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### Aeterni Patris; Infallibility; O'Connor, Flannery; Papal Documents

Howard J. Bromberg

*University of Michigan Law School, hbromber@umich.edu*

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Social Thought, Social Science,  
and Social Policy

*Volume 3: Supplement*

Edited by  
Michael L. Coulter  
Richard S. Myers  
Joseph A. Varacalli



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• A •

**AETERNI PATRIS** *Aeterni Patris* (“Of the Eternal Father”) is an encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated in 1879. In this encyclical, Leo sought to restore a central role for philosophy in Christian life. In particular, the encyclical promoted the scholastic method of St. Thomas Aquinas. The publication of *Aeterni Patris* spurred both a revival of Thomism in the Catholic Church and a century of papal pronouncements on Christianity and philosophy, culminating in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* by Pope John Paul II.

The origins of *Aeterni Patris* lie with what was perceived by the Holy See as the philosophical crisis of modern times, both inside and outside the Church. The medieval synthesis of philosophy and theology was neglected and modern thought tended to set reason against faith, weakening both. In its dogmatic constitution on the Catholic faith, *Dei Filius* (1870), the First Vatican Council maintained the compatibility of revelation and human knowledge, declaring that “not only can faith and reason never be at odds with one another but they mutually support each other” (DF # 4: 10). As bishop of Perugia for 32 years, Cardinal Joachim Pecci, the future Pope Leo XIII, advocated the teaching of the Dominican Doctor Thomas Aquinas as an antidote to false conclusions of modern thought. Leo’s first encyclical after becoming pope in 1878, *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio*, singled out Augustine and Thomas as exemplars of Christian philosophy (IDC # 13).

Leo promulgated *Aeterni Patris* on August 4, 1879, the second year of his papacy. It received the subtitle *On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy in Catholic Schools in the Spirit of the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas*. Leo was well known for his literary and scholarly merits, and the encyclical is written in elegant, classical Latin, often panegyric in praise of Thomas. It is divided into 34 numbered paragraphs.

In the first sections of *Aeterni Patris*, Leo outlines the role of philosophy in fortifying Christianity. Philosophy is both the handmaiden of faith and an intellectual discipline in its own right, necessary for the progress of human sciences. Since faith can be corrupted by “philosophy and vain deceit” (Colossians 2: 8), the magisterium is, however, compelled to oversee the right use of philosophy (AP # 1). Leo commends the early apologists and fathers of the church who employed philosophical methods to defend and advance Christianity in a pagan world, including Quadratus, Aristides, Hermias, Athenagoras, Lactantius, Victorius, Optatus, Hilary, Arnobius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of

Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Jerome, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyprian, Athanasius, and John Chrysostom (AP # 4, 11, 12). He especially praises Augustine as the greatest genius of the fathers, who combined the most refined secular learning with the loftiest faith, harmonizing natural philosophy and Christian revelation. Boethius and Anselm in the West and John Damascene in the East added to the patrimony of philosophy (AP # 13).

Christian philosophy reached its apex in medieval scholasticism. The scholastics systematized the early fathers, arranging their insights with diligence and skill and achieving an exemplary unity of human science and theological reflection. Leo quotes Pope Sixtus V on the glories of the two leading doctors of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure, who enriched scholastic theology with order, beauty, and genius (AP # 14).

*Aeterni Patris* reaches its climax when Leo focuses on St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, as the greatest of the scholastics and a perennial fountain of wisdom for Catholics. Thomas constitutes “the special bulwark and glory of the Catholic faith” because he “gathered together, encompassed and surpassed the teaching of all the other doctors.” Leo quotes Cajetan, saying that because Thomas is “most venerated the ancient doctors of the Church [he] in a certain way seems to have inherited the intellect of all” (AP # 17). Thomas reached the heights of scholastic philosophy and theology because he was humble and lucid, had an encyclopedic knowledge and memory, lived a virtuous and unblemished life, was devoted to prayer, and was a lover of truth. He improved all aspects of philosophy and was a master of reasoning, although he always subjected the natural to the supernatural order and to sacred scripture. His scholastic method was rigorous, balanced, orderly, and fruitful. His thought embraced both human and sensible objects and the loftiest of divine and ethereal essences. At all times, he searched for the reasons and causes of things, discovering their underlying principles and laying the groundwork for later insights (AP # 18).

