

CREATIVE FIDELITY: WEIGHING AND INTERPRETING DOCUMENTS OF THE MAGISTERIUM by Francis A. Sullivan SJ, *Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 209 pages, 1996, £9.99 pb.*

Professor emeritus at the Gregorian University in Rome and currently teaching at Boston College, and author of *Magisterium* (1983), the most widely used exposition of Catholic thinking about the teaching office of the Church, Sullivan is eminently well qualified to discuss the relative degree of authority in the various documents issued by councils, popes, Vatican dicasteries, etc., and what principles to follow in interpreting them. Most Catholics pay little heed to such documents, even if they ever knew of their existence; but Sullivan puts up a good argument to the effect that theologians at least should read them and make the necessary discriminations. We are (for example) in the territory of truths concerning faith and morals which, though not divinely revealed, may be proposed by the Magisterium in a definitive way and must thus be firmly accepted and held. We are trying to decide when a teaching may be 'authentic' but 'non-definitive', 'non-infallible' and perhaps 'non-irreformable'. Getting into the nitty-gritty, in chapter 9, Sullivan argues that what the Council of Trent decreed about transubstantiation is better expressed now in the ARCIC statement on the eucharist; something more than faith is required if a person conscious of mortal sin is to receive holy communion but contrition is what is required, not sacramental confession; the notion of sacramental character, commonly taught at the time of Trent, is not contrary to the reality of revelation but it is not a dogma of faith since it is not certain that Trent intended to define it as divinely revealed doctrine; since Trent did not condemn the practice of the Orthodox Church as heretical we may hold that it did not define as a dogma of faith the doctrine that marriage cannot be dissolved on the grounds of the adultery of one of the spouses; and so on, much else in the same vein. Sullivan argues that the virginal conception of Jesus is good example of a dogma of faith, never solemnly defined, but infallibly taught by the ordinary universal magisterium. He holds that the perpetual virginity of Mary has just as good grounds as there were for defining her immaculate conception and assumption; but that her virginity in giving birth is a tradition that is not uniform or constant enough to have dogmatic weight. In an appendix Sullivan argues that until it is manifestly the case that the bishops, in exercising their role as judges and teachers of the faith, have been unanimous in teaching that the exclusion of women from ordination is a divinely revealed truth to which all Catholics are obliged to give a definitive assent of faith, it cannot be certain, despite *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994) and the statement by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (18 November 1995), that this doctrine has been taught infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium. It's that kind of book.