

## How to Defend Your Faith

### Program and Handouts

(most of this information comes from the website catholic.com)

### Defend your faith

1. Start and end with love and prayer
2. Accept that some people won't listen; they just want to argue
3. Know how to use your Bible and the Catechism and have them handy
4. They will talk to you and ask you questions; not the priests
5. If you don't know, tell them you don't know, but you will find out

### Typical Protestant concerns or misunderstandings about the Catholic Faith

1. Sola Scriptura
2. Scripture quotes—read in context
  - a. Call no one earth your father
3. Faith and Works
4. Purgatory and Praying for the dead
5. BVM and the Saints—prayer to the saints, idolaters
6. The Pope and infallibility

## Scripture and Tradition

"I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2).

"Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us" (2 Tim. 1:13-14).

"So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter." (2 Thess. 2:15)

"You, then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:1-2).

"First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

"Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12).

### 1. *Sola Scriptura* Is Not Taught in the Bible

Catholics agree with Protestants that Scripture is a "standard of truth"—even the preeminent one—but not in a sense that rules out the binding authority of authentic apostolic Tradition and the Church. The Bible doesn't teach that. Catholics agree that Scripture is materially sufficient. In other words, on this view, every true doctrine can be found in the Bible, if only implicitly and indirectly by deduction. But no biblical passage teaches that Scripture is the formal authority or rule of faith in isolation from the Church and Tradition. *Sola scriptura* can't even be deduced from implicit passages.

### 2. The "Word of God" Refers to Oral Teaching Also

"Word" in Holy Scripture often refers to a proclaimed, oral teaching of prophets or apostles. What the prophets spoke was the word of God regardless of whether or not their utterances were recorded later as written Scripture. So for example, we read in Jeremiah:

"For twenty-three years . . . the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again . . . 'But you did not listen to me,' declares the Lord. . . . Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: 'Because you have not listened to my words. . . .'" (Jer. 25:3, 7-8 [NIV]).

This was the word of God even though some of it was not recorded in writing. It had equal authority as writing or proclamation-never-reduced-to-writing. This was true also of apostolic

preaching. When the phrases "word of God" or "word of the Lord" appear in Acts and the epistles, they almost always refer to oral preaching, not to Scripture. For example:

"When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13).

If we compare this passage with another, written to the same church, Paul appears to regard oral teaching and the word of God as synonymous:

"Keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6).

### **3. Tradition Is Not a Dirty Word**

Protestants often quote the verses in the Bible where corrupt traditions of men are condemned (e.g., Matt. 15:2–6; Mark 7:8–13; Col. 2:8). Of course, Catholics agree with this. But it's not the whole truth. True, apostolic Tradition also is endorsed positively. This Tradition is in total harmony with and consistent with Scripture.

### **4. Jesus and Paul Accepted Non-Biblical Oral and Written Traditions**

Protestants defending *sola scriptura* will claim that Jesus and Paul accepted the authority of the Old Testament. This is true, but they also appealed to other authority outside of written revelation. For example:

a. The reference to "He shall be called a Nazarene" cannot be found in the Old Testament, yet it was "spoken by the prophets" (Matt. 2:23). Therefore, this prophecy, which is considered to be "God's word," was passed down orally rather than through Scripture.

b. In Matthew 23:2–3, Jesus teaches that the scribes and Pharisees have a legitimate, binding authority based "on Moses' seat," but this phrase or idea cannot be found anywhere in the Old Testament. It is found in the (originally oral) Mishnah, which teaches a sort of "teaching succession" from Moses on down.

c. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul refers to a rock that "followed" the Jews through the Sinai wilderness. The Old Testament says nothing about such miraculous movement. But rabbinic tradition does.

d. "As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses" (2 Tim. 3:8). These two men cannot be found in the related Old Testament passage (Ex. 7:8ff.) or anywhere else in the Old Testament.

### **5. The Apostles Exercised Authority at the Council of Jerusalem**

In the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:6–30), we see Peter and James speaking with authority. This Council makes an authoritative pronouncement (citing the Holy Spirit) that was binding on all Christians:

"For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from

blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity" (Acts 15:28–29).

In the next chapter, we read that Paul, Timothy, and Silas were traveling around "through the cities," and Scripture says that "they delivered to them for observance the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem" (Acts 16:4).

## 6. Pharisees, Sadducees, and Oral, Extrabiblical Tradition

Christianity was derived in many ways from the Pharisaical tradition of Judaism. The Sadducees, on the other hand, rejected the future resurrection of the soul, the afterlife, rewards and retribution, demons and angels, and predestinarianism. The Sadducees also rejected all authoritative oral teaching and essentially believed in *sola scriptura*. They were the theological liberals of that time. Christian Pharisees are referred to in Acts 15:5 and Philippians 3:5, but the Bible never mentions Christian Sadducees.

