

TWO NOTES ON INFALLIBILITY

MY DEAR ———

I always prefer persons to objections. Objections are neither born nor settled *in vacuo*. They are the offspring of either *X* or *Y* or *Z*, who have a complex mental soil impossible to detect from a stray objection. Nevertheless, with no confidence in my ultimate success, I will do my best to be of use.

(a) Does your correspondent believe in the infallibility of the Bible?

If he does not believe in the infallibility of the Bible, then his difficulty is doubtless with the idea of objective infallibility. To bring his mind to the level of thought would require time and prayer. But there is no more inherent difficulty in objective infallibility than in subjective.

If he does believe in the infallibility of the Bible, then he has overcome the difficulty which you report him to have. He has contrived with his human reason to prove or accept an objective infallibility. I think it was Chillingworth who made great use of this objection against Papal Infallibility. He did not seem to see that he was in the same boat as the Papist. An agnostic or a Quaker might fairly say to him, ' Good Mr. Chillingworth, of what use is thine infallible Bible if it needs an infallible reason to demonstrate it? And if thy reason is infallible in this most important matter, why not go on to trust it as infallible in others? '

(b) The doctrine of Catholics demands one certain judgment, namely :

(1) The Church of God in its official teaching through Councils, etc., or Bible cannot err.

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The doctrine of Private Judgment demands more than one certain judgment, namely :

(1) The Bible cannot err.

(2) I cannot err when I interpret the Bible.

You will see that 'Private Judgment,' unless it mean the denial of objective infallibility, has all the difficulties of the Catholic doctrine *and others besides*. It out-herods Herod.

If your correspondent gave you his opinion on these points, I should have a fuller understanding of his point of view. As far as I can see, but I may be mistaken, he is really accepting in his subconsciousness the objections which look so strong against the accurate Catholic doctrine. To attempt an answer to his difficulties would probably complicate his mind still further.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

MY DEAR ———

I have several things to say. To make them clear I will set them under several heads.

I

'Private Judgment' may mean two things :

(a) The Protestant theory which was rife in the sixteenth century. It held three distinct doctrines :

(1) There is an objective Revelation.

(2) The objective Revelation is in the Bible.

(3) This objective Revelation is to be examined, understood and finally judged, not by Tradition nor Church, but by 'private judgment.'

(b) The purely rationalistic theory containing two points :

(1) It is not certain that there is an objective Revelation.

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(2) If there is an objective Revelation the ultimate judge of the so-called doctrines is 'Private Judgment.'

You will see at once that this is not Christianity, but pure Rationalism. Now to which of these two classes does your friend belong? If he holds the Protestant theory, then he has already overcome all the difficulties he is urging against you. He has accepted an objective infallibility. If he holds the rationalist theory, then he is not really a Christian but a Rationalist.

II

Does he hold that Jesus Christ was the Way, the Truth, and the Life? Does he, therefore, hold that Jesus Christ was infallible?

If he holds that Jesus Christ is infallible, then he has broken through his subjective infallibility into an objective infallibility. That is, he has solved all the difficulties he urges against you.

If he holds that Jesus Christ is not infallible, then he is not a Christian. He cannot echo St. Peter's essential words, 'To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'

III

The word 'Infallibility' frightens people. It is really no more in psychology than 'certainty.' It does not mean 'omniscience.' It is qualitative rather than quantitative. Thus it is partial. It may be in one sphere and not in another, or at one time and not at another. Psychologically we may be certain (*i.e.*, infallible) in the matter of principles, and extremely uncertain (*i.e.*, fallible) in the application of principles to concrete cases. For example, I may be quite certain upon the commandment 'Thou shalt not steal,'

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and extremely uncertain whether this particular kind of bargain or speculation is theft.

Or I may be quite certain that *X* is my friend and will do me nothing but good. Yet I may be extremely uncertain what he may do to me. And when he is doing it, it may take me all my time to feel that it is meant for my good.

We ourselves have a natural and limited infallibility. This is pure psychology. Our outer senses are infallible *per se* in judging on their own particular object, namely our ear in hearing, our eye in seeing. But we cannot argue that, because a faculty is infallible in one sphere it is infallible in every sphere. We cannot argue that, because the ear is infallible in detecting sounds, it is infallible in detecting colour.

So, too, our intuitions and reasonings have a natural and limited infallibility. Our intuitions in the sphere of ethics may be quite valid and in the sphere of dogma quite invalid. We may be able to discern by intuition that 'It is wrong to steal.' But no amount of intuition should convince us that the *Δόγος* is or is not *ἰσοσύσιος*.

So, too, we may be quite certain that Jesus Christ has the Words of Eternal Life—*i.e.*, is infallible—yet we may not know what those words will be, and when we hear them we take them to be true without seeing that they are true, for we have no means of judging of their truth, except His own divine truthfulness, of which we are certain.

IV

Now this subjective infallibility is not omniscience. It is in a certain definite sphere. It operates in the sphere of dogmatic principles, and formulates certain inarticulate articles which are '*Semina credendi*,' *e.g.* 'There is a God,' 'God is Truth and Goodness,' 'My

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soul is a spirit,' 'I do not know everything,' 'God knows everything,' 'God can speak to man,' 'If God speaks to man, man should hearken,' 'If God commands, man should obey,' etc.

This natural and limited human infallibility becomes supernaturalised and divine when helped by God's grace. 'I believe, help my unbelief,' is the cry for God's help to transform human into divine certainty.

Yet even after the transformation, man's infallibility remains limited. It is confined to dogmatic and ethical principles and does not extend to the '*Articuli Fidei*,' the revelation made by God through Jesus Christ.

V

Even the objective infallibility of the visible Church is limited. It does not extend to everything nor work anyhow.

It is merely in the sphere of faith and morals, and in that part of faith which actually has been revealed. I take it that endless mysteries of God never have been revealed. Over these the limited infallibility of the Church has no jurisdiction.

And thus I should think that the difficulties teasing the mind of X will be found to have a way out. We have our natural limited infallibility. It can operate in a certain sphere and hand us over to an objective infallibility. We can lawfully break out from the subjective to the objective.

It is the old problem of Realism, and realism is the act of divine daring whereby a man with violence takes possession of the Kingdom of thought.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.