

The work of the papacy today

From the very beginning, when Jesus chose St. Peter and declared him to be the “rock” upon which he would build his Church, the pope has had a unique role in teaching, sanctifying and governing the Christian faithful. This has taken many different forms over the centuries and has developed into the practice we have today. The pope is the visible head of the Church and the source of unity among all the Christian faithful. He is the one we look to for sound teaching, proper liturgical celebration, and governance, especially through the appointment of bishops throughout the world.

The pope exercises his teaching function primarily through letters written to the entire Church, known as encyclicals. These are letters which are intended to be “sent around” to the entire Church so that all might benefit from their teaching. Other teaching writings come from the pope, including apostolic letters and exhortations, which are intended for specific audiences or groups of people. He also has an opportunity to teach when he gives a talk at an audience, or in a homily at Mass. Pope Benedict XVI has written two encyclicals since becoming pope: *Deus Caritas Est* (“God is Love”) and *Spe Salvi* (“Saved by Hope”).

In extraordinary cases, the pope exercises his teaching function by proclaiming by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. He does so in virtue of his office as supreme pastor and teacher of all the Christian faithful. This teaching is referred to as infallible, which means that it is free from error. The pope rarely uses this method of teaching, and when he does, it is usually in union with the College of Bishops throughout the world, especially when they are joined together in an Ecumenical Council, such as the Second Vatican Council.

The pope exercises the ordinary teaching function of his office through what is called the Magisterium. This is the living teaching office of the Church, whose task it is authentically to interpret the word of God, whether in its written form (i.e., Sacred Scripture) or in the form of tradition. The Magisterium ensures the Church’s fidelity to the teaching of Jesus Christ in matters of faith and morals as it is handed down to us from the Apostles.

The main purpose of the pope's teaching function, therefore, is to be a guardian of the teaching received from the Apostles and to make sure it is handed down to the next generation with accuracy, faithfulness and in truth. It is not to come up with new and inventive teachings, but to interpret the authentic teaching of Jesus Christ and apply it to new, modern situations.

The pope exercises governance, or leadership, in the Church in several ways. One of the most visible ways he leads the Church is by appointing bishops to lead dioceses throughout the world. He does this with the assistance of the Congregation for Bishops in Rome and with the help of his ambassadors, or nuncios, to various countries. Here in the United States, the Apostolic Nunciature is located in Washington, D.C., in a part of the city where many other embassies are located. The pope also has an ambassador to the United Nations in New York.

In choosing bishops to lead God's people throughout the world, the pope chooses men who will cooperate with him in preserving and handing down the teaching of Jesus Christ faithfully. Each bishop of a particular diocese is like one of the Apostles. Together, they make up what is called the College of Bishops, a unified body. Like the Apostles, Jesus entrusts to them the power to forgive sins and to preach his Good News to all people.

To show their closeness to the pope, every bishop throughout the world is required to make a visit to Rome once every five years to pray at the tomb of St. Peter and to meet with the pope and give him an update on the state of the Church in his particular diocese. This visit is called the *ad limina* visit, because it brings the bishop to the threshold (*ad limina*) of St. Peter's Basilica. This gives each bishop an opportunity to speak with the pope about the life of the Christian faithful in his diocese and to ask for any advice he may wish from the pope. It also reflects the collegiality of all of the bishops in union with the pope, especially when they come together to teach the faith.

The pope's leadership in the Church also gives him the opportunity to visit the local Churches, or dioceses, throughout the world. That is the reason for Pope Benedict's visit now. This was done in a very extensive way by Pope John Paul II. Before him, most popes remained in Rome and tended to the daily operation of the worldwide

Church through their oversight of the congregations and dicasteries that assist with the governance of the Church. John Paul II changed that radically, in part due to the advances of modern times and the availability and ease of world travel. But, it was also to show that the pope is the shepherd and leader of the entire Church throughout the world. There is no better way to do this than actually to travel to different parts of the world and be physically present to the people. This is what Pope Benedict hopes to achieve with his visit to our country: To show us, in person, that he is our leader and to pray with us.

The pope exercises his sanctifying function by celebrating the sacraments, which give people an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ in a real and personal way. That is why when the pope travels to another country he almost always celebrates Mass for the Christian faithful: to show that he is our spiritual leader and to lead us to Jesus Christ.

By celebrating Mass with us, the pope also highlights the fact that liturgy in the Roman Catholic Church is unified, even allowing for local customs. In every Catholic Church throughout the world on any given day one can hear the same readings and recite the same prayers, albeit in different languages. This speaks to the universality of the Church and to its unity, which is exemplified in the person of the pope.

The pope also exercises his sanctifying role by praying with people in other forms than the Mass, as he often does at ecumenical gatherings. He blesses, or sanctifies, the “city of Rome and the world” (*urbi et orbi*) every Christmas and Easter with a blessing from the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica, the same balcony on which he appeared when he was introduced to the world for the first time as pope. He imparts this same Apostolic Blessing upon all the Christian faithful who are physically present at his weekly audiences and at all Papal liturgies and all who, through the use of television, radio and Internet, hear his blessing.

Whenever the pope prays, whether he is celebrating Mass for thousands of people or praying privately in his chapel, he represents the communion of worship and unity of faith that is made real by the Church.

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