The Pharisees, despite their corruptions and excesses, were the mainstream Jewish tradition, and both Jesus and Paul acknowledged this. So neither the orthodox Old Testament Jews nor the early Church was guided by the principle of *sola scriptura*.

## 7. Old Testament Jews Did Not Believe in *Sola Scriptura*

To give two examples from the Old Testament itself:

a. Ezra, a priest and scribe, studied the Jewish law and taught it to Israel, and his authority was binding under pain of imprisonment, banishment, loss of goods, and even death (cf. Ezra 7:26).

b. In Nehemiah 8:3, Ezra reads the Law of Moses to the people in Jerusalem. In verse 7 we find thirteen Levites who assisted Ezra and helped the people to understand the law. Much earlier, we find Levites exercising the same function (cf. 2 Chr. 17:8–9).

So the people did indeed understand the law (cf. Neh. 8:8, 12), but not without much assistance—not merely upon hearing. Likewise, the Bible is not altogether clear in and of itself but requires the aid of teachers who are more familiar with biblical styles and Hebrew idiom, background, context, exegesis and cross-reference, hermeneutical principles, original languages, etc. The Old Testament, then, teaches about a binding Tradition and need for authoritative interpreters, as does the New Testament (cf. Mark 4:33–34; Acts 8:30–31; 2 Pet. 1:20; 3:16).

## 8. Ephesians 4 Refutes the Protestant "Proof Text"

"All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

This passage doesn't teach formal sufficiency, which excludes a binding, authoritative role for Tradition and Church. Protestants extrapolate onto the text what isn't there. If we look at the overall context of this passage, we can see that Paul makes reference to oral Tradition three times (cf. 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:2; 3:14). And to use an analogy, let's examine a similar

passage:

"And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:11–15).

If 2 Timothy 3 proves the sole sufficiency of Scripture, then, by analogy, Ephesians 4 would likewise prove the sufficiency of pastors and teachers for the attainment of Christian perfection. In Ephesians 4, the Christian believer is equipped, built up, brought into unity and mature manhood, and even preserved from doctrinal confusion by means of the teaching function of the Church. This is a far stronger statement of the perfecting of the saints than 2 Timothy 3, yet it does not even mention Scripture.

So if all non-scriptural elements are excluded in 2 Timothy, then, by analogy, Scripture would logically have to be excluded in Ephesians. It is far more reasonable to recognize that the absence of one or more elements in one passage does not mean that they are nonexistent. The Church and Scripture are both equally necessary and important for teaching.

### **9. Paul Casually Assumes That His Passed-Down Tradition Is Infallible and Binding**

If Paul wasn't assuming that, he would have been commanding his followers to adhere to a mistaken doctrine. He writes:

"If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess. 3:14).

"Take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them" (Rom. 16:17).

He didn't write about "the pretty-much, mostly, largely true but not infallible doctrine which you have been taught."

### **10. *Sola Scriptura* Is a Circular Position**

When all is said and done, Protestants who accept *sola scriptura* as their rule of faith appeal to the Bible. If they are asked why one should believe in their particular denominational teaching rather than another, each will appeal to "the Bible's clear teaching." Often they act as if they have no tradition that guides their own interpretation.

This is similar to people on two sides of a constitutional debate both saying, "Well, we go by what the Constitution says, whereas you guys don't." The U.S. Constitution, like the Bible, is not sufficient in and of itself to resolve differing interpretations. Judges and courts are necessary, and their decrees are legally binding. Supreme Court rulings cannot be overturned except by a future ruling or constitutional amendment. In any event, there is always a final appeal that settles the matter.

But Protestantism lacks this because it appeals to a logically self-defeating principle and a book that must be interpreted by human beings. Obviously, given the divisions in Protestantism, simply "going to the Bible" hasn't worked. In the end, a person has no assurance or certainty in the Protestant system. They can only "go to the Bible" themselves and perhaps come up with another doctrinal version of some disputed doctrine to add to the list. One either believes there is one truth in any given theological dispute (whatever it is) or adopts a relativist or indifferentist position, where contradictions are fine or the doctrine is so "minor" that differences "don't matter."

But the Bible doesn't teach that whole categories of doctrines are "minor" and that Christians freely and joyfully can disagree in such a fashion. Denominationalism and divisions are vigorously condemned. The only conclusion we can reach from the Bible is what we call the "three-legged stool": Bible, Church, and Tradition are all necessary to arrive at truth. If you knock out any leg of a three-legged stool, it collapses.

## Priests as "Father"

Roman Catholic Christians have a long custom--tradition--to address their priests as "father." Many Christians feel that this practice is in disagreement with the word of God.

