

The Pope is Infallible

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1. THE CLAIM

When people learn that you are a Catholic, 'Ah,' they say, 'then you have to believe in the Infallibility of the Pope'. Their tone suggests that you don't want to believe in it really, and that they are much too sensible to try. They develop their attack. You listen. And you learn that what they are attacking is some such idea as that the Pope is incapable of sin, or that he can never on any occasion be wrong about anything at all, or that from time to time he is inspired with new doctrine from on high. Admittedly they are not always as crude as that, but almost invariably the attacker has failed to understand exactly what it is he is attacking. So your first, and often your only, task is to explain what Catholics mean when they claim that the Pope is infallible.

Statement of claim

By their claim that the Pope is infallible, Catholics mean that on those rare occasions when, with his full authority as Pope, he teaches all Christians what they must accept as true, or what they must do, if they are to please God and save their souls, then God watches over him so as to prevent his making any mistake in the matter. That's all. I say 'That's all' because when a person has seen how restricted is the claim to infallibility he usually finds that it is a much more modest claim, and therefore a much easier claim to accept, than he had imagined it to be.

How restricted it is

It is a claim that in certain circumstances God will not allow the Pope to make mistakes. The claim is modest because the circumstances in which alone it applies restrict it severely. The first big restriction is that it applies only to what the Pope says about religion. No Catholic suggests that the Pope is infallible concerning matters outside that subject. In questions of architecture, nuclear physics, food supplies, painting, finance, gardening ... anything but questions of religion, he is as liable to make mistakes as any other learned man.

And (a much greater restriction) even in that religious sphere he is not always infallible. He is infallible only when he uses his full authority as Supreme Head on earth of the Catholic Church to insist that what he teaches about faith or morality must be accepted by all the members of that Church. So when he privately expresses his opinions about religious matters, he is not infallible. Nor is he infallible, though he can be sure that he has God's special help, when he makes the routine decisions about religious matters that come under his control. He is not necessarily infallible even when he writes letters to all the other bishops of the Catholic world expressing officially his teaching about points of faith or morality. He is infallible only when he invokes his full authority to demand that every Catholic mind accept what he asserts, and that is a thing he rarely does.

How slight the divine intervention it implies

And now, having seen how narrow is the sphere of its operation, see how little infallibility implies in the way of divine intervention: 'God watches over him so as to prevent his making any mistake'. There is no claim there that God tells the Pope anything new. Neither, in point of fact, is there any claim that God tells him anything old, as He could be said to do if He told him once again the same truths He told the Apostles. There is no claim even that God gives the Pope any new light upon these ancient truths. He must find out for himself the truth of a matter about which he proposes to make an infallible decision. To do this the Holy Father has to use all the same means that you and I would use if we were making the same enquiries. And if he wants help, he must go to the same people as we would like to go to. His infallibility does not imply that God gives him any short cut to the solution of his problems. Nothing is claimed beyond this, that when the Holy Father finishes his investigation and imposes his answer on the Church in the way we have described, then God sees to it that that answer will have no falsehood in it.

To help the imagination of his students when he was lecturing to them about this question of the amount of divine intervention involved in Papal Infallibility, a famous professor in one of the universities in Rome used to point to a statue of St. Gregory. The saint was represented as usual with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove perched upon his shoulder. The professor's explanation was some thing like this: 'St. Gregory', he said, 'is shown with the Holy Spirit to remind us of the special guidance which he had when writing his books. But, if you like, you can think of our claim that all Popes are infallible as a claim that the Holy Spirit comes and rests like that upon the shoulder of every Pope who is making an infallible decision. As soon as the Holy Father begins to consider this important matter, the Holy Spirit is there, watching. Presumably the Holy Father will take the greatest possible care in his work, and get the best theologians in the Church to give him their advice. They will pool all their knowledge and check and recheck one another's conclusions. So it is most unlikely that any mistake will be allowed to pass.

