

For a Catholic who wants to understand the teachings of the Church, the place to start (and to constantly refer back to) is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II called the *Catechism* a "sure norm for teaching the faith." Drawing from the Scriptures—along with decrees, constitutions, encyclicals, writings of the saints, and other writings of the Church—the *Catechism* systematically presents what Catholics believe. When reading any book about religion, it's helpful to keep the *Catechism* nearby in order to look at the author's work alongside the teachings of the Church.

Another good set of resources is the sixteen documents of Vatican II. These documents address topics including the Sacred Liturgy, Sacred Scriptures, the ministry and life of priests, the apostolate of lay people, social communications, and ecumenism.

The *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* are guideposts to start Catholics on the path of good religious reading. A Catholic with knowledge of the faith grounded in the *Catechism*, Scriptures, and documents of Vatican II will then be equipped to evaluate and discern which writings will best build his faith.

#### What writings need authorization?

Only certain categories of writings must receive the bishop's authorization to publish. The *Code of Canon Law* specifies those categories:

- Books of prayers for the public or private use of the faithful (can. 826.3)
- Catechisms and other writings pertaining to catechetical instruction, or their translations (can. 827.1)
- Books that treat questions pertaining to Sacred Scripture, theology, canon law, ecclesiastical history, and religious or moral disciplines, if they are to be used as texts upon which instruction is based in parish religious education programs or in Catholic elementary, intermediate, or higher education schools, including Catholic colleges, universities, and seminaries (can. 827.2)

- Books or other writings dealing with questions of religion or morals, if they are to be exhibited, sold, or distributed in churches or oratories (can. 827.4; cf. cans. 1214 and 1223)
- Reprints of collections of decrees or acts issued by the local ecclesiastical authority (can. 828)

Additionally, the diocesan bishop may request that certain types of writings be submitted for his review (see *Canon Law*, can. 823.1).

Canon law provides that the writer or publisher must seek authorization from *either* the local ordinary of the author *or* the ordinary of the place where the book is published (Can. 824.1).

1 "Censor," *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, John A. Hardon, S.J.

2 "Imprimi Potest," *Modern Catholic Dictionary*. See also *Code of Canon Law*, can. 832

3 *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, 580

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Pamphlet 224

## Nihil Obstat and Imprimatur

**Issue:** What are the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*? Do they guarantee that a work will authentically present the teachings of the Church?

**Response:** In the Catholic Church, certain types of writings need a bishop's authorization to be published for use in Catholic instruction. The *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* indicate that a writing has received that authorization. They signify that, in the judgment of the bishop who grants the *imprimatur*, the work contains nothing contrary to faith and morals. However, the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* are not an endorsement and do not guarantee that the entire contents of a work are true.

**Discussion:** The bishop of a diocese participates in reviewing certain types of written materials produced in his diocese. These materials include writings by Catholics that concern faith and morals, are intended for publication, and are intended for use in Catholic instruction (see "What Writings Need Authorization?" below). The *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* show that a bishop has given authorization for a work to be published

"*Nihil obstat*" literally means "Nothing obstructs." It is given by the *censor librorum*, a person who is "appointed by the bishop of a diocese to examine before publication those writings or other media of communication that are subject to the Church's supervision."<sup>1</sup>

"*Imprimatur*" means "Let it be printed." A work may be given the *imprimatur* by the local ordinary (generally the diocesan bishop) after the censor has given the *nihil obstat*.

Some works might also have the *imprimi potest* (from the Latin, "It can be printed"). The *imprimi potest* is "permission that a religious receives from his major superior to publish a manuscript on a religious subject. This implies approval of the writing

by the superior and clearance to receive a bishop's imprimatur."2

The *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* are designed to ensure that those works that present the teachings of the Church do so correctly. They indicate that the bishop who has granted the *imprimatur* (or, as a practical matter, his censor on whom he must depend) sees nothing wrong with the work as it concerns faith and morals. The bishop's authorization "is an essentially negative judgment of non-offensiveness."3

The *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* are not the equivalent of an endorsement or recommendation. They do not affirm that the whole of a work's contents are true. Neither do the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* indicate that the censor or bishop necessarily agrees with the contents of a work. For example, a book on Catholic bioethics may have received the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*. Such a book may discuss Church teachings, and it may also proffer opinions in matters where the Church has not yet spoken (e.g., when new technology raises new ethical concerns). Those opinions may be deemed "free of doctrinal or moral error," but the bishop who granted the *imprimatur* may not agree with those opinions.