As a result, the perennial wisdom of Thomas Aquinas was recognized by the great religious orders, medieval schools and universities, and the ecumenical councils of Lyons, Vienna, and Florence, and the First Vatican Council (AP # 19–20, 22). Great praise was accorded to Thomas in papal bulls and briefs by Popes Clement VI, Nicholas V, Benedict XIII, Pius V, Clement XII, Urban V, Innocent XII, Benedict XIV, and Innocent VI (AP # 21). Unfortunately, the 16th century witnessed a plethora of new and tenuous philosophies

that disdained the accomplishments of the scholastics and made an exaggerated recourse to human reasoning (*AP* # 24).

Leo concludes *Aeterni Patris* by describing the great advantages that would accrue from reviving the teaching of Thomas Aquinas: to Catholic youth, Catholic schools, the disciplines of theology and philosophy, the peace of society, and the arts and sciences (*AP* # 27–29).

*Aeterni Patris* constituted the first papal document entirely devoted to philosophy and the most elevated status accorded to Thomas in a magisterial document. For Leo, the impartial and wide-ranging perspective of Thomas represented the Catholic middle ground between two extremes that plagued the 18th and 19th centuries: rationalism, which discarded faith; and fideism, which disparaged reason. Leo was a remarkably farsighted pope, and his exhortation to revive Thomas was forward, not backward, looking. Whereas previous papal documents had been content to condemn false propositions of philosophy, *Aeterni Patris* was essentially positive, focusing on the merits of Thomas and the scholastic method.

For Leo, the rigor that Thomas brought to philosophy was necessary to make it a systematic discipline and hence capable of sustaining a scientific approach to theology (*AP* # 24). Thomas was the most modern of philosophers because his method was rooted in realism. Thomas and other scholastics such as Albert the Great reasoned to the supernatural from sensible and material things, an approach not at odds with the empirical method (*AP* # 30). Leo rejected any notion of anti-quarianism, approving of new discoveries in philosophy (*AP* # 24) and excluding from his exhortation any theses from the scholastics that time has shown to be improbable, obscure, or obsolete. In like manner, he urged a return to the original writings of Thomas, wary of strange or stale derivations thereof (*AP* # 31). Although Leo gave priority to Thomas, his emphasis on Thomas's methodology, and his praise of other scholastics, implied an acceptance of the plurality of approaches that characterize Catholic theology and philosophy.

Leo took immediate steps to implement *Aeterni Patris*. On October 15, 1879, he established the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, with the mission to foster research into the work of St. Thomas, to explain and defend his doctrine, and to disseminate his teaching. (Popes Pius XI and Paul VI would earn their doctorates in Thomistic philosophy from the Pontifical Academy.) Leo ordered a new, critical edition of Thomas's work, the Leonine edition. He mandated that the philosophy

of Thomas be taught in Catholic education and declared Thomas the patron saint of Catholic schools. He also recommended the study of Thomas to the other orders, in particular to the Jesuits in 1892 and the Franciscans in 1898.

With Leo's support, the turn of the 20th century saw a flowering of Thomism. By 1902, there were centers of neoscholastic studies in 14 countries, with about 206 new periodicals and about a thousand articles published annually. A new crop of Thomistic scholars emerged, including Etienne Gilson, who was profoundly moved by *Aeterni Patris*; Joseph Pieper; Joseph Marechal; and Jacques Maritain. Subsequent popes confirmed *Aeterni Patris*. In his *motu proprio Doctoris Angelicis* (1914), Pius X renewed all of Leo's enactments promoting Thomas, requiring that the *Summa Theologica* be the fundamental text in institutions of apostolic right (*DA* # 11). The 1917 *Code of Canon Law* mandated that seminarians be instructed "according to the method, doctrines and principles of the Angelic Doctor" (Canon 1366). In the encyclical *Fausto Appetente Die* (1921), Pope Benedict XV congratulated the Dominican Order that "the Church declared the teaching of Thomas to be her own and that Doctor, honored with the special praises of the Pontiffs, the master and patron of Catholic schools" (# 7). Pius XI's 1923 encyclical *Studiorum Ducem* (*On St. Thomas Aquinas*) was devoted entirely to fostering Thomas's method; in it, Pius XI wrote that *Aeterni Patris* would alone be sufficient to render Leo's papacy glorious (# 11). In the celebrated encyclical *Humani Generis*, Pius XII confirmed that "the method of Aquinas is singularly preeminent both for teaching students and for bringing truth to light" (# 31). Paul VI's apostolic letter *Lumen Ecclesiae* (1974), commemorating the seventh centenary of the death of Thomas, described his synthesis of theology and philosophy as a safe hinge for the progress of Christian teaching.

