

CAN ANYTHING CHANGE IN CATHOLIC MORAL TEACHING?

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Abstract

This article examines whether change is possible within Catholic moral teaching, with particular attention to the relationship between doctrinal continuity and development. Drawing on the concept of *aggiornamento* articulated by Pope John XXIII, it situates moral teaching within evolving historical and cultural contexts. It argues that while the objective content of the faith, grounded in the deposit of revelation, remains unchanged, the Church's understanding and pastoral application of moral principles develop over time. Through an analysis of key moral issues—contraception, organ transplantation, homosexuality, and capital punishment—the article identifies a pattern of organic growth marked by both continuity and discontinuity. It concludes that such developments represent not a rupture in doctrine, but a deepening of the Church's engagement with enduring moral truths.

Keywords: Change, Doctrinal Development, Contraception, Organ Transplantation, Homosexuality, Capital Punishment, *Fiducia Supplicans*

Introduction

The Catholic Church today encounters diverse and often conflicting perspectives on a range of moral issues, both within the ecclesial community and in the wider Christian context. As history demonstrates, the Church's engagement with moral questions unfolds

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within changing historical and cultural circumstances, giving rise to ongoing theological reflection on the application of authoritative teachings. In this light, it is relevant to revisit the concept of *aggiornamento*, articulated by Pope John XXIII, which emphasises the need for a renewed presentation of the Church's teaching in response to contemporary realities.

This article, titled "Can Anything Change in Catholic Moral Teaching?", seeks to examine the historical dynamics that have contributed to the development of Catholic moral teaching. In order to explore how such development is understood and articulated, the paper analyses four key moral issues in a systematic manner, including contraception, organ transplantation, homosexuality, and capital punishment. Through this analysis, the work aims to evaluate whether, and in what sense, change can be affirmed within Catholic moral teaching while remaining faithful to the continuity of the Church's doctrinal tradition.

1. Development/Change of Doctrine: A Broader Perspective

Doctrine is a teaching put forward by the universal Church as necessary for the faithful to believe. The Church uses the term "doctrine" to refer to all teaching (i.e., the content of the Magisterium) that has to do with matters of faith and morals.¹ While doctrine expresses the enduring truths of faith, it raises an important question: how are these unchanging truths to be understood and articulated within ever-changing historical and cultural contexts? This question gives rise to the notion of development or change within doctrine.

In general terms, 'change' refers to something becoming different from what it previously was.² In theological discourse, however, such change is more precisely understood as "development," although others claim there is too much of a discontinuity to meaningfully discuss "development." Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that these changes involve both continuity and discontinuity.³

¹ Deacon Pedro, *Deacon-Structuring Doctrine Part 1: Doctrine vs. Dogma*, November 16, 2018, <https://slmedia.org/blog/deacon-structuring-doctrine-part-1-doctrine-vs-dogma>.

² James V. Schall, "On 'Changing' Catholicism," *Catholic Pulse*, January 17, 2014, <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/apologetics/on-changing-catholicism.html>.

³ Charles E. Curran, ed., *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings: Readings in Moral Theology No.13* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 57.

In this sense, there is a genuine way in which Church teachings can be said to “change,” a process more accurately described as the development of doctrine.⁴ The Church speaks of the deposit of faith, or the deposit of divine revelation, which consists of the truths communicated by God through Scripture and Tradition.⁵ These truths can never change; however, the Church’s understanding of them grows and develops over the centuries, as expressed in her doctrines.

Thus, while the substance of truth always remains the same, the grasp of that truth—through the gradual unfolding of the divine mysteries—develops.⁶ This does not mean that the Church contradicts its previous teachings; rather, deeper insights are gained in which the core doctrinal principles are preserved.⁷ The development of doctrine, therefore, is a growth in the Church’s knowledge of matters already revealed.⁸ As John Mahoney observes, change is an “unavoidable element of human existence” and may at times represent an appropriate response to changing conditions.⁹ Having examined the broader theological framework of doctrinal development within the Catholic tradition, it is now necessary to consider whether similar developments are evident in Catholic moral teaching.

2. Changing Catholic Moral Teachings: A Possibility and Analysis

This section examines the traditional understanding of Catholic moral teaching and explores whether the Church’s stance on certain moral issues has developed over time. By analysing selected themes such as contraception, homosexuality, capital punishment, and organ transplantation, the discussion highlights how theological reflection, pastoral concerns, and historical contexts have influenced the

⁴ Eduardo Echeverria, “Development of Doctrine or Change in Teaching?” *The Catholic World Report*, October 19, 2014, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2014/10/19/development-of-doctrine-or-change-in-teaching/>.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publication in India, 2015), § 84 This truth Church preaches and safeguarding her infallible teachings.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§ 66–67.

