

THE FALLIBILITY OF DR SALMON

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MANY years ago, when I was unsettled about the Anglican position, I read Salmon's *Infallibility*¹ with great care. It had been recommended to me as 'a devastatingly unanswerable criticism of the validity of the Roman claims'.

Though I did not realise it then, this book was a determining factor in my decision to become a Catholic. I had read at the same time Wilfrid Ward's *Life of Cardinal Newman* and Newman's own *Essay on Development*, the classical exposition in English of the doctrine of tradition. I saw at once that the infallibility which Salmon was attacking was not the infallibility which the Catholic Church claims and which had been defined with greater precision by the Vatican Council. I realised, too, that when Salmon wrote of tradition he meant something different from the tradition so clearly analysed and cogently expounded by Newman.

I knew that according to Catholic theology reason can go so far as to show the consonance of revealed truth with knowledge acquired by reason, and even to infer that what is revealed is true and should be believed. The assent of faith however is supernatural and cannot be produced by such knowledge, but is wholly dependent on the word of God in revelation. It was plain that Salmon had no clear conception of this distinction and was in constant confusion about the respective functions of faith and reason. These major defects in his understanding of what would be the classical Catholic position, if Newman rightly represented it, seemed to me to vitiate almost the whole of Salmon's massive and laborious argumentation. In spite too of his wide learning I could see that in one matter at least he was capable of serious misrepresentation. He had attributed to

1 *The Infallibility of the Church*, by George Salmon, D.D., abridged and edited by H. F. Woodhouse, B.D., with a preface by Bishop Walter Carey. (John Murray; 10s. 6d.)

Newman not simply the opinion that a definition of infallibility would be inopportune, but the belief that the doctrine itself was 'an entire innovation on the traditional teaching of the Church and absolutely contradicted by the facts of history'. His exposition also of Newman's subsequent arguments in defence of the infallibility defined appeared to me little less than a caricature. It is strange that, with the facts accessible to him, a scholar of Dr Salmon's standing should have allowed himself to fall into such errors and still stranger that his editor in this new issue of the book has reprinted them without comment.

And now on reading *The Infallibility of the Church* again I find my impressions of nearly forty years ago greatly reinforced. Although the thesis of the book is the infallibility of the Church, Dr Salmon constantly treats of papal infallibility as a gift so personal to the Pope as to have little reference to the possession of the *depositum fidei* by the members of the Mystical Body. In consequence he seems to think of the Pope's infallibility as if it were a kind of inspiration, personal to himself, enabling him to decide theological controversies out of hand and give ready-made oracular answers to every kind of question asked or doubt raised. He then criticises the Popes for their failure to do this, or, on the rare occasions when it is alleged that something of the kind was attempted and a wrong decision given, as in the case of Galileo, he blames them for the deficiencies of an infallibility they were not exercising.

Personal infallibility has never been claimed for the Pope in his day-to-day guidance of the Church. Indeed the present Pope expressly disclaims such infallibility in the recent encyclical *Humani Generis* when he says that in writing encyclicals the Popes do not exercise their teaching authority to the full. The day-to-day teaching of the Church claims our assent *ipso facto*; not the assent of faith directly engaged with its immediate interest, divine truths revealed, but a religious assent based on the obedience we owe to divinely commissioned authority. This assent demands obedience always and an attitude of mind deeper than merely outward respect, at least where what is proposed is bound up with already defined doctrine. History shows

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occasions, as Salmon is not slow to point out, when the day-to-day teaching of the Church has contained elements which needed correction in the light of subsequent knowledge. But he is quite wide of the mark when he attempts to place these within the scope of the Church's infallibility.

The *depositum fidei* is a living possession of the whole body of the faithful, growing under the power of the Holy Spirit in the very process of being lived, so that the mind of the Church continually penetrates more deeply into the Faith, drawing out what lies implicit in it. At the same time it assimilates the fruits of human knowledge by relating it to divine truth and finding a rightful place for it in the changing setting in which unchanging revelation must be apprehended. In this assimilating process tensions must occur, caused by the slowness of human perception in relating the extending range of secular knowledge to the truths of faith. In this the hierarchy have a duty, under divine guidance, to teach truth and protect from error with authority; but not, day by day, with officially infallible authority. This comes into play only when it is seen to be expedient to make true faith clear in face of prevalent error or to decide when doctrine has come by normal development to be recognised explicitly as part of the deposit of faith.

Closely connected with Dr Salmon's error about infallibility is his equally misleading view of the nature of tradition. The Council of Trent defined that the saving truth communicated by Christ to his Apostles, or brought to their minds by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, is contained in the Scriptures and in unwritten traditions, and that equal reverence is to be given to both. (Denzinger 783.) Dr. Salmon thinks of these unwritten traditions as a body of truths, not found in Scripture, but handed down from the Apostles orally and even in secret. He attacks doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception, and indeed the whole body of Mariology, because believing them to be in no way scriptural, he misunderstands the claim that they are supported by tradition. The ecclesiastical writers of the first centuries record no tradition of the kind he looks for, and he concludes that the appeal to tradition is baseless because no such traditions existed.

