



## Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time August 21, 2011 A

### The Papacy and Papal Infallibility

In today's Gospel, Jesus says to Peter:

*"You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* Matthew 16:18-19

When it comes to Catholic belief about the papacy, the above words are foundational.

Sometimes, I ask small groups what for them is the *most distinctive dimension* of Catholic beliefs and practices. For many people, it is the Mass. Some say confession and still others Catholic devotion to Mary and the saints. Episcopalians and Lutherans celebrate the Eucharist every weekend and I am nearly certain that both churches believe that Jesus is present in the bread and wine. The Greek Orthodox Church share our devotion to Mary and the saints and have seven sacraments. The biggest and only real stumbling block to our union with the Orthodox branch of Christianity is the papacy. Only the Roman Catholic Church believes that the primacy that Peter held amongst the Apostles was intended to be passed on to his successors.

Just as it took several centuries to establish that the New Testament was made up of twenty-seven books and not twenty-five or thirty, and just as it took the Church equally long to determine that there are seven and not ten sacraments, so also it took centuries for the Church to conclude that the successors of Peter were intended by Christ to hold primacy amongst all the bishops of the world. Just as we believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Church in the selection of the books that now make up the New Testament, so we believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding the historical development that gradually led the Church to accept the primacy of the Bishop of Rome amongst his fellow bishops.

As Catholics, we reason that as Christ decided that the Apostles and the early church needed one person

to be her leader and head, then surely the Church that was much larger in numbers after the Apostles would need someone to be her leader and head, someone who would maintain its unity and have the final say when disputes arose. Common sense and experience tell us that someone had to take the place of Peter as the leader and *visible* head of the Church. There is ample evidence from early church documents to show that "someone" was recognized as the Bishop of Rome and so was each one of his successors. Implied in Jesus' desire for his Church to continue is his desire for her to have an office or ministry that would be the visible center of her unity. It is in this context that Catholics believe that the office of Peter, now exercised by his successors, is of *divine* origin.

While there is much that we Catholics can learn from our Protestant brothers and sisters, I think it is fair to say that the biggest inherent weakness in Protestantism is the lack of a central authority where the buck stops, which is the reason why there are hundreds of Protestant denominations today.

When we listen to the stories of Protestant ministers who have come home to Rome (EWTN channel 169, Monday evenings at 8pm), we find that the authority issue is central. When doctrinal or pastoral disputes arise, who has to authority to give a final answer?

### Gift of infallibility

The gift of infallibility was given to the Church when Jesus promised to be with her at all times until the end of the world (Mt 28:20), and when he promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead the Church into the fullness of the truth (Jn 16:13). It would be pointless for Jesus to give his Church an infallible Bible if he did not also give her infallible teachers to protect her from errors when interpreting the Bible and teaching the core beliefs of the Church. The gift of infallibility which Christ gave to his Church is often misunderstood. It does not mean that popes cannot sin; obviously they can. It does not mean that they cannot err when speaking about non-Church matters. It does not mean that they cannot err in Church matters when writing a book as a private member of the Church. The gift of infallibility only comes into

play when the Pope is speaking *ex cathedra* (“from the chair”), that is, as universal shepherd in matters of faith and morals. The College of Bishops, when speaking as a body in union with the Pope, can also teach infallibly about matters of faith and morals. The Pope uses the gift of infallibility very rarely.

We can also say that the Church at large is infallible. In the fifth century in Constantinople, Bishop Nestorius started to preach that Mary was not *Theotokos* (Greek for “Mother of God”) but only the mother of the *human* Jesus. The lay faithful virtually revolted against their bishop’s heretical teaching. When the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius and declared Mary the Mother of God, believers took to the streets enthusiastically chanting, “Theotokos! Theotokos!”

**The Magisterium.** Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit enables the bishops in union with the pope to recognize God’s Revelation. The Magisterium is a living source of discernment for our Church family. When it comes to the *protection* and *interpretation* of Divine Revelation and the life of the Church, the role of the Magisterium (bishops’ teaching in union with the Pope) is that of watchdog of orthodoxy (right belief). Down through the ages, great theological battles had taken place concerning Church beliefs and practices. Sooner or later, it became the role of the Magisterium to step in and proclaim what theological opinions, pastoral practices or devotions are faithful or unfaithful to Sacred Tradition. (Hence the saying: *Roma locuta est, causa finita est*, or *Rome has spoken, the case is closed*.) A recent example of this is the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood. After much debate, the then pope John Paul II firmly affirmed that the Church had no authority to ordain women to the priesthood. Since the beginning of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, Christianity has been divided into hundreds of new churches usually concerning the interpretation of Scripture. One of the inherent strengths of Catholicism is the ministry of the Pope which works with the Magisterium to protect the unity of our faith. Having a Bible without the Magisterium is akin to having a Constitution without the Supreme Court.

In his book, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, Peter Kreeft writes:

*...To be holy is not to be perfect yet. The Church’s obvious human imperfections have been an occasion for scandal and apostasy for...centuries. But paradoxically this very fact is also a powerful*

*argument for her divine nature. This is cleverly brought out in Boccaccio’s story of Abraham, the medieval Jewish merchant in The Decameron. Abraham is contemplating becoming a Catholic. He tells his friend, the bishop of Paris, who has been trying unsuccessfully to convert him, that he has to go to Rome on business. The bishop is horrified: “Don’t go! When you see the stupidity and corruption there, you’ll never join the Church.” (This was the time of the Medici Popes who were notoriously worldly and corrupt.) But Abraham is a practical man. Business calls. Upon his return to France, he tells the bishop he is now ready to be baptized. The bishop is astounded, but Abraham explains: “I’m a practical businessman. No earthly business that stupid and corrupt could last fourteen weeks. Your Church has lasted fourteen centuries. It must have God behind it.”*

### On the Lighter Side

According to an anonymous storyteller, three people who recently died found themselves together before heaven’s gate. When asked by St. Peter what they had done to gain entrance, the first answered, “I was a physician and I helped many people to recover from their illness.” Peter admitted the doctor to heaven and questioned the second person similarly, “Why should I let you in?” She responded, “I was an attorney and I defended the rights of many innocent people.” “Welcome to your eternal home,” said Peter. Then he put the same question to the third candidate who replied, “I was the administrator of a Health Management Organization and I managed to keep healthcare costs to a minimum.” After a few moments of thought, Peter decided. “You may come in,” he said, “but you can stay for only three days!”

Have a blessed week,

