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2013

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## John Paul II on the Development of Doctrine

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THE VAST theological and philosophical opus of Pope St. John Paul II forbids any brief summary and invites caution. This caution is especially appropriate when the topic is one that he did not systematically address in any one major work. Although John Paul wrote encyclicals or apostolic addresses on virtually all significant topics in theology, there is no work focused on the development of doctrine.

Indeed, for some it would seem as if there could not be any such work insofar as the pope is characterized as traditional and opposed to certain proposed changes in the Church. In some ways of course, he has earned this characterization. John Paul II affirms traditional teachings, thereby rejecting what others take as legitimate developments of doctrine, in a number of controversial areas. The teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* affirmed the traditional Catholic teaching about intrinsically evil acts in opposition to proportionalism, and it likewise affirmed that some particular actions, mortal sins, can undermine our friendship with God in opposition to a “fundamental option,” which would make individual “inner-wordly” acts of lesser importance with respect to salvation. With respect also to many particular moral issues, including contraception and reception of communion for those divorced and married without an annulment, the pope reaffirms the teaching of his Petrine predecessors.

These traditional positions lead some to suggest that there exists a great reticence on the part of John Paul II to admit development of doctrine. Opponents of proportionalism are described as the “*immobilisiti*”<sup>1</sup> who

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<sup>1</sup> Richard McCormick, “Moral Theology 1940–1989: An Overview,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 1–24, at 21.



crush the faithful under unchanging principles<sup>2</sup> in the course of “waging war with ongoing police action.”<sup>3</sup> *The National Catholic Reporter* expressed this interpretation of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II in its coverage of a debate between then Fr. Avery Dulles and Fr. Richard McCormick about Church authority and dissent: “McCormick said the problem is rather the attitude of Vatican officials who act as if all doctrines except social teachings ‘are written in stone’ and treat any talk of doctrinal development as ‘confrontational.’ . . . If public dissent has become a problem, McCormick said, it is largely because of the attitudes and statements of John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger, who suppress authentic development through an overly rigorist stance.”<sup>4</sup>

However, these perspectives should take into account the numerous occasions in which John Paul II explicitly recognized development of doctrine. For example, in *Veritatis Splendor*, the pope noted that doctrinal development has taken place in various areas of theology. The Church “has achieved a *doctrinal development* analogous to that which has taken place in the realm of the truths of faith. Assisted by the Holy Spirit who leads her into all the truth (cf. Jn 16:13), the Church has not ceased, nor can she ever cease, to contemplate the ‘mystery of the Word Incarnate’, in whom ‘light is shed on the mystery of man.’ ”<sup>5</sup> Doctrinal development is not limited to Christological or Trinitarian mysteries but includes more practical and ethical concerns. In the pope’s words,

At all times, but particularly in the last two centuries, the Popes, whether individually or together with the College of Bishops, have developed and proposed a moral teaching regarding the *many different spheres of human life*. In Christ’s name and with his authority they have exhorted, passed judgment and explained. In their efforts on behalf of humanity, in fidelity to their mission, they have confirmed, supported and consoled. With the guarantee of assistance from the Spirit of truth they have contributed to a better understanding of moral demands in the areas of human sexuality, the family, and social, economic and political life. In the tradition of the Church and in the history of humanity, their teaching represents a constant deepening of knowledge with regard to morality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Talvacchia and Mary Elizabeth Walsh, “The Splendor of Truth: A Feminist Critique,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O’Keefe (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 308.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Stevens, “A Matter of Credibility,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Schaeffer, “Giants dissent, gently, over authority,” *National Catholic Reporter*, vol. 35, no. 33 (Jul 2, 1999): 3.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §28.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §4.



Passages such as these make clear that the pope recognized, indeed celebrated, doctrinal developments.<sup>7</sup> This essay calls attention to this seldom discussed, and often unrecognized, aspect of his thought by giving a more systematic presentation of remarks about development of doctrine found in various places in the *opera omnia* of St. John Paul.

Before attempting to bring together various *obiter dicta* in the opus of John Paul II about doctrinal development, it is also important to notice that the pope himself on various occasions contributed to the development of doctrine. In his article, “John Paul II and the Development of Doctrine,” Gerald O’Collins suggests that one can see development in three areas.<sup>8</sup> First, the pope emphasized the human experience of God’s self-revelation, an experience that continues in our own day, in the lives of each individual believer, and will continue until the definitive revelation of God at the Second Coming of Christ. Secondly, the pope deepened the Christian understanding of suffering, viewing it as a medium through which Christ becomes present to transform from within the person in pain.<sup>9</sup> Third, John Paul emphasized in a new way that the Holy Spirit is at work not just in the Church but also in peoples and cultures outside the Roman Catholic communion.<sup>10</sup> We can add to O’Collins’s list the teaching of *Evangelium Vitae* that the use of capital punishment should be rare if non-existent, which is, arguably, a doctrinal development.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in *Ut Unum Sint*, the pope’s statement on “reinterpreting” the role of the papacy in order to facilitate greater unity with the Eastern churches may be understood as explicitly calling for if not itself being a doctrinal development.<sup>12</sup> This list is not meant to be an exhaustive

<sup>7</sup> See too, Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §§1 and 3; *Fides et Ratio* §11.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald O’Collins, “John Paul II and the Development of Doctrine,” in *The Legacy of John Paul II*, ed. Michael A. Hayes and Gerald O’Collins (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 1–16.

