

The authority of Church documents



MELBOURNE
ARCHDIOCESE
CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

With the multiplication of Church documents — and commentaries and “interpretations” of them — the level of authority of these documents is not always clear. A “primer” of the names and designation of some of the main categories of documents — legislative, doctrinal (teaching) and “pastoral” — may be useful to those threading their way through them. Further information on authority can be found on the Catholic Australia website [here](#) and see also [A glossary of Vatican documents](#).

At the top of the hierarchy of authoritative documents are **apostolic constitutions and decrees** issued by popes, such as the Second Vatican Council documents. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* was presented by the apostolic constitution *Fidei Depositum* in 1992. These documents, along with the *Code of Canon Law* (1983) have binding authority on the entire Church. These are legislative documents, containing dogmatic or doctrinal elements.

Papal teaching documents, **encyclicals, apostolic letters, apostolic exhortations**, and “*motu proprio*” documents expound or explain existing law.

Instructions, issued by Congregations, with the approval of the pope, likewise explain Council documents or decrees. Examples are the Instructions on the implementation of the Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

There are other explanatory documents that interpret regulations given in Canon Law or other official legislative documents of the Church. For example, official responses to questions (*dubia*) of bishops addressed to the Holy See.

The official documents issued by a [national conference of bishops](#), usually called “**pastoral letters**”, are explanations of how Church teaching applies to or is to be put into effect within a given country. Such documents must always be absolutely consistent with the teaching and law of the universal Church, and ordinarily require official confirmation by the Holy See (*recognitio*) to be effective. This is the case with all the liturgical documents and texts a national conference produces.

Documents issued by an individual diocesan bishop have authority within that diocese, provided that they do not conflict with universal teaching or law, or documents of the conference that have the *recognitio* of the Holy See. They are also called *pastoral Letter*. An up to date national list of Australian diocesan *pastoral letters* can be found on Cath News [here](#).

A final category of documents, and these have no binding authority, are statements or “guidelines” of committees or subcommittees of the national conference issued without the approval of the conference. Such documents have often been accorded an authority that they do not possess, however.

In the liturgy, examples of these non-binding statements of the US Bishops Liturgy Committee are *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, (replaced by the guidelines on church architecture, *Built of Living Stones*); *Music in Catholic Worship*, and *Liturgical Music Today*. These “guidelines” do not possess the authority of the bishops’ conference.

A diocesan bishop has considerable freedom to adopt or adapt such guidelines as policies for his own diocese, however, which may give them an authority they do not otherwise possess.

Helen Hull Hitchcock, 2002 <https://adoremus.org/2002/09/the-authority-of-church-documents/>