'If all goes well in this way, the Holy Spirit will obviously not have to use His special influence to prevent errors. The Pope and his advisers will avoid them for themselves. But while their consultations are going on the Holy Spirit is watching every move. We can picture the dove sitting, watchful, but contented and quiet, upon the shoulder of the white cassock. But if anything false were to crop up at any stage, then most certainly the Divine Spirit would intervene. Picture His activity, if you like, as the dove whispering in the Pope's ear that the suggestion that is being put forward won't do. In reality the Holy Spirit might in fact inform the Pope directly by some inspiration or vision about the error to be avoided. But it is unlikely that He would. His ways of doing things are usually more delicate than that. What precisely they would be in this case, He does not tell us. He does not even tell us whether or not He will in fact ever have to intervene in any way to eliminate error from these solemn papal pronouncements. Perhaps the dove will never have to stir. Infallibility does not imply that He must. All that it implies is that God will be ever watchful to see that in those pronouncements there will never be any departure from the truth. The dove will always be there, "making certain"; it does not follow that He will ever have to intervene positively.'

You see what we mean when we speak of the modesty of the claim. To give a final summary of it: Infallibility is claimed only when the Pope is concerned with a limited subject, and even then only when he speaks in the most solemn and official way, and even then all that is claimed is that God has promised that the Pope will not make a mistake in what he says, a claim which does not necessarily imply any positive intervention whatever on God's part. The claim is as modest as that.

2. THE SETTING

Thus far we have been busy narrowing into focus the Catholic notion of infallibility. We have done so without reference to the setting into which the privilege of infallibility fits, or to the purpose for which it was given. So the picture lacks completeness. Now we must supply that lack. We must see what the purpose of infallibility is, and how it is part of the plan of God for our personal happiness.

God's plan

First, a few necessary words about that plan of God. As far as we are concerned, it begins to unfold itself when Jesus Christ, who is God, comes into this world. He declares that He has come that we 'may have life and may have it more abundantly' (John x. 10). What life is this? Not ordinary human life. The people Christ speaks of already have that. It is in fact nothing less than a share in God's own life. We are to be 'made partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter i. 4) and live the life of God. To do this is, in the technical language of the New Testament, 'to be saved'. And what must we do to be saved? We must believe in Him, and live according to our beliefs. That is to say, we must accept what God tells us simply because He gives His word for it (that is what it means to believe in Him), and we must do what He tells us He wants us to do.

His 'problem'

Now for reasonable people to be able to believe and behave in that way, one thing is necessary: they must be able to be quite certain what it is God tells them. Obviously, for it is clearly not reasonable to accept something as true because God has said it, unless you are first quite sure that what you accept is what God says. And there, if we may speak in human terms, is God's problem. He wants all men to be saved (1 Tim. ii. 4). And yet He will not save them unless they accept what He says precisely because He says it (Mark xvi. 16). So, to achieve His purpose, He must do two things. First He must convey what He says to everybody in the world, so that they may all have the opportunity to accept it. And, second, He must convey it to them in such a way that they can all be absolutely certain that what is put before them is, without a shadow of doubt, precisely what He wants to tell them. Otherwise it will not be reasonable for them to accept 'it for the precise reason that He gives His word for it.' How is He to do this?

One can imagine various solutions He might have found. Instead of ascending into heaven, He might have stayed on earth for the rest of time, and personally supervised the process of making His message available to everyone. But in fact He did not do that. He might Himself have written it all down. But nobody suggests that He did. We only hear of His writing once, and that was in the sand. Again, Christ could have told others to write it all down, but there is no mention in the New Testament of any command to write. What you do find in the New Testament is a commission to teach. It is in the last moments of His stay on earth, just before He goes up into heaven. 'And Jesus coming, spoke to them, saying: All power is given to me in heaven and in earth. Going therefore, teach ye 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' (Matt. xxviii. 18-20).

The solution

Here is the method chosen by God for putting sure knowledge of His teaching within the reach of all peoples for all time. As His heavenly Father had sent Him, so our Lord in His turn sent chosen men (John xvii. 18-20 and xx. 21) to teach to others what He had taught.