⁷ “Changes in Church Teaching: The Development of Doctrine,” *Catholic Exchange*, December 31, 2002, <https://catholicexchange.com/changes-in-church-teaching-the-development-of-doctrine/>.

⁸ Thomas Pazhayampallil, *Pastoral Guide: Fundamental Moral Theology and Virtues* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2021), vol.1, 522.

⁹ John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 326–27.

articulation and application of moral teachings within the Catholic tradition.

2.1 Moral Teachings on Contraception: Shift in Emphasis

The term “contraception” comes from the Latin words “*contra*” (against) and “*concepto*” (to conceive). It refers to methods that prevent sexual intercourse from resulting in pregnancy. John T. Noonan states that contraception includes any action that stops conception. For example, sexual continence acts as a contraceptive by preventing fertilisation when no ovum is present, similar to physical barriers that block the sperm and ovum from meeting. Contraceptive methods can work physically before, during, or after intercourse, or chemically before or after the act.¹⁰

When we consider the practice of birth control in ancient history, early civilisations in Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Rome utilised a variety of methods—ranging from the withdrawal method to the use of honey, dates, and crocodile dung—to manage family size, often driven by economic necessity or population pressures.¹¹ In the first centuries of Christianity, contraception was generally viewed as wrong due to its association with paganism and heretical groups. The Catholic Church’s condemnation of contraception was influenced by St. Augustine’s struggle against Manichaeism in the 4th century. In the Middle Ages, contraception was seen as a serious sin, and this position was later codified by Thomas Aquinas, who categorised contraceptive acts as ‘sins against nature.’ For much of this period, the Church viewed such practices through the lens of ‘homicide,’ particularly in relation to coitus interruptus.¹²

In the modern period, the Malthusian theory on population growth and social concerns about overpopulation contributed to renewed discussions on birth control. At the same time, scientific developments in reproductive biology and the identification of fertile and infertile periods in the female cycle led to new debates about the morality of regulating births.¹³ Research by Kyusaku Ogino and Hermann Knaus

¹⁰ John T. Noonan Jr., “Contraception,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 124.

¹¹ Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Contraception: Its Theory, History and Practice* (London: Jon Bale, Sons and Danielsson, Limited, 1927).

¹² Noonan Jr., “Contraception,” 124-126.

¹³ Singer Sanford S., “Birth Control,” in *International Encyclopedia Of Ethics*, ed. John K. Roth (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1995), 91-92.

in the early 20th century clarified the timing of ovulation and opened the possibility of avoiding pregnancy through periodic abstinence. Until 1930, all Christian churches were generally opposed to artificial birth control, but the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church in 1930 marked a significant turning point by permitting contraception in certain circumstances. This decision reflected a growing emphasis within Protestant communities on individual conscience and the relational dimension of marital life.

In response to these developments, the Catholic magisterium reaffirmed its traditional teaching while also engaging with new pastoral and scientific contexts. In the 1930s, Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, which emphasised the procreative purpose of sexuality and marriage. It condemned contraceptive practises as vices against marriage¹⁴ but allowed the conscious use of the infertile period as a legitimate natural method of contraception.¹⁵ In 1951, in his Address to Italian Midwives, Pope Pius XII approved periodic abstinence for the first time, requiring valid reasons for limiting intercourse to non-fertile periods.¹⁶ In 1965, the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* introduced a person-centred approach to sexuality, encouraging responsible parenthood and the divine origin of married life. It called on couples to assess their situation on material and spiritual levels and be guided by conscience (GS 50). Vatican II recognised society's evolving needs and adopted a more flexible and discerning approach to morality.

However, the Catholic Church faced a crisis in the 20th century due to religious and scientific developments. John Rock invented the contraceptive pill in the 1960s, but the Church opposed it. Pope John XXIII created the Papal Birth Control Commission in 1963, but in 1966, it voted in favour of artificial contraception.¹⁷ This led to the creation of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, reaffirming the Church's opposition to artificial contraception.

Humanae Vitae and *Amoris Laetitia* are two encyclicals that emphasise contraception and responsible parenthood. *Humanae Vitae* rejects the view that spouses intend to transmit life or to indulge

¹⁴ Pius XII, *Casti Connubii*, 53.