Given Pope John Paul II's predilection for philosophy, he can be considered *Aeterni Patris*'s most direct heir. In his address to the Eighth International Thomistic Congress on September 13, 1980, at the close of its centennial celebration of *Aeterni Patris*, John Paul looked to understand the Thomistic renewal in light of the Second Vatican Council, as was his practice. According to John Paul, "the directives of *Aeterni Patris* of Leo XIII" prepared the way for the Council to seek "unity and continuity between authentic humanism and authentic Christianity, between reason and faith" (# 2). John Paul wrote one of his most significant encyclicals, *Fides et Ratio* (1995), to take up the question of faith and philosophy in the spirit of *Aeterni Patris* (*FR* # 100). In

*Fides et Ratio*, he elaborated on the incomparable value of Thomas's teachings and method—realistic, faithful, objective, transcendent (FR # 43–44, 57–58)—while confirming that the Church has no particular philosophy or exclusive method of her own (FR # 49).

*Aeterni Patris* must be considered one of the most significant of papal encyclicals. It is widely regarded that Pope Leo's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) launched the social teaching of the papacy, which with great insight addressed economic and social conditions over the course of the 20th century. Perhaps in the same way, Leo should be considered with *Aeterni Patris* to have launched a sustained meditation by the papacy on the relation of faith and reason, and philosophy and theology, culminating in *Fides et Ratio*. John Paul in his March 24, 1993, general audience spoke of the ordinary papal magisterium, which, even without making any *ex cathedra* definitions, can shed profound light on the human condition. There is perhaps no better illustration of this charism than the revival of Thomism and sound philosophical methods urged by *Aeterni Patris*.—Howard Bromberg

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**INFALLIBILITY** Infallibility is preservation from the possibility of error. It is an attribute of the nature of God, who is omniscient and omnipotent. According to the Catholic faith, God bestows infallibility on his Church, which is manifested most clearly in its teaching magisterium—the episcopal college with its head, the pope. The Church’s charism of infallibility is evident from Sacred Scripture, theological necessity, and Church history. It extends to the entire deposit of revelation, that is, the totality of the Church’s teaching on faith and morals. The doctrine of papal infallibility was solemnly defined in the First Vatican Council and explained in the broader context of episcopal authority in the Second Vatican Council.

Among the religious groups and figures of the world, the Catholic Church is not alone in claiming infallibility, although its claim has been expounded with the greatest theological emphasis and elaboration. Infallibility is participation in the prophetic office of Jesus Christ and is a gift of the Holy Spirit. As such, it is an essential charism of the Church. As the Church is the universal instrument of salvation, God guarantees that the Catholic faith will be preserved and preached without error until the end of time. The infallibility of the Church is thus closely linked to its indefectibility.

Infallibility is manifested in the Church in various modes. By a supernatural sense of the faith, the entire People of God cannot err in belief when, “from the bishops to the last of the faithful,” they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals (*LG* # 12; *DVb* # 10). As a teaching Church, infallibility is located explicitly in the college of bishops, successor to the apostolic college. When Jesus Christ founded the church on Peter, he assured him that “the Gates of Hell will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16: 18). At the Last Supper, Jesus promised the apostles that “the Holy Spirit will teach you all truth” (John 16: 13). In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded the apostles to teach all nations, promising to stay with them until the end of time (Matthew 28: 18–20). St. Paul calls the Church “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3: 15). Paul told the Thessalonians to receive the apostles’ teaching “not as human words but, as it truly is, the Word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2: 13). The apostles attributed the decrees of the Council of Jerusalem to the Holy Spirit (Acts 15: 28). It is a traditional belief that the apostles received the gift of personal infallibility at Pentecost. Infallibility was exhibited by the early Church in its confessions of faith, its writing and canonization of Scripture, and the unanimous teaching of the fathers. Although the early Church was dogged by controversy, the creeds of the

ecumenical councils were accepted as without error, and their canons as inviolable.

The infallibility of the Church extends to the fullness of the deposit of revelation. This deposit extends to all dogmas that are directly propounded to the faithful; it can also extend to secondary truths that are necessary “to guard fully, explain properly and define efficaciously the very deposit of faith,” as Bishop Vincent Gasser related to the bishops of the First Vatican Council. Theologians have sought to understand the boundaries of infallibility in such questions as discernment of the natural law, approval of religious orders, and canonization of saints.