Who were the chosen men to whom He gave this task? We must get in touch with them. St. Matthew tells us who they were (xxviii. 16). He describes them as 'the eleven disciples'. These were

the eleven who remained after the defection of Judas Iscariot from the twelve whom He had selected to be His Apostles (Luke vi. 12-16). It was, then, these eleven Apostles whom Christ sent to teach what they had been taught. But they died about nineteen centuries ago. Christ's commission to them helped the people in their own time. But what about us? How are we provided for? The answer is that Christ's commission to teach was not to end with the work of the eleven Apostles. He meant it to extend to others. Of those whom the Apostles taught, some were to be chosen to succeed the Apostles as official teachers of Christ's doctrine, sharing the same authority as they had from Christ. These successors of the Apostles, in their own turn, were to have others to succeed them. And so it was to go on. Obviously this was Christ's intention, for explicitly He wanted the process to continue 'all days, even to the consummation of the world'. He, being God, knew that the end of the world was more than 1,909 years off. He knew also that these eleven disciples He was addressing would all be dead before the year 120. So when He speaks to them and tells them about His being with them 'even to the consummation of the world'. He sees before His mind's eye not only those eleven first Apostles but the men who would come after them as their successors in this task of teaching His doctrine, and the men who would come after them, and after them, right down to the end of time. If that were not the case He could not have spoken of being with them 'all days, even to the consummation of the world', nor, for that matter, of their 'teaching all nations'.

So there is His plan for giving to every nation for the rest of time the opportunity to know for certain what He, as God, teaches : a series of human teachers, each generation learning from its predecessors and providing chosen teachers to hand on in their turn, with authority derived. from Christ, what they have learned.

The defect

But isn't there a defect in the plan? Haven't you yourself had experience of sending messages through other people ? Has the message always been accurately delivered ? You have been very lucky indeed if it has. And yet in your experiences there is usually only one messenger. What is going to happen when between the Person who sends the message and the person who receives it there is, not just one messenger, but a long line of messengers each of whom has received it, carried it about in his mind for a. lifetime, and then passed it on to the next in the line ? Surely, if the messengers are human, the chances of the, message getting through accurately are extremely remote. At any rate you could never be sure of it. And the whole point of this divine plan is that you should be absolutely sure that what is delivered to you here and now in the. twentieth century is precisely what Christ delivered to His Apostles in the first. So if this method of conveying His teaching is to succeed, God must do something to counteract that corrosive action which the human genius for misunderstanding, misrepresenting, and otherwise mangling messages entrusted to it will have upon His message.

Its solution

What can He do, within the framework of the scheme He has chosen, that we may be sure of His message ? There seems to be only one solution. He must give His divine promise that, when they are dealing with what we ,must believe and do in order to be saved, God the Holy Spirit will watch over these teachers He employs, and will ;make sure that their human capacity for making mistakes does not in any way distort His message. In other words, He must give them the privilege of infallibility.

There you have the setting and the purpose of the infallibility we claim to have within the Catholic Church. Its setting is in God's plan for our everlasting happiness. its purpose is to eliminate what would otherwise be a fatal defect in God's plan for bringing us certainty about His teaching.

3. THE FACT

From our explanation of the setting and purpose of infallibility this point has emerged : that to give to the men He appoints to teach the privilege of being incapable of error would be the solution to a difficulty which would otherwise destroy our Lord's plan for giving us His message. From this it follows that it is very likely indeed that the Lord does give infallibility to these men who have His commission to teach. But we cannot let the matter rest there. The Catholic thesis is not that it is likely that they are infallible, but that they most certainly are infallible. Now therefore we must show that it is not only a likelihood but an historical fact that our Blessed Lord does give this privilege, and gives it to the Popes. In fact, of course, He gives it not only to the Popes, but, naturally enough, to all who form part of the official teaching body He set up : that is to say, He gives it, in slightly differing ways, to each of the Apostles, and to the bishops of the Catholic Church as a body, as well as to the Pope. But it is papal infallibility we are interested in here.

Papal Infallibility defined in 1870

How do we show that the Pope is infallible? In several ways. If we could take for granted, or had the space to prove, the fact that the bishops of the Catholic world are, as a group, infallible, it would be very easy, for, in the year 1870, 533 bishops assembled in Council solemnly declared it to be Christ's teaching that the Pope as an individual has the infallibility which Christ wanted His Church to have. When they made this declaration all the other bishops of the world concurred, and taught the same fact. If they are infallible, there is no more to be said.

Proved From history

But there is no need to presuppose belief in the infallibility of the bishops. The Pope's infallibility can be proved directly from the history of the origins of Christianity. Start with the incident at Caesarea Philippi which St. Matthew records in the sixteenth chapter of his account of our Lord's life. When Simon has expressed his faith in Jesus, 'Jesus answering said to him : Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say to thee : That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven' (verses 17-19).

The great point of this conversation, as far as we are concerned here, is that our Lord solemnly confers upon Simon the name 'Peter', which means 'The Rock'. As God gave Abram the new name of Abraham because in God's plan he was to be the father of many tribes (Gen. xvii. 5), and as Sarai was given the new name Sara because she was to be the mother of kings (Gen. xvii. 15), so now Simon is given the new name Peter, the Rock. Why? Our Lord explains: it is because, 'upon this rock I will build my church'. He gives to Simon this name because in God's plan Simon is to be to the society our Lord is establishing what the bedrock foundation is to a building erected upon it. In other words, it will be his office to ensure the stability and cohesion of Christ's Church.

Now remember the first of the things that are going to characterize this Church of His. It is going to be one, absolutely united, 'as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee ; that they also may be one in us :

that the world may believe that thou hast sent me' (John xvii. 21). Notice how the unity is to be a visible one, not some intangible unity of good intentions, but a unity such that the world can see and marvel at it. And it is to be so perfect a unity that men will deduce from it that He who founded so united a Church must have been sent by God, as He claims. In fact its unity is to be so perfect that the Incarnate Word dares to compare it to the unity of God Himself. Peter is to be Christ's agent for the fostering and preservation of this unity.

Remember, too, that if unity is the prime characteristic of Christ's Church, its prime function is to teach and to guarantee the truth. It is to have the Spirit of Truth to abide with it for ever (John xiv. 16-17). Peter is to have supreme authority (for without such authority no one could ensure stability and cohesion) in the society whose first purpose is to preserve and teach the truth about religion.

Then also, before we draw our conclusion, there is one other point about this Church, one which, in fact, our Lord mentions in the words He addresses to Simon at Caesarea Philippi. 'The gates of hell', He says, 'shall not prevail against it.' The powers of evil, death, and corruption shall never overcome it. It shall never disintegrate or collapse.

Such is the organization, the stability and cohesion of which Simon Peter is to ensure : a truth-teaching society which is to be absolutely united and never to fail. And the conclusion ? That because of the nature of the society in question, the appointment in it that is given to St. Peter is with appointment which implies and contains a promise that he will be infallible.

The way in which that follows is not perhaps clear at first sight. But it quickly becomes so if you think about it, and realize that if Peter were not infallible you would be driven to the impossible conclusion that our Lord's promises about His Church would be untrue.

Imagine for a moment that Peter were not infallible, and that God would permit him, with his full authority, to teach what is false. If he does that, one of three things must happen : either the whole Church accepts his teaching; or the whole Church rejects it; or the Church is divided, part accepting, part rejecting his teaching. If the whole Church accepts Peter's false teaching, then Christ's promise has failed, for the gates of hell have prevailed against His Church. It is impossible to imagine a more complete collapse for a society founded as the guardian and teacher, of truth than that even once it accept and teach what is false. Try the other possibilities. Suppose the whole Church, or part of it, were to reject what Peter taught. Again the gates of hell would have prevailed, for the unity of the Church would be shattered. Peter would be teaching one thing with his full authority, and some, or all, of the bishops would, quite justifiably, be teaching the contrary. Peter would not be Peter, the principle of stability and unity. Christ says he is. Christ's word would be untrue. You see : whichever way you turn, if you reject Peter's infallibility you come to the same impossible conclusion that Christ's word is false. In other words, what Christ says implies that Peter is infallible.

