

Important Church Writings...

Official documents of the Catholic Church have evolved and differentiated over time, but commonly come from four basic sources: 1) Papal documents, issued directly by the Pope under his own name; 2) Church Council documents, issued by ecumenical councils of the Church and now promulgated under the Pope's name, taking the same form as common types of papal documents; and 3) Bishops documents, issued either by individual bishops or by national conferences of bishops. The types of each are briefly explained below. Not all types of documents are necessarily represented currently in this Bibliography.

The level of magisterial authority pertaining to each type of document - particularly those of the Pope - is no longer always self-evident. A Church document may (and almost always does) contain statements of different levels of authority commanding different levels of assent, or even observations which do not require assent as such, but still should command the respect of the faithful. The Second Vatican Council, speaking through *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) identified as many as four different kinds of authority (n. 25).

Those affirmations of the Second Vatican Council that recall truths of the faith naturally require the assent of theological faith, not because they were taught by this Council but because they have already been taught infallibly as such by the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. So also a full and definitive assent is required for the other doctrines set forth by the Second Vatican Council which have already been proposed by a previous definitive act of the Magisterium.

The Council's other doctrinal teachings require of the faithful a degree of assent called "religious submission of will and intellect". Precisely because it is "religious" assent, such assent is not based purely on rational motives. This kind of adherence does not take the form of an act of faith. Rather, it is an act of obedience that is not merely disciplinary, but is well-rooted in our confidence in the divine assistance given to the Magisterium, and therefore "within the logic of faith and under the impulse of obedience to the faith" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Donum Veritatis*, 24 May 1990, n. 23). This obedience to the Magisterium of the Church does not limit freedom but, on the contrary, is the source of freedom. Christ's words: "he who hears you hears me" (Lk 10:16) are addressed also to the successors of the Apostles; and to listen to Christ means to receive in itself the truth which will make you free (cf. Jn 8:32).

Documents of the Magisterium may contain elements that are not exactly doctrinal — as is the case in the documents of the Second Vatican Council — elements whose nature is more or less circumstantial (descriptions of the state of a society, suggestions, exhortations, etc.). Such matters are received with respect and gratitude, but do not require an intellectual assent in the strictest sense (cf. Instruction *Donum Veritatis*, nn. 24-31).

Papal Documents

Decretal letter (Litteras decretals) - Once a common papal document, decretals are now restricted to dogmatic definitions and (more commonly) proclamation of canonizations and beatifications.

Apostolic Constitution (Constitutio apostolic) - Apostolic constitutions are considered the **most solemn kind of document issued by a pope in his own name**. Constitutions can define dogmas but also alter canon law or erect new ecclesiastical structures. An example is John Paul II's apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, defining the role and responsibility of Catholic institutions of higher education.

Encyclical Letter (Litterae encyclicae) – **Encyclicals are the second most important papal documents**, exhorting the faithful on a doctrinal issue. Its title taken from its first few words in Latin, an encyclical is typically addressed to the bishops but intended for instruction of Catholics at large. Most of the best known social teaching documents have been encyclicals. Examples include Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, first introducing Catholic social teaching, and John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, expanding on the application of the social teaching of *Rerum Novarum* in the post-Cold War world.

Apostolic Letter (Litterae apostolicae) – Apostolic letters are issued by popes to address administrative questions, such as approving religious institutes, but have also been used exhort the faithful on doctrinal issues. Apostolic letters do not typically establish laws, but rather should be thought of an exercise of the Pope's office as ruler and head of the Church. Paul VI issued *Octogesima adveniens* in 1971 as an apostolic letter because it was addressed to one person, Cardinal Maurice Roy.

Declaration (*declamatio*) - A declaration is a papal document that can take one of three forms: 1) a simple statement of the law interpreted according to existing Church law; 2) an authoritative declaration that requires no additional promulgation; or 3) an extensive declaration, which modifies the law and requires additional promulgation. Declarations are less common now as papal documents, but were resorted to several times by the Vatican II Council. An example is *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty.

Motu Proprio – A Motu Proprio is a decree issued by the Pope on his own initiative. A motu proprio can enact administrative decisions, or alter Church law (but not doctrine). An example is Benedict XVI's *Summorum Pontificum*, which relaxed restrictions on celebration of the traditional mass.

Apostolic Exhortation (Adhortatio apostolica) – An apostolic exhortation is a formal instruction issued by a pope to a community, urging some specific activity. Lower in import than an encyclical or apostolic letter, an exhortation does not define doctrine. An example is John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*, affirming the meaning and role of marriage and the family.

Allocutions (allocutions) – An allocution is an oral pronouncement by a pope, with pastoral, not doctrinal, import. Increasingly common in the modern age, allocutions are a way for popes to exhort the faithful both within and outside the context of homilies. An example is John Paul II's 2003 homily in Rijeka, *The Family Requires Special Consideration*.

Conciliar Documents

Traditionally, Church councils have issued documents only in the form of decrees or constitutions. The Fathers of Vatican II, however, intended a pastoral rather than a strictly doctrinal council, and as a result issued a number of different kinds of documents, all promulgated under the Pope's name and therefore taking the same name and form as papal documents. The highest form of document was the **constitution**, of which there were four (Ex: *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World). Ten other documents were issued as **decrees**, addressing specific issues within Church life (Ex: *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism). Finally, three documents were issued as **declarations**, fairly brief documents (Ex: *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty).

Bishops' Documents

National bishops' conferences were formally established by the Vatican II (*Christus Dominus* 38). Bishops conferences issue **pastoral letters**, explaining how Church teaching is to be put into effect in the relevant country. To have authority, however, such letters must be consistent with the teaching of the universal Church; they must also receive official confirmation from the Holy See by means of a **recognitio** from the relevant curial office.

Statements issued by an individual bishop only have authority within that bishop's diocese, and only provided that such statements do not conflict with the Church's universal law and teaching.