

Bad Popes, Bad Decisions, and Why Infallibility Was Not Broken

1. Why I Wanted a Better Answer Than "Popes Are Sinners"

The history of bad popes was one objection I did not want to answer with, 'Popes are sinners too.' That is true, but it does not touch the hardest cases. Some popes were not just personally immoral. They handled doctrinal crises badly, gave in to political pressure, made destructive public decisions, or said things that later Catholics had to explain. If the pope has a special role in guarding the faith, those cases deserve a real answer.

So the first thing I had to do was narrow the claim. Papal infallibility does not mean the pope is inspired, morally perfect, always courageous, always prudent, or always right when he talks about theology. It is a much smaller claim: under specific conditions, when the pope definitively teaches the whole Church on faith or morals, the Church says he is preserved from teaching error. Once I understood that, the history became something I could actually test instead of something I had to defend in the abstract.

Then I started going case by case. Liberius is a pressure-and-coercion problem. Vigilius is a leadership and policy mess. Honorius is harder because an ecumenical council later condemned him. John XXII really did preach a theological opinion the Church later rejected. Stephen VI and John XII show how ugly papal behavior can get. The Western Schism and Galileo raise different problems again. I found it more useful to let each case be what it is instead of forcing all of them into one answer.

The question I kept using was simple: did this pope actually use the Church's definitive teaching authority to bind the whole Church to a false doctrine of faith or morals? That does not make the other failures unimportant. A pope can hurt people, confuse the faithful, make terrible decisions, or hold a bad theological opinion. I just wanted to test the doctrine Catholicism really claims, not a larger version of it.

2. The Objection Is Stronger Than I First Thought

If Catholicism taught that popes are always wise, holy, brave, or even correct every time they talk about theology, the history of the papacy would destroy the claim. Some popes were immoral. Some were cowards. Some made reckless political decisions. Some reversed decisions made by other popes. Catholics don't help themselves when they act like those cases aren't real.

The actual infallibility claim is much narrower. The question is whether a pope has ever bound the whole Church, under the conditions Catholicism calls infallible, to a false doctrine of faith or morals. That isn't the same thing as saying every papal sermon, letter, interview, court judgment, political choice, disciplinary act, or personal theological opinion is protected from error.

Once I understood that distinction, the bad-popes objection became more interesting, not less. The scandals still matter. A bad pope can do enormous damage. But if I am testing infallibility, I have to test the doctrine the Church actually claims, not a much bigger version of it that Catholicism has never taught.

3. What Infallibility Actually Claims

Vatican I sets out specific conditions. The pope has to teach in his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, define a doctrine about faith or morals, and intend that doctrine to be held by the whole Church. That is what Catholics mean by an *ex cathedra* definition (Pastor Aeternus, ch. 4).

The Catechism gives the same basic framework and puts papal infallibility inside the wider infallibility of the Church (CCC 889-892). Bishops united with the pope can teach infallibly, especially in an ecumenical council, and the ordinary and universal Magisterium can also definitively hand on doctrines. So the Catholic claim is definitely not 'whatever the pope says becomes true.'

The checklist I use now is simple. Was the pope teaching as universal pastor? Was the subject faith or morals? Was he defining something, or was he discussing, advising, disciplining, judging, or speculating? Was he actually trying to bind the whole Church? If those conditions aren't there, the example may still show a bad pope or a bad decision. It just isn't an example of an infallible definition failing.

4. Peter Already Shows the Difference Between Office and Personal Failure

The distinction isn't something Catholics invented to escape bad history. Peter himself gives us the basic pattern. He confesses Christ correctly and receives a unique commission (Matt. 16:16-19). Jesus prays for Peter's faith and tells him to strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-32). Then Peter denies Jesus three times and later behaves so badly toward Gentile Christians at Antioch that Paul rebukes him publicly (Gal. 2:11-14).

Peter's bad behavior never became Church doctrine. In fact, Paul's correction proves the opposite: a Church leader can fail personally while the truth he is charged to guard remains true. Catholicism applies the same distinction to later popes.

