

# IS THE POPE INFALLIBLE?

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The Infallibility of the Pope in the Church is a live issue today.

It was defined by the I Vatican Council, and developed in the deliberation of II Vatican Council. Since then it has been the subject of much discussion.

This pamphlet examines this doctrine in its historical and theological context. Within its limited scope this pamphlet answers many of the questions raised in these controversies.

-THE EDITOR

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## INFALLIBLE?

"Infallible" is almost a dirty word in our language today. "You think you're infallible, don't you?", "I know a man who has an infallible system for betting. . . .". "Computers are infallible - unless someone upsets the programming." We just do not believe there is such a quality as "infallibility". The word suggests insanity, abuse, or sarcasm about weaknesses in people or machines.

But the Catholic Church does not hesitate to use this word.

Why?

This booklet will raise the common questions which give an answer to the whole problem of infallibility in the Church. It is directed mainly towards the question of the infallibility of the Pope. Today, even within the Church, voices are raised in criticism or denial of infallibility, especially as it concerns the Pope. These voices often use good arguments. They sound in tones of honesty and freedom of speech. They always have access to good publicity. But the effects are not always those which the objector would have wanted.

Many Catholic people are soon confused. Has the teaching of the Church changed? Has our Pope ceased to be the true teacher of mankind? Have we been wrong after all these years? For many, doubt rises upon doubt. But, there are many other Catholics who live through this petty turmoil with an unshaken Faith. This small booklet is dedicated to these devoted pilgrim People, to their unfailing "sense of Faith". It is intended to help and uphold this instinct of Faith. It is also an attempt to help those who are confused by establishing the genuine clarity and truth with which the authentic Church alone dares to speak.

The questions which follow are not intended to "defend" the Church and our Faith. The Holy Spirit takes care of this. They simply aim at clarity and understanding.

## I. THIS WORD "INFALLIBLE"

*Is papal infallibility a matter which can be understood and appreciated by anyone?*

Infallibility can only be understood and appreciated by Catholics. We shall see that the word itself has a particular meaning, that "infallible" may only be appreciated within the community of believers. Obviously one would have to have Faith before believing that the Pope can teach infallibly. Obviously one would have to hold to the Catholic Faith before presuming to discuss or analyse infallibility accurately.

When the secular Press ventures into this area of Catholic Faith, informed Catholics wince with embarrassment at the blunders and grave misunderstandings which appear. Like priestly celibacy, or the Mass, papal infallibility may only be understood for what it is meant to be from within the family. It is a "family matter", for God's People who accept and experience it.

Therefore, I warn non-Catholic readers that they are not likely to appreciate or fully understand this "domestic" question. I hope they will perceive the wider and deeper truth underlying the infallibility of the Church and the Pope. This deeper truth is our Catholic belief that Christ, the Truth, still speaks. Through the Holy Spirit he is still in his own People. In the centre of that world-wide community, which can never fail, the direct successor of Peter, Christ's right-hand man, can teach with the full assurance of truth.

*Is not this out of date in our modern world?*

It is out of date for those who conform to the "modern" world. It is completely irrelevant to them, but so is Christ. They no longer believe in truth at all. All truth is "relative". What matters to them is what you are, what you have, what you feel, what you need - not what you believe and whether it happens to be true or false. The conformists have been conditioned by advertising tricks and techniques, by "infallible" journalists, by "the experts", by "nine out of ten people say . . .", by fear of being ridiculed for not "being with it", for "not having it" or "getting it".

To all this, Jesus Christ says "No!".

Jesus did not say that "all truth is relative", that "this might be true, but so might be that, so we just don't know . . .". In the earliest and simplest Gospel, St. Mark, we read of the uproar created by the blunt and confident teaching of Jesus. ". . . they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority . . ." (Mark 1: 22). Eventually, his claim to speak truth led him to death on a Cross. The world cannot cope with a man who claims to speak truth. It has to destroy him.

Jesus said that he spoke for God, that God spoke through him, and he finally revealed the truth that he was God in flesh, as we put it today, that he is the God-Man. But what good would it be for Jesus simply to be a distant historical figure? Perhaps we have heard young people say, "Wouldn't it be terrific if he were still around today!" But he is still around today. As he promised, he is with and in his People, the Church.

If a Christian believes Jesus taught truth, that he was "infallible" - and if that same Christian believes in his infallible promise to be with his Church always, then somehow the infallibility of Jesus must be seen by that Christian in the Church. Risen from death, alive and acting in his People, Jesus the Truth will continue to teach truths through his People. Just as the truth of Jesus was "irrelevant" to the modern world of his day, so the same truth in his People will be "irrelevant" to our modern world today. It tried to destroy him. It will try to destroy his People.

*What then does "infallible" mean?*

It means "true". Therefore, "infallibility" means "truth", but the sort of truth revealed only by God, only through Jesus Christ, only in his People - and only of real interest to them.

Pontius Pilate, in St. John's beautiful Gospel, encountered Jesus on trial for his life. As judge he

interrogated Jesus, probing into his background, trying to puzzle out why Jesus was called a King. Jesus said, "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice". To this, Pilate replied, "What is truth?"

Ever since that encounter some people have remarked how witty or clever Pilate was. But he was quite blind. Truth was standing there in front of him. Truth is a Person. Truth is Christ.

In John's Gospel we also find the words of Christ, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me". (John 14: 6). This is the high point of John's majestic theme of truth in our world, truth enfleshed as a Person. We are perhaps familiar with the words we hear at Christmas, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth". (John 1: 14). John makes it plain that Jesus, being the God-Man, teaches truths. We can rely on what he teaches. Reliability was a Jewish way of understanding something to be true.

*But how can this infallible truth be passed on to the Church?*

If by Faith we believe Jesus is Truth, that what he says is true, then we accept his promises. He promised that truth would continue in his followers, his People, his Church. The night before he gave himself up to death, he made his promise to his close friends.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth . . ."