Although the bishops do not possess infallibility individually, the college of bishops can exhibit infallible teaching in two ways. The first is through their ordinary and universal magisterium. When the bishops, although dispersed throughout the world, in the course of their daily ongoing mission teach authoritatively and uniformly in communion with the pope that a matter of faith and morals is to be definitively held by the faithful, their teaching is infallible. Second, the bishops also teach infallibly in extraordinary circumstances, such as when in valid ecumenical councils they proclaim a truth of the Catholic faith. In the Church’s 21 ecumenical councils, the bishops defined without error the major Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesiastical dogmas.

The pope exercises infallibility in his capacity as successor to St. Peter when he teaches *ex cathedra*, that is, when as supreme teacher of the faith he solemnly defines a doctrine of faith or morals. The scope of papal infallibility is coextensive with that of the Church. The pope derives infallibility from the charism of his office and not from his own character or the consent of the Church.

Papal infallibility is one of the more distinctive and, to the larger world, contested of Catholic doctrines. Nevertheless, it is evident that the infallibility of the Roman See and more specifically of the Roman pontiff was believed from the beginning of the Church, even though not articulated with the precision of the First Vatican Council. When Christ gave the primacy to Peter (Matthew 16: 18; Luke 22: 31–32; John 21: 15–17), he granted him infallibility in the solemn exercise of this authority. In the second century, St. Irenaeus wrote that because of its greater authority, “all Christians must agree with the Church of Rome,” which has “kept the apostolic tradition” (*Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 3). In 252, St. Cyprian of Carthage wrote of the “seat of Peter whence apostolic faith is derived and whither no errors can come” (*Epistulae* 59: 14).

The Synod of Milan in 389 stated that the creed of the apostles “the Roman Church has always kept and preserved undefiled” (*Ambrose Letters*, 42). In 420, Bachiarius of Spain wrote that “none of the heresies could gain hold of or move the Chair of Peter, that is the See of faith” (*Professio Fidei* 2). In 450, Blessed Theodoret of Syria wrote of the faith of the Holy See as “free from heretical taint,” which has “preserved the Apostolic Grace unsullied” (Epistle 116 to Renatus). The Formula of Hormisdas, which was signed by the Eastern bishops in 519 and ended the Acacian schism, stated that “in the Apostolic See, the Catholic religion has always been preserved immaculately.” The Formula of Hormisdas was professed at the eighth ecumenical Council of Constantinople (869–870) and at the reunion Council of Florence (1431–1435). It was also cited in the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), which formally defined the doctrine of papal infallibility in the dogmatic constitution, *Pastor Aeternus*.

Papal infallibility can be both underestimated and exaggerated. Critics such as Hans Küng, August Bernhard Hasler, Peter Chirico, and Brian Tierney have unconvincedly challenged its historical support. Of the most commonly alleged claims of papal error—those of Popes Virgilius, Liberius, and Honorius—Msgr. Ronald Knox wrote: “Here have these popes been, fulminating anathema after anathema for centuries—certain in all human probability to contradict themselves or one another over again. Instead of which you get this measly crop of two or three alleged failures!”

The scope of papal infallibility may be exaggerated as well. In theological terms, infallibility must be distinguished from *revelation*, in which God makes known new supernatural truth. The infallible magisterium arrives at a sure and fuller understanding of the faith, but proposes no new dogmas. Infallibility is not *inspiration*, by which God influences the language of humans such that God can be called the principal author of the utterance. Papal infallibility does not equate with *impeccability*, which constitutes sinlessness. The pope and bishops are not oracles. In expounding the faith, they must “by fitting means diligently strive to inquire properly into that revelation and to give apt expression to its contents” (LG # 25).

Likewise, papal infallibility is misperceived if it is aggrandized as the sole criteria of faith. There is a modern tendency to demand that all Catholic teaching be proclaimed by the papacy to be received as definitive. Although the Immaculate Conception of Mary (*Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854) and her Assumption (*Munificentissimus Deus*, 1950) were infallibly defined by the pope, most

Catholic teaching partakes of the ordinary and universal magisterium. For this reason, recent popes have decided against resolving controversies through the extraordinary papal magisterium. Rather, they have chosen to attest to teachings rendered infallible by the ordinary and universal teaching of the Church. Examples include the reservation of the priesthood to men (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*) and the moral teachings regarding the taking of innocent human life, abortion, and euthanasia (*Evangelium Vitae*). Infallibility is best understood as ultimately the charism of the Church. For example, it is the Church’s constant and ordinary teaching that demonstrates the certainty of the prohibition against artificial contraception. Thus Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) serenely explained and ratified the Church’s constant and infallible teaching as to the regulation of births, without resorting to extraordinary proclamations.

