

How the Catholic Church Teaches

Dogma, doctrine, discipline, and theological opinion

Their authority, purposes, history, and proper reception

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1 Why a Church that has received the truth still has to teach

Christian faith is not assent to a classification system. It is the graced answer of the whole person to God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Yet a faith confessed in history needs words, judgments, teachers, and practices. The apostles preached a determinate Gospel; churches guarded a rule of faith; bishops judged rival accounts of Christ; councils chose language capable of excluding an error without pretending to exhaust the mystery. The resulting distinctions do not divide truth into important and disposable parts. They say what kind of claim is being made, by whom, with what relation to Revelation, and what response the claim therefore asks of a Catholic.

The distinction serves natural human goods. It makes speech intelligible, preserves institutional memory, permits real disagreement to be located, protects consciences from inflated claims, and prevents every policy or theologian's conclusion from masquerading as divine speech. These goods do not produce Revelation. They are created capacities—reason, language, testimony, authority, and common life—placed at the service of receiving it.

Its supernatural purpose is deeper. Christ entrusted the apostolic deposit to the Church so that the Gospel would be preached faithfully, the sacraments celebrated, believers formed in one confession, error corrected, and persons led to communion with God. The Magisterium is therefore ministerial: *Dei Verbum* 10 says it is not above the word of God but serves it. Assistance by the Holy Spirit is not a replacement for evidence, deliberation, holiness, or responsible language; it is Christ's gift for the Church's fidelity under the conditions he has willed.

2 The map: object, mode, authority, and response

No single ladder answers every question. Four axes must be kept together:

1. **Object:** Is the proposition formally revealed, necessarily connected with Revelation, authoritatively taught without definitive proposal, disciplinary, prudential, historical, or theological?
2. **Mode:** Is it defined by pope or ecumenical council, taught infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, proposed authentically but non-definitively, legislated, judged administratively, or argued by a theologian?
3. **Competence and intention:** Who speaks, about what, to whom, and with what manifested intention? Office, genre, wording, repetition, and context matter.
4. **Response:** Is divine and Catholic faith required, definitive holding, religious submission of intellect and will, juridical obedience, a prudent reception of counsel, or free but responsible theological judgment?

Class	What makes it this class	Proper response	What it is not
Dogma	A truth contained in the word of God, written or handed on, and proposed as divinely revealed by a solemn judgment or the ordinary and universal Magisterium	Divine and Catholic faith	Merely a highly valued opinion, or only a proposition defined by a modern pope
Definitive doctrine	A truth necessarily connected with Revelation and proposed definitively, even when not itself proposed as formally revealed	Firm and definitive assent	Optional because it is not called a dogma
Authentic non-definitive teaching	Teaching on faith or morals proposed by the pope or bishops in communion with him without a definitive act	Religious submission of intellect and will, calibrated to the manifested mind and authority	Infallible by default; disposable by default
Discipline or law	A norm established by competent authority for ecclesial life	Obedience within its scope while it remains in force	An irreformable truth merely because obedience is owed

Class	What makes it this class	Proper response	What it is not
Prudential or administrative judgment	An authoritative application to contingent facts, persons, risks, or pastoral action	Serious, loyal reception according to competence and scope	A universal doctrinal definition
Theological conclusion or opinion	Reasoning proposed by Fathers, Doctors, schools, scholars, or this study	Weight according to evidence, reception, and authority; freedom within the bounds of faith	Magisterium simply because its author is holy, ancient, learned, or popular

The 1989 *Professio fidei* and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1998 doctrinal commentary give the clearest modern three-paragraph map: truths to be believed as revealed; truths to be held definitively; and teachings to which religious submission is owed. Canonical expression appears in the Latin and Eastern codes. *Ad tuendam fidem* inserted the definitive- holding norm into CIC canon 750 §2 and CCEO canon 598 §2, with parallel sanctioning provisions; the rest of either code must be read in its own jurisdiction. The map describes different objects of assent. It is not a list produced by counting how solemn a document sounds.

3 Dogma and the deposit of faith

A dogma is a divinely revealed truth proposed by the Church for belief as revealed. Its formal motive is God’s authority revealing, not the historical plausibility of a committee or the private brilliance of a pope. The Church’s proposal supplies the authoritative ecclesial identification of the object; it does not cause the truth to become revealed. Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, chapter 3, names both forms of infallible proposal: solemn judgment and the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

This excludes two reductions. Dogma is not confined to propositions bearing a particular verbal charm such as “we define.” Intention and object must be manifest, but infallible teaching also occurs through the bishops’ universal and concordant proposal in communion with Peter. Conversely, emphatic papal language, canonization, liturgical celebration, disciplinary severity, or frequent repetition does not by itself transform every associated statement into dogma.

A definition is delimited. The Church may define that Christ is one divine person in two natures without defining every philosophical account of personhood; she may define Mary’s bodily Assumption without defining whether Mary died. Fidelity includes the definition’s deliberate silences. The contrary error often begins by making a dogma assert more than its competent act asserts and then rejecting the exaggeration.

4 Definitive teachings that are not proposed as revealed dogma

Some truths are so connected with Revelation that the deposit cannot be faithfully guarded or expounded without them. When the Church proposes such a truth definitively, it is to be held firmly and irrevocably. The assent differs formally from divine and Catholic faith because the proposition is not proposed as itself formally revealed; its certainty is nevertheless definitive.

The 1998 commentary gives examples while warning readers not to confuse examples with an exhaustive catalog. The category includes truths connected logically or historically with Revelation and judgments required to preserve the deposit. The same doctrine may later be proposed as revealed if the Church authoritatively determines that formal relation; classifications follow the Church’s act, not a writer’s preference.

The distinction refutes a common binary: “infallible dogma or optional opinion.” It also restrains maximalism. A Catholic cannot infer definitiveness from importance alone. The competent authority must manifest the definitive proposal, whether by a defining act or by an authoritative confirmation that the ordinary and universal Magisterium has already taught the matter infallibly.

5 Authentic teaching and religious submission

Lumen gentium 25 requires a religious submission of intellect and will to authentic papal teaching even when the pope does not speak *ex cathedra*, and it directs attention to the document's character, repetition, and manner of speaking. This response is neither divine faith nor mere external silence. It is a real presumption of truth and a loyal willingness to be taught, arising from Christ's ordering of the Church.

Non-definitive teaching can contain contingent elements, incomplete formulations, or prudential applications capable of development and correction. Calling it reformable does not mean that a private reader may suspend it at will. *Donum veritatis* distinguishes a serious difficulty, pursued with competence, patience, and ecclesial loyalty, from organized pressure, appeal to public opinion, or a parallel teaching office. Difficulty should be stated exactly: the proposition, authority, evidence, prior teaching, and feared consequence. A Catholic continues to avoid contempt, scandal, and the claim that personal judgment is self-authenticating.

The opposite fault is to demand internal certainty by force. Authority can oblige a posture and conduct; it cannot make a person perceive an argument that he does not yet perceive. Pastors and theologians serve communion by clarifying the object, removing caricatures, distinguishing levels, and permitting honest questions within their proper bounds.

6 Doctrine, discipline, prudence, and fact

Doctrine teaches what is true. Discipline orders ecclesial action. The same document may contain both, and a discipline may embody doctrine without being irreformable in its concrete form. Fasting rules, canonical procedures, liturgical calendars, and governance arrangements can bind while remaining changeable. Disobedience is not excused merely by changeability; irreformability is not proved merely by obligation.

Prudential judgments join stable principles to mutable facts: a diplomatic strategy, an assessment of danger, an administrative restriction, or the credibility of an alleged apparition. They deserve reception proportionate to office and competence, but they do not receive supernatural guarantees foreign to their object. Historical assertions used in magisterial documents retain their historical character unless necessary to the defined object.

The "hierarchy of truths" in *Unitatis redintegratio* 11 is another distinction. It orders Catholic doctrines by their relation to the foundation of Christian faith; it does not rank some truths as false, dispensable, or unauthoritative. A truth may be remote from the center yet definitively taught. Centrality, certainty, and pedagogical priority are related questions, not one scale.

