Reading, Exegesis, Interpretation and Application of Magisterial Documents
Boston College School of Theology & Ministry E-mail: bretzke@bc.edu

1. Six Common Misconceptions Regarding Church Texts
   a. No text is self-evident, nor self-interpreting, nor self-applying (all texts need to be first translated, read, understood, interpreted and only then applied)
   b. All texts are not created equal (just as the Church is hierarchical, so some texts are more authoritative than others depending on the character of the content, the manner in which the text is presented and under whose authority the text is given)
   c. The “latest” text is not necessarily the most authoritative (one needs to look carefully at the manner and level of authority of the text)
   d. There is no “The Vatican” which exists as a monolithic entity (one needs to look carefully at who authors the text and at the type of authority the text itself carries)
   e. The language used in the text does not necessarily mean the same as in general idiomatic usage (one needs to be clear on technical meanings of certain words, concepts, formulae, and so on)
   f. Each and every pronouncement of the Pope (or lower authorities such as Vatican offices, cardinals, bishops, monsignors working in the Vatican) is not infallible.  This means that if a statement is not infallible it may be fallible.  Fallible does not mean “false,” but it does mean that the statement or formulation may be partial, incomplete, open to revision, and even rejection later on (as has happened with several Church teachings over the centuries, such as the teachings on slavery, interest taking, religious freedom, capital punishment, and so on).  See the definition and notes on infallibility further down.

2. Step One: Begin with Translation
   a. What is the language of the official text? (Editio typica)
   b. What do all the words mean in that language? Do they mean exactly the same in this language? Where might be some changes in nuance, loss and/or confusion of meanings?
   c. Are there differing possible translations? (E.g., for obsequium religiosum [Lumen gentium #25] or intrinsece dishonestum [Humanae vitae #14]
   d. Are there technical meanings which might be different from the usual vernacular usage? E.g., “human act” (actus humanus) or “intrinsically disordered” or sub secreto.
3. **Step Two: After Translation Move to Exegesis, Using the Basic Tools of Exegesis**

   a. Pay attention to the form(s), context, and intended audience
   
   b. Source criticism (especially look at drafts, revisions, language)

4. **Step Three: Primary Interpretation**

   **Guidelines for Reading Magisterial Teaching**
   (Given in Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* #25)

   a. **Character** of the teaching
      
      i. Not all truths are of the same importance, and thus the Church explicitly states there is a hierarchy of truths necessary for salvation.
      
      ii. The character of the teaching and the manner of teaching may be on different levels (e.g., we can have a “lower” doctrine on the hierarchy of truths, yet have it proclaimed at the highest level of authority, such as the Marian doctrine of the Assumption.

   b. **Frequency** of repetition
      
      i. Errors are “corrected” and/or teaching is “changed” *not* by saying “we were wrong” but by ceasing to repeat a certain position, e.g., the teaching that interest-taking was intrinsically evil.
      
      ii. Even some teachings that have been “frequently repeated” over a long period of time still can be changed (e.g., the teaching on freedom of religion, which was explicitly condemned by Gregory XVI and Pius IX, but which was affirmed by Vatican II in *Dignitatis humanae*).

   c. **Manner** of the teaching
      
      i. How (in what form) is the text itself delivered?
      
      ii. To whom is it explicitly addressed?
      
      iii. Under whose authority is *this* text issued, even if it is meant to explain something else? (E.g., the CDF *Responsum* to the putative infallibility of John Paul II’s *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*).

5. **Supplemental Additional Interpretive and Application Guidelines**

   a. Distinction (where applicable) between “ideal” and “fulfillment” commands and legislation
b. Distinction between theory in the abstract and application in the concrete

c. Legal world-view of Roman (Italian) law; minimalism is not necessarily a vice nor the same as laxism according to this legal culture.

6. **Consider the level(s) of authority of Magisterial teaching based on the manner in which it is proposed:**

a. Teaching solemnly proposed *de fide definita* in *ex cathedra* form which is an infallible, irrefutable teaching (see the definition and discussion of infallibility below)

b. Conciliar teachings, which themselves have differing levels of authority (e.g., Constitution, Decree, Declaration)

c. Papal Encyclicals (addressed to all people? to the whole Church? to a particular area or group?)

d. Papal Apostolic Exhortations (especially following the triennial Synod of Bishops)

e. Apostolic Constitutions (e.g. establishment of a particular celebration, such as the Holy Year, or which address various matters, such as penitential practices, the reform of the curia, etc.)

f. Apostolic Letters given "motu proprio" (e.g., a personal letter written by a pope either to the whole church, a local church, or some particular group or body; or used to issue norms, establish a new institute, restructure various situations, etc.)

g. Occasional papal allocutions (e.g. from a congress, etc.; Wednesday audience)

7. **Some Guidelines for Interpreting Documents of Roman Dicasteries** (Offices of the Vatican)

a. Congregation, Council, Commission, Office (ranking of levels of bureaucratic importance)

b. Declaration, Instruction, Letter, Notification, *Responsum*, etc. (ranking of levels of content importance)

8. **Mode of dicasterial promulgation**, e.g. issued *In forma communi* or *In forma specifica*.

a. *In forma communi*: without specific papal approbation, through with his approval. The vast majority of Vatican documents issued by the various congregations and dicasteries are in this mode. *Dominus Iesus* is an example.
b. **In forma specifica:** With papal approbation in which the pope explicitly takes over and makes his own (i.e., as if issued in his name) a document promulgated by a Vatican office. This is rare, and the most recent example is the 1997 Vatican “Instruction on Some Questions Regarding Collaboration of Nonordained Faithful in Priests’ Sacred Ministry.”