<sup>9</sup> See Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* §26.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* §5.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* §56. See too, Christopher Kaczor, “Capital Punishment and the Catholic Tradition: Contradiction, Change in Circumstance, or Development of Doctrine,” *Nova et Vetera* 2, no. 1 (2004): 279–304.

<sup>12</sup> “Whatever relates to the unity of all Christian communities clearly forms part of the concerns of the primacy. As Bishop of Rome I am fully aware, as I have reaffirmed in the present Encyclical Letter, that Christ ardently desires the full and visible communion of all those Communities in which, by virtue of God’s faithfulness, his Spirit dwells. I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.” John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §95.



summary of all the ways in which the pope contributed to doctrinal development. However, these examples are enough to show that it is inaccurate to claim that Pope John Paul merely statically reiterates and does not develop Catholic teaching. Indeed, the pope called for and prayed for doctrinal development on several occasions.<sup>13</sup>

However, this essay does not focus on John Paul's doctrinal developments in their particularity (on suffering, human experience, or capital punishment) but rather focuses on the subject of doctrinal development as articulated in various texts, especially *Veritatis Splendor*. The pope's account of doctrinal development emerges from several factors including his understanding of Vatican II, his consideration of 'enculturation,' and his acknowledgement that history and the development of non-theological knowledge contributes to the deepening of theological study and practice.

### **John Paul II on Vatican II on Development of Doctrine**

Any contextualized account of John Paul II's theology must place his thought in relationship to the Second Vatican Council. The choice of his name, taken of course from the two popes who oversaw the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII and Paul VI, says something important about Pope John Paul II. He understood a primary task of his Petrine ministry to be the implementation of the Council. He wrote, "For me, then—who had the special grace of participating in it and actively collaborating in its development—Vatican II has always been, and especially during the years of my Pontificate, the constant reference point of my every pastoral action, in the conscious commitment to implement its directives concretely and faithfully at the level of each Church and the whole Church."<sup>14</sup> The pope's thought on development arises from his understanding of the Second Vatican Council's account of development.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul calls attention to an important distinction drawn by John XXIII between the doctrine itself in its fullness, our understanding of doctrine, and its expression to diverse audiences:

The development of the Church's moral doctrine is similar to that of the doctrine of the faith. The words spoken by John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council can also be applied to moral doctrine: "This certain and unchanging teaching (i.e., Christian doctrine in its completeness), to which the faithful owe obedience, needs to be more deeply understood and set forth in a way adapted to the needs of our time. Indeed, this deposit of the faith, the truths

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §95.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Fidei Depositum*, introduction.



contained in our time-honored teaching, is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning preserved intact) is something else.<sup>15</sup>

This quotation sums up in kernel form the essential challenge of any account of Christian doctrinal development. Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's revelation, and prior to the Second Coming of Christ public revelation ends with the death of the last apostle. Yet, our understanding of the fullness of revelation can grow and develop over time, both for us as individual Christians and for the Christian community as a whole.<sup>16</sup> This process of deepening our understanding and expressing this understanding in ways suitable for evangelization and catechesis of various groups is called doctrinal development. This development includes deeper understandings of the mysteries of faith, such as the Trinity or the hypostatic union, but it also includes deeper understandings of moral doctrine, such as undertaken by the pope in *Centesimas Annus* which developed the teachings of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* as well as *Veritatis Splendor*. It is important to note that both the Council and John Paul II, as mentioned in the quotation above, highlight that legitimate development retains intact the original meaning of the doctrine even if expressing this meaning in a new way.

It is important, as the pope says in *Veritatis Splendor*, for theologians to keep this distinction in mind: "The Council also encouraged theologians, 'while respecting the methods and requirements of theological science,

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, note 100; citations within the quotation omitted.