Other passages in the Gospels convey the same fact that Peter is infallible. It stands out particularly in the incident of Christ's prayer for Peter (Luke xxii. 31-32). Our Lord prayed (and His prayers are always answered) that Peter's faith might not fail, and added that he, Peter, was to be a pillar of strength to the others in this matter of faith. One who could make mistakes about what we must believe would fail in his own faith and would be a stumbling-block rather than a, pillar of strength to the rest of us.

You find it again when our Lord fulfills the promise made at Caesarea Philippi and gives Peter supreme authority in the teaching organization which is His Church (John xxi. 15-17). By giving

him that authority, Christ, who is God, put all of us, bishops priests, and people, under Peter's authority as a teacher. What Peter teaches we must accept. Could God bind us to accept false teaching? That is impossible. Peter must be, and is, infallible.

It occurs again in the very promise. itself : 'Whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven' (Matt. xvi. 19). God will ratify St. Peter's decisions. God cannot ratify what is false. Conclusion : St. Peter's decisions cannot be false. That is clearly the teaching of the New Testament. Peter is infallible.

Now what about the Popes, his successors? Are they infallible? We can answer that question from what we have already seen concerning the mind of Christ in commissioning His Apostles. It is not Christ's design that their teaching authority should die with them. He gives it as much to those who succeed them in their office as to themselves. So with Peter. He is the bedrock foundation that must last as long as the building raised upon it. This building is to last to the end of the world (Matt. xvi. 18., xxviii. 20). Yet Christ clearly foresees that Simon will die (John xxi. 18-19). So in conferring his office upon him He speaks to him as the first holder of the office, but gives its necessary powers and privileges equally to his successors as to himself. He makes our present Holy Father as infallible as St. Peter.

To show that we have not misunderstood the implications of our Lord's words, we can point to the way in which the early Christians understood them. They are better judges than we are, in so far as they were closer to our Lord in time and language. They took it for granted that the Popes are infallible. Look at St. Irenaeus, for example. Writing about the year A.D. 180, he tells us that there are two ways of finding out what Christ's teaching is. One is to find out what is taught by all the Catholic churches of the world (a reference to the infallibility of the bishops as a body), the other is to take the teaching of the Church at Rome alone. He understands that that is infallible by itself. Add his statement that the bishop is the source of teaching in each church, and you see that Irenaeus acknowledges that the Bishops of Rome are infallible. Nor was Irenaeus by any means alone. From the earliest times all Christians knew that the Popes were infallible. They did not shout about it much. There was no need to do so. Nobody thought of denying it. But you can see from the things they did that they took it for a certain fact. For example, right back from the first centuries Popes have sat in judgement upon any teaching that appeared to depart from that of Christ. If they judged that in fact it was false, they condemned it. They condemned it without consulting the other bishops, and nevertheless their decisions were accepted everywhere as final and binding : a thing that could not have happened unless everyone appreciated the fact of Papal Infallibility. For unless the Popes were incapable of error their decisions could not be so final in such matters.

The Councils of bishops throughout the ages have referred one after the other to the Pope's infallibility. from the bishops assembled at Chalcedon, who in A.D. 451 accepted Pope Leo's decision with the cry, 'Peter has spoken through Leo', to the Vatican Council of 1870 which, far from introducing anything new, did no more than state in precise terms what had always been the conviction of the Christian Church. 'Adhering faithfully to the doctrine handed down from the beginning of the Christian faith', they declared, 'we teach and define that it is a truth revealed by God that the Bishop of Rome, when he speaks "from the chair", that is to say when he acts in his official capacity as Shepherd and Teacher of all Christians, and uses his supreme apostolic authority to decree that a piece of teaching concerning faith or morality is to be accepted by the whole Church, then, because of the divine assistance promised to him in St. Peter, he enjoys that infallibility which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to have in defining teaching about faith

and morality; and therefore such definitions of the Bishop of Rome are unchangeable of themselves, and not because the Church accepts them.

If anyone presume to contradict this definition of ours, which God forbid, let him be anathema. (Vat. Counc., Sess. IV, ch. 4).
