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Lutherans and Catholics on Infallibility

Few ecumenical issues bear such a burden of history and emotion, but on it rests the preservation of the authentic teaching of Christ to the Apostles. Differences remain, but the areas of agreement are extensive

Most ecumenical statements do not make exciting reading. They are carefully formulated documents, hammered out by the theologians of bilateral commissions. They express where their two traditions find agreement in faith and isolate the remaining differences. Sometimes they have exciting moments. They can find a new, common approach to an old and divisive problem, or they can discover an agreement in principle that like the dropping of a veil leads to a new vision of a growing unity. But generally they are documents to be studied by theologians. However, the recent Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement, "Teaching Authority and Infallibility," is a significant exception.

The question of infallibility is not the most crucial issue dividing the churches today, but it certainly is one of the most complex and emotional. For many 20th-century Roman Catholics, papal infallibility is intimately tied up with their own Catholic identity, yet many of them would admit to confusion about what their church really means by infallibility. For Lutherans, the 1870 proclamation of papal infallibility by Vatican I seemed to signify a finalization of the breach between the two churches. At the end of this new statement, the Lutheran participants acknowledge that they "were prepared for disappointments as they approached this round of the dialogue." What they discovered, however, was that infallibility is not just an "inner Catholic problem," but a question that involves "the very nature and truth of the Gospel, the verification and authority of its proclamation and interpretation and the credibility of the church's preaching and teaching ministry."

"Teaching Authority and Infallibility" is a long 53 pages. It is actually three documents, a "Common Statement," "Roman Catholic Reflections" and "Lutheran Reflections." But the statement is much more than these three titles indicate. It also represents a short course in the development of the New Testament, the Roman primacy, the concept of infallibility and its meaning today in light of Vatican II, more recent Roman statements and contemporary scholarship. In the course of the study, all of the complex theological and ecclesiological issues related to the concept of infallibility emerge. The statement utilizes the best of contemporary scholarship, yet presents its material in such a way as to make it intelligible to the ordinary reader. To suggest in summary form its method and findings is the purpose of this article. One hopes that the complete statement will be made widely available in pamphlet form so that those in parishes and schools might take advantage of its considerable educational value.

The Common Statement

The introduction to the common statement begins by pointing out why the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue treated papal primacy and papal infallibility as separate issues. The two are conceptually distinct from one another. Methodologically, the statement situates papal infallibility within a "broad horizon" embracing the wider questions related to infallibility: "the authority of the Gospel, the indefectibility of the church, the infallibility of its belief and teaching and the assur-

ance or certainty which Christian believers have always associated with their faith."

Even though Vatican I placed its definition of papal infallibility within carefully circumscribed limits, the statement acknowledges that both theological manuals and the popular imagination ascribed a much broader infallibility to papal pronouncements. This extended beyond the requisite conditions for "ex cathedra" definitions. A footnote adds that most popular catechisms (on which the majority of 20th-century Catholics were raised) did not generally distinguish between the ordinary and extraordinary magisterium of the pope. They merely taught that the pope is infallible when he proclaims a doctrine of faith or morals to all. It is interesting to note that today even many educated Catholics who have difficulty accepting the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* on artificial contraception have the misapprehension that Paul VI's encyclical was officially proposed as infallible, even though the Vatican's Msgr. Vincenzo Lambruschini at the press conference at which *Humanae Vitae* was released said that the encyclical did not contain an ex cathedra definition.

The introduction outlines the attitudes of the Lutheran participants toward papal primacy and infallibility. Lutherans could acknowledge some aspects of papal primacy as a legitimate historical development, but not as something taught in Scripture. Their second point, formed as a question, is the key for understanding the Lutheran attitude toward papal infallibility proposed in the statement. In light of the present Roman Catholic reevaluation of infallibility, the Lutheran participants

suggest "that Lutherans may well ask themselves whether the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility, even if not something which they would be able to affirm for themselves, need continue to be regarded by them as anti-Christian and

forms: first, in credal and liturgical formulas, hymns, narratives and catechetical instructions, and later in written Gospels, letters and other books gathered in time into the collection we call the New Testament. Together with the Old Testament,

'Lutherans and Catholics are agreed that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church who discloses His sovereignty through the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments; that the Word of God in Scripture is normative for all proclamation and teaching; that the Word of God is transmitted in the apostolic tradition'

therefore as a barrier to the unity of the churches."

