

***How the Pope Became Infallible: Pius IX and the Politics of Persuasion*
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Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1981.
Introduction by Hans Küng; translated by Peter Heinegg.

INTRODUCTION:
*The Infallibility Debate —
Where Are We Now?*

Can a great public question be laid to rest before it has found an answer? The old infallibility of kings, emperors, and tsars reigning by the grace of God has long since ceased to be an issue. And the newer infallibility of autocrats, dictators, dukes, führers, and general secretaries reigning on their own has now become — after two world wars, Auschwitz, the Gulag Archipelago, democratization in Spain, and the first signs of a turning away from Mao in China — distinctly brittle. Of course, debate over infallible *parties* (and their current representatives) is still being stifled as usual, from Moscow to Havana, with every oppressive and repressive means available. And then, many people are asking in turn, what about the infallibility of *churches*, which, like certain political parties, “are always right”? What about the Church’s representatives, past or present, who invoke the Holy Spirit to justify their decisions? Whatever other differences may separate the Catholic Church from totalitarian societies, this one at least is clear: In the wake of the Second Vatican Council it is simply impossible for the Church to bury the issue of infallibility.

On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of papal infallibility (defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870), I tried to give a precise formulation to this widely discussed but vague question in my book *Infallible? An Inquiry* (1970). This was something like a parliamentary interpellation by His Majesty’s loyal opposition in a free commonwealth. Religious authorities in Rome, with the help of bishops’ conferences, were doing their best to mandate silence on this problem, which had suddenly sprung to life again, and to get rid of the whole thing once and for all. But, though condemned to death, the issue remained alive, and discussion among believers could not be throttled.

And surely, unprejudiced observers in Rome never imagined that in this day and age the Church could dispose of such an inquiry merely by repeating conciliar decrees whose infallibility had been dubious from the very beginning and which were once more being challenged. Well before the 1970s a similar line used to be taken by kings and generals, fathers, teachers and, often enough, professors trying to rescue their jeopardized infallibility: We are infallible because we have said that we are infallible!

But there was no avoiding the reply: With what right have you — and your forebears — said that you were infallible? And in the Church of all places. With what right do you lay claim to the infallibility of the Holy Spirit of God, which “blows where it wills,” you who are men and not God? Doesn’t “to err is human” hold true for you? Or has God anywhere ascribed to you his own infallibility? If so, that would have to be attested to in the most unambiguous language. People in the Bible (and in the Church of the New Testament, beginning with Peter, the “Rock”) do not exactly convey an impression of infallibility. Peter was not the only one — Peter, whom the Lord once called “Satan,” who denied the Lord three times, who, even after Easter, and above all in Antioch, proved to be quite fallible in his controversy with Paul — for whom the cock crowed. And thus, for many long decades nobody mentioned any infallibility of the bishop of Rome (nor, for the time being, of the ecumenical councils either). In fact, upon close inspection the historian must judge infallibility to be an innovation of the second millennium, and really only of the nineteenth century. So what is left of the argument that papal and conciliar infallibility are rooted in Scripture and old Catholic tradition?

Or may one not ask that question? Should even asking it be a sin, and full-fledged inquiry a mortal sin? No, once the Vatican has gotten over its first (and understandable) shock, it can’t seriously say things like that anymore. That would be a sign of fear, and would only provoke the child’s question about the emperor’s new clothes. No, a church that has nothing to fear from the truth, that has nothing more to fear than untruth, that claims to be the “pillar and foundation of the truth” — a church like that has an altogether vital interest in seeing that the truth is not stifled but continually “revealed” anew. Too much is at stake here to let silence become the long-term policy. For, after all, isn’t the problem of infallibility now as ever the biggest obstacle to renewal within the Church? Isn’t the doctrine of infallibility the most serious stumbling block on the road to ecumenical understanding? Isn’t it the claim to infallibility which costs the Church its credibility and makes it seem so inept, despite all its unquestionably positive contributions and its still greater potential for good in today’s society? Poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World, the population explosion, birth control, the encyclical *Humanae vitae*, the infallibility of traditional church doctrine — all these things are now so tightly connected that people who preach such loud sermons to outsiders actually ought to shout this message to those inside the Church instead of keeping silent on the whole business of infallibility.

Certainly anyone who has clearly and repeatedly said what needs to be said on this subject doesn’t have constantly to start all over again. In the current overheated atmosphere, that might do more to hinder than help thoughtful self-criticism and practical planning (on both sides). But continual readiness to discuss the issues is just as imperative as thorough respect for the persons involved (though in any case there must be no compromise on essentials). This way we can be sure of reflecting on the problem in a spirit both critical and self-critical. But there can be no “truce” on such a fundamental matter — and there never has been one — not just because the authorities in Rome have yet to enter into any such “partnership” but also because

in the long run unconvinced individuals would be obliging themselves to keep silent, which would go against their conscience, against the freedom of scholarly research, and against the true interests of the Church and its leadership.

The Catholic Church and its leaders, in fact, ought not to view questions and inquiry as an attack from outside but as help from within. For they themselves have the greatest interest of all in seeing

1) that the process of undoing the ideology of the absolutist-authoritarian magisterium, which began with John XXIII and Vatican II, be completed so as to create a genuine spiritual authority and to free the Church from the arrogance, coercion, and dishonesty of a curialist theology and administration;

2) that a conscious effort be made to exploit the new beginnings of Vatican II, which, under the inspiration of John XXIII, deliberately chose to forego infallible definitions, and in opposition to traditional dogmatism called for a new way of proclaiming the Christian message — and to some degree made such a proclamation itself; and

3) that the historicity of truth and of its formulations be given fresh recognition in the Church, thus making possible a better foundation for the Christian faith, furthering the modernization and renewal of the Catholic Church, and in all this helping the cause of Jesus Christ to make a new breakthrough in a “church” system which in many ways contradicts the message of him in whose name it speaks.