Mt 23:8-10

As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Messiah.

If this passage was meant to be taken literally, then we all offend the Scripture. We all have used "father" to designate our birth father; and "teacher," our instructors at school. On the other hand, the meaning of the scripture is that no person should be given the respect and honor due ultimately to God the Father.

Catholic Christians call the priests "father" with the sense understood by Paul.

1 Cor 4:14-16

I am writing you this not to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Therefore, I urge you, be imitators of me.

1 Thess 2:11-12

As you know, we treated each one of you as a father treats his children, exhorting and encouraging you and insisting that you conduct yourselves as worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

## Faith and Works

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'" (Matt. 7:21).

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46).

"For he will render every man according to his works . . ." (Rom. 2:6-8).

"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Rom. 2:13).

"For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgments . . ." (Heb. 10:26-27).

"What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?" (Jas. 2:14).

"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas. 2:17).

"But some one will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. . . .Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren?" (Jas. 2:18-20).

"You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24).

**In John 3:16 Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whomsoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." It's clear that Scripture rejects the Catholic view of salvation by faith plus works. It teaches salvation by faith alone. All you have to do is believe, period.**

First of all, the Catholic view of salvation is not faith plus works, if by works you mean purely human efforts to win God's favor.

Catholics believe in salvation by grace alone, yet grace must not be resisted, either before justification (by remaining in unbelief) or after (by engaging in serious sin). Read carefully 1 Corinthians 6, Galatians 5, and Ephesians 5.

Second, the Bible nowhere uses the expressions "justification by faith alone" or "salvation by faith alone." The first was directly the invention of Luther; the second his by implication. Luther inserted "alone" into the German translation of Romans 3:23 to give credence to his new doctrine.

But your question deals with John 3:16. Yes, this passage does speak of the saving power of faith, but in no sense does it diminish the role of obedience to Christ in the process of getting

to heaven.

In fact, it assumes it. Just as Fundamentalists overlook the rest of the chapter in connection with what being born of water and the Holy Spirit really means--they ignore the water part, which refers to baptism--they also overlook the context when interpreting Christ's words about obtaining eternal life in John 3:16.

In John 3:36 we are told, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him."

This expands on John 3:16. It is another way of saying what Paul says in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Although we cannot earn God's unmerited favor by our good works, we can reject his love by our sins (that is, by our evil works) and thereby lose the eternal life he freely offers us in Christ.

## Purgatory

"For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Macc. 12:44-45).

"Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny" (Matt. 5:25-26).

"Each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:13-15).

"For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey . . ." (1 Peter 3:18-20).

"But nothing unclean shall enter it [heaven] . . ." (Rev. 21:27).

### Why do Catholics pray for the dead?

Because those in Purgatory ARE part of the SAVED Church. Out of Christian charity we pray for those who died with self-love remaining on their souls.

In addition, practicing Jew's of Jesus' days thought it was a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead. Though Protestant Bibles don't have this book, *but should*, no Protestant can deny the historicity of this book or the reality of this event.

An important P.S. Purgatory has NOTHING to do with ones justification or salvation. Those in purgatory are justified; they are saved. Purgatory has to do with ones HOLINESS and the burning away of remaining self-love. Revelation 21:27

### How to Argue the Existence of Purgatory

**What good are prayers for the dead? If a person is in heaven, he doesn't need prayers, and if he is damned, then no amount of prayers will help him.**

By Jason Evert

Catholics and Protestants can agree on two things regarding the afterlife: Souls in hell will not grow close to God, and those in heaven cannot draw any nearer to him. If purgatory does

not exist, prayers for the dead are useless. But if a state of purification exists for some after death, and if prayers can help others in their process of sanctification in *this* life (Job 1:5; 1 Thess. 5:23), it seems reasonable that prayers would be beneficial to those who are being sanctified after this life. This narrows down the essential question: Does purgatory exist?

If sin still clings to Christians (Heb 12:1), but there is no sin in heaven (Rev. 21:27), there must be a purification that takes place after one's death and before one enters heaven. Even if it were "in the blink of an eye," this final stage of sanctification must take place, so those who die in God's favor may be cleansed if any affection for sin remains in them.

Paul mentions this in 1 Cor. 3:13–15: "Each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

Paul's thought calls to mind the image of God as the refiner's fire and fuller's soap mentioned in Malachi 3:2. The fuller's soap was lye or alkaline salt that removed stains from clothing. A refiner's fire was an oven of intense heat where precious metals were placed in order to purify them of their corrosion and dross. In the same way, purgatory is when a soul is immersed into the fire of God's love and lifted out of the residue of its imperfections.

