

RCIA
The Curia, Infallibility, Vatican State
Session 16

Christ promised to send His Holy Spirit to those who believed in Him to guide them in all truth (cf. John 16:13). An important gift to the whole believing Church, and to the teaching Church, is the gift of infallibility, that is, a certain inability to err in believing or teaching revealed truth. The unerring faith of the Church is a gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the faithful.



VATICAN STATE, MAGISTERIUM, & INFALLIBILITY

Vatican State

The capital city of the Vatican state, which includes the principal territory of the surrounding city of Rome, was recognized as sovereign land of the Roman Catholic Church by the Lateran Treaty. It includes the Vatican palace, its gardens, the basilica and piazza of St. Peter's, and other official buildings on a plot of land about one square mile with approximately 1000 residents, all of whom are citizens. It is properly called the papal state and is governed by the pope as the sovereign ruler with executive, legislative, and judicial powers exercised through commissions or delegated groups. There are other properties fixed by the treaty not within Vatican State yet under its sovereign dominion. These are the basilicas and buildings of St. John Lateran, St. Mary Major, St. Paul outside the Walls, and the Holy Apostles as well as the churches of Saint Andrea-della-Valle and San Carlo-ai-Catarini with their adjoining building, the palace summer residence, Castel Gandolfo.

The Vatican is an independent state in Italy where the Bishop of Rome (the pope) resides. The term is often used as a shorthand expression for the central authority OF THE Catholic Church: the pope, the Roman Curia, and the Vatican City State together. It takes its name from the Vatican hill, which in classical Rome was located outside the city walls and was the site of Nero's circus and a cemetery. Tradition holds that the Apostle Peter was martyred in Nero's circus and buried in the nearby cemetery. A shrine over the tomb of the apostle was reported in the second century, and the fourth-century emperor Constantine leveled the previously hilly site of the cemetery and built a basilica in honor of the apostle. This church was replaced in the Renaissance by the present St. Peter's Basilica (dedicated, 1626).

Because of the deterioration of the palace at the Lateran, the papal residence at the Vatican became the principal residence of the Bishops of Rome after the Avignon papacy in France (1309-77), though the popes also used other residences, including the Quirinal Palace until the unification of Italy and the fall of the Papal States in 1870. At that time the pope became a "prisoner of the Vatican" until the solution of the "Roman Question" in 1929. The Lateran Treaty with the Italian government recognized the independent sovereignty of the Vatican City State, compensated the papacy for the loss of the Papal States and granted official recognition and privileges to the Catholic Church in Italy. The treaty was renegotiated in 1985, with the Catholic Church relinquishing most of the privileges granted in 1929, including compulsory religious instruction in government schools and the payment of clergy salaries by the Italian government.

The Vatican City State is the political entity that governs the territory where the Holy See is located. The smallest sovereign state in the world (108.7 acres in all), it is completely surrounded by the city of Rome. It contains St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican Palace (the residence of the pope), Vatican Radio,

Vatican Television Center, the Vatican Observatory, Vatican Polyglot Press, the Vatican Gardens, art galleries, archives, a post office, a bank, a newspaper, a railroad station, and various offices, apartments, and service facilities. Its extraterritorial rights also extend to various buildings in Rome, including the major basilicas of the St. John Lateran, St. Mary Major, and St. Paul's Outside the Walls. It also includes office buildings for various Congregations of the Roman Curia and the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo, fifteen miles south east of the city. The pope is the head of the government, with full executive, legislative, and judicial powers. The administration of its daily affairs however, is in the hands of the Pontifical commission for the State of Vatican City. The territory's normal population is about 1000, but it employs about 4000 in all. One could walk across the territory in 30 minutes or less.

