

Pastor Aeternus in Perspective:

Vincent Gasser and John Henry Newman on Papal Infallibility

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A few months ago a Protestant friend asked to borrow my bible. I handed him my black, leather-bound copy of the scriptures, inscribed in simple gold lettering with “Holy Bible.” On the surface, nothing about my text seemed remotely different from his. And then he opened the cover to see the piercing blue eyes of the late Pope John Paul II staring out at him. “Ahh, the Pope on page one,” he sighed. “This must be a *Catholic* bible.”

The pope claims to be a spiritual father to all Christians, and the most recent occupier of St. Peter’s chair surely ranks as one of the world’s most influential spiritual leaders. But the Roman Pontiff is first and foremost the head of the Roman Catholic Church, the visible symbol of the unity of the church for Catholics. For Protestants and Orthodox, the Pope is at best an inspiring spiritual writer, teacher, and Christian witness; at worst he remains “a Man of Sin, a harlot, a mother of spiritual fornications to the kings and people of the nations, a child of perdition....”¹ What especially bothers even sympathetic Protestants are lofty Catholic assertions about the papal office, foremost among which is the claim to papal infallibility. It is this doctrine in large part that explains why the papacy remains for many the “main stumbling block on the way of unity of the Churches” and “the most important ecumenical problem.”²

This essay looks to offer a deeper historical and theological analysis of this “stumbling block to Christian unity” by engaging in a close reading of the doctrine as promulgated in chapter four of Vatican I’s dogmatic constitution, *Pastor Aeternus*. In an effort to further discern the original meaning of the text, the heart of the paper compares two influential voices during the conciliar and post-conciliar debates, Council father Vincent Gasser and reluctant yet loyal convert John Henry Newman. My reflections conclude with a consideration of how Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* changed the context of papal infallibility while retaining the fundamental theological principles at stake in the dogma.

¹ James Ussher’s scathing description can be found in J.F. Puglisi (ed), *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 39.

² *Ibid*, 88, 116.

I. Historical Background and the *Pastor Aeternus* Text

“The Roman Pontiff, when he speaks “ex cathedra,” i.e. when exercising his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians he defines, by his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine of faith or morals which must be held by the universal Church, enjoys, through the divine assistance, that infallibility promised to him in blessed Peter and with which the divine Redeemer wanted His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine of faith and morals; and therefore that the definitions of the same Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves and not from the consent of the Church.” – Pastor Aeternus 4

Before delving into Gasser and Newman’s interpretations of the document, it would be wise to offer a brief historical background on the infallibility debate as well as some initial analysis of the crucial fourth chapter of *Pastor Aeternus*. Called by Pius IX in 1867, the “Vatican Council” (it did not become Vatican I until Vatican II) assembled over 600 prelates from Europe and the Americas. With Garibaldi’s Italian nationalists threatening to overrun Rome at any moment, and with relations between France and Germany strained on the eve of the Franco-Prussian War, the Council labored under the constant threat of foreign intervention. Such pressures partly account for the rushed nature of the Vatican Council, which was suspended prematurely after only ten months in session.³

The most important statement to emerge from the abridged Council was the formal enunciation of papal infallibility. The conciliar push toward defining papal infallibility was not welcomed in all quarters. Catholic liberals like Ignaz von Döllinger (who would break with Rome and form the “Old Catholic” church over this issue), non-Catholic commentators like William Gladstone, and even moderate voices like John Henry Newman resisted a formal dogmatization of the long-held doctrine. These trepidations ran the gamut from political fears (i.e., further straining church/state relations after the 1864 Syllabus of Errors) and ideological concerns (i.e., a perceived sanctioning of papal absolutism) to worries over potential schism and a sense that

³ Historical background information on the First Vatican Council is taken from Stephen Duffy, “History – The Modern Period,” in T.J. Tekippe (ed.), *Papal Infallibility: An Application of Lonergan’s Theological Method* (Washington, D.C.: Univ. Press of America, 1973), 178-79.

ecclesial politics was running roughshod over careful theology.⁴ The rushed nature of the Council also gave pause to many observers, as well as the abstentions of a large minority of bishops at the final voting for *Pastor Aeternus*. In particular, more cautious voices felt strongly that the Council should address ecclesial infallibility prior to papal infallibility, arguing that the latter must always be seen in the context of the former.

For all these fears, however, the 18 July 1870 promulgation of the doctrine of papal infallibility did not have the cataclysmic results that many had envisioned. The Old Catholic movement failed to gain a significant following, and all of the 150+ Council fathers who either abstained from or opposed a draft version of the text publicly agreed to the doctrine by early 1871. Despite the exaggerated claims of maximalists like English Archbishop Henry Edward Manning,⁵ Pius IX himself gave official approbation to the more modest interpretations of Vincent Gasser, Joseph Fessler, and the Swiss bishops. The definition did not mark a decisive change in the substance of Catholic magisterial teaching. In fact, only Pius XII in his 1950 promulgation of the dogma of the assumption of Mary invoked papal infallibility as such. But Duffy is probably correct in arguing for the symbolic importance of papal infallibility, which further entrenched Pius XI's ultramontane "monarchical" papal model and accelerated the 19th century "Romanization" of the global Catholic Church.⁶

Turning now to the text of *Pastor Aeternus*'s fourth chapter,⁷ one immediately notes the opening connection between the Roman Pontiff's "apostolic primacy" and the "supreme power of

⁴ Ibid, 180.

⁵ See Manning's statement quoted in Duffy, 181: Papal Infallibility includes "any matter of faith and morals put into doctrinal form. All dogmatic judgments are included, all judgments in matters of dogma, as the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of uninspired books; legislative or judicial acts, judgments, sentences or decisions, which contain the motives of such acts as derived from faith and morals."

⁶ Ibid, 184.

⁷ My close reading will be limited to the constitution's fourth chapter. The first three chapters sketch out the scriptural roots of Peter and the pope's "primacy of jurisdiction" over the church universal, with expected references to the standard papal proof texts of Matthew 16:16-19 and John 21:15-17. Papal power is described in highly juridical terms, with popes having the right to intervene in dioceses around the world (over and against the wishes of secular powers). In particular, the right to appeal a papal judgment to a higher "ecumenical council" is specifically rejected. An abridged text of these three chapters can be found at www.ewtn.com/faith/teachings/papae.

teaching.”⁸ It is significant that such power is located solely with the primate; the pope’s inerrancy rather than ecclesial infallibility *per se* is at stake here. In fact, one could almost read the text as implicating the church in error, with the pope coming to rescue her through calling ecumenical councils, synods, or other means.⁹ The prevailing assumption here is that Christ gave the “charism of truth” and “unfailing faith” (PA 4.3) not to the apostles, the bishops, or even the church as a whole, but to Peter.

