

The Encyclical Era: Are Catholics Obligated to Read Every Papal Document?



Timothy Flanders [October 15, 2020](#)

For years as an Evangelical Protestant, the common discourse revolved around quotations from the Holy Scriptures. Speakers would talk at conferences. Pastors would preach. No one would think anyone really argued a point without copious references to the Holy Bible. I remember talking to my friends when I was a Protestant—we quoted the Scriptures in conversation. We had Bible studies and talked about what the Word of God meant to us personally. Any outsider would be able to find the authoritative text of the community by the proportion of quotations and

authoritative weight given to the 66 books of the Protestant Bible.

Now many Catholics in our time know why Protestantism is folly. In rejecting the pope and bishops and latching onto the Bible Alone as the authority, Protestantism creates as many popes as there are Protestants and Bibles. This is why their discourse remains saturated with quotations from chapter and verse. But there is nevertheless something true about this emphasis. It's simply missing something crucial to keep it on track.

When I was an Orthodox Christian, I discovered the importance of Tradition. The proportion of quotations shifted away from only the Scriptures to include the Church Fathers. St. John Chrysostom was quoted. St. Ambrose was given a nod. Other more modern saints were tapped for wisdom. This common discourse made sense to my ears, having recognized the foolishness of private interpretation: the Holy Fathers were necessary if we were to avoid creating thousands of popes.

Yet eventually I realized that although the number of popes were minimized with this approach, it remained more than the worst number of popes ever found in Catholicism (three). This is because the Orthodox would split over universal doctrinal questions and no Magisterium existed to adjudicate them. Tradition was added to the discourse, but something was still missing, and I realized that was a living Magisterium.

But when I began to spend time with Catholics, I noticed something strange among them. Yes, they had a Magisterium. But instead of simply adding that to the conversation, the quotations from Sacred Scripture seemed to fall silent. The words of the Church Fathers were absent. The only person quoted now was the pope. The pope. The pope.

I remember when I was still Orthodox I happened to be with some Catholic friends at a retreat given by a Conservative Catholic religious order. During the presentation, the speaker kept saying “Pope John Paul teaches such and such...Pope Benedict reminds us about such and such.” I felt like I had traveled to a foreign land where they spoke a different language. Why all these quotations from popes? As an Orthodox, I could barely remember a time when the local bishop was quoted, much less the Patriarch. In fact all I knew about the bishop and the patriarch were their names! I had no idea what they were teaching about this or that topic. So I looked upon this apparent obsession with what the pope says to be rather odd.

What is Normal Catholic Discourse?

After I accepted the abstract necessity of the papacy and came to Rome, I continued to observe this strange proportion of quotations in common discourse with the current or recent popes. In mainstream Catholic presentations all the weight seemed to be placed on what the pope was saying. How many minutes were devoted to the current or recent popes,

and how many to Scripture and the Church Fathers? Indeed it was very little for the latter. Catholics themselves give the impression that the pope is the faith and the faith is the pope, and I think this is what keeps people away from the Church.

I had done my homework about the Church and I had read some of the great classics of Catholic literature which helped convert me: Thomas à Kempis, St. Francis de Sales, Lorenzo Scupoli. These great masters spent only a fraction of their words (if that) quoting any currently reigning or prior pope. Their primary point of reference was the Sacred Scriptures, with the Church Fathers forming a second place in terms of number of quotations. The same was true for the Council of Trent or the whole collection of Denzinger. St. Thomas and the other doctors also took a third place.

As such, I knew what normal Catholic discourse was like. In terms of the point of reference and number of quotations, Catholics both in conversation and writing normally gave most authority to the Scriptures, then the Fathers, then the Scholastics like St. Thomas. After these were given nearly all the weight, we might hear a quotation from the pope in that context who made authoritative judgments about particular points. I knew this was the normal thing, so after I came into communion with Rome in 2013, I didn't spend much of my time as a Catholic reading what Pope Francis was currently saying on this or that. Frankly, I did not have the time. I was trying to learn St. Thomas and absorb the teachings of the saints. I was working to read the

Holy Bible every year and spend time learning the Rosary.

