

# INFALLIBILITY

(This article is reprinted here, with some editorial modifications, from the 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica)

Infallibility (Fr. *infaillibilite* and *infallibilite*, the latter now obsolete, Med. Lat. *infallibilitas*, *infallibilis*, formed from *fallor*, to make a mistake), is defined as the fact or quality of not being liable to err or fail. The word has thus the general sense of "certainty"; we may, e.g., speak of a drug as an infallible specific, or of a man's judgment as infallible. In these cases, however, the "infallibility" connotes certainty only in so far as anything human can be certain.

In the language of the Christian Church the word "infallibility" is used in a more absolute sense, as the freedom from all possibility of error guaranteed by the direct action of the Spirit of God. This belief in the infallibility of revelation is involved in the very beliefs about revelation itself, and is common to most all groups of Christians, who differ mainly as to the kind and measure of infallibility residing in the human instruments by which this revelation is interpreted to the world.

Some see the guarantee, or at least the indication, of infallibility in the consensus of the Church (*quod semper, ubique, et ab omnibus*) expressed from time to time in ecumenical councils; others see it in the special grace conferred upon Saint Peter and his successor, the bishop of Rome, the Pope, as head of the Church; others again see it in the inspired Scriptures, God's Word. This last was the belief of the Protestant Reformers, for whom the Bible was in matters of doctrine the ultimate court of appeal. To the translation and interpretation of the Scriptures men might bring a fallible judgment, but this would be assisted by the direct action of the Spirit of God in proportion to their faith. As for infallibility, this was a direct grace of God, given only to the few. "Whatever was perfect under the sun," ask the translators of the Authorized Version (1611) in their preface, "where apostles and apostolick men, that is, men endued with an extraordinary measure of God's Spirit, and privileged with the privilege of infallibility, had not their hand?" In modern Protestantism, on the other hand, the idea of an infallible authority whether in the Church or the Bible has tended to disappear, religious truths being conceived as valuable only as they are apprehended and made real to the individual mind and soul by

the grace of God, not by reason of any submission to an external authority.

At the present time, then, the idea of infallibility in religious matters is most commonly associated with the claim of the Roman Catholic Church, and more especially of the pope personally as head of that Church, to possess the privilege of infallibility, and it is with the meaning and limits of this claim that the present article deals.

The substance of the claim to infallibility made by the Roman Catholic Church is that the Church and the pope cannot err when solemnly enunciating, as binding on all the faithful, a decision on a question of faith or morals. The infallibility of the Church, thus limited, is a necessary outcome of the fundamental conception of the Catholic Church and its mission. Every society of men must have a supreme authority, whether individual or collective, empowered to give a final decision in the controversies which concern it. A community whose mission it is to teach religious truth, which involves on the part of its members the obligation of belief in this truth, must, if it is not to fail of its object, possess an authority capable of maintaining the faith in its purity, and consequently capable of keeping it free from and condemning errors. To perform this function without fear of error, this authority must be infallible in its own sphere. The Christian Church has expressly claimed this infallibility for its formal dogmatic teaching. In the very earliest centuries we find the episcopate, united in council, drawing up professions of faith or creeds, which every believer was bound to accept under pain of exclusion, condemning heresies, and casting out heretics. From Nicaea and Chalcedon to Florence and Trent, and to the present day, the Church has excluded from her communion all those who do not profess her own faith, *i.e.* all the religious truths which she represents and imposes as obligatory. This is infallibility put into practice by definite acts.

The infallibility of the pope was not defined until 1870 at the First Vatican Council; this definition does not constitute, strictly speaking, a dogmatic innovation, as if the pope had not hitherto enjoyed this privilege, or as if the Church, as a whole, had admitted the contrary; it is the newly formulated definition of a dogma which, like all those defined by the Councils, continued to grow into an ever more definite

form, ripening, as it were, in the always living community of the Church.

