

THE MAGISTERIUM

The magisterium is the authority of the Pope and the bishops of the Church.

The nature of the magisterium
The Catholic Church has three distinct sources of authority to support its teaching about Christian beliefs:

The Bible

The Bible as the Word of God is the primary source of authority for all Christians. Christians believe that the writers of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit and the Church believes that the Holy Spirit continues to work through the Church.

Tradition

Over the centuries important theologians have explained beliefs to the Christian community. This is called the 'Tradition'.

The Magisterium 'Apostolic Succession'

The leaders of the Church, the popes and bishops, have also clarified and made statements on certain aspects of Catholic faith. Their particular authority is called the 'magisterium'.

The Latin word 'magister' means a 'master' or 'teacher'. After his resurrection Jesus gave the Apostles the instruction to '*make disciples of all nations*' (Matthew 28:18-20).

In this way they received their authority to teach the faith directly from Jesus. Catholics believe that the present Pope and bishops can trace their own appointment and ordination back to the first apostles.

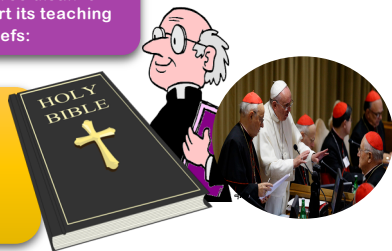
This is called the 'apostolic succession' and is why the Pope and bishops have the authority to make statements about the Catholic faith.



SOURCES OF WISDOM AND AUTHORITY

Jesus gave the Apostles the instruction to '*make disciples of all nations*' (Matthew 28:18-20). Catholics believe that the Pope and bishops can trace their appointment and ordination back to the first apostles. That is why they have authority. This is known as 'apostolic succession'.

You will also need to know about the documents published at the Second Vatican Council, in particular the four key documents known as 'Constitution'.



Ordinary Magisterium

Popes and bishops regularly preach the Good News in homilies and in their regular letters to their dioceses. Most often, these are to encourage faith and devotion, clarify a point of faith or to give instructions. The most well-known are those written by the Pope. These are called encyclicals and an example is *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life). This was written by Pope St John Paul II to clarify the Church's responses to a variety of modern ethical issues that affect the sanctity of life.

'Taking into account these distinctions, in harmony with the magisterium of my predecessors and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that ...' *Evangelium Vitae* 65 – Pope St John Paul II 1995.

The function of the magisterium is to present Catholic teaching in the modern context. It is important for the Church to be able to respond to issues that were not considered by the writers of the Bible (such as IVF and genetic engineering). The authority of the magisterium gives confidence to the next generation of Catholics that they are following the Church's teaching as they face the issues of modern society.

Extraordinary Magisterium

Sometimes the Church needs to respond to specific disputes or particular circumstances. These have more importance than the ordinary teaching role of the Pope and the bishops, so they are called the 'extraordinary magisterium'.

Conciliar magisterium:

Sometimes the bishops of the Church are asked to sit in a General Council. The task of a General Council is to explore matters of significance to the life of the Church. This could be a specific doctrine or guiding the Church's response to developments in the modern world. The first record of a General Council is in the Bible (Acts 15) when the leaders of the Christian community gathered in Jerusalem to decide what procedures were required of new converts to Christianity.

The decisions made at these General Councils have great significance in the life of the Catholic Church, for example, the decisions of the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople resulted in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is still regularly said in churches on Sundays (see page 88). The Council of Trent (1545-63) responded to the Protestant Reformation by, for example, reinforcing Catholic belief that Christ is fully present in the Eucharist.

The Conciliar magisterium is an example of the bishops of the Church working together to make sure that they are speaking to the worldwide Church. This working together also includes synods, such as the 2015 Synod on the Family.

Pontifical magisterium:

Another form of 'extraordinary magisterium' concerns specific and rare declarations by a pope.

The Pope has the authority to make the final decision on some disputed matters of faith or morals. The rules for such declarations were finally set down by a General Council in 1870. They are called **ex cathedra declarations**.

Before making such a declaration, the Pope is expected to **consult widely, have discussions with key advisers and spend time in prayer**. When a pope makes an ex cathedra statement in this way the teaching is considered to be without error (infallible).

It is important to note that this papal infallibility is limited to faith and morals. The use of this form of extraordinary also includes synods, such as the 2015 Synod on the Family.

Summary

- Catholics use the Bible, Tradition and Magisterium as sources of authority.
- Magisterium can be 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'.
- Pontifical magisteria are rare, but Catholics believe these teachings to be infallible (without error/mistake).
- The last extraordinary magisterium was the Second Vatican Council which led to many significant changes and developments.

Knowledge Check

1. What are the three main sources of authority in the Catholic Church?
2. What is meant by the term *apostolic succession*?
3. What is meant by *extraordinary magisterium*?
4. What instruction did Jesus give to the Apostles in Matthew 28: 18-20?
5. What is the function of the magisterium?
6. What is the role of a General Council?
7. What does the Latin word *magister* mean?
8. What must a pope do before making an *ex cathedra* statement?

Choose a Task

1. Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual)
2. Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions)
3. Create a poster/leaflet

CHALLENGE!

Turn over the mat and try to complete your task without looking at the information. Then refer back to the task mat to see what you have missed/could have included.

Exam Question

b) Describe Catholic belief on the role of the Magisterium [5]