Fortunately, the latest phase of the infallibility debate — as early as 1973 there was uncontested evidence of progress here — has already clarified a good number of points:

I. *Justification for the inquiry:* The uncomfortable texts from Vatican I and II — on this point both the critical inquirers themselves and the Roman authorities agree — are to be taken literally. Their original meaning may not be softened or watered down, as Catholic theologians in recent days (for reasons which are transparent) have continually tried to do. Opportunistic reinterpretation, ultimately leading to outright denial of the text, is a common feature of all authoritarian systems, but it only obscures the problems, violates intellectual integrity, and delays a comprehensive solution. Of course, read in their original sense, knowing what we know today, the texts on infallibility pose a still greater challenge to every Catholic than they did one hundred years ago. But sticking one’s head in the sand, theologically speaking, leads nowhere: An enlightened attitude here is as indispensable as it once was on the issue of Galileo. Catholic belief need not degenerate to the level of blind faith, where one believes only because the pastor says so. On this matter our examination must go beyond the (so-called “extraordinary”) infallibility of the pope making dogmatic definitions (“how the pope became infallible”). A second question, much neglected by the anti-Infallibilist minority at Vatican I, is the (likewise “extraordinary”) infallibility of definitions made by an ecumenical council. And a third is even more explosive: the (everyday, usual, “ordinary”) infallibility of the entire episcopate all over the world. According

to Vatican II, this body is also supposed to be infallible whenever pope and bishops concur in teaching that a specific theological or moral doctrine (e.g., the immorality of “artificial” contraception) is definitively binding. This question of doctrinal agreement between pope and bishops was a determining factor in the promulgation of *Humanae vitae*. Vatican II guaranteed the infallibility of such joint declarations (“Thus they proclaim in infallible fashion the teaching of Christ”), even in the absence of any explicit definition. This has proved to be the chemical agent that keeps the question of infallibility in constant ferment. Traditionally minded theologians often see this connection more clearly than the ones thought of as progressive. Such clarity, however, only throws into sharper relief the general perplexity vis-à-vis the infallibility of this “ordinary” magisterium.

II. *The contemporary Catholic consensus*: There is fundamental agreement on three important points:

A. The errors of the magisterium are a fact. Nowadays Catholic theologians concede with heretofore unwonted frankness that even the organs responsible for “infallible” doctrinal decisions can err, at least in principle (though perhaps not in specific situations), and often have erred. “No one who observes the history of the Church with any objectivity can deny that it has often enough promulgated errors. This is true both of the Church as a whole and of those church authorities which view themselves as the source of infallible doctrinal decisions, namely, the pope and the ecumenical councils, as well as the entire episcopate in the daily exercise of proclaiming the faith — insofar as it does this in a body.” (O. Semmelroth)

B. Skepticism has been eating away at the concept and practice of infallibility: Even some conservative theologians consider the notion misleading, in fact, largely incomprehensible in today’s world. One cannot help noticing that since the recent debate on the issue began, the word “infallible” has largely disappeared from theological and even official ecclesiastical terminology. Nobody wants infallible definitions anymore, neither to foster piety nor to clarify complex contemporary problems. If it hadn’t already been defined, papal infallibility would certainly not be defined today. The plausibility structures — the political, social, cultural, and theological presuppositions — supporting the Vatican definitions in the nineteenth century no longer exist. All that remains for the Catholic people is the definition itself, and neither the laity nor the theologians nor even the popes have a very good idea of what to do with it. The “exaggerations” and “misuse” of the papal magisterium over the past hundred years are often bemoaned, but those who complain are less willing to admit that such negative developments are not accidental but built right into the structure of the Vatican dogmas. Still, there is no longer any ignoring the pattern leading from Pius IX and Vatican I through the campaign against modernism under Pius X to the *Humani generis* purge under Pius XII. The era of the Sodalitium Pianum (see Chapter 8) in nineteenth- and twentieth-century church history only ended with John XXIII.

C. Despite all its errors, the Church will remain preserved in the truth: Even for conservatives who defend infallible pronouncements, the Church's indestructible link with the truth (indefectibility) is more basic than the infallibility of particular statements. And now that no one can argue about the existence, in general, of errors by the magisterium, there is agreement, at least in principle, on the positive thesis that the Church will be preserved in the truth of the Gospel, for all its errors. But what this means concretely will have to be discussed later on.

III. *The decisive question:* Beyond this fundamental indefectibility, aren't there perhaps judgments, statements, definitions, and *credal propositions* which are not only de facto true (which no one denies) but *infallibly true*? That is, are there not certain officials or authoritative institutions which, owing to the special assistance of the Holy Spirit, in a certain specified situation find themselves a priori incapable of making a mistake? This is a clear and precise phrasing of the question in the wake of Vatican I, which taught that the repositories of authority (pope and bishops) were not continually infallible, but only in delivering themselves of carefully specified judgments, sentences, definitions, and "propositions." In the recent debate on infallibility, critics have taken direct aim at these infallible propositions, which are not only not false de facto but can in no way be false because of the help of the Holy Spirit (e.g., the Marian dogmas). And what was the result? Briefly put, to date not a single theologian and not a single official authority have managed to make a case for the possibility of such infallible credal propositions which, together with the authorities behind them, would be guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. The altogether exhaustive discussion we have had thus far shows that there are no solid grounds in Scripture or the body of Catholic tradition for accepting such infallibly true propositions or authorities. And to adduce as proof for them the very doctrinal texts from Vatican I and II that are in dispute is a transparent begging of the question. It only stands to reason that Vatican I and Vatican II never solved problems whose existence neither Council recognized.

