

# **PETER AND THE CHURCH: *Christ's gift to the Church of authority, the Magisterium and the Hierarchy - a sign of the Spirit***

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church 874 – 896)*

## **Introduction - Papal Infallibility**

The position of reverence and authority that Catholics give to the Bishop of Rome is possibly the cause of more anti-Catholic literature and feeling than any other Catholic doctrine. Properly understood, our theology of the visible headship of the Church on earth is unique to Catholics. Having said that, we need to remind ourselves that the position of the Pope in the Catholic Church is very rarely understood properly, even by Catholics! In particular, the issue of papal infallibility causes enormous confusion: many presume by this that Catholics believe that the Pope cannot make a mistake or commit a sin. They have not realised that what they are describing is not papal *infallibility* but papal *impeccability*. Very few know that there is a difference between these: we must do so - because we believe that infallibility was given to the Church by Christ, but we absolutely reject the notion that somehow the Pope, the bishops or any other group within the Church is absolutely free of sin. Even those who do understand the difference are often offended by infallibility: they ask with horror 'how can a human being, even on limited occasions be guaranteed to preach the truth with no admixture of error?'

We should not be confused with or flustered by such a question: after all, every Christian would maintain that on at least two occasions, St. Peter was able to write with infallible and unquestionable authority on the faith of Jesus Christ - his two letters, contained in Sacred Scripture show that it is at least possible for God to preserve his chosen voices on a number of occasions from preaching error as truth. The same gift of infallible teaching must also have been given for a time to St. Paul, St. James, St. Jude, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, St. John and all the countless and unknown writers of the books of the Old Testament. We believe that for the time that

God used them as writers through which to communicate his message of Good News, his gift of the Holy Spirit preserved them from adding errors to the words they wrote. It is a temporary protection, given by God, so as preserve the integrity of the truth, so that when the Church claims to proclaim the truth, it is truly the truth that is proclaimed.

NOTE: we do not say that because these books contain no error in what they teach that therefore we believe the writers were somehow incapable of making any mistakes whatsoever or were totally sinless. We wouldn't say that St. John, who wrote a Gospel & three Letters which are inerrant and infallible (hence they are in the Scriptures) was perfect and never sinned: we don't say that since St. Matthew spoke infallibly when he composed his Gospel that therefore we must be saying that he never made a mistake in the rest of his life or sinned - only that while he was writing the Gospel he was so profoundly inspired by the Holy Spirit and guided to the recognition and accurate description of truth that God preserved him from teaching error concerning Christ. In other words, human beings have the capacity to teach infallibly and in addition the capacity to sin, to make errors of judgement, to make rash decisions and so on. We teach the same with the infallibility of the Church and the Pope - not that they are perfect or incapable of sin BUT that God will and does use them (not just in the past but today) to proclaim essential saving truths about God and man that we can trust.

### ***All Christian groups claim infallibility***

Catholics are not unique in claiming this authority: practically every Christian group claims something like it. Any denomination which teaches that the Scriptures are truthful or which has any certain teaching (such as God is Father, Son & Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ is Lord - our Saviour and Redeemer; by Christ's death and Resurrection we are freed from sin etc.) would teach that in these teachings (and in many others) they were absolutely and certainly teaching the truth with no hint of error. That is the claim of infallibility - that when I teach this, it is absolutely and definitively true. The only disagreement is who has the authority to speak this way, and what does it cover? For instance, can we speak infallibly about the weather ("it will rain tomorrow")? What about matters of personal taste and opinion ("Barbara Cartland is the greatest writer England has ever produced")? Perhaps in the realm of private spirituality and devotion ("the prayer of St. Francis - Make me a channel of your peace.. - is greater than all other prayers written by the saints or used in Church")?

In effect, the theory of infallibility (that a human being can be preserved for a time by God himself from proclaiming error as truth) is really one that we already implicitly accept, and even presume in the authors of Sacred Scripture. Without assuming that the writers were writing infallibly, there is no certainty of belief: every belief of the Church would be doubtful - the Church couldn't say that Christ was definitely the Son of God, only that he might be; that murder, theft, adultery, child abuse or genocide are certainly sinful and contrary to God's law, only that we think they are (but we could easily be wrong). We couldn't be certain that God loved us, only that it looks that way at the moment. We'd even have to admit that we aren't sure you can trust what you read in the Bible because it is just as likely that the writers made it all up, or got it down wrong, or spiced up the story with their own twists. We couldn't proclaim belief in the Resurrection, in heaven, in the reward for virtue or even in the existence of God at all without qualifying our statement immediately afterwards by saying that we

cannot be sure these things really exist. We would have to say that we don't believe anything certainly, that you can't bank on any of it being true, that God may or may not have revealed these things, that there may well be some truth in all of it (but we can't be certain what it is or tell it apart from the lies). The Creed would begin *"We believe in one God - but we could just as easily be wrong"*; at the end of the readings we would say, *"This is the word of the Lord - well, probably – that is, presuming we are correct that he even exists..."*