¹⁵ Pius XII, *Casti Connubii*, 59.

¹⁶ Pius XII, "Address to Italian Midwives," 845.

¹⁷ John Gallagher, "Magisterial Teaching from 1918 to the Present," in *Readings in Moral Theology No.8: Dialogue about Catholic Sexual Teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 83-86.

lustful desires, distinguishing between natural family planning¹⁸ and artificial methods. It recommends morally valid means for achieving responsible parenthood, marking a significant shift in moral teaching since 1930. Pope Francis, on the other hand, emphasises contraception and responsible parenthood, opposing artificial birth control and advocating natural family planning. He emphasises couples' responsibility to make informed decisions about the number of children, fosters a dialogical approach, and respects couples' consciences.¹⁹ In this context, it can be observed that while the fundamental teaching that artificial contraception is intrinsically disordered remains unchanged, the Church's pastoral and moral approach has gradually developed. Greater emphasis is now placed on responsible parenthood, discernment, and the role of conscience, reflecting the Church's effort to respond to contemporary challenges while remaining faithful to its moral tradition.

2.2 Changing Perceptions of Organ Transplantation

Organ transplantation is the successful transfer of tissues or organs from one person to another. It is a significant medical advancement and is classified into four types: autografts, isografts, homografts, and heterografts.²⁰ The Catholic tradition's moral perspective on organ transplantation is rooted in the concept of mutilation. Philosophical and theological foundations support this perspective. In Immanuel Kant's deontological approach, practices of self-mutilation were known and were often regarded as violations of the integrity of the human body. Within this framework, practices such as paid organ donation, killing donors for organs, or unjust medical procedures are considered morally unacceptable.²¹

In the biblical and patristic periods, attitudes toward mutilation were also complex. While self-mutilation was generally condemned, certain forms of bodily intervention were permitted in cases of disease or medical necessity. Classical moral theologians often appealed to the fifth commandment and argued that individuals possess only a limited right over their bodies because the body ultimately belongs to God. Consequently, many moral manuals regarded self-mutilation as

¹⁸ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, § 14.

¹⁹ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, § 222.

²⁰ Autografts: within the same individual; isografts: between genetically identical individuals; homografts: between members of the same species; heterografts: between different species (e.g., animal to human).

²¹ Scaria Kanniyakonnal, *The Fundamentals of Bioethics: Legal Perspectives and Ethical Approaches* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 2007), 61-69.

inherently wrong.²² However, from the seventeenth century onward, moral theology increasingly drew upon the "principle of totality," rooted in the thought of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.²³ According to this principle, the parts of the body exist for the good of the whole, and therefore a part may be removed if it seriously threatens the well-being of the entire organism.²⁴ In medical ethics this principle justified surgical interventions that damaged or removed a part of the body when such action was necessary for the health of the person as a whole.

This principle became an important foundation for the Church's later reflection on organ transplantation. Pope Pius XI briefly referred to the principle of totality in *Casti Connubii* (1930), affirming that a person does not have unlimited authority over the members of the body but may permit their removal when this is necessary for the welfare of the whole organism.²⁵ This teaching reflects the Thomistic understanding that bodily integrity must be respected while also recognizing legitimate medical interventions. Pope Pius XII further developed this perspective in his 1952 Address to the First International Congress on the Histopathology of the Nervous System, where he discussed the principle of totality in greater detail. According to Pius XII, "by virtue of the principle of totality, by virtue of his right to use the services of his organism as a whole, the patient can allow individual parts to be destroyed or mutilated when and to the extent necessary for the good of his being as a whole. It is wholly absorbed by the totality of the organism to which it is attached."²⁶ Through this teaching, the Church gradually moved toward a more integrated moral understanding of medical interventions, and the principle of totality began to provide an ethical foundation for the acceptance of organ transplantation.

²² Raphael Gallagher, "Catholic Medical Ethics: A Tradition Which Progresses," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 13: Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 306–318, at 307.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Law and Political Theory*, trans. Thomas Gilby, vol. 38, (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1966), Ilae, q. 65, art.1.

²⁴ John F. Tuohey, "The Principle of Totality: A Reassessment of the Content of II-IIq. 65, a.1 and Its Role in Ethics," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 61, 1 (1995): 294–311.

²⁵ "Man has no power over his own body except in accordance with its natural purpose; he cannot mutilate or render himself incapable of natural functions, except for the welfare of the whole body," -Pius XII, *Casti Connubii*, § 23, AAS 22 (1930): 561–592.

