

Is the Catholic Church Always Fallible? Gabriel Moran

The answer to the above question would seem to be simple: Every human being and every human institution makes mistakes. Sometimes what a person thinks is true turns out to be false. The reason why the question is posed at all is because the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century audaciously declared that under certain conditions the pope speaks infallibly. Few popes have actually made the explicit claim to be speaking infallibly but there are bishops who are not hesitant to refer to some church teachings as falling within the “infallible magisterium” of the Catholic Church.

The question of infallibility has been brought up recently by the distinguished Catholic thinker, Hans Küng. Actually, Küng has been raising the question for forty-five years but could not get any popes to listen to him. However, he revealed that Pope Francis has been cordial in reaction to Küng’s question, which of course is not the same as agreeing with Küng. In 1971 Küng published a book entitled, *Infallibility: An Inquiry*. He piled up historical examples to show that official teachings of popes have been wrong a good many times. Not surprisingly, an infallible pope was not interested in making such an admission.

When Küng’s book was published it caused a stir, more so in Europe than in the United States. Küng was very disappointed that there was not more interest in the United States in buying his book and debating the issue. Gregory Baum, a friend of Küng’s, told him that not many people in this country cared enough about the doctrine to express opposition to it.

People did not really need the ammunition that Küng supplied to conclude that a claim to be infallible by anyone other than God could not be defended. They thought it would be a better strategy to keep quiet and let the doctrine simply get forgotten. Perhaps that was too sanguine an outlook to think that the doctrine would just go away without many people noticing. But if it could ever happen that the leaders of the Catholic Church solemnly declared that they had been mistaken about never being mistaken, the event would just be embarrassing.

Because the claim of infallibility is seldom explicitly invoked, the doctrine may seem to be of little consequence and therefore not worth debating. Does anyone really believe the doctrine? Whether or not any bishops would be ready to defend the intelligibility of such a claim, they do presume that some teachings cannot be called into question. A Catholic might acknowledge that a doctrine does not mean

what it seems to mean or that the doctrine needs further “development.” But the Catholic must accept without question that the doctrine is true. Thus, although only a few doctrines such as the “bodily assumption of Mary into heaven” may have been tagged as infallible, there is what is called a “creeping infallibility” which is extended to a great many doctrines.

Over the centuries the Catholic Church has pronounced about two thousand teachings as “defined doctrines.” Most of these defined doctrines are intricate theological propositions. The case might be made that these are the teachings that constitute the beliefs of the Catholic Church so that anyone who says they are wrong is simply not a Catholic. On the matter of church doctrine, if you made it, you own it and who is to say you are wrong?

The creeping infallibility gets into much more questionable territory when moral teachings are included. Not only contemporary scientists but ordinary people are ready to contest official teaching on sexual matters. Perhaps church officials are trying to protect some important principles but moral teachings are very specific. The teaching that a particular behavior is “objectively wrong” is always expressed in language that is inherently ambiguous

The language used for asserting a particular moral teaching may not always have been available. Words such as masturbation and homosexuality were coined in the nineteenth century. Did the church always condemn practices that it could not name? The bible has precisely nothing to say about homosexuality; biblical writers lacked both the word and the idea.

Words change their meaning in the course of history; some words drastically change in meaning. Is euthanasia wrong? In its original meaning it was certainly incompatible with the rest of the church’s teaching. Today one has to spell out how the meaning of “euthanasia” has changed before discussing whether some of what people are including in euthanasia may be compatible with church teaching. In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church condemned “usury,” which was the charging of interest on loans; today the church still condemn usury which now means “excessive” interest on loans. The teaching has been consistent only because in keeping up with the change of economic systems the language has changed.

Suppose that Küng were successful in getting the pope and the bishops to renounce a claim to infallibility. It might cause havoc and turmoil. Everything would suddenly be up for discussion. Quite possibly, however, it would hardly cause a stir. Right now many Catholics question church teachings. The old saying that

“Rome has spoken, the case is ended” has not been widely functioning for a good while. The turning point was the Second Vatican Council and the access that news media, especially television, had to the bishops’ deliberations. It was obvious for the whole world to see that the solemn teachings of pope and bishops did not come directly from God but were hammered out in political debate. There were winners and losers in those debates and compromises to get consensus. Nothing wrong with that; it is a healthy part of politics.

The revelation that doctrines were the result of debate, compromise and consensus in ambiguous wording had more effect than the sixteen documents that were issued by the Council. The change may not have hit with full force until three years after the Council when Pope Paul VI dithered over what to say about birth control. He finally rejected the advice of his own commission and published a document that was immediately rejected by a large segment of the church, including prominent theologians.

Conservative bishops do attach the term infallible to many statements that come from ecumenical councils, papal encyclicals, and statements on which bishops agree. I don’t think that their mindset would change much if the word infallible were eliminated from their vocabulary. They conceive of their job as preserving “revealed truths” that were delivered to the church two thousand years ago. A description of these truths as infallible is a near redundancy. If they are God’s truths then obviously they are true. These revealed truths are located in a “deposit of faith” and the bishops’ vocation is to transmit these truths to the “faithful.” It is useless and somewhat unfair to criticize bishops when they are doing what they believe is their vocation in life.

The last two centuries of biblical criticism has done little to alter the assumption that “God’s Word” provides a series of truths that constitute a Christian revelation. The Catholic Church does not tie itself exclusively to the bible so that other truths can be invoked as included in the deposit. In fact, for its moral teaching the church relies more heavily on truths from “natural law” than from the bible. While there is no claim that natural law supplies revealed truths, the certainty that church officials give to their interpretation is not much different from the trust they put in biblical pronouncements. They confidently assert that abortion or gay marriage is forbidden by natural law; end of discussion. The problem is that both the bible and the nature of human nature require considerable interpretation before one can extract any certain truths that might apply to all men and women.