The doctrine of infallibility gives certitude to Church teaching unrivaled in any other dimension of human life. The pope is enabled by the Holy Spirit to teach with infallibility so that “the whole church is preserved in unity, and, resting on its foundation, can stand firm against the gates of hell” (*Pastor Aeternus* 4: 7). The charism of infallibility allows the Church to proclaim its mission authoritatively and with clarity. The luminous defining of Christian mysteries achieved at great cost in the first councils cannot be retracted, and the multifarious heresies cannot be reasserted.

Although the doctrine of papal infallibility has been called an obstacle to ecumenism, in fact the charism does not permit the untrammelled or even whimsical authority of the pope, as each infallible proclamation adds an unchangeable rock to the edifice of the faith. Infallibility is necessary for the exercise of papal authority, because it is essential for the unity of the Christian faith. While the Supreme Pontiff is able to exercise his jurisdiction freely and without restraint, his teaching is shaped and even constrained by the Church’s body of infallible teachings, which, having been proclaimed as without error in the past, guides the magisterium in the future.—Howard Bromberg

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VATICAN COUNCIL, FIRST; VATICAN COUNCIL, SECOND

**O'CONNOR, FLANNERY (1925–1964)** Flannery O'Connor is a leading Catholic fiction writer of the 20th century. She was born Mary Flannery O'Connor in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, the only child of Edward and Regina (Cline) O'Connor. Both of her parents came from long-standing Southern Catholic families. When she was 12, her family moved to the small town of Milledgeville, the former antebellum capital of Georgia, so that her father could take a job with the Federal Housing Administration. When she was 15, her father died of disseminated lupus erythematosus, a debilitating autoimmune disease. After attending mostly parochial schools, Flannery enrolled in the Georgia State College for Women, earning a social sciences degree in 1945.

Always a bookish person, Flannery discovered in college her talent for writing fiction. From 1945 to 1947, she studied at the famous Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, developing friendships with some of America's most noted writers, friendships she would cultivate her entire life. After earning her master of fine arts degree in 1947, she studied at Yaddo, the celebrated writer's colony in New York.

Her Northern idyll came to an abrupt end in 1951 when she was diagnosed with lupus, the incurable disease that killed her father. She returned to her 500-acre family dairy farm, Andalusia, located 12 miles outside of Milledgeville to live with her mother. For the remainder of her life, her daily routine consisted of taking care of the peafowl and other birds on the farm, suffering through cortisone treatments for lupus, practicing her Catholic faith, and writing.

From an early age, O'Connor took a rigorous, disciplined approach to the craft of writing. Her 32 published short stories are replete with trenchant prose,

brilliant imagery, and dramatic effect. Her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), reveals that O'Connor had both assimilated the work of contemporary writers, most notably Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and achieved an original style of her own. In her second and final novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), O'Connor powerfully combines Old and New Testament themes of prophecy, baptism, sin, and forgiveness.

All of O'Connor's fiction shows a startling maturity and consistency of style. Her stories are set in the Deep South, and her fiction incorporates the racial antagonisms of her region. Her characters are haunted by religious quests and confronted with stark epiphanies and searing moral choices. O'Connor's prose is spare and wry, her imagery pointed. Her stories consist mostly of dialogue, and with her great talent for irony and for dialect, the words of her characters reveal layers of unintended meaning, as well as unwitting humor and genuine comic effect.

Although O'Connor is often described as a writer of Southern gothic or grotesque fiction, she considered herself as foremost a Catholic writer. While there are occasional Catholic characters and explicit references to the Eucharist in her fiction—such as in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”—O'Connor drew mostly on the Protestant landscape of rural Georgia. Paradoxically, she was best able to plumb Catholic themes by means of her often extravagantly Protestant and primitive characters, who seek to inflict Christ on a bland, secular world. Her stories bring to the surface an ironic humor that underlies even the most pained religious search. In *Wise Blood*, the protagonist Hazel Motes preaches “the Church of Christ without Christ.” O'Connor neither condemns nor mocks her religious zealots; their absurdities point to a transcendent world, opposed to nihilistic visions of other modern authors. The highlight of her stories, she wrote, is the sudden opportunity for grace that overtakes her protagonist, which must be accepted or denied. In her story “The River,” for example, she makes use of a Protestant ritual of a crude baptism in a local river to uncover themes of original sin, blasphemy, the Fall, cleansing, and accidental grace.

