

# What Do You Know About?

## Saint Peter and His Successors? Infallibility? Catholic or “Roman” Catholic?

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London Catholic Truth Society No.c283 (1957)

THOSE who consider the position of the Catholic Church seriously sometimes have difficulty in understanding how Saint Peter’s authority is continued in the Church through the succession of the Popes.

Our Lord said Saint Peter would die a martyr (John 21:18-19), yet He gave him authority over the Church, which was going to last until the end of the world. From Peter, the Rock, were to come that unity and strength which would make the Church impregnable. The “gates of hell” would not prevail and Christ would be with His Church “all days, even to the consummation of the world” (see Matthew 16:18, and 28:20).

If the Church changed essentially it would cease to be Christ’s Church. But these promises of Christ apply to His Church and no other. Therefore, all the essentials given by Christ to His Church must remain. They must still be in His Church. He guaranteed that.

One such essential feature of the Church was undoubtedly the authority of Saint Peter. It was the foundation, and what could be more essential to any building than the foundation? If the foundation changes, the building changes. Our Lord actually compared His Church to a building erected on the foundation of Saint Peter’s authority. All the component parts would be held together by that authority, just as the bricks and girders of a building only remain together in position if the foundation remains solid.

Therefore, Christ’s own guarantee of permanence to His Church implies that the authority he conferred on Saint Peter will remain with it as the most essential feature, the foundation, the source of unity, strength and endurance. Peter would die for the Faith, as Our Lord foretold; but his living voice, his authority, would remain in the Church. Otherwise, the Church would have changed essentially. It would not be Christ’s Church.

How does that come about? There is an early record that before Saint Peter and Saint Paul were martyred in Rome they together chose Saint Linus as Saint Peter’s successor. He ruled the Church for about eleven years from A.D. 67. For the next twelve years, Saint Cletus was Pope and then Saint Clement from A.D. 90 to 100.

We know very little about the early elections of the Popes apart from names and dates. Probably priests and people assembled in Rome chose their new Bishop. Some scholars think the laity took no part in the election until after the time of Pope Saint Sylvester, A.D. 314-335. From his time, the Christian emperors had a voice in the elections. There was trouble later on from the barbarian

invaders. Then came interference from other sources, such as the civil authorities and the principal families of Rome. All wanted to have a Pope of their choosing.

From A.D. 769, lay-folk were officially excluded from the papal elections, but still powerful people, like the Emperor Otto I in the tenth century, tried to interfere. In the end, the Church had to take drastic measures to safeguard such an important matter.

In 1227, the fourteenth General Council of the Church brought the Conclave into being. It was the last and most decisive of several steps taken since 1059 (when the election of the Popes was entrusted mainly to the Cardinal Bishops) to define the manner of election. The method then confirmed is still observed in its essentials.

In the Conclave, the Cardinals vote in secret session. They remain isolated (conclave means literally a room closed with a key) until the Pope is chosen. Two-thirds plus one of the Cardinals must agree on the same candidate before the election is completed. Under the Conclave system, the Cardinals are free from outside pressure. The disputes and delays of the earlier methods can no longer happen.

Note that the headship of the Church belongs to the Bishop of Rome. The Pope becomes head because he is Bishop of Rome; he does not become Bishop of Rome, because he is head of the Church. The Pope's election is primarily the choosing of Rome's Bishop. The College of Cardinals makes the election because they are the chief of the Roman clergy.

When their number is complete, there are 70 Cardinals. [This was changed by Pope John XXIII. In 2012, there are 120 voting Cardinals.] They can be of any nationality. In their own country, they may also be archbishops or bishops. They have a church in Rome or a bishopric near Rome. They are not obliged to live in Rome unless their work makes it advisable for them to be near the Pope. But wherever they live and whatever positions they have in their own countries, they are the supreme members of the bishopric of Rome. They have been the only men with the right to choose Bishops of Rome since A.D. 1139.

The Pope does not get his powers (like Infallibility) from those who elect him; he gets them from his position as Bishop of Rome and head of the Church. Our Lord created that position and made it permanent. It is He, Christ, who gives the powers to the man the Cardinals choose.

Suppose there is a mistake? Suppose the Cardinals elect someone unworthy? It could happen. Even though the Cardinals pray for light and pledge themselves most solemnly to choose the worthiest candidate, their choice is still a human one. Christ never guaranteed that the choice would always be perfect. But, whoever is validly elected succeeds to Saint Peter's position and receives his authority which, we have seen, was given permanently to the Church by Christ.