<sup>16</sup> The Second Vatican Council put the point as follows: "This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her. The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church. Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col. 3:16)." Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* §8.



to look for *a more appropriate way of communicating* doctrine to the people of their time; since there is a difference between the deposit or the truths of faith and the manner in which they are expressed, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment.’”<sup>17</sup> This distinction between the deposit of faith and the manner in which these truths are expressed keeping the same meaning and judgment, drawn by Pope John XXIII at the opening of the council, is a frequent reference point in John Paul’s thought. John Paul notes that John XXIII’s insight is glossed in Vatican II’s decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*:

Taking up an idea expressed by Pope John XXIII at the opening of the Council, the Decree on Ecumenism mentions the way of formulating doctrine as one of the elements of a continuing reform.<sup>18</sup> Here it is not a question of altering the deposit of faith, changing the meaning of dogmas, eliminating essential words from them, accommodating truth to the preferences of a particular age, or suppressing certain articles of the *Creed* under the false pretext that they are no longer understood today. The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety. In matters of faith, compromise is in contradiction with God who is Truth. In the Body of Christ, “the way, and the truth, and the life” (*Jn* 14:6), who could consider legitimate a reconciliation brought about at the expense of the truth?<sup>19</sup>

Authentic development of doctrine, on John Paul’s view, must always be a fuller expression of previously proclaimed truth and must never be a reduction or elimination of essential elements of the Christian patrimony. Authentic development includes the fullness of faith, a retention of the meaning of dogmatic formulas, and a proposing of Christian truths, even if not commonly understood in a particular cultural context.

Keeping in mind the distinction between the deposit of faith and doctrinal formulations of the deposit of faith, Vatican Council II notes that doctrinal formulations may be deficient.

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<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §29.

<sup>18</sup> “What has just been said about the lawful variety that can exist in the Church must also be taken to apply to the differences in theological expression of doctrine. In the study of revelation East and West have followed different methods, and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God’s truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting.” Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* §17.

<sup>19</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §18.



Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement toward unity. Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment.<sup>20</sup>

This teaching of Vatican II finds its echo in *Veritatis Splendor*. The pope recognizes that doctrinal development may arise from the imperfections of the arguments put forward by the Magisterium in articulating Church teaching. He notes, “While recognizing the possible limitations of the human arguments employed by the Magisterium, moral theologians are called to develop a deeper understanding of the reasons underlying its teachings and to expound the validity and obligatory nature of the precepts it proposes, demonstrating their connection with one another and their relation with man’s ultimate end.”<sup>21</sup> Moral theologians can contribute to development but shoring up these limitations in the human arguments deployed in addition to giving their loyal assent to the Magisterium’s teachings. In a variety of ways, the teachings of the Second Vatican Council orient and stimulate John Paul’s reflections on doctrinal development but the pope’s thought on this subject includes elements not emphasized by the Council, such as enculturation.

### **Enculturation Contributes to Doctrinal Development**

A second vital stimulus to Pope John Paul’s thinking on doctrinal development is enculturation. Enculturation, defined as “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures,” is a recurring theme in the thought of Pope John Paul II.<sup>22</sup> The Gospel message encounters various cultures transforming them, but the change is not unilateral: Christian theology (and practice) can transform non-Christian culture, but non-Christian culture can also inform Christian thought and practice. Although Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 3:18), our understanding of the person and message of Jesus,

<sup>20</sup> Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism* §6.

<sup>21</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §110.

<sup>22</sup> See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* §52. Also, *Slavorum Apostoli* (2 June 1985) §11: AAS 77 (1985), 792, and *Ut Unum Sint* §19.



particular that articulation of our understanding known as theology, does change. Encounter with another culture is an engine for that change, as when early Christianity encountered Hellenistic thought and culture, giving rise to various Patristic theologies. Not just Greek culture but other cultures can contribute to a richer understanding of faith. In the words of Pope John Paul in *Fides et Ratio*:

In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. . . . What has been said here of India is no less true for the heritage of the great cultures of China, Japan and the other countries of Asia, as also for the riches of the traditional cultures of Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Great care and discernment are needed in this process, for not every aspect of every culture should be embraced. Yet the Spirit of God is not confined to one people or one culture. Indeed, in virtue of God's love for all people, we can expect to find elements of the true, the good, and the beautiful in every culture and in every person. One of the reasons that other cultures can enhance the Christian understanding of revelation is that John Paul believed that the Holy Spirit is at work, not just in the Church, but also in peoples and cultures outside the Roman Catholic communion.<sup>24</sup> In *Dominum et Vivificantem*, John Paul taught that the Holy Spirit is active in every time and in every place, and in the lives of every individual.<sup>25</sup> In *Redemptoris Missio*, he wrote: "the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions."<sup>26</sup> This insight that cultures untouched by the Gospel, nevertheless contain elements of truth is ancient in the Christian tradition. The Fathers of the Church spoke of the *semina Verbi*, the seeds of the Gospel from which evangelization and missionary work can spring. By encouraging the use of insights from other cultures, John Paul II echoes the thought of Augustine, who pointed out in *De Doctrina Christiana* that whatever is true, even as found in pagans, comes ultimately from God. Just as the Israelites stole gold from the Egyptians as they were leaving for the promised land, so too the Christian should make use of non-Christian sources of wisdom

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<sup>23</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* §72.

