

## AN EASILY MISUNDERSTOOD DOGMA: INFALLIBILITY AT VATICAN I

No matter how much I tried, I never learned to juggle. **Barnum & Bailey** Circus never called to recruit me! I **nearly** had it down but gave up. There were too many moving pieces—I do better with stationary objects! Church life surely demands of pastors the ability to “juggle” disparate parishioner preferences with respect to music, Mass times, etc. But other juggling is more consequential, as popes and bishops consider serious theological and ecclesiological questions. **Infallibility** is a case in point. While most Vatican I bishops accepted the **concept**, some felt it was *inopportune* and would too easily **be misunderstood**, especially by non-Catholics. **John Henry Newman** (not yet a bishop) was in this camp. Was it **worth** the **risk**? A healthy **debate** ensued at Vatican I. Jesus assured the faithful of the Holy Spirit’s guidance: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you.” (John 14:25-26).

Infallibility derives from the belief that, guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church cannot *fall* into error. It is not the “whether” question as much as the “how” that needed definition. Positing that the Church is preserved from error is **not** the **equivalent** of saying that any formulation is the full and final word. The Catechism states: “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.” (CCC, # 890) Most teaching occurs in an ordinary manner—homilies, encyclicals, General Audiences. These are exactly what the word signifies—**ordinary**. Only **rarely** is a dogma promulgated in an extraordinary way. Declarations by ecumenical councils are a prime example—there are seven sacraments, 46 books in the Old Testament, 23 in the New, etc. These are enshrined as irreformable Catholic doctrine and are understood to be infallible teachings.

Vatican I sought to clarify the exercise of infallibility by the **pope himself**. The weather wasn’t exactly cooperating. A heatwave of nearly two months had left the city unbearable. Neither electric fans nor air conditioners existed in those days. The specter of a Franco-Prussian War was looming—time was of the essence. The final decree read: “When the Roman **pontiff** speaks ‘**ex cathedra**,’ that is, when, in the exercise of his **office** as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church, he **possesses**, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer **willed** his **church** to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals; and that, therefore, such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are of themselves, and **not** from the **consent** of the Church, **irreformable**.” (emphasis added) Recall, *ex cathedra* literally means, “from the chair” of the pope.

The above decree represented a **nuanced articulation** of the pope’s teaching authority. **Some** bishops wanted the teaching to encompass even more. Approximately **sixty** bishops who opposed it on **prudential** grounds departed before the final vote, **hesitant** to cast a negative vote. The **Bishop of Little Rock**, AK though did vote against it. Remember that not every teaching falls under the rubric of infallibility. In fact, **very few** do. The pope’s infallibility is set within definite **boundaries**. When the above-mentioned conditions have been fulfilled, the **pope** possesses that infallibility by divine assistance and understood within the context of the Church’s faith. It is first

and foremost a promise of Christ to His Church, not to any particular individual. Far too many think Catholic doctrine holds that infallibility resides in the pope absolutely, separately and personally. Only a tiny minority of bishops favored that interpretation.

**St. John Henry Newman** was squarely on board with Vatican I's final decree and went to great pains to show that infallibility does **not** cover general areas of administration or personal opinion, but only **clearly** specified **parameters** of faith and morals. It also must be very clear that a teaching was being proposed as such. He shared practical examples (the Pope's blessing of the Spanish Armada) that are not an exercise of his pontifical authority in an infallible manner. He noted that on **rare occasions** a person's conscience may collide with the Pope's teaching, citing two reasons: 1) the Pope is attempting to teach in an area not pertaining to faith and morals or 2) the person's conscience has not been formed properly.

This gave rise to Newman's famous (and misconstrued) quotation: "Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts... I shall drink— to the Pope, if you please— still, to conscience first, and to the Pope afterward." He meant that by obeying the Pope in such matters, moral conscience is neither eliminated nor substituted by papal authority. It is imperative to understand the backdrop of Vatican I, especially the Enlightenment and its threat to the Church. A reactionary response could easily have occurred. But the Holy Spirit **prevented** that from happening, though it is accurate that much was left **unsaid** that required clarification. That it took **nearly a century** to do so demonstrates how the church moves with due deliberation and caution, not in a knee-jerk manner. Vatican I ended abruptly— clarification would have to wait.

- One example of an infallible *ex cathedra* papal pronouncement is Pope Pius XII's declaration of the Dogma of the Assumption on November 1, 1950. Click [here](#) to watch a brief (and grainy!) video of the Latin proclamation, and [here](#) to see a news report in English.
- Last week's beautiful weather attracted many **visitors**, including to our backyard courtyard. We also hosted several parish related events on the lawn. I would be remiss not to recognize **Carl Gray** for his generous and faithful service in **watering** our backyard **flowers** by the large Cross. Thank you, Carl!
- The 2020 census reveals changes in my **hometown** of **St. Paul**. The peak population of St. Paul was in 1960, when its population was 313,411. After steady decline, the population rebounded to **311,527** in the 2020 census, up from 285,068 in the 2010 census, a **9.2% increase**. However, the **poverty** rate also increased to **17.9%** in the capital city. To me, that is a staggering statistic.
- Wow! To date, \$9,005 has been raised in our **Safety and Security** appeal. These funds will provide **additional cameras** (\$1000 each), removing several "blind spots" on campus. We are taking particular care to monitor the parking lot during Masses. Thank you!
- Everyone is now back in **school**! May our Cathedral parishioner students know of my prayers, that you may enjoy a fruitful and productive year. And do **not** buy into the lie that "The earlier you get behind, the more time you have to catch up!" I have news for you— it doesn't work that way. ☺ Happy studying!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector