

QUESTIONING THE PAPACY?

Yes. Believe it! The coming of Pope Francis to the United States has given rise to an unprecedented bevy of questions from thoughtful people throughout our country. It was not just the papal *visit* that prompted such reflection but, also, the extensive television coverage, the articles in magazines, journals and newspapers, the appearance of the pope's picture on the cover of numerous national periodicals and, especially, his highly touted speeches to our Congress and one of the largest groups ever at the United Nations. It is no wonder that this once-in-a-lifetime, morning-noon-and-night, unrelenting focus on Catholicism and the papacy would prompt many people to think more deeply about related issues than ever before. Not surprisingly, as a pastor, I have been the recipient of some of those questions.

In questions posed to me, two, in particular, dominated all others. The one repeated most often was, "can intelligent people believe in papal infallibility?" And the second in popularity was, "What do *you* think about Pope Francis?" (Or "What is your own *personal* assessment of the pope?").

As most of you know, I attempt always to respond to honest questions; in fact, I *welcome* them. So that is why I decided to share my response to the two aforementioned enquiries in my article this month.

To answer the first question, it is important to take a look at the facts. What is the evidence, the *background* of the Catholic claim to infallibility of the pope?

In 1870, the Vatican Council declared papal infallibility to be incontrovertible dogma. That means, whatever a pope says on the issues of faith and morals is *always* reliable and *completely* free from error—never wrong!

Is there any reasonably legitimate way to *try* to determine whether the dogma of papal infallibility is true or not? Yes. (1) For people who take seriously the importance of scripture, it would be helpful to ask, what does the New

Testament say? And (2), are there any valuable insights we can gain from the *history* of Christianity?

Our Catholic friends tend usually to *quote* the New Testament as “proof” that Jesus appointed a man named Peter as the first pope. (The passage they choose is Matthew 16:18-19.)

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build up my gathering. And I will give you the keys of heaven’s reign. Whatever you tie on earth will have been tied in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.

That sounds very convincing, doesn’t it? But, hold on. Those words, it seems, were not given to Peter *exclusively!* How do we know? Because, in the *same gospel*, Jesus gives that identical responsibility *also* to his *other* followers!

I tell you (*hymin*; in Greek, “you” is *plural!*), that whatever *you* tie on earth will have been tied in heaven, and whatever *you* loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18).

As a result of this biblical passage, Saint Augustine, in *his* writings, declared that Peter, along with Jesus’ other followers, was simply “a *representative* of the church,” and that, in the New Testament, it was the community of faith as a *whole* that had the power to include or exclude members. Also, in the New Testament, *no one* was given the authority by Jesus to speak without the possibility of error or misunderstanding on *any* issues!

On the basis of New Testament evidence, therefore, it is necessary to conclude that the claim of the Vatican Counsel that a *pope* can speak without error is spurious and cannot “hold water.” Moreover, in order to make an unquestionable declaration of papal infallibility, the Vatican Council *itself* would have to be infallible! And, of course, there obviously is not evidence in the New Testament to support a ridiculous possibility such as that.

So, we are left with the question of evidence from the *history* of Christianity. Is there any support for papal infallibility *there?* Unfortunately for our Catholic friends, the evidence is strongly to the contrary, and I’ll tell you why.

The Catholic claim that papal authority can be traced all the way back to the New Testament is contradicted by a very early source, Ignatius of Antioch (late 1st century and early 2nd century), who stated categorically that there were no bishops or heads of the church during Peter's lifetime, and that no such position even existed until the 2nd century, well *after* the death of Peter. This bit of historical evidence is supported by the fact the even Peter himself, in a biblical book attributed to him, describes himself *only* as one of the *elders*, not a priest or even as a high ranking official—not *even* as first *among* other elders (I Peter 5:1).

Also, historically, there was never an unbroken line of succession after bishops (or popes) came into being. And when popes eventually were appointed, *supposedly* under the direct leadership of the Holy Spirit, that assumption was nullified by historical documents indicating that *some* popes achieved their position as a result of bribery, intimidation, and imperial interference by secular rulers. Indeed, records indicate that, sadly, the papacy often was bought; and, once, it was sold for money (by Benedict X). So much for the claim of “unbroken” apostolic succession under direct guidance of the *Holy Spirit*!

