

## Is the Pope “Infallible”?

by Moisés Pinedo

One of the most treasured doctrines of the Roman papacy is that of infallibility. This dogma was issued by Pope Pius IX and was approved and defined by the Vatican I Council in 1870. The conciliar document declares that

when the Roman Pontiff speaks EX CATHEDRA...he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. Therefore, such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the Church, irreformable (“First Dogmatic...,” 1870, 4.9).

In other words, papal infallibility means that the pope makes, or should make, **no** mistakes in matters concerning the doctrine of the Catholic Church. The Council even went so far as to state that “should anyone, which God forbid, have the temerity to reject this definition [of papal infallibility—MP] of ours: let him be anathema [condemned—MP]” (“First Dogmatic...,” 1870, 4.9).

For more than a century, this dogma has plagued many Catholics who have worked feverishly to try to harmonize the nature of the “infallible” dogma with the declarations, teachings, and revelations of the popes who lived before and after its establishment. After all, it is claimed that the Catholic Church does not create new dogmas; rather, it proposes eternal truths already contained in the “deposit of faith” (see “Roman Catholic...,” 1892, 8:772; Dixon, 1852, p. 197). Therefore, it could be said that, before the 19th century, every pope has been subject to “infallibility” without knowing it.

History militates against papal infallibility. For example, Pope Honorius I (A.D. 625-638) was deemed a “heretic” for many years after his death for espousing the doctrine of monotheletism (the doctrine that acknowledged two distinct natures within Christ, but only one divine will). He was censured by the Third Council of Constantinople in 680 (see “Honorius I,” 2001). Another pope, Eugenius IV (1431-1447), condemned Joan of Arc, considering her to be a participant of witchcraft, though Benedict XV canonized her as a “saint” in 1920 (see “Joan...,” 2001). Other popes, such as Paul III, Paul IV, Sixtus IV, Pius IX, et al., authorized, promoted, incited, and reinforced the “Holy” Inquisition for which the late Pope John Paul II had to apologize worldwide.

John Paul II himself (1978-2005) gave a fatal blow to the doctrine of infallibility. In opposition to the declarations of other popes and to Catholic doctrine itself, this pope declared:

- The Spirit of Christ uses churches and ecclesial communities other than the Catholic Church as means of salvation (1979, 4.32).
- People outside the Catholic Church and the Gospel can attain salvation by the grace of Christ (1990, 1.10).
- People can be saved by living a good moral life, without knowing anything about Christ and the Catholic Church (1993, 3).
- There is sanctification outside the Catholic Church (1995, 1.12).
- The martyrs of any religious community can find the extraordinary grace of the Holy Spirit (1995, 3.84).

Furthermore, concerning the erroneous concept of organic evolution, on October 22, 1996, Pope John Paul II declared that “new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis” (see John Paul II, 1996). But if evolution is to be considered **more** than merely a hypothesis, Adam disappears! Ultimately, then, how can it be, as Catholics allege, that humanity carries the sin of the first man? Should they not say, instead, that humanity carries the “sin” of the last primate from which we “descended” (as if primates could sin!)?

Due to this obvious failure to satisfy the demands of infallibility, Catholicism has to explain, reformulate, and justify the dogma. Innumerable “clarifications” have been offered to calm Catholics and other religious people who question its veracity. Concerning the possibility that the pope could fall into heresy, Cardinal Cajetan, one of the most outspoken supporters of papal infallibility, maintained that “this only applies to the pope as a private individual, for then he is as fallible as any other person” (quoted in Fernhout, 1994, p. 106).

In a Web site devoted to Catholic apologetics, the following is said about the pope:

And if he is a heretic, at least he is not going to declare his heresies as part of the doctrine of the profession, that is, things which we are required to believe and observe. It was never permitted by the Holy Spirit (see Toth, et al., n.d).

