Papal Infallibility

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The Catholic Church's teaching on papal infallibility is one that is generally misunderstood by those outside the Church. In particular, Fundamentalists and other "Bible Christians" often confuse the charism of papal "infallibility" with "impeccability." They imagine Catholics believe the pope cannot sin. Others, who avoid this elementary blunder, think the pope relies on some sort of amulet or magical incantation when an infallible definition is due.

Given these common misapprehensions regarding the basic tenets of papal infallibility, it is necessary to explain exactly what infallibility is not. Infallibility is not the absence of sin. Nor is it a charism that belongs only to the pope. Indeed, infallibility also belongs to the body of bishops as a whole, when, in doctrinal unity with the pope, they solemnly teach a doctrine as true. We have this from Jesus himself, who promised the apostles and their successors the bishops, the magisterium of the Church: "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16).

Vatican II's Explanation

Vatican II explained the doctrine of infallibility as follows: "Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they can nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly. This is so, even when they are dispersed around the world, provided that while maintaining the bond of unity among themselves and with Peter's successor, and while teaching authentically on a matter of faith or morals, they concur in a single viewpoint as the one which must be held conclusively. This authority is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church. Their definitions must then be adhered to with the submission of faith" (Lumen Gentium 25).

Infallibility belongs in a special way to the pope as head of the bishops (Matt. 16:17–19; John 21:15–17). As Vatican II remarked, it is a charism the pope "enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith (Luke 22:32), he proclaims by a definitive act some doctrine of faith or morals. Therefore his definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly held irreformable, for they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, an assistance promised to him in blessed Peter."

The infallibility of the pope is not a doctrine that suddenly appeared in Church teaching; rather, it is a doctrine that was implicit in the early Church. It is only our understanding of infallibility that has developed and been more clearly understood over time. In fact, the doctrine of infallibility is implicit in these Petrine texts: John 21:15–17 ("Feed my sheep . . . "), Luke 22:32 ("I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail"), and Matthew 16:18 ("You are Peter . . . ").

Based on Christ's Mandate

Christ instructed the Church to preach everything he taught (Matt. 28:19–20) and promised the protection of the Holy Spirit to "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). That mandate and that promise guarantee the Church will never fall away from his teachings (Matt. 16:18, 1 Tim. 3:15), even if individual Catholics might.

As Christians began to more clearly understand the teaching authority of the Church and the primacy of the pope, they developed a clearer understanding of the pope's infallibility. This development of the faithful's understanding has its clear beginnings in the early Church. Saint Augustine succinctly captured the ancient attitude when he remarked, "Rome has spoken; the case is concluded" (Sermons 131, 10).

Some Clarifications

An infallible pronouncement—whether made by the pope alone or by an ecumenical council—usually is made only when some doctrine has been called into question. Most doctrines have never been doubted by the large majority of Catholics.

Pick up a catechism and look at the great number of doctrines, most of which have never been formally defined. But many points have been defined, and not just by the pope alone. There are, in fact, many major topics on which it would be impossible for a pope to make an infallible definition without duplicating one or more infallible pronouncements from ecumenical councils or the ordinary magisterium (teaching authority) of the Church.

At least the outline, if not the references, of the preceding paragraphs should be familiar to literate Catholics, to whom this subject should appear straightforward. It is a different story with "Bible Christians." For them papal infallibility often seems a muddle because their idea of what it encompasses is often incorrect.

Some ask how popes can be infallible if some of them lived scandalously. This objection, of course, illustrates the common confusion between infallibility and impeccability. There is no guarantee that popes won't sin or give bad example.

Other people wonder how infallibility could exist if some popes disagreed with others. This, too, shows an inaccurate understanding of infallibility, which applies only to solemn, official teachings on faith and morals, not to disciplinary decisions or even to unofficial comments on faith and morals. A pope's private theological opinions are not infallible; only what he solemnly defines is considered to be infallible teaching.

Even Fundamentalists and Evangelicals who do not have these common misunderstandings often think infallibility means that popes are given some special grace that allows them to teach positively whatever truths need to be known, but that is not quite correct, either. What infallibility does do is prevent a pope from solemnly and formally teaching as "truth" something that is, in fact, error. It does not help him know what is true, nor does it "inspire" him to teach what is true.