When ecumenical councils are invoked, the purpose is to build a historical and theological paper trail in favor of Roman primacy. Three councils – the Fourth Council of Constantinople (869-70), the 1274 Council of Lyons, and the Council of Florence (1439-45) – are all noted for their inclusion of both Eastern and Western bishops. The effort to portray ecumenical consensus is notable, but the implications might very well overstate reality; it seems a bit of a stretch to make “the Greeks” the main actors at the post-schism Council of Lyons.¹⁰ Florence provides much of the papal language that Vatican I adopted in *PA*, with the Roman pontiff described as “true Vicar of Christ,” “head of the whole Church,” “father and teacher of all Christians,” and in possession of “full power of shepherding, ruling, and governing the universal church” (PA 4.1).

Inerrancy serves both evangelical and apologetic functions. Past popes have “expended untiring effort to see that the saving doctrine of Christ be propagated among all the peoples of the earth” (PA 4.2). The polemical nature of the papal teaching office emerges, with the pontiff’s

⁸ Vatican Council I, *Dogmatic Constitution “Pastor Aeternus,” Chapter IV*: “On the Infallibility of the Roman Pontiff,” par. 1. It is worth noting that the final draft of the document replaced the even more juridical “supreme power of apostolic jurisdiction” with this milder language of primacy. The draft and final versions of the doctrine can be found in V. Gasser, *The Gift of Infallibility: The Official Relatio on Infallibility of Bishop Vincent Gasser at Vatican Council I*. Ed/Trans. J.T. O’Connor (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1986), 9-15.

⁹ Note that the “Catholic faith has always been preserved immaculate in the Apostolic See and its teaching kept holy” (PA 4.2). Bishops reported problems to Rome “so that harm to the faith might be especially repaired in that place where the faith can suffer no defect” (PA 4.2).

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the original draft’s subject here was “we” rather than “the Greeks” (Gasser, *Gift of Infallibility*, 9). *PA* is not totally exaggerating. As Kenneth Latourette points out, Greek delegations at both Lyons and Florence accepted papal primacy in theory, but such agreements were quickly nullified by the Orthodox churches. (K.S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity Vol. 1 – Beginnings to 1500* (New York: HarperCollins, 1953, 1975), 575, 621-23).

infallibility particularly suited to handle “special dangers” (PA 4.2), remove the occasion for schism, and preserve the church “against the gates of hell” (PA 4.3). Rome has used multiple means to exercise this duty, from calling ecumenical councils to asking the opinion of the whole church¹¹ These “means” are kept intentionally vague so as not to hinder future exercise of the papal charism. Following the “tradition received from the beginning of the Christian religion,” the Vatican Council is promulgating the doctrine of infallibility for the “glory of God our Savior, the exaltation of the Catholic faith, and the salvation of the Christian people” (PA 4.5).

The actual definition will be discussed in far more depth below, but a few initial observations are in order. One, as might be expected, the view of authority is hierocratic rather than voluntarist; papal decisions are “irreformable of themselves and not from the consent of the Church” (PA 4.5). In this light, it seems particularly significant that the phrase “universal Church teaching united with its head” was cut in the final draft; this may have been the final nail in the coffin of conciliarism. In *Pastor Aeternus*, the Roman pontiff very much stands over and even against the church universal, possessing “supreme” apostolic authority and the infallibility of Peter when exercising his role as “pastor and teacher of all Christians.”

At the same time, such phrasing indicates implicit limitations on the pope’s exercise of this power. Stemming from the “divine assistance” (4.5), the charism applies solely to the pope’s public office, and infallible statements can only be made *ex cathedra* (a phrase whose implications will be discussed below).¹² To its credit, Vatican I here finally puts papal infallibility in its broader ecclesial context (“that infallibility...with which the divine Redeemer wanted His Church to be endowed in defining doctrines of faith and morals”). The final words of the text make it clear, however, that ecclesial context does not equal ecclesial consent.¹³

¹¹ This latter reference may be a not-so-subtle way of defending the orthodoxy of Pius IX’s pre-definition enunciation of the Immaculate Conception in 1854.

¹² This famous language of “ex cathedra” was also a last-minute inclusion. See the draft text in Gasser, 10.

¹³ Once again, this crucial passage on consent was not present in the initial draft document (Gasser, 10).

II. The Voice of Vatican I: Bishop Vincent Gasser on Infallibility

Emerging from the debates of the Council themselves, a critical interpretation of papal infallibility comes from the pen of Bishop Vincent Gasser of Brixen. One of the leading fathers of the Council, Bishop Gasser served on the Deputation of Faith entrusted with formulating a draft document on papal infallibility. In the midst of a firestorm of controversy, with Italian nationalists threatening to overrun Vatican City from without and dozens of dissident bishops threatening to split the Council from within, Bishop Gasser received the unenviable task of offering the “official” interpretation of the proposed dogma of papal infallibility. Considering the circumstances in which it arose, Gasser’s document is an impressive achievement, notable for its balance, lucidity, and depth of analysis. Like the definition itself, it has also stood the test of time. In its discussion of magisterial authority nearly a century later, Vatican Council II’s *Lumen Gentium* cited Gasser’s *relatio* no less than four times.¹⁴

Recognizing the furor that the proposed dogma had instigated, Gasser begins his statement on a plaintive rather than triumphal note. For Gasser the unity of the Catholic Church is at stake, for the “center of ecclesiastical unity” had become an “occasion of discord.” Gasser worries that he himself is not up to the task, and that “a great cause (would) be ruined by its advocate” (GR 19). Such self-effacing niceties quickly give way to Gasser’s primary thesis: namely, that “Christ the Lord granted to St. Peter the prerogative of infallibility in His Church at the same time as He granted him the primacy, and that this infallibility passed on to all the successors of St. Peter” along with the Petrine primacy (GR 20).¹⁵ Gasser’s argument here will not deal directly with the scriptural case *per se*, but rather on how Peter’s primacy inherently included infallibility, and how this gift was then passed on to future popes.

