

Papal Infallibility

by Sebastian R. Fama

The doctrine of Papal Infallibility can evoke some strong reactions from those who oppose it. This is due to a misunderstanding of what the Church means by "Papal Infallibility." The most common misconception is that the Church claims that the pope himself is infallible, that in all things he is incapable of error. This, of course, is not true! The pope is a human being. It is a necessity of Christian theology that every person be allowed the exercise of free will. Everyone, the pope included, must be free to accept or reject Christ for himself. If God were to make the pope infallible in the ultimate sense, he would be depriving him of his free will. So, what is Papal Infallibility?

Infallibility does not mean that a pope is incapable of sin. All popes are human and therefore sinners.

Infallibility does not mean that the pope is inspired. Papal infallibility does not involve any special revelation from God. A pope learns about his faith in the same way that anyone else does – he studies.

Infallibility cannot be used to change existing doctrines or proclaim new ones. It can only be used to confirm or clarify what has always been taught. The teachings of Christ cannot change. As the Scripture says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Infallibility does not mean that a pope cannot err when he speaks as a private teacher. As a man he is fallible and capable of error.

Infallibility does not guarantee that a pope will officially teach anything. However, when he does teach he is protected. If he decides to teach the truth, the Holy Spirit allows it. If he decides to teach error, either knowingly or unknowingly, the Holy Spirit will not allow it.

Infallibility is not something that endows a pope with divine powers, but rather it is a gift of the Holy Spirit that protects the Church from the human frailties of a pope.

All Christians believe that God used men infallibly in writing Scripture. Why then is it so hard to believe that He would work infallibly through men to protect it from corruption? Surely such a protection was implied when Jesus said to His disciples, "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16).

The First Vatican Council taught that three conditions must be met for a pronouncement to be considered infallible:

1. The pope must speak *ex cathedra* (from the Chair of Peter) in his official capacity.
2. The decision must be binding on the whole Church.
3. It must be on a matter of faith or morals.

The first two conditions can be reasonably deduced from Matthew 16:19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." The acts of binding and loosing in this context would by necessity be something more than casual remarks. The previous verse begins with Jesus saying, "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church" (16:18). Thus, the acts of binding or loosing would have to be official and meant for the whole Church.

The third condition stems from the fact that Christian teaching is primarily a matter of faith and morals. Christianity's main objectives are getting people to heaven (faith) and teaching them how to live here on earth (morals).

Infallibility is also extended to the college of bishops when they, as a body, teach something in union with the pope. Collegial authority is usually exercised in an ecumenical council such as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29).

Upon leaving the earth Jesus' final command to His apostles was to make disciples of all nations, "**teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age**" (Matthew 28:20). Are we to believe that Jesus left us no means of knowing exactly what He commanded? That would make His parting statement nonsense. The Catholic Church believes the Bible when it teaches that:

1. Jesus requires that we obey all that He commanded (Matthew 28:20).
2. Jesus gives us the grace to obey all that He commanded (Philippians 4:13).
3. Jesus provides us a means of knowing what He commanded (Matthew 16:15-19).

Early Christian writers bear witness to the Church's infallibility. Cyprian declares: "If someone does not hold fast to this unity of Peter, can he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he [should] desert the chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, can he still be confident that he is in the Church?" (*The Unity of the Catholic Church* 4, [A.D. 251]). Clement of Alexandria writes: **[T]he blessed Peter, the chosen, the preeminent, the first among the disciples**, for whom alone with himself the Savior paid the tribute [Matt. 17:27], quickly grasped and understood their meaning. And what does he say? "Behold, we have left all and have followed you" [Matt. 19:27, Mark 10:28] (*Who is the Rich Man That is Saved?* 21:3-5 [A.D. 200]).

Despite the Scriptural evidence, critics try to prove their case by appealing to three supposed examples of popes teaching error. The first two are Pope Liberius (352-366) and Pope Vigilius (537-555). Both were made to sign questionable statements of faith while under duress. This of course does not count, as Infallibility only applies to free acts of the pope and not to acts under torture.

The third example is that of Pope Honorius (625-638). Critics of Papal Infallibility feel that this example demolishes the doctrine once and for all. Here, they contend, is an example of a pope teaching error. After his death, an ecumenical council (The Third Council of Constantinople) condemned him. What could be more contradictory than an infallible pope being condemned by an infallible council? However, there is much more to the story.

The controversy stems from a letter that Pope Honorius wrote to Sergius, a Monothelite heretic. The Monothelite heresy maintained that Jesus had only one will, a divine will. The Church had always taught that Jesus was fully God and fully man. As such, He had both a divine and a human will. Before the heresy was widely known, Sergius sought to get the pope's approval by deception. In a letter to the pope, he stated that Jesus never opposed the Father. Consequently, if two persons agree they may be spoken of as being of "one will." The pope, unaware of Sergius' deception, answered to the subject of Christ's "opposition" to the Father. He wrote in part: "We confess one will of our Lord Jesus Christ...Since Christ's human will is faultless there can be no talk of opposing wills." Subsequently, Monothelites fraudulently used this statement to claim the pope agreed with them.

Pope Honorius was deceived and then misrepresented. Furthermore, the Third Council of Constantinople condemned him for inaction, not for teaching heresy. In any event, his letter was private. Thus, the issue of infallibility never even entered the picture. By the way, if papal infallibility really was just a human invention, don't you think that the list of errors after 20 centuries would fill at least one book? And yet we are presented with only three examples, three examples that are not even plausible. Does this not speak in favor of the Church's position?

Ironically, many of the individuals who oppose the doctrine of papal infallibility claim to receive special revelations from God. Most believe that they can privately interpret Scripture in direct violation of 2 Peter 1:20. They characterize the doctrine of papal infallibility as arrogant, while claiming for themselves authority that goes far beyond it. And what is the fruit of their claims? Thousands of denominations all claiming the Bible as their authority and yet all disagreeing on what it teaches. To make matters worse, many of their teachings change from time to time. Those who object to the doctrine of papal infallibility are the greatest proof of its need.

An honest examination of the evidence can only lead to one conclusion: That Jesus Christ established an infallible Church. Scripture teaches it, logic demands it, and history confirms it.