The Pope need not be an Italian. Most of the nations of Europe have given Popes to the Church. Adrian IV (1154-1159) was formerly Nicholas Brakespeare of Abbots Langley, England.

For a considerable time now, the Popes have been Italian. The Cardinals have very prudently chosen as Bishop of Rome a man from the country of which Rome is the capital city. It need not be so. But the nationalism which has divided Europe for the past few hundred years made it very difficult and unpractical to make any other choice. In any case, when a man becomes head of the Church he ceases to have any nationality. He is the supreme representative of Christ, and the thought of his being subject to any temporal sovereign has always been repugnant to Christian people. [Most know that Pope John Paul II was Polish, and Pope Benedict XVI is German.]

Enquirers sometimes ask: “Have there not for periods of history been two or three Popes or claimants to the Papacy at the same time, as, for instance, during the great Western Schism from 1378 to 1418? Can we be sure that the right Pope emerged after the trouble?”

Yes, there were several claimants to the Papacy at the same time, but only one Pope. All Catholics knew there could be only one. The question was: Which of the claimants was the true Pope? News travelled slowly in those days. National groups confused the issue by indulging in active propaganda for their own candidate. There was confusion and much scandal. But the succession from Saint Peter was never broken.

In 1309, there were civil wars in Italy, so Pope Clement V moved to Avignon in the south of France. The next five Popes were French; they lived at Avignon, but they were, of course, Bishops of Rome. Pope Gregory XI died in 1378 and the Conclave met in Rome to choose his successor. Urban VI, an Italian archbishop, was chosen.

Thirteen French Cardinals then said the wish of the Roman people to have an Italian Pope had influenced the Conclave in its choice. So they chose Cardinal Robert, of Geneva, as Clement VII. The Roman Cardinals naturally declared this election schismatical but the rival lines went on for nearly forty years side by side. Clement VII was anti-Pope (i.e., a false claimant to the Papacy) from 1378 to 1394. Anti-Pope Benedict XIII succeeded him and France, Lorraine, Scotland (France’s ally), Naples and Spain declared for him and regarded him as being legitimately chosen. Other countries stood by Urban VI. The confusion was increased when a local council of bishops at Pisa tried to heal the schism in 1409, but only succeeded in producing yet another anti-Pope, Alexander V, who lasted for a year and was followed by anti-Pope John XXIII (1410-1415).

The solution finally came when John XXIII resigned, Benedict XIII was deposed and Gregory XII, Urban VI’s legitimate successor laid down his office for the sake of peace. A full Council of the Church then elected Martin V (1417-1431).

The Western Schism is an indication of the power of Christ in His Church. No merely human institution could have survived such a test of its unity. The foundation of that unity is Peter’s authority vested in the Bishop of Rome. Unity survived; its foundation survived.

Doubt about who was the rightful Pope during the years of the Schism does not affect the position of later Popes. The Papacy is not handed on by one Bishop of Rome to another, any more than the Prime Minister hands on his office to another. As a Pope does not receive his office from his predecessor; the identity of that predecessor does not really concern him. A man is Pope because the Church recognises him as Bishop of Rome, the successor of Saint Peter.

Once universal agreement was reached after the Western Schism as to whom the Church recognised as Bishop of Rome, that person’s position as Pope was clear. Who were his predecessors during the period of doubts is of no importance. His position depended on the permanence of the See of Rome, not on the identity of its Bishops.

It is well worthy of note that even during the darkest days of the Great Schism nobody doubted the fact of the unity of the Church as a visible society. No one was prepared to see distinct organisations within the Church, each demanding obedience. On the contrary, everyone knew that there was but one visible authority left to His Church by Christ; all knew that the holder of that authority was the Bishop of Rome; and all were anxious that the identity of that person should be finally decided.

The basic truth emerges as the constant belief of the Church: Where the Bishop of Rome is, there is Peter; where Peter is, there is Christ; therefore, where the Bishop of Rome is, there is Christ.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT

INFALLIBILITY?

MANY people miss the point of Infallibility because they miss the point of the Church. Brought up in one or other of the denominations they are used to thinking of the churches as mere organisations of believers. The concept of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ, as a living organism, as the union of men with God in Christ, is foreign to them. Yet that is the key to the right understanding of infallibility.

Christ redeemed our race and cancelled out the effects of Adam's sin. But He did more. He set up amongst us a living Society, one Church. He gave His Holy Spirit to that Society. He commissioned her to preach His truth to every creature.

The Holy Spirit is the Church's life-breath. He transforms it from being only an organisation (linked together by the force of authority) into an organism (welded into one by the inner principle of life). Christ's Church is His presence in the world, carrying on His work, saving the souls of men and teaching them God's truth.

He often spoke of His Church as a "kingdom." In every kingdom, there is authority. Indeed, find the authority and you find the kingdom. In the Church, the purpose of authority is God's glory and men's salvation. Through it men are united with God, they worship God, they obey and they hear God.

So the Church bears witness to the truth just as Christ did: "For this was I born, and for this came I into the world, that I should give testimony to the truth." (John 18:37.) She must pass on the truth — always God's truth, revealed in Christ. The Spirit of Truth enables her to do this: "When the Paraclete comes, whom I shall send you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, He shall give testimony of Me. And you shall give testimony because you are with Me from the beginning." (John 15:26.)

The continuous presence of Christ keeps His Church from error: "Going, therefore, all of you, teach all nations. . . . Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world." (Matthew 19:20).

"To err is human," wrote Pope. And we might add, with Dryden:

"Nor is the people's judgment always true

The most may err as grossly as the few."

Even the most brilliant human mind cannot know for certain (unless he is told) what the man next to him is thinking. Groups of brilliant men have again and again come to conclusions which have later been proved to be false. All history is witness to the fallibility of human reason.

Suppose, then, that God made a revelation to men and merely left it to ourselves to discuss and interpret and teach, it would become so entangled in the course of time that no one would know for certain what the original revelation had been or whether there had even been one.

Certainly, God could not command the acceptance of truth on fallible human authority under pain of eternal damnation. He could not say of truth taught by man unaided: “He that believes and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believes not shall be condemned.” (Mark 16:16.) Yet that is what He said about His Church’s teaching.

If you believe that there is a God who is absolute truth and that God has revealed certain things to men, you must reasonably expect those revealed matters to contain truths you would not otherwise be able to know. You must suppose that those truths are important, even vital, for you — otherwise God would not have revealed them.

You must suppose, therefore, that God wants you to know them truly. He wants you to know them as they left Him — unaltered, undiminished, undefiled by the treatment of fallible human reason. How could that be?

God has devised a way. It is His Church. He has made it that channel by which His truth passes to men. That is why the Church is infallible. Christ meant it to be so, as we have seen. He sent His Holy Spirit to guide the Church to witness to the truth as He did.

Infallibility is not sinlessness. It is not divine inspiration. It is not a special message from God. It is not an illumination of the mind. It is not a special source of information. It does not mean that individual Bishops or groups of Bishops or one Pope or all Popes can never make mistakes or teach error. It does not give divine power to the Pope. It does not even mean that the Pope cannot be condemned as a heretic.

The infallibility of the Church is the infallibility of the Bishops. They are, in the fullest sense, the successors of the Apostles. When they teach a truth so widely that it can be called the teaching of the episcopate of the Catholic Church, that teaching is true. ‘God’s power’ keeps it from being wrong.

Sometimes a definite statement of the truth is demanded. The world may, for example, want to know authoritatively what the Bishops teach on a certain matter. Or a new problem might arise for which a solution is urgently demanded. Or it might be that men need a certain truth to be emphasised for them by being declared part of God’s revelation. In cases like these, the Pope may make a solemn definition.

If you really want to know what the infallibility of the Pope means you should go to the source, the definition by the General Council of the Church at the Vatican on July 18, 1870. Here it is: “It is a divinely revealed dogma that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when, acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, doctrine, concerning faith or morals, to be held by the universal Church, possesses through the divine assistance promised to him in the person of Saint Peter the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining doctrines concerning faith or morals, and that definitions of the Roman Pontiff are therefore irreformable because of their nature, and not because of the agreement of the Church.”

Note what a limited gift this is. Infallibility simply guarantees that the teachings of the united Catholic episcopate and the definitions of the Pope (whose authority is the foundation of the unity of the Church) are free from error. God’s revelation is safeguarded. Human minds can work on it, discuss it, study it, explain it, draw conclusions from it and still not destroy it.

That is what matters most. God's truth must be preserved. In studying that truth, the human mind has abounding scope for its activity. But infallibility is there all the time to keep the truth untarnished. It is God's wonderful device for reconciling the fallible activity of our minds and the infallible truth of the revelation He has made.

It is important to understand the conditions which must be fulfilled before the Pope speaks infallibly. They should be studied carefully in the definition of the Vatican Council already quoted. Once they are realised it is easy enough to see that if a Pope, in his private teaching, for example, or in a letter to a Bishop or group of Bishops, or under any circumstances when all the conditions for infallibility are not fulfilled, teaches error, he may even be condemned as a heretic.