²⁶ Kelly, "Pope Pius XII and The Principle of Totality," 380.

In contemporary Catholic teaching, organ transplantation is generally viewed in a positive light, provided that fundamental ethical principles are respected. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that organ donation from the living is morally good,²⁷ and that organ donation from the dead is noble and meritorious, provided that valid consent has been given. Furthermore, it emphasises that organ transplants are not morally acceptable if the donor or those who speak for them have not given their informed consent.²⁸ Similarly, Pope John Paul II described organ donation as a “beautiful act”,²⁹ expressing the culture of life and even as a form of genuine heroism³⁰ when it offers hope to those who have no other possibility of survival. At the same time, the Church continues to address new ethical challenges arising from medical developments, such as xenotransplantation and foetal tissue transplantation. In this context, the Pontifical Academy for Life has indicated that xenotransplantation may be morally acceptable in principle if certain conditions are fulfilled, including respect for the integrity of the human person and the avoidance of disproportionate risk.³¹ When viewed in light of this historical development, it becomes evident that Catholic moral reflection on organ transplantation has evolved from a strict concern about mutilation toward a broader anthropological perspective grounded in both the principle of totality and the principle of charity or solidarity. This development does not abandon earlier principles but integrates them within a deeper understanding of the human person as existing not in isolation but in a community of mutual care and responsibility.

²⁷ The natural moral law which rests on two essential principles: 1) good ought to be done; evil must be avoided and 2) evil may not be done that good might come of it. This compliments the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2296 which teaches that the removal of organs that would “directly bring about the disabling mutilation or death of a human being” is intrinsically evil.

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 494.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Address of the Holy Father John Paul II to the 18th International Congress of The Transplantation Society*, 3. “Here precisely lies the nobility of the gesture, a gesture which is a genuine act of love. It is not just a matter of giving away something that belongs to us but of giving something of ourselves, for ‘by virtue of its substantial union with a spiritual soul, the human body cannot be considered as a mere complex of tissues, organs and functions . . . rather it is a constitutive part of the person who manifests and expresses himself through it.”

³⁰ John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 86.

³¹ John Paul II, *Address of the Holy Father John Paul II to the 18th International Congress of The Transplantation Society*, 3.

2.3 Moral Teaching on Homosexuality: Emerging Concerns

Significant confusion exists regarding what the Catholic Church teaches about homosexuality. While the Church condemns same-sex sexual acts and opposes same-sex marriage, it simultaneously opposes unjust discrimination against homosexual persons. This dual stance is central to understanding the Church's moral and pastoral approach.

Homosexuality refers to sexual attraction or behaviour between persons of the same sex.³² In India, it was decriminalised on 6 September 2018 following the annulment of Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code.³³ Scholars note that its causes remain complex, involving biological, psychological, socio-cultural, and situational factors.³⁴ The term derives from the Greek *homo*, meaning "same," and indicates a persistent erotic attraction toward one's own sex.³⁵ Homosexuality includes both homosexual orientation and homosexual behaviour: persons who are attracted to the same sex have a homosexual orientation, whereas homosexual behaviour refers to sexual acts between persons of the same sex.³⁶

Christian understanding of homosexuality is also informed by biblical interpretation, though scholars caution against reading biblical texts without attention to historical and cultural contexts.³⁷ The account of Sodom (Gen 19) is debated, with some interpreting the

³² Thomas Samprickal, "Complex and Uncertain Etiology of Homosexuality," *Jeevadhara* 44, no. 6 (2014): 52.

³³ Mathew Kanayankal, "Annulment of Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code and the Approach of the Catholic Church towards Homosexuality," *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 23, no. 1 (2019): 53.

³⁴ Studies indicate that homosexual orientation may involve genetic, hormonal, neurological and developmental influences, including twin studies, family patterns, brain-structure differences such as the hypothalamus, prenatal hormones, and childhood relational experiences, though no explanation is conclusive. William H. Masters, Virginia E. Johnson, and Robert C. Kolodny, *Human Sexuality*, 3rd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown College Division, 1988), 45–46; M. Goretti Kankarathinam and Jose Parappully, "Sexual Orientations and Sexual Behaviours," in *Psychosexual Integration & Celibate Maturity*, ed. Jose Parappully and Jose Kuttianimattathil (Bangalore: Salesian Psychological Association, 2012), 218–219. Jose Parappully, "Role of Counselling in Psychosexual and Celibate Integration," in *Psychosexual Integration & Celibate Maturity*, ed. Jose Parappully and Jose Kuttianimattathil (Bangalore: Salesian Psychological Association, 2012), 607.