O'Connor's Catholic faith underlies her fiction, but in her essays and speeches her religious devotion is explicit. She wrote the essay “The Church and the Fiction Writer” for the March 30, 1957, issue of *America* and “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South” in 1963. Her marvelously phrased and wide-ranging letters disclose her profound Catholic belief, her prayer life, and her daily attendance at Mass. The suffering brought on by her disease deepened her faith; she accepted and did not protest her condition. O'Connor

described the Eucharist as the “center” of her existence: “All the rest of life is expendable.”

Since her premature death from lupus at the age of 39 on August 3, 1964, her reputation as a writer has magnified. Her literary work has been examined in numerous full-length studies and journal articles. *Wise Blood* has entered the canon of American classical literature, and her finest short stories such as “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “The Artificial Nigger,” “The Late Encounter with the Enemy,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” “Parker's Back,” and “Judgment Day” are classics of the form. O'Connor's essays and lectures were collected and published in 1969 with the title *Mystery and Manners*. In 1971, her *Complete Stories* was published, winning the National Book Award. Her letters were published in 1979 with the title *The Habit of Being*. In 1988, the Library of America published her *Collected Works*; she was the first post-World War II writer to be included in this prestigious series. Her reputation as a great American author and one of the greatest of modern Catholic writers is secure.—Howard Bromberg

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**PAPAL DOCUMENTS** Papal documents are issued by the pope or by the Roman Curia under his authority. They manifest his doctrinal, juridical, and pastoral authority over the universal Church. Promulgated by the oldest continuous institution in the West, papal documents have both religious and historic significance and have helped give rise to their own field of study—diplomats. Legislative decisions of the pope, issued in official letters known as *decretals*, were collected in registers and were an important source of canon law. By the Middle Ages, papal documents had become highly formalized and were commonly known by their method of authentication, as *bulls*. With the worldwide teaching of the papacy in the last century, the *encyclical letter* has become perhaps the most influential of papal documents.

The range of papal documents reflects the complexities of administering a worldwide church. They are variously classified according to their format, their method of authentication, their juridical content, their mode of promulgation, and other factors. The typology of documents has varied over two millennia. Although the classification of papal documents through history is complex and often inconsistent, their variety demonstrates the breadth, range, and flexibility with which the papal office is equipped to sustain the Church and teach the world.

The varieties of papal documents can perhaps best be understood as the following types: (1) *constitutions*, which address important matters of Church polity or Church doctrine; (2) *decretals*, which constitute papal juridical decisions, either as *rescripts* (responses to questions posed to the pope) or as *motu proprio* (answers proposed on his own initiative); and (3) *encyclicals*, pastoral letters sent to the bishops of the church. Historically, these documents were promulgated in the form of *bulls* or *briefs*.

The Roman chancery is entrusted with drawing up and promulgating papal documents. The innovations and traditions of the chancery played a decisive role in the development of letter writing and official documentation in the West. Since 1865, papal documents have been promulgated in the official gazette of the Holy See, the *Acta Sanctae Sedis* and since 1909 the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. Most papal documents are issued in Latin, often with official translations. Despite the importance of the form and method of a document, in the end significance must be accorded to the words and

intent of the Roman pontiff, such that it can be said, “He who heareth you, heareth Me” (Luke 16: 10).

As is evident from the New Testament, the apostles exercised their supervisory authority by writing letters to the far-flung churches of Christendom. The first and second letters of Peter manifest pastoral care for the universal Church. The first popes continued to settle doctrinal questions in ecclesiastical letters. In the first century, Pope Clement wrote to the church in Corinth restoring presbyters who had been deposed. In the second century, Pope Victor wrote to the bishops of Asia to unify the date for celebrating Easter. With the rise of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire, papal documents took on an increasingly legal character, reflecting the heritage of imperial Rome. The pontificates of Julius (R. 337–352) and Damasus (R. 366–384) contain the first mention of papal secretaries and notaries to prepare, copy, send, and receive papal documents, as well as papal registers and archives.