Located outside the walls of classical Rome, the Vatican hill is revered as the site of the Apostle Peter's martyrdom and his burial place. Although the term "Vatican" has come to refer to the pope as well as to those offices of the Roman Curia that assist the pope in his teaching and pastoral ministry, the Vatican City State was established only in 1929 as part of the Lateran accords that regularized the relationship of the Holy See with the government of Italy. The pope has been a temporal sovereign until the fall of the Papal States in 1870. The "Roman Question" then became a vexing concern especially between the new state of Italy and the Holy See. The question involved a number of issues, including a concern to grant the pope an independence from temporal authority that could allow him to fulfill his ministry to the universal church, free from coercion. As part of the settlement the Vatican City State was created as an independent political entity. This Lateran Treaty was signed on February 11, 1929, and ratified on June 7th of the same year, by the Italian government and Vatican City. The agreement recognized Catholicism as the religion of Italy and provided financial compensation for the loss of the Papal States. A new concordat was ratified on June 3, 1985, ending the official status of Catholicism in Italy, the mandating of Catholic instruction in government schools, and the payment of clergy salaries by the Italian government.

Vatican City State and the Holy See are not synonymous. The Holy See is the sovereign spiritual and diplomatic authority exercised by the pope. Vatican City State is the political entity and territory in which the Holy See is located and that guarantee the Holy See's independence. Over one hundred nations have formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See, not with Vatican City State.

Magisterium

Jesus Christ is the light of the world (Jn 8:12), the Savior of all mankind (Jn 4:42). He spent the years of his public life teaching his followers. He was their *magister*, their teacher; for them he had "the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68).

For each person, the one really important thing is to meet Jesus, to be enlightened by him, to follow him. Despite our failures, our efforts will be fruitful

if they are directed toward believing Our Lord's Revelation and doing his will. But where can we find Jesus' teaching? How and with what certainty can we know it? The Catholic believes Christ's saving words are to be found not only in Scripture but also in Tradition. The Magisterium or teaching authority of the church has as its pastoral duty "seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that Liberates" (CCC 890).

Christ's teaching in Scripture is usually very clear. At times, never the less, he deliberately formulates it in parables and has to explain its meaning and application privately to his Apostles. On occasions we find the Apostles failing to understand his words or even scandalized at his teaching (Lk 18:24, Mt 19:10, etc.). When the exact meaning of a teaching or precept contained in Scripture is not clear, human minds, unaided, are likely to give it very different interpretations. If these are contradictory, they obviously cannot all be true. For instance, when Our Lord said at the Last Supper, "Take, eat in memory of me," did he literally mean what he said? Did he really give his own Body and Blood to be eaten? Was it just a meal – or also a sacrifice that he was offering and wished to be perpetuated throughout the ages? Did Jesus want all of his followers to be able to truly eat his flesh ("Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53), as Catholics believe? Or should his work and intention be reduced to the idea of the Eucharist as a simple memorial of the Last Supper, the bread a mere symbol of Christ's love? After the words of consecration in a Eucharistic celebration, is the bread (and wine) now truly the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, with only the appearances of bread remaining, or is it still just bread that momentarily evokes Christ's love (cf. CCC 1374-1377)?

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Was Jesus really born of a Virgin? Did he truly rise from the dead? Is he truly God incarnate? Did he found a visible, hierarchical Church and endow it with the charism of infallibility? Did Jesus want his teaching to be subject to contradictory interpretations? It would seem not. It makes a vast difference how one answers questions such as these. Yet knowing men as he did (cf. Jn 2:25), he also knew that by themselves they tend to interpret even the clearest truth or message in differing ways, finding it hard to agree about the truth or to hold it firmly.

Living Presence of Christ* Thus, instead of leaving his teaching to men to make what they liked or chose of it, Jesus himself acted (and continues to act) with divine power to preserve the integrity and clarity of that teaching. Precisely to ensure that his work of salvation – doctrine, sacraments, sacrifice – should be preserved in its totality and be available without any corruption to each generation and each person, he set up his Church, "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tm 3:15; cf. CCC 2032). He promised to be always present in his Church, ensuring that what she teaches as doctrine of salvation will be protected and guaranteed in heaven. Whoever listens to Jesus' Church will in fact be listening to Jesus himself: "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to

observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 18-20). "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19; cf. Mt 18:18), "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16).