³⁵ Kankarathinam and Parappully, "Sexual Orientations and Sexual Behaviours," 241.; Parappully, "Role of Counselling in Psychosexual and Celibate Integration," 608.

³⁶ Kankarathinam and Parappully, "Sexual Orientations and Sexual Behaviours," 220.

³⁷ Shaji George Kochuthara, "Does the Bible Condemn Homosexuality," *Jeevadhara* 48 (2018): 43.

sin as inhospitality and social injustice rather than homosexuality.³⁸ Similarly, the Levitical prohibition (Lev 18:22) is often understood within the framework of cultic purity and idolatrous practices. In Romans 1:26–27, Paul contrasts “natural” and “unnatural” relations in reference to the created order, though some theologians argue this passage addresses those who abandon heterosexual relations rather than persons with stable same-sex orientation.³⁹ These interpretations underscore that Christian ethical reflection on homosexuality must consider context, intention, and the natural purpose of human sexuality.

Within Catholic theology, the moral assessment of sexuality has historically been conducted within the framework of natural law. Based on the Aristotelian teleology embraced by Thomas Aquinas, actions are ethically appraised based on their intrinsic end or purpose. Since human sexuality is oriented toward procreation and the union within marriage, acts that intentionally hinder this end are regarded as incompatible with natural law. From this viewpoint, homosexual acts are considered morally disordered due to their deviation from the procreative and complementary objectives of sexuality.

While condemning homosexual acts, Catholic teaching simultaneously affirms the inherent dignity of persons with homosexual tendencies, insisting that they be treated with respect and without unjust discrimination. Official magisterial documents such as *Persona Humana* reinforce that every genital act must occur within marriage and remain open to procreation, thereby describing homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered.⁴⁰ Importantly, the Church does not consider the entirety of a person’s character or personality as disordered.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes an important distinction between homosexual acts and same-sex attraction. It teaches that homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered” and contrary to natural law,⁴¹ whereas same-sex attraction is not considered a personal sin, even though it is described as an “objective disorder.”⁴² This distinction indicates that moral responsibility is attributed to freely

³⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options* (MN: Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2010), 281–86.

³⁹ Kochuthara, “Does the Bible Condemn Homosexuality,” 43–56.

⁴⁰ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana*, 1965, §12.

⁴¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 2357, § 429.

⁴² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 2358.

chosen actions rather than to mere tendencies. The 1986 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith further clarifies that "when they engage in homosexual activity, they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent."⁴³

At the same time, the Church emphasises that persons experiencing same-sex attraction must be treated with dignity and respect. Since this attraction is not sinful in itself, the Church does not mandate a universal or coercive approach, such as the imposition of reparative therapy. Instead, it calls for a pastoral response marked by sensitivity, accompaniment, and a universal call to chastity.⁴⁴

This pastoral approach has developed progressively within the Church's recent magisterium and has become particularly visible in the pontificate of Pope Francis. Without altering Church doctrine, he consistently emphasises a compassionate and welcoming attitude toward persons with homosexual orientation. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis reiterates that all persons possess inherent dignity as children of God and must be treated with respect, insisting that "every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity" and that unjust discrimination must be avoided.⁴⁵

This pastoral emphasis, however, is not entirely new but reflects continuity with earlier magisterial teaching. The 1986 Letter issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger), had already distinguished between homosexual orientation and acts while affirming the dignity of the person.⁴⁶ While Francis does not change the Church's teaching that marriage is a union between a man and a woman, his pastoral tone foregrounds mercy and accompaniment, thereby demonstrating doctrinal continuity alongside a renewed pastoral sensitivity.

While this development in pastoral approach reflects continuity in the Church's teaching, it has also generated significant public debate

⁴³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Vatican City, 1986), § 7.

⁴⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 2358, §429.

⁴⁵ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016), § 250, AAS 108 (2016): 402.

⁴⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1 October 1986), no. 3, Vatican.va, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html

and misunderstanding, particularly in contemporary media contexts. The question of homosexuality has been widely discussed, especially following media reports in 2021 suggesting the possibility of blessings for same-sex unions. Much of this discussion stemmed from misunderstandings of Pope Francis' remarks in the 2020 documentary *Francesco*.⁴⁷ In the interview, Pope Francis used the Italian phrase "*convivenza civile*," referring to legal civil protection for people living together, which many media outlets translated as support for "same-sex marriage."⁴⁸ However, the Pope was speaking about civil unions in the context of civil law rather than sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church.