¹⁴ See James O’Connor’s introductory remarks in V. Gasser, *Gift of Infallibility*, 1-4. Further embedded citations will include the acronym for Gasser’s *relatio* (GR) and page number.

¹⁵ Later Gasser will phrase this as “from the primacy we deduce the supreme power of teaching...from the supreme power of teaching, paying attention to its purpose, namely the preservation of unity in faith, and to the promises of Christ, we deduce infallibility” (GR 61).

The first key distinction between episcopal and papal power concerns *ordinary* versus *extraordinary* power. For Gasser, the “prerogative of infallibility belonged *ordinarily* to Peter” (GR 20) and therefore passed on to his successors after his death. Jesus would not have promised that his Church would withstand the powers of the netherworld if Peter’s authority dissolved with his physical person. On the other hand, while recognizing the other apostles as infallible *in their persons*, Gasser considers this to be “extraordinary” or “time bound” infallibility that did not transfer to individual successors. Apostolic infallibility was only applicable for the initial post-Pentecost period, when the apostles needed to serve as uniquely “authentic ocular and auricular witnesses” (GR 21) to the gospel. Unlike the pope with his “universal apostolate,” later bishops were simply consecrated as “rulers of individual churches,” and episcopal infallibility applies only to the “bishops taken together and joined with their head, for it was said to all generally and not to each individually” (GR 22).

Holding to a strongly hierocratic view of the church, Gasser sees the pope as the unique “center of unity” in the church. If he were to fall into error, the Church would “dissolve, deprived of the bond of its unity.” With this in mind, then, the pope must retain jurisdictional authority over his episcopal colleagues and cannot be limited to exercising authority only in communion with the other bishops. After all, how can the pope fulfill his special office of “confirming and preserving his brothers in the faith” (Lk 22:31) if he is not also *primo inter pares*? Christ instituted Peter, not the apostles, as the bulwark of the faith, and the pope must therefore possess an infallible authority unique and independent from the bishops (GR 24).

Gasser next sketches out the historical argument for papal infallibility, positing that the Roman See’s persistent defense of the faith against heresy offers convincing proof of her special charism (GR 26).¹⁶ He also underlines the indirect testimony of the church fathers, from Irenaeus’ positing of Rome’s “dignity of primacy” to Augustine’s contention that “no Donatist

¹⁶ This argument seems a bit circular. Rome may have fought “strenuously and constantly” for the “truth” of the gospel, but then again Rome always got to determine the final content of that truth. So is Rome infallible because she fought for the truth, or is the truth “truth” because Rome fought for it?

was ever bishop of Rome” (GR 28). Also mentioned are Leo’s Tome, which resolved an episcopal division without requiring episcopal assent, and the 6th century Hormisdas formula, in which Eastern bishops had to recognize the prerogative of the Roman See before rejoining the church. Gasser concludes that “the holy Fathers held it as certain and obvious that Peter, who constituted the foundation of the Church, could not be separated from the Church itself and that the Church could not be separated from Christ and that Christ could not be separated from the truth” (GR 29). The section ends with excerpts from the three councils of Constantinople IV (869-70), Lyons (1274), and Florence (1438-45) (which, of course, Orthodox do not recognize as ecumenical councils).

Such conciliar references raised a crucial issue that would echo until John XXIII surprised the world by calling Vatican II in 1959 – namely, whether after enunciating papal infallibility the Catholic Church would still need to convoke general councils for determining dogmatic truths. On an “absolute” level, Gasser responds “no,” as “Christians of good will can know the truth with certitude” through the *ordinary magisterium* of the church (i.e., the bishops speaking in communion with the Apostolic See) (GR 37).¹⁷ Having said this, however, a general council retains the highest symbolic and juridical authority in the Church, as it expresses the deepest essence of magisterial authority. “But the most solemn judgment of the Church in matters of faith and morals is and always will be the judgment of an ecumenical council, in which the Pope passes judgment together with the bishops of the Catholic world who meet and judge together with him” (GR 38).

¹⁷ *Lumen Gentium* would state this more explicitly in claiming that the “infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme teaching office” (LG 25). In a helpful concluding commentary, J.T. O’Connor notes that such “ordinary magisterial teaching” has always been the standard way of passing down authoritative teaching. For example, the “ordinary magisterium” of the Church had long taught the Immaculate Conception of Mary before the “extraordinary” promulgation in 1854. According to O’Connor, Catholics should not limit infallible teaching to the few modern “extraordinary” examples, as if dogmatic Catholic truth was limited to the two Marian dogmas and papal infallibility (O’Connor, “The Subject of Infallibility,” in Gasser, 107).

As for the definition itself, Gasser begins by discussing the three key descriptors of papal authority as “personal,” “separate,” and “absolute.” While his committee left such incendiary phrasing out of the text for fears of misinterpretation, Gasser goes to some length to explicate an appropriate usage of such terminology. First, language of “personal infallibility” helps to avoid false distinctions people might try to make between the Roman See and its current occupier (GR 41). “Personal” does not refer to the pope’s “private person” or to the pope as a “private teacher,” but rather to the Roman pontiff as a “public person...as head of the Church in its relation to the Church universal” (GR 42). In this role as ecclesial authority, the pope is the “supreme judge in all matters of faith and morals” and father and teacher to all Christians. Crucially, however, the pope only enjoys the divine charism of infallibility *ex cathedra*, “when he really and actually exercises his duty as supreme judge and universal teacher of the Church” by making a “solemn judgment” about faith and morals for the universal Church (GR 42).¹⁸

The pope’s infallibility is “separate” in that he enjoys a “special and distinct privilege” not equivalent to the ordinary infallibility of the bishops united with the Roman Pontiff. Gasser contends that such language does not separate the pope from the church, as the pope is only infallible when he is “exercising his function as teacher of all Christians and therefore representing the whole Church” (GR 43).¹⁹ Likewise, an infallible statement always implies the “consent of the Church”, even if the pope does not have to obtain this consent either *a priori* or *a posteriori*.²⁰

¹⁸ In spurning one of the more extreme infallibilist positions, Gasser here rejects any overly personalist interpretation of the pope as a “particular person who is not able to be heretical.” In his response to Gladstone, Newman will cite the example of 6th century Pope Honorius’ letter to Sergius as a good example of this point. Honorius’ views may have been condemned at the Sixth Ecumenical Council, but they were issued in a private letter and therefore did not rise to the level of *ex cathedra*. “At the utmost it only decides that Honorius in his own person was a heretic, which is inconsistent with no Catholic doctrine.” J.H. Newman, “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” in A.S. Ryan (ed.), *Newman and Gladstone: The Vatican Decrees* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1962), 179-81.