Still, Catholics all around me continued to talk about what Pope Francis was saying. I thought: if he's not making definitive judgments, why is everyone talking about his words and not the words of Jesus Christ, St. Paul, or the Fathers? It seemed to me that if the pope wanted to make universal proclamations of the sort that popes were known for ("We define, we declare, we teach..."), then I would certainly pay attention. But I could not keep up with the number of words being produced on the Vatican's website, especially after *Amoris Laetitia* spanned 260 pages.

The Era of the Encyclical

Eventually I read more history and discovered some of the roots of this strange obsession with the pope's latest words. For centuries the pope's authoritative acts mainly concerned a small minority of theologians, unless there were larger issues like Protestantism or Jansenism, which might bear upon a greater number of faithful. Authoritative judgements from the pope were sought and referenced, but they were normally concise and obvious. No Catholic was reading sermons, letters, and encyclicals from the pope in their daily life. Most Catholics lived and died without knowing who the pope was. A faithful Catholic spent time reading Scripture, the Catechisms, spiritual works like the *Imitation of Christ*, and praying the Rosary.

The era of the encyclical began in the 18th century as the modern crisis began to take shape and the universal problems started to gain momentum, breadth and speed. Benedict XIV condemned usury for the Italians in *Vix Pervenit*, but Gregory XVI felt the need to universalize this. Meanwhile, Pius VI had universalized his condemnation of a local council in *Auctorem Fidei*. As the problems with Liberalism swept the world, Bl. Pius IX responded with universal teachings and eventually an Ecumenical Council which defined the infallibility of the pope on faith and morals. This finally led to the first real encyclical pope, Leo XIII, who continued to confront the onslaught of Liberalism and Communism in the world. He wrote eighty-eight encyclicals in twenty-five years, churning out an average of 3.5 encyclicals per year.

No doubt the popes had every right to issue as many encyclicals as they pleased, but they did not intend to create a situation where common Catholic discourse lost the authoritative weight of the Scriptures, Fathers, and Doctors. This, however, was nevertheless the result. In many ways it was the false spirit of Vatican I which was a prelude to the false spirit of Vatican II. Even as the governments of the world gained more power than ever before and demanded more obedience and sacrifice on the altar of earthly, national interests, it was as if the population of the faithful also felt their whole Catholic life must revolve around the pope and his current words. Today it seems like the only time Catholics hear quotations from

Scripture and the Fathers is from the pulpit on Sunday —if they are lucky enough to have a priest like that.

Return to Normalcy

A faithful Catholic should spend his time saving his soul and doing whatever reading and study is necessary for that. This should be the first priority, because we are all going to die and face judgment. We must understand the faith and morals passed down by our Fathers, overcome sin and obtain virtue. If we spend our time with that, then our conversations can return to normalcy: the Scriptures, Fathers, and Doctors. If we are studying a particular point of doctrine, we might then find that a current or recent pope has pronounced some judgment or promulgated some statements on a given topic. In that event, by all means study the matter and give what is due to the pope: religious submission of mind and will.

But the danger is in the vice of curiosity, which means to obsess over less important study, to the neglect of the necessary study (II-II q167 a1). The necessary matters for study have been given to Catholics: the Scriptures, the Catechisms, the writings of the Saints. The faithful were not obliged to read every new encyclical even in the time of Leo XIII (how many were addressed to the faithful and not solely the bishops?). His own encyclicals bear witness to the authoritative sources which should be studied first of by all Catholics. In fact, it can be argued that he was the one who promoted the study of Scripture and St.

Thomas perhaps more than any other pope. The study which is necessary to save your soul has not changed. If you spend your time on this, then you will be able to spend the appropriate amount of time on current encyclicals. Concern yourself with your own soul's salvation first: *Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God, and his justice, and all these things shall be added unto you* (Mt. 6:33).

 Print Friendly



Timothy Flanders

Timothy S. Flanders is the author of *Introduction to the Holy Bible for Traditional Catholics*. In 2019 he founded *The Meaning of Catholic*, a lay apostolate. He holds a degree in classical languages from Grand Valley State University and has done graduate work with the Catholic University of Ukraine. He lives in the Midwest with his wife and four children.