What emerges from these passages is the living presence of Christ in the Magisterium of the Church, the teaching office she received from her founder. Vatican Council II teaches that "the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office (Magisterium) of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ" (*Dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum 10*). The teaching of Jesus coming to us in the complementary sources of Scripture and Tradition, as interpreted by the Magisterium, is the heritage of each Christian. Each has a strict right in justice to receive this teaching: "The right of the faithful to receive Catholic doctrine in its purity and integrity must always be respected" (Pope John Paul II, encyclical *The Splendor of Truth, Veritatus Splendor*, 113 [1993]; cf. Canons 213, 762; CCC 2037). Similarly, the pastors of the Church, to whom the passing on of this doctrine has been specially entrusted, have a particular obligation to respect this trust and to hand on what they have received to the people they serve (cf. Canon 760). The church has the *right* to teach and the duty.

The work of the Magisterium is not only to preserve intact the message of Christ but also to spell out how it applies to issues not mentioned in Scripture. Each age (and certainly our own) tends to bring up questions of belief and behavior that Our Lord did not explicitly deal with. Did he wish to leave us without a means of knowing his mind on population questions, on drug taking, on the right or wrong use of medical treatment that can prolong or shorten a sick person's life? No! It is the right and duty of the Magisterium to teach on just such contemporary questions "to the extent ... required by the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls" (Canon 747.2; cf. CCC 2032).

Functioning of the Magisterium* The teaching of the Magisterium can be solemn or ordinary. Each calls on our believing response. The solemn Magisterium is usually exercised through a formal proclamation by the Pope acting as supreme pastor and teacher or by an ecumenical council teaching in union with the Pope (cf. CCC 891). The ordinary Magisterium is that exercised by the Pope alone or by the bishops teaching in communion with him, "when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a 'definitive manner,' they propose ... a teaching that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals" (CCC 892). "The Church's Magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas, that is, when it proposes truths contained in divine Revelation or having a necessary connection with them, in a form obliging the Christian people to an

irrevocable adherence of faith" (CCC 88). The definition of a dogma of faith is the highest and most guaranteed exercise of the Magisterium. Vatican Council II in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 25*, says that our response to the ordinary Magisterium must involve a "religious assent of mind and will" (*obsequium religiosum*). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that while this assent is distinct from the assent of faith, it "is none the less an extension of it" (CCC 892).

While various degrees of response to the Magisterium are possible according to the way in which it is exercised, no response is adequate unless rooted in faith. So, for instance, we believe that in the godhead there are three distinct Persons but one god (Dogma of the Blessed Trinity), not because we understand how this is (we do not), but because it is a revealed truth taught as dogma by the Church's living Magisterium. Similarly, because of faith and not because of some rational argument, we believe that grace gives us a real participation in the life of God as his adopted children (doctrine of our divine filiation; cf. CCC 1997). Faith is not irrational of course, but our faith essentially is faith in God, not an analogous and merely human faith in human reasoning powers.

It is true that one could reject a proposition taught by the ordinary Magisterium without falling into heresy, strictly speaking. But one could not actively dissent from it without detriment to one's faith. At the same time, it can be possible to maintain a certain reserve, in the sense that something proposed by the Magisterium, not yet being cast in the final form of a dogmatic definition, may be subject to further, refinements of meaning: always "in the same sense and along the same lines of understanding" (*eodem sensu, eademque sententia*: St. Vincent of Lerins). Yet the fact remains that "the freedom of the act of faith cannot justify a right to dissent" (congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, 36*).

Theologians and the Magisterium* In the ongoing task of probing, clarifying, and illustrating the power and beauty of the truth Christ bequeathed to us, theologians have an important role to play. They too are subject to the Magisterium. Indeed, humility and awareness of the greatness of the subject they are investigating and of their own human limitations lead theologians to look especially to the Magisterium for orientation in their work.

The relationship between the Magisterium and theological research is at times debated today. Ideally, they should "interpenetrate and enrich each other," for both are in the service of the People of God – pastors obliged to guard unity and forestall divisions, theologians responsible for "participating in the building up of Christ's Body in unity and truth" (*Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, 40*). The fundamental issue is the right of the faithful to know the mind of Christ, and in this regard it is the Magisterium's task "to preserve God's people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error" (CCC 890).