The exact formula for the papal infallibility is given by the First Vatican Council in the following terms (Constit. **Pastor aeternus**, cap. iv.); "*we teach and define as a divinely revealed dogma, that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks **ex cathedra** - i.e. when, in his character as Pastor and Doctor of all Christians, and in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he lays down that a certain doctrine concerning faith or morals is binding, upon the universal Church, - possesses, by the Divine assistance which was promised to him in the person of the blessed Saint Peter, that same infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer thought fit to endow His Church, to define its doctrine with regard to faith and morals; and, consequently, that these definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable in themselves, and not in consequence of the consent of the Church.*" A few notes will suffice to elucidate this pronouncement.

(a) As the Council expressly says, the infallibility of the pope is not other than that of the Church; this is a point which is too often forgotten or misunderstood. The pope enjoys it in person, but solely as head of the Church, and as the authorized organ of the ecclesiastical body. For this exercise of the primacy as for the others, we must conceive of the pope and the episcopate united to him as a continuation of the Apostolic College and its head Peter. The head of the College possesses and exercises by himself alone the same powers as the College which is united with him; not by delegation from his colleagues, but because he is their established chief. The pope when teaching *ex cathedra* acts as head of the whole episcopal body and of the whole Church.

(b) If the Divine constitution of the Church has not changed in its essential points since our Lord, the mode of exercise of the various powers of its head has varied; and that of the supreme teaching power as of the others. This explains the late date at which the dogma was defined, and the assertion that the dogma was already contained in that of the papal primacy established by our Lord himself in the person of Saint Peter. A certain dogmatic development is not denied, nor an evolution in the direction of a centralization in the hands of the pope of the exercise of his powers as primate; it is

merely required that this evolution should be well understood and considered as legitimate.

(c) As a matter of fact the infallibility of the pope, when giving decisions in his character as head of the Church, was generally admitted before the Vatican Council. The only reservation which the most advanced Gallicans dared to formulate, in the terms of the celebrated declaration of the clergy of France (1682), had as its object the irreformable character of the pontifical definitions, which, it was claimed, could only have been acquired by them through the assent of the Church. This doctrine, rather political than theological, was a survival of the errors which had come into being after the Great Schism, and especially at the Council of Constance; its object was to put the Church above its head, as the council of Constance had put the ecumenical council above the pope, as though the council could be ecumenical without its head. In reality it was Gallicanism alone which was condemned at the Vatican Council, and it is Gallicanism which is aimed at in the last phrase of the definition we have quoted.

(d) Infallibility is the guarantee against error, not in all matters, but only in the matter of dogma and morality; everything else is beyond its power, not only truths of another order, but even discipline and the ecclesiastical laws, government and administration.

(e) Again, not all dogmatic teachings of the pope are under the guarantee of infallibility; neither his opinions as private instructor, nor his official allocutions, however authoritative they may be, are infallible; it is only his *ex cathedra* instruction which is guaranteed; this is admitted by everybody.

But when does the pope speak *ex cathedra*, and how is it to be distinguished when he is exercising his infallibility? As to this point there are two schools, or rather two tendencies, among Catholics: some extend the privilege of infallibility to all official exercise of the supreme *magisterium*, and declare infallible, *e.g.* the papal encyclicals.' Others, while recognizing the supreme authority of the papal *magisterium* in matters of doctrine, confine the infallibility to those cases alone in which the pope chooses to make use of it, and declares positively that he is imposing on all the faithful the obligation of belief in a certain definite proposition, under pain of heresy and

exclusion from the Church; they do not insist on any special form, but only require that the pope should clearly manifest his will to the Church. This second point of view, as clearly expounded by Joseph Fessler (1813-1872), who was secretary to the Vatican Council, in his work *Die wahre and die falsche Unfehlbarkeit der Papste* (French trans. *La vraie et la fausse infaillibilite*, Paris, 1873), and by Cardinal Newman in his "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," is the correct one, and this is clear from the fact that it has never been blamed by the ecclesiastical authority. Those who hold the latter opinion have been able to assert that since the Vatican Council no infallible definition had yet been formulated by the popes, while recognizing the supreme authority of the encyclicals of Leo XIII. That is, until Pius XII who, in 1952, declared the teaching of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be infallible.