This leads to a hilarious paradox: the Church which totally denies Christ's gift of infallibility would even have to admit that since absolutely nothing can be believed with total confidence, then even their denial of infallibility could be wrong (i.e., if you are absolutely sure that no one is infallible, and teach that this is a certainty which everyone can rely on, then in effect you are claiming to be infallible on this point!). SO, if you deny infallibility, you have first to presume that you can speak infallibly on that issue. I hope that makes sense to you! It is a logical impossibility – like saying “I always lie!” Think about it!

Whether they admit it or not, every Christian group claims to speak with infallible authority at least on a few occasions. SO the question is not "can I accept infallibility?" - it is actually "who is infallible?" The difference with the Catholic Church is that we are not afraid to accept the logic that all religion is based on the implied claim to infallibility: so, we proclaim it as evidence of the mercy and wise providence of God, teach that it is the work of God in the Church who is guiding us into truth in every age, AND, crucially, have good reason for believing in infallibility, can show how it was given to the Church by Christ, how Christ entrusted St. Peter especially with the power of the keys so that there would always be in the Church a voice of authority to settle questions in dispute about what we believe. In other words, we haven't just made it up, presumed to have the gift of infallibility because there's no alternative (see above): we can actually show that we have good reason to claim it and demonstrate when and how it was given by Christ.

## **1. Peter And The Apostles**

It is the teaching of the Catholic Church that Jesus Christ entrusted the authority with which he taught to his apostles while he lived, and confirmed it after his Resurrection. The Church goes on to proclaim that while their authority to proclaim the meaning of the Gospel was held equally by each of the college of apostles, a particular primacy was entrusted to St. Peter, and that this primacy was to be continued in his successors, just as the teaching authority of the Twelve was also to be passed on throughout the life of the Church.

The Sacred Scriptures make three explicit references to the donation and nature of this primacy:

### **1. The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven - Mt. 16**

- *"Jesus said to them "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood did not reveal this to*

*you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, 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." (Mt. 16:13-20)*

This is the most famous passage of the three. Peter is given particular teaching authority so that whatever he should proclaim and declare in using this authority should be considered absolutely binding - not simply because he has said it but because in exercising these powers he is being guided by the Holy Spirit and thus the truth of what he has declared is absolutely guaranteed by the authority of God himself. One other thing - all the apostles are given the authority to bind and loose later on (*Mt. 18:18*), but the keys are only entrusted to Peter. This clearly marks him out as being first amongst the apostles - not first among equals, *primus inter pares* - as some would argue, but as the highest or first minister in the Cabinet Christ is forming.

## 2. Strengthen your Brethren - the Last Supper - Lk. 22

- *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." (Lk 22:31-32)*

Christ says this at the Last Supper, fully conscious that Peter's faith would fail a little later on and he would deny Christ three times. The English does not transmit the force of the passage: we do not use different words for the singular and plural form of "you" - but Greek does. Christ actually says that Satan has demanded to have *you all (plural)*, to sift *you all* like wheat - but I have prayed for *you (singular - Peter himself)* so that *your faith (singular - Peter's)* may not fail and, having turned, *you (singular - Peter)* may strengthen *your brethren (singular - i.e., Peter's brethren)*." SO Peter is singled out by Christ as the focal point and hinge of the apostolic college: his faith is especially reinforced by Christ's unique protection so that *he* may ensure that the faith of the other apostles remains true and strong.

## 3. Feed my Sheep - after the Resurrection - Jn. 21

*"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ...."Tend my sheep"...."Feed my sheep." (Jn 21:15-17)*

We should remember a number of things here:

- (1) John, the author, was the 'beloved disciple' - why should he incorporate this repetitive passage that elevates a different disciple to pre-eminence over the flock of Christ? If Christ never said it but it was made up by the apostles, why would St. John agree to have his unique position as the beloved be overshadowed by the position given to St. Peter? If it were made up, St. John would be unlikely to include it.

- (2) John says later on that he has been incredibly brief in his account of Christ's life and teaching (*Jn 21:25*) - in other words, he has included only the most essential teachings which capture the indispensable heart of Christ's mission: in which case what is so important about this repetitive text that it requires inclusion?
- (3) John probably wrote his Gospel well after St. Peter's death - what could be the need for this tremendous insistence on Peter's position and authority if it was intended by Christ only to apply to Simon Peter and to die with him?