Then Jesus went on with words which remind us that this infallible gift cannot be appreciated beyond Christianity.

". . . the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." (John 14: 15-17).

For two thousand years the Catholic Church has taken Christ at his word. In terms of teaching power, assurance of truth, he also said, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age". (Matthew 28: 20.) In John's Gospel Jesus makes it clear that his own teachings will be further developed by the Holy Spirit.

"These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, 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." (John 14: 25, 26.)

*Why can't the Church just look back and repeat Christ's teachings?*

The Church does look back and repeat faithfully the teachings of Christ. They are utterly infallible. But Christ's teachings, especially his clear and simple moral teachings, point to development in later time. Obviously his principles will have to be applied in complicated situations. Obviously his doctrines of God, man, eternal life, etc., will need explanation and interpretation so that they can be taught to all men, as he commanded. The science of this development we call "theology". But the defining of this development we understand in terms of the authority of the Church.

Jesus knew this would have to happen. To his close friends he said,

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

Then he went on with the warm assurance of truth in his People.

"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" (John 16: 12-14).

The early Christians, who compiled the Gospels, were aware of this Gift of the Spirit of Truth, this infallible gift from God. St. Paul was aware of it, and rejoiced confidently in the way God reveals truths to men. In the Acts of the Apostles we read of the confident preaching and teaching of men filled with the Holy Spirit of truth. Had not Christ assured them, "He who hears you, hears me."? (Luke 10: 16.)

The Catholic Church, the same People of whom these Apostles are the foundations, is still aware of the gift of Truth, of infallibility. From the earliest times it was simply taken for granted.

*But how exactly did it work?*

It is not enough to leave infallibility as some undefined gift, vaguely present in God's People. When Christians had to work out exact doctrines, for example the Person and Natures of Jesus, the infallible authority came to life. It was focused in the supreme representative body of the whole Church - an Ecumenical Council of the bishops. Such a Council would be the direct successor to the group of Apostles sent out by Christ. Such a Council would come to decisions under the approval or supervision of that one man who succeeds the leader of the group of Apostles, St. Peter. That one man is the Pope.

In the earliest Councils of the Church, at the time of the fall of the Roman Empire, there was no clear awareness of papal infallibility. Men assumed that the final decisions of a Council (if endorsed by the Bishop of Rome) on basic matters such as the Trinity or the Person of Christ were infallible decisions. Among the first signs of the decisive role the Pope plays in this infallibility of the Church was when Pope St. Leo the Great sent his famous letter on the human and divine natures of Christ to the bishop of Constantinople. Leo's letter was acclaimed as authentic doctrine by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. Peter's successors, the bishops of Rome, were fulfilling Christ's promise to Peter, "strengthen your brethren". (Luke 22: 32).

In the centuries which followed, the papacy assumed a clearer control of the government of the whole Church, especially when secular princes tried to take control of the Church. By the Middle Ages, theologians were beginning to take an interest in the doctrinal authority of the Pope as well as his power to govern and shepherd all believers, that work given to Peter by Christ.

*Some of those Popes made mistakes, some were bad men, how could theologians see the infallibility of the Church in their teachings?*

Some Popes did make mistakes, especially in political matters. Some had strange personal doctrinal ideas. Some were bad men. But the theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas ignored the personal foibles and sins of individual Popes, and looked to the Gift entrusted to Peter and his successors. St. Thomas saw that it belonged to the papacy "finally to decide questions of Faith, so that they may be held with unshakeable Faith by all." St. Thomas was already on the path to working out **how** the Spirit of Truth works clearly in the Church. In the last resort, when even a Council could not come to clear truths, the infallibility of the Church is expressed in the Pope.

But after St. Thomas there were many more centuries of development. The Popes declined in their prestige for some time. There were attempts, because of division in the Church, to raise up the Council as superior to the Pope. But that failed - and for a good reason. Unity was seen as St. Paul saw it - under a single head. The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic revival led to further necessary concentration on this leader and teacher. But it was not until the First Vatican Council of 1870 that the Church agreed on the formula of the full teaching authority of the Pope. This was the definition of papal infallibility, as we shall see later.

If a man argued, as many argued, that immoral Popes could not teach in the Church, then he would have to judge all papal teaching on the saintliness or holiness of individual Popes. This is almost impossible. We should remember that in our human weakness God gives his Gift, Grace. St. Paul knew he was not perfect, but he confidently declared, with words he claimed came from Christ to him, "My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12: 9). All members of God's People are sinners. That is why they have been called into his People by the One who came to call sinners to Himself. The wonder of Christianity is that Truth can be given to sinful men and that they can appreciate it and love it.

If a theologian argued that Popes make mistakes, because they are human beings, he could still hold to infallibility. We shall see that when at last the Church defined how a sinful human being can teach God's truth, that this definition limited the exact time and conditions when this could happen. It is easy to unearth papal mistakes. One Pope was even a heretic! But it is very mysterious to note that not one of these mistakes could be claimed to belong to authentic infallible teaching. This is why an argument on papal mistakes can be so unfair. It has to distort history and doctrine to give the impression that a Pope intended to teach infallibly and yet failed.

*But why couldn't the infallibility of the Church just stay in the Councils?*

It did stay in the Councils. But human beings are prone to squabbling, and a Council is open to interference because it consists of a number of different bishops from different countries. The authority of the Pope over the Council, always a delicate matter, was seen as the final court of appeal beyond a deadlock or division in a Council. Government by Councils did not work. Doctrinal decisions by Councils were often difficult to obtain. But these practical arguments are not the real reason why infallibility was finally seen as resting in the Pope. St Peter the fisherman of Galilee was the real reason.

We will now consider the office and role of Peter in the Church,

1. as it involves infallibility and Christ's promises of truth,
2. as it was worked out in the First Vatican Council of 1870.