The Roman Catholic Church may be undergoing its severest challenge since the sixteenth century when the Church of Rome was born out of the Reformation. Its confidence in being an ark of eternal truth in a sea of modern fashions has been badly shaken. No one can predict what shape this church may take in the future. The church is not likely to disappear despite its steep decline in Europe and its problems in North America, South America and Australia. But there are many individual Catholics who have had a personal crisis as the firm basis of their religion has been threatened. For many people their Catholicism was not a “denomination” that they happen to subscribe to. It was the basis of their personal identity; they were “born Catholics” or were “brought up Catholic” and they have never seriously considered an alternative.

There are two kinds of Catholics who are having great difficulty in accepting the fallibility of Catholic Church teaching. In some respects the two groups are almost opposites but their relation to the question of certainty is similar. One variety of Catholic is the person who is convinced by arguments about the truth of their religion. They often figured out a worldview when they were teenagers or young adults and since then have steadfastly held to that vision. The world has an order and a consistency evident to those who are open to being convinced by reasonable arguments. They think it is obvious that one can prove the existence of God. From that point forward, reason provides a solid underpinning to what the Catholic Church teaches.

At the end of the nineteenth century Pope Leo XIII decreed that seminaries around the world should teach Thomism. That decree affected Catholic universities too. Both philosophy and theology departments adopted variations on a system attributed to Thomas Aquinas. The philosophy and theology were in remarkable agreement. But the neat convergence of philosophy and theology on the same timeless truth which was assumed by Vatican I began to break down after Vatican II. At present the philosophy departments of Catholic universities are often a bastion of conservative Catholics. They are critical of the theology department in their university because it is filled with liberal theologians who are weak in philosophy

The literature on natural law includes many bright and scholarly Catholics who seem very certain of their findings. It is supposedly a philosophic venture that just happens to provide support for some key Catholic Church doctrines. The writing in this area is dense so that it attracts only a small band who are willing and able to find their way through historical data and abstract philosophical concepts. For writers on natural law it can be frustrating that so many people cavalierly dismiss

talk of natural law. Why can't people see that human beings are bound by the law of their own nature? The International Theological Commission's study of natural law ends with an appeal to people of all traditions to join with them in a conversation on natural law. But people who are not Catholic would probably find the Commission's hundred page report suffused with language from Catholic theological tradition that has been mixed in with philosophical reasoning.

The other group of Catholics who are having a difficult time with what has been going on in their church are people who distrust science and philosophy as a distraction from "the faith." Reason can only take a person so far; what is needed for the important questions in life is the holy, Catholic faith of the saints. Reason might take us part of the way but what finally counts is the "leap of faith," to use the image made popular by the Danish Lutheran, Soren Kierkegaard. You have to take your foot off the ocean floor, said Kierkegaard, so as to float on a sea of faith. The bible presents numerous characters who support an unquestioning faith, from Abraham, willing to sacrifice his son, to Paul who ridiculed the philosophy of the Greeks and preached faith in Christ Jesus.

For Catholics who have accepted "the faith" and submitted to the authority of holy mother church, the changes introduced already and the likelihood of further changes can only be a dilution of the faith of our ancestors. What is particularly distressing is that the present pope has been a chief instigator of some of these changes. He says he is not changing "doctrines" but he is allowing changes of "pastoral practice" that imply a change of doctrines. For these Catholics, the faith is an organic whole, the true religion that God established on earth. What good is a religion which like everything else changes with the fashions of the day?

I think one has to be sympathetic with people in both of these forms of Catholicism. They are trying to hold on to something valuable. Both groups of people are aware that every human being needs certainty in his or her life. There are people who would ridicule the idea that that everyone needs certainty but people do settle into some set of ideas and words that guide them in what they do.

The Catholic Church is still a powerful force that can offer a challenge to think deeply about life even for those who are not classified as "believers." Actually, the division of people into believers and nonbelievers is not helpful. The important questions are what do people believe and how do they believe. The complicated doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church point beyond themselves. At its best "Catholic faith" is not a set of propositions that one holds as true; it is an openness to trust and love, an acceptance of all that is real. It is not a "belief that" a being

called God exists but a “believing in” the One beyond names who is the source of being and goodness.

Beliefs are an attempt to express faith in a verbal form. The formulas that the Catholic Church holds to are the least inadequate expressions of faith. The certainty which we all seek can never be found in beliefs although beliefs are important – along with rituals – to join us in a community of seekers. Certainty comes from a convergence of pointers in one’s life.

John Henry Newman is revered by many on the intellectualist side of conservative Catholicism. Much of his writing can be called conservative. But he was also a creative thinker who did not fit into the reactionary tone of nineteenth century Catholicism. Newman famously opposed the Vatican Council’s decreeing papal infallibility. He offered an alternative basis of certainty in his brilliantly original work, *A Grammar of Assent*. In that work he meticulously examined what it means to believe. Faith is a convergence of numerous convictions that emerge from the orientation of one’s whole life.

Anti-intellectualism is always a danger in religion; academic arguments have been an important part of the Catholic Church. Precisely stated beliefs are important for the long journey of the Catholic religion. But catholicity means a tolerance if not approval of practices of folk religion. To have a certainty in the direction of one’s life allows for a playing with unorthodox ideas and an acceptance of people whose beliefs differ from one’s own but who are recognizable as fellow travelers in seeking peace, justice and a kinder world.