

Infallibility: God's Perfect Gift to His Imperfect Church

Infallibility verses Impeccability

- If papal infallibility meant that “the pope is perfect,” it would be an embarrassing and entirely unacceptable claim: only God is perfect
- “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.
- 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 Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church.
- A number of these have caused painful divisions. These divisions continue to this day and have resulted in over 30,000 Protestant denominations and sects.
- Without a guide or teacher, without a true witness, we are in danger of error. A Church without a Pope is like

a school without a Head – everyone does their own thing.

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 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 and to “guarantee,” until the end of the world the profession and transmission of 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, are authentic teachers and see to it that the People of God are taught the Gospel Truth without error.

Infallibility in Context

- The gift of infallibility is only exercised in matters of faith and morals.

- The teachings of the pope and the bishops are not infallible when they offer opinions or recommendations outside these areas.
- 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”). 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 that he remains immune from error.
- Though the teaching of Christ is constant and unchanging, it must be applied to the circumstances of every age, including our own.

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.

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.

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/
- 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 throughout its history.