But the *depositum fidei* in the Catholic conception of tradition did not contain all truth explicitly from the beginning. The Apostolic *kerygma*, the gospel, the word of salvation, was carried to the Jew first and then to the Gentile by word of mouth. As the Church spread the apostolic witness was written down, under divine inspiration, in Epistles and Gospels. All that was necessary to salvation was at least implicit in this written word of God, rooted as it was in the Old Testament Scriptures. But even during the earliest days, when the New Testament was in the making, there was in progress a deeper understanding and development of the *depositum fidei* by the Apostles themselves and their converts. It is hardly possible to read in the *Acts of the Apostles* of the judaising controversy without realising this; already, under the continuing influence of the Holy Spirit, truth that had been implicit in their message was becoming explicit; 'It hath seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us' (Acts vii, 28). Doubtless too when the written tradition was complete there remained an inheritance of unwritten knowledge of the Master's thought and intentions, apostolic in origin and retained by the indwelling Spirit in the living mind of the Church. By this the written word was interpreted, and the interpretation handed down to form a single tradition of divine doctrine springing from two sources, the inspired Scriptures and the Spirit-guided mind of the Church. It would be difficult, for instance, to think of the mystery of the '*Hoc est corpus meum*' and not realise that its meaning must have been understood from the first in the light of tradition, not found explicitly in Scripture, but derived from apostolic knowledge of the Lord's mind.

When the written tradition was completed, and the *depositum* closed by the death of the last Apostle, the unwritten tradition and the insight of the faithful in prayer and the study of theology combined to effect deeper realisation of the meaning of the written word. Thus new insights into known truth have been continuously incorporated by the indwelling Spirit into the Church's consciousness. This is the Catholic conception of tradition; it is identical with the faith as it exists in the conscious mind of the Church at any given period of her history. It increases as it were in

volume yet adds nothing to itself but what was latent there from the beginning.

Theologians of an earlier day sometimes thought of doctrines of the faith as explicitly held from apostolic times which had in fact remained implicit till much later. The progress of scientific history has made clearer that there is an organic development of doctrine in the Church, comparable to the growth of a physical organism from embryo to full stature. Although St Thomas Aquinas and others had dealt theologically with the question of how the faith could remain always the same yet grow by development from implicit to explicit, Cardinal Newman was a pioneer in the exposition of the way this has occurred in the history of dogma, and his essay has remained classic. Had Dr Salmon not misconceived Newman's thesis he would not have been so confident that infallibility involves abandonment of the appeal to antiquity, and his line of attack would have had to take another direction.

For the radical flaw in his argument is that he has no place for supernatural certitude. The Catholic position is that many strands of evidence converge, to give such certainty as human reason can, that God speaks authoritatively and infallibly through his Church, but that this human certainty is raised by his gift of faith into a different order of certitude which is higher because both object and motive lie beyond the scope of natural apprehension. For Dr Salmon the Scriptures contain God's revelation, but he recognises no infallibility in their interpretation by the Church, and no means of apprehending the revelation they contain but the ordinary working of human reason. In consequence there can be no certainty about what God has revealed beyond the practical certainty which governs our decisions in the most important affairs of life, and which critical philosophy will only allow as high probability. Dr Salmon's basic argument against infallibility is that it involves the logical fallacy of the vicious circle, because belief in it must ultimately rest on an act of private judgment and an act of private judgment cannot guarantee certainty. This however itself involves a fallacy: that of confusing objective and subjective certitude. My bad arithmetic does not dis-

prove the infallibility of the arithmetical process I am using. The argument is rendered still further nugatory in that it takes no account of the possibility that an act of private judgment may be raised by grace to a higher order of certitude than it can reach by its own inherent powers. This would nullify the premises from which Salmon's arguments against the possibility of an infallible authority are drawn, and it would do so as completely as misapprehension of the nature of tradition nullifies his contention that the Catholic Church is false to antiquity, has added new dogmas to the Faith and has abandoned the scriptural foundations upon which the Christian revelation is based.

Dr Salmon's mind reveals the remarkable lack of understanding in Anglicanism and elsewhere of what are after all cardinal elements in the Catholic position. Bishop Walter Carey, who writes an enthusiastic preface to the new edition, evidently shares the same mind. He speaks confidently of the historical facts of the creed as being verifiable by intrinsic probability and experience; but he does not say whether we can be certain of their truth and how. He seems unaware that Salmon's attack is not simply on the teaching of the Catholic Church, but on the possibility anywhere of certitude in the communication of divine things, and that his argument reduces faith to a complex of converging probabilities. He thinks that whatever else may be found in the Catholic Church it will not be historical truth, and he emphasises that Salmon's particular investigation of truth deals with history—with facts. But historical truth is the true interpretation of facts, and facts must be interpreted by principles which must themselves be factual: actually held by those to whom they are attributed. Salmon's book is a learned work packed with statements of historical fact. He interprets these facts by three basic principles: infallibility, tradition, and faith. All three principles as he states and uses them are in fact of a different nature from those held by the Church against which his arguments are directed, and they are powerless in consequence to prove his thesis.