We may conclude that John included this passage because it is critical - and in this regard, what it says about Peter's specific responsibility to feed and protect the Church is special to Peter and not shared by the other apostles: he beyond any other is charged by Christ with leading and preserving the Church. In addition, he felt it needed to be recorded because it had enduring value, beyond the death of Peter - in other words after his death, there would be successors who would inherit his authority.

It would seem from the evidence of the Gospels alone that Peter's position among the apostles was unique, that he was given a commission not only to feed the world with the authentic Gospel (as were all the apostles), but also to feed the apostles with the true nourishment of the Faith, and that this responsibility of service to the college of apostles was to be a continuing service offered to the Church through Peter's successors, who would all inherit the supreme commission to feed the entire flock of Christ.

### ***What does Sacred Scripture say about Peter's role in the Church?***

Peter's role among the Twelve, and the position he takes after Christ's Ascension (in the Acts of the Apostles) is presented as central. Every time the apostles are listed in the Gospels, St. Peter's name is given first. Some indication of his pre-eminence is shown in the number of times he is referred to in comparison with the other Apostles. The 12 Apostles are referred to by name on 320 occasions in the New Testament: of that number, 155 are to Simon Peter - almost half the total. The next highest is St. John the Evangelist with only 34 references. (The others are Philip 29; Judas Iscariot 26; the 2 James together 36; Andrew 13; Thomas 11; Matthew 5; Bartholomew and Jude both 4; Simon the Zealot 3). Peter is referred to more than four times his nearest rival - and is present on almost every major moment in Christ's ministry in the Gospels.

The frequency of his appearances is underscored by the significance of the occasions at which his involvement is pivotal. At Pentecost, it is Peter who speaks for the Twelve (*Acts 2*). When the Pharisees arrest all the apostles, it is Peter again who speaks for them and turns the tables on his accusers (*Acts 5:29ff*). When the miracles of the apostles are alluded to, it is Peter who is singled out as the pre-eminent healer, and everyone flocks to him, since even his shadow can heal (*Acts 5:15*). Peter is the one who administers the goods and discipline of the first community, in Jerusalem (*Acts 5:1-11*), and it is Peter who authoritatively denounces Simon Magus in his attempt to buy the gift of the Spirit (*Acts 8:18ff*).

*We can say that Scripture says 3 key things about the role Peter plays among the apostles:*

1. His position is both spiritual and administrative.

As spiritual leader, Peter is the key apostle - he speaks for the others, his decisions regarding the faith are considered normative, especially at the Council of Jerusalem, when Peter's judgement concerning the mission of the apostles to the Gentiles is accepted as settling the issue (*Acts 10-11*). In addition, his position as the first and most authoritative preacher of the Good News is recognised by St. Paul himself, who went to Jerusalem after his conversion, to confer with Peter, James and John "*who are reputed to be pillars*" in order to confirm the authenticity of the message he was preaching (*Gal. 1:18, 2:6-9*). Furthermore, when news reaches the apostles of the mission in Samaria, they send Peter, together with John, to establish what is being done, to confirm the truthfulness of the message being spread and to bring the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 8:14*). On the administrative side, the episode of Ananias and Saphira (*Acts 5*) demonstrates the pre-eminence that Peter exercised in the community. This is not the picture of a figurehead, but of an active, powerful leader. In other words, Peter's primacy covers not simply the preaching of the Gospel message but the governance of the Church as well.

2. Peter's position is an office that is to be passed on, not to die with him.

This is made clear in the text from Matthew concerning the keys. Biblical scholars from Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Anglican communities now concur with constant Catholic teaching in that Christ's words about the keys of the kingdom are inspired by Isaiah 22:15-25. In this passage, God directs Isaiah to sack Shebna, the steward of the King of Israel and to place Eliachim in his place. The steward was in effect Prime Minister, the chief authority in the kingdom under the King, who was entrusted with the keys of the Royal Palace – those he approved of would enter to place their petitions before the King. The key became a symbol of this delegated royal power. Thus when Eliachim is appointed, the prophet is directed to say, "*I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open and none shall shut; and he shall shut and none shall open.*" (*Is. 22:22*) Christ's appointment of Peter seems deliberately to echo this passage, and we are to understand it in the same way - Peter has been appointed 'steward' of the House of Christ, its Prime Minister, given real authority, not merely an empty title conferring honour alone. In addition, it is an office: when Eliachim died, the King needed a new steward to fill his shoes. In the same way, when Christ's steward, Peter, is martyred, there is a need for a new steward to take his place and exercise his office of headship. Instead of calling these successors 'stewards', we call the "Bishops of Rome" - yet the implication of an inherited office is clearly there in the words of Christ himself. In other words, Peter's primacy is to be inherited - and this is by the direct will of Jesus Christ.

