



When the Church Discerns with Patience: History, Theology, and Spiritual Lessons for Our Time

Throughout more than two thousand years of history, the Catholic Church has defined a number of **dogmas**, that is, truths revealed by God which must be believed by all the faithful. However, not every theological idea that emerged within Christian thought eventually received that solemn definition.

In fact, many **doctrines, hypotheses, and influential theological reflections** came close to becoming dogma... but ultimately did not.

Far from being a sign of confusion, this reveals something profoundly wise about the way the Church discerns the truth: **prudence, time, prayer, and fidelity to the Revelation received from Christ and the Apostles.**

Sacred Scripture itself already invites this kind of discernment:

“*Test everything; hold fast what is good.*”
(1 Thessalonians 5:21)

This principle has guided generations of theologians, bishops, and saints.

In this article we will explore:

- what a dogma truly means
- how doctrine develops within the Church
- some teachings that were close to being defined as dogma
- why they ultimately were not
- what spiritual lessons we can draw today for our Christian life

Because understanding this process **strengthens our faith and helps us live it with greater maturity and humility.**



1. What Is a Dogma, Really?

In Catholic theology, a **dogma** is a truth that fulfills three fundamental conditions:

1. It has been **revealed by God** in Sacred Scripture or Apostolic Tradition.
2. It has been **solemnly defined by the Magisterium of the Church**.
3. It must be **believed by all the faithful**.

Among the most well-known examples are:

- the Holy Trinity
- the divinity of Jesus Christ
- the **Immaculate Conception** of the Virgin
- the **Assumption of Mary**

However, before becoming dogma, many truths pass through a long process called **doctrinal development**.

During this process there appear:

- debates among theologians
- different interpretations
- deeper study of Scripture
- philosophical and pastoral reflection

This process can last **centuries**.

And precisely this slowness is a sign of the Church's prudence, which does not define dogmas without profound certainty.

2. The Development of Doctrine: How the



Understanding of Faith Matures

Although Revelation ended with the Apostles, **the understanding of that Revelation continues to grow** within the Church.

This idea was explained masterfully by the great nineteenth-century English theologian:

John Henry Newman

Saint John Henry Newman taught that Christian doctrine develops like a **seed that grows over time**.

The essential content remains the same, but its understanding deepens.

However, something important also happens: **not every theological idea eventually consolidates into definitive doctrine**.

Some remain **respectable theological opinions**, but not obligatory teachings.

This forms part of the legitimate freedom within theological reflection.

3. The Limbo of Infants: A Widely Accepted Theory

One of the most well-known doctrines that came close to becoming a universal teaching was the theory of the **limbo of infants**.

For centuries theologians reflected on a painful question:

What happens to children who die without receiving baptism?

Catholic doctrine affirms two important truths:

- baptism is the ordinary path to salvation
- God is infinitely just and merciful



To harmonize these two affirmations, several theologians — among them the great Doctor of the Church:

Thomas Aquinas

proposed the existence of a state called **limbo**.

According to this hypothesis:

- children would not suffer punishment
- they would not experience the direct vision of God
- they would live in a natural happiness

This explanation was widely accepted for centuries in scholastic theology.

However, **it was never defined as dogma**.

Today the Church maintains a posture of hopeful trust in divine mercy.

This reminds us of something essential:

God is not limited by our theological categories.

4. The Possible Immaculate Conception of Saint Joseph

Another interesting theological idea is the hypothesis that:

Joseph

might have been preserved from original sin from the moment of his conception.

Some theologians defended this possibility for several reasons:

- the unique mission of Saint Joseph as guardian of the Holy Family
- his extraordinary holiness



- his singular closeness to Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary

Among those who reflected deeply on the spiritual greatness of Saint Joseph was the Franciscan preacher:

Bernardine of Siena

However, the Church never defined this idea as official doctrine.

The only human being — besides Christ — whose conception without original sin has been defined as dogma is:

Mary

This prudence protects the uniqueness of the Marian privilege.

5. Automatic Universal Salvation

Another doctrine that generated debate was the possibility that **all human beings would inevitably be saved**.

This idea is known as **universal apokatastasis**.

Its origin lies in the thought of a theologian from the early centuries of Christianity:

Origen

Origen speculated about the possibility that, at the end of time, all creation — even demons — might be reconciled with God.

However, this idea was rejected by the Church because it contradicts two fundamental teachings:

- human freedom
- the reality of the final judgment

Jesus Himself warns clearly:



“Enter through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction.”

(Matthew 7:13)

Therefore, automatic universal salvation **cannot be considered Catholic doctrine**.

Nevertheless, the debate helped deepen the understanding of God’s mercy and human responsibility.

6. Mary Co-Redemptrix: A Contemporary Theological Debate

Another issue that has generated discussion in more recent times is the title **Mary Co-Redemptrix**.

Many saints and theologians have used this expression to describe the unique cooperation of the Virgin in Christ’s redemptive work.

Among them are:

Maximilian Kolbe
Louis de Montfort

The central idea is clear:

- Jesus Christ is the only Redeemer
- but Mary cooperates in a unique way in the plan of salvation

However, some theologians believe the term could generate confusion if interpreted incorrectly.

For this reason, the Church **has not defined it as dogma**, although it fully recognizes Mary’s cooperation in redemption.



7. Why the Church Acts with Prudence When Defining Dogmas

When observing these historical examples, something very important becomes clear:

the Church does not define dogmas lightly.

A dogmatic definition means declaring that a truth belongs definitively to the **deposit of faith revealed by God.**

For this reason, discernment requires:

- centuries of theological reflection
- consensus among bishops
- deep study of Scripture
- the guidance of the Holy Spirit

Christ promised His Church:

“*The Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth.*”
(John 16:13)

This slow process is precisely a sign of fidelity.

8. What These Doctrines Teach Us for Our



Spiritual Life

Beyond their historical interest, these theological discussions offer **very valuable spiritual lessons for Christians today.**

1. The Christian faith is profound

Faith is not a collection of superficial ideas.

It is a mystery that requires reflection, prayer, and study.

Theology is a way of **loving God with the intellect.**

2. God always surpasses our understanding

Many debates arise because we attempt to confine the divine mystery within human categories.

But God is always greater than our explanations.

This invites us to live our faith with **intellectual humility.**

3. Patience is part of the search for truth

We live in a culture that demands immediate answers.

Yet the Church teaches us that truth matures slowly.

In spiritual life the same is true: **holiness is built with patience and perseverance.**

4. Charity must guide every theological discussion

Theological debates only make sense if they are guided by love.



Saint Paul expresses this clearly:

“Let all that you do be done in love.”
(1 Corinthians 16:14)

Without charity, even theology can become intellectual pride.

Conclusion: The Wisdom of a Church That Knows How to Wait

The doctrines that came close to becoming dogma reveal something fascinating about the history of Christianity.

For two thousand years, the Church has never stopped **reflecting, studying, and discerning**.

Some ideas eventually became dogma.

Others remained respected theological hypotheses.

But all of them have contributed to a greater goal: **to better understand the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ**.

And ultimately, that is the true purpose of theology.

It is not simply about accumulating knowledge.

It is about drawing ever closer to the heart of Christ.

As the Gospel says:

“This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and



| *Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*
(John 17:3)

To know God, to love Him, and to follow Him...
that is the ultimate goal of every theological reflection and every Christian life.