

Infallibility

Each human being is unique; that is the way God made us. It would be wrong then for someone to try and make us conform in such a way that we lose our individuality. It is good as Christians too that we remain different. At the same time we must not be so different that it becomes impossible for us to be united as “Christians”.

The role of the Pope is to make sure that we have the freedom to be different but also, most importantly, ensuring that we do not err from the truth. In matters of truth, it is essential that we all be the same. At various times in the history of the Church the Truth about Christ has been attacked. Some have claimed he was not God, some that he was not man. At such times as these it was necessary for the Church, under the leadership of the Pope, to express the truth in a clear way, to maintain unity. At such critical moments it would be necessary for such statements to be free from error. This is what is meant by Papal Infallibility. (See Luke 10:16, John 16:13). We require some measure of certainty in every area of our lives, otherwise we will get nowhere. It is just as important for us as a Church. The gift of infallibility is a gift of the Spirit’s guidance of the Pope in matters of faith and morals that are essential in maintaining the Church as the Body of Christ.

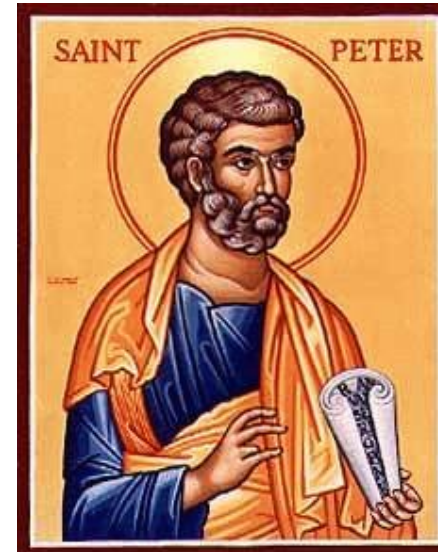
As a matter of interest the last four Popes have never issued an infallible statement because they haven’t deemed it necessary. Without that belief that at critical times the Holy Spirit would guide us safely in our faith, we would have suffered far greater division in the past. So even when this gift is not used, it is important to know that such protection is there.

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Do you find it easy to identify with the Pope?

Is there anything you would like to see the Pope do or change?

Why do other Christians object to the idea of the papacy?



According to tradition SS.Peter and Paul met in Rome. This mosaic at Palermo, Sicily is based on Paul’s arrival at the Three Taverns in Rome as told in Acts 28: 15-16.

St Peter – the Man

He was a fisherman. That we all know. He gave up his livelihood to follow Jesus. But in following Jesus he shows certain characteristics which are hardly recommendations for a leader.

When Jesus says that he must die in Jerusalem, Peter tries to stop him (Mtt. 16:22). It is Peter who rashly tries to walk on the water with Jesus. Again, even before Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus could see that it would happen (Lk. 22:31). So why did he choose this man?

What sometimes comes across as rashness in the character of Peter might also be described as total and even foolhardy commitment to Jesus. Look at how often Peter takes the initiative. At the Transfiguration, with questions (Matt. 18:21, Mtt. 19:27, Mtt. 15:16, Mk 9:5, 11:20). Peter is captivated by Jesus. Most of all he is the one who senses that Jesus is more than a Rabbi, more even than a prophet.

“Now one day when he was praying alone in the presence of his disciples, he put this question to them, “Who do the crowds say I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist; others Elijah; and others say one of the ancient prophets come back to life”. “But you”, he said “who do you say I am?” It was Peter who spoke up. “”The Christ of God” he said

Luke 9:18-21

It is Peter who rushes into the empty tomb (Jn 20); it was Peter who cut off the servant’s ear when they tried to arrest Jesus. He was so utterly bound up with Jesus. He was certainly not full of his own sense of importance as we see when he is called. Peter falls at the knees of Jesus and says, “Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man”. But Jesus said to Peter, “Do not be afraid, from now on, it is people you will catch”.

Jesus entrusted his flock to Peter, not because of his brilliance or his courage but because of his love.

“After the meal Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?” He answered, “Yes Lord, you know I love you”. Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs”. A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He replied, “Yes Lord, you know I love you”. Jesus said to him, “Look after my sheep”. Then he said to him a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me? “ Peter was upset that he asked him the third time. “Do you love me?” and said, “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you”. Jesus said to him: “Feed my sheep”.

John. 21:15-17

Jesus knew that Peter would make mistakes, as he already had; but Jesus also knew that he was putting the church into good hands. So great was the love of Peter for Jesus that he would always be open to the Spirit of Jesus working in him.

THE ENDURING PAPACY

The papacy has endured over the centuries, but it had a tempestuous history. In the first 250 years after the death of Christ nearly all the Popes died as martyrs. It was only when the Roman Empire officially became Christian (in the fourth century) that life became safer for Peter’s successors.

The only English Pope was Adrian IV in the middle ages (1154-1159). His name was Nicholas Breakspear, a monk from St. Albans. Like other Popes he not only became a spiritual leader but also a powerful political leader too. Newman used to think the papacy was shaped by the needs of its times. “No-one who was but a thousand barons in himself could contain the petty tyrants of the middle age” he wrote. However, not even Cardinal Newman would try to justify the abuses that have cast a shadow over some of the Popes. Human nature can so easily be corrupted by power and wealth (and “the flesh”!!); Popes can be tempted too.

Considering the hundreds of Popes we have had, we haven’t fared too badly. Even among the twelve chosen by Jesus there was power seeking (Mk. 9:23) and betrayal.

In the papacy we have been given a firm foundation for the Church. This was what Peter was called for; to be a rock (Mtt. 16:13 – 20). This firm foundation became even more important as the Church grew. It is a human experience we can all identify with, that it is much easier to be united under one leader than under numerous leaders. The visit of John-Paul II was a great focus of unity for us.



What qualities would you look for in choosing someone to lead the Church?

In what ways does St. Peter appeal to you?

What are the advantages of having a Papacy?

What problems can arise?