

Editorial

THE DYNAMICS OF CATHOLIC MORAL TEACHING

At the core of Catholic moral teachings lies a paradox. The Church positions itself as the protector of an immutable moral law, derived from divine revelation and natural law; however, its specific moral teachings have evolved significantly over the centuries. Usury – lending money at interest – was historically condemned as a serious sin; presently, it is regarded as a standard economic practice. Slavery, which was tolerated for much of the Church’s history, is now explicitly condemned as inherently evil. Capital Punishment, once deemed a legitimate, albeit regrettable, means of state enforcement, has recently been reclassified by magisterial authority as fundamentally unacceptable. To sceptics, these changes may appear as moral relativism cloaked in ecclesiastical attire. To believers, they might seem like shifting goalposts. Nonetheless, a proper understanding of these transformations requires an appreciation of the underlying dynamics – the internal logic of growth, clarification, and profound insight – that shape the Catholic moral tradition.

The analogy, originally attributed to Cardinal John Henry Newman, likens the development of doctrine to that of a living organism. A sapling and a fully matured oak are identical as trees, yet they exhibit markedly different appearances.¹ Doctrine, encompassing moral doctrine, evolves not through contradiction but through the unfolding of what was initially implicit. This developmental model repudiates two errors: the rigidity error, which posits that nothing ever changes (implying the Church would be frozen in first-century Palestine), and the relativist error, which contends that truth varies with circumstances (thereby eroding moral absolutes). Rather, Catholic moral teaching functions similarly to a

¹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

language: its grammar remains invariant, while its vocabulary and syntax adapt to emerging contexts.

Natural Law Vs Eternal Law of God

The moral framework of Catholic doctrine is founded upon natural law – the participation of rational beings in the eternal law of God. This signifies that moral norms are not arbitrary divine edicts but are rooted in the comprehensible structure of human nature itself. Actions that respect and foster the comprehensive good of the human person—such as life, family, truth, property, and sexuality—are deemed virtuous; those that impair these goods are considered evil. This paradigm provides consistency and stability. Adultery, murder, and blasphemy are not deemed wrong solely because of the Church’s pronouncements; rather, the Church affirms their immorality because they are perpetually and universally incompatible with human flourishing. This principle remains unaltered.

Dynamism is introduced by applying these foundational principles. Consider the issue of usury². The classical condemnation was rooted in Aristotle’s argument that money is sterile³ – it does not naturally reproduce. Lending at interest was perceived as selling time, which belongs solely to God. However, with the rise of capitalism, the Church acknowledged that money in a dynamic economy indeed generates value through factors such as risk and opportunity cost. The core principle – that one should not exploit a neighbour’s necessity – remained intact. Nevertheless, the application evolved as the economic context changed. Similarly, regarding slavery: the principle of natural law, asserting that every human being possesses dignity and liberty, has always been present. Nonetheless, early Church teachings tolerated certain forms of servitude as a lesser evil within a fallen world. Over the centuries, however, the implications of baptismal equality and the *imago Dei* became undeniably clear: no human being may be owned as property. This development was not a reversal but rather a drawing out of what had always been latent.

A more recent and contentious example is capital punishment. For most of Church history, theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas justified the death penalty as a legitimate means of safeguarding society and administering retributive justice. Nevertheless, Pope

² John T. Noonan Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

³ Aristotle, *Politics: The Originals unabridged Classics, Book I, Part 10*, (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2026).

Francis, continuing the teachings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has declared the death penalty to be “inadmissible” because it undermines the inalienable dignity of the individual. Critics perceive a contradiction; supporters interpret it as an evolution. The fundamental principle—that legitimate authority may employ proportionate force to defend the common good—remains unaltered. What has changed are the empirical and moral evaluations concerning whether execution is ever proportionate today, given contemporary prison systems capable of incapacitation without capital punishment. The Church has not asserted that past popes were incorrect; rather, she affirms that the understanding of human dignity and the scope of permissible punishment has been more comprehensively comprehended.

This dynamism is possible because Catholic moral teaching distinguishes between absolute norms (never do evil that good may come) and contingent applications. It also distinguishes between infallible definitions (e.g., that abortion is intrinsically evil) and prudential judgements (e.g., the morality of nuclear deterrence).⁴ The former are irreversible; the latter can—and should—change as circumstances and understanding mature. The tragedy of much public debate is that it collapses this distinction, treating every Vatican statement as equally unchangeable or, conversely, dismissing all moral teaching as merely political.

Cultural Accommodation Vs Pastoral Encounter

The primary catalyst for these developments is not merely cultural accommodation but rather pastoral encounter. As the Church engages with and responds to the suffering of real individuals—Indigenous victims of colonisers, prisoners on death row, and workers burdened by usurious loans—she revisits the Gospel with new enquiries. In addressing these enquiries, she often realises that her previous formulations were not incorrect but rather incomplete. The Holy Spirit, promised to guide the Church into all truth, operates through history, not in spite of it. This has profound implications for contemporary Catholic engagement with moral teachings. It explicitly rejects a complacent “anything goes” mentality while also discouraging a Pharisaic rigidity that dismisses the Spirit’s guidance in evolving circumstances. To be a Catholic moral thinker entails maintaining two principles simultaneously: a steadfast dedication to

⁴ Curran, Charles E., *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, D.C. : Georgetown University Press, 1999).

the objective moral order and a humble readiness to perceive that order with increasing clarity. This dynamism is not a flaw warranting justification; rather, it is a hallmark of a vibrant tradition capable of addressing each era, as it is not confined to any single historical period.

