

Not everything written in a papal encyclical or other similar documents, not even everything spoken by a council, is intended to be a definitive teaching. This is clear from the new Code of Canon Law, no. 752: "*Not indeed an assent of faith, but yet a religious submission on mind and will must be given to the teaching which either the supreme pontiff or the college of bishops pronounces on faith and morals when they exercise the authentic magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim it by a definitive act.*"

An Apologetical Note: Why believe the Church?

Why should we believe the Church's teaching authority? We certainly don't believe because we consider a particular pope holy, smart, well-educated and so forth. Those qualities are irrelevant. It is precisely and only because Jesus, who proved he was a messenger sent from God, commissioned his apostles to teach and promised that he would protect their teaching: "*He who hears you, hears me*" (Luke 10:16; cf. Matthew 18:17). What is more, he meant this help for all ages: "*Behold I am with you all days, even to the end of the world*" (Matthew 28:20).

*Reference: J.P.M. van der Ploeg, OP, *I believe*, Newman Press, 1986, p.99-100.

The Evangelization Station
Hudson, Florida, USA
E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net
www.evangelizationstation.com

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Four Levels of Magisterial Teaching

Victor R. Claveau, MJ

The Magisterium is the living teaching office of the Catholic Church, whose task is to give as authentic interpretation of the word of God, whether it is in written form (Sacred Scripture), or in the form of Tradition. The Magisterium ensures the Church's fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles in matters of faith and morals (See Catechism of the Catholic Church §890, 2033).

Vatican Council I (1869-1870) declared that the pronouncements of the head of the Church are infallible (when the necessary conditions are fulfilled) *ex sese*, that is, by or from themselves, "*not by the consent of the Church*" (DS 3074). Infallibility begins at the top of the Church, not at its base. The Magisterium does not accept and confirm what is said and done at a lower level, but pronounces, defines and confirms the doctrine it has received from its predecessors in office, which therefore can be traced back to the revelation given by God.

Infallible also is an ecumenical Council when it is presided over by the Pope, and when he ratifies its definitions. Besides this, the whole Church is infallible when, headed by its hierarchy, it affirms that a doctrine or a moral commandment has been revealed by God and therefore belongs to the faith.

So the unity of the Church is based on its head, that is to say on Peter and his successors in office. He is the *Ecclesiae catholicae fundamentum*, the foundation of the Catholic Church, as the papal legate declared at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and Vatican I repeated (DS 3056).*

There are four levels of magisterial teaching.

1. ***The top level is the solemn definition***, of course, which is infallible.

Vatican Council II, therefore, wrote, "His definitions of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are rightly called unchangeable, for they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, as assistance promised him in blessed Peter. So they need no approval from others, nor is there room for an appeal to any other judgment" (*Lumen Gentium*, On the Church, 25).

The pope, with or without a council, need not use a set formula of words to define. He--or they--must simply clarify the intention to define in some way.

2. ***As the top level is the extraordinary infallible magisterium or solemn definition, the second level is the ordinary infallible magisterium.***

Vatican Council II was merely expressing traditional teaching in this statement, "*Although the individual bishops do not have the prerogative of infallibility, they can yet teach Christ's doctrine infallibly. This is*

true even when they are scattered around the world, provided that, while maintaining the bond of unity among themselves and with the successor of Peter, they concur in a teaching as the one which must be definitively held" (ibid., 25). This is the day-to-day teaching of the Church throughout the world, when it presents matters to be held definitively as part of the deposit of faith.

How can we know when the Church intends to teach infallibly on the second level? Everything depends on the intention of the teachers; they must in some way clarify that they intend to make this teaching one to be held definitively as part of the deposit of faith. If for any reason they fail to make this point clear, we need not consider the item as infallibly taught on the second level--although, of course, it might be guaranteed in a different way.

We likewise take note that it is required that the bishops teach in unison with one another, as well as with the pope; otherwise their teaching will not be infallible.

3. ***The third level of the magisterium is based on the pope's teaching authority in a way that excludes further discussion, much less dissent.*** We commonly note this level in the encyclicals.

Another way of describing this level is *certitude from the promise of Christ*. In his Encyclical, *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII made some important clarifications, due to a current error to minimize the range of

teaching that Catholics are obliged to believe. He wrote, "*Nor must it be thought that things contained in encyclical letters do not of themselves require assent of the mind on the plea that in them the pontiffs do not exercise the supreme power of their magisterium. These things are taught with the ordinary magisterium, about which it is also true to say, 'He who hears you, hears me'*" (Luke 10:16).

When I spoke about level two, I said that the pope and bishops together, even when scattered throughout the world, can teach infallibly when they present something as definitively part of the faith. Now Pope Pius XII pointed out that the pope alone, because he can speak for the whole Church, even when he is not making a definition, can effect a universal papal teaching or the equivalent of a teaching of the pope with a council. He can teach definitively in such a way that his doctrine is protected by the promise of Christ: "*He who hears you, hears me.*" Such a teaching clearly pertains to the faith.

4. ***The fourth level of the magisterium provides moral certitude***, that is, it provides safe opinions. (Moral certitude is that kind which generates actions on our part that are based on the typical judgments of prudent persons with common sense, balance and experience. They provide the safety factor in uncertain areas of life.)