3. This office is not simply a human invention

It is not a man-made office of overall headship (which we may disband if we feel like it). This is made clear in the same passage in Matthew. Peter's profession of faith in Christ goes beyond the scope of human reason and was only possible by a direct inspiration from the Father: "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*" (Mt. 16:17) Peter's role is not simply to facilitate the work of the twelve like the foreman of the Jury - he is picked out by the Father to give a lead to his brothers through the unique insight given to him by God as the leader of the Twelve. In other words, Peter's primacy is of divine origin not invented by us for our own convenience - thus, if it should ever become inconvenient for we human beings, that is not sufficient grounds for campaigning for its abolition!

In these key texts, the meaning is clear: Peter's role is one of teacher - he is to bind and loose in heaven and on earth (i.e., the authority to proclaim the message of salvation in Christ without admixture of error), he is to strengthen his brethren (i.e., to be the foundation point from which the unity of the apostles flows - without unity among the apostles, the task of preaching the Gospel with a single voice would be almost impossible), and he is to be the one to feed and tend the flock of Christ (i.e., he takes primal responsibility for ensuring the wholesomeness and authenticity of the Gospel which is proclaimed as Christ's own). Above all, Sacred Scripture presents Peter as a shepherd who is given to the Church as the sure foundation of teaching in the Church: should we ever ask the question "what is the authentic teaching of Christ on this particular issue?" Christ has provided us, in Peter, with the means of discovering the answer.

## **2. The Primacy of Peter within the Church**

This primacy can be traced in the teachings of the Church from the first century to the present day without interruption. In the early centuries of the Church, it was a primacy exercised by the Bishop of Rome without specific definition: whenever there was a dispute in a local church which could not be settled at the local level, it was almost always to the Bishop of Rome that the petitioners went.

### *Third Century - Controversy over Baptism*

For instance, in the mid 3rd century there was a disagreement concerning those baptised Christians who had abandoned the Faith during persecution - some felt they could scarcely be allowed back into the Church, and those who could be allowed back would have to undergo Baptism again so as to wash them clean of the terrible sin of apostasy. Others disagreed, taking a more lenient approach. Although he favoured the rigorist approach, St. Cyprian of Carthage appealed to St. Cornelius of Rome for guidance and deferred judgement on the issue until the Pope had spoken. Cornelius upheld the moderate approach, arguing that Baptism was unrepeatable and could never be received twice, no matter how serious the subsequent sin. His judgement in this matter of theology was held to be normative - it is still and always will be our teaching on Baptism.

### *Fifth Century - Controversy over Jesus Christ's divine and human natures*

In the fifth century, during the terrible controversies concerning the nature of Jesus Christ (was he truly man as well as truly God? How could he be both? Does not being one absolutely preclude the possibility of being the other at the same time?), when the greatest theologians in the East were totally embroiled in the worst kind of theological slanging match with no clear solution forthcoming, a General Council was called at which Pope Leo the Great settled the issue with his definition of the two natures in Christ. The council fathers accepted his findings with the words "Peter has spoken through Leo": his definition was adopted by the bishops and since then has become the standard explanation of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ accepted by every Christian denomination - the Definition of Chalcedon (451 A.D.)

These are only two of an endless list of occasions when the Faith has been doubted or rejected on one corner of the Church or the other. On each occasion, it was the immediate instinct of the early Church to appeal to the successors of St. Peter for a definitive settlement of the question. On each occasion, his decision was binding and has come down to us unchanged today.

This primacy has only come to be defined clearly in recent times. The Church has never taught that every word uttered by the Bishop of Rome should be revered as infallibly true, only a small number of doctrinal statements. Equally, the Church never taught that the primacy of the Pope placed him outside and above the college of bishops. However it was precisely because at various times in the Church's history these ideas seemed to have crept into the thinking of many inside and outside the Church, that the position and authority of the Pope were carefully defined in 1870.