¹⁹ As Gasser illustrates, “he is no more able to be separated from the universal Church than the foundation from a building it is destined to support” (GR 43).

²⁰ The argument runs roughly like this: the “consent of the Church is never lacking from the Pope” because the Pope is infallible, and the body of bishops could not be separated from its head, and the whole Church could not fail since the Holy Spirit is guiding it. “For it is impossible that general obscurity be spread in

As for the final term, “absolute,” Gasser surprises by initially rejecting any easy association of the term with the pope. “In no sense is pontifical infallibility absolute, because absolute infallibility belongs to God alone, who is the first and essential truth and who is never able to deceive or be deceived” (GR 45). The Vicar of Christ can, however, claim a more limited “absoluteness” when speaking as universal teacher and supreme judge concerning faith and morals for the whole church. Furthermore, such a charism does not relate to the pope’s “conscience” but rather to a statement on the “public relation of the Pontiff to the universal Church.” Gasser does not worry about a pope forcing a false doctrine on the church, for he believes that the same Holy Spirit that inspires infallibility will impede the enunciation of a “false or heretical doctrine” (GR 46).

Many of the dissenting bishops felt that the Council needed to more carefully define the *means* that the Pope should use to reach an infallible judgment. After all, what if a pope used nefarious tactics to promulgate a supposedly holy doctrine? In response, Gasser points to the long history of papal “dogmatic judgments,” cautioning against any premature dogmatization of means (GR 47) that could ultimately hinder the pope’s free exercise of his charism. It is here that the language of “divine assistance” rather than “inspiration” should be noted. The former “direct revelation from God” was a unique gift for the Evangelists; the latter method requires the pope to consult with bishops, theologians, and other human sources before promulgating a dogma. In other words, the “means” of papal infallibility are rather pedestrian – no supernatural whisper in the ear, but rather the long, exhaustive consultation, study, and prayer necessary to reach a definitive judgment on an outstanding issue of faith or morals (GR 44-45).

Addressing in more detail the demand for *a priori* episcopal consent, Gasser commends Pius IX’s example prior to enunciating the Immaculate Conception. However, he does not think such episcopal consultation should be mandated as a “strict and absolute necessity.” After all,

respect to the more important truths which touch upon religion...” (GR 44-45). Implicit here is the rejection of any kind of “pneumatological contradiction” – the same Holy Spirit who guides the pope in making an infallible statement also guides the people in accepting it. This order, of course, should be noted.

magisterial consent can often be read from the clear testimony of Scripture, the “consent of antiquity,” the tradition of the Church of Rome, and even through private consultation with theologians. Gasser worries that mandating episcopal consent raises the specter of conciliarism, with final authority placed in the hands of an ecumenical council with no agreed means of resolving inevitable intra-conciliar disputes. In addition, texts like Luke 22:32 and titles like “supreme judge,” “universal doctor,” and “pastor of the whole flock of Christ” signify a teacher/disciple relationship between the pope and his brother bishops (GR 48). As O’Connor notes, the crucial “leap of faith” here is trusting divine providence to prevent errancy even should the pope fail in his “moral duty” to consult prior to enunciating an infallible dogma (GR 52).

Another proposed modification looked to make infallible statements dependent on episcopal reception. In the words of its advocates, “just as the bishops cannot act without the Pope, the Pope cannot act without the bishops.” Gasser agrees with the first point (Christ’s Matthean commission granted infallibility to the apostles together with Peter), but he cannot sign off on the second. Once again, the Luke 22 passage is a crucial proof-text – Christ instructed Peter to strengthen his brothers, thereby implying that there will be times when the holder of Peter’s chair has to act individually for the good of the Church (GR 49-50).

Having laid out his general argument, Gasser next turns to a consideration of specific emendations to the text. For the most part, he continues to hold a firm line on the original draft text. Many critics (including Newman) had complained that the Council was prematurely addressing papal infallibility before dealing with the more essential question of ecclesial infallibility. Perhaps sensing the Italian legions hovering at the gates of Rome, Gasser rejects this line of reasoning, claiming somewhat disingenuously that the “apostolicity and indefectibility” of the Church is “implied” in the text, and that it would be impossible to bring forward all the necessary arguments at this late stage (GR 61). Another discarded suggestion looked to limit infallibility to “negative” statements (i.e., proscribing heresies under pain of excommunication).

Perhaps most relevant for our own contemporary debates is Suggestion #45, which aimed to substitute “principles of faith and morals” for the text’s “matters of faith and morals.” In his own textual commentary, O’Connor argues that “matters” language was intentionally broad, including direct revelation, natural law and the “specific, concrete decisions which the Church had to make on moral matters for which an answer was not found in revelation” (GR 69). In substituting “principles of faith and morals,” critics hoped to limit the applicability and range of infallibility to moral issues. In a deft if slightly underhanded move, Gasser rejected such “principles” language as *itself* potentially too broad, including forms of natural morality that may not be critical to the deposit of faith (GR 69, 82).²¹

Gasser concluded his four-hour *relatio* by attempting to clarify several key terms in the text. Once again, the “subject” of infallibility is the Roman Pontiff *as Pontiff*, a “public person in relation to the universal church” (GR 73). An “*ex cathedra*” statement is not a private decree issued by a local bishop, but rather a formal declaration by a pope “teaching in his office as supreme pastor and teacher of all Christians” and possessing a “manifest intention of defining dogma” for the universal Church (GR 73). The “cause of infallibility” is the protection of Christ and the assistance (not inspiration) of the Holy Spirit, while the “objects” of infallibility are *de fide* matters of faith and morals. God’s purpose in granting the Church this charism is to “guard the deposit of faith.” Finally, Gasser at last connects papal infallibility with ecclesial infallibility. “Therefore not only must it be said that the Pope is infallible in matters of faith and morals, when he defines doctrines about faith and morals, but that this infallibility is that infallibility which the Church enjoys” (GR 77).