<sup>24</sup> Here, I am drawing on the work of Gerald O'Collins, "John Paul II and the Development of Doctrine," *The Legacy of John Paul II*, ed. Michael A. Hayes and Gerald O'Collins (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 1–16, especially 11–13.

<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* §5.

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* §28.



in understanding God's word.<sup>27</sup> John Paul finds this insight also expressed in the Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas:

In the footsteps of the Fathers of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas can maintain that no spirit can be so darkened as not to participate in some way in the divine light. In fact, every known truth from any source is totally due to this "light which shines in the darkness," since every truth no matter who utters it, comes from the Holy Spirit (*Super Ioannem*, 1, 5, sec. 3, n. 103).<sup>28</sup>

Every truth, whatever its cultural or philosophical origin, ultimately comes from God and can perhaps contribute to enriching our understanding of revelation. Great discernment is needed to find and refine the elements of the true, good, and beautiful in a particular system of thought or culture, and yet to find these elements and incorporate them into a fuller understanding of revelation advances the human quest for greater unity with God.

### **Diversity of Language and Philosophy Contributes to Development**

Another source of development of doctrine is the diversity of language and unfolding of philosophical insights. Just as John Paul often highlighted

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<sup>27</sup> In Augustine's words, "If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use. Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them when they fled, as if to put them to a better use. They did not do this on their own authority but at God's commandment, while the Egyptians unwittingly supplied them with things which they themselves did not use well. In the same way all the teachings of the pagans contain not only simulated and superstitious imaginings and grave burdens of unnecessary labor, which each one of us leaving the society of pagans under the leadership of Christ ought to abominate and avoid, but also liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth, and some most useful precepts concerning morals. Even some truths concerning the worship of one God are discovered among them. These are, as it were, their gold and silver, which they did not institute themselves but dug up from certain mines of divine Providence, which is everywhere infused, and perversely and injuriously abused in the worship of demons. When the Christian separates himself in spirit from their miserable society, he should take this treasure with him for the just use of teaching the gospel. And their clothing, which is made up of those human institutions which are accommodated to human society and necessary to the conduct of life, should be seized and held to be converted to Christian uses." *De Doctrina Christiana* XL, 60.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, "The Holy Spirit as the Source of Every Truth," General Audience, September 16, 1998.



that different formulations may be used to speak of the same truth, he also emphasized that these varying expressions are a source of richness of the Church. These differences need not be viewed as detrimental for unity, but can contribute to a legitimate pluralism of expression aiding believers of different kinds to understand, believe, and live Christian teaching. In a rich quotation from *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul developed his thoughts on this matter with reference to ecumenism.

In dialogue, one inevitably comes up against the problem of the different formulations whereby doctrine is expressed in the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities. This has more than one consequence for the work of ecumenism. In the first place, with regard to doctrinal formulations which differ from those normally in use in the community to which one belongs, it is certainly right to determine whether the words involved say the same thing. This has been ascertained in the case for example of the recent common declarations signed by my Predecessors or by myself with the Patriarchs of Churches with which for centuries there have been disputes about Christology. As far as the formulation of revealed truths is concerned, the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* states: “Even though the truths which the Church intends to teach through her dogmatic *formulas* are distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given epoch and can be expressed without them, nevertheless it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the Sacred Magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions. In view of this, it must be stated that the dogmatic *formulas* of the Church’s Magisterium were from the very beginning suitable for communicating revealed truth, and that as they are they remain for ever suitable for communicating this truth to those who interpret them correctly”. In this regard, ecumenical dialogue, which prompts the parties involved to question each other, to understand each other and to explain their positions to each other, makes surprising discoveries possible. Intolerant polemics and controversies have made incompatible assertions out of what was really the result of two different ways of looking at the same reality. Nowadays we need to find the formula which, by capturing the reality in its entirety, will enable us to move beyond partial readings and eliminate false interpretations.<sup>29</sup>

This significant passage suggests several important points. First, a single proposition (a non-linguistic entity) may be expressed in contrasting linguistic forms: I believe in God, *Credo in Deum*, *Ich glaube an Gott*. These linguistically different tokens express the same proposition in English, Latin, and German. Even within a single language in varying eras, different linguistic forms may reflect the same proposition. In the wedding service from the

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<sup>29</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §38.



Anglican Book of Common Prayer, spouses promised in marriage, “With my body, I thee worship.” In contemporary usage, “worship” should be reserved to God alone, but in the archaic wedding vow, the proposition means roughly, “I will honor my spouse with my body.”