## **II. PETER, CHURCH AND POPE**

*a) Do we have any signs of papal infallibility in the Bible?*

Yes. These signs which point towards the teaching of truth, the meaning we have seen in "infallibility", centre around St. Peter. Especially in Matthew's Gospel we find how the early Church saw that central role Christ gave to Peter. It is contained in a dramatic dialogue. (Matthew 16: 13-20).

Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples reply with other people's weak answers. Then Jesus comes back with a direct challenge - "But who do you say that I am?"

Only one man replies - Peter. He is suddenly inspired. His words seem to tumble out. Obviously he does not know the real meaning of what he says. Obviously it is too much to call his words a personal "confession of faith". A few moments later Christ will rebuke him for misunderstanding what he said. But at one point, Peter speaks with truth and strength.

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

We know that Jesus echoed that profound statement with those familiar words, "You are Peter, and upon this rock. . . ." Jesus said in effect, "Right! You've told me who I am - the Christ. Now I tell you who you are - the Rock, on whom my People, my Church, will rise."

Jews would know that Jesus' words were similar to the rabbis' saying that Abraham was the rock on whom the old Israel was built. Jesus has found a bed-rock for his new Israel, the Church.

*b) But what has all that to do with papal infallibility?*

Matthew was very careful in writing his Gospel. At this point scholars believe he wanted to use the Jewish "catechism" method of giving teaching, the targum, comments, and questions and answers. Matthew arranged his text to point out the main truth, the climax of his whole Gospel - "You are the Christ . . .". But Matthew wanted to emphasize the role of Peter. Some argue that Peter was already dead when Matthew wrote, so he wanted to emphasize a role continuing in Peter's successors in Rome.

When we realize this, we look at the passage as a whole. We do not just pluck texts out to "prove" things. When we look closer we find a very interesting theme, often missed because people look at "You are Peter . . . etc."

Before Jesus said, "You are Peter . . ." he said something mysterious and important. He told Peter that his words "You are the Christ . . ." were directly inspired by God. "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven . . ."

Peter did not speak as an ordinary man. He spoke God's truth. In Matthew's carefully arranged text, Peter reveals the infallible doctrine about Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

What else is that, but the basic truth or dogma on which the whole of Christianity is balanced?

*c) Does the "Rock" theme have any bearing on infallibility?*

It seems as if Matthew's account makes Peter's words of truth the sign Jesus was looking for, by which he could make one of his disciples the leader and basis of his People. It seems as if Peter's infallible statement, the truth of our Faith in Jesus, was the way the Father revealed which man would be the chief shepherd of the Church. Jesus calls him "rock", possibly because of the rabbis' saying about Abraham, possibly because a rock is a sign of reliability in the Jewish scriptures. God is called a "rock". The centre of Israel's life was the holy rock, Mount Zion, where the temple rose. The Jewish test for truth was in terms of reliability, a practical test.

For us Catholics, truth is very practical. It is expressed often as doctrine or dogma, but it is meant to be lived, applied and understood. For us Catholics, the teaching Pope is our rock in a trembling and uncertain world.

*d) Do the "keys" Christ gave Peter have any bearing on infallibility?*

Yes. The keys were symbols of authority. ". . . you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. 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."

This was a personal promise given first to Peter alone. Later (Matthew 18: 18) Jesus gives keys to all the disciples, but in terms of how they can discipline members of the Church. Some have seen in Peter's keys the symbol of the chief steward or "major domo" of the Church. Others prefer the discipline meaning. The rabbis used a sign of discipline and authority in the "binding and loosing" language, a symbol of making judgements and decisions in matters of the holy law, the Torah. Jesus was using Torah language. Peter could be seen by a Jew as the "chief rabbi" in the New Israel.

The keys stand for authority. In Isaiah 22: 22 they represent royal authority. In Revelation 1: 18 a symbolic vision shows Jesus with the "keys of death and Hades" because he rose from death. In Revelation 3: 7 Christ has the royal power of the "key of David". The sharp rebuke Jesus gave to lawyers ". . . you have taken away the key of knowledge . . ." (Luke 11: 52) argued that they had obscured the truth and not used their own Jewish writings to point to the new Kingdom, the Church. All these varieties of meaning in the "keys" enrich our understanding of Peter's role - to decide, to teach, to interpret, to judge, to rule, to protect that community against which the "powers of death" can never triumph.

The keys and the binding and loosing involve authority given to men by God, authority he will honour and guide "on earth" and "in heaven". This is exactly the authority used by the Pope when he teaches in the Church and for the Church at those rare but definite moments of infallibility.

*e) Are there other indications of infallibility in the Bible?*

We have seen how the Holy Spirit of Truth is the infallible principle in the whole Church. We have just seen how Peter is the focus of truth in Matthew's writing. There are several other interesting signs which indicate infallibility associated with Peter and the Church.

In Luke's beautiful Gospel, Christ reassured Peter just before he predicted Peter's terrible denial of his Lord.

"Simon, Simon, behold. Satan demanded to have you (plural), that he might sift you (plural) like wheat, but I have prayed for you (singular) that your (singular) faith may not fail; and when you (singular) have turned again, strengthen your (singular) brethren." (Luke 21: 31, 32).

The function of this rock-man is clear. He will be the strengthener of his fellow apostles. His faith will not fail, even under moral pressures and temptations. Satan is out to destroy the rock-man, but the powers of death can never triumph over an unfailing community of Faith led by the guardian of Faith.

What else is this but the function of the Pope?

In the Acts of the Apostles, also written by Luke, we have a more practical description of Peter strengthening the Faith of the community with the truth. But we find Peter making a mistake, requiring converts to follow Jewish laws (see Acts chapters 10& 11 and Galatians chapter 2). Yet the author of Acts shows Peter receiving a direct revelation in a dream which corrects him. Peter is shown the truth and acts on it.

