

Infallibility: God's Perfect Gift to His Imperfect Church

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

~ John 16:12-15

THE infallibility of the pope is one of those key Catholic beliefs that are often puzzling, even to some Catholics. It takes its place beside terms like transubstantiation and the Immaculate Conception. If not suitably explained, the truths attached to these terms can lie trapped behind a wall of confusion. Where papal infallibility is concerned, a certain nagging suspicion or personal embarrassment may deepen misunderstandings. It is highly probable that many Catholics today turn a distinctive shade of red when asked why the Church continues to insist that the pope is perfect.

Infallibility versus Impeccability

If papal infallibility meant that “the pope is perfect,” it would be an embarrassing and entirely unacceptable claim: only God is perfect. But the Catholic Church does not claim that her leaders have divine attributes. In reality, the term “infallible” is not synonymous with perfection. “Infallible” means “incapable of error,” which is certainly a characteristic of perfection, but not the fullness of perfection. Most modern calculators are “incapable of error” when it

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means “without flaw,” a claim that the Church does not make and never will.

“Papal infallibility” is a technical, theological term used to explain a fairly straightforward reality. It means that on specific matters and under very precise conditions, it is impossible for the pope to teach falsely. The following paragraphs set the stage for this gift and spell out the terms and conditions associated with it.

At the Sources of Infallibility

Like all things but sin, infallibility is a gift from above. It has its source in the divine life of the Holy Trinity. In concrete form, it has been revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the eternal Son of God made man (see Jn 1:1-2, 14), and who “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), the reflection of God’s glory (see Heb 1:3), “full of grace and truth”



Papal crown and stole on the Sacred Scriptures: The Church discerned which books were inspired by the Holy Spirit

(Jn 1:14). He speaks the truth and is the truth (see Jn 14:6). In him, men and women have access to the truth without error and find the answers to their deepest questions.

The Ongoing Quest for Meaning

For centuries, the Church has asked “What did Jesus mean?” and “How does this apply to a given situation?” In general, these questions were answered in ecumenical councils by the successor of Peter (the Pope) and the bishops in union with him. Today, these questions are asked by Catholics, by Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church, and by men and women of good will everywhere. There is hardly a word spoken by or about Jesus Christ that has not been subject to careful scrutiny. Regrettably, the results of these analyses have led to many varying and often contradictory interpretations of meaning. A number of these have caused painful divisions in the Christian community itself and have weakened the power of the Gospel. These divisions continue to this day and have resulted in over 30,000 Christian denominations and sects.

From this, a new question is raised. “How do we know what Jesus really meant, and how do we apply this to present day circumstances?” Without a guide or teacher, without a true witness, we are in danger of error. In many cases, people simply resign themselves to the notion that there really is no way of knowing (with true certainty) the truth on which Christ constantly and forcefully insisted (see Jn 1:14, 17; Jn 3:21; Jn 4:23-24; Jn 8:31; Jn 14:6, 17; Jn 16:13). But is this really so?

The Church’s Magisterium

In the midst of this uncertainty stands the “Magisterium” of the Church’s teaching authority. It is comprised of the pope and the bishops in union with him. Thus, the Magisterium is rooted in the



Antique holy card dating from the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) which more clearly defined papal infallibility

mission given by Jesus to the apostles and is handed down to every generation through apostolic succession. The mission of the Magisterium is to “preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15) and to “guarantee,” until the end of the world, “the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error” (CCC 890). As successors of the apostles, the pope and the bishops in communion with him, under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, see to it that the People of God abide in the truth that brings freedom. They are the authentic teachers and witnesses of the Gospel and the guarantors of every true interpretation of it. To fulfill this service, they possess the gift of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.

Infallibility in Context

The gift of infallibility is exercised in several forms and under very precise conditions. First, it is only exercised in matters of faith and morals. Infallibility extends to the entire deposit of faith, as well as to elements of doctrine such as morals, to ensure that all the saving truths of the faith are preserved and explained without error. The teachings of the pope and the bishops are not infallible when they offer opinions or recommendations outside these areas. Matters of personal opinion, Church discipline, and Church administration represent examples of non-infallible teaching.

As chief shepherd and teacher of all Christians (see Jn 21:15-17), however, the pope teaches infallibly whenever he teaches *ex cathedra* (Latin for “from the chair”). This is a figure of speech meaning from the seat of teaching authority. When the pope teaches “from his chair,” that is, formally and consciously as the Chief Shepherd, he is by the protection of the Holy Spirit prevented from teaching falsely. In other words, God sees to it

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that he remains immune from error.

The pope is infallible only by virtue of the special promise of Jesus and the grace of the Holy Spirit. The gift can be exercised without the consent of the other bishops or of the faithful, but the pope is not infallible as a private citizen. To teach infallibly, the pope must be acting deliberately as visible head of the Church, supreme teacher of all Christians, and a subject of Christ the King. Infallible teaching must be a definitive teaching on faith or morals. The bishops, too, can teach infallibly when they teach together in this way united with the pope. Outside of communion with the successor of Peter, no episcopal teaching can be authenticated. When the bishops teach infallibly, they normally do so in the context of an ecumenical council.

Though the teaching of Christ is constant and unchanging, it must be applied to the circumstances of every age. It must be read along with the signs of the times. The Church remains deeply conscious of her responsibility in this area. It is the Church’s duty to examine the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel. She does this so that she can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation an authentic response to every human question about the meaning of life, the promise of the life to come and how they are related. It is therefore necessary for the Church to constantly and consistently answer the questions presented to her by the modern world.

Objections

A primary objection raised by this truth is the reality of weakness and sin. It is said that, given the notorious sins of certain popes, it is clear that infallibility does not exist. Yet the charism of infallibility is not a question of personal holiness. It is a question of teaching. It is a question of the Holy Spirit who will not let the Church sink into error regarding faith and morals. Popes may reject in their own personal lives both faith and morals, but they will never be given over to teaching as true what is actually false. It is worth noting that no pope in history has even attempted to make an infallible statement justifying his own sins or the sins of others, or to satisfy some whim or fancy.



Pope John Paul II, reigned from 1978 to 2005

Infallibility not Inspiration

Finally, infallibility does not imply divine inspiration nor is it to be considered new revelation. When the pope teaches infallibly, it is after much prayer and the careful study of divine Revelation (Scripture and Tradition), as well as collaboration with his brother bishops. It is chiefly a response to a question, the clarification of a particular doctrine, or the final settling of a dispute, all having to do with faith or morals. For example: Was Jesus truly God and truly human or a confused mixture of both? What does it mean when we say that Mary was immaculately conceived? When a pope is asked to formally decide on these questions, he has basically two choices. He can either give the right answer or no answer. To get the right answer he must investigate like anyone else. In light of his investigation and guided by the Holy Spirit, he is able to discern the truth and preserve and effectively guard the deposit of Revelation entrusted to the Church.

Recent Infallible Statements

Several examples can be cited of recent formal infallible statements made by popes outside of a formal church council. For example, Pope Pius IX in 1854 defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and, in 1950, Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption of Mary. Both definitions were made with almost unanimous consent from both the body of the bishops and the faithful (though this is not necessary). Other infallible definitions have been made through the voice of the many church councils through time, such as the definition of the Blessed Trinity made at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

(CCC 888-892, 2035)