**The only reason the Catholic Church invented this unbiblical idea of purgatory is to make money off the faithful who think that they can save their unrepentant deceased relatives by paying for Masses.**

Does the Church amass wealth off of the doctrine of purgatory? The average Mass stipend (which is optional) is around five dollars. Say a parish had two daily Masses offered for the dead, it would amount to 70 dollars a week. Considering that the five-dollar stipend typically goes to pay for the church's electricity, maintenance, furnishings, salaries, Mass wine and bread, etc., it is apparent how silly this objection about "wealth" is.

Can Masses said after a person's death save his soul? No. Purgatory is only for those who have repented and have died in God's grace but still have some attachment to sin. While the Church cannot judge souls, we can be certain that if a person dies in a state of mortal sin without asking God's forgiveness, purgatory does not await him as if it were a second chance.

**Weren't prayers for the dead an invention of the medieval Church?**

Prayers for the dead are not only older than the Middle Ages, they pre-date Christianity. In the Old Testament, Judah Maccabee and his companions pray for the souls of departed soldiers: "It was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Macc. 12:45). While Protestants do not accept this as an inspired book, it is worthwhile to point out that even today Jews have a prayer called the kaddish that is offered for the purification of the deceased.

This practice of praying for the dead is also recorded throughout ancient Christian documents, such as the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and in the writings of Abercius, Perpetua,

Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Chrysostom, and Augustine. Since all of these men wrote between A.D. 160 and 421, prayers for the souls in purgatory can hardly be considered a medieval invention. On the contrary, refusing to pray for the dead is a novel idea in light of historic Judaism and Christianity.

**The idea of souls needing prayers in purgatory seems so contrary to the gospel that no Bible-believing Christian could believe it.**

Actually, since roughly 50 percent of all Christians are Catholics and 25 are Orthodox, about three-quarters of all Christians believe it. Certain Protestants, such as C.S. Lewis, have also held to the truth of the doctrine. In his *Letters to Malcom*, he said, "Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age, the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to him?"

"I believe in Purgatory. . . . Our souls demand Purgatory, don't they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, 'It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy'? Should we not reply, 'With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I'd rather be cleansed first.' 'It may hurt, you know'—"Even so, sir."

**But purgatory implies that Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient, that he didn't finish the work of redemption on Calvary. Why do Catholics feel the need to add to it by doing more work in purgatory?**

This objection is based on a pair of erroneous presumptions: That progressive sanctification and suffering take away from Christ's work on Calvary and that the Church teaches that purgatory is work.

To address the second objection first, purgatory is not a place for those bad Catholics who didn't finish working their way to heaven while on earth. "For by grace you have been saved by faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). The purification that takes place in purgatory is purely a work of God's grace, since there is no chance for merit after death, and the judgment of each individual is based solely upon their earthly life. But regardless of where Christ purifies men, it is precisely *because* his sacrifice was sufficient that each believer can be perfected.

Though Christ paid the infinite debt of man's sins 2,000 years ago, the sanctification process in the life of each Christian continues. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul tells the faithful, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." According to Scripture, sanctification is a thing of the past (1 Cor. 6:11), present (1 Thess. 4:3), and future (1 Thess. 5:23) in the Christian life.

This process often involves suffering, as Paul indicates: "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, for the joy that was set before him,

endured the cross. . . . 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:1–12).

Therefore, the presence of suffering does not detract from Christ's sacrifice. In fact, there is only one mention in all of Scripture of something "lacking in Christ's afflictions," and that missing link is the suffering of his mystical body, the Church (Col. 1:24).

**I can accept that suffering happens to each believer, but Christ paid all punishments for sin. If purgatory is a punishment, then it means Christ left some part of the debt unpaid.**

Some Christians maintain that all temporal punishments for sin are taken away if the person has repented. But the Bible indicates that although God takes away the eternal punishment, some temporal punishments may remain.

In the Old Testament, God forgave David, but still took the life of his son (2 Sam. 12:13–14). In the New Testament, Christ reiterates this principle, "Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny" (Matt. 5:25–26). It can also be mentioned that Christian women still experience the temporal punishment of birthpangs (Gen. 3:16), although Christ paid the infinite debt of man's original sin (Rom. 5:12–21).

The sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice is not lessened by the fact that God's work of perfecting his children is a process that often involves suffering and even temporal punishment. While "for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant" (Heb 12:11), it is all a part of God's promise made through Paul, "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6), even if it should be "as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:15).

## Honor Due to the Virgin Mary

"And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'" (Luke 1:41-43).

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name'" (Luke 1:46-49).

"If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26).

## Praying to the Saints

"'And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not God of the dead, but of the living . . .'" (Mark 12:26-27)

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely . . ." (Heb. 12:1).