7 Before the modern taxonomy: Scripture, Fathers, and councils

The New Testament already shows authoritative transmission: the apostolic Gospel is received and handed on (1 Cor 15:1–5), the "pattern of sound words" is guarded (2 Tim 1:13–14), and the Jerusalem assembly distinguishes the Gospel's demand from an unnecessary burden (Acts 15). These texts do not supply a ready-made 1998 chart. They disclose the apostolic realities from which the Church's later precision grows.

Irenaeus answers Gnostic appeals to secret knowledge with the public apostolic tradition confessed throughout the churches (*Against Heresies* 1.10; 3.3–4). He joins unity of the received faith to legitimate growth in explanation: greater skill can draw out connections without changing the faith's subject matter. His appeal to public succession likewise rejects a private elite's claim to possess a second apostolic teaching. This is real patristic provenance for creed, reception, and teaching office; it is not yet the modern three-paragraph taxonomy.

Ancient creeds and councils arose from baptismal confession, worship, exegesis, and controversy. Nicaea's *homoousios* did not add a second revelation; it made a judgment about which account faithfully confessed the scriptural Son. Ephesus and Chalcedon likewise used precise exclusions to protect the identity of Christ. Reception was real and sometimes contested, but "reception" cannot mean that a definition becomes true only when each believer approves it. Nor should later categories be projected backwards as though every Father had assigned a modern theological note.

Medieval schools developed increasingly exact censures and "theological notes" to distinguish revealed doctrine, proximate conclusions, common teaching, probable opinion, and error. These systems did valuable diagnostic work

but never formed one universally promulgated, immutable table. Labels such as *de fide*, *fidei proxima*, *sententia certa*, and *communis* must be attributed to an author and date. They are historical theological judgments, not substitutes for the postconciliar profession and the competent Magisterium.

8 From Vatican I to the present articulation

The Reformation dispute intensified questions about Scripture, Tradition, ecclesial authority, and conscience; confessional polemics sometimes reduced complex positions on every side. Trent issued dogmatic and reforming decrees without a single later-style preface assigning a note to every sentence. Vatican I's *Dei Filius* clarified Revelation, faith, and reason, while *Pastor aeternus* defined papal primacy and a carefully conditioned papal infallibility. The council's interruption left fuller episcopal and ecclesial teaching to later articulation.

Vatican II placed authority within the whole people of God, episcopal collegiality, Tradition, and the service of the word, especially in *Lumen gentium* 12 and 25 and *Dei Verbum* 8–10. It did not make “pastoral” a synonym for “optional.” *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973) defended the permanence of dogmatic truth while acknowledging the historical conditions of formulations. The 1983 Latin Code juridically articulated obligations; the 1989 profession, the 1998 commentary, and *Ad tuendam fidem* aligned the doctrinal and canonical threefold schema. *Donum veritatis* supplied a moral and ecclesial account of theological vocation and difficulty.

9 Serious objections

9.1 “Scripture is sufficient; later definitions add human doctrines”

The objection rightly fears a human authority placed above God's word and tests whether later formulas have apostolic warrant. The Catholic answer is not that Scripture is deficient material. Scripture is inspired and normative within the one apostolic deposit. The dispute concerns whether Christ left that deposit to self-interpreting individuals or to a visible apostolic Church whose teaching office serves it. A legitimate definition identifies and defends what was given; a purported novelty contrary to the deposit would lack authority. Development therefore requires continuity of object, not merely an institutional signature.

9.2 “Later papal definitions bypass the ancient conciliar Church”

Eastern Orthodox criticism often joins doctrinal, historical, and ecclesiological concerns; it should not be reduced to dislike of Mary or of certainty. Catholic teaching answers that the bishop of Rome's defining office belongs within, not outside, the Church's apostolic faith and episcopal communion. Consultation and reception are theologically significant even though they are not causes that make a valid *ex cathedra* definition irreformable. The remaining disagreement about primacy and the conditions of ecclesial reception is real and cannot be dissolved by relabeling it.