## **3. The Authority of Peter**

"Whatever the Pope says, goes." Is this what we really believe? Are we claiming that the Pope can bind God, as some think we are saying? Do we mean that if the Pope were to define, for instance, that all saints from New Mexico have the highest places in the kingdom of heaven, then God would have to make it so, in obedience to the Pope's edict? Of course not - but before you dismiss this as ridiculous, realise that many non-Catholics think that this is what we believe: if the Pope says it, God must make it true.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Pope has no authority over God - it is precisely God's unerring devotion to truth that is manifest in papal and magisterial infallibility. In other words - if the Pope speaks infallibly, it is because God speaks through him, leading him to a truth which human reason and insight would otherwise not necessarily be capable of. An arrogant claim? - Not really, since this is precisely what Christ says in his words to Peter. When Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, "*the Son of the living God*" (Mt. 16:16), Christ's reply is penetrating:

- "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in Heaven.*" (Mt. 16:17)

In other words, Christ confirms that Peter is speaking the truth - and yet that this truth is not a human insight which anyone could have come out with, but a revelation, in

faith, which came directly from the Father. THIS is the heart of papal authority: just as he did with St. Peter, God the Father uses the successors of Peter as authoritative teachers of the truth. On their own, Popes are as fallible as you and I - but when used by God as the vocal-point of the Gospel, the Pope speaks guaranteed truth. The guarantee is not the Pope's own unique holiness, but God's infallibility. So he never binds God - he can only reveal that which God has revealed to him through Christ. This means that the Pope is above all a teacher - he proclaims with confidence the truth of the Gospel, as St. Peter did. He does not invent new teachings but simply restates the Church's teaching with the highest possible authority so that there should be absolutely no doubt on the matter.

As successor to St. Peter, the Pope speaks with the authority not simply of an apostle but of the head of the apostolic college. In other words, as Catholics, we should listen to his teaching, his exhortations and his requests as we would to those of St. Peter. This does not mean that all he says is infallible: but it does mean that we should take seriously his role as visible head of the Church and accord to his words the importance and dignity of the office he has been called exercise in the Church by Christ himself. Because we owe obedience to Christ, we must give deference of mind and will to his vicar, in the faith that Christ guides the Pope in his leadership of the faithful. The Pope's decisions in matters of Church discipline may not always be prudent or the wisest judgement (because Christ never promised that Popes would always act with perfect wisdom or insight) but he should always be listened to in an attitude of humility and with the charity with which the early Church listened to the words of St. Peter. We can be sure that we are always in treacherous waters when we contradict or reject the explicit teachings of the Pope, no matter with what degree of authority he speaks them. In some, limited, cases, we can go further and be certain that we are in error (i.e., we are departing from the teachings of Christ) when we reject the Holy Father's teachings - such occasions would be when we dissent from infallible papal pronouncements.

### ***The definition of Papal Infallibility***

The First Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1870) solemnly defined the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning the infallible teaching office of the Bishop of Rome. This definition is considered by the Catholic Church as revealed by Christ to his Church, therefore free from error, or - to use the technical phrase - infallibly taught, and therefore binding on all Catholics. The Council recognised in the holders of the see of Rome "the supreme power of teaching" and declared how this infallible authority was considered by the Church to be exercised:

- *"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 declares, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, possesses through the divine assistance promised him in the person of blessed Peter, the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining the doctrine concerning faith or morals; and that such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are therefore irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church."*

This dogma must be read very carefully. It contains three critical clarifications of the infallible teaching office of the Pope:

- (1) 'When he speaks *ex cathedra*': this means that only those statements that the Pope declares with the highest solemnity are to be considered as qualifying. 'Cathedra' means throne or chair - the phrase '*ex cathedra*' is a term from ancient Roman law which simply means that a judgement has been given from the imperial throne or the judgement seat of an imperial officer (in other words it is authoritative, not just an idle musing of the Emperor or one of his officers). He must be speaking in his capacity as the visible head of the Church and as the supreme teacher, established by Christ as the rock.
- (2) 'A doctrine concerning faith or morals': statements from the Pope concerning Church discipline are not matters of faith or morals and are therefore neither irreformable nor infallibly taught. The papal insistence on clerical celibacy is not a matter of faith or morals and therefore could be changed. However, the teaching on the divinity of the Son of God or the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother Mary are both matters of faith - the declarations on both these subjects are therefore covered by this definition.
- (3) 'Concerning the whole Church': a decision of the Pope concerning a local Church is explicitly disqualified from the band of infallibility. Such decisions are confined to the local area and are not binding on the whole Church (for instance, in England we have papal approval to ordain married former Anglican clergymen to the priesthood once they have been approved by a panel of bishops: this only extends to England and can not be used to justify the ordination of married men outside the parameters already laid down).

We should remember that this definition was produced not to broaden the powers exercised by the Pope - the Church is incapable of extending the nature of the gift of infallibility beyond the degree that Christ has given it. It was defined to clarify and declare the limits of the gift of infallibility, to show that it does not cover every word of the Pope. It was worded deliberately so as to exclude those more exaggerated theories of the scope of Christ's gift to St. Peter that were held by some members of the Church in the nineteenth century. Indeed it makes clear just how restricted is the Pope's infallible teaching office:

- only on matters of faith or morals,
- only when he is speaking solemnly as head of the Church on earth with the authority given to St. Peter,
- only when his teaching is for the whole Church, not just one part of it.

