

# What Is the Hierarchy of Truths?

All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council explained, “in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith” (Decree on Ecumenism [Unitatis Redintegratio], 11). This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 36)

| Type of Document  | Author  | Audience   | What’s in it? Examples  |
|---|---|--|---|
| Sacred Scriptures   | various writers inspired by the Holy Spirit                           | all people   | the Word of God in words of humans  |
| Dogmatic Constitution   | the Pope and Ecumenical Council fathers (example: Vatican Council II) | all the people of God (addressed primarily to believers)   | a solemn, formal decree that expresses the dogma or doctrinal understanding of the Church in a particular era (example: <i>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964]</i> , from Vatican Council II)                 |
| Apostolic Constitution  | the Pope in his own name  | usually all the faithful, but note the greeting for specific group addressed                                       | a solemn, formal document on matters of highest consequence concerning doctrine or disciplinary matters that are published as either universal or particular laws of the Church (example: <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> ) |
| Encyclical (encyclical <i>epistola</i> : literally “circular letter”) | the Pope in his own name  | usually addressed to the bishops, clergy, and faithful of the entire Church, but also to “all people of good will” | a pastoral letter that attempts to refine our understanding of some doctrine or part of the human condition through the Pope’s ordinary teaching office (example: <i>Laudato Si’</i> , by Pope Francis)                             |



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| Apostolic Letter  | the Pope in his own name or a Vatican congregation       | addressed to a particular audience noted in greeting                    | a formal papal teaching document, not used for dogmatic definitions of doctrine but to give counsel to the Church on points of doctrine that require deeper explanation in the light of particular circumstances or situations in various parts of the world (example: <i>Rosarium Virginis Mariae</i> , by Pope John Paul II)                 |
| Apostolic Exhortation                                     | the Pope in his own name                                 | addressed to bishops, clergy, and all the faithful of the entire Church | a reflection on a particular topic that does not contain dogmatic definitions; not a legislative document (example: <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i> , by Pope Francis)  |
| <i>Motu Proprio</i> (literally “by one’s own initiative”) | the Pope in his own name                                 | addressed to bishops, clergy, and all the faithful of the entire Church | a legislative document or decree issued by the Pope on his own initiative, not in response to a request (example: <i>Summorum Pontificum</i> , by Pope Benedict XVI)   |
| Declaration and Decree                                    | specific Vatican congregations or specific bishop groups | addressed to specific group noted in greeting of document               | a statement involving Church law, precepts or judicial decisions on a specific matter; an ordinance given by one having the power of jurisdiction (worldwide or local diocese) (example: <i>On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church [Dominus Jesus]</i> , from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) |



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| Instruction     | specific Vatican congregations                | addressed to specific group noted in greeting of document | explains or amplifies a document that has legislative force, such as apostolic constitutions, and states how its precepts are to be applied (example: <i>General Instructions on the Roman Missal</i> )         |
| Pastoral Letter | national bishops' conferences or local bishop | to the faithful within the country or the local diocese   | an explanation of how Church teaching applies to or is to be put into effect within a given country or diocese (example: <i>Economic Justice for All</i> , by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) |