One of the most egregious incidents in the history of Christianity took place when there were three individuals claiming, at the same time, to be the “true” pope, with each one excommunicating the other two. *All three* had to be “dethroned” and a *new* pope was appointed (1417) by the Council of Constance!

In light of overwhelming evidence, it should not be a surprise that even leading *Catholic scholars* have rejected the legitimacy of papal infallibility as a myth that cannot be substantiated. Prominent Catholic historian, Gary Wills, has demonstrated conclusively that the claim made dogma by a Vatican Council is negated by both scripture *and* history. The Catholic priest and biblical scholar, John Meier, stated that Jesus at *no* time gave his movement an authority structure; and one of my own teachers, the eminent Catholic Scholar, Raymond Brown, wrote, “Peter *never* served as the bishop or local administrator of *any* church—Antioch and Rome included!”

As far as I am concerned, the evidence speaks for itself. To quote Catholic scholar Gary Wills again:

The idea that Peter was given some special power that could be handed on to a successor runs into the problem that he *had* no successor! The idea that there is an “apostolic succession” to Peter’s fictional episcopacy did not arise for several centuries, at which time Peter and others were *retrospectively* called bishops of Rome to create an *imagined* succession.

As for the second question I have been asked about my personal opinion of Pope Francis, I frankly am awed by him and his *non-authoritarian, pastoral* approach to the papacy. I don’t know whether *Pope Francis* believes that he is infallible or not, but I am impressed by his aura of humility and the deference that he gives to others—*all* others, and I consider him a breath of fresh air. I actually wept as I listened to him address our assembled Congress. Not only was he achingly relevant and *undogmatic*, he seemed intentionally to avoid aligning himself with a particular political party. Instead, every word he spoke seemed to be based solidly on the teachings of *Jesus* and anchored in the unconditional love exemplified by Jesus. Also, at the beginning of his message, he told the Congress that he wanted to engage in a dialog with them rather than speaking “down” to them from an exalted position of assumed authority. So, *thus far*, I can say that I consider Pope Francis to be a *prophet*—an authentic representative of the God of Jesus—not an advocate for anyone’s political ideology. Rather, it appears that he tried to offer spiritual wisdom that might be helpful to both major parties and the country as a whole.

Now, you have my response to each of the questions I received: the one about papal infallibility *and* the one about my personal evaluation of Pope Francis.

This probably is my longest newsletter article ever, but I hope that it has been both helpful and informative.

Please remember, always, that I love each of you profoundly.

Your pastor and friend,

John

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT CCM?

Sunday, October 11 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. OPENING TO THE SACRED THROUGH WORSHIP

Originally, the word “worship” meant “worthship”—declaring the *worth* or *value* of something. That *something*, of course, is affirming the value of the sacred or spiritual dimension in our life and relationships by what we do when we assemble together. On this particular Sunday, we will do so as our pastor, John, shares with us a message entitled, “RELIGIOUS DOUBTS: WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE THEM!” An opportunity to discuss the message with John and with one another (a valued hallmark of CCM gatherings) will follow worship. Out by about 12 noon.

Sunday, October 25 (4th Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. OPENING TO THE SACRED THROUGH THOUGHTFUL CONSIDERATION AND DISCUSSION

It is no secret that Jesus said, if we ask, seek, and knock, the spiritual realm will be opened to us. Our time of togetherness today provides an opportunity to allow that potential in each of us to be realized. Persons who do not take advantage of such opportunities rarely have a meaningful sense of the presence of God. So, at CCM, we’ll use this time of togetherness to open ourselves to the dimension of the sacred with radical seriousness. When we gather, we’ll continue to discover what it means to be a *progressive* spiritual person (as Jesus himself seemed to be)—an emphasis that seems often to be ignored in most church groups. So if you want to be serious about an *authentic* spiritual journey, we’ll look forward to seeing you. (Out between 11:30 a.m. and 12 noon, depending upon the extent of productive discussion).