"And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Rev. 5:8).

## Praying to the Saints

The historic Christian practice of asking our departed brothers and sisters in Christ—the saints—for their intercession has come under attack in the last few hundred years. Though the practice dates to the earliest days of Christianity and is shared by Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, the other Eastern Christians, and even some Anglicans—meaning that all-told it is shared by more than three quarters of the Christians on earth—it still comes under heavy attack from many within the Protestant movement that started in the sixteenth century.

## Can They Hear Us?

One charge made against it is that the saints in heaven cannot even hear our prayers, making it useless to ask for their intercession. However, this is not true. As Scripture indicates, those in heaven are aware of the prayers of those on earth. This can be seen, for example, in Revelation 5:8, where John depicts the saints in heaven offering our prayers to God under the form of "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." But if the saints in heaven are offering our prayers to God, then they must be aware of our prayers. They are aware of our petitions and present them to God by interceding for us.

Some might try to argue that in this passage the prayers being offered were not addressed to the saints in heaven, but directly to God. Yet this argument would only strengthen the fact that those in heaven can hear our prayers, for then the saints would be aware of our prayers even when they are not directed to them!

In any event, it is clear from Revelation 5:8 that the saints in heaven do actively intercede for us. We are explicitly told by John that the incense they offer to God are the prayers of the saints. Prayers are not physical things and cannot be physically offered to God. Thus the saints in heaven are offering our prayers to God mentally. In other words, they are interceding.

## **One Mediator**

Another charge commonly levelled against asking the saints for their intercession is that this violates the sole mediatorship of Christ, which Paul discusses: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

But asking one person to pray for you in no way violates Christ's mediatorship, as can be seen from considering the way in which Christ is a mediator. First, Christ is a unique mediator between man and God because he is the only person who is both God and man. He is the only bridge between the two, the only God-man. But that role as mediator is not compromised in the least by the fact that others intercede for us. Furthermore, Christ is a unique mediator between God and man because he is the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 9:15, 12:24), just as Moses was the mediator (Greek *mesitas*) of the Old Covenant (Gal. 3:19–20).

The intercession of fellow Christians—which is what the saints in heaven are—also clearly does not interfere with Christ's unique mediatorship because in the four verses immediately preceding 1 Timothy 2:5, Paul says that Christians should intercede: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and pleasing to God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1–4). Clearly, then, intercessory prayers offered by Christians on behalf of others is something "good and pleasing to God," not something infringing on Christ's role as mediator.

## **"No Contact with the dead"**

Sometimes Fundamentalists object to asking our fellow Christians in heaven to pray for us by declaring that God has forbidden contact with the dead in passages such as Deuteronomy 18:10–11. In fact, he has not, because he at times has given it—for example, when he had Moses and Elijah appear with Christ to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3). What God has forbidden is necromantic practice of conjuring up spirits. "There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. . . . For these nations, which you are about to dispossess, give heed to soothsayers and to diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you so to do. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed" (Deut. 18:10–15).

God thus indicates that one is not to conjure the dead for purposes of gaining information; one is to look to God's prophets instead. Thus one is not to hold a seance. But anyone with an ounce of common sense can discern the vast qualitative difference between holding a seance to have the dead speak through you and a son humbly saying at his mother's grave, "Mom, please pray to Jesus for me; I'm having a real problem right now." The difference between the two is the difference between night and day. One is an occult practice bent on getting secret information; the other is a humble request for a loved one to pray to God on one's behalf.

## Overlooking the Obvious

Some objections to the concept of prayer to the saints betray restricted notions of heaven. One comes from anti-Catholic Loraine Boettner:

"How, then, can a human being such as Mary hear the prayers of millions of Roman Catholics, in many different countries, praying in many different languages, all at the same time?"

"Let any priest or layman try to converse with only three people at the same time and see how impossible that is for a human being. . . . The objections against prayers to Mary apply equally against prayers to the saints. For they too are only creatures, infinitely less than God, able to be at only one place at a time and to do only one thing at a time.

"How, then, can they listen to and answer thousands upon thousands of petitions made simultaneously in many different lands and in many different languages? Many such petitions are expressed, not orally, but only mentally, silently. How can Mary and the saints, without being like God, be present everywhere and know the secrets of all hearts?" (*Roman Catholicism*, 142-143).

If being in heaven were like being in the next room, then of course these objections would be valid. A mortal, unglorified person in the next room would indeed suffer the restrictions imposed by the way space and time work in our universe. But the saints are not in the next

room, and they are not subject to the time/space limitations of this life.

