in the first place except as expressing the *consensus Ecclesiae* or *sensus fidei* or *sententia Ecclesiae* (the phrase used earlier in chapter 4 of “Pastor Aeternus”): in other words, the mind of the Church as embodied in the various documents and monuments of Holy Tradition. These papal decisions are irreformable, then, of themselves and not from the consent of the Church, precisely *because* they come from the *consensus Ecclesiae*. The holy Spirit was promised to the successors of Peter, as the text says, “that by his assistance they might inviolably keep and faithfully expound the revelation of deposit of faith delivered through the apostles”. Thus, a prophetic distinguishing of the true from the false which keeps inviolate and faithfully expounds the deposit of faith is nothing else than a particular articulation of the tradition of the Church—the tradition which is the mind of the Church as a whole. It is a discernment which is true as soon as it is made. However welcome the plaudits of some episcopal assembly or whatever, such approval could not add to or confirm the truth of the judgment.

Large questions remain, of course, yawning wide open, and not inviting very easy answers. To concede that the pope might on occasion be called upon to make a prophetic judgment of this kind is not to specify the circumstances in which it would be appropriate. Nor on the other hand is it to say that an ecumenical council might not equally well make such a judgment. In fact, historically, in the setting of the great Trinitarian and Christological controversies which was the making of Christian doctrine, councils were the instrument of such judgments. The first seven great councils, recognized as ecumenical by East and West, are ecumenical councils at all only because they made such decisions. But it was not always clear at the time that any particular council would be ecumenical in this sense. There is no simple way of explaining why some councils turned out to be ecumenical and others failed to do so. It does not depend on whether a council thinks of itself as ecumenical. In many simple and straightforward ways a general council or a pope may easily be seen to represent the Church. But at times of crisis, when a conciliar or papal judgment enters the category of a

prophetic discernment of the true from the false, it is simply not possible to lay down in advance how such a decision is to be arrived at. Not every general council that has declared itself “holy and ecumenical” has subsequently proved to be such, far from it. There is no more reason to suppose that whenever a pope says that he is making a decision by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority that he is in fact possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed. Neither pope nor council can be saved from straying from the truth on any other basis than the way in which the Church herself is. It is the *sensus fidelium*, the mind of the Church as a whole, which has the gift of truth and never-failing faith.

Some of the bishops at Vatican I thought that they were there only to advise the pope. The decisions of the Council were in fact promulgated by the pope “with the approval of the Council”; which has not failed to raise in Orthodox minds the status of Vatican I as any kind of council at all. In his speech on May 25th, 1870, William Clifford pointed out that some who defended the doctrine of papal infallibility were also saying that bishops in general were not *vere iudices* but, like the theologians present, were only advising the pope, *ut consilium praestant pontifici* (Mansi 52, 282). He quoted from the book just published, at the pope’s instigation, by one of the Curial officials, Archbishop Joseph Cardoni, in which papal infallibility was evidently understood in a sense that reduced the other bishops to mere advisers—“Who does not see”, Clifford asked, “that this question touches the very root of episcopal rights”? The anxiety of the majority of the English bishops at Vatican I was precisely that the doctrine of papal infallibility was being expounded by some of their foreign colleagues in a way which seemed to make bishops and councils superfluous. On questions of faith did they, as successors of the apostles, *decide*, together with Peter’s successor, what was to be taught, or did they merely give him advice, upon which he might or might not rely to reach *his* decision? It is, in fact, only at Vatican II that we have a clear affirmation of the traditional ecclesiology (cf “Lumen Gentium”, 25): “Although individually bishops do not possess the prerogatives of infallibility, they proclaim Christ’s teaching infallibly, even while they are dispersed throughout the world, provided that they maintain the bond of communion with one another and with Peter’s successor, whenever they teach authentically in matters of faith or morals, and concur in one judgement as definitive. This is even more manifestly the case when, gathered in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church”. But that leaves open the difficult question of what makes an assembly of bishops into an ecumenical council in the full sense.

