

## What Is Truth?



The “Saint of the Day” calendar for August lists two extraordinary celebrations: the Transfiguration and the Assumption of Mary. Catholics accept each as Truth, but for different reasons. Their rationales rely on words and concepts such as Revelation, Dogma, Scripture, or Tradition. Many are even cited in Latin – “*Vox Populi, Vox Dei*” (The Voice of the People is the Voice of God); or “*Sensus Fidelium*” (The Sense of the Faithful); or “*Ex Cathedra*” (From the Chair).

When discussing these words and concepts, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes that the **Bible** is the Word of God; that **Tradition** is the Word of the Church; and that **Revelation** ended with the death of the Apostles. Keeping those sources in mind, let’s begin tonight’s reflection by reviewing the use and meaning of two key terms: *Dogma* and *Ex Cathedra*.

**Dogma** is the name given to a proposition solemnly proclaimed by either by the Pope or by an Ecumenical Council. This implies a relation to both Divine revelation and to the authoritative teaching of the Church. Dogma, then, is a truth that the Church solemnly declares to be true, revealed, and most properly considered an object of faith.

**Ex Cathedra** literally means “*From the Chair*.” It is a theological term that signifies an authoritative teaching, and more particularly is applied to definitions given by the Pope himself. Its present meaning was formally determined by the Second Vatican Council.

The Church also uses two key concepts in her formulations – “*Irreformable*” and “*Definitive*.” Even though each term can be seen as possessing the binding quality of an infallible doctrine, they are not necessarily *Ex Cathedra*. That is, they aren’t promulgated by the Pope himself but by the larger Magisterium of the Church. More specifically,

“Irreformable” teachings on faith and morals are Divinely Revealed. They include teachings regarding Jesus, Mary, sin and grace, the sacraments, the primacy of the Pope, and the doctrinal formulations of the ancient creeds.

“Definitive” teachings on faith and morals are those the Church holds to be logically derived from Divine Revelation. They include the doctrine of Papal Infallibility, the immorality of abortion and euthanasia, and the Communion of Saints.

Got it? So, the big question is: When has a Pope defined a doctrine *Ex Cathedra*?

In 1870, the First Vatican Council made its solemn Declaration of Papal Infallibility. Since that time, the *only* example of an Ex Cathedra decree took place in 1950, when Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption of Mary as an article of faith. Pope Pius IX’s 1854 declaration of the Immaculate Conception was grandfathered in after Vatican I. But neither of these declarations was earth-shattering to Roman Catholics, because these beliefs had been nurtured through devotion, prayer, and local teaching for centuries before becoming official.

During his interrogation, Pilate asked Jesus: “What Is Truth?” My Brothers, my objective tonight has been to introduce you, as Knights and Defenders of our Faith, to the foundations of our Truths. Jesus did not answer Pilate; but during his earlier Agony in the Garden, he prayed to his Father:

“Sanctify them through Thy Truth:  
Thy Word is Truth.”

Can I get an Amen?