5. Pope Liberius and the Arian Crisis

Liberius is one of the classic examples because he lived right in the middle of the Arian crisis, when emperors were pressuring bishops to blur or abandon the Nicene confession that the Son is consubstantial with the Father. Liberius initially backed Athanasius and Nicaea and was exiled by Emperor Constantius II.

The sources don't give us one perfectly clean story about what Liberius signed while in exile. Some say that after heavy pressure he condemned Athanasius and accepted an ambiguous formula that left out the Nicene homoousios. Some documents in the tradition are disputed or forged. Even Catholic historians have allowed that Liberius may have broken under coercion.

Even if I grant the worst reasonable reconstruction, it still isn't an ex cathedra definition. A coerced signature on an ambiguous creed, or a disciplinary condemnation of Athanasius, isn't a solemn teaching imposed on the universal Church. Liberius never defined Arianism as Catholic dogma. Nicaea remained the faith of the Church.

What Liberius shows me is that infallibility never promised courage. A pope can give in under political pressure. The claim is about definitive teaching, not heroic character.

6. Pope Vigilius and the Three Chapters

Vigilius may be an even clearer example of terrible leadership. The Three Chapters controversy in the sixth century involved writings connected with Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, and Ibas, along with Emperor Justinian's attempt to reconcile anti-Chalcedonian Christians. Western bishops worried that condemning the Three Chapters would make it look as if Chalcedon itself was being undermined.

Vigilius changed direction more than once. He issued a *Judicatum* condemning the Three Chapters, backed away from it under pressure, resisted the emperor, took sanctuary, opposed the council's procedure, issued a *Constitutum*, and eventually accepted the condemnation and confirmed the Second Council of Constantinople. Even Catholic historians have described his handling of the crisis as weak and indecisive.

What I kept coming back to is what never happened. The Church didn't end up teaching both that Chalcedon was true and that Chalcedon was false. The final settlement kept Chalcedon while condemning writings judged incompatible with it. Vigilius shows that papal strategy and non-definitive judgments can be a mess. He doesn't give us two contradictory ex cathedra definitions.

7. Honorius I: The Case I Wouldn't Try to Dodge

Honorius is probably the case Catholics most need to face honestly. In the seventh-century Monothelite controversy, Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople wrote to Honorius about how to speak of Christ's wills and operations. Honorius answered in a way that discouraged the orthodox formula of 'two wills' and used language that later became part of the controversy.

The Third Council of Constantinople in 680-681 condemned Honorius by name. Pope Leo II confirmed the council and blamed Honorius for failing to put out the heresy and instead allowing it to spread through negligence. So I don't think it is serious history to say Honorius was never condemned. He was.

The question I think matters for infallibility is whether those letters were ex cathedra definitions. They weren't. Honorius was responding to Sergius, not solemnly defining doctrine for every Christian. He didn't bind the universal Church to Monothelitism. The case is ugly, but it actually shows the difference between limited papal correspondence and the Church's later definitive dogmatic judgment.

I also don't think Catholics should oversimplify what Honorius personally believed. Scholars still argue over whether his wording was actually Monothelite, an attempt at compromise, or simply a failure to insist on the distinction the Church needed. The council's condemnation is real whichever way that question is answered. But the letters still fall outside the conditions Vatican I later described for ex cathedra infallibility.

8. John XXII Is the Clearest Example of a Pope Holding a Wrong Theological Opinion

John XXII is useful because there really isn't much need to dance around the issue. In sermons late in his life, he argued that the souls of the blessed wouldn't enjoy the full Beatific Vision until after the Last Judgment. Major theologians opposed him, including theologians at Paris.

John himself said the Holy See had not definitively settled the question. He was presenting an opinion under debate, not binding the Church to a dogma. Before his death he withdrew the position. His successor, Benedict XII, then defined in *Benedictus Deus* that the purified souls of the just see God before the final resurrection.