A case in point is that of Pope Honorious (625-638), who was condemned as a heretic by the Sixth General Council in 680 for having in a letter to Sergius, Patriarch of Constantinople, smoothed over heretical teaching and failed to give a dogmatic decision.

Much money has been spent by various Protestant bodies in the attempt to find one single Papal definition which has been proved wrong or to find where one Pope contradicted another or a General Council. The records have been diligently searched by brilliant minds; nothing has been overlooked; not one minor detail has been ignored. The result has been the complete vindication of the Church and the Pope.

From what has been written it will be evident that the personal character of the Pope is quite irrelevant to his infallibility. God uses his preventive power over him, whether he be a Saint, like Pius X, or a sinner, like Alexander VI.

It should be evident, too, that infallibility is in no way opposed to legitimate human freedom. Quite the opposite. The purpose of infallibility is to safeguard the truth. Therefore, it is to safeguard freedom. For, said Christ, "The truth shall make you free." (John 8:32).

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT

CATHOLIC OR "ROMAN" CATHOLIC?

"WHY do you not call yourselves Roman Catholics? There are other true Catholics apart from members of the Roman Church. There are different traditions in the Church of Christ. You have no right to a monopoly of the word 'Catholic'."

That is how a favourite objection is often stated. More official perhaps, is the statement in Hook's "Church Dictionary": "Let the member of the Church of England assert his right to the name of Catholic, since he is the only person in England who has a right to that name. The English Romanist is a Roman Schismatic and not a Catholic." One even finds in Blunt's "Dictionary of Sects and Heresies" the statement that "Roman Catholics are a sect organised by the Jesuits out of the relics of the Marian party in the reign of Queen Elizabeth."

There are those, too, especially some Anglicans and Modernists, who use the word "Catholic" in the sense of comprehensiveness. The Church is Catholic, they maintain, because it must welcome and assimilate all opinions, however contradictory they may be, so long as they are sincerely held.

The answer to these contentions rests on the true meaning and history of the word "Catholic." It is derived from a Greek word and it means universal.

When Jesus Christ, Our Lord, established a Church amongst us, He said it was for all men. It was to be universal or Catholic. Here are His words: “Going, al of you, teach all nations. Go ye into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature.” (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15.)

Less than a century after Christ’s death Saint Ignatius, the great martyr-bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter to the people of Smyrna in which the combination “the Catholic Church” occurs for the first time. His words are: “Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be, even as where Jesus may be, there is the Catholic Church.” By the beginning of the third century, the meaning of the term “Catholic” as applied to the Church had become clearly established. It was used technically to imply sound doctrine as opposed to schism.

Thus, Clement of Alexandria (died 215) wrote: “We say that both in substance and in seeming, both in origin and in development, the primitive and Catholic Church is the only one, agreeing as it does in the unity of one faith.” From quotations like this it is easy to see how “Catholic” became the proper name of the true Church founded by Christ.

There are two significant passages in the “Catechetical Discourses” of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, composed about the year 347. In the first he gives some advice to travellers: “If ever you are staying in any city, ask not simply where the Lord’s house is — for the sects of the profane also attempt to call their own dens houses of the Lord — not merely where the church is, but where is the Catholic Church. For this is the special name of the holy body the mother of us all.” Writing of the Creed he tells us: Now it (the Church) is called Catholic because it is throughout the world, from one end of the earth to the other.”

Saint Augustine of Hippo uses the word Catholic as a synonym for the Church 240 times. The occasion was mainly the Donatist heresy. Against its errors, the note of universality was particularly emphasised. Note what Saint Augustine wrote: “Whether they wish or no, heretics have to call the Catholic Church Catholic.”

In another place, he put down something which is applicable today: “Although all heretics wish to be styled Catholic, yet if anyone ask where is the Catholic place of worship none of them would venture to point out his own conventicle.” Ask a London policeman for the Catholic Church, and he will direct you to Westminster Cathedral, not Saint Paul’s.

The word Catholic is, therefore, the proper name of that one, visible, organised Church founded by Jesus Christ, God Himself. It is the Church we read about in the Acts of the Apostles, where it is described as having its head, its bishops, its priests, its deacons, its sacraments, its doctrines, its authority, its unity and its disciples.

That same Catholic Church was persecuted by the Roman Emperors. It emerged triumphant and saved civilisation in Europe. It is the Church of all the Fathers, Doctors and Saints of East and West. It was the glory of Europe; it was the pride of England.

This same Catholic Church came to this country first in Roman times. When it had almost died out Saint Augustine (of Canterbury, we call him) brought it back again from the Bishop of Rome, Saint Gregory the Great. They knew it as the Catholic Church. As such, it was known by the ordinary men and women of England until the so-called Reformation. For them Christ’s Church was simply the Catholic Church.