Just as various believers in different times express their shared belief with different linguistic expressions of the same truth, so too within even one epoch various believers may have alternative ways of expression that may seem, but not actually be, contradictory. In reality, the alternative ways of expression may simply reflect that one *Denkform* has replaced another. For example, a Platonically grounded theology may in fact complement rather than contradict an Aristotelian-inspired theology. Just as different formulations arose in the East and in the West to speak of the same realities, so too, one form of doctrinal development is a reformulation and representation of the same truth making use of different philosophical expressions common to a particular epoch.

Different philosophical approaches bring with them not just different ways of expressing propositions but also genuinely new insights into the truth. The advancement of philosophy aids the advancement of theology, which in turn stimulates doctrinal development. In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul wrote, “Theology in fact has always needed and still needs philosophy’s contribution.”<sup>30</sup> For the pope, various branches of theology require sound philosophical presuppositions in order to achieve their goals. In dogmatic theology, philosophy is needed to articulate theological concepts in a critical, consistent, and communicable way. Philosophy has contributed to dogmatic theology through clarifying the relationship of “person” and “nature,” human freedom and divine freedom, and the use of language to speak about God. Fundamental theology makes use of rational arguments to establish the credibility of Revelation. Moral theology employs concepts found in moral philosophy (including philosophy of law) such as guilt, voluntariness, conscience, law, freedom, virtue, final end, and weakness of will. Philosophy has enriched theology. The pope writes, “[S]ince God’s word is Truth (cf. *Jn* 17:17), the human search for truth—philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules—can only help to understand God’s word better.”<sup>31</sup>

On the pope’s view, theology can help philosophy itself develop over time in a variety of ways, and philosophy in turn can contribute to theology.<sup>32</sup> Christian belief itself stimulates philosophers to ask new questions, and philosophical advances in hermeneutics and linguistics can help

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* §77.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* §73.

<sup>32</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* §§76; 84; 101.



believers interpret Scripture. In Karol Wojtyla's own thought, the great achievement of St. Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics finds a complement in the personalism of more contemporary authors such as Max Scheler. On John Paul's view, since philosophy greatly contributes to theology, and since philosophy itself develops over time, we have a source of doctrinal development in the ongoing development of philosophy.

**New Questions, New Scientific Knowledge,  
and New Circumstances Leading to Development**

Three vital stimuli to doctrinal development are new questions, new knowledge, and new circumstances. Often doctrinal developments take place through the asking of previously unasked questions. Only after theologians wondered how Jesus could be both the Son of the Father and the Son of Mary did they begin to work out the doctrine of the Hypostatic Union. Similarly, in moral matters, new questions begin to be debated and out of these questions a new precision, a deepening and enriching, of doctrine can take place. Indeed, such new questions led in part to John Paul's writing of *Veritatis Splendor* itself: "Precisely on the questions frequently debated in moral theology today and with regard to which new tendencies and theories have developed, the Magisterium, in fidelity to Jesus Christ and in continuity with the Church's tradition, senses more urgently the duty to offer its own discernment and teaching, in order to help man in his journey towards truth and freedom."<sup>33</sup> In a similar way, doctrinal development is stimulated by new questions about ecumenism, the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to other ecclesial bodies, and so forth. He writes:

Any progress which the Catholic Church makes along the path of ecumenism must always be in keeping with the organic development of doctrine. Although the patrimony of faith and moral teaching can be better explained and understood, the essential content of salvation which the Catholic Church has always proclaimed must remain intact. When new doctrinal and moral questions arise, the Church must resolve them with the same principles and with the same logic of faith with which she has acted from her origins under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

For this reason, doctrinal development is both unpredictable and unending. It is unpredictable because one cannot foresee the new questions that

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<sup>33</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §27.

<sup>34</sup> Address of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II to a group of Bishops of the United States of America on their ad limina visit, Friday, October 7, 1988.



will arise in any particular era. It is unending because the human mind—on its restless pilgrimage towards better understandings of the truth—continually and ceaselessly questions. Indeed, faith itself gives rise to many new questions, for only if one, for example, believes that Jesus is true God and true man, does it make sense to begin to ask questions based on this belief, such as how does the human intellect of Jesus relate to the Divine Intellect? Hitherto unasked questions prod to doctrinal development; and doctrinal development leads to new questions.

New knowledge, in particular scientific advancements, can also contribute to development of doctrine. The pope notes: “It is a duty for theologians to keep themselves regularly informed of scientific advances in order to examine if such be necessary, whether or not there are reasons for taking them into account in their reflection or for introducing changes in their teaching.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the sciences can be of particular help when considering remedies for weakness of will or how to develop new (virtuous) habits.<sup>36</sup> As the Second Vatican Council pointed out, “In pastoral care, sufficient use must be made, not only of theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences, especially of psychology and sociology, so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally, shifting historical circumstances stir the development of Christian doctrine, on the pope’s view. “For the People of God, therefore, history becomes a path to be followed to the end, so that by the unceasing action of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Jn* 16:13) the contents of revealed truth may find their full expression.” This is the teaching of the Constitution *Dei Verbum* when it states that “as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly progresses towards the fullness of divine truth, until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her.”<sup>38</sup> This deepening over time, guided by the unceasing action of the Holy Spirit is particularly evident in the social teaching of the Church. John Paul reflected on and contributed to this development of doctrine in a number of encyclicals. The pope is historically aware of the way in which this teaching has unfolded since the nineteenth century, a prime example of how changing historical circumstances

<sup>35</sup> John Paul II, “Faith Can Never Conflict with Reason,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 4 Nov. 1992, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, Roy Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); Kelly McGonigal, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It* (New York: Avery, 2011); and Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* §62.

