

THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

This morning I would like to finish off my talks on the church by looking at the church's infallibility, as it is called. The word infallibility means 'the impossibility of being wrong'.

Let me begin by asking the question: what do Catholics mean when they say things like 'the Pope is infallible'. Many, I suspect, believe that what it means is that the Pope cannot make a mistake when he teaches us about our faith. That's not true. Many popes have made such mistakes. One has to be more specific. They should be meaning something like the following: the Pope cannot make a mistake about what he teaches us when he solemnly declares that it is a dogma of our faith. A dogma is a belief that the church is committed to irrevocably. And precisely because it is committed to it irrevocably it must be true. Why? Because if it is not true then something false will be part of the church's teaching for ever. And that in turn means that the church cannot be the trustworthy embodiment of the God-humankind community it is meant to be. And that means that the Holy Spirit given, amongst other things, to guide us into all truth has let us down – which is unthinkable.

There are many beliefs that Catholics have. Some may or may not be true. Some may be new ideas some may be very old ones. But there must be some core of beliefs of which we are able to say: that is an irrevocable part of the faith that every Catholic must live by. Those beliefs are called 'dogmas'.

So to return to the Pope, when he gets up and says as he did in 1954 'I hereby today declare most solemnly that the blessed virgin Mary was taken up body and soul into heaven when her life on this Earth came to an end" he is making it clear that he is declaring that belief to be a dogma of our faith. And because he has the God-given authority to do so we believe that the holy spirit will ensure that what is defined as a dogma is indeed the truth.

The Pope therefore is said to be infallible **when he defines a dogma** – something incidentally that he has only done twice in the whole history of the church. But this is shortcut language for the belief that the holy spirit protects him from making a mistake when he makes such a declaration. Infallibility is not something like an invisible, supernatural

vestment that descends on the Pope when he defines a dogma. In fact there is no such thing as infallibility existing in a heavenly cupboard somewhere which you can take out and clothe yourself in it. It is simply the protection that the spirit gives the church against committing itself irrevocably to a belief that is false.

Let me make the same point with a rather silly example. Pope X decides one day to declare it a dogma of the church that all roses go to heaven. Since this is not a truth believed in by anybody in the church, the holy spirit has got to stop reading the Sunday Times and make sure that Pope X says no such thing. Perhaps he may call Pope X to his heavenly reward. In the next scenario, Pope Y decides to make a huge solemn declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord and saviour. Since this is something the church does believe, the holy spirit can carry on reading the Sunday Times. There is nothing for the spirit to do.

Infallibility is then not a special thing or quality given to someone. It is simply a name we give to the divine protection given to the church against declaring a falsehood to being a truth to which we are irrevocably committed.

Who then in the church enjoys this protection: in shortcut language who in the church is infallible?

The answer is: every member of the church. No I haven't at long last gone mad. Listen to what Vatican two says: 'the body of the faithful as a whole, [that is you and me & the persons sitting around you] anointed as they are by the holy one... cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterises the people as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,' it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals'. Now the words 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,' do not mean that absolutely every member of the church must agree on what is a dogma if it is to be a dogma. But it does mean that almost all the members of the church must agree.

But even when almost all, if not all, the members of the Church agree that a particular belief is the truth, that does not mean that it is automatically a dogma. Take for example the belief that God created the world in seven days. For centuries no one questioned it (though it was questioned by St Augustine). But that does not make it a dogma. They have to believe that it

is a truth to which we are committed irrevocably. Most people don't dig that deeply into the doctrines that they believe in. That is usually the work of theologians. But the process frequently starts as the Church passes from one cultural setting to another. The core remains (or should remain) but the cultural skin in which every statement we make about anything is clothed is not part of the core, the dogma. Also asking questions can force us to see whether we have clarified what is the core and irrevocable about a doctrine and what is disposable cultural wrapping.

That makes things a bit fuzzy and very difficult to judge from the people's belief alone whether or not a particular doctrine is a dogma or not. But it is crucial to hear what God's people actually do believe in. After all, they have been anointed by the Spirit who has implanted within them the gift of wisdom and understanding and therefore should be consulted on matters of doctrine. Therefore when the Pope did proclaim the two Marian dogmas (on the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption) on each occasion he wrote first to every Bishop throughout the world and asked them this question: is this what your people believe?

However, what is or is not a dogma becomes much clearer if a council meets to discuss the issues that had led the council to be convened in the first place. Traditionally, all ecumenical councils have been called to settle a debate that was beginning to tear the church apart. The end result was the issuing of a document that clarified what was the truth and concluded with a solemn decree as to what was the church's faith in the disputed matter. That would settle the issue and dissenters were to be regarded as heretics. Vatican two was, as far as I know, the only council that explicitly said it was not its intention to define any dogmas or condemn anybody.

Finally there is perhaps the clearest statement of a particular dogma when the Pope gets up and defines it. Unlike in a Council all the focus is on the particular belief that the Pope intends to define is a dogma of our faith.

But let's get back to what the council had to say about the agreement that needs to exist amongst the members of the church for that belief to be a dogma. While the agreement does not have to be given by every single catholic, if a significant number of the church's

members disagree, one is entitled to draw the conclusion that that belief is not yet a dogma. That does not mean it is wrong. It only means that it is not yet clear that it *is* a dogma.

Indeed it could give rise to a situation where some say this is a dogma while others say no it is not yet a dogma and may never become one. In fact the situation already exists in our church as regards certain issues: for the example, the ordination of women and the use of contraceptives. We have here an extremely difficult situation. Two popes have stated their belief that the non-ordainability of women and the sinfulness of contraception belong to the body of beliefs that must be adhered to by all the faithful. And yet in those two areas there is anything but overwhelming agreement amongst the faithful. Cardinals, bishops, priests, theologians and very many laity simply do not believe that women cannot be ordained or that contraception is a grave sin. If anything is clear to me it is that the dogmatic status of these two solemn teachings of the church is unclear. I can see only one way of solving this problem. The Pope should stop banning discussion on whether the Church's official stand on this is correct and instead actively promote the exact opposite: promote as much discussion as possible and see what the fruit of such discussions are.

Finally, what sort of beliefs or doctrines can enjoy the Spirit's guarantee that they are true? The question is important because it shows the limitations to the infallibility that our beliefs and church pronouncements may enjoy. And the limitation is that the guarantee of the Spirit's protection of the truthfulness of our dogmas only extends to truths derived from Christ's revelation. It is customary to say that infallibility is limited to matters of faith and morals (and not physics, e.g.). But even that is not an accurate enough statement. To be more accurate one needs to say that infallibility (to use that misleading term) is limited to matters of *revealed* faith and morals. Thus if a pope pronounces on an issue of natural law that has no connection at all with Christ's revelation, what he says may be very worthwhile hearing, but it cannot become a dogma of our faith.

With that very sketchy presentation of a difficult subject we come to the end of my talks on the Church. I strongly recommend you get a copy of the documents of Vatican II and read the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church. If a group wants to study the document with my help, I would be only too willing to help as far as I am able: provided the group does the work of studying it and I fit in just as a resource person!