The criteria laid down by Roman canon law are no help. Popes have been claiming since the eleventh century that a council cannot be ecumenical unless it has been convoked by the pope, and since the early sixteenth century it has been claimed that it falls to the pope to preside, either in person or through delegates. But of the first seven great Ecumenical Councils none was convoked by the pope, all were convoked by the emperor (or in the last case by the empress). What has been recognized as the second Ecumenical Council since the beginning of the sixth century (Constantinople 381) was a purely eastern assembly, to which the pope was not even invited. At this council the consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit as well as of the Son was affirmed, hence putting the Nicene Creed into its final form. The fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople 553), even more bizarrely, was held against the will of the pope, Vigilius, who was in Constantinople at the time, and finally consented to its decrees in order to get home. Papal recognition cannot be counted as the decisive factor in establishing the "ecumenicity" of a council. Nor need the bishops assembled be representative of the Church in any statistical or geographical sense. It certainly seems impossible to discern institutional or juridical features, particularly any such which might be prescribed in advance, to define a council as "ecumenical". It is rather as Georges Florovsky says: "those Councils which were actually recognized as 'ecumenical', in the sense of their binding and infallible authority, were recognized, immediately or after a delay, not because of their formal *canonical* competence, but because of their *charismatic* character: under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they have witnessed to the Truth, in conformity with the Scripture as handed down in Apostolic Tradition".

A series of learned articles by Hermann Josef Sieben, published from 1970 onwards in *Theologie und Philosophie*, the German Jesuit quarterly, offers the most detailed study so far of the development of the concept of an ecumenical council. For the bishops at Nicaea in 325, and certainly for the emperor who summoned them, the great number of the participants seems to have been what conferred a special character on that council. But as Sieben shows, first from the writings of Athanasius of Alexandria, who attended the council as deacon to his bishop, the question had arisen within ten years or thereabouts as to the special authority that Nicaea enjoyed over preceding and subsequent councils. For Athanasius, Nicaea derived its special authority from the faith or the tradition of the Church which, in rejecting Arius, the bishops brought faithfully to expression. In later years, as Sieben shows in his second article, the authority of Nicaea was attributed to the fact that many of the bishops were confessors and martyrs; more often appeal was made to "inspiration"; but usually the special

quality of Nicaea was traced to the fact that it expressed the tradition of the Church and that it had done so because of the *consensus omnium*. Significantly for the future, it is Damasus, pope at Rome from 366 to 384, who attributed the special authority of Nicaea to the presence of an official papal delegation. He was not to know that a council which took place at Constantinople in his own life-time, and to which he was not invited to send delegates, would one day be recognized as the second Ecumenical Council.

In other words, among all the many synods and councils which the Church has held from the earliest times some turn out in retrospect to be exceptionally "inspired", and produce doctrinal and canonical decisions of permanent validity and authority. But, being such charismatic and prophetic events, truly "ecumenical councils" cannot be legislated for in advance. Since the struggle against Montanism in the latter half of the second century, if not earlier, the Catholic Church has always displayed a certain suspicion of inspiration, prophecy and new revelations. In seeking (quite properly) to relate the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to such "moments" in the texture of church life as conciliar and papal decisions, we have always to remember that *anybody* may be called upon, at times of crisis, to discern and to proclaim the true faith. In the bitter struggle to gain acceptance for the Nicene creed the mass of the laity played a far more honourable part than the majority of the bishops. Three centuries later, in the middle of the seventh century, it was the lay monk Maximus who spoke for the Orthodox and Catholic Church against heresy. But even for conciliar and papal decisions, it is simply not possible to determine beforehand, by juridical and canonical criteria, which decisions will bear the marks of the truth. It is only in the continuing life of the Church that it becomes apparent, sometimes after considerable delay and confusion, that a particular council has been truly ecumenical, and that a particular papal decision has been truly an exercise of the Petrine ministry, whether the Spirit of God has granted "infallibility" or not. As Robert Markus writes (*Papacy and Hierarchy*, p. 143): "Only the Church's reception of a statement as infallible can in the end validate it as such".