Chapter I of the common statement re-examines the question of infallibility in the broader context of the whole question of doctrinal authority. With the aid of modern historical studies in Scripture and the church fathers, the dialogue participants discovered that they were "able to think in new ways which are different from earlier discussions." Most important for what follows is the emergence of a new and common point of departure for the discussion of doctrinal authority. While Roman Catholics have traditionally approached doctrinal authority from the standpoint of the church, and too often the church defined as the hierarchy, Lutherans have emphasized the Reformation principle, "Scripture alone." The statement circumvents this traditional impasse by starting with the Gospel. God, who has made Himself known through His salvation in Jesus Christ, is the source of all authority for the church. The Gospel is an expression of the authority of God and is understood dynamically; it is not a book, but "the proclaiming of this saving action of God in the person, life, death and Resurrection of Jesus . . . made present by the Holy Spirit."

The following paragraphs articulate the different ways in which the Gospel as the expression of the risen Lord's authority and power is preserved and kept alive in the church. From the very beginning, the Gospel is proclaimed by witnesses, often anonymous, who shared in the authority of Christ Himself. The Gospel they proclaimed found expression in different

this written expression of the church's faith represents a new source of doctrinal authority, which "is normative and authoritative for all the church's statements of faith and teaching."

The statement emphasizes that "the Spirit of God has been at work in every stage of the transmission of the Gospel," especially in the community, which "plays an authenticating role in the reception of Scripture and the Gospel." The "inspiration" of Scripture is to be understood within this community context.

As the Gospel found expression in the emergence of the New Testament books and in "rules of faith" or credal statements, particularly the conciliar creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople (A.D. 325, 381), so also was it served by the ministry of church leadership. Here the statement introduces the "Petrine function," a ministry of guiding and serving the unity of the universal church symbolized in the New Testament in the figure of Peter. Although the statement acknowledges that the New Testament associates Peter's role with the promise of Jesus to remain with His disciples until "the close of the age" (Mt. 28:20), it also points out that Scripture does not give clear evidence that this promise represents a guarantee of Christian preaching and teaching: "Infallibility is not a New Testament term. It is used neither of the Gospel nor of its proclamation, let alone of books, doctrines or persons. Yet the New Testament is concerned with many of the issues that arise in later theological discussions of the authority and infallibility of Scripture, councils and popes."

The statement briefly summarizes the growing role of the Bishop of Rome in preserving and guarding the faith of antiquity. As the practice grew of appealing to Rome for the final word in questions of faith, so also grew the authority of the bishops of Rome. As early as Pope Siricius (A.D. 384-99), popes appealed to Jesus' prayer to strengthen Peter's faith, that he might strengthen the faith of his brethren (Lk. 22:32) as the basis of their own teaching authority. It was not until the late 13th century that the word "infallibility" came to be used of the papal teaching authority, although some continued to dispute the idea of papal infallibility until the definition of Vatican I in 1870.

Both Lutherans and Catholics believe that through the Holy Spirit the church is able to faithfully proclaim and interpret the Gospel to subsequent generations. Both traditions believe in the indefectibility of the church. But indefectibility and infallibility are two different concepts. Indefectibility "refers to the continued existence of the church in all its essential aspects, including its faith." It is not a quality that belongs to all teachings of church leaders. Infallibility refers "to an immunity from error in specific beliefs and teachings." It does not rule out the possibility of a more adequate expression of those particular beliefs and teachings.

Catholic and Lutheran Emphases

Having outlined a common approach to the development of doctrinal authority, based on the Gospel, chapter II of the common statement clarifies the distinctive Catholic and Lutheran emphases in regard to the transmission and preservation of the Gospel.

Contemporary Roman Catholicism emphasizes that the responsibility of transmitting the Gospel belongs to the whole people of God. Within this people, the college of bishops has a special role in guarding the truth of the Gospel. The authority of the episcopal college is exercised in a solemn way at an ecumenical council when the bishops of the world gather together with the head of the college, the pope. For Catholics, the church's highest authority in the transmission of the Gospel is exercised when a pope or council teaches *ex cathedra*; in such a case, the infallibility belonging to the entire church comes to expression. It is important to

note that infallibility belongs primarily to the church. The statement points out that there is no official list of *ex cathedra* definitions and that some points of doctrine thought to have been infallibly proclaimed may not actually have been so.

