

**Looking for Answers –  
Explore What The Catholic Church Really Teaches –  
Part 5**



**Question:**

Why do Catholics believe the Pope is infallible in his teachings when he is a human being, with a finite human intellect, like the rest of us? What is the scriptural basis for this belief?



**Answer:**

The doctrine of Papal Infallibility does not mean the Pope is always right in all his *personal* teachings. Catholics are quite aware that, despite his great learning, the Pope is very much a human being and therefore liable to commit human error. On some subjects, like sports and manufacturing, his judgment is liable to be very faulty. The doctrine simply means that the Pope is divinely protected from error when, acting in his official capacity as chief shepherd of the Catholic fold, he promulgates a decision which is binding on the conscience of all Catholics throughout the world. In other words, his infallibility is limited to his specialty – the Faith of Jesus Christ.

In order for the Pope to be infallible on a particular statement, however, four conditions must apply: 1) he must be speaking *ex cathedra*... that is, *from the Chair* of Peter, or in other words, *officially*, as head of the entire Church; 2) the decision must be for the *whole* Church; 3) it must be on a matter of faith or morals; 4) the Pope must have the intention of making a final decision on a teaching of faith or morals, so that it is to be held by all the faithful. It must be interpretive, not originative; *the Pope has no authority to originate new doctrine*. He is not the author of revelation – only its guardian and expounder. He has no power to distort a single word of Scripture, or change one iota of divine tradition. His infallibility is limited strictly to the province of doctoral interpretation, and it is used quite rarely. It is used in order to clarify, to "define," some point of the ancient Christian tradition.

It is the infallibility of which Christ spoke when He said to Peter, the first Pope: *I will give to thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in Heaven.* (St. Matthew 16:19). Certainly Christ would not have admonished His followers to *hear the Church* (St. Matthew 18:17) without somehow making certain that what they heard was the truth – without somehow making the teaching magisterium of His Church infallible.

For a complete understanding of the Pope's infallibility, however, one more thing should be known: His *ex cathedra* decisions *are not the result of his own private deliberations*. They are the result of many years, – sometimes hundreds of years – of consultation with the other bishops and theologians of the Church. He is, in effect, voicing the belief of the *whole* Church. His infallibility is not his own private endowment, but rather an endowment of the entire Mystical Body of Christ.

Indeed the Pope's hands are tied with regard to the changing of Christian doctrine. No Pope has ever used his infallibility to change, add, or subtract any Christian teaching; this is because Our Lord promised to be with His Church until the end of the world. (St. Matthew 28:20). Protestant sects, on the other hand, feel free to change their doctrines. For example, all Protestant sects once taught that contraception was gravely sinful; but since 1930, when the Church of England's Lambeth Conference decided contraception was no longer a sin, virtually all Protestant ministers in the world have accepted this human decision and changed their teaching.