Gasser’s heartfelt closing words return the Council’s focus to the fundamental issue of church unity. For Gasser, the “Western Schism” (i.e., the Protestant Reformation) revolved

²¹ O’Connor claims that earlier Vatican I drafts of a potential dogmatic constitution on the church “proposed to teach that the Church’s infallibility extended not only to matters of faith and morals revealed by God, but to all the truths needed to explain, guard, and define the truths which had been revealed” (GR 82). Arguments over this distinction and the range of the church’s ordinary magisterium continue to be hotly debated in the post-Vatican II era.

around one issue and one issue alone: papal sovereignty. When the Protestant churches disregarded the authority of the Pope, they ushered in sweeping tides of change that flipped the natural hierarchy of sacred and secular authority on its head. While skeptics like Newman feared the dogma's ramifications on ecumenical relations, Gasser sees the road to unity as passing right through the heart of the Catholic/Protestant division. "Let us therefore put an end to this epoch, lifting up once again the authority of the Roman Pontiff to that eminence it had in this regard before it was so greatly disputed" (GR 91).

III. The Faithful Convert's Struggle: John Henry Newman on Papal Infallibility

If Vincent Gasser was the official voice of Vatican I on papal infallibility, John Henry Newman was its troubled conscience. While Newman always personally accepted the teaching after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, he balked in the late 1860s at the increasingly likely idea of its formal enunciation, particularly if it preceded a broader statement on ecclesial infallibility. "Since the infallibility of the Church has not been defined, it must be defined, if anything on the subject is defined, before we come to define the infallibility of the Pope."²² In Newman's opinion, most faithful Catholics agree on the pope's role in the church –that he is the center of unity, teacher of the faithful, and possessor of universal jurisdiction. The key theoretical difference between supporters and opponents of infallibility revolves around the issues of consent and reception – "whether that (ecclesial) acceptance is necessary as a condition of his decision being accepted as infallible."²³

²² This quote is taken from Newman's "Letter to Ryder" in J.H. Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Biblical Inspiration and on Infallibility*. Ed. J.D. Holmes. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 143. In a private letter to his ordinary, Bishop Ullathorne, Newman further addresses the distinction between his own private views and the advisability of public promulgation. "As to myself personally... I do not expect any trial at all; but I cannot help suffering with the various souls which are suffering, and I look with anxiety at the prospect of having to defend decisions, which may be not difficult to my private judgment, but may be most difficult to maintain logically in the face of historical facts." (J.H. Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Eds. C.S. Dessain and T. Gornall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 25:18.

²³ Newman, *Theological Papers*, 143.

For Newman, though, this issue also has ethical and practical ramifications. He argues that declaring infallibility would have negative ramifications for internal Catholic life, external Catholic relations, and future Catholic legitimacy. Since the entire notion rests on the concept of *assistencia* rather than supernatural inspiration, it was even more critical that the pope take *time* to consult fellow bishops, carefully study the theology and history, and consider reasoned arguments on both sides.²⁴ Newman here fears that the “party of dogmatists,” led by his nation’s own senior primate, Archbishop Manning, would manipulate the definition to further isolate moderates like himself.²⁵ Most of all, Newman consistently argued that the Church needed more time and more careful reflection before enunciating this dogma. One of his most persistent critiques of Vatican I was what he perceived to be its rushed, “politically expedient” handling of the sensitive doctrine of infallibility.

Newman tried to keep his views private in the period between Pius IX’s 1864 Syllabus of Errors and the December 1869 opening of the Vatican Council, claiming that he had not sufficiently thought through the subject to issue any public opinions. Inevitably, though, the prominent English apologist and man of letters was drawn into the very public debate that was consuming Catholic and non-Catholic worlds alike. This first came inadvertently when a private letter to his sympathetic ordinary, Bishop Ullathorne, was leaked to the press in March 1870. In this letter Newman reiterated his personal support for the doctrine while conveying his deep reservations at its dogmatic enunciation. “When has definition of doctrine *de fide* been a luxury of devotion, and not a stern painful necessity?”²⁶ This in turn reflected Newman’s characteristic

²⁴ Ibid, 143-44. While Newman claims that his opposition is merely pragmatic, he conveys more theoretical concerns. In his “Letter to Ryder” Newman hints at an intriguing “constitutional” argument against explicit papal infallibility. Since the Pope already rules as a “chief executive” with the “fullness of governing power,” it is unlikely that God intended him to have infallible legislative or dogmatic authority as well, as this would combine legislative and executive powers in one person/office and pose too great a risk of “temptation to abuse.” Later he also questions infallibilists who insist on locating the charism exclusively with the Petrine office. “He believes as much who gives it to the *coetus Episcoporum*, as he who gives it to the See of St. Peter” (Newman, *Theological Papers*, 144).

²⁵ See J.R. Page, *What will Dr. Newman Do? John Henry Newman and Papal Infallibility, 1865-1875*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 399.

²⁶ Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, 25:18-19.

emphases that “the Church only speaks when it is necessary to speak”²⁷ and that she lays only absolutely necessary “dogmatic burdens” on the shoulders of the faithful. In addition to these concerns over necessity, Newman saw the definition as having potentially disastrous ramifications for recent Catholic progress in converting Anglicans and Protestants.²⁸ And as Council proceedings made it clear that “moral unanimity” would be lacking in the final definition, Newman also criticized the “majoritarian” principle that appeared to be squelching the consensus building needed to promulgate a truly dogmatic statement.²⁹ Anticipating post-conciliar violence, disputation, and schism, Newman’s initial view of the definition of papal infallibility as “inopportune, uncharitable, and unecclesiastical”³⁰ made him an unlikely future apologist for the dogma.

And yet four years later John Henry Newman would find himself thrust into this position. After years of marked public silence in which he privately accepted the doctrine³¹ while simultaneously lamenting the heavy-handed tactics of the Church hierarchy,³² Newman found himself confronted with the incendiary charges of the Anglican William Gladstone, the once-and-future Liberal party prime minister. In an essay on infallibility and church/state issues in

²⁷ J.H. Newman, “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” in A.S. Ryan (ed), *Newman and Gladstone: The Vatican Decrees* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1962), 183.

²⁸ Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, 25:19.

²⁹ As he writes in a June letter to Ullathorne, “But a moral unanimity is indispensable – for how could we take as the voice of the Council, which is infallible, a definition which a body of Bishops, of high character in themselves, and representing large masses of the faithful, protested against?” (Newman, *Letters and Diaries* 25:138-39). Of course, such episcopal divisions have been more of a rule than an exception in church history, a brief review of Nicea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon makes clear. But as John Page puts it, “however conversant he was with the story of such tactics at councils in the first centuries of the Church, it was quite another matter to be confronted with the real live unfolding of such events and to know firsthand some of the chief actors in them” (Page, 407).