St. Matthew tells us Jesus “taught as one who has authority, and not as the scribes” (Mt 7:29). Today also one would expect anyone teaching in the name of Christ to speak authoritatively, offering truths clear in their formulation and application. Teaching in Christ’s name must be authoritative in a further sense. It should have the proper credentials. The matter of who “has the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16) is to be decided on the basis of charismatic gifts. The Magisterium has that charismatic credential of divinely given grace. It teaches not in its own name nor as claiming more expert knowledge, but in virtue of a charism given for the sake of the whole body of the faithful.

In ways both mysterious and clear, Jesus sends his grace and light to every single person (Jn 1:9). Yet not all recognize his voice or respond to it. If we already have the good fortune to be Christians through Baptism, we need to keep our hearts and minds open to his will, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (cf. Acts 22:10); for he will speak to us in vain if we are not ready to respond.

The Church is for us both “Mother and Teacher” – *Mater et Magistra* (cf. CCC 2030-2051). Her Magisterium is a logical consequence of the Incarnation, a particular expression of Our Lord’s loving promise to be “with us always” (Mt 28:20). The Magisterium is a divine gift helping us in our pilgrim way on earth to see clearly the way that is Jesus and hear clearly his words of eternal life.

Cormac Burke, Our Sunday Visitor’s Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine

Infallibility

The Apostles had the immense good fortune to meet Jesus Christ; their lives and eternities were stamped by that meeting. Their faith was put to many tests, but in a moment when many abandoned him, Peter said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). Peter’s words were those of a man bound to Jesus by love. His faith, his fidelity, was to the Person of Jesus. That also meant fidelity to his teaching: “words of eternal life.” Scripture says forcefully that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6). A practical faith is asked of us; that is, faith that endeavors to carry out the teachings of Jesus in one’s personal life.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said to his Apostles: “When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Thomas was quick to intervene: “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus replied with marvelous and divine words: I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:3-6). The Apostles believed Jesus, followed him as the way, held to him as the truth, and reached the life that he promised and is. With one exception, they adhered to Jesus in faith and in deeds. This is our calling too. But how can we hear and follow Jesus? Has he not provided some means by which his teaching would be preserved in its authenticity throughout the ages?

He has: by endowing his Church with the charism of infallibility. "In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility" (CCC 889). The New Testament tells of Christ's decision to set up a visible, hierarchical, teaching Church, giving authority to the Apostles (and to their successors, the bishops), accompanied by the promise of his presence and that of the Holy Spirit, and the guarantee that whatever is taught will faithfully express his mind and will. "Go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always" (Mt 28:18-20). "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18). "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16). "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth"(Jn 16:13).

Scope, Nature, Origins of Infallibility* Infallibility is not to be confused with the charism of inspiration, nor is it to be considered a source of new revelations. What matters is to "hold fast what you have, until I come" (Rv 2:25), to "guard what has been entrusted to you" (1 Tm 6:20).

"The infallibility which the divine redeemer wished to endow his Church in defining doctrine pertaining to faith and morals is co-extensive with the deposit of revelation" (Vatican council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 25; cf. CCC 2035*). The Church lives with the life of Christ. Her faith expresses his mind, constantly clarifying itself to us through the ages. Infallibility therefore is a possession and prerogative of the entire Church. Our Lord's words "Go, teach; I am with you always" apply to the whole body of the faithful united in belief down through the ages. But the guarantee contained in these words has been more particularly given to the Magisterium – the teaching office exercised by the bishops and the Pope. "it is this Magisterium's task to preserve God's people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error ... To fulfill this service, Christ endowed the Church's shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals" (Mt 16:18-19).

The promise of Matthew 28:18-20, "Go make disciples of all nations ... I am with you always, to the close of the age," should be seen in the light of the earlier guarantee addressed to all the Apostles: "Whatever you (plural) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you (plural) loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18). This latter promise made to the whole apostolic college should in turn be understood in the light of the prior commission made to Peter alone: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church; ... and whatever you (singular) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you (singular) loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:18-19).

