

Is the Pope Infallible? It depends.

Since Pope Francis has seemingly jumped into the American presidential election with his [comment](#) about Donald Trump and building a wall on the southern border of the United States (see below), it's worth clarifying what the Catholic Church actually teaches on papal infallibility.

“‘A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian,’ Francis said when a reporter asked him about Mr. Trump on the papal airliner as he returned to Rome after his six-day visit to Mexico.”

Understandably, there's been quite a bit of furor over Pope Francis' comment. Even here at Intellectual Takeout, we felt compelled to [point out](#) that quite a few popes have engaged in wall building.

In all the discussion, though, we noticed a number of comments about papal infallibility. Is the pope always right? Simply put, no.

So what does papal infallibility mean and how does it work? For that answer, we turn to Catholic Answers, an organization setup to answer those kinds of pressing questions about Catholics. Here's the [short answer](#):

“Papal infallibility means that the pope is protected from error when he ‘proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals’ (CCC 891). This does not mean that he is impeccable (incapable of sin) or inerrant (incapable of error).”

Here's a longer answer:

“Vatican II explained the doctrine of infallibility as follows: ‘Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they can nevertheless proclaim Christ’s doctrine infallibly. This is so, even when they are dispersed around the world, provided that while maintaining the bond of unity among themselves and with Peter’s successor, and while teaching authentically on a matter of faith or morals, they concur in a single viewpoint as the one which must be held conclusively. This authority is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church. Their definitions must then be adhered to with the submission of faith’ (Lumen Gentium 25).

Infallibility belongs in a special way to the pope as head of the bishops (Matt. 16:17–19; John 21:15–17). As Vatican II remarked, it is a charism the pope ‘enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith (Luke 22:32), he proclaims by a definitive act some doctrine of faith or morals. Therefore his definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly held irreformable, for they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, an assistance promised to him in blessed Peter.’”

In other words, for Catholics the pope is only infallible when it comes to a very narrow set of issues. To meet the conditions of infallibility the pope must meet three requirements:

1. Speaking not as an individual, but on behalf of the Church.
2. Officially proclaiming a doctrine on faith and morals.
3. The declaration must be declared binding on the whole Church.

While there are several examples of infallible Church

teachings, there are two widely agreed upon examples in the recent history of Catholicism where it was agreed that the pope made an infallible pronouncement. The first was in 1854 when Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the second was in 1950 when Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven.

It should be clarified, too, that the Church has other infallible teachings, but they were not declared so by the pope *ex cathedra*, or, by invoking the power of his office. Part of the reason behind that is because the dogma of papal infallibility wasn't defined until 1870.

What does all this mean for the current discourse for Catholics and non-Catholics? Simply put, it means that what the pope says in normal conversation may just be his opinion and both Catholics and non-Catholics may feel free to disagree. In other words, Catholics don't believe that the pope is perfect or that every word he utters is from God. He is a fallible person just like everyone else, though he is called to a higher standard and duty.

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