This same Catholic Church built our splendid Cathedrals — Canterbury, York, Lincoln, Durham and the rest. It gave us the fine churches which still decorate our land. It founded the great

universities and many schools and hospitals. For fifteen hundred years, all the great apostles and missionaries belonged to it.

The saints, whose names many of us bear, like Francis of Assisi, Thomas of Canterbury, Wilfrid of York, Bernard of Clairvaux, Henry the Emperor, Louis of France, Edward the Confessor, Margaret of Scotland, Hilda of Whitby, and hosts of others, were members of it. One and all, they knew it as the Catholic Church.

In 1529, the Diet of Spires took place. When the Catholic princes proposed certain moderate conditions for the settling of religious difficulties, the Lutherans solemnly protested against them and the word Protestant was born of the denial of freedom and conscience. Although that historical fact is now generally forgotten. Protestant still remains an official name of the Established Church of England. The Sovereign designates it by that name in the Coronation Oath.

It would have been obvious to any of the Saints we have mentioned that a church different from theirs could not be rightly called the Catholic Church. But how could a church be different from the Catholic Church?

The difference would have to be in essentials. For example, if a Church professed doctrines different from those of the Catholic Church, it could not be the Catholic Church.

If a church's essential acts of worship were different from those of the Catholic Church, it could not be the Catholic Church. If the authority acknowledged by a church is not the same as the authority of the Catholic Church, that Church could not be the Catholic Church.

In the course of time, bodies broke off from the Catholic Church because they did not agree with her beliefs, or did not worship as she did or would not recognise her authority. They became new and different churches. They ceased to be the Catholic Church.

Also, at different times men started new churches. They were not the same as the Church Jesus Christ had founded. They were in opposition to it. His Church was, as we have seen, the Catholic Church: those new, man-made churches were not the Catholic Church.

It is particularly obvious that the new churches which came into being as a result of the Reformation are different from the Catholic Church. They were founded as protests against the belief and the worship and the authority of the existing Church, which was the Catholic Church. They are, therefore, non-Catholic churches; they are protesting or Protestant churches. If any pre-Reformation Saint were to come back today, he would recognise the Old Church, the Church he knew and loved, the Catholic Church. The new churches would be strange to him, different in essentials from his Church. He would know them as non-Catholic churches.

Roman Catholics are the only real Catholics. There are no Catholics apart from them. The word "Roman" only describes Catholic more fully. The universal Church founded by Christ, has its centre in Rome. By their very nature or their constitution, all other churches are local, racial or national. Words like Roman, Romish, Romanist, Papist, Papistical, Papisher were originally used of the old Church by Protestants to signify their hatred of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope.

Nowadays Roman is applied to the one Catholic Church to indicate that there are other Catholics as well, who are not in union with Rome. This is a return to the trick of the fourth century heretics who were so thoroughly castigated by Saint Augustine of Hippo.



The centre of unity at Rome is the greatest source of strength in Christ's Church. We are proud to be called Roman Catholics in that sense. But when those who do not acknowledge the authority of the Pope claim that they are Catholics as opposed to us who are Roman Catholics we register the strongest possible objection.

Christ's Church is Catholic, because it encircles the whole world. It is Roman, because its centre is in Rome, where the Bishop of that City is the successor of Saint Peter, whom Christ made head of His Church. On the other hand, the term Anglo-Catholic is self-contradictory. Catholic means universal or international; Anglo means not universal but national.

"It is not against the nature of a circle, however large, to have a centre," wrote the late John Arendzen; "but it is decidedly against the nature of a circle to be square. To speak of Anglo-Catholics is like speaking of square circles; and to speak of Roman Catholics is like speaking of a circle with a centre."

As for the use of the term "Catholic" to indicate comprehensiveness, it is thoroughly dishonest to give the impression that this is the sense in which it was used by Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem or Saint Augustine of Hippo. These and other Fathers of the Church taught that the Catholic Church is most decisively cut off from all that lies outside her. She must oppose with all her strength anything that threatens her vital principle of unity and stability.

It is not to our purpose here to show how this principle of comprehensiveness offends, not only against the teaching of Christ, which, being absolute truth could not embrace contradictions, but against right reason as well.

There is no need to call the Pope's Church the Roman Catholic Church, Catholic alone is sufficient. "Roman" is often used with an insulting or unacceptable meaning. There is only one Catholic Church. It is that which Jesus Christ founded, which has been on earth since His day, and to which He said: "I will be with you all days even to the consummation of the world."

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