IV. *Unexpected confirmation:* The newer (older, in point of fact) Catholic position on infallibility has been unexpectedly confirmed by Catholic scholars:

A. With regard to *Peter*: Recent exegetical studies by Catholics have elaborated on Peter's genuine but fallible authority, and the problems related to succession in the "Petrine service." The symbolic figure of Peter kept its importance for the Church in the generations that followed him, but there is little support in the New Testament and the first three centuries for any infallibility on his part (the biblical evidence characteristically combines Peter's positive *and* negative qualities at every turn), and still less for the infallibility of the bishops of Rome. The main proof text cited at Vatican I for papal infallibility, Luke 22:32 ("I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail") was never used even by medieval canonists to document this dogma — and rightly so. In this passage Jesus does not promise Peter freedom from error but the grace to persevere in the faith till the end. Still, the same medieval canonists applied this not to the Roman bishops but to the faith of the entire Church. To construe Luke 22:32 as referring to the infallibility of the bishop of Rome turns out to be an innovation with no textual basis.

B. With regard to the *ecumenical councils*: The first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325) got along without any claim to infallibility. Recent historical research has pointed out the way in which the leader of this Council, Athanasius, along with many Greek Fathers of the Church and Augustine as well, explained the true — but in no sense infallible — authority of a council: A council speaks the truth not because it was convoked in a juridically unobjectionable manner, not because a majority of the bishops in the world were in attendance, not because it was confirmed by any sort of human authority, not, in a word, because it was, from the start, incapable of being deceived; but because, in spite of new words it says nothing new, because it hands on the old tradition in new language, because it bears witness to the original message, because it breathes the air of Scripture, because it has the Gospel behind it. One must distinguish this classical Catholic notion of a council from, in the East, the later mystical or juridical *Byzantine* “conciliar revalorizations,” and, in the West — especially with reference to the authority of the papacy — from the *Roman Catholic* versions. The latter began to take on a distinctly Roman character with the popes of the fifth century, became dominant after the reform of Gregory VII, and was finally made a dogma at the First Vatican Council.

C. With regard to the *origin of the Roman doctrine of infallibility*: The latest historical studies — this was perhaps the biggest surprise of the whole debate — have discovered the unorthodox origins of the Roman doctrine of infallibility at the end of the thirteenth century. Scholars have the American historian Brian Tierney to thank for the discovery that the doctrine did not slowly “develop” or “unfold,” but rather was created in one stroke in the late 1200s. And the “inventors” of papal infallibility and irreformability (both go together from the very beginning) were not at all, as previously suspected, the orthodox papalist theologians and canonist-popes of the High Middle Ages but an eccentric Franciscan, Peter Olivi (d. 1298), repeatedly accused of heresy. At first no one took Olivi’s notion seriously, and in 1324 it was condemned by John XXII as a work of the devil, the Father of Lies. Even the Reformation popes could not invoke any generally accepted concept of infallibility, and the Council of Trent, it is worth noting, likewise never defined the pope’s infallibility. Intellectually speaking, it was the ideologues of the counterrevolution and the Restoration, de Lamennais and above all de Maistre, who were primarily responsible for Vatican I’s definition of infallibility: The dogma was essentially a “new idea of the nineteenth century” (C. Langlois). The medieval canonists — and in those days the Church’s teaching was their business — had never claimed that the Church needed an infallible head to preserve its faith. Instead they maintained that, however its head might err, the Church as a whole would never be led astray.

On the strength of the exegetical, historical, and systematic research conducted thus far, one point can hardly be disputed: More than was to be expected, the modern critical attack on the principles of infallibility has the backing of Scripture and the body of Catholic tradition. This fact has now been reconfirmed in many different

ways by the new book of a Vatican insider: August Bernhard Hasler, Catholic theologian, historian, and for many years member of the staff of the Secretariat for Unity. I could not turn down the request of my fellow countryman for a word of introduction. What new material does his book bring to bear on the subject of infallibility?

1. *Hasler's book tells the story of how the definition of infallibility came about.* Anyone who has read Butler and Lang's history of the First Vatican Council or the Louvain Catholic historian Roger Aubert's studies of Pius IX and Vatican I knows in the main what awaits him. Hasler, to be sure, recounts the history of infallibility in a more systematic, detailed, graphic, and unsparing fashion than do either Aubert or Butler and Lang. This is not due to the historian who does the telling; it is the story he has to tell, one that is by and large simply a *chronique scandaleuse*. Hasler unfolds it before us without glossing over or hushing anything up, describing the manipulation of the debate over infallibility — how the definition was prepared for, promoted, and pushed through — and returning again and again to Pius IX. Finally we have a Catholic historian who gives truly serious attention to the losing side at the Council and to their arguments (which have been proved right many times over since then); who has exhaustively perused the diaries and notes — those still available, at any rate — of the anti-Infallibilist bishops and even of the most hard-line spokesmen *for* infallibility (often just as awkward as the first group for writers who stress the Council's harmoniousness); who deals with both parties without defusing, downplaying, or explaining away the conflict between them; and who thus, with an understandable one-sidedness, brings in new sources to correct and balance the previous one-sided historical accounts.