At the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) it appears that Peter does not preside. The local Jerusalem apostle, James, is President. But Peter has the first say at the Council. He makes the crucial decision. James has the final say, (as the authority which had been claimed to have promoted the mistaken ideas of the full continuation of the Mosaic Law,) and seems to make a judgement, or so it appears in English translation. But he only repeats what Peter said ( and therefore entirely concedes the points as made by Peter).

The decision of this Council, not to burden new Christians with Jewish laws, was embodied in a letter. In the main phrases of this letter we have a clear awareness of the infallibility of the Church. Before the final decisions are set out, we find the words, ". . . it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . .". This is infallibility as teaching truths.

The story recorded in John chapter 21, written well after Peter's martyrdom, is a further indication of the role of Peter and infallibility.

*f) How was the infallibility of Peter's office defined in 1870?*

Eighteen hundred years separate the Council of apostles in Jerusalem from the Council of hundreds of their direct successors, the bishops, in Rome, the Council which finally clarified what the Church means by "infallibility". Yet, across those centuries runs a continuous living tradition of confidence in the Holy Spirit of Truth, the Strengthener who is with his People in their stormy pilgrimage through time into eternity.

After heated debates, and the strong opposition of a minority group who thought it was not the right time to make a definition, the First Vatican Council, challenged the world and strengthened the People of God with the following truth:

"We teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks **ex cathedra**, that is, when in discharge of the office of Shepherd and Teacher of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the Universal Church, by the divine assistance promised him in Blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals: and that therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church."

*g) What does all this mean?*

When the debates of the Council reached a critical point, Bishop Vincent Gasser of Brixen delivered a speech which sums up the meaning of this definition of papal infallibility. Absolute infallibility belongs to God alone, so the Pope does not have absolute infallibility as a possession. But his infallibility is personal. Gasser made it clear that by this he did not mean that the Pope as a private citizen is infallible. But the man who succeeds to the Office of Peter in the Church can teach infallibly at certain times. The Roman Church or the Holy See are not infallible.

Gasser saw a **separate** quality in papal infallibility. The Pope is not cut off from the Church. But Christ's promise that faith would not fail in this unique teaching area belongs **separately** to the men who directly succeed Peter. No other members of the Church have this unique gift at their disposal. However, the Pope can only teach truth when he is acting in and for the Church: It would be impossible to have a Pope teaching infallibly apart or isolated from the Church - for he would not be Pope. In the rare moments of infallible teachings, the Pope will use the co-operation, consent and agreement of the Church, but these factors do not govern or determine the papal exercise of infallibility. In the Church, teaching for the Church, the man who succeeds to Peter's role remains free to teach.

We can see that Bishop Gasser presented an accurate view of the Pope so that he is not simply the voice of the Church, a mere spokesman. On the other hand he did not allow the Pope to become a magic oracle above the Church, a sort of super computer with a direct line to perfect truth all the time. There were extremists at the First Vatican Council who wanted to turn the Pope into this sort of infallible oracle - the sort of parody some people imagine infallibility to be. But there were others, in another faction, who were frightened to define infallibility, except in weak and useless terms. Neither of these extreme groups won at the Council.

*h) Who were the two extreme groups at the First Vatican Council?*

The first group was known as the "Ultramontane" party. They were those loyal to the Pope "over the mountains", or the Roman party, "over the mountains" - "ultra-montane". The extreme wing was known as the "New Ultramontane" group. It had outspoken supporters in France, England, Italy and Spain. The extreme wing seemed to want to make every papal word infallible! However, we should not be distracted by the erratic element in this "party", for the vast majority of bishops at the Council could be described as "Ultramontane". Pope Pius IX was very angry that this snide name had been given to what was clearly the normal position of most Council Fathers. Unfortunately the extremists resorted to all sorts of unscrupulous methods to defeat or confuse the rival minority party.

The minority, consisting of many fine scholars, was known as the "Inopportunist" party. These bishops were not against infallibility, although they wanted certain safeguards to prevent absolute power. But they believed that the time was not "opportune" to define infallibility. They feared violent or harsh reactions from the various governments of Europe if papal infallibility were defined. A few of them still held to a heretical tradition known as "Gallicanism", because it came from France, a tradition which exalted the local national Church, submitted that Church to local royal control, and played down the international authority

of the Pope as much as possible. Some scholars argue that fear of this Gallicanism was responsible for the definition of papal infallibility.

*i) Was this Gallicanism the error which led the Church to define infallibility?*

This is a disrupted area of historical interpretation. Personally, I do not believe that the bishops were fearful of "Gallicanism". It was really a lost cause, although revived in Germany and Austria under different names. If we want to find the sort of world context in which infallibility was defined, we must look at Europe in that troubled year of 1870.

In 1870 we could see the year when major changes were breaking in the Western world. Germany was uniting for the first time under the Prussian Empire. Germany and France were on the brink of a war which disrupted and shut the Council in Rome. France was defeated in that war and the world saw the first brief victory of Communism, the Paris Commune, the first success of the new economic and political doctrines of Karl Marx. Italy moved into the final stage of her struggle for unity, finally defeating the papacy and seizing the last papal territory around Rome. In the United States the nation - was being drawn together after the agonies of the Civil War. All of these events involved challenges to the Church, questionings of the rights and freedom of the Church, even - as a reprisal for infallibility - Bismarck's open persecution of the Church.

The Church was striving to define her strength, spiritual power only, in the face of the new "secular" world, of which we are the inheritors today. The Church, with many romantic backward glances, was realizing that the old order had passed away once and for all.