The Lutheran emphases in regard to doctrinal authority grew out of the experienced need for church reform in the 15th century. Therefore they have traditionally emphasized the authority not of church structures, but of God's Word. "The Word of God has priority: The initiative is God's." Unlike Catholics, who tend to start from the church, Lutherans move from the Word of God to the church. The church is truly church, where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed. Thus the Word of God in Scripture remains for Lutherans "the final judge of all teaching in the church." With respect to the question of the interpretation of Scripture, Lutherans point to tradition in the form of creeds (the early ecumenical councils) and confessions (the Lutheran confessional writings) as a secondary guide or hermeneutical principle.

Convergences

Chapter II begins by stating that "the context within which the Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility is understood has changed." The dialogue participants acknowledge that Lutherans and Catholics "now speak in increasingly similar ways" about the Gospel, the authority of Christian truth and the resolving of disputes concerning its interpretation. What follows as a sign of the convergence between the two traditions is a long list of issues on which the two churches are agreed.

Lutherans and Catholics are agreed that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church who discloses His sovereignty through the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments; that the Word of God in Scripture is normative for all proclamation and teaching; that the Word of God is transmitted in the apostolic tradition, which itself is interpreted "with the assistance of traditions in the forms of creeds, liturgies, dogma, confessions, doctrines, forms of church government and discipline and patterns of devotion and service." They are agreed that there are ministries and structures charged with teaching, supervision and coordination, and with the responsibility "to judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is

contrary to the Gospel"; that "there may appropriately be a ministry in the universal church charged with primary responsibility for the unity of the people of God in their mission to the world"; that this ministry "includes a responsibility for overseeing both the church's proclamation and, where necessary, the reformulation of doctrine in fidelity to the Scriptures." They also agree that "harmony between the teaching of the ministers and its acceptance by the faithful constitutes a sign of the fidelity of that teaching to the Gospel"; and finally, that no human language or doctrinal definition can exhaust the richness of the Gospel or adequately address every historical situation.

The foregoing convergences do not yet indicate full agreement on the question of doctrinal authority. The statement points out that the Lutheran churches are deficient in not having the structures to exercise a universal magisterium: "Lutherans, like other Christians in our present divided state, lack the institutional means to participate with other Christian traditions in doctrinal decision making." On the other hand, Lutherans still regard Catholics as overconfidently identifying the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church with one particular person or office, and together with many Catholics "believe that the doctrine and practice of papal teaching authority are not yet sufficiently protected against abuses."

Most important is the growing agreement on the practice of doctrinal authority. Both affirm the supreme authority of the Gospel, and neither can continue to insist onesidedly on church structures, tradition or "Scripture alone" as the uniquely sufficient source for the transmission and interpretation of the Gospel. A growing recognition of the need to restructure teaching authority emerges. The Lutheran tradition needs to develop the structures to participate in a universal magisterium; Catholics need to provide for a greater participation by all levels of the church, laity, theologians and bishops, in the definition of doctrine.

Conclusions

The conclusion affirms that the ultimate trust of Christians rests in Christ and the Gospel, "not in a doctrine of infallibility, whether of Scripture, the church or the pope." For Catholics, the doctrine of papal infallibility is really a statement

about the church. In their reflections, the Catholic participants note that papal infallibility has been unequivocally invoked only three times: in the definition of papal infallibility by Vatican I (1870) and in the two papal dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950). While important, these three dogmas do not stand "at the very center of Christian faith and teaching" or at the top of what Vatican II called "an order or 'hierarchy' of truths." Catholics "should not therefore regard the Lutheran rejection of papal infallibility as equivalent to a denial of the central Christian message." Lutherans can come to appreciate how developments within the last 20 years have led to a new understanding and practice of papal leadership in the church. The doctrine of papal infallibility expresses for Catholics a confidence in the Spirit's abiding presence in the church. Both traditions need to take seriously the possibility of a "magisterial mutuality," an effort to work toward developing a more unified voice in proclaiming the Gospel to today's world.

