

Reviews

INFALLIBILITY: THE CROSSROADS OF DOCTRINE by Peter Chirico, SS. *Sheed & Ward, 1977. £9.50.*

The author rightly complains that the doctrine of infallibility tends to be treated either with the limited perspectives and presuppositions of the old manuals, or as effectively false in the manner of so many modern writers. But he points out how Protestant and Orthodox Christians, just as much as Roman Catholics, are aware that Christianity has a central and enduring content which remains the same in time and space and through the many linguistic and cultural differences of its expression in the past and present. He maintains that one can only get a just view of the doctrine of infallibility if one regards it as a means by which these enduring elements, short of which Christianity would cease to be itself, may be identified. Once this has been grasped, it may be seen that infallibility actually fosters pluralism within the Church, rather than being inimical to it as is so often supposed; 'once one knows what cannot be given away or changed, one is more easily able to accept and appreciate differences which do not deny these essentials but fulfill them in a unique way.'

By way of background to consideration of the doctrine itself, the author very reasonably devotes a couple of chapters to problems of interpretation as such. After all, the Christian faith comes to us largely through texts written in the past; and it is therefore important to have some idea of what it is to come to a correct view of what is really meant by such texts, and how they can be of significance to men of very different cultural backgrounds from those against which the texts were written.

The results arrived at are drawn out in an account of how texts should be dealt with in theology, and of some of the special pitfalls which are to be avoided. There follows an investigation of the meaning and implications of the central Christian proclamation, of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which it is the business of an infallible *magisterium* to protect and attest; and an attempt to demonstrate their relevance for the authentic human development of all men everywhere.

Fr. Chirico welcomes the new situation within the Church whereby a greater variety of expressions of Christian faith are tolerated than was the case in former times; this variety is the inevitable outcome of 'the attempt to root the lasting meaning of the Christian tradition in a multiplicity of cultures and subcultures.' This goes with a more positive evaluation of the heretics of the past, as struggling, however unsuccessfully, to provide answers to questions which inevitably arose as the faith was carried to new cultures and had to commend itself in their terms. In such a situation, dogmatic definitions may be seen to have an importance even greater than they had formerly, as 'formulations that are recognised by the Church to represent its conscious grasp of the transcultural meanings that constitute its unity over space and time.'

All in all, the book seems to me a very useful treatment of a notoriously contentious matter, and one which does not shirk the issues in the ways which have become fashionable over the last few years.

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