It is remarkable that the definition of the infallibility of the pope did not appear among the projects (*schemata*) prepared for the deliberations of the Vatican Council (1869). It doubtless arose from the proposed forms for the definitions of the primacy and the pontifical *magisterium*. The chapter on the infallibility was only added at the request of the bishops and after long hesitation on the part of the cardinal presidents. The proposed form, first elaborated in the conciliary commission *de fide*, was the object of long public discussions from the 50th general congregation (May 13th, 1870) to the 85th (July 13th); the constitution as a whole was adopted at a public session, on the 18th, of the 535 bishops present, two only replied " *Non placet* "; but about 50 had preferred not to be present. The controversies ' It was in this sense that it was understood by Dollinger, who pointed out that the definition of the dogma would commit the Church to all past official utterances of the popes, e.g. the Syllabus of 1864, and therefore to a war *d'outrance* against modern civilization. This view was embodied in the circular note to the Powers, drawn up by Dollinger and issued by the Bavarian prime minister Prince Hohenlohe-Schillingsfirst on April 9, 1869. It was also the view universally taken by the German governments which supported the *Kulturkampf* in a greater or less degree.

The controversy occasioned by this question had started from the very beginning of the Council, and were carried on with great bitterness on both sides. The minority, among whom were the

prominent Rauscher and Schwarzenberg, Hefele, bishop of Rotterdam (the historian of the councils) Cardinal Mathieu, Mgr Dupanloup, Mgr Maret, &c., &c., did not pretend to deny the papal infallibility; they pleaded the inopportuneness of the definition and brought forward difficulties mainly of an historical order, in particular the famous condemnation of Pope Honorius by the 6th ecumenical council of Constantinople in 680.

The majority, in which Cardinal Manning played a very active part, took their stand on theological reasons of the strongest kind; they invoked the promises of Our Lord to Saint Peter: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her " and again, "I have prayed for thee, Peter, that thy faith fail not; and do thou in thy turn confirm thy brethren." They showed the popes, in the course of the ages, acting as the guardians and judges of the faith, arousing or welcoming dogmatic controversies and authoritatively settling them, exercising the supreme direction in the councils and sanctioning their decisions; they explained that the few historical difficulties did not involve any dogmatic defect in the teaching of the popes; they insisted upon the necessity of a supreme tribunal giving judgment in the name of the whole of the scattered Church; and finally, they considered that the definition had become opportune for the very reason that under the pretext of its inopportuneness the doctrine itself was being attacked.

The definition once proclaimed, controversies rapidly ceased at the First Vatican Council; the bishops who were among the minority one after the other formulated their loyal adherence to the Catholic dogma. The last to do so in Germany was Hefele, who published the decrees of the Council, thus breaking a long friendship with Dollinger; in Austria, where the government had thought good to revive for the occasion the royal *placet*, Mgr Haynald and Mgr Strossmayer delayed the publication, the former till the 15th of September 1871, the latter till the 26th of December 1872. In France the adherence was rapid, and the publication was only delayed by some bishops in consequence of the disastrous war with Prussia. Though no bishops abandoned it, a few priests, such as Father Hyacinthe Loyson, and a few scholars at the German universities refused their adherence. The most distinguished among the latter was Dollinger, who resisted all the advances of Mgr Scherr, archbishop of Munich, was

excommunicated on the 17th of April 1871, and died unreconciled, though without joining any separate group. After him must be mentioned Friedrich of Munich, several professors of Bonn, and Reinkens of Breslau, who was the first bishop of the " Old Catholics." These professors formed the " Committee of Bonn," which organized the new Church. It was recognized and protected first in Bavaria, thanks to the minister Freiherr Johann von Lutz, then in Saxony, Baden, Wurttemberg, Prussia, where it was the pretext for, if not the cause of, the Kulturkampf, and finally in Switzerland, especially at Geneva.

For the theological aspects of the dogma of infallibility, see, among many others, L. Billot, S.J., *De Ecclesia Christi* (3 vols., Rome, 1898-1900); or G. Wilmers, S.J., *De Christi Ecclesia* (Regensburg, 1897). The most accessible popular work is that of Mgr Fessler already mentioned.