I actually think this example helps more than it hurts once the doctrine is stated correctly. A pope can preach a mistaken theological opinion when he isn't defining doctrine for the whole Church. Other theologians can resist him, the question can remain open, and the Church can later define the opposite without any contradiction between infallible teachings.

9. Stephen VI and the Cadaver Synod - Just a Disaster

The Cadaver Synod is one of those stories that sounds made up until you read it. Pope Stephen VI had the corpse of his predecessor Formosus dug up, dressed in papal vestments, put on trial, condemned, mutilated, and thrown into the Tiber. He also tried to nullify Formosus's acts and ordinations.

Later popes reversed the Cadaver Synod's actions and recognized the validity of Formosus's ordinations. The episode became part of a wider period of political violence and factional control in Rome.

There isn't much theological subtlety needed here. This was judicial, disciplinary, and political madness, not an ex cathedra dogmatic definition. Later popes reversed the decisions. If anything, the episode proves that a pope can make a terrible canonical judgment that another pope later overturns. Infallibility never said otherwise.

10. John XII and Popes Who Were Simply Bad Men

John XII matters for a different reason. He isn't mainly remembered for a theological mistake; he is remembered for a scandalous life. Even older Catholic sources describe him as coarse and immoral and repeat accusations of grave sexual and political corruption. Benedict IX and Alexander VI are other obvious names that come up when people talk about morally disastrous popes.

Nothing in papal infallibility says a pope can't commit mortal sin. The word for being unable to sin would be impeccability, and Catholicism has never claimed papal impeccability. A sinful or even criminal pope can still occupy an office whose definitive teaching is protected in a limited way, just as a sinful priest can still validly baptize. The grace attached to an office isn't a statement that the man holding it is holy.

That may feel uncomfortable, but it isn't foreign to the Bible. Caiaphas can prophesy truly because of his office while at the same time taking part in the plot against Jesus (John 11:49-52). That doesn't make Caiaphas a good man. It shows that God can work through an office even when the officeholder is bad.

11. The Great Western Schism

The Great Western Schism from 1378 to 1417 was a real institutional crisis. At different points two and eventually three men claimed to be pope, and even saints and sincere Christians could end up backing different claimants.

But the argument was over who the pope was, not whether the Church should have a pope or whether two opposite doctrines had both been infallibly defined. The Council of Constance and the election of Martin V eventually restored one recognized papal line. The schism shows that identifying the rightful officeholder can become historically messy. Infallibility never promised every papal election would be obvious in real time.

12. The Galileo Affair

The Galileo affair is often told as if a pope solemnly defined geocentrism and science later proved the Church wrong. That isn't what happened. The Roman Inquisition's 1633 judgment was a disciplinary and judicial act involving biblical interpretation, scientific claims, and the politics of the time. Urban VIII was deeply involved, and the treatment of Galileo was badly handled.

But no pope issued an ex cathedra definition that the sun revolves around the earth as a revealed doctrine binding the universal Church. I think the affair is a real warning about Church authorities speaking too confidently on scientific questions and treating a current interpretation as if it were revelation. It just isn't a counterexample to the defined conditions of papal infallibility.

13. 'It Wasn't Infallible' Doesn't Mean 'It Didn't Matter'

One Catholic answer I don't like is, 'That wasn't infallible, so it doesn't matter.' Of course it matters. A non-infallible papal decision can hurt people, confuse Catholics, damage the Church's credibility, and make later teaching harder to hear. Honorius mattered. Vigilius mattered. The Cadaver Synod mattered. Galileo's treatment mattered.

The point I am trying to keep clear is this: Catholicism never promised those failures couldn't happen. A limited charism of infallibility doesn't turn every papal decision into a wise or good decision.

14. Development Is Not the Same Thing as Reversing a Doctrine

Another thing I had to sort out was why Catholic teaching can sound different in different centuries. Catholics call that doctrinal development, but the phrase can become an excuse if it just means, 'The Church changed its mind.' A real development has to keep the substance of what came before while making it clearer, drawing out implications, or ruling out an error.