In response to these interpretations, Church authorities offered clarification. Vatican spokesman Antonio Spadaro explained that civil unions belong to the domain of civil law and remain distinct from sacramental marriage. Due to ongoing confusion, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the 2021 *Responsum ad dubium*, which reaffirmed that sacramentals, including blessings, must be "objectively and positively ordered" in accordance with God's design.⁴⁹ Consequently, the Church cannot bless same-sex unions in a manner analogous to marriage, and such refusal does not constitute unjust discrimination.

Despite these clarifications, confusion persisted, particularly through media representations. The recent initiatives by local churches, though not altering Church doctrine, attracted widespread attention and were often reported in secular media in ways that amplified misunderstanding among the faithful. For example, a headline in *The Hindu* (December 19, 2023) announced that "Pope Francis approves blessings for same-sex couples,"⁵⁰ illustrating how media coverage can blur important theological distinctions.

⁴⁷ Evgeny Afineevsky (dir.), *Francesco* (documentary, 2020).

⁴⁸ La Nación, *El Papa pidió una ley de convivencia civil para los gays: "tienen derecho a estar cubiertos legalmente"*, 21 October 2020, updated 2 January 2024, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/el-papa-pidio-ley-convivencia-civil-gays-nid2485449/>.

⁴⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responsum ad dubium on the blessing of unions of persons of the same sex* (22 February 2021), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20210222_responsum-dubium-unioni_en.html.

⁵⁰ "Morning Digest | INDIA partners call fresh suspensions an 'attack on democracy'; Pope Francis approves blessings for same-sex couples, and more," *The Hindu*, December 19, 2023, 06:21 am IST, accessed July 20, 2024, <https://www.>

In reality, such reports referred to the 2023 declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* issued by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and approved by Pope Francis. This document emerged in a context where local developments – such as the German bishops’ decision to permit blessings beginning in 2026 and pastoral initiatives in Belgium – had intensified discussion regarding the Church’s position.⁵¹

In this context, it becomes necessary to interpret *Fiducia Supplicans* not merely as a response to contemporary debates but as a significant development in the Church’s pastoral approach. *Fiducia Supplicans* introduces the possibility of spontaneous, non-liturgical blessings for persons in irregular situations, including same-sex couples, as an expression of pastoral accompaniment and prayer. Such blessings must never resemble marriage rites, be associated with civil unions, or employ gestures, words, or symbols proper to a wedding.⁵² Instead, blessings are envisioned in informal settings, such as pilgrimages, visits to shrines, or personal meetings with a priest. It explicitly affirms that blessings within a liturgical or ritual context cannot be extended to same-sex unions, since such actions would imply a recognition analogous to marriage.⁵³

In this way, *Fiducia Supplicans* demonstrates that pastoral practice can develop without altering doctrinal foundations. The provision of such blessings signifies a movement toward greater acceptance and sensitivity while remaining fully within the bounds of Catholic teaching. Thus, the declaration maintains continuity in doctrine while articulating a renewed pastoral emphasis on accompaniment and prayer. Accordingly, while homosexual acts continue to be evaluated within the framework of moral teaching, the Church’s pastoral approach reflects a shift from a predominantly condemnatory stance

thehindu.com/news/national/morning-digest-december-19-2023/article67652073.
ece.

⁵¹ The Associated Press, “German bishops vote in favor of blessing same-sex unions in the Catholic Church,” *America Magazine: The Jesuit Review*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politicssociety/2023/03/10/german-church-synod-same-sex-blessings-244883/>.

⁵² Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings*, 18 December 2023, §37, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html.

⁵³ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings*, § 31.

to one characterised by sensitivity, accompaniment, and affirmation of human dignity.

2.4 An Evolving Approach to Capital Punishment

Capital Punishment, derived from the Latin *caput* (head, life), refers to the state-authorised execution of offenders. Practiced since ancient times through methods such as stoning, crucifixion, and burning, it was justified as a means of upholding justice, expiating wrongdoing, and deterring crime. The Code of Hammurabi established retributive justice, while Aristotle identified capital crimes.⁵⁴ A well-known instance of capital punishment in world history is the condemnation and execution of the great Greek philosopher Socrates.⁵⁵