So rare are infallible papal teachings that most Catholics never live to see one proclaimed during their lifetime. Indeed, on only two occasions have Popes spoken with their infallible teaching office (and one was *before* the solemn definition of Papal Infallibility in 1870 - so don't believe anyone who tells you that it was only invented then and was not believed before that date. This would come as a great shock to Pope

Pius IX who issued an infallible statement of the Faith in 1854, a full 16 years before the definition was proclaimed!)

A much larger number of certain and infallible teachings have been promulgated by Ecumenical Councils (accepted by the Pope) than have ever been issued by Popes acting outside a Council - for all that is said about Pope John Paul II by those who reject his teaching (his authoritarian style, conservative theology, monarchical reign over the Church and centralising of power in Rome and the office of the Pope), he has not exercised his infallible teaching office except to declare the sainthood of those whose lives have been investigated and shown to exhibit heroic virtue in the Faith. Many have tried to persuade him to make an infallible statement about Mary, about abortion or euthanasia, but this 'right-wing' Pope has always been reluctant to use this authority. In history, Popes have been far more cautious about the exercise of infallibility than most lay Catholics would like, and than practically all non-Catholics believe.

Remember also, that papal infallibility is really a negative protection - we are simply stating that on these limited occasions, what he says will be preserved from error by Christ because Christ will not allow his Church to be deceived: the Pope is protected by Christ from teaching something which is untrue. BUT it is not a positive inspiration - in other words, unlike Sacred Scripture, we do not say the God is the author of these teachings; he does not choose the words and inspire them in the Pope. SO, infallible statements can be trusted as absolutely true in what they teach - but there is no guarantee that they are expressed in the best possible way, in the clearest language or even at the most appropriate time.

- C.C.C. 891-892
- To summarise, papal infallibility means that when he is proclaiming the faith of Jesus Christ, as the rock established by Christ himself, St. Peter and his successors in Rome are protected by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit from teaching error under the impression that it was truth. Thank God for it: otherwise, you could never completely trust anything that anyone told you concerning Jesus Christ, his teaching, his actions even the fact of his existence.

### ***Does Papal Primacy and Infallibility make the Pope a Dictator over the Church?***

This charge is often levelled at Catholics: they say that Catholics believe that the Pope can decide what he likes, do whatever he wants and simply command us to obey. This is not the faith of the Church. As we have seen above, the definition of papal infallibility was written so as to clarify that it is limited and does not extend to everything he says.

In addition, it is worth noting that the definition was not imposed by the Pope on the Church: it was not even written by him - it was composed, argued over, amended, re-drafted and finally accepted by the bishops of the Church, in an Ecumenical Council. In fact, the Pope (Pius IX) was, by his own choice, not even present in the Council at the time, but represented by a Cardinal. He had no direct input in the drafting of the

definition. In other words, it was the Church that declared the Holy Father to possess this divine gift, not the Pope. No dictatorship there.

What of the exercise of papal infallibility? Have Popes used it to force doctrines onto an unwilling Church? On the two occasions when it has been used by the Pope (in 1853 and in 1950), the infallible declarations were made only after the Pope had consulted all the bishops of the Church, heard their opinions, moderated the decree and achieved their overwhelming encouragement. No dictatorship there, either.

Other occasions when Popes have exercised the fullness of their authority within the Church were almost always collaborative with the college of Bishops (today numbering over 2500 Bishops from every country in the world) and not decisions of the Pope acting on his own. For instance when, in 1968 Pope Paul VI confirmed constant Catholic teaching for nearly 2000 years concerning the immoral nature of artificial contraception, it was done only after seven years of investigation, study and repeated consultation with all the bishops of the Church: he did not impose his conclusions on the Church - they helped him to reach those conclusions! The same is true concerning the ordination of women to Holy Orders: when Pope John Paul II definitively taught, in 1996, that the Church had no authority to ordain women, many of our newspapers cried in protest 'Papal dictatorship; rule by decree; Pope overrides view of the majority' etc. These writers are either ignorant of or have forgotten that in the 1970s when the Church of England first raised the issue, Pope Paul VI instructed Cardinal Willibrands, Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, to gather theological opinions from theologians and bishops throughout the world to clarify the Catholic understanding of this question. After universal consultation, the result was almost unanimous.... the bishops responded to the Pope unanimously that the Catholic Church does not possess the authority to widen the scope which seems to have been Christ's deliberate choice: Christ only calls certain men to Holy Orders. This being the case, in 1996, Pope John Paul was settling nothing by his arbitrary and absolute authority: he was simply re-stating, with the strongest emphasis, what the Church universal had already made absolutely clear 20 years previously and had been the unchanged teaching of the Catholic Church from the time of the apostles. The charge of dictatorship simply does not stick.