At the close of the common statement, both Catholic and Lutheran participants address three specific questions to their own churches for consideration. The Catholics ask, first, for a review of the meaning and possible rescinding of the anathemas directed against Luther and Lutheran teaching in the past. Second, they suggest a new examination of the Lutheran confessional writings, especially the Augsburg Confession, with a view toward recognizing them as valid expressions of the church's teaching. Third, they ask for creative efforts to discover a form of institutional relationship between the

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Catholic and Lutheran Churches that could express magisterial mutuality and perhaps lead to some kind of sacramental sharing between the two churches.

The Lutherans ask their churches if they "are ready to acknowledge that the polemical language traditionally used to describe the papal office is inappropriate

The Catholic participants again emphasize that the doctrine of infallibility is basically a statement about the faith of the living church. They spell out carefully the ways in which infallibility is limited, both in its exercise and in the definitions themselves, which are conditioned by the knowledge, concerns, thought categories

'Recently, Karl Rahner has raised the question "whether in the foreseeable future we are able to expect ex cathedra definitions at all or whether for a variety of reasons these are improbable." However one answers this question, it is clear that any exercise of magisterial infallibility is becoming increasingly both a collegial and a communal undertaking'

and offensive in the context of Catholic-Lutheran relations today." In their Reflections, the Lutheran participants recommend that Lutherans officially declare that their commitment to the Lutheran Confessions "does not involve the assertion that the pope or papacy in our day is the antichrist." Second, they ask if Lutherans would be willing to consult with Catholics in forming doctrinal and social-ethical statements. Third, they raise the question of developing a closer institutional relationship with the Catholic Church in respect to teaching authority.

Roman Catholic Reflections

The Reflections of the Roman Catholic participants focus more specifically on certain themes in the common statement and on questions raised by the Lutheran participants. They point out that the convergences recognized at the end of the common statement, together with the agreements in the earlier statement, "Papal Primacy and the Universal Church," are especially noteworthy. These agreements "may be seen as compatible with a recognition of the universal teaching ministry of popes and councils." The paragraphs that follow are well worth reading in full, for they represent one of the most concise but careful and thorough reflections on infallibility and the issues relating to it available. We can only summarize them in very brief form.

and language of any given historical context. It follows that infallible definitions, while "irreformable" in the sense that their truths cannot be denied, are still historically conditioned and are therefore subject to further reformulation or reinterpretation.

In reviewing the biblical and historical background, they judge that the common statement offers "a satisfactory overall presentation" of the New Testament evidence in regard to authoritative teaching. Yet they acknowledge that some texts, such as Mt. 28:19-20, suggesting a special ministry with teaching authority within the Christian community, have correctly received greater emphasis in the Roman Catholic tradition. In respect to infallibility, they point out that Vatican I did not define the precise sense of the Petrine texts in Mt. 16:18 and Lk. 22:32.

Regarding the distinction between infallible and noninfallible papal teaching, the Catholic participants discuss the difficulties involved in ascertaining whether a particular teaching is indeed infallibly proclaimed. They also point to the "very important difference between the assent of faith, which is called for by infallible teaching, and the religious allegiance or submission which is per se expected in the case of ordinary but noninfallible papal teaching." A vast literature exists dealing with the latter case "and the conditions under which this or that form of silent or vocal dissent may be permitted or required."

The question is raised as to the possibility of lifting the anathemas attached to the three clear definitions in which infallibility has been invoked. But in weighing the issue, the Catholic participants are reluctant to answer in the affirmative, lest the truth of the dogmas be compromised. Such a removal might also "contribute to the 'take your pick among the dogmas' mentality that is already found among some Catholics." Here as elsewhere, one notes the careful fidelity of the Catholic participants to their own tradition.

In concluding, several specific recommendations are offered: that Catholics use an "evangelical discretion" in speaking of the papacy, avoiding exaggerated or misleading titles; that Lutheran Church authorities be invited to participate in the formulation of Catholic doctrine in a consultative capacity; that Catholic bishops and their Lutheran counterparts seek to give joint witness in furthering Christian unity; and that as an aid to this, Catholic theologians and religious educators make greater use of statements issued by Lutherans.