³⁰ J.H. Newman, “Memorandum on the Definition of Infallibility,” in *Letters and Diaries*, 25:151.

³¹ As he says in a September 1870 letter to his close friend Ambrose St. John, “if nothing sufficient can be brought to contradict a definition from Scripture or Tradition, the fact of a legitimate Superior having defined it may be an obligation in conscience to receive it with an internal assent...I can obey without inconvenience; and the Doctor Ecclesiae, whether exceeding his power or not, bids me obey. Therefore I have an obligation of accepting the definition as a dogma. In this case I do not receive it on the word of the Council, but on the Pope’s self-assertion” (Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, 25:168).

³² “The fullest time should be given to those who have to make up their minds to hold an article of faith which is new to them...There are too many high ecclesiastics in Italy and England, who think that to believe is as easy as to obey – that is, they talk as if they did not know what an act of faith is” (Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, 25:430).

England, Gladstone insinuated that recent Vatican guidelines (e.g., the Syllabus and the definition of infallibility) enunciated principles inherently “adverse to the purity and integrity of civil allegiance.”³³ With the stakes raised even higher, Newman worked furiously through the fall of 1874 to compose an adequate public response to Gladstone’s accusations.³⁴

While primarily intended to exculpate English Catholics from any insinuation of national disloyalty, Newman’s January 1875 *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* also contains his most extensive public remarks on the definition of papal infallibility. It is to these latter remarks that we will now turn. Newman first outlines three standards for receiving doctrine as dogma:

- 1) *Apostolic Tradition*: Can one locate the doctrine within the primitive and uninterrupted tradition going back to Christ?
- 2) *Legitimate Superior*: Is the doctrine promulgated by a pope or an ecumenical council?
- 3) *Divine Providence*: Does the history of the church attest to providential approbation (or at least not condemnation) of the doctrine? Does the statement make theological sense?

For Newman, the importance of infallibility for the church’s legitimacy, his faith that God would not allow the pope and so many bishops to err so gravely, and his trust in future conciliar clarification allowed him to assent to the dogma of papal infallibility.³⁵ He is confident that the statement is “without error,” even as he recognizes that definitions will vary in “perspicacity” according to the “quality of men who meet together in Councils, the investigation and diligence

³³ W.E. Gladstone, “The Vatican Decrees in their bearing on Civil Allegiance: A Political Expostulation,” in A.S. Ryan (ed.), *Newman and Gladstone*, 8.

³⁴ Page speculates that Newman may also have broken his silence at this time for four other reasons: 1) the minority bishops all accepted the definition by early 1871, and the chances of the Council’s reconvening were slim, 2) there was no mass hemorrhaging of the Catholic laity, and the post-conciliar atmosphere was largely free of rancor and discord, 3) Newman continued to hold that time (and a possible future council) would resolve any lingering interpretive disputes, and 4) he remained more suspicious of liberalism’s threat to religious belief and increasingly saw an “infallible Pope” as a “strong, universal voice” in the battle with “proponents of skepticism and indifference” (Page, 422-23).

³⁵ His somewhat qualified support is made clear in two statements here, though. One, Newman argues that he accepts the doctrine as a dogma “not so much from a Council, as from a Pope and a very large number of Bishops” (Newman, LDN, 171). Newman continues to hold that conciliar definitions require moral unanimity. Second, he cites the Ephesus/Chalcedon history as an example of God using subsequent councils to ensure right teaching. “Should the need arise (which is not likely) to set right a false interpretation, another Leo (the Great) will be given us for the occasion...” (172).

applied, (and the) greater or lesser experience and knowledge.”³⁶ This in turn reflects Newman’s strong belief in ongoing revelation, with papal infallibility’s “degree of certitude” gradually manifested to the church over time. Newman fully expects this “revelation” to continue in subsequent generations, clearing up many of the hermeneutic problems that remained in his day.³⁷

Newman’s final chapter directly engages the substance of the *Pastor Aeternus* definition. He begins in similar fashion to his previous private statements, arguing that faith is a great challenge and that the church has a responsibility to “contract, as far as possible, the range of truths and the sense of propositions, of which she demands this absolute reception.”³⁸ Newman here focuses on why *ecclesial* infallibility is so critical to the claims of the Catholic Church. God willed Christian revelation to be both “acknowledged and authenticated” and “public, fixed, and permanent,” and God also willed that this revelation come through the mediation of a “society of men.”³⁹ In order for this revelation to be preserved uncorrupted to the “end of the age” (Mt. 28:20), then, God had to ensure the infallible teaching and interpretation of his “feeble company of fishermen and labourers”⁴⁰ through the supernatural charism of infallibility.

If a conflict in doctrine arises, the church must speak with a united voice through either an ecumenical council or papal teaching *ex cathedra*.⁴¹ Newman outlines the stringent requirements for a papal *ex cathedra* statement (e.g., speaking as universal teacher, speaking on a point of faith and morals, and speaking with the intention of binding every member of the Church to accept and believe the decision).⁴² In addition to excluding private statements, such language would also exclude issues like the censure of Galileo.⁴³

³⁶ Newman quoting the 17th century Jesuit Luis de Molina in *LDN*, 173.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 182.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 183.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 184.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 186.

⁴¹ Newman here adds another layer of wry commentary, tracing the scriptural roots of *ex cathedra* to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ occupation of Moses’ seat. In the words of Jesus, “they were to be obeyed by their people, whatever were their private lives or characters” (Newman, *LDN*, 186).

⁴² *Ibid*, 187.

