

# A Resource for Evaluating Levels of Authority in Church Teaching

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Regarding the weight of documents with regard to a doctrine, it is perhaps easiest to categorize by the agent proposing doctrine, namely the Ecumenical Council, the pope and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

## The Ecumenical Council

- Dogmatic Constitutions
- Decrees
- Declarations
- Pastoral Constitution (unique to Vatican II)

## The Pope

- Infallible doctrine (extraordinary magisterium, *defining* a doctrine)
- Infallible doctrine (ordinary magisterium, *affirming* a doctrine as such)
- Papal Bull (used widely until the 19th century, affirming a wide variety of things)
- Apostolic Constitution (a wide variety, so must be read in context)
- Papal Encyclical (more common since Pope Leo XIII, 1878-1904)
- Apostolic Letter
- Apostolic Exhortation
- Homilies
- Audiences (Allocutions)

## The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

With its roots established in the 13th century, and commonly referred to today as “the Holy Office,” the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) is unique among the various and varied Vatican dicasteries. Until 1963, the cardinal who oversaw the work of the CDF was its “pro-prefect” because the actual head of the CDF is the pope himself, and all its plenary sessions were conducted “*coram Summo*,” with the pope presiding. Now, the cardinal

is designated as prefect and the pope accepts, affirms or approves “in a formal manner” the matter at hand, in ascending order of importance. Also, until the early 1960s, the CDF often made the theological note of its statements explicit.

The documents and communiqués emanating from the CDF are varied. They take the following forms, in descending order of importance:

- Decrees
- Declarations
- Monita (“warnings”)
- Responsa (answers to questions)
- Explanations
- Press Conferences

These various documents carry theological weight in accord with the manner of the pope’s acceptance, in descending order:

- *In modo specifico* (most formally, and in every part, especially assigned to some decrees)
- Formal acceptance (especially in disciplinary matters)
- Acceptance
- The pope’s ordering of a document’s publication

The CDF can produce a document on doctrine (generally with a high theological note); discipline sometimes with penalties; and most recently, it can render a verdict with penalties inasmuch as Pope John Paul II established the CDF as a tribunal to handle cases of priests’ misconduct, in addition to its long-standing responsibility to review marriage cases involving the Petrine Privilege.

For a slightly expanded version of this resource, CHA members can visit the ethics section at [www.chausa.org](http://www.chausa.org).

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**Websites**

[www.CHE.org/ethics/testing](http://www.CHE.org/ethics/testing)

[www.ethics.va.gov/ETHICS/integratedethics/index.asp](http://www.ethics.va.gov/ETHICS/integratedethics/index.asp)