

Decoding Different Types of Church Documents

Adapted from https://charlestandiocese.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Church_documents-1.pdf

Types of Papal Documents

- **Decretal letter** - Once a common papal document, decretals are now restricted to dogmatic definitions and (more commonly) proclamation of canonizations and beatifications.
- **Apostolic Constitution** - Apostolic constitutions are considered the most solemn kind of document issued by a pope in his own name. Constitutions can define dogmas but also alter canon law or erect new ecclesiastical structures.
- **Encyclical Letter** - Encyclicals are the second most important papal documents, exhorting the faithful on a doctrinal issue. Its title taken from its first few words in Latin, an encyclical is typically addressed to the bishops but intended for instruction of Catholics at large. Most of the best known social teaching documents have been encyclicals.
- **Apostolic Letter** - Apostolic letters are issued by popes to address administrative questions, such as approving religious institutes, but have also been used to exhort the faithful on doctrinal issues. Apostolic letters do not typically establish laws, but rather should be thought of as an exercise of the Pope's office as ruler and head of the Church.
- **Declaration** - A declaration is a papal document that can take one of three forms: 1) a simple statement of the law interpreted according to existing Church law; 2) an authoritative declaration that requires no additional promulgation; or 3) an extensive declaration, which modifies the law and requires additional promulgation.
- **Motu Proprio** - A Motu Proprio is a decree issued by the pope on his own initiative. A motu proprio can enact administrative decisions, or alter Church law (but not doctrine).
- **Apostolic Exhortation** - An apostolic exhortation is a formal instruction issued by a pope to a community, urging some specific activity. Lower in import than an encyclical or apostolic letter, an exhortation does not define doctrine.
- **Allocutions** - An allocution is an oral pronouncement by a pope, with pastoral, not doctrine, import. Increasingly common in the modern age, allocutions are a way for popes to exhort the faithful both within and outside the context of homilies.

Church councils have issued documents in the form of **constitutions, declarations, and decrees**. For example, Vatican II four Constitutions, ten Decrees, and three brief Declarations.

National Bishops' conferences issue **pastoral letters**, explaining how Church teaching is to be put into effect in the relevant country. Statements issued by an individual bishop only have authority within that bishop's diocese.

How Canon Law, Policy, and Other Guiding Documents Interact:

- **Canon law** is the body of ecclesiastical laws promulgated by the Church's governing authority to regulate its members, clergy, and institutions, covering matters such as sacraments, governance, discipline, and property.
- **Particular Law** is a type of canon law that applies to a specific territory, person, or group, promulgated by the bishop or local synod.
- **AOB Policies** are the formally codified norms & directives of the AOB and are designed to be consistent with its mission. All internal operating procedures, practices, rules and guidelines of individual schools, parishes and agencies must be consistent with these policies. The process of codifying policies can be lengthy/time-consuming, requiring several phases of approval.
- **AOB Guidelines/Guidance documents** are formally approved by the relevant consulting in response to pastoral need and serve to supplement the relevant policies (*ex.- 2022 Updates Guidelines for Confirmation & First Eucharist, 2024 Family Faith Formation Guidance*).
- **AOB Frameworks, Implementation Plans, Best Practices, and the like** are less-formal, timely documents intended to assist with the practical implementation of policy and guidance.