⁴³ James O’Connor argues that secondary moral or religious issues that could “corrupt the articles of faith” may fall under “ordinary” infallibility. In a seventeenth century context, wouldn’t Galileo’s astronomical

Newman spills considerable ink making the important distinction between apostolic “inspiration” and infallible “*assistencia*.” The latter is merely an “external guardianship” that preserves the church from error (As Newman colorfully explains, this is like a guardian angel who does not make a person walk but does “keep him from pitfalls along the way.”)⁴⁴ “Divine assistance” is also mediated through human media, and so there could be a potential error in the process. But what is crucial for the Catholic is that God has promised that “there should be no error in the final step, in the resulting definition or dogma.”⁴⁵

Reflecting his audiences,⁴⁶ Newman also spends more time than Gasser elucidating what papal infallibility does *not* allow the pope to do. Most obviously, the pope cannot contradict the apostolic deposit of faith as handed down through scripture and tradition (as Newman points out, he could not suddenly add the Letters of Ignatius to the canon).⁴⁷ Furthermore, the pope is not infallible in every moral precept, but rather only in issues concerning the moral law as revealed by God. (As he says, the pope could not suddenly prescribe lying or command everyone to be a vegetarian.) For this reason, Newman argues that most infallible moral statements would be issued as *proscriptions* rather than *prescriptions*.⁴⁸

In conclusion, while firmly holding to ecclesial infallibility, John Henry Newman takes a far more “reductionist” line on papal infallibility than someone like Vincent Gasser. Both would agree that papal infallibility encompasses “direct statements of truth” and “condemnations of error.” But for Newman the former will be conveyed in largely “abstract” terms, admitting multiple interpretations and “exceptions in their actual application.” Condemnations are also

theories threaten the faithful’s core belief in the Creator God as revealed in Genesis? I would see the shifting line here as where to draw the line on what constitutes “faith” and “morals.” (See O’Connor, “The Infallibility of the Church’s Magisterium,” in Gasser, *Gift of Infallibility*, 118-19).

⁴⁴ Newman, *LDN*, 189. I wonder if contemporary understandings of biblical inspiration are closer to this notion of “divine assistance” than what Newman enunciates as apostolic inspiration.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 189.

⁴⁶ Page argues that Newman was writing his document for three primary audiences: 1) Gladstone and Protestant England, 2) Manning and the Ultramontanist party in the English Catholic Church, and 3) Döllinger and his Old Catholic followers on the continent (Page, 414).

⁴⁷ Newman, *LDN*, 190.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 191-92.

typically vague, stating that a certain proposition contains error while leaving the details to the theologians.⁴⁹ Noting its approval by no less an authority than Pius IX, Newman culminates by listing the *limitations* on papal infallibility cited in a recent Swiss bishops' pastoral: 1) the Creeds, 2) preceding definitions of the Church, 3) divine law, 4) the Church's constitution, and 5) the "divinely revealed doctrine" of civil/political sphere separation. For John Henry Newman, true Catholics have nothing to fear in accepting this dogma and should do so not in a spirit of "grudging faith," but rather in one of *pietas fidei* to ecclesiastical authority.⁵⁰

IV. Conclusions: Vatican II, Infallibility, and the Ecumenical Problem

Both Vincent Gasser and John Henry Newman looked forward to a future ecumenical council to complete the work of the abridged Vatican Council, with particular hopes for a more complete statement on ecclesiology. This declaration came nearly a century later with Vatican II's 1964 dogmatic constitution on the church, *Lumen Gentium*. Complete studies of the Second Vatican Council or *Lumen Gentium* obviously lie beyond the scope of this essay. However, it seems appropriate to conclude with a brief examination of how *LG* both retained a strong doctrine of papal infallibility yet simultaneously placed this doctrine within the wider ecclesial context for which Newman had advocated.

First, the entire tone of *Lumen Gentium* represents a fundamental change from *Pastor Aeternus*. The tenor is a bit more restrained; Vatican I's triumphal Church beating back the gates of hell now stands "at once holy and always in need of purification, follow(ing) constantly the path of penance and renewal" (LG 8).⁵¹ The *LG* church is not defined wholly through its

⁴⁹ Ibid, 192-93. As always, Newman's illustrations are highly instructive. Discussing the age-old teaching of "outside the Church there is no salvation," Newman points out that even such a seemingly exclusivist statement allows for nuances like "invincible ignorance" or belonging to the "soul" of the Church (194).

⁵⁰ Ibid, 197-98.

⁵¹ The dogmatic constitution concludes on a similar humble note. The Church remains a "pilgrim Church" living in the in-between times, "receiving its perfection only in the glory of heaven, when will come the time for the renewal of all things" (LG 48).

hierarchy; she is first a mystical communion consisting of the whole people of God.⁵² Not only is the ultimate head of this body unambiguously Christ,⁵³ but the “people of God” themselves possess an “anointing that comes from the holy one” and thus “cannot err in matters of belief” (LG 12).⁵⁴ The first reference to the “Chair of Peter” sees the Pope not as battening up the church against internal and external “dangers” (PA 4.2), but rather as “presiding over the whole assembly of charity” and “protecting their legitimate variety” as he works toward building deeper ecclesial unity (LG 13).

The third chapter of the constitution, “The Church is Hierarchical,” deals directly with issues of authority and infallibility in the Catholic Church. After establishing an overall dynamic of “power as service” and “primacy in the service of unity” (LG 18), the text places papal infallibility within an episcopal context, beginning notably with Jesus’ commissioning of the apostles in John 20:21 rather than the *pietra* text of Matthew 16:18. The sacramentality of bishops is affirmed, with consecrated bishops described as vicars of Christ rather than vicars of the pope; bishops “take the place of Christ himself as teacher, shepherd, and priest, and act(ing) as his representatives” (LG 21).⁵⁵ Both pope and bishops serve as a “visible source and foundation for unity” (LG 24). This “collegiate structure of the ecclesiastical order” (LG 22) is perhaps the most striking differences in emphasis between PA and LG.⁵⁶

Having said this, those looking to Vatican II to overturn or substantially modify papal infallibility will go away disappointed. For all of this talk of collegiality, the body of bishops has

⁵² Note the initial two chapters on “The Church as Mystery” and “The Church as the People of God.”

⁵³ Note the references to Col 1:15-18 and Eph 1:18-23 in LG 7.

⁵⁴ This infallibility is expressed as the *sensus fidei* when the whole people “from the bishops to the last of the faithful manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals” (LG 12). In other words, the laity are never placed over and against the hierarchy; both stand together as crucial members with differing functions within the people of God.

⁵⁵ Quoting Luke 10:16, the text also states that “whoever listens to them is listening to Christ and whoever despises them despises Christ and him who sent Christ” (LG 20). Later *LG* explicitly says that “bishops are not to be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiff; for they exercise the power which they possess in their own right and are called in the truest sense of the term prelates of the people whom they govern” (LG 26).

⁵⁶ The Christocentric roots of the apostolic mandate are also more explicit here than in *Pastor Aeternus* – “the apostles gather the universal church, which the Lord founded upon the apostles and built upon blessed Peter their leader, the chief corner-stone being Christ Jesus himself” (LG 19).

