

# Strengthening the Papacy: Vatican I

Times were troubled, and many Catholics wanted a strong leader to guide them through the chaos; they came to believe that the Church's power and authority needed to be more centralized in the papacy than ever before. What with secular governments trying to get control over the Church in their lands and national churches heading off in all sorts of directions, these Catholics wanted a pope who would rule with a strong hand, someone more like the absolute monarchs of old than the elected presidents of the modern era. These Catholics became known as ultramontanists, literally "beyond the mountain" people, because they believed the highest authority should not come from within their own lands but from "beyond the mountains"—in Rome, where the Pope was. It was this desire for a strengthened papacy that led to the First Vatican Council, which we usually call Vatican I.

The Council began in December 1869 under the direction of Pio Nono (the informal play on Italian words used as a name for Pope Pius IX, combining *Pio*, the Italian for Pius, meaning pious or devout, with *nono*, meaning ninth), with about seven hundred bishops present. No laypeople or representatives from other Christian denominations were invited, although Pio had notified them that he was calling the Council together.

From the beginning, there was conflict between the ultramontanist bishops wanting a monarch and the liberals who thought the Church should accept and incorporate modern ideas. The battle was a lopsided one because the ultramontanists were in control from the beginning. They showed it by making infallibility—the doctrine that the Pope can issue certain kinds of statements that can never be wrong—the central issue to resolve.

Most of the bishops gathered actually supported the idea of infallibility, but not all believed that defining it as doctrine was a good idea. Some thought they needed a way to make sure such statements would be rare, some were not convinced about the theological and historical basis for the concept, some were worried that the bishops' authority was being undercut, and some just thought the timing was bad because it was sure to cause problems in dealing with other Christian denominations. The bishops debated a draft statement for nearly two months, then finally issued a document explaining the Pope's infallibility:

[S]ince in this very age when the salutary effectiveness of the apostolic office is most especially needed, not a few are to be found who disparage its authority, we judge it absolutely necessary to affirm solemnly the prerogative which the only-begotten Son of God was pleased to attach to the supreme pastoral office.

Therefore, faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, to the glory of God our saviour, for the exaltation of the Catholic religion and for the salvation of the Christian people, with the approval of the sacred council, we teach and define as a divinely revealed dogma that 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 him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. Therefore, such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the Church, irreformable.<sup>1</sup>



About sixty bishops who could not in good conscience support the statement left Rome before the final vote; they would not publicly stand against the work of a Church council, but they could not be a part of it, either.

Infallibility is probably the most misunderstood doctrine in the Church. *Infallible* literally means “not able to be wrong,” and theologically it means that the Pope has a special gift of the Holy Spirit that protects him from error when he is solemnly defining matters of faith and morals. The idea is that at those special moments when he speaks *ex cathedra*, literally “from the chair” of Peter, the Pope expresses the mind of the whole Church coming together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By definition, an infallible statement is guaranteed to be free from error but is not guaranteed to be the best or fullest expression of the issue. The Catholic belief that the Church is constantly led by the Holy Spirit to deeper understanding of the truths it teaches means that later generations of Catholics may come to see older statements, even infallible ones, as no longer fully expressing those truths.

While the formal definition of infallibility had to wait for Vatican I, the idea that the Pope could make infallible statements first was directly expressed in the fourteenth century. You will not find anything specifically about infallibility in the New Testament (NT), but Catholics see the roots of this doctrine in the authority Jesus gave to his apostles, the need to make sure correct doctrine is taught, and the belief that the Holy Spirit guides the Church. Although the infallibility of the Pope is a point of contention between Catholics and other Christian groups, most popes never make a statement that comes under the heading of “infallible.” This has occurred only twice: in 1854—sixteen years before the doctrine was officially defined—when Pio Nono declared Mary to be the Immaculate Conception; and again in 1950, when Pope Pius XII declared that she was bodily taken up into heaven in the Assumption.

Back at Vatican I, the ultramontanists finished defining the doctrine just in time; one day after the infallibility statement was issued, the Franco-Prussian War broke out and the bishops had to leave Rome. The declaration of infallibility may have been a shining light in the eyes of those Catholics who wanted the popes to be absolute monarchs, but another event of the same war dashed at least some of their hopes: An Italian army captured Rome, and the Pope’s power as a political ruler came to an end. The Papal States were no more. Almost sixty years later, the Pope was once again declared a ruler but this time over a tiny fraction of the area once controlled by the papacy. Vatican City, the world’s smallest sovereign state, was created in 1929.

## Endnote

1. First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, Chapter 4. Retrieved from [www.catholicbook.com/AgredaCD/Ecumenical\\_Councils/Vatican1.htm#session4chapter4](http://www.catholicbook.com/AgredaCD/Ecumenical_Councils/Vatican1.htm#session4chapter4) (accessed 10/5/07).

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