

## A long-simmering tension over 'creeping infallibility'

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 9, 2011



Priests lie prostrate before Pope Benedict XVI during their ordination Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 7, 2006. (CNS/Chris Helgren)

**Rome** -- When Pope Benedict XVI used the word "infallible" in reference to the ban on women's ordination in a recent letter informing an Australian bishop he'd been sacked, it marked the latest chapter of a long-simmering debate in Catholicism: Exactly where should the boundaries of infallible teaching be drawn?

On one side are critics of "creeping infallibility," meaning a steady expansion of the set of church teachings that lie beyond debate. On the other are those, including Benedict, worried about "theological positivism," meaning that there is such a sharp emphasis on formal declarations of infallibility that all other teachings, no matter how constantly or emphatically they've been defined, seem up for grabs.

That tension defines the fault lines in many areas of Catholic life, and it also forms part of the background to the recent Australian drama centering on Bishop William Morris of the Toowoomba diocese.

Morris was removed from office May 2, apparently on the basis of a 2006 pastoral letter in which he suggested that, in the face of the priest shortage, the church may have to be open to the ordination of women, among other options. Morris has revealed portions of a letter from Benedict informing him of the action, in which the pope says Pope John Paul II defined the teaching on women priests "irrevocably and infallibly."

In comments to the Australian media, Morris said that turn of phrase has him concerned about "creeping infallibility."

Speaking on background, a Vatican official said this week that the Vatican never comments on the pope's correspondence but has "no reason to doubt" the authenticity of the letter.

Moreover, he denied that Benedict's wording in the letter represents a novelty, citing a 1995 statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that asserted the teaching on women priests "has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium," as well as the congregation's 1998 document *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, accompanied by a commentary from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, saying essentially the same thing.

## **Debate began with Vatican I**

Debate over the reach of infallibility has swirled ever since the First Vatican Council in the 19th century, and has become steadily more intense since the early 1980s.

Vatican I formally defined papal infallibility in 1870, and most experts say it has been clearly invoked only with two dogmas, both about Mary: the Immaculate Conception in 1854, and the Assumption in 1950. In that light, some theologians and rank-and-file believers argue that on other contentious matters that have never been formally proclaimed as infallible, such as the ordination of women, contraception and homosexuality, dissent remains legitimate.

Other voices in the church, however, insist that a tight focus on rare public proclamations downplays the role of the church's "ordinary and universal magisterium," meaning things that have been taught consistently across time. Such teachings are effectively infallible, according to this understanding, even if no pope has ever formally declared them as such, and thus Catholics are bound to accept them.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, a leading advocate of this more expansive view of infallibility was Cardinal Ratzinger, today Pope Benedict XVI.

In the 1980s, these clashing views were at the heart of an exchange between Ratzinger and Fr. Charles Curran, an American moral theologian fired in 1987 by The Catholic University of America in Washington after a lengthy investigation by Ratzinger's office. In back-and-forth correspondence with Ratzinger, Curran defended a right of dissent from what he called "authoritative non-infallible hierarchical teaching."

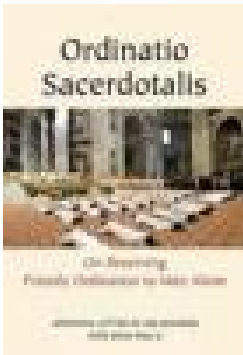
Ratzinger responded that such a restricted view of the church's teaching authority derives from the Protestant Reformation, and it leads to the conclusion that Catholics are obligated only to accept a few core dogmatic principles -- the Trinity, for example, or the resurrection of the body -- while everything else is debatable. In fact, Ratzinger said, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) used the phrase the "secondary object of infallibility" to refer to a wide range of teachings on faith and morals that are intrinsically connected to divine revelation, and therefore infallible.

The Curran exchange formed part of the backdrop to a 1990 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith titled "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," warning against "a kind of theological positivism ? according to which doctrines proposed without exercise of the charism of infallibility are said to have no obligatory character, leaving the individual completely at liberty to adhere to them or not."

In turn, the instruction paved the way for Pope John Paul II's 1994 document on women's ordination, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, and the 1995 clarification from the doctrinal congregation insisting that its teaching is infallible.

At the time, that assertion sparked wide debate.

## **Papal fundamentalism?**



American Jesuit Fr. John Coleman called it a form of "papal fundamentalism." The Catholic

Theological Society of America endorsed a 5,000-word study that concluded "there are serious doubts" about whether the teaching is infallible, and called for "further study, discussion and prayer." The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland likewise concluded in 1996 that the teaching on women priests was not infallible.

In December 1996, the then-secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Bishop Tarcisio Bertone, published an article in *L'Osservatore Romano* in which he asserted that certain papal teachings should be considered infallible, even in the absence of a formal statement. Bertone mentioned three such documents: *Veritatis Splendor*, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and *Evangelium Vitae*.

Bertone is today a cardinal and the Vatican's secretary of state.

In January 1997, the doctrinal congregation published a collection of documents supporting its reasoning on women's ordination. In a press conference, Ratzinger addressed the question of whether Catholics who believe that women should be priests are heretics. Technically, he said, the term "heresy" refers to denial of a revealed truth such as the Incarnation or the Resurrection. The ban on women priests, he said, is a doctrinal conclusion derived from revelation, and as such those who deny it are not literally heretics. They do, however, "support erroneous doctrine that is incompatible with the faith" and exclude themselves from communion with the church.

In his 1998 commentary on *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, Ratzinger argued that a host of teachings are infallible because they're joined to the revealed truths of the faith, either by a historical relationship or by a logical connection.

Examples of doctrines connected by historical necessity, according to the Ratzinger commentary, include: the legitimacy of the election of a given pope; the acts of an ecumenical council; the canonizations of saints; the declaration of Pope Leo XIII in the papal bull *Apostolicae Curae* on the invalidity of Anglican ordinations. Examples of doctrines connected by logical necessity include: the doctrine that priestly ordination is reserved only to men; the doctrine on the illicitness of euthanasia; the teaching on the illicitness of prostitution; the teaching on the illicitness of fornication.

Once again, when *Ad Tuendam Fidem* appeared, reaction in theological circles was mixed.

French Jesuit theologian Bernard Sesboué wrote, "We are in the presence of a new domain of the exercise of infallibility of the church." For that reason, Sesboué said *Ad Tuendam Fidem* is a development virtually as grave as the declaration of papal infallibility at Vatican I in 1870. This argument was echoed by Jesuit Fr. Ladislav Örsy of Georgetown University in the United States.

What this history suggests is that Benedict's reference to the teaching on women priests in his letter to Morris as "irrevocably and infallibly defined" did not fall out of the clear blue sky. Instead, it's a restatement of a longstanding conviction, one that today he's in a position to apply throughout the church -- and, as the Morris case shows, from time to time he's willing to do just that.

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