So the Second Vatican Council teaches: "The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme

pastor and teacher of all the faithful ... he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. For that reason his definitions are rightly said to be irreformable by their very nature and not by reason of the assent of the church, inasmuch as they were made with the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised to him in the person of blessed Peter himself" (*Lumen Gentium, 25*), either in the solemn declarations of ecumenical councils or in and through the ordinary Magisterium. The charism of infallibility enables us to hear the voice of Christ, speaking through those whom he has appointed. It is an expression of God's mercy; to ensure that truth he has communicated remains accessible to us.

Infallibility in Belief* Infallibility in belief should be distinguished from infallibility in teaching. The latter pertains to the Magisterium alone, given the conditions indicated above. Infallibility in belief pertains to the whole Church. "The whole body of the faithful ... cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people when, from the bishops to the last of the faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals" (*Lumen Gentium, 12*).

"By a 'supernatural sense of faith' the People of God, under the guidance of the Church's living Magisterium, 'unfailingly adheres to this faith'[LG 12; cf. DV 10]" (CCC 889). To understand properly how the whole People of God is infallible in its sense of the faith, it must be borne in mind that the body of the faithful goes beyond the limits both of place and, especially, of time. The People of God always includes those of past generations, as well as those of the present moment. The former are in fact the vast majority, and it is easier to ascertain what they believed. It is that belief that marks the *sensus fidelium* and points infallibly to the truth.

This should be kept in mind in evaluating sociological data about current opinion in the Church. The norm in the Church is always what God wants. It is the one faith professed by the People of God over the centuries that is infallible; and in that faith we are called to communion. The faith of our fathers is a sure reference point, linking us to the teaching of Jesus "that comes down to us from the "Apostles," as Eucharistic Prayer I expresses it.

Some persons see pride at work in the Church's claim to infallibility. But the claim is not proud; it is an acknowledgement of the greatness of what God has done in and through her. Pride instead is a danger for someone who, wanting to follow Christ, nevertheless refuses to admit any infallible organ of teaching instituted by him. Acceptance of the Church's infallibility is a key test of faith in God's providence – in this divine way of ensuring access to the message of salvation.

Cormac Burke, Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine

Infallibility has been present in the Church, even from apostolic times as is frequently affirmed by actions and declarations of the apostles (Gal 1:9) and spoken by the fathers of the Church as the "Charisma of truth" (St. Irenaeus). However, it was not defined as a teaching until the First Vatican Council (1869-70). The constitution *Pastor Aeternus* of the First Vatican Council described the "infallible magisterium of the Roman Pontiff in the following words: "when a Roman Pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when ... as pastor and teacher of all Christians in virtue of his highest apostolic authority he defines a doctrine of faith and morals that must be held by the Universal Church, he is empowered, through the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, with that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer will to endow the Church".

In its Catholic, doctrinal meaning, infallibility is the end result of divine assistance given the church whereby she is preserved from the possibility and liability to error in teachings on matters of faith and morals. The Doctrine defines that infallibility is: (1) in the pope personally and solely as the successor of St. Peter, (2) in an ecumenical council subject to confirmation by the pope, (3) in the bishops of the Universal Church teaching definitively in union with the pope. As such, infallibility does not extend to pronouncements on discipline and Church policy and by no means includes impeccability of the pope or inerrancy in his private opinions. It is, briefly, the assured guarantee of the unfolding of the apostolic deposit of faith by authority of the Church whereby Christ's doctrine must and will be handed on by an infallible Church guided by the Holy Spirit. It is distinguished from both biblical inspiration and revelation.

Some aspects of the infallibility debate could be resolved by a more careful use of terms. For example, 'infallibility' immunity from error, must not be confused with "impeccability," immunity from sin. Thus 'infallibility' does not imply that popes cannot sin. Similarly, infallibility is not "omniscience", knowledge about everything. Thus, the pope and the college of bishops can teach with infallibility only in the very restricted area of revelation. Moreover, the exercise of infallibility is rare; the only generally acknowledged use since the time of Vatican I is the declaration of Mary's Assumption by Pope Pius XII in 1950.