Other apologists even have gone so far as to declare that

it is true that certain popes have contradicted other popes, in their private opinions or concerning disciplinary dogmas; but there was never a Pope who would officially contradict what a previous Pope officially taught about faith and moral matters. The same could be said about ecumenical councils, which also teach with infallibility. **There was not an ecumenical council that would contradict the teaching of a previous ecumenical council concerning faith and morals** (Keating, n.d., emp. added).

Now Catholicism proposes that, in reality, the pope can make mistakes in religious matters, but he **never** will do it officially. [This is very convenient, since Catholicism itself defines what is "official."] In the same way, we are told that the councils invoked by the popes teach with infallibility and **never** contradict each other. But are these statements true? We are going to let the two last **official** councils of the Catholic Church answer this question.

In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Vatican I Council expressed the following:

The abandonment and rejection of the Christian religion, and **the denial of God and his Christ**, has plunged the minds of many into the abyss of pantheism, materialism and atheism, and the consequence is that they strive to destroy rational nature itself, to deny any criterion of what is right and just.... **And so we, following in the footsteps of our predecessors, in accordance with our supreme apostolic office, have never left off** teaching and defending Catholic truth and **condemning erroneous doctrines** (1870, 7,10, emp. added).

While Vatican I condemned erroneous doctrines such as the denial of Christ, Vatican II declares:

**The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems.** They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth.... **Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God**, they revere Him as a prophet ("Declaration Nostra Aetate...", 1965, 3, emp. added).

But Muslims' refusal to acknowledge Jesus as God is a denial of God and His Christ, and thus the heresy condemned by Vatican I.

In its canonic sentence on written revelation, Vatican I states:

**If anyone does not receive** as sacred and canonical **the complete books of Sacred Scripture with all their parts**, as the holy Council of Trent listed them, or denies that they were divinely inspired: **let him be anathema** [condemned—MP] ("Canons," 1870, 2.4, emp. added).

However, Vatican II, in speaking about Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions that discard much of canonical Scripture, declared that these religions

try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and **sacred** rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, **though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men** ("Declaration Nostra Aetate...", 1965, 2, emp. added).

On the permanence of the Petrine primacy of the Roman pontiffs, Vatican I, in its Pastor Aeternus, declares:

Therefore, **if anyone says** that it is not by the institution of Christ the Lord himself (that is to say, by divine law) that blessed Peter should have perpetual successors in the primacy over the whole Church; or **that the Roman Pontiff is not the successor of blessed Peter in this primacy: let him be anathema** ("First Dogmatic...", 1870, 2.5, parenthetical item in orig., emp. added).

However, Vatican II claims:

The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, **though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter** [that is to say, they do not accept the papal hierarchy—MP]. For there are many who honor Sacred Scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and a pattern of life, and who show a sincere zeal. They lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and Saviour. They are consecrated by baptism, in which **they are united with Christ** ("Dogmatic Constitution...", 1964, 2.15, emp. added).

Now Vatican II has "united to Christ" the same people who, for refusing Petrine hierarchy, were condemned as anathema by Vatican I. Truth be told, the Vatican II Council, invoked by John XXIII, cannot coexist with Vatican I Council, invoked by Pius IX (the father of the dogma of infallibility). These two councils stand as permanent historical evidence of papal fallibility.

Upon analyzing the allegedly infallible history of the popes, we can arrive only at the same conclusion to which Adrian VI (another supposedly infallible pope) arrived in the 16th century: "The pope may err even in what belongs to the faith" (McClintock and Strong, 1867-1880, 1:83).

Certainly, the doctrine of papal infallibility has caused, and continues to cause, many people to accept false doctrines such as original sin, the assumption of Mary, the canonization of saints, the "factuality" of evolution, and even papal "infallibility" itself—doctrines that are completely lacking biblical foundation. Christians must understand that there is only one infallible truth—the Word of God (John 17:17). It is this truth from which we need to obtain the salvation of our souls. It will keep us away from error and apostasy. In the end, when our Savior returns in the clouds to reward and punish in a universal Judgment, it will not be the words of men's **fallible** councils, but the Word of God, that will be open; then the Lord will give the "canonical" sentence.

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