*j) Did the world powers resent the definition of infallibility?*

Yes. We have overwhelming evidence, in diaries, diplomatic documents, letters, to prove that the world powers were almost frantic at the prospect of papal infallibility. They imagined that this would turn the Pope into an infallible politician who would interfere in the lives of Catholic citizens in countries where Catholics were a minority, or in Ireland where Catholics were a subject majority. Even Catholic governments misunderstood the meaning of the definition. Strangely enough, this hostile world reaction, this suspicious fear of any new life or vitality in the Church, was passed over in virtual silence in a recently publicized attack on infallibility. The author of that attack has preferred to emphasize the alleged "rigging" of the Council, trumpeted by hostile politicians and theologians who preferred to serve their nation rather than their Church. He had to admit that at least one could not claim, as some claimed, that the Council was not "free".

In a strange way the hostile governments were right in opposing the definition. It was, after all, the great spiritual centre of later loyalty to the Papacy, a loyalty and devotion which held the Church together as those same hostile governments hurled themselves into two World Wars, as their causes and their nationalisms rose and fell, as the new dictators, Communist or Fascist, appeared, as revolutions and depressions tore at the people. In all this, the voice of Peter's successor rang out as a beacon of truth in a darkening world. Perhaps, in this century of blood which separates us in 1971 from that First Vatican Council, we can at least see Providence.

Jesus once said, ". . . be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16: 33). How? One way Jesus overcame the powers of this world was by truth. He gave us a charter of freedom. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free". (John 8: 31-32).

So we have a fallen world, which tries to take away our freedom. But Jesus has overcome that world. He has created a community of free people, 'the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.' (1 Timothy 3: 15).

Now let us see how truth is taught in this Church of the living God.

### III. INFALLIBLE TEACHINGS

*Looking at the exact words of the definition of 1870 (see Section II, Question 'f') , is it right to say "The Pope is infallible" ?*

Strictly speaking the sentence "The Pope is infallible" is ambiguous and therefore open to misunderstanding. The First Vatican Council was careful to define what we could summarize in a short sentence, "The Pope is able to define infallible teachings."

**If we mean this**, that he can teach truths at certain times and under certain circumstances, then we could say, "The Pope is infallible." We should add some words of explanation, otherwise we could encourage superstition or lead non-Catholic friends to misunderstand this truth of our Faith. We do not believe that the Pope is infallible as a private person, Giovan Battista Montini. [or Karol Wojtyla.] We do believe that simply because he succeeds to the Office of Peter, so he is open to a unique gift of being able to define truths, when rare circumstances demand this.

We can say, "Certain defined papal teachings are infallible."

That is, they are true. Therefore, if we seek a simple answer to the title of this booklet, "**IS THE POPE INFALLIBLE?**", we can answer - "Yes. But let us say rather that we mean 'The Pope is able to define infallible teachings'."

*Are all papal teachings infallible?*

No. Infallible teachings require certain circumstances, laid down by the First Vatican Council.

The Pope must teach

- (a) **ex cathedra** (from the Chair of Peter), that is
- (b) as Shepherd and Teacher of all Christians,
- (c) speaking with Peter's apostolic authority,
- (d) defining a dogma of faith and morals.

Papal teachings under these circumstances come from the "Extraordinary" Magisterium (teaching authority). The Holy Spirit in these extraordinary circumstances preserves Peter's successor from a false decision (negative assistance), and leads him to the right knowledge and teaching of truth (positive assistance).

*Does this infallible teaching just happen?*

No, of course not. The Pope does not say, "Oh, I think I'll define a dogma today!" He only acts at the final point of clarifying and defining doctrine which has puzzled Christians or caused debates for many years.

In the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady we have a truth defined by a Pope. God created a woman to be his Mother. He created her perfectly. She was as perfect as a human being can be, as we were meant to be, as God still intends us to be. She had not the slightest trace of that disastrous warp in our human nature which is Original Sin. God created Mary for Himself, so that she could provide true human flesh and nature for the Person of her Son - God's Son. The perfect Mother gave birth to a perfect Son, not a Son different from herself, but a real Son of her own immaculate flesh.

For centuries Catholics believed this truth. Back in the Fourth Century St. Augustine wrote that all men must admit they are sinners, "except the Holy Virgin Mary, whom I desire, for the sake of the honour of the Lord, to leave entirely out of the question, when the talk is of sin." Augustine was even arguing here that Mary never sinned at all.

But theologians found a difficulty. How could Mary be redeemed before Christ died to save us from sin? Even one of the greatest theologians of all time, St. Thomas Aquinas, could not see a solution. In the Sixteenth Century the great Council of Trent followed Augustine's general approach and simply left Mary out of the question of sinfulness. It did not attempt infallible teaching.

But the people persisted in believing in Mary's perfection. In 1854 the pressure of their faith in Mary's origin came to a climax. After consulting the bishops and having received many petitions from the faithful, Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception as a dogma. His solution to Mary's redemption was simple, but profound.

Mary was preserved free from all stain of Original Sin by the free gift of God "in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of mankind." God simply anticipated the death of His Son on the Cross. What we see as a heroic act of love on the Cross is really something eternal, the continuous self-giving of Jesus to His Father in the Spirit. God was free to apply the power of that eternal fact at any point of time. God is always free.

This pattern of development and problems shows us how a dogma is defined.

*The people played a part in that dogma. Is infallibility simply the possession of the Pope and bishops?*

Infallibility is only the "possession" of God. We saw that He gives it, in the Person of the Spirit, to his whole Church. Therefore, it extends in different ways to all God's People. We can only define the infallibility of the Church in terms of the Pope and Councils of the bishops. But to a certain extent a mysterious general "infallibility" was recognized in the lay people and this we find in part of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

"The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (John 2: 20, 27) cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity', it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals." (Decree on the Church, 12).