Where my *Infallible? An Inquiry* merely broke a taboo, Hasler seems to be digging into an open wound, which may be the reason why in a few cases Catholic critics reacted to his earlier scholarly study of Vatican I by maligning him instead of arguing with him. But all the various defense mechanisms, narrow-mindedness, repressions, anxieties, and ideological interests manifest in the writing of these critics only make it more difficult to argue the question rationally. For all the attention that Hasler devotes to the most pronounced tendencies, developments, and structures of the age, he focuses especially on the figure of Pius IX, analyzing him as one would other world-historical personalities, from both the historical and psychological point of view. This is appropriate for the narrative of a period where no one played a more decisive role than this man: Without him Vatican I's dogma of infallibility would never have been defined. (For fuller documentation of Hasler's account of Pius IX and Vatican I, see his earlier scholarly study, *Pius IX [1846-1878], Papal Infallibility, and the First Vatican Council: Dogmatization and Imposition of an Ideology*, on which this new book is based.) In view of the superabundance of convergent testimony from participants and observers at Vatican I, one wonders: Can all the suspicious facts reported here concerning the genesis of the dogmatic definition and its triumph at the Council really have no impact on the question of the *truth* of the definition?

2. *Hasler's book intensifies the inquiry into the legitimacy of the definition of infallibility.* Reducing this book to a mere popularized retelling of how this extraordinary late stage of papal evolution occurred would be to belittle it. No, this is a very concrete treatment of the fundamental questions as they emerge from history itself. Almost all of them had already been discussed during Vatican I or immediately after it, but later sank out of sight, only to reappear with new explosive force in the context of the recent debate over infallibility. Historians may quarrel with Hasler over his evaluation of this or that source, the way he incorporates specific details into his presentation, and similar things. But one would have to trot through history wearing blinders if, after reviewing the quantity and quality of the disquieting material Hasler has accumulated, one did not find oneself asking questions akin to the following four:

A. Was Vatican I a *really free council*? Freedom is certainly a very relative concept, historically speaking. But what if there is evidence that a quite significant part of the Council did not feel free? Anyone who tries to head off the question of freedom at Vatican I by pointing out the lack of freedom of other councils (such as, say, Ephesus in 431) merely aggravates the problem. Non-Catholic church historiography unanimously contests the freedom of Vatican I with respect to the infallibility debate (which is the only issue here). But recent Catholic writing on church history likewise concedes that conciliar freedom was sharply limited — though it generally dilutes this admission with the claim, more apologetic-dogmatic than historical, that there was enough freedom to insure the validity of the Council's decrees.

But even back in 1870 a large number of prominent participants and observers at Vatican I denied the presence of this necessary freedom, and hence this issue deserves to be looked into today. In point of fact, what sort of freedom could there be at a council where discussion had been prejudiced from the very start, where the agenda only allowed a limited freedom of speech and never when it counted, where the pope exercised a predominant influence from beginning to end — a pope whose own peculiar claim to power and sovereignty was the subject of the whole debate? So repressive were the agenda and official procedures; so one-sided and partisan were the selection of the main theological experts and the composition of both the conciliar commissions and the conciliar presidium; so numerous were the means of pressure (moral, psychological, church-political, newspaper campaigns, threatened withdrawal of financial support, harassment by the police) to which the bishops of the anti-Infallibilist minority *and* the Infallibilist majority were exposed; so varied were the forms of manipulation applied, at the pope's behest, to advance the definition before, during, and after the Council that we should not be surprised to see the old question of conciliar freedom, once pushed aside, now coming back, revived by the recent debate over infallibility. As painful and embarrassing as it may be to admit, this Council resembled a well-organized and manipulated totalitarian party congress rather than a free gathering of free Christian people.

B. Was Vatican I a *really ecumenical council*? Ecumenicity, too, is a historically relative concept, but this much is clear from church history: Not every council that claimed to be ecumenical has been accepted (“received”) as ecumenical. And the fact that when its freedom is called into question, the ecumenicity of Vatican I also becomes problematical, ought not to prevent a new, objective investigation.

What the French bishop Francois Lecourtier wrote at the time is confirmed by similar testimony from countless bishops and council observers: “Our weakness at this moment comes neither from Scripture nor the tradition of the Fathers nor the witness of the General Councils nor the evidence of history. It comes from our lack of freedom, which is radical. An imposing minority, representing the faith of more than one hundred million Catholics, that is, almost half of the entire Church, is crushed beneath the yoke of a restrictive agenda, which contradicts conciliar traditions. It is crushed by commissions which have not been truly elected, and which dare to insert undebated paragraphs in the texts after debate has closed. It is crushed by the commission for postulates, which has been imposed upon it from above. It is crushed by the absolute absence of discussion, response, objections, and the opportunity to demand explanations; by newspapers which have been encouraged to hunt the bishops down and to incite the clergy against them; by the nuncios who bring on reinforcements when the newspapers no longer suffice to throw everything into confusion, and who try to promote the priests ahead of the bishops as witnesses to the faith, while reducing the true, divinely chosen witnesses to the level of delegates of the lower clergy, indeed to rebuke them if they do not act accordingly. The minority is crushed above all by the full weight of the supreme authority which oppresses it with the praise and encouragement it lavishes on the priests in the form of papal briefs. It is crushed by the displays of favor to Dom Guéranger, and of hostility to M. de Montalembert and others.”