Ultimately, Catholic moral teaching functions analogously to a river: the boundaries are established—the dignity of the human person, the finality of human acts, and the primacy of love—yet the water continually flows, deepens, and shapes new pathways as it encounters diverse terrain. To remain solely on the bank and assert that the river never changes is to confuse a still photograph with a living existence. Conversely, to swim without banks risks drowning. A devout Catholic learns to navigate both: grounded in truth yet flowing with the currents of grace.

The Contributors' Insights

Yuan Jin, in his article, examines *Peter Lombard's theology of marriage as presented in his Sentences*, focusing on his definition of marriage as a sacrament instituted before the Fall. It highlights Lombard's view that mutual present consent alone constitutes an indissoluble marital bond, without requiring consummation—exemplified by Mary and Joseph's union. The article explores Lombard's teachings on the three goods of marriage (faith, offspring, sacrament), marital equality, impediments, and permissible separation. It concludes by noting Lombard's enduring influence on Catholic marriage doctrine, including modern canon law's understanding of marriage as a covenant and lifelong partnership.

The article by *Burggraeve* studies Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) as promoting a "logic of pastoral mercy and discernment" in marriage and family. It emphasises the shift from abstract ideals to an ethic of growth that acknowledges imperfect, "irregular" situations (e.g., cohabitation, civil marriage, divorce, and remarriage). *Burggraeve* clarifies key concepts: the "law of gradualness," mitigating circumstances, and the "lesser good" (*minus bonum*) as seeds for growth. Central is the role of an enlightened, formed, and dialogical conscience, which allows personal discernment without abandoning Gospel ideals. The article applies this framework to remarried divorcees' access to communion and extends it to contraception and homosexuality, concluding that mercy and discernment together prevent laxity while encouraging authentic integration.

The article, *Proposals for the Use of Scripture in Catholic Moral Education*, authored by Edwin B. Odulio, examines the utilisation of Scripture in instructing Christian morality within the context of Philippine Catholic religious education. It delineates three predominant approaches: employing Scripture as an introductory narrative, as a historical source of moral wisdom, and as a foundation or support for moral obligations. Although useful, these approaches frequently do not incorporate Scripture thoroughly into the lessons. The author advocates a more comprehensive framework by emphasising Scripture's nature as the inspired Word of God, as a symbolic text that engages the imagination, and as a religious text that fosters a relationship with God. Drawing on the four senses of Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic), Odulio contends for progressing beyond the view of the Bible as merely a moral manual toward an encounter with God's living word, thereby transforming moral education into a formative and spiritually engaging process.

Jovit Maria, in her article, explores whether *change is possible in Catholic moral teaching* by distinguishing between unchanging doctrinal truths and their evolving understanding and pastoral application. Examining four key issues—contraception, organ transplantation, homosexuality, and capital punishment—the author highlights patterns of organic development rather than rupture. Contraception illustrates a shift towards responsible parenthood and conscience; organ transplantation progressed from concerns about mutilation to a focus on solidarity; capital punishment transitioned from retributive justice to an emphasis on human dignity; and homosexuality reflects expanding pastoral support while upholding traditional doctrine. The article concludes that authentic development entails deeper engagement with enduring moral truths rather than contradicting previous teachings.

The article, *Homosexuality and Erroneous Cognition: A Philosophical-Theological Inquiry Toward a Holistic Understanding of Human Sexuality*, critically examines contemporary understandings of homosexuality through philosophical, theological, and Indian theories of erroneous cognition. It distinguishes between sexual inclination, behaviour, and identity, arguing that absolutising sexual orientation as a defining identity reflects an incomplete view of human sexuality. Drawing on Catholic natural law and personalist anthropology, the study reaffirms the unitive and procreative dimensions of sexuality. Indian philosophical theories, specifically Anirvachaniya Khyati and Satkhyati, are employed to conceptualise homosexuality as

potentially involving erroneous cognition. While maintaining moral clarity, the paper emphasises empathy, respect, and compassionate pastoral accompaniment for individuals with same-sex tendencies, advocating for a holistic, dialogical approach.

The article written by Biju Lawrence Moolakkara & Maria Lourdes L. Chavez is a multiple case study of nine Deaf young adults in Kerala, India, and reveals that early access to Indian Sign Language (ISL) is the primary determinant of socio-emotional health, while oralist education and fragmented communication lead to isolation and developmental gaps. Participants described non-verbal gestures and lip-reading as exhausting and superficial, whereas Deaf communities and associations function as essential “lifelines” and “oxygen cylinders” for belonging and resilience. A positive Deaf identity, rooted in cultural pride rather than through a medical-deficiency lens, emerges as a protective factor against marginalisation. The findings advocate for bilingual-bicultural education, linguistically accessible mental health services, and Deaf-led mentorship to replace transactional survival with relational thriving.

This article, *Diversity of Karnatak Classical Music in Christian Thematic Kriti-s of George Panjara: A Study*, examines how Karnatak classical music relates to Christian devotional themes through the compositions of George Panjara, a composer based in Kerala. Unlike the Hindu-centric origins of traditional Karnatak music, Panjara’s work exemplifies inculturation—integrating Christian faith with indigenous musical forms. The paper analyses two of his *kriti-s* in the *audava ragas Hamsadwani* and *Karnataka Sudhasaveri*, focusing on their melodic structure, lyrical meaning, prosody, and tala. Panjara’s compositions blend Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit, drawing inspiration from biblical sources while maintaining classical rigour. His work renders Karnatak music accessible to Christian communities and broadens its devotional scope beyond Hindu traditions. The study underscores how unity in diversity is manifested within Indian classical music through innovative, faith-based composition.

Joby Jose Kochumuttom
Editor-In-Chief