This sense of faith is an instinct among Catholic people. It discerns what is true or false, even when the most sophisticated deceiver is at work. It is not something merely passive, just accepting teaching from above. We saw how it was a pressure leading to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Cardinal Newman isolated examples of this instinct in the early centuries of the Church. Many bishops had wandered off into false paths, deceived by clever heretics. But the ordinary faithful people stood firm in the right beliefs concerning the Person of Christ and that Mary can be called "Mother of God". In those early centuries it would be impossible to have a developed papal teaching authority, a unity centre in a confused world just accepting our Faith as the normal religion. So the Spirit, who is always free and unpredictable, moved as the Spirit of truth and unity among the people themselves.

This **sense of faith** is impossible to define as exactly as we can describe papal or Council teachings. That is why the Fathers at Vatican II did not try to define this mystery. They humbly recognized it.

*How does the people's sense of faith relate to papal infallibility?*

Here is something wonderful. There is a lively and close relationship between papal infallibility and the people's sense of faith. The one seems to respond to the other, in a response which works both ways. This was so in the definitions of Mary's Immaculate Conception (1854) and Assumption (1950).

But let us never forget that when we talk of the sense of faith and papal or Council infallibility, we must always go back to the Holy Spirit, back to the total infallibility of the Church, back to the simple meaning

of "infallible" - truth. We are looking at different aspects of the working of the One Spirit, leading his People in their pilgrimage into all truth.

*Did the Second Vatican Council break down papal infallibility?*

No. The Council defined papal authority, mainly in government of the Church, in terms of the other bishops. But, when we look at infallibility, we find how carefully the Council adhered to the First Vatican Council, of which the Second Vatican Council is a modern continuation.

The Second Vatican Council speaks of the Pope as "supreme teacher of the Universal Church. . . . one in whom the charism (gift) of the infallibility of the Church herself is individually present." (Decree on the Church 25). These words take us back to Bishop Gasser's wise explanation at Vatican I.

The Church comes before the Pope, but her infallibility is able to be used by an individual. It is a gift, only given to one man, the successor of Peter, the first of the bishops in the Church. The Second Vatican Council was also clear that "The infallibility promised to the Church resides also in the body of bishops when that body exercises supreme teaching authority with the successor of Peter." (Decree on the Church 25).

*Why then can we not just have infallibility in a Council of all bishops?*

Papal infallibility shows how God understands human nature "from the inside," and how he guides his Church accordingly. Councils of bishops, theologians' congresses, even the sense of faith among the people, are very difficult to measure or judge at times. We cannot always see what these vital areas of Church life are saying to us. We need a clear voice to lift us out of this predicament.

We ask questions. Who has the right to judge, to decide? Where does the final decision rest? Who will take responsibility ultimately? These are common questions in our modern world.

We lack leaders with courage to risk, to take responsibility. We have lost faith in the individual's gifts or strength of character. But, in his People, God has provided for such an individual, for a man who can assume responsibility for a final decision. The Pope inherits this servant role as the first bishop in the Church. His function is practical.

His role, as teacher of truth, works. Is this practical argument very "Christian"? God became one of us. That was practical. The People he called together are practical. They live practical Christian lives, dealing in practical human truths and practical divine truths. It is not enough to see infallibility as something supernatural. Infallibility is also God involved in our world, in our time, our language, our striving for truth.

## IV. PROBLEMS OF PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

Various problems arise in the area of papal infallibility. They cannot be ignored, but once we have established what we mean by infallibility we can come to solutions to these problems.

*Was the Pope's teaching on birth control infallible?*

In this booklet, so far, we have examined infallible teachings of the Extraordinary Magisterium (teaching authority). The birth control and abortion teaching in **Humanae Vitae** came from a different form of teaching authority, known as the Ordinary Magisterium.

The teachings of this Ordinary Magisterium, the "day to day" normal teaching authority, are binding on all Catholics. This teaching authority, which is heard much more frequently than the rare extraordinary definitions, is guided by the Holy Spirit of Truth. He is not bound only to the rare exercise of papal or Council infallibility.

Catholics with consciences formed by the Gospel follow the papal teaching on birth control. Just because it is not infallible in the extraordinary sense does not give anyone the right to twist that teaching, to ignore it, or to make it conform to the easy standards of decadent fashion.

With reference to an attack on infallibility, an attack which strangely used **Humanae Vitae**, the noted theologian Karl Rahner made several points. He said it is wrong to see **Humanae Vitae** as a dogma. But it is teaching of the Ordinary Magisterium. When teaching the normal doctrines of our Faith, all over the world, the Pope and bishops in that Ordinary Magisterium can teach infallibly. Obviously this is one of the ways the normal doctrines in catechetics, instruction, preaching, etc., continue to be true. But in the case of **Humanae Vitae** the Ordinary Magisterium did not give moral teaching which was

- (a) to be accompanied by an absolute assent of faith from believers or
- (b) as revealed truth from God.

Nevertheless, devoted Catholics will strive to follow the papal teaching. Some theologians see this birth control teaching as being the right decision for our time, an act of true prudence, of Spirit guided wisdom.

*Can the encyclical letter **Humanae Vitae** be used to attack infallibility?*

No. A person doing this would be acting in an unfair and irrational way. Even if a person argued that certain prelates wanted it to be infallible, he would have to admit that Pope Paul did not intend the letter to be infallible. It would be irrational of him to waste a large part of a book against infallibility by working out his grudges against **Humanae Vitae**. If he gave a parody impression of the authority of the encyclical, then his arguments would be unfair.

This author would have to demonstrate that in fact **Humanae Vitae** was wrong. Devout Catholics all over the world prefer to accept and follow the prophetic leadership of the Pope in this matter. But even if he were able to demonstrate that the birth control teaching was wrong, his case would still be irrelevant if he was writing against papal infallibility.

*If a man rejects infallibility, is he still a Catholic?*

He is still a member of the Church, to be treated with charity and understanding. But he is in serious error. He has cut himself off from the community of believers. Since his position would be close to that of Martin Luther, he could leave the Church of his own accord and enter a separated Christian community where he could maintain his opinions in clear conscience. If he refused to leave the Church, or to renounce his opinions, after proper attempts to incorporate him back into the community of believers, he could face official separation from the Church.