There is no getting around the questions which arise out of this situation: Did the other “half” of the Catholic Church get a sufficient chance to speak? Were not the representatives of this group in a hopeless position before they started, faced with the numerical superiority of the bishops from Italian cities and overmatched by the pope and the curial machine? Was the quantitative majority of this Council truly representative of the whole Catholic Church, not to mention the entire Christian ecumene? And, at the very least, has the definition of infallibility been accepted (“received”) by the whole Catholic Church?

The drama of Bishop Lecourtier — who ended up throwing his conciliar documents in the Tiber and leaving Rome prematurely, for which reason he was removed from office as bishop of Montpellier after the Council — is an example of the crisis of conscience that so many of the most prominent and best educated of the bishops went through. They, too, left Rome before the deciding vote was taken, and only endorsed the dogma after being subjected to indescribable pressure from the Vatican and from their own dioceses. They often gave their final consent only for the sake of church unity, acknowledging the definition in an attenuated sense and without any inner

conviction. All the books put on the Index, the dismissals, the sanctions and excommunications, all the manipulative and repressive methods used by the Curia and the nuncios, the threats, surveillance, and denunciations, and, last of all, the Old Catholic schism and the “interior emigration” of so many Catholics, especially theologians and educated people: All this makes it seem perfectly justified to ask whether the definition of infallibility passed by this Council ever got anything like a free “reception.”

C. Were *the sacrifices* worth it? The definition of infallibility marked the apogee of the Roman system, particularly as it had developed after the Gregorian reform in the eleventh century. Infallibility performed the function of a metadogma, shielding and insuring all the other dogmas (and the innumerable doctrines and practices bound up with them). With infallibility — and the infallible aura of the “ordinary,” day-to-day magisterium is often more important than the relatively rare infallible definitions — the faithful seemed to have been given a superhuman protection and security, which made them forget all fear of human uncertainty, as well as freedom and the risk that faith entails. In this sense the dogma of infallibility has undoubtedly integrated the lives of believers and unburdened their minds, and most effectively furthered the unity, uniformity, and power of Roman Catholicism. This was fitting for a Church which, as time went on, increasingly came to look upon itself as a “bulwark” (Cardinal Ottaviani’s *il baluardo*) against evil in this world. What could be better for legitimizing, stabilizing, mid immunizing this system against criticism than the dogma of the infallibility of its highest representative(s)? The only question remaining was whether the dogma of infallibility itself was actually legitimized, stabilized, and immunized: whether its own truth was secure.

Up until Pius XII the system seemed intact. Only under John XXIII did the energies which had been forcibly repressed and dammed up for so long come bursting forth, leading in a relatively short time (to the surprise of the greater part of mankind to a new attitude on the part of the Catholic Church towards itself, the other Christian churches, the Jews, world religions, and modern society in general. Things tabooed under Pius IX (such as religious freedom and tolerance, ecumenism and human rights) were now loudly praised as Catholic teaching. By the time Vatican II was under way, infallibility, which had been used for an entire century to defend traditional positions on every trend in modern life, already seemed to many people, in Rome and elsewhere, badly shaken and in danger of collapse.

But, as Catholics realized with fresh clarity after John XXIII and Vatican II, what sacrifices it had cost to achieve the old authority, continuity, and infallibility! John XXIII had named some previously condemned theologians as official conciliar experts, which gave many council fathers pause. Even the more traditional theologians later wondered whether Vatican I’s definition of infallibility might not have been, after all, something like the “gigantic disaster” Hans Urs von Balthasar said it was. Had the Old Catholic schism and the emigration inward of so many educated people, who no longer felt at home in an authoritarian and often totalitarian church, really

been necessary? Had the demoting of bishops to lackeys of Rome, the purges of theologians under Pius IX, Pius X (*Pascendi gregis* and the antimodernism campaign), Pius XII (*Humani generis* and the condemnation of the worker-priests), and even Paul VI (*Humanae vitae*) really been worth it? And all the bans on speaking and writing, the advance censorship and autocensorship, the denunciations and prohibition of books, the excommunications and suspensions, the restricted access to archives, the dictation of policy on church personnel, the Curia, and the episcopate along party lines, and, lastly, along with all this, the self-imposed isolation of the “prisoner in the Vatican” (a prisoner in more than one way) — had it been worth it? Was Ignaz von Dollinger altogether wrong when he wrote to the archbishop of Munich in 1887 that the papal dogmas had come into being thanks to force and coercion, and that they should also have to be continually paid for with force and coercion?

There is no dodging the fact that in the Catholic world church history, exegesis, dogmatics, moral theology, and catechesis have all had to pay a high price since Vatican I for this infallibility, which allowed for no genuine corrections and revisions, but at best “interpretations” and adaptations. It brought on a continual conflict with history and the modern world which profoundly shook the credibility of the Catholic Church; a continual defensiveness towards new information and experiences, towards all scientific criticism, towards all possible enemies, real or imagined. And it created a gap between the Church and modern science, between theology and historical research, but increasingly, too, within theology itself between dogmatic history and dogmatics, and exegesis and dogmatics. Enormous sacrifices were also indirectly demanded of the “little people” — in the interests of authority, continuity, and doctrinal infallibility. The ban on contraception is only a particularly striking example of all the burdens placed on the individual conscience by the teaching presented as *de facto* infallible in catechisms, confessionals, religious instruction, and sermons. The exodus of countless intellectuals, the inner alienation of many believers, the lack of creative people and initiatives in the Church, the processes of repression, the symptomatic hardening and stiffening, the psychic disturbances, the loss of touch with reality, the mighty religious machine whose operations very often conceal the absence of inner life ... There is no point in prolonging the list of complaints, but the question suggests itself irresistibly: Was all that necessary? What good did it do?

