

Common Infallibility Questions

Does Church teaching develop? – Yes, it certainly does. We know that Jesus entrusted to the Apostles everything that the Church needed to be saved (cf. Matthew 28:18-20 and 1 Timothy 6:20-21). Over the centuries, the Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has been able to unpack this Deposit of Faith and continually come to a better understanding of it. Thus the teachings of today are more detailed and explicit than those of 500 years ago, but they are also consistent with the teachings of 500 years ago. Once a teaching has been infallibly taught by the Church, the Church can still come to a better understanding of said teaching (e.g. the Church has continued to develop in her understanding of the two natures (Divine and human) of Christ even though that teaching was infallibly taught over 15 centuries ago).

Are only Ex Cathedra teachings infallible? – No, if someone were to say that only those statements that have been pronounced ex cathedra are infallible, they have a misunderstanding of what ex cathedra means. It is easy to understand this misunderstanding because there is the Vatican I meaning and the more specific meaning commonly in use today:

For the First Vatican Council, it meant the broad scope of when the Pope teaches using his authority; for it states: *“when the Pope 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 doctrine concerning faith and morals to be held by the whole Church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals”* (#9).

The way ex cathedra is commonly used today refers to a particular way that an infallible teaching is taught (e.g. the way the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary were infallibly taught), which may or may not include the infallible teachings of an ecumenical council or the infallible teachings of the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

What is the ordinary and universal Magisterium? – The *Magisterium* is the teaching office of the Church. The Magisterium proper is an ability and authority to understand and teach the truths found explicitly and implicitly in Tradition and Scripture. *Ordinary* means that it is the usual manifestation of

infallibility of the Church (i.e. the usual way that the Church teaches infallibly). *Universal* means that the Pope and the Bishop throughout the world have taught the same doctrine of faith and morals, to be definitely held by the faithful, over the course of some length of time.

A good way to think of the ordinary and universal Magisterium is to think of all the bishops and the Pope gathered for an Ecumenical Council for an allotted amount of time and then teaching something infallibly. Rather than them being all in one place for this allotted amount of time, they are spread throughout the world and not limited by a timed meeting. The only difference, then, in the way the infallible teaching is taught is the proximity of the Bishops to each other and the time it takes to come to an agreement on the teaching.

Are encyclicals infallible? – No, because infallibility pertains to truths, not to documents per se. It is what is contained in the encyclical that is infallibility taught, not the document itself. The same can be said for the Catechism. The Catechism isn't infallible in itself, but almost all that is taught in it is.

Is *Humanae Vitae* infallible? – It is clear that *Humanae Vitae* is a true teaching of the Church, that has been taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium and, as such, needs to be adhered to, out of love. That said, which level it falls into is another question. I would think that when *Humanae Vitae* refers to “direct abortion” (#14), it belongs to the 1st level. When H.V. refers to “direct sterilization, whether permanent or temporary (#14)”, it belongs to the 2nd level.

If someone disagrees with the Church on a teaching are they excommunicated?
No, not if they just disagree. Unless there is an action that automatically excommunicates them or if they publically proclaim their disagreement as true and are subsequently excommunicated by the Church. It is important to realize that most people don't just disagree with the Church on an issue; they disagree so they can do or not do the action that they want to do or not do (i.e. they disagree with the Church so they can justify their actions).