*What are Catholics to make of a book attacking infallibility?*

With reference to a particular book written by a Catholic against all infallibility in the Church, the Italian Bishops' Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith and Catechetics stated,

". . . one cannot knowingly adhere to the aforesaid opinions and theses (**in such a book**), support them or circulate them, without separating oneself from the full communion of the Church."

*Does the argument that "nothing men say is completely true" destroy infallibility?*

But can we dare to make the absolute statement "nothing men say is completely true"? This can backfire. If a man argued that way, and attacked all infallibility in the Church, I could reply, "Well, you say that nothing men say is completely true. You must include your own language! Therefore, I cannot take your arguments against infallibility seriously, because you have told me that they are 'not completely true'."

This would only be a shallow answer to the profound problem of human truth. But if a man contradicts himself he is using a perilous argument. If he sticks to his principle, he will have to argue that "Jesus rose from the dead" is not completely true. Christians think otherwise.

*But are not the words of any human statement always inadequate?*

Human statements are often open to error. I can never contain all truth or reality about something in one sentence. There is always something else to be said - explanations, meanings, definitions, for example of those simple words, "Jesus rose from the dead". Because words often have different levels of meaning, my statements could be misunderstood. Translated into other languages, my statements could change their meaning. My statements will be understood by different people at different times in different ways. My statements could be twisted by a man like Dr. Goebbells into propaganda or abuse.

But having said all this, we dare not claim that **all** human statements must **always** fall into these common pitfalls. The statements the Church makes, her dogmas, have clear meanings, convey clear truths, although they often lead on to fresh speculation and the research of theologians.

Let us take two statements, "Jesus rose from the dead", and "Mary was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven". Now both of these statements can be misunderstood. Simple people could believe that Jesus' dead body was simply revived and that he walked around again in the same way as he lived before his crucifixion. Simple people could imagine that Mary's body floated up into the sky, where they imagine heaven to be. But the Church, using Scripture, theological learning, and the simple words of those statements of truth, will not allow these misunderstandings.

Both those statements about Jesus and Mary are about the same wonderful event - resurrection from death. The Church understands that resurrection is far more wonderful than reviving a dead body to lead the same life or floating up into the sky. Resurrection is the rising to a new life of glory, with the sort of free and agile supernatural body which Jesus had when he appeared to his friends after he left a tomb empty. Mary was taken straight into the same glory after her own death. On the other hand, the Church maintains clearly that the physical bodies of Christ and his Mother were involved fully in this glorious change. The same Body which hung on the Cross for us has passed into glory in a glorified form. The same body which bore the Son of God has passed into the glory of that dimension which we humans call "heaven".

So these dogmatic statements perfectly hold the balance of truth. The Church teaches them, believes them, and as far as we can, understands them.

*What is a "dogma"?*

The word itself means "a teaching", understood by Christians as a truth. In reference to an attack on infallibility, the German bishops declared:

"Formulas which serve to clarify the **Creed** and in so doing serve the objective interpretation of the testimony intended by Scripture, and are proposed as such by the Church in a definitively binding manner, are called **dogmas**."

The bishops also described dogmas as "unmistakable statements of **Yes** and **No**."

For believers, dogmas are helps towards truth. They are obligatory because they are designed to isolate error and to maintain the Gospel of Jesus in an accurate way. In different ways all Christians, not just Catholics, have their dogmas - and we all agree on the basic dogmas, hence the possibility of Christian unity. In practice, most Christians treat certain early Councils of the Church as infallible, because they accept the dogmas taught at these Councils, truths about Christ and the Trinity.

*How important are the words of a dogma?*

No one believes that the words of a dogmatic definition say everything about the truth they accurately contain and protect.

But, as words, they accurately define the limits and open the paths forward of particular truth. They do this infallibly. They set the authentic boundary beyond which men do not go unless they want to re-write the Gospel and part company with the living Church.

In the early centuries, the Church was very serious about the exact meanings of technical words in making dogmas. Philosophers and theologians deliberately chose and tightly defined, the words they used. This continues to our own day. If this process were abandoned, then the science of theology would perish.

As devices which protect, define and open up God's truths, dogmas are usually defined when serious errors appear. The people want clear guidance, so that they can hold to truths and avoid watering down of the Gospel.

*But how important were the papal definitions about Our Lady?*

It has been claimed that these infallible definitions were irrelevant pious notions. But let us look at history, an area rarely well covered when infallibility is attacked.

In 1854 Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception. He was throwing down a challenge to an age when man had become an idol. He focused attention on the uncomfortable fact of Original Sin. Humanists then, as now, were arguing that man is really a perfect creature. There is no twist in his nature, no Original Sin. Man is a "noble savage", so that free secular education, good diet and clean drains will liberate him to be perfect.

The Pope said that one woman was perfect, but not because she was just a normal member of the human race. She was made perfect only by the free act of God's Grace. Again, this challenged the fashionable Humanism of the day. It claimed that man could rise or evolve to perfection by his own efforts. To this, the Church said No. God alone redeems. God alone acts to raise man. It is Grace that saves, not human efforts. At least on that point Catholics and Protestants join hands in one Gospel.

In 1950, Pius XII defined the bodily Assumption of Our Lady. We may remember that post-war era. All man's hopes, much of that vain Humanism of the last century, had shattered. Men had become beasts and monsters. Human bodies were burned in the millions in the death ovens of the Third Reich. Human bodies were suddenly reduced to ashes in the fire storms of Hamburg or Dresden, and above all, in the nuclear horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Man's body was something cheap. Life was cheap. Hope was merely in material survival or comfort.

The Pope said that, in fact, the human body matters, it too will be raised up, raised in hope no matter what happens in this world. God had acted. He had taken his Mother to himself, body and soul. By affirming the holiness, not merely of the soul but of the body of Mary, the Pope cut at the despair and perversion of that age. We say "that age". But are we not the inheritors of "that age"?