To repeat, then: there is no need for any *consensus Ecclesiae* for the kind of papal judgment in question if we are thinking in Gallican (and Roman!) terms of some formal and juridical ratification by episcopal synods or individual bishops. There is no need for *consensus Ecclesiae* in *that* sense because the judgment issues from the common faith of the Church in the first place; it is because the papal judgment articulates the *consensus Ecclesiae* in the real and deep sense that it requires no *consensus Ecclesiae* in the merely formal and juridical sense. But there is no reason to expect that the Christian people as a whole, or even bishops and

clergy, not to mention theologians, will always immediately recognize that what has been made articulate actually voices appropriately what the tradition which they bear, and which bears them, really means. Equally, however, there is no reason to suppose that a decision might not on occasion be acclaimed with joyful recognition from the outset. Thus, in the long history of the making of Christian doctrine, papal judgments (like conciliar ones) have, in the end, to demonstrate their consonance with the *sensus fidelium* from which they derive. They are true – infallible – because they derive, with the help of the Holy Spirit, from the *sensus fidelium*; but the sign that they are true – infallible – is that they are adopted as part of the *sensus fidelium*. And that may take a long time, and the history of the Church is littered with conciliar and papal decisions that have come to nothing. But that does not always show that they were not true.

We return, then, to the most difficult question. The pope, like a general council, may, on occasion, be “possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals”. The question is when and how we are to recognize *that* infallibility.

In a fine statement, which precedes all discussion of papal or conciliar infallibility, Vatican II made the following affirmation (“Lumen Gentium”, 12): “The holy People of God shares in Christ’s prophetic office.... The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of faith. It manifests this unique property by means of the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) which the people as a whole has, when ‘from the bishops down to the last member of the laity’ it shows its universal *consensus* in matters of faith and morals”. The text continues: “This sense of faith, which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, enables the People of God ... to receive the Word of God, to adhere indefectibly to the faith once delivered to the saints, to penetrate it more profoundly by right judgment, and to apply it more fully to life”. As Aloys Grillmeier says in the Herder Commentary on this passage (volume 1, p. 164-5), it is of great importance not only for ecumenical theology but also for renewal in the Catholic Church: “In the mind of the faithful, as in that of the magisterium, the gift of infallibility had been too one-sidedly concentrated on the office, and even on a papal primacy which was considered in isolation from the episcopate as a whole. This could only lead to passivity and indifference with regard to responsibility for the word of God”. He goes on to suggest that the infallible instinct of faith in the People of God as a whole is related to the infallible expression of the faith by bishops in the same sort of way that the common priesthood of the baptized is related to the ministerial priesthood. Such words

certainly recall the “Reply of the Orthodox Patriarchs” sent to Pius IX in 1848 (Mansi 40, 377-418): “The guardian of religion is the very body of the Church, the *laos*”. As Vatican I is “received” anew by the Catholic Church in the light of Vatican II it is the infallible faith of the baptized that at last surfaces as the matrix of the infallible teaching of the ordained. “You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you know, all of you, *already*” (1 John 2: 20).

The problem of what to do about a pope who falls into heresy attracted a good deal of attention until the late Middle Ages. For four hundred years, every new pope on taking office had to repeat the condemnation of Pope Honorius, that good pope of the seventh century, who managed the patrimony of Peter wisely and took an uncommon interest in the English, but who, on being formally asked for a judgment on whether Christ had one or two wills, gave the wrong answer. The case was discussed at Vatican I and some not altogether satisfactory solutions were offered by the higher infallibilists – as that, for example, the pope’s letters were faked or else that what they say is *substantially* orthodox even if plainly heretical, or that he wrote as a “private theologian”, an anachronistic category and anyway evidently untrue, or finally that his statements did not fulfil the conditions laid down at Vatican I. As Yves Congar has always insisted, the doctrine of the infallibility that may sometimes be granted to papal teaching, as proclaimed by Vatican I, has been limited from the beginning by the facts of the case of Honorius. Chalcedonian in his faith (there is no doubt about that), Honorius could not be bothered with new theological questions (“we leave all that to grammarians or styl-ists”) and thus fell into heresy. The main point is, however, that since the sixth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople 681) the orthodoxy of the successor of St Peter cannot be said to be beyond all doubt.