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* §11.



contribute to reformulations and reapplications of Church teaching. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, he notes that this social doctrine,

beginning with the outstanding contribution of Leo XIII and enriched by the successive contributions of the Magisterium, has now become an updated doctrinal “corpus.” It builds up gradually, as the Church, in the fullness of the word revealed by Christ Jesus and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 14:16, 26; 16:13–15), reads events as they unfold in the course of history.<sup>39</sup>

The social doctrine of the Church deepens over time, becoming enriched by successive generations of reflection as well as by diverse circumstances stimulating new reflections. In this, the social doctrine is not entirely different from more explicitly theological doctrine such as the Trinity. It took generations of theologians and bishops (and many bishop-theologians), wrestling with the fundamental Gospel truth that Jesus is one with the Father and yet Jesus is not the Father or the Spirit, to articulate the dogmatic formula of the Holy Trinity. In like manner, the fundamental truth of the Gospel message in the social order—the innate dignity of every single human person, whether a tax collector, prostitute, leper, or Samaritan—is adapted in every age to changing circumstances. The ethics of inclusion remains a constant aspiration (even if, in concrete circumstances, not the reality). This emphasis on the changing circumstances of history are relevant for understanding the pontiff’s view on how doctrine changes. The elements of continuity—most especially, fidelity to the Gospel message of Jesus—provide an orientation within which applications of fundamental principles to ever-changing circumstances can be made with practical wisdom.

On the one hand it is constant, for [doctrine] remains identical in its fundamental inspiration, in its “principles of reflection,” in its “criteria of judgment,” in its basic “directives for action,” and above all in its vital link with the Gospel of the Lord. On the other hand, it is ever new, because it is subject to the necessary and opportune adaptations suggested by the changes in historical conditions and by the unceasing flow of the events which are the setting of the life of people and society.<sup>40</sup>

On John Paul II’s view, development can be stimulated by historical occurrences that shape religious practice and in turn deepen the understanding of divine revelation. John Paul saw this kind of development in

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<sup>39</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §1.

<sup>40</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* §3.



the East during the persecution of Christians under the authority of Byzantine emperors seeking to abolish the use of icons in the liturgy. The pontiff writes:

An important doctrinal development occurred between the eighth and ninth centuries after the “iconoclast” crisis unleashed by several Byzantine emperors, who decided radically to suppress the veneration of sacred images. Many were forced to suffer for resisting this absurd imposition. St John Damascene and St Theodore the Studite come to mind in particular. The victorious outcome of their resistance proved decisive not only for devotion and sacred art, but also for a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation. Indeed, in the final analysis the defense of images was based on the fact that God truly became man in Jesus of Nazareth. It is therefore legitimate for the artist to endeavor to portray his face, not only with the aid of his talent, but especially by interior docility to God’s Spirit. The images refer to the Mystery that surpasses them, and they help us feel its presence in our life.<sup>41</sup>

This passage highlights not only the contingent historical circumstances that lead to doctrinal development but also the close link between the liturgy and development. When the persecution calls into question the legitimacy of liturgical practice, the response of St. John Damascene and St. Theodore the Studite not only stimulates liturgical devotion and sacred art but also deepens the theological understanding of the Incarnation and the importance of embodied representations of the Divine. Historical circumstances can occasion new insights into the deposit of faith.

### **Authentic Development Deepens Prior Teaching Rather Than Rejects It**

Like Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, Saint John Paul II recognized that not all changes in doctrinal expression are legitimate developments; some proposed “developments” are in fact doctrinal corruptions. One characteristic mark of authentic development, for the pope as for Newman, is continuity of the teaching with previous teachings. In other words, doctrinal development is not a contradiction or repudiation of prior teaching but rather an outgrowth and completion of what came previously. John Paul writes:

Within Tradition, *the authentic interpretation* of the Lord’s law develops, with the help of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who is at the origin of the Revelation of Jesus’ commandments and teachings guarantees

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<sup>41</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Eastern Theology has Enriched the Whole World,” §1, August 11, 1996.



that they will be reverently preserved, faithfully expounded and correctly applied in different times and places. This constant “putting into practice” of the commandments is the sign and fruit of a deeper insight into Revelation and of an understanding in the light of faith of new historical and cultural situations. Nevertheless, it can only confirm the permanent validity of Revelation and follow in the line of the interpretation given to it by the great Tradition of the Church’s teaching and life, as witnessed by the teaching of the Fathers, the lives of the Saints, the Church’s Liturgy and the teaching of the Magisterium.<sup>42</sup>

For John Paul II, the authentic interpretation of the Christian Tradition develops over time with the help of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is the same Spirit that came upon the Apostles at Pentecost, the same Spirit that inspired the authors of the various books of Scripture, and the same Spirit that guided the great ecumenical councils. This Spirit, animating the great Tradition of the Church, does not contradict itself.

