



What About Bad Popes?



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Earlier this summer Catholic Christians received some more bad news. About twenty years ago Catholics had to deal with the fact that some of their priests were child molesters and their bosses had covered up their crimes. Now we discover that some of the very men

who were supposed to be dealing with the problem are, themselves guilty of abusing boys and adult young men. Stories have erupted from around the world of Catholic prelates who have been accused of financial corruption and moral depravity.

Discovering corruption in the leadership of the church is frustrating. It sparks not only disappointment, but genuine anger. The men we thought were shepherds turn out to be wolves. The men we looked up to we now look down on. Of all churches, the Catholic Church has the highest standards, so when our leaders fall, they seem to fall harder and faster.

Furthermore, the dark sinfulness is not only an item in yesterday's paper. The history of the Catholic Church is riddled with corrupt cardinals and pleasure loving, power hungry popes. I've explored some of these dark corners of our history in my twenty part podcast Triumphs and Tragedies on my blog at dwrightlongenecker.com.

It has to be admitted that these terrible examples have caused Christians to stumble, brought about bitter division in the Body of Christ and driven many good people away not only from the Catholic Church, but from the Christian faith. Truly Jesus' warnings against those who cause little ones to stumble apply to such men: It is better that a huge millstone is hung around their necks and they are cast into the sea.

Anyone who thinks about their Catholic faith has to ask the question: "How do we explain the wickedness of our church leaders?"

First of all we should be reminded of Jesus' words, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." **A n y b o d y** who thinks it through will soon realize that the Catholics don't have a monopoly on financially and morally corrupt leaders. Scandals happen to the leaders of every religious group and when we read the history of any religious movement we uncover dark corners and stories of sinfulness that make for disappointing reading.

This is not to make excuses, but to face the reality of our shared human sinful condition. Furthermore, if the church leaders struggle with temptation and sin, aren't we all in the same boat? We should also remember that the devil attacks the pastors, knowing they are on the front line and if the shepherd falls the flock is scattered.

Second, we should also remember that although the scandals make the headlines there are far more good,

faithful, hard working, hard praying ministers, priests and bishops than bad ones. The same is true when you read the whole history of the Catholic Church. The bad popes (and some of them were very bad!) stick out like sore thumbs, but the majority of the popes were decent, hard working servants of the Lord. Just like the leaders in any church, they were not all saints, but neither were they total stinkers!

The third thing to remember is that this disappointing blend of saints and sinfulness is present

all through our shared salvation history. Noah was a drunkard, Abraham disobeyed God's commands. Jacob was a cheat, Joseph was arrogant, Moses was a murderer, King David was an adulterer and murderer and among Jesus' apostles were Thomas who doubted, Peter who denied the Lord and Judas who betrayed him. Why should we expect the church to be any better?

"Hang on!" You might protest, "this is different. You Catholics make an even higher claim for your pope. You say he is infallible. How can he be infallible when he is such a wicked man?"

That's an excellent question!

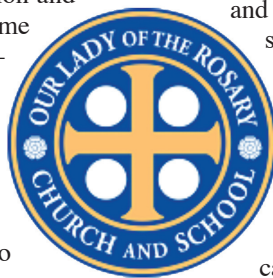
First we have to understand that by "infallible" we do not mean "impeccable." Infallible means "without error" and "impeccable" means without sin. It is perfectly possible to teach the truth without error even though you are a sinner. G. K. Chesterton observed that a murderer may preach an excellent sermon against the sin of murder. So Catholics believe that when a pope teaches on matters of faith and Christian morals he does so without error. We do not believe this makes him morally perfect. Indeed, no pope has claimed to be morally perfect even though he might claim to teach the truth without error. Another way of saying this is "Popes might have been robbers and thieves but none of them taught that stealing was good."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is an excellent volume to learn what Catholics really believe. It is available online or in book form, and the Catechism teaches that it is Christ himself who grants a measure of his own infallibility to his church. This infallibility is exercised through the whole teaching of the ministry of the church, but is expressed most clearly through the formal teaching of the bishops with the pope as the head bishop. To put it more plainly, Jesus teaches us the truth through the Scriptures and through church interpretation. This teaching is trustworthy and true and the pope is the head teacher.

Like the Old Testament, the history of the Catholic Church is the great drama of a sinful humanity in relationship with a forgiving heavenly Father. Just like us, the popes struggle with who they are and who God has called them to be. In that herculean struggle of sinners striving to be saints we see the mighty hand of God at work. In the midst of the sin and darkness his light shines, and in the midst of human weakness his power is made perfect.

If you have questions regarding Catholic beliefs and practices, Father Longenecker will try to answer them in future columns. Please send your questions to olr@charlestdiocese.org.

Father Longenecker's book, *More Christianity*, is a friendly explanation of the Catholic faith for Evangelical Protestants. The book retails for \$16.95, but is offered to readers of this ad for \$10.00. Reply to the email address above to order your copy.



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