D. *Will Pius IX be canonized?* Right now powerful reactionary forces in Rome are once again pressing for the canonization of the “infallible teacher of the faith.” The motives for this are transparently ideological and political, to support Pius IX .mil Vatican I and to oppose John XXIII and Vatican II, and hence to oppose any overtures by the Catholic Church to the rest of Christianity and the modern world. However, the negative judgments of Pius IX by his contemporaries, both bishops and others, are so numerous and carry so much weight that only with difficulty could they be made to square with the requirements for canonization. Catholic saints are supposed to exhibit a heroic degree” not just of the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) but also of the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and

temperance). Pius IX had a sense of divine mission which he carried to extremes; he engaged in double-dealing; he was mentally disturbed; and he misused his office. These negative qualities cannot be changed around into positive ones by appealing to the allegedly providential, unique ecclesiastical vocation of this pope. And then, in addition to Pius IX's notoriously weak theological training, there are his anti-Semitic, antiecumenical, and generally antidemocratic attitudes. A saint for the twentieth century? Discussion here ought to concentrate less on hypothetical or speculative matters (the effects of the pope's epilepsy, whether Cardinal Guidi was Pius IX's illegitimate son, and so forth) than on the undeniable facts which stand in the way of a canonization. These facts naturally make it advisable to suspend the proceedings as soon as possible. Otherwise the problems involved in such canonizations (especially when popes canonize their papal predecessors) will only become even more obvious.

The whole issue of Pius IX and Vatican I gives a particular urgency to the demands by church historians for broad access to the Vatican archives. Of what use was the much-heralded announcement that the Vatican's secret archives would be opened up for the entire pontificate of Pius IX (and now for the pontificate of his successor, Leo XIII, as well), when the archival material from Vatican I, along with other important documents, is still being withheld from researchers as much as ever? As long as the most significant archives remain closed (those belonging to the Congregation for Extraordinary Church Affairs and the Congregation of the Faith, formerly called the Holy Office and before that known as both the Holy Inquisition and the Congregation of the Index), one can only speak of conditional accessibility. Leo XIII, who opened the Vatican's secret archives for the first time, said the Church had nothing to fear from the truth. If this is so, why does the policy of suppressing it go on?

The questions which grow out of Hasler's historical study are, unmistakably, highly troublesome ones. But even someone who would answer them differently from Hasler will admit that they are all, without exception, questions which may, indeed, which must, be asked for the sake of truth and of the Church's credibility. Anyone who finds this scandalous ought to recognize where the scandal is — in reality — and not accuse the man who simply reports about it, and who has the right to a free, unbiased, critical discussion of his findings.

With the critical destruction of Infallibilist myths and the historical reconstruction of Vatican I finally out of the way, the first half of the theological business at hand has been taken care of. But no less momentous than the question of "how the pope became infallible" is another one: "How can the pope (once more) be pope without infallibility?" Here are some thoughts on that subject as I framed them in connection with the infallibility debate back in 1973.

How could the pope "function" without infallible doctrinal definitions? As a matter of fact, we have in our time come to know two possibilities here. There was a pope — Pius XII — who, not quite a century after Vatican I, felt he had to lay claim to the full

power which the Council had ascribed to the popes but which they had never used. He did this in order to proclaim an infallible doctrinal definition, a new dogma on Mary, *urbi et orbi*. Yet none of his other pronouncements were ever so controverted, throughout the Christian world and even in the Catholic Church, as this “infallible” definition. Pius XII had high hopes then that the dogma would foster devotion to Mary among Catholics and help to convert the world — hopes which, thirty years later, we can only judge to have been intemperate. The fact that Vatican II dissociated itself from Mariolatry has made the questionableness of that definition still more apparent.

The other example: The next pope, John XXIII, had, from the start, no ambition whatever of proclaiming an infallible definition. On the contrary, he continually stressed in the most varied ways his own humanity, his limitations, and now and again even his fallibility. He lacked the aura of infallibility. And yet none of the popes in this century had as great an influence on the course of Catholic history and of Christianity itself as this pope who put no stock in infallibility. Pope John and Vatican II ushered in a new era of church history. Without any infallible proclamations he succeeded in getting the Church to listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ once more. This is what gave him the authority he had both inside and outside the Catholic Church, in a way that would have been unthinkable back in the days of his predecessor. In any event, with all his weaknesses and mistakes his approach was more spontaneous than planned, more sketchy than programmatic — he demonstrated in rough outline how the pope could be pope without claiming infallibility: no jealous insistence on full power and prerogatives, no exercise of authority after the fashion of the *ancien régime*, but an authority of service, in the spirit of the New Testament, with a view to the needs of today — fraternal partnership and cooperation, dialogue, consultation and collaboration, above all, with the bishops and theologians of the entire Church, participation in the decision-making process of everyone affected by it, and an invitation to share responsibility. In other words, even when teaching and proclaiming the faith, the pope is most emphatically to see his function as *in* the Church, *with* the Church, *for* the Church, but not *over* or *outside* the Church.