This does not imply that the saints in heaven therefore must be omniscient, as God is, for it is only through God's willing it that they can communicate with others in heaven or with us. And Boettner's argument about petitions arriving in different languages is even further off the mark. Does anyone really think that in heaven the saints are restricted to the King's English? After all, it is God himself who gives the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Surely those saints in Revelation understand the prayers they are shown to be offering to God.

The problem here is one of what might be called a primitive or even childish view of heaven. It is certainly not one on which enough intellectual rigor has been exercised. A good introduction to the real implications of the afterlife may be found in Frank Sheed's book *Theology and Sanity*, which argues that sanity depends on an accurate appreciation of reality, and that includes an accurate appreciation of what heaven is really like. And once that is known, the place of prayer to the saints follows.

### "Directly to Jesus"

Some may grant that the previous objections to asking the saints for their intercession do not work and may even grant that the practice is permissible in theory, yet they may question it on other grounds, asking why one would *want* to ask the saints to pray for one. "Why not pray directly to Jesus?" they ask.

The answer is: "*Of course* one should pray directly to Jesus!" But that does not mean it is not also a good thing to ask others to pray for one as well. Ultimately, the "go-directly-to-Jesus" objection boomerangs back on the one who makes it: Why should we ask any Christian, in heaven or on earth, to pray for us when we can ask Jesus directly? If the mere fact that we can go straight to Jesus proved that we should ask no Christian in heaven to pray for us then it would also prove that we should ask no Christian on earth to pray for us.

Praying for each other is simply part of what Christians do. As we saw, in 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Paul strongly encouraged Christians to intercede for many different things, and that passage is by no means unique in his writings. Elsewhere Paul directly asks others to pray for him (Rom. 15:30-32, Eph. 6:18-20, Col. 4:3, 1 Thess. 5:25, 2 Thess. 3:1), and he assured them that he was praying for them as well (2 Thess. 1:11). Most fundamentally, Jesus himself required us to pray for others, and not only for those who asked us to do so (Matt. 5:44).

Since the practice of asking others to pray for us is so highly recommended in Scripture, it cannot be regarded as superfluous on the grounds that one can go directly to Jesus. The New Testament would not recommend it if there were not benefits coming from it. One such benefit is that the faith and devotion of the saints can support our own weaknesses and supply what is lacking in our own faith and devotion. Jesus regularly supplied for one person based on another person's faith (e.g., Matt. 8:13, 15:28, 17:15-18, Mark 9:17-29, Luke 8:49-55). And it goes without saying that those in heaven, being free of the body and the distractions of this life, have even greater confidence and devotion to God than anyone on

earth.

Also, God answers in particular the prayers of the righteous. James declares: "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit" (Jas. 5:16–18). Yet those Christians in heaven are more righteous, since they have been made perfect to stand in God's presence (Heb. 12:22-23), than anyone on earth, meaning their prayers would be even more efficacious.

Having others praying for us thus is a *good* thing, not something to be despised or set aside. Of course, we should pray directly to Christ with every pressing need we have (cf. John 14:13–14). That's something the Catholic Church strongly encourages. In fact, the prayers of the Mass, the central act of Catholic worship, are directed to God and Jesus, not the saints. But this does not mean that we should not also ask our fellow Christians, including those in heaven, to pray with us.

In addition to our prayers directly to God and Jesus (which are absolutely essential to the Christian life), there are abundant reasons to ask our fellow Christians in heaven to pray for us. The Bible indicates that they are aware of our prayers, that they intercede for us, and that their prayers are effective (else they would not be offered). It is only narrow-mindedness that suggests we should refrain from asking our fellow Christians in heaven to do what we already know them to be anxious and capable of doing.

## **In Heaven and On Earth**

The Bible directs us to invoke those in heaven and ask them to pray with us. Thus in Psalms 103, we pray, "Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will!" (Ps. 103:20-21). And in Psalms 148 we pray, "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host!" (Ps. 148:1-2).

Not only do those in heaven pray with us, they also pray for us. In the book of Revelation, we read: "[An] angel came and stood at the altar [in heaven] with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God" (Rev. 8:3-4).

And those in heaven who offer to God our prayers aren't just angels, but humans as well. John sees that "the twenty-four elders [the leaders of the people of God in heaven] fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Rev. 5:8). The simple fact is, as this passage shows: The saints in heaven offer to God the prayers of the saints on earth.

## The Papacy

"And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter . . ." (Matt. 10:1-2).

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'" (Matt. 16:18-19).

"Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren'" (Luke 22:31-32).

"He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, 'So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)" (John 1:42).

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'" (John 21:15-17).

## Papal Infallibility

The Catholic Church's teaching on papal infallibility is one which is generally misunderstood by those outside the Church. In particular, Fundamentalists and other "Bible Christians" often confuse the charism of papal "infallibility" with "impeccability." They imagine Catholics believe the pope cannot sin. Others, who avoid this elementary blunder, think the pope relies on some sort of amulet or magical incantation when an infallible definition is due.