The Christological councils are a good example. Nicaea uses *homoousios* to clarify the Son's relation to the Father. Chalcedon later talks about one person in two natures. The language is more precise than first-century vocabulary, but the purpose is to protect the same apostolic confession, not reverse it.

The same standard has to apply to popes. A later pope can change discipline, prudential policy, liturgical law, canon law, diplomacy, or a non-definitive theological opinion. That is different from definitively teaching the opposite of a dogma the Church had already defined.

15. The Bigger Claim Is That the Church Will Not Defect

Papal infallibility sits inside the larger Catholic belief in indefectibility. Christ says the gates of Hades won't prevail against his Church (Matt. 16:18), promises to remain with the apostolic mission until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20), and promises the Spirit's guidance (John 16:13). Catholics understand those promises to mean the Church won't disappear or, as Church, become the authoritative teacher of a false gospel.

That is a lot more realistic than pretending Church history should be clean. Israel survived corrupt priests and kings. The apostolic Church survived Judas, Peter's denial, doctrinal fights, and moral scandals. God's promise doesn't require every person he works through to be impressive.

16. The Test I Use When Somebody Brings Up a Bad Pope

When someone says, 'A pope was wrong, so infallibility is false,' I try to ask what kind of wrong we are talking about.

Personal sin: John XII's immorality. This has nothing to do with infallibility.

Political or disciplinary decision: the Cadaver Synod, papal wars, appointments, trials. These can be reversed and aren't protected as dogma.

Private or non-definitive theology: John XXII on the Beatific Vision. A pope can be wrong here.

Limited correspondence or failed leadership in doctrinal controversy: Honorius. Serious, but not a universal definition.

Coerced or ambiguous action: Liberius. Again, not an ex cathedra definition.

The last category is the one that would actually test papal infallibility: a definitive teaching on faith or morals intended for the universal Church. To refute the doctrine historically, that is the kind of contradiction someone has to produce. A bad pope somewhere in the record isn't enough.

17. The Ugly History Actually Made the Claim More Specific for Me

Oddly enough, reading the ugly parts of papal history didn't make infallibility seem more vague to me. It made it more specific. If the Church had only ever been led by brilliant saints, doctrinal continuity would be easier to explain on purely human terms. Instead, the papacy survived men who were weak, compromised, politically trapped, or morally disgraceful.

I don't mean that as a proof by itself. Institutions can survive bad leaders. What I find interesting is that the Church's central dogmatic confessions didn't simply become the private theology of whatever pope happened to be in office. Honorius could fail badly and still be condemned by an ecumenical council confirmed by a later pope. John XXII could preach a disputed opinion and theologians could oppose him until the question was actually defined. The office is bigger than the personality of the man holding it.

18. Where I Ended Up

There is no honest version of Church history in which the popes always look good. Some sinned badly, some panicked, some compromised, some changed policy, some made unjust decisions, and some held questionable theological opinions. Any Catholic defense that hides that history is going to fall apart as soon as somebody reads more than the easy stories.

But none of that is the same thing as a contradiction of papal infallibility. The doctrine is narrow on purpose. It protects definitive teaching on faith and morals under specific conditions. It doesn't protect a pope's personality, prudence, courage, politics, discipline, scientific judgment, sermons, private opinions, or every document he signs.

Liberius can show weakness under pressure. Vigilius can show indecision. Honorius can fail badly in a doctrinal crisis. John XXII can preach an opinion the Church later rejects. Stephen VI can make grotesque judicial decisions. John XII can be morally corrupt. The Great Western Schism can make it hard even to know who the pope is. Those are serious failures, but none of

them gives us a pope solemnly defining heresy for the whole Church under the conditions Catholicism calls infallible.

So I don't think the Catholic answer should ever be, 'Popes never did anything wrong.' That is obviously false. The stronger claim is that Christ's protection of the Church was never a promise to remove human weakness. It was a promise that the apostolic faith wouldn't finally be lost. The history is messy enough that we need that distinction, and as far as I can see, the evidence actually fits it.

References

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