“no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff” (LG 22). As always, the Pope must summon, preside over, and confirm ecumenical councils. LG 25 basically repeats the definition from Vatican I verbatim,⁵⁷ with the notable exception of transferring the locus of infallibility from the Roman pontiff to the Church as a whole.⁵⁸ In some ways papal authority is extended even further as the Council fathers advise the faithful on how to respond to the “ordinary” magisterial teaching of the papal office. “The loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra*...” (LG 25). In sum, Vatican II may have provided the ecclesial and episcopal context that Newman and many of the reluctant Vatican I fathers desired, but it in no way challenged the basic principle of papal infallibility that *Pastor Aeternus* enunciated.

This brief review of the relevant texts of *Pastor Aeternus* and *Lumen Gentium*, complemented by the erudite commentaries of Vatican I contemporaries Vincent Gasser and John Henry Newman, have hopefully clarified what the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility is *not*. Exaggerated claims that the pope possesses infallibility in his private person or with every statement he utters have been debunked. Important distinctions between apostolic “inspiration” and infallible “divine assistance” have been made. The central premise that infallibility protects the truth of the Church’s gospel proclamation has surely been reinforced.

And yet I doubt that this study will fully convince sympathetic Protestants and Orthodox of, to paraphrase Gasser, the “strict and absolute necessity” of the dogma of papal infallibility. Less sympathetic ears might even continue condemning the idea as sheer heresy (or at least an

⁵⁷ Cf. LG 25: The Roman Pontiff enjoys infallibility “in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful – who confirms his brethren in the faith (Lk 22:32) – he proclaims in an absolute decision a doctrine pertaining to faith and morals.” Such promulgations are “irreformable by their very nature and not by reason of the assent of the church,” as they were made with the “assistance of the Holy Spirit promised to him in the person of blessed Peter.”

⁵⁸ Cf. LG 25: “The Church’s charism of infallibility is present in a singular way” in the Pope.” This is echoed shortly thereafter when the text addresses the nature of “ordinary” magisterial infallibility: “infallibility *promised to the Church* is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme teaching office” (LG 25, my emphases).

anachronistic misappropriation of Christ's words to a Peter who is, after all, compared to Satan in the same Matthew 16 dialogue). Even the recent voices from J.F. Puglisi's "patient and fraternal dialogue" would surely balk at the interpretations put forward by Gasser, Newman, and *Lumen Gentium*.⁵⁹ The question we must ask ourselves is simple: is there a way forward? Is there a way for the pope to "exercise the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation"?⁶⁰ Or does the "the way in which the pontifical office is currently exercised" remain "totally unthinkable" for other Christians?⁶¹ In other words, is the papal office destined to remain a rod of ecumenical division or a means to greater Christian unity?

In this light, perhaps we would do well to heed Newman's advice to begin a few steps earlier than the pope. All Christians at some point have to "give a reason for the hope that is in us," and this requires reliable sources and authorities. Most Christians therefore accept the notion of infallibility at some level, even if they refer to this charism as the "inerrancy of scripture." I would argue for the priority of the church to scripture, and I believe that many other Christians could accept this principle to some degree (at least to the extent of passing down oral tradition, determining the canon, and providing an interpretive community which guides and shapes our reading of the text). In turn, the need for an ecclesial charism of inerrancy seems particularly acute in light of the post-Reformation history of the Christian church, with an often-dizzying array of traditions claiming their teachings as the "gospel truth." One can, in good post-modern fashion, simply accept this plurality of views, positing that God is much bigger than any of our meager efforts at explaining God's revelation. But at the end of the day, such an apophatic

⁵⁹ I think especially of the Orthodox commentators (Popescu, Zizoulas, and Krikorian) with their strong emphasis on an ecclesiology of "*koinonia*" rather than "*monarchia*," with jurisdictional power and authority located in the ecumenical council rather than the Roman Pontiff. See J.F. Puglisi (ed), *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 97-134.

⁶⁰ The quote is taken from the current occupier of Peter's chair, John Paul II, in his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (par. 95).

⁶¹ E. Geldbach, "The Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: A Baptist Perspective," in Puglisi, *Petrine Ministry*, 169.

posture is intellectually and spiritually unsatisfying. It not only sidesteps the foundational faith question of how to relate our perceived reality to God's reality, but it fails to grapple sufficiently with the Christian belief that God has revealed God's self through human means.

Newman then is right to begin the conversation with the *church's* infallibility. At some point along the way, whether with scripture, creeds, or the 1854 doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, every Christian has to admit that the "church got it right." And yet as far too many Christians could readily express, the church has "feet of clay," more than revealing in her two-millennia pilgrimage her "need for purification" (LG 20). And so perhaps the key is to recapture the theocentric dimensions of the question. Would *God* leave *God's* church without a "charism" for discerning the truth of the gospel? Would *God* allow *God's* people to fall into error with no means of recourse? Would *God* simply allow "fallible humans" to stumble rather than offer "supernatural infallible guidance?"⁶²

Having established the need for *God's gift* of infallibility to the Church, the question returns to "means," to how this gift is mediated. Perhaps here a key interpretive lens might be the "scandalous particularity of the incarnate Christ." The central claim of the Christian faith is that God became incarnate in the man Jesus Christ in order to save the world from its own self-imposed alienation from God. The familiarity of this claim should not remove the sheer scandal of it. The Catholic Church in turn believes that God has given the Roman pontiff a special charism to help protect the church's apostolic deposit of faith concerning the revelation of Jesus Christ. Likewise, whatever the scriptural evidence, historical orthodoxy, and contemporary witness of the papacy, Roman claims to primacy, juridical authority, and infallibility surely ring scandalous in many democratic ears. "*How can one person be trusted...?*"

At the end of the day, then, the key leap of faith may be a scandalous (if not irrational) *trust* in God's usage of the Bishop of Rome to help ensure the inerrant teaching of God's church. The scriptural evidence can be analyzed; the historical record, particularly the pope's role in

⁶² Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 185.

combating heresy, is there for the viewing; the theological reasons are evident if not wholly conclusive; and the recent witness of a truly remarkable pope offers experiential testimony. But the leap of faith remains daunting; it remains as Newman says a “difficult virtue.”⁶³ Despite my skepticism, I would not advocate giving up the ecumenical dialogue on the subject of the Petrine office. But perhaps all Christians need to remind themselves yet again that the key to the fraternal dialogue is not necessarily to speak first, but rather to listen to each other in prayer, trusting that God will ultimately lead us into all truth.

⁶³ Newman, LDN, 185.

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