Given these common misapprehensions regarding the basic tenets of papal infallibility, it is necessary to explain exactly what infallibility is *not*. Infallibility is not the absence of sin. Nor is it a charism that belongs only to the pope. Indeed, infallibility also belongs to the body of bishops as a whole, when, in doctrinal unity with the pope, they solemnly teach a doctrine as true. We have this from Jesus himself, who promised the apostles and their successors the bishops, the magisterium of the Church: "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16), and "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" (Matt. 18:18).

## Vatican II's Explanation

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."

The infallibility of the pope is not a doctrine that suddenly appeared in Church teaching; rather, it is a doctrine which was implicit in the early Church. It is only our understanding of infallibility which has developed and been more clearly understood over time. In fact, the doctrine of infallibility is implicit in these Petrine texts: John 21:15–17 ("Feed my sheep . . ."), Luke 22:32 ("I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail"), and Matthew 16:18 ("You are Peter . . .").

## Based on Christ's Mandate

Christ instructed the Church to preach everything he taught (Matt. 28:19–20) and promised the protection of the Holy Spirit to "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). That mandate and that promise guarantee the Church will never fall away from his teachings (Matt. 16:18, 1 Tim. 3:15), even if individual Catholics might.

As Christians began to more clearly understand the teaching authority of the Church and of the primacy of the pope, they developed a clearer understanding of the pope's infallibility. This development of the faithful's understanding has its clear beginnings in the early Church. For example, Cyprian of Carthage, writing about 256, put the question this way, "Would the heretics dare to come to the very seat of Peter whence apostolic faith is derived and whither no errors can come?" (*Letters* 59 [55], 14). In the fifth century, Augustine succinctly captured the ancient attitude when he remarked, "Rome has spoken; the case is concluded" (*Sermons* 131, 10).

## Some Clarifications

An infallible pronouncement—whether made by the pope alone or by an ecumenical council—usually is made only when some doctrine has been called into question. Most doctrines have never been doubted by the large majority of Catholics.

Pick up a catechism and look at the great number of doctrines, most of which have never been formally defined. But many points have been defined, and not just by the pope alone. There are, in fact, many major topics on which it would be impossible for a pope to make an infallible definition without duplicating one or more infallible pronouncements from ecumenical councils or the ordinary magisterium (teaching authority) of the Church.

At least the outline, if not the references, of the preceding paragraphs should be familiar to literate Catholics, to whom this subject should appear straightforward. It is a different story with "Bible Christians." For them papal infallibility often seems a muddle because their idea of what it encompasses is often incorrect.

Some ask how popes can be infallible if some of them lived scandalously. This objection of course, illustrates the common confusion between infallibility and impeccability. There is no guarantee that popes won't sin or give bad example. (The truly remarkable thing is the great degree of sanctity found in the papacy throughout history; the "bad popes" stand out precisely because they are so rare.)

Other people wonder how infallibility could exist if some popes disagreed with others. This, too, shows an inaccurate understanding of infallibility, which applies only to solemn, official teachings on faith and morals, not to disciplinary decisions or even to unofficial comments on faith and morals. A pope's private theological opinions are not infallible, only what he solemnly defines is considered to be infallible teaching.

Even Fundamentalists and Evangelicals who do not have these common misunderstandings often think infallibility means that popes are given some special grace that allows them to teach positively whatever truths need to be known, but that is not quite correct, either. Infallibility is not a substitute for theological study on the part of the pope.

What infallibility does do is prevent a pope from solemnly and formally teaching as "truth" something that is, in fact, error. It does not help him know what is true, nor does it "inspire" him to teach what is true. He has to learn the truth the way we all do—through study—though, to be sure, he has certain advantages because of his position.

## **Peter Not Infallible?**

As a biblical example of papal fallibility, Fundamentalists like to point to Peter's conduct at Antioch, where he refused to eat with Gentile Christians in order not to offend certain Jews from Palestine (Gal. 2:11–16). For this Paul rebuked him. Did this demonstrate papal infallibility was non-existent? Not at all. Peter's actions had to do with matters of discipline, not with issues of faith or morals.

Furthermore, the problem was Peter's actions, not his teaching. Paul acknowledged that Peter very well knew the correct teaching (Gal. 2:12–13). The problem was that he wasn't living up to his own teaching. Thus, in this instance, Peter was not doing any teaching; much less was he solemnly defining a matter of faith or morals.

Fundamentalists must also acknowledge that Peter did have some kind of infallibility—they cannot deny that he wrote two infallible epistles of the New Testament while under protection against writing error. So, if his behavior at Antioch was not incompatible with this kind of infallibility, neither is bad behavior contrary to papal infallibility in general.

