

## Infallible? Are You Sure?

**Q: How can the Pope be infallible, as the Catholic Church claims? He is just a man. Wouldn't he have to be God to be truly infallible?**

A very good question! Especially as the Church comes under increasing fire for its controversial teachings on homosexuality, contraception, abortion and other similar moral issues. Many wonder why the Church doesn't just get with the program and adapt its teachings to the modern world.

But the truth is, the Catholic Church has absolutely no authority to change its teachings - because it has received those teachings directly from Jesus and the Apostles. It only has authority to proclaim the truths God has delivered to it: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe ALL that I have commanded you**; and lo, **I am with you always**, to the close of the age.

So how **can** the Church do this - teach the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles – **ALL that I have commanded you** – without error? At the heart of this lies the doctrine of infallibility. This is perhaps one of the Church's most important but least understood doctrines.

Let me start by explaining what the doctrine of infallibility is and is not. Infallibility does not refer to the personal holiness or lack of holiness of the Pope or bishops. In fact, it works in spite of these things. It does not infer that the Pope is sinless or that scandals will not occur, as many commonly believe. The Pope is human, and, despite the great outpouring of graces he must receive to faithfully fulfill his role as the earthly leader of the Body of Christ on earth, he is still susceptible to temptation and sin like anyone else. And while we have had some incredibly faithful, holy, fearless, martyred popes over the centuries, there have also been a few scoundrels as well. Jesus Himself picked 12 and one was Judas. We should expect that there will be weeds and wheat.

So what is a Catholic understanding of this doctrine? Infallibility is a charism, or gift of the Holy Spirit, that applies to the **office** of the Papacy. It protects the Pope, and the Magisterium of the Church, (essentially, the teaching office of the Church, comprised of the Pope, and all bishops teaching in union with him) from ever teaching error when speaking under the following four conditions:

- 1) Ex Cathedra (when speaking from 'the chair of Peter', i.e. officially, in his office as Pope)
- 2) On issues of faith and morals [not science, geology, sports, etc.]
- 3) **Clearly** [dogmatically] defining the doctrine to be believed
- 4) On matters to be believed by the universal church, and not one particular group

It is worth mentioning here that we must distinguish doctrines from disciplines. Disciplines are usually practical guidances that the Church has put in place, usually ordered towards the aiding of sanctity in the members of the Body of Christ. But they are changeable, at the discretion of the Church – what it discerns is needed at a particular time: think length of fast before Mass, or whether to eat meat on Fridays or not.

But many ask, how does this gift of infallibility work? How is the Church protected from teaching error? Scripture gives us a clear picture of the blueprint Jesus established to pass on His teachings.

During the Last Supper, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, who were the foundation of His Church [cf. Ephesians 2:20, Revelation 21:14]. In John 14:26 He says, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, **He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said** to you.” In John 16:13, He goes on to add that “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.**”

St. Paul carries this theme on, instructing, St. Timothy, a Bishop in the Church, how to pass on Jesus’ teachings to the Church: “follow the pattern of the sound words which you have ***heard*** from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; **guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us**” (2 Tim 1:13-14) and then, “what you have ***heard*** from me before many witnesses, **entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.**” (2 Tim 2:2). Similarly, in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, he instructs: “hold to the ***traditions*** which you were taught by us, ***either by word of mouth*** or by letter.”

That’s it! That’s how the Holy Spirit guards the teachings Jesus left to the Church – from Pope to Pope and Bishop to Bishop. They are passed on intact in a living way in the Church, through the successors of the apostles, the bishops. This is referred to as Apostolic Succession, and is the primary way the Holy Spirit guards the truths Jesus left to us, protecting them from any form of error or corruption.

In 2000 years of teaching, the Church has never contradicted itself when declaring official dogmatic teaching.

Recall also that in Matthew 16, Jesus gives Peter the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven and promises that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the Church. This is profound in itself, but He then goes on to add that, “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” Can you imagine an error being “bound” or taught on earth by the Church if it also had to be bound in heaven? It just could not happen!

Precisely because of Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church, founded on the Apostles and their successors, can claim that “he who hears you hears Me, and he who rejects you rejects Me” (Lk 10:16), and, “as the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn 20:21 and Jn 17:18). We can stand with St. Paul in declaring with certainty, that the Church is “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim 3:15).

*“Would the heretics dare to come to the very seat of Peter, whence apostolic faith is derived and whither no errors can come?”* St. Cyprian, martyred Bishop of Carthage, 256 AD.

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