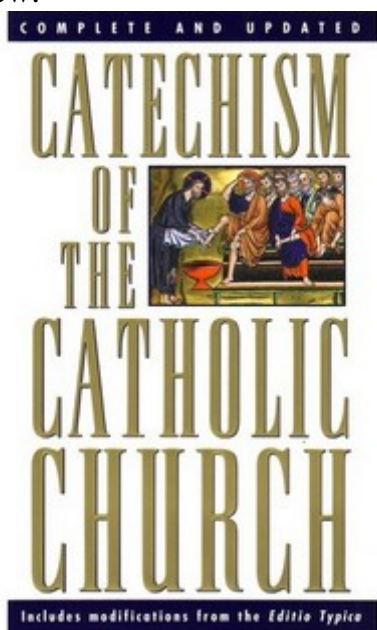


Can the Catechism of the Catholic Church evolve?

“A tradition, if it is not to die, must express its convictions in the language of the time: a language that will, therefore, be new.”



Pope Francis recently stated that the death penalty is “inadmissible” and should be categorically banned. Speaking at a Vatican conference celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, he clearly emphasized that “Tradition is a living reality”.

“Only a partial vision can think of ‘the deposit of faith’ as something static,” he explained. “One cannot conserve the doctrine without making it progress, nor can one bind it to a rigid and immutable reading without humiliating the Holy Spirit.”

Indeed, “since the very beginning of Christianity, the faith has been expressed anew according to new cultures, and new questions, sensitivities, and realities”, states Michel Castro, Professor of Fundamental Theology in the Theology Faculty of Lille University.

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“Evangelical values enter the consciousness of human beings over time,” adds the Jesuit theologian Bernard Sesboüé, “and the Church has sometimes had to follow a long road in order to increasingly clarify the element of ‘infallible truth’”.

One moral theologian puts it this way: “Today, we consider that there are solutions other than the death penalty. The human conscience is appalled by the idea of having to kill a person for the good of others. We give much greater consideration to each person as an individual. It seems illogical to defend life from the moment of conception and, at the same time, to support the death penalty.”

Another theologian, explaining Pope Francis' position, emphasizes that "doctrine has always developed in the same way as a plant does. Sometimes, it extends too far into ramifications and sub-concepts, and it has to be trimmed back. This is what the Pope did on Wednesday evening."

Benedict XVI proceeded in the same way, in 2007, when he cut away the notion of limbo, a sort of theological overgrowth that was no longer valid. Some theological elements have helped to reveal the doctrine more clearly but do not necessarily belong to the doctrine itself.

Nonetheless, the Catholic Church prefers to speak of the "homogenous development of the doctrine" rather than of "evolution". This was pointed out by Father Jacques Ollier, a teacher in the Theology Faculty of the Collège des Bernardins and the parish priest of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont. His view is based on the theology of Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890) because of whom the lived experience of believers was recognized as a key part of theological reflection.

Father Jacques Ollier explains that "The term 'evolution' is not really appropriate as it could lead one to think of moving from one truth to another, without there being any integral relationship between them."

He continues: "However, if we speak of 'development', as in the 'development of a person, we do so because we believe above all in a personal God, not in a message. The Revelation itself remains the same, even though it may find a different expression in some of its parts."

However, is the development of the doctrine always homogenous and linear? Is there always continuity? Or is there, instead, rupture at times, as in the case of slavery, which was once acceptable but then considered as contrary to human dignity and rights?

Such subtleties are cause for debate among theologians.

"Theological tradition speaks of homogenous development; more critical minds speak of the Church changing its mind without wanting to admit it," points out one theologian.

"The Church does not want anyone to think that what was said before was false. Rather, this was partial or did not take into account some elements that have since been revealed thanks to the faith of Christian people. It was not false, as such, as it was true in the context of the time. But, since then, other elements have been revealed that invite a different perspective on certain points."

The Church has adopted canonical criteria of discernment that mark out the perimeter of this "development". The Magisterium, the first, is the guarantor. And some subjects lend themselves to new interpretations and developments more than others: the Church's position on the death penalty is more susceptible to evolution than its position on the Trinity.

This is the case at the base of most moral questions, which come up against changing contingent realities.

"Some Catholics are concerned when they read *Amoris Laetitia*," the same theologian continues, "because they think the doctrine has changed. It hasn't changed. Rather, the Church is taking into

consideration elements that were not taken into account as much previously. This is particularly true with regard to the individual value of each human being. The discourse will change, but the fundamental vision remains the same. This is the great tradition of discernment.”

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