John Paul emphasizes that authentic development does not involve a contradiction to the truths explicated in previous centuries. Even if truths need to be reformulated and re-expressed, they remain substantially the same.

Certainly there is a need to seek out and to discover *the most adequate formulation* for universal and permanent moral norms in the light of different cultural contexts, a formulation most capable of ceaselessly expressing their historical relevance, of making them understood and of authentically interpreting their truth. This truth of the moral law—like that of the “deposit of faith”—unfolds down the centuries: the norms expressing that truth remain valid in their substance, but must be specified and determined “*eodem sensu eademque sententia*” in the light of historical circumstances by the Church’s Magisterium, whose decision is preceded and accompanied by the work of interpretation and formulation characteristic of the reason of individual believers and of theological reflection.<sup>43</sup>

The work of theologians is absolutely essential in the growth and deepening of the Church’s understanding of the deposit of faith; this work, if it is to be an authentic service to theology, cannot be a radical reformulation that in fact denies the truth of what has unfolded in previous centuries.

Reflecting the work of the theologian who contributed perhaps the most to an articulated understanding of the subject of development of doctrine, Blessed John Henry Newman, the pontiff also views the faithful as having a role in the deepening of the Church’s understanding of reve-

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<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §27.

<sup>43</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §53.



lation. The pope echoes Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman's emphasis that authentic change involves "conservative action upon its past."<sup>44</sup> Development takes place in successive generations of the faithful, but authentic development is not a simple contradiction to current Church teaching. In an address to the U.S. Bishops, John Paul II noted that

the faithful themselves contribute to the further growth of the Church's understanding of God's word (Cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 8), and, in this sense, faith develops in each succeeding generation of the Church. But, in the words of Saint Vincent of Lerins, "it must truly be development of the faith, not alteration of the faith. . . . The understanding . . . of individuals as well as of the whole Church ought then to make great and vigorous progress with the passing of the ages and the centuries, but only along its own line of development, that is, with the same doctrine, the same meaning and the same import" (*First Instruction*, ch. 23). Understanding the development of doctrine in this way, we know that the present or "current" teaching of the Church does not admit of a development that is either a reversal or a contradiction.<sup>45</sup>

This principle of development excludes, it would seem, what some theologians advocate as legitimate changes to Church teaching, such as admission of women to priestly ordination, the use of contraception, and the ethical permissibility of intentional abortion.

An argument sometimes given in favor of a change of teaching on these matters is that the Catholic faithful have not received these teachings. It is the case that the vast majority of Catholics use contraception, and the inference is made that this widespread practice calls into question the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. Surely, the argument goes, if so many of the faithful have not received this teaching, it is legitimate to understand that the Church's doctrine on this point must develop to allow the use of contraceptives in at least some circumstances.

Although John Paul II valued the sense of the faithful as a way of gaining greater understanding of the truths of faith, he did not accept an oppositional understanding of the sense of the faithful and the teaching of the Magisterium.

In the community of the faithful—which must always maintain Catholic unity with the Bishops and the Apostolic See—there are great insights of faith. The Holy Spirit is active in enlightening the minds of

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<sup>44</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 199.

<sup>45</sup> Address of Pope John Paul II to a group of Bishops from the United States of America on their ad limina visit, October 22, 1983, 6.



the faithful with his truth, and in inflaming their hearts with his love. But these insights of faith and this *sensus fidelium* are not independent of the Magisterium of the Church, which is an instrument of the same Holy Spirit and is assisted by him. It is only when the faithful have been nourished by the word of God, faithfully transmitted in its purity and integrity, that their own charisms are fully operative and fruitful. Once the word of God is faithfully proclaimed to the community and is accepted, it brings forth fruits of justice and holiness of life in abundance. But the dynamism of the community in understanding, and living the word of God depends on its receiving intact the *depositum fidei*; and for this precise purpose a special apostolic and pastoral charism has been given to the Church. It is one and the same Spirit of truth who directs the hearts of the faithful and guarantees the Magisterium of the pastors of the flock.<sup>46</sup>