Peter Not Infallible?

As a biblical example of papal fallibility, Fundamentalists like to point to Peter's conduct at Antioch, where he refused to eat with Gentile Christians in order not to offend certain Jews from Palestine (Gal. 2:11–16). For this Paul rebuked him. Did this demonstrate papal infallibility was non-existent? Not at all. Peter's actions had to do with matters of discipline, not with issues of faith or morals. Furthermore, the problem was Peter's actions, not his teaching. Paul acknowledged that Peter very well knew the correct teaching (Gal. 2:12–13).

Fundamentalists must also acknowledge that Peter did have some kind of infallibility—they cannot deny that he wrote two infallible epistles of the New Testament while under protection against writing error. So, if his behavior at Antioch was not incompatible with this kind of infallibility, neither is bad behavior contrary to papal infallibility in general.

Turning to history, critics of the Church cite certain "errors of the popes." Their argument is really reduced to three cases, those of Popes Liberius, Vigilius, and Honorius, the three cases to which all opponents of papal infallibility turn, because they are the only cases that do not collapse as soon as they are mentioned. There is no point in giving the details here, but it is enough to note that none of the cases meet the requirements outlined by the description of papal infallibility given at Vatican I (see Pastor Aeternus 4).

Their "Favorite Case"

According to Fundamentalist commentators, their best case lies with Pope Honorius. They say he specifically taught Monothelitism, a heresy that held that Christ had only one will (a divine one), not two wills (a divine one and a human one) as all orthodox Christians hold.

But that's not at all what Honorius did. Even a quick review of the records shows he simply decided not to make a decision at all. As Ronald Knox explained, "To the best of his human wisdom, he thought the controversy ought to be left unsettled, for the greater peace of the Church. In fact, he was an inopportunist. We, wise after the event, say that he was wrong. But nobody, I think, has ever claimed that the pope is infallible in not defining a doctrine."

The rejection of papal infallibility by "Bible Christians" stems from their view of the Church. They do not think Christ established a visible Church, which means they do not believe in a hierarchy of bishops headed by the pope.

This is no place to give an elaborate demonstration of the establishment of a visible Church. But it is simple enough to point out that the New Testament shows the apostles setting up, after their Master's instructions, a visible organization, and that every Christian writer in the early centuries—in fact, nearly all Christians until the Reformation—fully recognized that Christ set up an ongoing organization.

One example of this ancient belief comes to us from Ignatius of Antioch. In his second-century letter to the church in Smyrna, he wrote, "Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" (Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8, 1 [A.D. 110]).

If Christ did set up such an organization, he must have provided for its continuation, for its easy identification (that is, it had to be visible so it could be found), and, since he would be gone from earth, for some method by which it could preserve his teachings intact.

All this was accomplished through the apostolic succession of bishops, and the preservation of the Christian message, in its fullness, was guaranteed through the gift of infallibility, of the Church as a whole, but mainly through its Christ-appointed leaders, the bishops (as a whole) and the pope (as an individual).

It is the Holy Spirit who prevents the pope from officially teaching error, and this charism follows necessarily from the existence of the Church itself. If, as Christ promised, the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church then it must be protected from fundamentally falling into error and thus away from Christ. It must prove itself to be a perfectly steady guide in matters pertaining to salvation.

Of course, infallibility does not include a guarantee that any particular pope won't "neglect" to teach the truth, or that he will be sinless, or that mere disciplinary decisions will be intelligently made. It would be nice if he were omniscient or impeccable, but his not being so will fail to bring about the destruction of the Church.

But he must be able to teach rightly, since instruction for the sake of salvation is a primary function of the Church. For men to be saved, they must know what is to be believed. They must have a perfectly steady rock to build upon and to trust as the source of solemn Christian teaching. And that's why papal infallibility exists.

Since Christ said the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church (Matt. 16:18b), this means that his Church can never pass out of existence. But if the Church ever apostasized by teaching heresy, then it would cease to exist; because it would cease to be Jesus' Church. Thus the Church cannot teach heresy, meaning that anything it solemnly defines for the faithful to believe is true. This same reality is reflected in the Apostle Paul's statement that the Church is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). If the Church is the foundation of religious truth in this world, then it is God's own spokesman. As Christ told his disciples: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

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