



## Faith vs. Fiction

### Myth #16: Catholics Believe Everything the Pope Says

*That apostolic primacy which the Roman Pontiff possesses as successor of Peter, the prince of the apostles, includes also the supreme power of teaching. This Holy See has always maintained this...*

—Pope Pius IX, *Pastor Aeternus*

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#### 5 Fast Facts

1. The doctrine in question here is that of **papal infallibility**. This means that the pope cannot speak in error when definitively teaching on matters of faith and morals.
2. **Infallibility also applies to the teaching body of the Church**, that is, the *Magisterium*—a word which comes from the Latin for “teacher” and refers to the pope and all the bishops in union with him in their official teaching capacity.
3. **Infallibility applies only to matters of faith and morals**, and only when the pope and/or Magisterium are **officially teaching** the **entire Church** about these things, and **intend to speak infallibly**.
4. An *ex cathedra* (“from the chair”) statement is one kind of infallible statement, but **not the only kind**. It usually comes in the form of an official declaration on dogma. The last one happened in 1950, when Pope Pius XII declared the doctrine of Our Lady’s Assumption *ex cathedra* in the encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus*.
5. Based on all this, it is clear that **things that the pope says that fall outside these parameters are not infallible** and faithful Catholics are not required to believe, support, or agree with them.



## Faith vs. Fiction

### Who's Who in Papal Infallibility

**St. Peter** (d. ~67 A.D.) In the 16th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus names Peter the first pope of the Church. Jesus explicitly confers the attributes of indefectibility (remember that word?) and infallibility on the Church, saying:

“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.”

—Matthew 16:18-19

Jesus says that the Church shall remain steady and unchanging for all time (indefectibility) and that Peter and his successors shall have the power to teach doctrine to the faithful without the possibility of error (infallibility).

**St. Francis de Sales** (1567 - 1622 A.D.) This Swiss priest and bishop is among the great masters of the spiritual life. He lived during the time when Calvinism was taking over Switzerland and he made it his mission to convert the heretics back to the Faith. He was appointed bishop of Geneva and became well-known for his practical, gentle method of spiritual direction. He wrote several spiritual classics, including *Introduction to the Devout Life*, directed towards the sanctification of lay people. He also wrote *The Catholic Controversy*, in which he lays out in accurate and practical detail the nature of papal infallibility.

**Blessed Pope Pius IX** (pontificate: 1846 - 1878 A.D.) Pope Pius IX, with a pontificate lasting 32 years, was the longest-serving pope in history after St. Peter. He reigned during a time of great political upheaval as the Catholic states of Europe were shaken by revolutions and various liberal and nationalist movements. The Vatican, too, saw its temporal power diminish when the Papal States were lost to the secular powers of Italy. It was against this tumultuous backdrop that the pontiff convened the 1st Vatican Council in 1869. It issued the dogmatic constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, which made several definitive pronouncements regarding the primacy and teaching authority of Peter and his successors, restating the ancient belief of the Church as expressed in several prior



## Faith vs. Fiction

councils. *Pastor Aeternus* included an *ex cathedra* definition of the doctrine of papal infallibility.

### 1 Useful Case Study

*My Dear Duke of Norfolk...*

So begins what is possibly one of the most articulate pieces ever written against the idea that “Catholics believe everything the pope says.”

St. John Henry Newman’s *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* was written as a response to a rather familiar-sounding accusation that the former and future Prime Minister of England, William Gladstone, had brought against English Catholics.

The year was 1874. The occasion was Vatican I’s formal definition of papal infallibility in 1870. Mr. Gladstone, not at all pleased with the declaration, stated that English Catholics were mental and moral captives, labeled them slaves to the Pope, and called their loyalty to England into question.

It is worth noting that Newman was actually against the idea of formally defining papal infallibility at this time. He was a prominent member of what were called the “Inopportunist”—those who agreed with the doctrine of infallibility but thought the time was wrong for a formal definition. They were opposed by the “Ultramontanists”—those who strongly emphasized papal authority (sometimes to an extreme degree) and supported a formal definition.

However, when Pius IX defined the doctrine, Newman—an obedient son of the Church—supported it, submitting his own opinion to the decision of the Vatican. And when Gladstone slandered the Catholics of England, Newman—once an Anglican—brought all his formidable powers of argument to bear in their defense.

His letter, addressed to the Duke of Norfolk because the Duke was Catholic, is actually a book of 10 chapters. It addresses the historic relationship between the Church and the state, the independence she has always enjoyed from state interference, the non-contradiction between allegiance to the king and allegiance



## Faith vs. Fiction

to the pope, the true meaning of conscience, and the moral and mental *freedom* that Catholics, in fact, enjoy.

He explains Vatican I's teaching on papal infallibility in the final chapters, delving into the text of the dogmatic declaration and explaining the true meaning of the doctrine and the parameters within which it functions.

Newman ably dismantles the false charges of Gladstone, demonstrates Church teaching with striking clarity, and proves the true patriotic sentiments of his fellow English Catholics—and hence of all citizens who faithfully maintain both their duty to their country and their loyalty to the pope.