Remember, the Pope is first and foremost a teacher - the prime teacher of the Good News. This means we have a source of teaching we can trust. It also means we have a measure against which to judge our faith: if I deviate from the faith Jesus held, I need someone in authority to point out my error, so that I may learn (the word 'disciple' means just that; 'learner'). So, on occasion, the Pope will have to correct an error in the faith of the people, or the priests. Correcting an error where he detects one does not automatically make him a dictator - it might instead indicate that he is a good teacher i.e., one who always teaches truthfully. It is also the action of a good father - reminding his children of the constant teaching of the Church, which it has received from the apostles and revealed by Christ. For this reason, Catholics rightfully call him "Holy Father".

## 4. Peter and the Bishops

Vatican I (1870) stressed the infallible authority given to St. Peter and his successors - this marks the Pope out as essentially distinct from any other Bishop in the Church. Vatican II (1962-5) confirmed all that Vatican I had defined about the authority of the Pope and put this in the context of the other Bishops of the Church.

In *Lumen Gentium* (the document concerning the Church) the Pope is described at the head of the college of bishops - he is one of them, and his supreme authority among them derives from his position as Bishop of Rome (i.e., successor to St. Peter). Indeed he is the president of the college of bishops: this makes him more than simply the first among equals with a primacy of honour alone. The Pope is not simply the most well known of the bishops because he is the chairman of their conference. The text states that the body of bishops has no authority unless it is united to its head, the Pope.

- *"The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered." (L.G. 22)*

The Bishops share in the power of binding and loosing and together with the Pope, they constitute the governing body of the Church - a power they exercise always in union with the Pope and can never be exercised without his agreement. There is a collegial relationship between all the bishops that binds them intimately to their Head, the Pope. The bishops are not mere representatives of the Pope, but exercise rightful authority in their dioceses by virtue of their consecration as bishops - and together they have a pastoral oversight of the entire universal Church: something which is demonstrated in Ecumenical Councils when all the bishops are gathered to discuss doctrine.

- C.C.C. 880-887

## 5. Peter, Authority and the Holy Spirit

In this day and age, there is a tendency to be suspicious of authority and authority-figures. Over the last 50 years, practically all of the figures or bodies we invest authority in have been shown to be untrustworthy: monarchs, politicians, police, doctors, lawyers and even the authority-figures within the family, especially fathers. Nowadays it is accepted that no claim to authority can be trusted, that people in positions of authority need monitoring and scrutiny. More than that, there is a tendency today to rejection of authority: no one has the right to instruct me as to how I behave, and all such instruction is an infringement of my personal freedom.

In the world of religion, this is particularly evident. Our press and media are immediately suspicious of any denomination that claims authority to teach: they are labelled as autocracies, fanatics or extremists. The world is most comfortable with religions which make no demands, claim to have no divine authority, require nothing of their members in terms of beliefs or action but in general preach a message of liberal tolerance - love everyone, tolerate everything. In the mid 1980's the American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.) demonstrated just this kind of thinking when they

released a statement which denounced the prosecution of child abusers on the grounds that the law was restricting what they felt was a legitimate form of personal self-expression and love: to condemn it as evil is to infringe the personal liberty of the individual by criticising this form of 'love'. (It is to be noted that since then this statement has been quietly ignored by both A.C.L.U and the American public – A.C.L.U have never been called to explain their stance and they have never withdrawn the statement!)

In this environment, it is no wonder that the Catholic Church comes in for a great deal of criticism because of the authority that the Pope exercises. He is called a tyrant, a totalitarian, dictator etc. It is only in societies that over-stress the personal freedom of the individual that these opinions are heard (i.e., the liberal democracies of the West).

God does not work this way. Nor, if truth be told, do you or I. We accept authority structures and we need them. The family cannot operate if the children are afforded equal authority to their parents. Our society only functions because we recognise the authority of Parliament to pass laws and the authority of the police to uphold them. We accept the authority of the courts to try breaches of the law and to sentence: in fact, rejection of this authority is simply not tolerated – it is called contempt of court. Rejection of the authority of Parliament is called treason. The fact is that we do accept authority: we just don't like it very much when we don't wield it. Those who agitate for the tearing down of authority figures are motivated not by a rejection of all authority but by a desire to be the ones who wield it – and if that isn't possible, then no one should have it. They accept that someone should exercise authority: they just feel it should be them or no one.