The Catholic faithful, properly understood, are those who are full of faith. Animated by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit guiding the Magisterium, the faithful understand and live the Gospel message. For this reason, statistical surveys of Catholics to determine the sense of the faithful are of little value. Some ethicists, writes John Paul, “can be tempted to take as the standard for their discipline and even for its operative norms the results of a statistical study of concrete human behavior patterns and the opinions about morality encountered in the majority of people.”<sup>47</sup> Such surveys typically include both those who rightly qualify as the faithful as well as those who were validly baptized but were catechized inadequately or not at all. Such surveys typically do not differentiate Catholics who are daily communicants and “Catholics” who do not believe in God. Furthermore, it is inconsistent to selectively appeal to the “sense of the faithful” on some issues but not others. Surveys show that Catholics reject the Church’s teaching on contraception, but the same surveys also show widespread non-acceptance of Catholic teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the duty to care for the poor with voluntary charitable donations, and the illegitimacy of the practice of capital punishment in contemporary circumstances. These later teachings, however, are not often called into question on the basis of a lack of reception by the lay faithful.

Even aside from such difficulties, neither surveys of human opinion nor surveys of human behavior determine what is morally right for human conduct. John Paul writes:

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<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Bishops of the United States of America, Chicago, Friday, 5 October 1979, §7.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §46.



Because the Church's morality necessarily involves a *normative* dimension, moral theology cannot be reduced to a body of knowledge worked out purely in the context of the so-called *behavioural sciences*. The latter are concerned with the phenomenon of morality as a historical and social fact; moral theology, however, while needing to make use of the behavioural and natural sciences, does not rely on the results of formal empirical observation or phenomenological understanding alone. Indeed, the relevance of the behavioural sciences for moral theology must always be measured against the primordial question: *What is good or evil? What must be done to have eternal life?*<sup>48</sup>

The behavior science cannot—in virtue of its empirical orientation and limitation—determine what is right and what is wrong. If we understand science as limiting itself to that which is empirically verifiable, science as such cannot and does not seek to make determinations of what is non-empirical, such as what is morally good or morally evil. The moral question is “What ought to be done?” which is not the same as the question “What has been done or what do (most) people think we ought to do?” Common human failings remain common human failings, despite being common. It is not consistent to hold (a) that the behavior of the majority of people determines what is morally right and (b) that there is an obligation to love your neighbor as yourself, since the majority of people have not lived according to this precept. Similarly, we cannot determine what is morally right by a simple consideration of public opinion. The use of contraception was condemned by all major Christian denominations and illegal in many part of the United States early in the twentieth century. Even in the early 1960s, a majority of Catholics thought that use of contraception was always wrong. Now, of course, the opinion polls have shifted in the opposite direction. But it is absurd to think that contraception was intrinsically evil and then became permissible or even obligatory when one person changed his mind about contraception and so tilted the balance in favor of contraception.

It must be noted, however, that faithful assent to the teaching of the Magisterium by both pastors and laity does not exclude a legitimate pluralism. Orthodoxy does not demand, on John Paul II's view, strict homogeneity or conformity in every theological, liturgical, or spiritual aspect. In particular, the pope was deeply aware that legitimate diversity is found in the Eastern Churches, which have developed over the centuries their own ways of living and expressing Gospel truth.

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<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §111.



Speaking of the Churches of the East, the Council acknowledged their great liturgical and spiritual tradition, the specific nature of their historical development, the disciplines coming from the earliest times and approved by the Holy Fathers and Ecumenical Councils, and their own particular way of expressing their teaching. The Council made this acknowledgement in the conviction that legitimate diversity is in no way opposed to the Church's unity, but rather enhances her splendour and contributes greatly to the fulfilment of her mission.<sup>49</sup>

Here, the pope spoke of doctrinal developments as they arose somewhat differently in the East and in the West. Yet his point can be broadened to include the insight that any legitimate development does not undermine but enhances the Church's unity by enabling the Church to better fulfill its mission. Unity in orthodoxy does not demand homogeneous conformity in ways of expression, practice, or worship in every respect. Now, where precisely to "draw the line" as it were—between differences that express a legitimate plurality and those differences that threaten the unity and mission of the Church—is a vital service that is, according to the Second Vatican Council and the pope, a responsibility exercised by the Magisterium.

### Conclusion

Although Pope John Paul II did not write a major systematic work on the subject of development of doctrine, one can find in his major works, especially *Veritatis Splendor*, remarks that indicate his views on this important topic. Situating his insights about development in relationship to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the pope recognizes that multiple factors contribute to and stimulate new formulations of the faith of the Church. These include new scientific and philosophical insights, new circumstances and questions, and a diversity of cultures which can enrich the Church's understanding of revelation. Although one searches in vain the *opera omnia* of John Paul II for a full length work similar to Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, one can find in various passages from various works important insights into the topic of doctrinal development. N&V

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<sup>49</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* §50.