

Understanding Church Documents

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 Benedict XVI's apostolic constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus* Providing for Personal Ordinariates for Anglicans entering Into Full Communion with the Catholic Church.

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. Recent examples include: John Paul II's *Ecclesia De Eucharistia* on the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church Francis' *Laudato Si'* on Care for Our Common Home

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. Francis issued *Misericordia Et Misera* at the conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

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. Recent exhortations have been issued by the Pope following a Synod, for example, Benedict XVI's *Sacramentum Caritatis* on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission

One of a series of resources produced by the Liturgy Office of the Bishops' Conference to accompany the publication of the *SCM StudyGuide to Catholic Liturgy* © 2018 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.
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Allocutions (allocutions)

An allocution is an oral pronouncement by a pope, with pastoral, not doctrine, import. Increasingly common in the modern age, allocutions are a way for popes to exhort the faithful. These can include homilies, general audiences, speeches and at the weekly Angelus

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.

Constitution

The highest form of document was the constitution, of which there were four (e.g. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy).

Decrees

Ten other documents were issued as decrees, addressing specific issues within Church life (e.g. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism).

Declarations

Finally, three documents were issued as declarations, fairly brief documents (e.g. *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty).

Curial Documents

Instruction

Instructions are statements issued by a Congregation, always with the approval of the pope. Instructions are usually intended to explain or clarify documents issued by a Council or decrees by a Pope. An example of an instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* which is concerned good practice in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Recognitio

A *recognitio* supplies the acceptance by the relevant office of the Holy See of a document submitted to it for review by a local conference of bishops. Liturgical translations are subject to *recognitio* have first been approved by the local conference.

Replies to Dubia

Dubia are official responses to questions (dubia) of bishops addressed to the Holy See seeking clarification on statements of doctrine or discipline. Dubia are addressed to congregations having jurisdictions. The Congregation for Divine Worship publishes its responses in the journal *Notitiae*.

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.