### ***The Church is not a democracy***

When it comes to the Church, people in the West feel it should be structured along the lines of a Western-style liberal democracy: here, laws are passed by majority of those thought fit to vote, laws change when the prevailing standards of acceptable behaviour change and authority comes from below (i.e., we elect them into office and they can be removed if we decide we don't like them any more, or if they do not give us what we want). Unfortunately, God is not a Western-style liberal democrat - he is absolute master and lord of all creation. he does not need our approval to act, nor rely on maintaining his popularity by playing to the gallery: he is God by nature, not by the permission of his creatures. This being true, we should not be surprised that God does not structure the Church like a Western-style democracy: Christ established the Kingdom of God, not the Republic of Heaven. In other words, we are not masters of the Faith - God is. So, we cannot change the fundamental truths of the faith by majority vote, or because we don't like them (any more than a child who finds fractions difficult in maths class can decide to abolish them). Christ came to teach us the hidden truth about human nature and the nature of God: neither of these can we alter because neither are within our power. Take the laws of nature: if I felt that the law of gravity was an infringement of my freedom, that I should be able to fly or to hover if I jumped off a building, then no matter how many people I converted to my cause and regardless of the number of laws I had passed through Parliament, the result would still be the same when I launched myself on my maiden unassisted flight!

I say all this because people often say, "When we get another Pope, he will change the law so that this or that won't be a sin any more." This would truly make the Pope an autocrat: it implies that he has the power to change everything, even divine revelation! These people would give to the Papacy a power that even Christ does not possess (and he is God, don't forget!). Even the most right wing, conservative extremist in the Church would never claim this power for the Pope. On the other extreme are those who deny he has any real authority. The Pope, to them, is no more than a figurehead. They resist his authority to teach the faith, to condemn error, to govern the Church. We have seen already that this is indefensible from the Sacred Scriptures: Christ gives real authority to St. Peter, represented in the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and this power is invested not just in the person but in the office - so that when St. Peter died, the authority did not die with him but is passed to his successor (as with the resignation of a Prime Minister or the death of a monarch).

### ***Authority is a gift of the Holy Spirit***

BUT we would go further. Christ established an authority structure in the Church: the apostles were to teach with his authority, to bind and loose, to absolve sin, to baptise, to celebrate the Mass, to heal etc. He did this not as a reluctant thing, a sad but unavoidable necessity: quite the reverse, he did it as a gift of his own presence. In other words, their authority was to be one of the privileged ways that he would continue to be present in the Church: he taught, *"those who hear you hear me; those who reject you reject me and those who reject me reject not me but the One who sent me."* (Lk. 10:16) It is quite clear that Christ meant that if we reject the teaching of the apostles, we are rejecting Christ himself: and that because he was so unbreakably united to the Father, if we reject Christ then we are ultimately rejecting the Father as well - all because we will not listen to the apostles and their successors, the bishops.

Is this overstating the case? St. Paul did not think so, for he brooked no diversion from the gospel he proclaimed: if anyone else, even an angel, preached a different version *"let him be accursed"* (Gal. 1:6-8). In the early Church, to flout, reject or deny the authority of the apostles was a dangerous business: Ananias and Saphira, who lie to St. Peter about the sale of their property, are told by St. Peter that in lying to him, they have in truth lied to the Holy Spirit - *"You have not lied to men but to God"* (Acts 5:4). They drop down dead.

SO, the authority of the Pope and the Bishops is not a necessary evil to be endured - quite the reverse: it is another way in which Christ is present in his Church (this is why flouting that authority is so serious). It is truly a gift of the Holy Spirit: like a human family, the family of God needs a visible head whom God will guide in the governance of his people. Abraham was appointed as Patriarch (father-figure) over Israel by God and his authority was underwritten by God himself: *"Those who bless you I will bless, and he who curses you I will curse"* (Gen. 12:3). It is clear to see how this is reflected in the words of Christ to the apostles *"Those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; those whose sins you retain, they are retained"* (Jn. 20:23). In both cases, God underpins the authority of his ministers: what they do, he makes effective, and those who accept them receive blessings from God, because in accepting them they are accepting the God who gave them this authority.

When speaking of the Church and how God designed it to be built, the Second Vatican Council states without any room for confusion that the hierarchy (the authority structure of Pope, bishop and priest) was deliberately willed by Christ and is a blessing on the Church. They call it a "charism of the Holy Spirit" - in other words not something which has evolved by accident or simply by the design of human beings who felt they needed some form of authority structure, but something which God intended from the beginning, which he positively builds up in each generation and which is the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit.

- The Holy Father, the Magisterium and the Hierarchy of the Church are signs of the presence of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that they are all (or even any of them) perfect and without flaw – but it does mean that they are *directly willed by God* and therefore *indispensable for the life of the Church*.

Fr Guy de Gaynesford