

# Theology and Doctrines and Dogmas, Oh, My!

Have you ever wondered what is the difference between dogma and doctrine? Have you thought about the meaning of theology, or the purpose of theologians? Would you like to? Oh, go ahead — just for the next few minutes, anyway...

“Dogma” and “doctrine” are often used almost interchangeably, though they are not exactly the same. Both dogma and doctrine are developed through dialogue, debate, and prayer.

I wanted to set the baseline this way: Dogma is “because I said so” and doctrine is “because it makes sense.” I wanted to say: dogma is revealed by God and doctrine is figured out. In other words, I wanted to make this simple.

But it turns out that it’s not simple. Both dogma and doctrine take some figuring out. For example, it took nearly four centuries for the Church to come to a solid agreement that Jesus is both God and Man — two natures in one person. But this understanding is so basic that it can only be called dogma.

Perhaps it could be said that, while dogma is revealed by God through scripture or even tradition, it can take some time for us feeble humans to figure out what God has revealed.

Doctrine is a bit more logical, not that dogma isn’t or can’t be. Doctrine is built on dogma or on other doctrines. Doctrine involves reason, dialogue, and study. And who does the reasoning, dialoguing, and studying? Doctors of the Church, that’s who! Certain saints, 36 of them so far, have been named Doctors of the Church. You’ve heard of all of them:

Gregory the Great, Augustine, Jerome, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, John of the Cross... all saints, and all “Doctors of the Church.” There are many more. Most are men, but there are several notable women among the Doctors as well: Theresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, Therese of Lisieux (the “Little Flower”).

And what is the process by which these “doctors” help the Church to discern, develop, and articulate doctrine? Theology! “Theo” (God) “logy” (thinking or study) = the study of God. It’s been called “Faith seeking understanding.”

Naturally, there was more figuring out of both dogma and doctrine to be done in the early centuries of the Church than more recently. Once the basics are figured out, they don’t need much development or change. Basics are like that; they’re, well, basic.

Doctrines are pretty durable, too. But there are different levels of doctrine. Some doctrines are based upon other doctrines; some doctrines are based upon dogmas.

For example, Mary could not be called “Mother of God” until Jesus was defined or understood to be God — or one with God — rather than a creation of God. So “Mother of God” is more like a doctrine than a dogma, even though this understanding has become so very basic that it could be defined as dogma.

By contrast, there’s Limbo. Limbo was more like a doctrine in that it was a response to an earlier belief that the unbaptized, upon their death, would go to hell because their Original Sin had not been removed.

But there isn’t space to deal with Limbo here. So Limbo will have to stay in, well, limbo until next time.