Lutheran Reflections

The Lutheran participants begin by reviewing the Lutheran objections to traditional infallibility claims and language, "their basic conviction of the fallibility of all ecclesiastical institutions and orders," their shock resulting from Vatican I and the hardening of attitudes in the following decades. They note similar difficulties within the Lutheran tradition itself over the elaboration by the "fathers of the second Lutheran generation" of a doctrine of scriptural infallibility. Some Lutherans would regard the doctrine of the "inerrancy of Scripture" as the touchstone of orthodoxy. Yet this threatens the transcendence of the Gospel, with its message that God justifies sinners. This Gospel alone is the basis of the Christian's confidence. Thus, Lutherans believe that "the authority of the church's teachings and teaching office is dependent on the degree to which these further the proclamation of the Gospel in accordance with Scripture."

Although the Lutheran participants "continue to question the appropriateness of speaking of the church's teaching office or doctrine as 'infallible,'" they recognize that the Catholic Church's understanding of papal infallibility is subordi-

nate to the Gospel and that its exercise is becoming more communal and collegial. They point out the need for Lutherans to develop "an effective magisterium." In their conclusions, they offer the following recommendations: that Lutherans replace the polemical language of the past with an attitude of respect and love toward the papacy; that they examine their catechetical and other teaching material to eliminate distorted accounts of Roman Catholicism; that Lutherans make greater use of Roman Catholic materials in presenting their common Christian faith; that "they facilitate Catholic contributions to the process of formulating Lutheran positions on doctrinal and ethical issues"; that they develop structures for regular consultation with Catholic bishops on matters of mutual concern; and that they express a willingness to participate in a worldwide and ecumenically based magisterium.

The statement "Teaching Authority and Infallibility" does not arrive at more than "partial agreement." Yet in relocating infallibility within the broader context of teaching authority in general, the statement has clarified the issues involved for both traditions and led to a surprising consensus on the place and nature of magisterial authority in the church. The dialogue has led to an awareness of the complexities of the interpretation and preservation of the Gospel that is the concern of any expression of doctrinal authority. "Neither the sola scriptura principle alone nor formal references to the authoritativeness of the magisterial office are sufficient." Although the Lutheran participants are not yet able to place the same confidence as Catholics in infallible expressions of the magisterium, they acknowledge in principle the teaching authority of popes and councils as a ministry for the universal church and call for the development of a magisterial authority capable of making doctrinal decisions for the Lutheran churches. The Catholic participants acknowledge Scripture as normative for all church statements of faith and teaching. In showing how the concept of infallibility has been reinterpreted, beginning with Vatican II, they help dispel many popular misapprehensions regarding infallibility. They note that the common statement "seeks to place the doctrine of infallibility in the theological categories of promise, trust and hope rather than in the juridical categories of law, obligation and obedience." At the

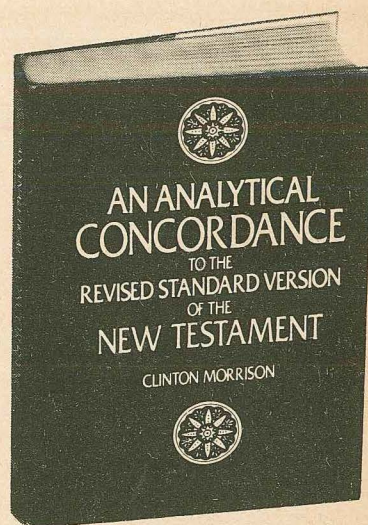
same time, they underline the true meaning of infallibility as the ability of the church to authoritatively guard and express its faith.

Recently, Karl Rahner has raised the question "whether in the foreseeable future we are able to expect papal ex cathedra definitions at all or whether for a variety of reasons these are improbable." However one answers this question, it is clear that any exercise of magisterial infallibility is becoming increasingly both a collegial and a communal undertaking.

With so much agreement in principle, one hopes that both the Lutheran and the Catholic traditions will begin to take the concrete steps necessary for an eventual shared exercise of the church's magisterium.

«Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., *assistant professor of religious studies at Loyola Marymount University and a member of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Committee of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, recently contributed "Catholics, Lutherans and the Augsburg Confession" (2/10).*»

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