In the biblical tradition, the Old Testament contains numerous references to the death penalty, and Mosaic Law lists offences punishable by death, including idolatry, blasphemy, murder, and adultery. Although the New Testament emphasises mercy, Jesus Christ himself suffered capital punishment under Jewish and Roman law. His response to the good thief (Lk 23:41) does not challenge its justice, and in the case of the adulterous woman (Jn 8:1-11), he emphasises mercy without denying the law. Early Christians accepted its legitimacy, as seen in Acts 5:1-11, in the divine punishment of Ananias and Sapphira, within the Roman Empire, where war and capital punishment were regarded as normal occurrences. Many Christians served in the military and the legal system after Constantine took power in 315 A D, and they participated in the execution of capital punishment because of their conflicting views on death and war.⁵⁶

Within the Christian tradition, attitudes toward capital punishment were not entirely uniform but generally acknowledged the authority of the state to impose it. Some Church Fathers, such as Origen and Cyprian, accepted the legitimacy of the death penalty, while others, such as Tertullian and Lactantius, expressed more pacifist attitudes and questioned its compatibility with the Gospel.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Rengith Chakkummoottil, "Capital Punishment from a 'Human Life' Perspective: A Catholic Understanding," *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 18, 1 (March 2014): 46-60.

⁵⁵ M. B. Crowe, "Theology and Capital Punishment," (Part I) *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 30 (1964): 25.

⁵⁶ Tirimanna, "Catholic Teaching on Capital Punishment," 100.

⁵⁷ Chakkummoottil, "Capital Punishment from a 'Human Life' Perspective: A Catholic Understanding," 51.

St. Augustine argued that the death penalty could serve as a deterrent to the wicked and as a means of protecting the innocent, maintaining that public authorities who execute criminals according to law do not violate the commandment "Thou shalt not kill." This reasoning influenced later theological reflection.⁵⁸ In the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas provided one of the most influential justifications for capital punishment, arguing that the state has the authority to execute criminals who seriously threaten the common good. Aquinas compared the execution of a dangerous criminal to removing a diseased limb from the body in order to preserve the health of the whole community. Although he supported the legitimacy of the death penalty, Aquinas also emphasised that such punishment must be exercised by legitimate public authority and only for grave offences, reflecting his concern for justice and the protection of society.⁵⁹

From the Reformation period to the modern era, Catholic teaching generally continued to recognise the authority of civil authorities to impose capital punishment in certain circumstances.

For instance, the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* (1520) was the official response issued by Pope Leo X, condemning and rejecting the teachings of Martin Luther. Martin Luther, a Catholic priest at the time, commented on the morality of burning heretics to death during the Leipzig Debate before his excommunication. The commentary said that "burning heretics is against the will of the Spirit." Luther's proposition was condemned as an error by Pope Leo X in the 1520 papal bull *Exsurge Domine*.⁶⁰ Pope's diplomatic reaction, which both rejects Luther's proposal and remains silent on the legitimacy of the death penalty, shows that he is not against capital punishment but rather in favour of the practice. The *Roman Catechism* of the Council of Trent (1566), in its explanation of the Fifth Commandment, explicitly taught that civil authorities possess the legitimate power of life and death in order to punish criminals and defend the innocent.⁶¹ Similarly, the *Catechism* of Pope Pius X (1908) teaches that the death

⁵⁸ Augustin, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 36.

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 2 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc, 1947), 11-2ae, 64, a.2-3.

⁶⁰ E. Christian Brugger, *Capital Punishment and Roman Catholic Moral Tradition* (Noter Dame, Indiana: University of Notre dame Press, 2014), 144.

⁶¹ Charles of Borromeo, ed., *The Roman Catechism Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. John A. Mchugh, O. P. and Charles J. Callan, O. P. (Decree of Pope St. Pius V, 1566), Part III, 5, n. 4, accessed 24 October 2022, PDF by www.catholicsociety.com.

penalty is lawful under the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill.’⁶² Pope Pius XII (1952) emphasises that when the state executes a criminal, it is not taking life unjustly or randomly. Instead, because the person has committed a very serious crime, they have, in a sense, lost their right to be protected by the law. So, the state is seen as carrying out justice, not acting unfairly.⁶³ The references cited above suggest that early Christians did not express opposition to the use of the death penalty. The Church identified two objectives for imposing punishment, namely “medicinal” and “vindictive,” and has consistently upheld capital punishment based on the principle of retributive justice in both theory and practice.