Most papal documents were classified as letters (*epistolae* or *litterae*), although precise distinctions have since been drawn among the various types. Legal matters were classified as *epistolae praecepta*, *decreta*, or *sententiae*. An *epistola synodica* was written upon the advice of a Roman synod of presbyters. *Tomes* addressed dogmatic questions, such as the famous Tome of Pope St. Leo the Great to St. Flavian in 449, which definitively formulated the dogma of the two natures in one person of Christ and was proclaimed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The formula of Pope St. Hormisdas achieved the end of the Acacian schism in 519. It was signed by the bishops of the East and was a *libellus*.

Both the terminology and typology of papal documents shifted with the advent of the medieval papacy. By and large, papal letters were classified according to their method of sealing and presentation. *Letters close* were sealed for private use; *letters open* (*patent*) were delivered unsealed and were meant as public documents. The majority of letters were also classified according to their legislative authority—*constitution* (forerunner of the apostolic constitutions), *decretalis*, *edictum*, or *statutum*. Papal replies to an individual case were classified as either *mandata*, *responsa*, or *rescripta*. *Privilegia* conveyed papal grants of jurisdiction, property rights, and titles to churches, religious houses, and clergy. A *chirograph* was a papal letter addressed to the Roman Curia.

The sealing and authentication of papal documents were made elaborate to prevent forgeries, which were common enough in any event. Documents became highly formalized, as is customary with legal and diplomatic papers. They were distinguished in name,

type of parchment, folds, signature, papal seal, insignia, script employed, and salutation. The more solemn papal letters took the name “bull” from their method of authentication, which was a leaden ball. A bull was characterized by the initial *protocol* (invocation, names and titles of the pope and the addressee, and greeting), the *contextus* (preamble, narration, disposition, and sanctions), and the concluding *eschatocal* (the pope’s signature, date, and location).

The modern registering of papal letters began with Pope Innocent III (R. 1198–1216). The first modern archival office was created in 1612 and is now referred to as the Vatican Secret Archives. Diplomats, the study of ancient official documents, can be said to have begun with the Benedictine J. Mabillon (1632–1707), who wrote the first comprehensive study of papal documents. The Vatican Library estimates that more than 30 million papal documents have been issued. Taking the period 1909 to 1976 as an example, 1,681 documents were promulgated as apostolic constitutions, 2,067 as apostolic letters, and 78 as encyclicals. As noted by the Second Vatican Council, religious obedience to the papal magisterium takes into account the character of the papal documents, as well as the force and emphasis of the teaching contained therein (LG # 25).

Given modern means of communication, forgery of papal pronouncements is no longer possible and papal documents have been greatly simplified in form and type, with elaborate presentation now being purely ceremonial. As terminology has carried over from earlier periods, however, the nomenclature of papal documents bears reviewing. There are various categories of papal documents—decretals, bulls and briefs, apostolic constitutions, *motu proprio*s, apostolic letters, and encyclicals—each of which will be treated below.

Historically, decretals were letters embodying a papal decision, usually on questions of discipline, faith, or morals. The first decretal letters are considered to be Pope Damasus’s address to the bishops of Gaul around 365 and Pope Siricius’s letter to a Spanish bishop, Himerius of Tarragona, in 385. Significantly, decretals from the outset exhibited a concern for the universal Church. In form, they reflected the influence of the imperial responses of the Roman Empire, which expressed juridical decisions in the form of letters. Decretals were collected in canonical collections and were the major source of the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, the legislative canons of the Church before the codification of 1917. Some of the more notable decretal collections include *Canones Urbicani* (fifth century), *Collectio Dionysiana* (525), *Decretals of Gratian* (c. 1150), *Decretals of Pope Gregory*

*IX* (1234), *Constitutiones Clementinae* (1317), and the various collections known as *Extravagantes*. Recently popes have made use of decretal letters to proclaim canonizations.

Papal bulls were issued from the sixth century and became prevalent in the eighth century, when the pope became responsible for governing the Papal States. The papacy of Leo IX (R. 1049–1054) saw the regularization and expansion of the work of the chancery, and papal bulls took on a fixed form, seal, signature, and salutation. The intricately designed leaden seal that gave bulls their name showed the name and insignia of the pope on the obverse and depicted SS. Peter and Paul on the reverse; it was attached to the document by a hemp or silk cord for authentication. Papal bulls traditionally began with the pope’s name, his title as “Bishop, servant of the servants of God” (*Episcopus, servus servorum dei*), and a clause of perpetuity (*in perpetuam memoriam*). The *incipit* is the first few words of the message, from which the title is derived. Bulls conclude with blessings or prohibitions.

