

St. John's Newsletter



What is a papal encyclical?

A **Papal Encyclical** is a pastoral letter written by a Pope to a particular audience of Bishops but also to Catholics and all people. Often the topics, especially in recent years, have to do with social issues that affect the world and how Catholics should recognize Church teachings in a modern world. As part of the pope's teaching authority, he can use an encyclical to be a valuable source of Catholic teaching and guidance on contemporary topics, including sexuality, Catholic Social teaching, and stewardship of the earth.


With the changes in communications in the last century, papal encyclicals began reaching broader audiences in the modern period, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's groundbreaking 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. It marked the first time in many years that the bishop of Rome had written a pastoral letter on matters other than doctrine or internal affairs of the Church, instead addressing workers' rights, the right to private property, and the dangers of socialism. St. Paul VI wrote *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, reiterating and applying Church teaching to the question of artificial birth control. St. John Paul II dedicated four encyclicals to promoting Catholic social teaching, building on Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Francis' four encyclicals largely addressed the preservation of ecology and universal fraternity.



Leo PP XIV

Pope Leo XIV just released his first Encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*: "On the Protection of Human Dignity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence." Published on the anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, its underlying premise is that technology is not "a force antagonistic to humanity", nor is it "inherently evil." However, "technology is never neutral, because it takes on the characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate, and use it." Therefore, Pope Leo XIV appeals for people to build "for the common good" and to "remain human," following a courageous mentality of shared responsibility and communion, so that the world "will come to recognize the human heart as the place where God desires to dwell." It continues to support the dignity of humanity and to promote the use of technology to protect human dignity rather than let technology replace humanity.

PAPAL INFALLIBILITY



Infallibility is only conferred on papal pronouncements which are solemnly and dogmatically defined, and does not apply to remarks made by the pope as a private individual, or even as a priest, the bishop of Rome or the pope. Only when he speaks as the pope *ex cathedra* (literally "from the chair" - meaning that he is formally defining something as infallible) is infallibility invoked. Such instances are very rare indeed - far rarer than many non-Catholics think.

Reference: Saint Michael's Basic Training : Apologetics

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Comparing an encyclical to other kinds of official Roman Catholic documents is a good way to understand the significance of an encyclical. Usually when the pope makes a declaration of some article of faith or moral law it is given in the form of a **Papal Bull**, which is very formal and uses prescriptive and dogmatic language. These are rare in recent times. Then there are **Decrees**, which address a very particular problem requiring precise response and action. A third style of Papal documents are **Apostolic Letters** and messages, which are characteristically pastoral, encouraging, and inspirational. Encyclicals can have some features of all these categories but are generally longer; the thinking behind the statements is deeper and articulated more expansively.

Encyclicals dating from 1493 (Pope Alexander VI) to present are available on the Vatican website at www.papalencyclicals.net/encyclical. You can find Pope Leo's first Encyclical on the website in Arabic, German, English, Spanish, French, Italian, Polish, or Portuguese.

Sources:

- <https://www.ewtnnews.com/vatican/cna-explains-what-is-a-papal-encyclical>
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