On the other hand, this does not exclude the possibility of a pope’s taking a decisive stand *against* something or, under certain circumstances, having a duty to take a stand. There was no need of any sort of infallible definition in the face of the blitzkrieg in Poland or the mass murder of the Jews: A clear, understandable statement from the “Deputy” truly reflecting the Christian message would have been enough. It is remarkable how seldom the popes have spoken “infallibly” in modern times just when countless millions of people would have expected them to. Conversely, in spite of all his fallibility, the pope can (together with the rest of the bishops) serve the community of the Church, promote its unity, inspire the missionary work of the Church in the world, and intensify his efforts for peace and justice, disarmament, human rights, the social liberation of nations and races, and the disadvantaged everywhere. Without making any claim to infallibility, he can let the voice of the Good Shepherd ring out time and again in the Christian ecumene and far beyond it through his life

and work. He would then become a source of inspiration in the spirit of Jesus Christ and a leader in Christian renewal, and Rome would become a rendezvous for conversation and candid, friendly cooperation.

It follows from all this that the pope can indeed function without infallible doctrinal definitions. He can, in fact, *better* fulfill his obligations in the Church and the world such as they are today without such definitions. To raise doubts, then, about the infallibility of papal pronouncements is not to call the papacy itself into question. This point must be stressed as firmly as possible to correct the continual errors, distortions, and insinuations one hears on this topic. Many aspects of the Petrine office *have* become dubious, most notably the medieval and modern forms of absolutism, which have been retained right up to the present. The papacy has a future only if it is understood in the light of the Petrine symbolism found in the New Testament. The exegetical and scholarly grounds for a *historical* succession of the bishops of Rome have also become questionable. But the papacy will have kept its real meaning if it functions as a *practical succession* of servants to the entire Church: a primacy of service in the full biblical sense.

Such a primacy of service, as we saw it, at least sketched out if not completed, in the figure of John XXIII, offers the Catholic Church and the whole Christian world a great *opportunity*. A primacy based on service would be more than a “primacy of honor.” The latter would be unforgivable in a church that aimed to serve mankind; it would, in its very passivity, be of no help to anyone. A primacy of service would also be more than a “primacy of jurisdiction”: Seen purely in terms of power and authority, that would be a fundamental misunderstanding of the ideal, and if taken literally would leave out the most important thing of all, namely, service. The papacy, as the Bible would have it, can only be a “pastoral primacy”: a service of ministry to the entire Church. This sort of papacy is fully supported by the New Testament, despite all the problems of historical succession which have not yet been cleared up and probably never will be. This sort of papacy could greatly benefit all of the modern Christian world.

I bring this up partly by way of answering Hasler’s question about my own position: Yes, the Catholic Church once was and might once more become a community “without strictly authoritarian management (as in the magisterium’s official monopoly on interpreting Scripture and Tradition).” Free, unbiased scientific research, which obviously includes critical historical examination of the New Testament (see *On Being a Christian*) as well as critical reflection on the relationship between faith and understanding (see *Does God Exist?*), does not lead to the self-destruction of the Church but to its renewal. In the context of this Introduction, I would rather not go any further into the basic theological issue of the Church’s indefectibility in the truth which is admittedly a matter of faith. Instead I refer the reader to my brief “theological meditation” entitled *The Church — Maintained in the Truth?*, which is coming out just now.

There is one last question left: Can a Catholic theologian who criticizes infallibility *remain a Catholic*? Superficial observers sometimes miss the point that excommunication, suspension, or loss of one's teaching post are still real possibilities. They are, wherever they prove effective, still in use. Even Catholic theologians with economic and legal security would find such forms of condemnation difficult to bear. This again is naturally something which only someone who values his membership in a specific community of believers can really understand.

Thus far the recent debate over infallibility has not been marked by excommunications, suspensions, or professors losing their jobs, and such things are not likely to occur in the future. This is not only because, as Hasler argues, individual theologians critical of Rome have so much popularity, influence, and power that they could not be punished; but because people throughout the Catholic world and even in Rome have recognized that the facts at issue and the questions being asked are complex and difficult. The number of doubters is too high. Opinion polls, were they taken, might well show that in many countries only a minority of Catholics believe in papal infallibility. And so the previous attempt to brand the critics of infallibility before all the world as un-Catholic proved to be a failure. The same thing happened with the critics of the Papal States, who were threatened with excommunication but who have finally been vindicated — many of them, of course, only after their death.

We have to make a distinction here. “Un-Catholic” does not mean someone who turns against the *Roman system*, that is, Roman Catholicism, which achieved a position of dominance in doctrine, ethics, and church government in the eleventh century, and which has been continually accused of overcentralization, absolutism, triumphalism, and imperialism, both at Vatican II and in the postconciliar period, by bishops, theologians, and laymen. From the standpoint of the Gospel, there is no reason to reject the notion of a unique role — in connection with Peter and the great Roman tradition — for the pope as servant ministering to souls. But that absolutist curial system which views the free community of the Catholic faith as a religious version of the Roman Empire violates the spirit of the Gospel and is chiefly responsible for the schism with the Eastern Church, for the Protestant Reformation, and for the petrification of the Catholic Church.

“Un-Catholic” refers to anyone who voluntarily turns his back on the Catholic (or whole, universal, all-encompassing) Church. Or, more precisely, anyone who abandons the dogged continuity of belief and of communion in that belief (catholicity in time), which has persisted through all the Church's failures; anyone who gives up on the universality of belief and of communion in that belief (catholicity in space), which embraces all different groups; anyone, then, who falls prey to a “Protestant” radicalism and particularism, which has nothing to do with genuine evangelical radicalness and orientation to local communities. Today, more clearly than ever before, the question poses itself: Does not the infallibility of doctrinal propositions (like the Papal States in the last century) belong more to the curialist system than to the Catholic Church, as it has understood itself from the very first?

