

Myths about Papal Infallibility

If there is one institution in the world that is misunderstood the most, it is probably the Catholic Church. In fact, we probably win the Guinness World Record for “Most Misunderstood Institution.” Even at the conception of the Church, people thought we were cannibals and practicing incest at the Eucharistic table. Today people misunderstand our teachings about marriage and the family. One doctrine that many people misunderstand is the Church’s teaching about papal infallibility. Here are two myths about papal infallibility.

MYTH #1

The Pope is not infallible because he is not perfect (or impeccable)

Some people would use our first reading for today as an example that the Pope is not infallible. ‘See look at St. Peter! He is definitely not infallible, even Paul had to correct him for leaving the Gentiles to sit with the Jews!’ This situation follows the council of Jerusalem where the apostles and the elders had decided that the Gentiles would not be required to undergo circumcision in order to become a follower of Jesus (praise God!).

However, St. Peter by withdrawing from the Gentiles to have dinner with the Jews in this particular context seemed to indicate by his actions that the Gentiles had to follow Mosaic purity laws (e.g. circumcision) in order to be Christian. St. Paul rebukes him because Peter is contradicting with his **actions** what was confirmed in **doctrine**.

This objection misunderstands what infallibility means. People think Papal infallibility means that the pope knows everything or that the pope can never sin. Wrong! Infallibility means being unable to transmit errors in relation to matters of faith and morals. The Catechism says this:

The Roman Pontiff...**enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office** when...he proclaims by a definitive act **a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals** (CCC 891)

Jesus wanted to instill in us the confidence that we absolutely know the way to heaven. Jesus is the Truth and therefore infallible and so he allows St. Peter to share in his infallibility when he says to Peter in Luke 22:32, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your

brethren” and Mt 16:18, “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”

I remember speaking to an Anglican once about a controversy in the Anglican Church and he said: “sometimes I wish we just had a pope to tell us exactly what the truth is.” The gift of infallibility gives us the confidence that we have the truths necessary to go to heaven.

MYTH #2

Everything and anything the pope says is infallible

From his opinions about ketchup chips to some off-the-cuff comments on an airplane or in an interview, some non-Catholics and Catholics believe that everything he says is infallible. That is incorrect because the Church also indicates the specific limitations within which the pope is infallibly declaring a doctrine on faith and morals.

The Roman Pontiff...enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office **when...he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine** pertaining to faith or morals (CCC 891)

This definitive act has only been done twice in the history of the Church: The dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius XI in 1854 and the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary by Pope Pius XII in 1950. In these pronouncements, the pope is very intentional and very clear. He cannot be infallible by ‘accident’.

Jesus promised: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (Jn 16:13). This gift of the Spirit has been given to St. Peter and his successors in a unique way through the charism and gift of papal infallibility. In these troubling times in our Church, Jesus gives us the confidence to remain in the Church because he has not and will not abandon his Church which is the “pillar and bulwark of truth” (1 Tim 3:15).