In recent decades, however, the Church’s approach to capital punishment has undergone significant development. While the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) still acknowledged the right of the state to impose penalties proportionate to the gravity of crimes,⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) argued that cases in which execution is necessary to defend society are “very rare, if not practically non-existent,” emphasising the dignity and inviolability of human life even in the case of criminals.⁶⁵ This perspective was reflected in the 1997 second edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC §2267), which, citing *Evangelium Vitae* §56, states: ‘If bloodless means suffice to defend against an aggressor and protect persons, public authority should use only those; cases of absolute necessity are now very rare, if not practically non-existent.

Pope Benedict XVI called for the abolition of the death penalty and urged criminal justice reform that respects human dignity. He emphasised restorative justice – promoting reconciliation, justice, and rehabilitation of victims and offenders.⁶⁶ A further development occurred in 2018 when Pope Francis approved a revision of paragraph 2267 of the *Catechism* declaring that the death penalty is “inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.”

⁶²James Akin, “The Catechism of St. Pius X: The Fifth Commandment,” 1996, accessed 26 October 2022, <http://www.cin.org/users/james/ebooks/master/pius/pcomm05.html>, 3Q.

⁶³ Pope Pius XII, “The Moral Limits of Medical Research and Treatment: An Address given September 14, 1952 by His Holiness to the First International Congress on the Histopathology of the Nervous System.,” *Eternal World Television Network*, May 4, 2016, accessed 28 October 2022 <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P12PSYCH.HTM>.

⁶⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§ 2266– 2267.

⁶⁵ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, §40, §56.

⁶⁶ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus—Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (2011) § 83.

⁶⁷ This position was reaffirmed in *Amoris Laetitia* (§83), where Pope Francis emphasises the right to a natural death and rejects the death penalty. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he declares it 'inadmissible,' linking its abolition to recognising the inalienable dignity of every human being."⁶⁸

In this way, the Catholic Church's moral reflection on capital punishment has evolved from a traditional acceptance based on retributive justice toward a stronger emphasis on the dignity of human life, restorative justice, and the possibility of conversion. This development illustrates how Catholic moral teaching can deepen its understanding of the Gospel while remaining within the broader framework of the Church's moral tradition.

Conclusion

In response to the question, "Can anything change in Catholic moral teaching?", it is important to reflect on the profound implications of John T. Noonan Jr.'s statement: "Change, in continuity with roots, is the rule of human life; it has been the way of life of the Church. In other words, change means that the old slowly comes to fruition in the new."⁶⁹ This insight highlights that change, rightly understood as development in continuity, is intrinsic both to human life and to the historical journey of the Church.

The preceding analysis illustrates that, although objective moral principles persist unchanged, there have been considerable advancements in the Church's comprehension and pastoral implementation of these principles across various contexts.

Such development can be clearly observed in specific moral issues. In the area of contraception, there is a shift from a predominantly legalistic emphasis to a more personalist approach that highlights responsible parenthood and the moral agency of couples. In *Amoris Laetitia*, moral discernment reflects a shift from a purely deductive application of universal norms to a more inductive and pastoral approach that takes into account concrete human situations. In the case of organ transplantation, there is a shift from an exclusive reliance on the principle of totality to a broader emphasis on solidarity and the

⁶⁷ "New revision of number 2267 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the death penalty – Rescriptum 'ex Audentia SS.mi'", *Summary of Bulletin*, Holy See Press Office, 2 August 2018, Retrieved 3 August 2018.

⁶⁸ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, § 263.

⁶⁹ John T. Noonan Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2005), 7.

gift of self. Concerning capital punishment, there is a shift from a retributive understanding of justice to a stronger emphasis on restorative justice and the dignity of the human person. In addressing homosexuality, the Church's pastoral approach reflects a shift from a predominantly condemnatory attitude to one that emphasises respect, accompaniment, and mercy.

These developments indicate that, although the objective moral order remains unchanged, there has been genuine growth in the Church's understanding of moral truth, as well as in its pastoral approach, language, and method. Such development does not imply a contradiction of doctrine but rather a deepening of the Church's engagement with enduring truths.

Thus, the history of the Church's moral teaching is not characterised by abrupt ruptures, but rather by a gradual process of learning, discernment, and maturation. Through its engagement with historical contexts, cultural realities, and lived human experience, the Church attains a deeper understanding of the moral truths it professes. Consequently, each new challenge contributes to this organic development, allowing the Church to respond more faithfully to the demands of the Gospel across different eras. Just as personal transformation unfolds over time, the development of the Church's moral teaching is likely to occur through sustained theological reflection, pastoral experience, and engagement with emerging historical contexts, rather than through sudden or radical shifts.