The author of this new book on infallibility should realize, though, that any Catholic theologian who tries to make distinctions in his critique of the Church has chosen a narrow and dangerous path, and he is likely to be the target of invective from two opposing sides. This sort of theology, which subjects everything to critical scrutiny, will undoubtedly be abused by the benighted guardians of the faith. Because these people (for reasons one can partly comprehend) would prefer not to have theologians saying their piece in a new fashion. The Church, after all, might lose some of its teaching authority if anyone thinks or speaks about God and the Church except along lines that have been sanctioned by ecclesiastical tradition and officialdom.

A theology that continually presses forward through and beyond all its negative criticism to positive answers will doubtless be attacked by both conservatives *and* pseudoenlightened despisers of religious belief. Because these people (again for reasons one can partly comprehend) would prefer not to have theologians saying anything at all about God and still less about the Church in the world of today. In their dreary one-dimensional manner they have yet to notice that it is precisely the enlightened individual nowadays who can think and speak in a new, different, and better way about God and even about the Church.

Anyone choosing this intermediate critical path will quite likely be taken by the first group for an unchurched heretic and by the second for an ecclesiastical conformist. Both groups say the same thing, the first out of pastoral concern, the second out of cynical provocation: Be consistent. Either come over to our side or the other; there's no partial identity. Isn't there? As if, when you detect serious flaws and abuses in a democratic state, you must, for consistency's sake, either acquiesce in them completely or leave the country. But this is not the case. True consistency is not artificial rigidity — that would be false consistency. There is a course that avoids uncritical accommodation and hypercritical sectarianism, even if it is hard to hold to and exposed to misunderstanding from both sides: loyalty based on a sense of obligation to the Church, but always a critical loyalty, manifested in loyal criticism. That way his duty to the Church and to its message does no more harm to the critical theologian than duty to a state and its constitution does to a critical jurist. Loyalty and criticism, duty and freedom, sympathy and open-mindedness, faith and understanding are complementary, not mutually exclusive.

In hopes of reaching a fair resolution of the controversy over infallibility, the French theologian Yves Congar has called for a “re-reception” of Vatican I's papal doctrines. More than anyone else it was Congar who laid the groundwork for the modern understanding of the Church characteristic of Vatican II. Historical studies (Aubert, Torrell, Schatz), historical-theological analyses (Thils, Dejaifve, Pottmeyer), radical questions (Küng), then the fact of Vatican II itself, the revival of local and particular churches and, lastly, the revived appreciation of the principles of Eastern ecclesiology — all this, Congar maintains, has made more people realize how trapped in its own time Vatican I was. It also impels us “with our Catholic loyalty” to “re-receive”

the Vatican dogmas, and especially the dogma of papal infallibility. Taking into consideration an authentic conception of the magisterium, the best exegetical, historical, and theological studies of the past few decades, the ecumenical contacts (made in such a changed environment) with the theology and concrete existence of the local churches, Congar thinks Catholics should get together with the other Christian churches to re-examine and reformulate the dogmas first defined by Vatican I in 1870 and subsequently accepted by the rest of the Church under the conditions prevalent during that epoch. Hasler believes that such a “re-reception” would, in fact, boil down to a revision of the decrees of Vatican I, which would in turn provide the Catholic Church and its theologians, and all of the ecumene, too, with a way out of a position which has become indefensible and a way into a new future.

Let me take Congar’s suggestion and make it more concrete, not to stir up another round of arguments over infallibility but to put an end to the old one:

Now that there is a new pope, why not have a fresh investigation into the problem of infallibility from the exegetical, historical, and theological point of view, judging the matter with objectivity, scientific integrity, fairness, and justice?

Why not set up an *ecumenical commission* to deal with this issue (as was done before with birth control) made up of internationally recognized experts from the various disciplines (exegesis, history of dogma, systematic theology, and relevant nontheological fields)?

In carrying out this investigation, why not put more emphasis than before on the positive, constructive side of the question and less on the negative, critical side? Why not ask whether the notion that *the Church will remain in the truth despite all errors* doesn’t have a more solid foundation in the Christian message and the great Catholic tradition than does infallibility, and whether this wouldn’t make for a better life in the Church today?

One application of this idea: Pope Paul’s rejection of every form of contraception was based on the Roman concept of the authority, continuity, universality, and therefore de facto infallibility and irreversibility of traditional doctrine. Since that time Rome seems to have come to an impasse on this question, as it has on some others. *Non possumus* (we cannot) is still the response today, as it once was to the demand that the Church relinquish the Papal States. The only way to solve the problem of contraception is to solve the problem of infallibility. The Church’s leadership is all too often satisfied with admonishing everybody. In this case it could, in an act of humility and self-criticism, lend the world some active help by courageously revising the doctrine of the supposed immorality of all (!) contraception. This teaching, which forms the basis of *Humanae vitae*, has laid a heavy burden on the conscience of innumerable people, even in industrially developed countries with declining birthrates. But for the people in many underdeveloped countries, especially in Latin America, it constitutes a source of incalculable harm, a crime in which the Church has implicated itself. High birthrates are linked in a cause-effect relationship with poverty, illiteracy,

unemployment, malnutrition, and disease. In the last two decades most of the gains (by no means insignificant) in food production among Third World nations were wiped out by population growth.

Pope John Paul II has just come back from Latin America with a store of new experiences. While he was there he spoke out clearly against poverty, underdevelopment, and the misery endured by children. He has also indicated a desire to work for greater ecumenical understanding. Is it hoping for too much, then, to expect him to take a decisive step towards clearing up this vexing question of infallibility — in an atmosphere of mutual trust, free research, and fair-minded discussion?

Tübingen, February 1979

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