Turning to history, critics of the Church cite certain "errors of the popes." Their argument is really reduced to three cases, those of Popes Liberius, Vigilius, and Honorius, the three cases to which all opponents of papal infallibility turn; because they are the only cases that do not collapse as soon as they are mentioned. There is no point in giving the details here—any good history of the Church will supply the facts—but it is enough to note that none of the cases meet the requirements outlined by the description of papal infallibility given at Vatican I (cf. *Pastor Aeternus* 4).

### **Their "Favorite Case"**

According to Fundamentalist commentators, their best case lies with Pope Honorius. They say he specifically taught Monothelitism, a heresy that held that Christ had only one will (a divine one), not two wills (a divine one and a human one) as all orthodox Christians hold.

But that's not at all what Honorius did. Even a quick review of the records shows he simply decided not to make a decision at all. As Ronald Knox explained, "To the best of his human wisdom, he thought the controversy ought to be left unsettled, for the greater peace of the Church. In fact, he was an inopportunist. We, wise after the event, say that he was wrong. But nobody, I think, has ever claimed that the pope is infallible in *not* defining a doctrine."

Knox wrote to Arnold Lunn (a future convert who would become a great apologist for the faith—their correspondence is found in the book *Difficulties*): "Has it ever occurred to you how few are the alleged 'failures of infallibility'? I mean, if somebody propounded in your presence the thesis that all the kings of England have been impeccable, you would not find yourself murmuring, 'Oh, well, people said rather unpleasant things about Jane Shore . . . and the best historians seem to think that Charles II spent too much of his time with Nell Gwynn.' Here have these popes been, fulminating anathema after anathema for centuries—certain in all human probability to contradict themselves or one another over again. Instead of which you get this measly crop of two or three alleged failures!" While Knox's observation does not establish the truth of papal infallibility, it does show that the historical argument against infallibility is weak.

The rejection of papal infallibility by "Bible Christians" stems from their view of the Church. They do not think Christ established a visible Church, which means they do not believe in a hierarchy of bishops headed by the pope.

This is no place to give an elaborate demonstration of the establishment of a visible Church. But it is simple enough to point out that the New Testament shows the apostles setting up, after their Master's instructions, a visible organization, and that every Christian writer in the early centuries—in fact, nearly all Christians until the Reformation—fully recognized that Christ set up an ongoing organization.

One example of this ancient belief comes to us from Ignatius of Antioch. In his second-century letter to the church in Smyrna, he wrote, "Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8, 1 [A.D. 110]).

If Christ did set up such an organization, he must have provided for its continuation, for its easy identification (that is, it had to be visible so it could be found), and, since he would be gone from earth, for some method by which it could preserve his teachings intact.

All this was accomplished through the apostolic succession of bishops, and the preservation of the Christian message, in its fullness, was guaranteed through the gift of infallibility, of the Church as a whole, but mainly through its Christ-appointed leaders, the bishops (as a whole) and the pope (as an individual).

It is the Holy Spirit who prevents the pope from officially teaching error, and this charism follows necessarily from the existence of the Church itself. If, as Christ promised, the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church then it must be protected from fundamentally falling into error and thus away from Christ. It must prove itself to be a perfectly steady guide in matters pertaining to salvation.

Of course, infallibility does not include a guarantee that any particular pope won't "neglect" to teach the truth, or that he will be sinless, or that mere disciplinary decisions will be intelligently made. It would be nice if he were omniscient or impeccable, but his not being so will fail to bring about the destruction of the Church.

But he must be able to teach rightly, since instruction for the sake of salvation is a primary function of the Church. For men to be saved, they must know what is to be believed. They must have a perfectly steady rock to build upon and to trust as the source of solemn Christian teaching. And that's why papal infallibility exists.

Since Christ said the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church (Matt. 16:18b), this means that his Church can never pass out of existence. But if the Church ever apostasized by teaching heresy, then it would cease to exist; because it would cease to be Jesus' Church. Thus the Church *cannot* teach heresy, meaning that anything it solemnly defines for the faithful to believe is true. This same reality is reflected in the Apostle Paul's statement that the Church is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). If the Church is the foundation of religious truth in this world, then it is God's own spokesman. As Christ told his disciples: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).



## Defending Your Faith Resources

### Books

The Bible

The Treasury of Catholic Wisdom by John A Hardon, SJ

Catholic Replies by James J Drummey

Handbook of Christian Apologetics by Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli

The Usual Suspects by Karl Keating

Catechism of the Catholic Church

### Internet

[www.catholic.com](http://www.catholic.com)

[www.catholicapologetics.info](http://www.catholicapologetics.info)

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