9.3 “History shows change, so irreformable truth is impossible”

History does show changing vocabulary, questions, evidence, and conceptual frameworks. *Mysterium Ecclesiae* rejects the inference that formulas therefore cease to signify determinate truth. A formula can be limited without being false, and later expression can deepen without reversing its object. Historical criticism serves faith when it distinguishes the ancient substance from later terminology; it undermines inquiry when it assumes in advance that continuity is impossible.

9.4 “If teaching is not infallible, conscience is sovereign”

Conscience is the proximate judgment one must follow, but it must be formed; it is not a private source of revelation or immunity from ecclesial obligation. Authentic teaching has a claim before agreement. At the same time, “obey” cannot erase the difference between doctrine, law, prudence, and an administrator's factual mistake. A properly formed response seeks truth, receives authority, states difficulty honestly, and refuses both self-will and false certainty.

9.5 “If obedience is required, every Roman statement is effectively infallible”

This maximalism protects neither Rome nor faith. It converts changeable discipline and prudential acts into alleged revelations, then makes every correction look like contradiction. Catholic obedience is differentiated because ecclesial authority itself is differentiated. Precision is not minimalism; it is justice to the authority actually exercised.

10 The unity beneath the distinctions

The categories exist for confession, not classification as an end in itself. Dogma protects the identity of the God who saves. Definitive doctrine protects the conditions under which that confession remains coherent. Authentic teaching forms the Church amid questions not always settled by definitions. Discipline makes common fidelity practicable in time and place. Theology tests, connects, explains, and contemplates what has been received.

All remain accountable to charity and truth. A correct theological note does not excuse contempt; a warm devotion does not create a dogma; a law does not become doctrine by longevity; and a difficulty does not become fidelity by sincerity alone. The Catholic position is neither a single undifferentiated voice nor a market of equal opinions. It is an ordered communion receiving one Revelation through distinct gifts and offices.

A Scope, Method, and Qualifications

This is a Latin-Church-centered theological account with explicit notice that the Eastern code and Eastern ecclesiological questions require their own exact application. It concerns universal categories of teaching and assent, not a canonical judgment about a person, a complete catalog of dogmas, or an assignment of theological notes to every disputed proposition. “Natural purpose” means created human goods served by classification; “supernatural purpose” means the graced ecclesial ends of guarding and transmitting Revelation. It does not divide doctrines into truths of natural and supernatural revelation.

Official sources control claims about present categories. Patristic and historical witnesses establish earlier practices and conceptual provenance, not the anachronistic presence of the modern three-paragraph schema. Protestant and Orthodox objections are presented at the level of durable arguments; neither tradition is internally uniform. Manualist notes are treated historically rather than promulgated as a current universal tariff.

The official online witnesses are identified through 26 July 2026; exact acquisition and passage verification still follow the states disclosed in the source audit. Short translations and paraphrases identify their source; this work reproduces no complete copyrighted official translation. Independent review in dogmatic theology, patristics, ecumenism, intellectual history, and canon law remains outstanding. This study is not a catechism, magisterial act, or ecclesiastical approval.

B References

- Sacred Scripture: Acts 15; 1 Corinthians 15:1–5; 1 Timothy 3:15; 2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2 Peter 1:20–21.
- First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, especially chapters 2–4; *Pastor aeternus*, chapter 4.
- Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 2–10; *Lumen gentium* 12, 20–25; *Unitatis redintegratio* 11.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973); *Donum veritatis* (1990); doctrinal commentary on the concluding formula of the *Professio fidei* (1998).
- John Paul II, apostolic letter *Ad tuendam fidem* (1998), especially the inserted CIC canon 750 §2 and CCEO canon 598 §2 and their parallel sanctioning provisions.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church, 74–95, 888–892, 2032–2040.
- Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1–3; 3.3.1–4, in the Roberts–Rambaut translation printed in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Buffalo, 1887); exact retained OCR used only as a locating witness.

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