The *consensus* of the People of God is infallible. The People of God as a whole can neither deceive nor be deceived as to what is true Christian doctrine. But as Peter Chirico points out in his important book (*Infallibility*, Sheed & Ward, London 1977), the most elementary questions here have never been properly discussed. How is the truth implicitly present in the mind or tradition of the faithful in fact discovered? Clearly it cannot simply be a matter of counting votes for or against some particular thesis. On certain matters, as perhaps liturgy and birth control, people vote with their feet; that does not necessarily mean that they are right. Is it enough that the laity throughout the world take for granted that a particular doctrine is true without ever having seriously examined it? Fifteen or twenty years ago, virtually all Catholics believed in limbo for infants who died unbaptized, as they believed in the in-

trinsic evil of artificial contraception. Few believe these doctrines today. Is it that, placed in a new perspective, the truth that these doctrines expressed can now be better said by denying them? People obviously have often suffered and died for principles that turned out to be false; but is it easy to go on proclaiming the infallibility of the faithful when such doctrines, which bit deeply into our lives, now appear untrue? If the Holy Spirit could not save the faithful from being so deceived on such important matters of faith and morals, what is the never-failing gift of truth worth? There is no use in saying that these were unimportant doctrines. The doctrine of limbo, apart from its importance for grief-stricken parents, touched deep questions about sin, death, culpability, innocence, choice, rationality and so on; while the doctrine of contraception as intrinsically evil belongs to a whole traditional and instinctive understanding of marriage, parenthood, fertility, continence, nature, and the human body. It is precisely because each of these two doctrines fits into a whole web of beliefs which itself has (arguably) shifted and reformed that the doctrines can change direction. But in that case our faith in the undeceivable and undeceiving *sensus fidei* in the People of God must allow for such radical changes of direction. (It is of some interest to observe the change about contraception in such a classical exposition of the Orthodox faith as Archimandrite Ware's Pelican book, from the first (1963) to the latest edition.)

But even such considerations are not fundamental enough. As Michael Dummett pointed out some years ago (in *New Blackfriars*, August 1965), the most serious theological enquiry that can be made is simply *how corrupt is the Church*: "It is of the greatest moment that we should understand in detail to what forms of corruption this witness – the Church – is liable: both so that we should be able to recognize them when they occur, and also so that we should not be seduced into taking as the word of God what is only the babbling of men". His examples come mostly from the field of morals, but in the context of our present reflections on the papacy it is perhaps worth quoting this passage, written in full-hearted acceptance of the new emphasis on episcopal collegiality: "the bishops have, over the centuries, made themselves total dictators, not only over their laity, but also over their clergy: and now that papal protection against these episcopal dictators will be much harder to come by, because the Vatican will henceforth be far more chary of interfering with the independence of bishops, the last state of our Church will be worse than the first if we do not speedily erect safeguards against episcopal power". In the end; perhaps, what we most need is what Maurice Nedoncelle has claimed to find in the writings of Newman: "une théologie des abus ecclésiastiques", a theological analysis of corruption in the

Church. If that is so, it would be an appropriate complement to his thinking on the place of the laity in the shaping of Christian doctrine as well as on the infallibility of some conciliar and papal pronouncements. Manning would, of course, have read the text with complete acceptance, but it seems particularly apposite to think rather of Newman when reading Vatican II's account of the People of God ("Lumen Gentium", 9): "Through trials and tribulations the Church makes her way, strengthened by the power of God's grace promised her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not fall away from perfect fidelity but remain a bride worthy of her Lord, never ceasing to renew herself, under the impact of the Holy Spirit, until she comes, through the cross, to the light which never sets".

(To be continued)

The Image of the Invisible God

**A Review of Jesus and the Gospel of God,
by Don Cupitt,
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Geoffrey Turner

When the editor of *New Blackfriars* reviewed in August 1977 the collection of essays published as *The Myth of God Incarnate* (edited by John Hick, SCM Press, London 1977) he had some very critical remarks for most of the contributors in their evident lack of understanding of orthodox christology, but of Don Cupitt he said that he had written 'the most lucid and perceptive chapter in the book', 'his article is an outright rejection of Catholic Christianity', and he looked forward to 'the debate on fundamentals which surely ought now to arise between Don Cupitt and his fellow sym-