The two truths of Mary's origin and destiny remain as Christian challenges to our age, when men continue the Humanist fantasy of human perfection and unlimited ability, when men continue to cheapen or idolize human flesh, to lose hope in what Christ promises - resurrection.

*If the infallibility of the Church comes first, why didn't Vatican I define it first?*

This basic infallibility was just taken for granted. Why? It cannot be defined exactly, and why should it be? This would be like looking for a definition of the Holy Spirit. That is impossible.

But in a way the Council did define Church infallibility, in the only way human beings can do this - in terms of **acts**. The Council said **how** the Church is infallible. The teachings of the Pope in certain circumstances, his limited extraordinary acts, this is a way the Church is infallible.

*Could we replace "infallibility" with something better?*

For ecumenical reasons, and because history does not present infallibility in a neat way, it has been suggested that we find another word, or indeed another idea. This is "indefectibility". Apparently Martin Luther thought along these lines four hundred years or so ago, but the suggestion has been made again.

Unfortunately, indefectibility already has a clear meaning for most Christians, not just Catholics. It means that the Church will never vanish, that the Church is "unfailing", "indefectible". No matter what terrible turns history takes, there will always be Christians somewhere, ". . . Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." The Church will never fall, ". . . the powers of death shall not prevail against it."

Obviously, this is closely related to infallible teaching of truths in the Church. But it is not the same. The "indefectible" Church is the natural community for "infallible" teachings.

*What would happen if we got rid of infallibility?*

This, too, has been suggested. It is as ludicrous as suggesting that a man should have his hands amputated to increase his efficiency. In a body the hands are normal to the whole man. Unless equipped with substitutes for them, he cannot function as a whole man without them. So infallibility is normal to the Church - but we can fashion no substitute for it, for truth.

Where would the teaching office of the Church be if infallibility was removed? There would be no teaching office. No one would have enough confidence to teach. Democratic voting cannot decide truth in doctrine. Men would be free to pick and choose the truths of Christianity as they pleased. Soon we would have no clear Gospel to preach.

The most impudent suggestion of a "replacement" for the infallible teaching authority is that we use a world body of theologians. Some theologians already speak as if they were endowed with gifts beyond the limited and controlled gift of papal infallibility. The babble of confusion, of a clash between "infallible" theologian A or "infallible" theologian B is imaginable, and not to be seen as a genuine development for the future. Theologians must serve the Church, not dominate it. They guide and help those in the supreme teaching authority, both the Ordinary and Extraordinary Magisteria. The Holy Spirit works in and through their minds, in their lively debates, in the raw material of human language, law and logic. Their arguments and theories remind us that the thinking Church is alive, even if troubled at times. We must respect their task, but always see it as service, not domination.

The Pope and bishops serve the Church by their teaching offices. Perhaps what makes their sacred role more credible than that of certain theologians is its lack of arrogance, its humility, its burden of grave responsibility for the sake of us all.

## V. GOD INVOLVED

Using various questions, some determined by attacks on the teaching offices, we have probed into the infallibility of the Church, the infallible teachings of the Pope. Let us briefly summarize all this.

1. Only God the Holy Spirit is absolutely infallible. Jesus promised this Spirit of Truth to his own **People**. "**Infallible**" = "**true**".
2. His People, the Church, live in this Spirit of Truth. The Church is infallible, ever being led into truth. The Church is indefectible, never able to fail, no matter what happens.
3. This infallibility of the Church is seen in certain acts of the Pope.
4. The Pope is able to define infallible teachings.

5. However, he must be teaching

- (a) **ex cathedra** (from the Chair of Peter), that is,
- (b) as Shepherd and Teacher of all Christians,
- (c) speaking with Peter's apostolic authority,
- (d) defining a dogma of faith and morals.

6. Such teachings are infallible of themselves, not from the consent of the Church. The Pope always teaches within the Church.

7. The bishops, teaching in unity with the Pope, for example, in an Ecumenical Council, are able to define infallible teachings.

8. We have set out the **Extraordinary** Magisterium (teaching authority). However, in the **Ordinary** Magisterium, the more common day to day authority, unanimous teachings of Pope and bishops are infallible when taught throughout the world. This includes the normal basic doctrines of the Faith.

9. The Holy Spirit, always free, works within the whole Church in an infallible "sense of faith" of God's People. This instinct accepts authentic teaching and itself actively moves to make such teaching clear.

*But what does it all mean for the Church today?*

Here is the Church. Here at least is a place of truth. Here in a world which strives for truth and often finds shoddy substitutes, we have the unique People, the People who live in truth. This Church is a People with one foot firmly planted in time, the other planted in eternity.

In Faith, God's People are led by the Spirit, as they pray, reflect, argue, teach, doubt, believe and live. God the Spirit is free. So he will not be tied down. No academic elitism, no intrusion of majority opinions moulded by the world, no superstitious hunger for a magic oracle who answers trivial questions, no attempt to turn Peter's successor into a mere spokesman, none of these trends can take away the freedom of the Spirit.

But the free Spirit wants to make us free. ". . . you will know the truth. . . ." says Jesus Christ. His Church acts and teaches so that we can "know the truth". ". . . and the truth will make you free", Jesus Christ continues. But how does this truth make us free?

**The freedom we seek is the life of God, eternal life, which takes us beyond death to our true destiny. The way of eternal life is the way of Jesus Christ, his teachings, continually passed on and clearly proclaimed in his Church. This is the sort of truth in which a man can live in faith and die in hope. So what can a member of the community of infallibility say to mankind?**

**"Look! Listen! Jesus still teaches in his People. Truth is living in the world. Truth can be heard. Truth can give hope. Truth can lead beyond death itself. Truth will free you from doubt and despair. This is God's world. Here He is involved."**