Bulls were classified as cameral, consistorial, curial, half-bulls, secret bulls, or golden bulls. Most major papal pronouncements were promulgated as bulls, including documents establishing the College of Cardinals (1059), establishing the Dominican order (1216), convoking the Second Crusade (1145), defining papal primacy (1302), stating the necessity of the Church for salvation (1441), excommunicating Martin Luther (1521), promulgating the Tridentine rite (1570), establishing the Gregorian calendar (1582), condemning Jansenism (1713), and summoning the First (1868) and Second (1961) Vatican Councils.

A brief was a medieval modification of the bull. Briefs were employed for expedited decisions and less formal letters and were sealed with stamped wax. The oldest preserved papal brief is from Pope Boniface IX in 1390. Papal briefs were issued to dispense King Henry VIII from the prohibition against marrying his brother’s widow, to suppress the Society of Jesus in 1773, and to restore the English Catholic hierarchy in 1850.

Apostolic constitutions represent the most solemn form of papal document and were usually issued in the format of a bull. Apostolic constitutions state important legislative, liturgical, and dogmatic pronouncements of the Church. The infallible papal definitions of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (*Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854) and of her Assumption (*Munificentissimus Deus*, 1950) were apostolic constitutions in the format of bulls. The most important documents of the two Vatican Councils were promulgated as dogmatic constitutions. The *Code of Canon Law* was

promulgated in the apostolic constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges* (1983) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in *Fidei Depositum* (1992). A series of 20th-century apostolic constitutions revised the rules for electing the pope, culminating in *Universi Dominici Gregis* (1996).

*A motu proprio* (Latin for “of one’s own will”) is a signed document of the pope issued on his own initiative. In this manner, they differ from most decretals, which were answers to petitions or rescripta. Thus, *a motu proprio* does not depend on the truth of the case narrated in a rescript. The first *motu proprio* is usually attributed to Pope Innocent VIII in 1484. Decrees of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI permitting the Tridentine Mass were promulgated by *motu proprio*.

Papal letters remain an essential and increasingly flexible medium for the papal mission. Apostolic letters by Pope Pius IX (*Epistle to the Easterns*, 1848) and Leo XIII (*Praeclara Gratulationis Publicae*, 1894) urging reunion of the churches were rejected in encyclicals of the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs. Pope Paul VI’s luminous *Credo of the People of God* (1968) was an apostolic letter in the *motu proprio* form. John Paul II reserved ordination to men in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994).

An *apostolic epistle* is a letter addressed to a specific group. An *apostolic exhortation* is a papal document encouraging a portion of the church to carry out an ecclesiastical activity or mission. A *consistorium* convokes a meeting of members of the hierarchy. Oral pronouncements of the pope can be issued as homilies or allocutions. John Paul II created a new format for papal documents in the collections of teachings he delivered in his pastoral visits to the countries of the world. Papal agreements, congratulatory messages, addresses, appointments, excommunications, dispensations, and the like are usually issued as letters. The Roman Curia issues documents of its own.

Modern encyclicals began in the 18th century as letters written by the pope to the Catholic bishops on a pastoral matter. In recent pontificates, they have often been addressed to all people of goodwill, and as John Paul II indicated in his general audience of March 10, 1993, have the “value of universal teaching.” In *Humani Generis* (1950), Pope Pius XII wrote that encyclicals, even though not partaking necessarily of the pope’s supreme teaching authority, can require assent from Catholics, as they “are taught by the ordinary magisterium.” The encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) called for a revival of Thomism, which helped spark a century of papal pronouncements on faith and reason, culminating in John Paul’s encyclical *Fides et*

*Ratio* (1998). The encyclicals *Casti Connubii* (1930) and *Humanae Vitae* (1968) addressed questions of birth control and marital life. The social teaching of the papacy was launched with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and was elaborated in more than 10 encyclicals by subsequent popes, including *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991). In earlier centuries, the most important papal documents were legislative and dogmatic. With the emergence of the modern papacy as a pastoral voice to much of the world, it can be surmised that the encyclical has become the most influential of papal documents.—Howard Bromberg

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