We assume that our bishops act in good faith when they grant permission for a book to be published. Most go to great lengths to insure that no *imprimatur* is granted when one should not be. At the same time, there are several reasons why a Catholic would still want to carefully evaluate a publication bearing the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*:

A book may contain doctrinal or moral errors that the censor(s) did not notice. This is unlikely but possible. Just as a math teacher grading a large number of exams may miss marking a wrong answer on a student's exam, a censor may miss an error in the work he is reviewing. In neither case does the "grader's" oversight make the error correct.

A book may present material that is technically accurate while being somewhat or even highly

misleading. An example of this might be a book that draws great attention to St. Thomas Aquinas's theory that a baby *in utero* does not receive its soul at conception. The author might present this as a half-truth, letting the reader draw the false inference that St. Thomas was indifferent to the evil of abortion. Then again, the author might simply be conducting a study of the history of Church teaching on abortion and calling too much attention to St. Thomas's theory (which the Church never officially embraced and many rejected even in his own day). Supposing the author did not make any false assertions but presented information that might be taken the wrong way, should an *imprimatur* be granted? This is a matter of pastoral judgment; different bishops of good will may come down on different sides of issues like this.

An author might state Church teaching accurately, but then put forth opinions by other theologians that call Church teaching into question. Often this will not involve a direct attack on the doctrine of the Church. Instead, it may involve presenting information that casts clouds of doubt and uncertainty over the Church's teaching, when in fact that teaching may well have been proposed clearly and definitively. Censors will sometimes recommend *imprimaturs* in these cases on the basis that the book overall might be in conformity with Church teachings, and therefore the book does more good than harm.

A publication may advance speculative theological opinions. One finds this particularly in fields such as Scripture study and ethics. For example, a book by a Catholic scripture scholar may have a fascinating explanation of the theology of a particular passage of Scripture. His interpretation may build upon God's word, along with interpretations by Church Fathers, Doctors of the Church, and so forth. The book may be wholly consistent with Church teachings. But not every Catholic has to agree with the opinions offered therein, including the bishop who grants the *imprimatur*. Other Catholics are free to come to different conclusions through their own careful study, provided they adhere to the guidelines the Magisterium has issued concerning the Scriptures. When works that advance more speculative positions

receive an *imprimatur*, they do not receive an endorsement that the theories are necessarily true. Rather, the *imprimatur* signifies that, given the censor's understanding of the Church's teaching as it stands today, the theories are not definitely false. There may, on occasion, be a difference of opinion as to what Church teaching is on a given subject. This is because magisterial documents consist of words that different people might interpret in different ways. Sometimes the issues can be over matters that are very important. (An example of this would be the Church's teaching on the inerrancy of Scripture. See our Faith Fact "Taking God at His Word: A Catholic Understanding of Biblical Inerrancy.") When there is even a shadow of a doubt as to what the Church really teaches, many times censors and bishops will give the benefit of the doubt to the author, even if the author espouses a view which may in fact be erroneous.

Finally, a *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* do not guarantee that a book is well written. They do not ensure that arguments are well presented, that explanations are complete, or that topics are fully covered. For example, a particular marriage book may obtain authorization but never mention the Church's teaching on contraception. Based on the disregard of this teaching in our culture, this might be considered a serious omission. Yet that book could have the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*.

This is not to suggest that Catholics should stay away from any writing that is not directly from the mouth of the Church. The *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* provide for the bishop's participation in reviewing writings intended for public distribution to the faithful, and most writings bearing an *imprimatur* will indeed present the teachings of the Church in a faithful manner. On account of the censor's review, many works undergo changes to ensure that the work accurately reflects the teachings of the Church. If further review shows that a work is not in conformity with faith and morals, the *imprimatur* can be withdrawn. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for instance, has ordered the *imprimatur* to be withdrawn from certain publications.