9. Magisterial teachings of individual bishops and Bishops’ Conferences likewise must be looked at in terms of the above considerations of exegesis and manner of teaching, etc.

10. **Some canonical principles for interpretation and application**

   a. *Nisi* clauses (the exception *is* often the rule!) The law often states an ideal, and the application is found through the stated exceptions and modifications.

   b. *Odia restringi et favores convenit ampliari* (This principle of canon law interpretation holds that burdens or strictures are to be interpreted in a narrow sense of application, while on the other hand favors are to be widely applied. [cf. Canon 18])

   c. Automatic and imposed penalties and extenuating circumstances (i.e., *latae* and *ferendae sententiae*). One size does not fit all! and the focus is on the pastoral care of the individual involved rather than the punishment of the crime.

   d. *Vacatio legis* (delay between promulgation and implementation; this is done so that proper refinements, exceptions, dispensations might be obtained before the law goes into effect)

   e. Custom has the force of law: *Consuetudo optima legum interpres.* People(s) and their lived history are what counts.

   f. Desuetude (a law which falls into disuse ceases to bind)

   g. Non-reception (in which a law, though validly promulgated by a legitimate authority, is never “received” and put into practice by those for whom it is intended, and thus does not have the force of law).

11. **A Note on the Catechism of the Catholic Church**

   a. This document is largely a summary compendium of Church teaching, done by a committee over several years, and published by Pope John Paul II. It is not explicitly a papal document, nor is it a collegial document of all the bishops of the Church in the sense of a conciliar document.

   b. The *stated* primary purpose of the *Catechism* is to provide an aid for bishops and bishops’ conferences (the designated primary audience) in the preparation of catechetical materials better adapted to the needs of their individual dioceses. The
Catechism is not meant to be the universal, exhaustive, and ultimate highest authority of Church teaching for each and every person(s), place or situation.

c. The Catechism often uses brief excerpts from other Church documents to make its points, and therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to the footnotes given in the Catechism as these will give the fuller text that the passage in the Catechism is treating. These individual texts in turn would enjoy their own “authority” based on the principles outlined above. Thus, other things being equal a quotation from Matthew’s Gospel in reference to a certain point would have greater weight than the CDF’s Persona humana.

d. The Catechism generally speaking does not claim to be “new” Church teaching, and it would be misleading to suggest that the sum of the many different parts which make up the Catechism would somehow be greater than the individual texts themselves or that the Catechism supercedes any major Magisterial document outlined above.

12. Doctrine of Papal Infallibility (Given in 1870 in Pastor Aeternus, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, Vatican I [DS 3074-3075]).

a. “It is a divinely revealed dogma that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when, acting in the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held [tenenda] by the universal Church, possesses through the divine assistance promised to him in the person of Blessed Peter, the infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining the doctrine concerning faith or morals; and that such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are therefore irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church (ex sese, non autem ex consensu ecclesiae). But if anyone presumes to contradict this our definition--which God forbid-- anathema sit.”

b. Note a certain "circularity" to the formulation and reasoning in this definition, as well as the implied limitations to this infallibility. The definition does not say even that an ex cathedra statement will be fully and completely true from an objective perspective, but rather that such statements would contain the level of certainty “which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining the doctrine concerning faith or morals.” Thus, an important related question is to what extent Jesus wills moral certainty in such pronouncements (e.g., does Jesus will that a potential statement on the morality of interest-taking [usury] remain absolutely true in every detail for each and every economic situation throughout all of human history.

c. “Faith and morals” is one possible English translation of the Latin original, de fide vel moribus. However, it is difficult to translate the term moribus [mores] since it could legitimately mean “customs” in the sense of the English cognate “mores.”
d. For this and other reasons concerning what is called the primary and secondary objects of infallibility related to “faith,” there is a real debate over whether the pope could make an infallible pronouncement over a concrete material norm (such as each and every usage of a contraceptive device is always immoral). Some bishops and theologians say “yes,” while others say “no.” (Archbishop William Levada of San Francisco did his doctoral dissertation on this topic and gave “no” has his answer to the question). To date no such infallible moral pronouncement has been made.

13. **Summary Points:**

a. All of the above considerations are part of the Tradition of the Church in the official exercise of the Magisterium and thus are explicitly recognized and accepted by the Magisterium itself.

b. Reading, understanding, interpreting and applying Church texts is related to human individuals and human communities. Therefore, differing situations and contexts must be taken into account. It is not like loading a new piece of software on a computer.

c. Technical skill is certainly necessary to do the above, but a more apt metaphor would be an artistic performance rather than a mechanical operation. Seen in this metaphor a given magisterial text might function a bit like a musical score: the notes, time value, key, etc., are all given, but the level of “perfection” in the execution of the score depends much on the virtuosity of the performer.

d. Remember the ultimate *norma normans non normata*: It is God’s definitive revelation of God’s self in Jesus Christ, and Jesus’ own ministry and Gospel message which stand above the whole Church, including all of its members, regardless of their rank and office.

14. **Suggestions For Reference and/or Further Reading**


This book-length dictionary compiles, translates, and explains the meaning of a large number of Latin terms employed in the various branches of theology: moral, biblical, canon law, systematic, liturgical, and historical).


Very good for developing an understanding of how to exegete and interpret the various levels of teaching contained in Vatican documents. Helpful in dogmatic theology as well. Good historical examples are used to illustrate the various points.