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## **Things Old and New:**

### **Pope Saint John Paul II on Moral Doctrine and its Development**

1. John Paul II on the development of the Church's doctrine – 2. John Paul II on the development of social doctrine – 3. John Paul II on the development of moral doctrine – 4. John Paul's development of Church teaching on women

Roman Catholics are heirs to a complex and dynamic doctrinal teaching tradition; one to which Pope Saint John Paul II contributed greatly. During his long papacy (1978–2005), John Paul's doctrinal output in faith and morals was prolific and its scope wide-ranging. This legacy has left a doctrinal imprint on the Church that has defined the course of Catholicism in the post-conciliar era. Containing things old and new, it is one which will engage theological interpreters and commentators for many years. In his role as pontiff, John Paul was concerned to protect and promote the truths of the faith. In defence of certain doctrines, John Paul stifled ecclesial discussion and debate and blocked what some regard as necessary doctrinal developments. Yet in doctrinal terms he was also an innovator, introducing new teachings, new language, and new ways of thinking about old certainties into the Catholic moral tradition. Notwithstanding his strong avowal of the existence of absolute and unchanging moral norms, John Paul contributed more than any other pope to the Church's thinking about the historicity of morality and the historicity of doctrine. In what follows, we shall outline John Paul's approach to doctrine and its development and discuss how this was put into effect, especially in relation to his teaching on women's dignity and rights.

## 1. John Paul II on the development of the Church's doctrine

John Paul regarded as his solemn papal duty to take forward the work of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and to build on its achievements. This provides a hermeneutical key to understanding John Paul's doctrinal legacy. In his first public address following his election to the papacy, John Paul pointed to the significance of the Council and promised to make its furtherance the focus of his pontificate: "we wish to point out the unceasing importance of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, and we accept the definite duty of assiduously bringing it into effect"<sup>1</sup>. John Paul knew that fidelity to the Council would entail capturing its spirit as much as applying its letter. It would be a task of envisioning and of bringing unfinished business to fruition, in new and diverse contexts and conditions, which would require interpretation and discernment as much as implementation and application:

[O]utlooks must be at one with the Council so that in practice those things may be done that were ordered by it, and that those things which lie hidden in it or – as is usually said – are implicit may become explicit in the light of the experiments made since then and the demands of changing circumstances. Briefly, it is necessary that the fertile seeds which the Fathers of the Ecumenical Synod, nourished by the word of God, sowed in good ground (cf. Mt 13:8,23) – that is, the important teachings and pastoral deliberations – should be brought to maturity in that way which is characteristic of movement and life<sup>2</sup>.

This statement – employing the biblically-based metaphor of organic growth, maturation and fruitfulness to describe the approach required to carry forward the work of the Council – signals the approach that John Paul would adopt towards the development of the Church's tradition and doctrine.

In the same speech, John Paul pledged to be faithful to the tasks required of those "called to hold the Supreme Office in the Church", including the responsibility to "preserve intact the deposit of the faith"<sup>3</sup>. While his papacy would zealously guard the Church against doctrinal error, John Paul wanted to transmit a thriving and relevant faith. In this respect, he would continue the *aggiornamento* project initiated by his predecessor Pope Saint John XXIII who, famously, in *Gaudet Ma-*

<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *First Radio Message "Urbi et Orbi"*, October 17<sup>th</sup> 1978.

*Ibidem.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem.*

*ter Ecclesia*, his opening speech at the Council, urged the Church to undertake the task of “bringing herself up-to-date where required”, through a re-examination and renewal of Christian doctrine. “Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure” of Christian doctrine, John said, “as if we were concerned only with antiquity” John recognised that the pressing concern was how best to mediate the message of the gospel and convey its relevance to the people of the present age. Whereas the truths of the faith are unchanging and cannot be subject to discussion or renewal, the manner in which these truths are communicated should be subject to discussion and, potentially, to renewal: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the Deposit of Faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another”<sup>4</sup>. This statement by John XXIII is the inspiration and key source for the Council’s and for John Paul’s approach to doctrinal development. John Paul would invoke this passage and build on it in order to adopt and defend a developmental approach to doctrine – including moral doctrine – in his papal *magisterium*.

Vatican II cemented John XXIII’s teaching about doctrinal renewal into its Pastoral Constitution when it invited theologians

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 judgement<sup>5</sup>

John’s insights about the manner of presenting the faith also influenced other Council documents. The Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops states:

The bishops should present Christian doctrine in a manner adapted to the needs of the times, that is to say, in a manner that will respond to the difficulties and questions by which people are especially burdened and troubled. They should also guard that doctrine, teaching the faithful to defend and propagate it<sup>6</sup>

The Decree on Priestly Training advises that candidates for the priesthood and students of theology

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<sup>4</sup> JOHN XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia: The Opening Speech at the Second Vatican Council*, in: F. ANDERSON (ed.), *Council Daybook: Vatican II. Session 1, Oct. 11 to Dec. 8, 1962, Session 2, Sept. 29 to Dec. 4, 1963*, Washington D.C. 1965, p. 25–29.

<sup>5</sup> GS 62.

<sup>6</sup> CD 13.

should learn to seek the solutions to human problems under the light of revelation, to apply the eternal truths of revelation to the changeable conditions of human affairs and to communicate them in a way suited to men of our day<sup>7</sup>

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the formation of priests, John Paul would follow this formula, stating that the Church's *magisterium*

refutes objections to and distortions of the faith and promotes, with the authority received from Jesus Christ, new and deeper comprehension, clarification, and application of revealed doctrine<sup>8</sup>.

The Council's Decree on Ecumenism, which provides guidance on presenting Church doctrine in an ecumenical context,<sup>9</sup> also states:

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>10</sup>.

John Paul's encyclical on ecumenism repeats this call to correct and reformulate doctrine<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, in his encyclical on moral theology, John Paul notes "the possible limitations of the human arguments employed by the Magisterium"<sup>12</sup>. John Paul undertook to put this conciliar summons into effect in his teaching on certain moral questions (such as in his teaching on women, as we shall see), though never in a manner that drew attention to deficiencies in the formulation of earlier papal teachings. John Paul regarded doctrinal reformulation as a necessary and ongoing

<sup>7</sup> OT 16.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day "Pastores Dabo Vobis"*, Vatican 1992, n. 55; cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian "Donum veritatis"*, Vatican 1990, n. 21.

<sup>9</sup> UR 4, 11.

<sup>10</sup> UR 6

<sup>11</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical On Commitment to Ecumenism "Ut Unum Sint"*, Vatican 1995, n. 18; cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 16.

<sup>12</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching "Veritatis Splendor"*, Vatican 1993, n. 110.

ecclesial task. However, John Paul was clear that the truths of the faith must be protected and preserved, rather than adapted or diluted:

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<sup>13</sup>

## 2. John Paul II on the development of social doctrine

John Paul made important contributions to the social teaching of the Church, which expanded its scope, updated its content and strengthened its biblical and theological foundations. In his social encyclicals, John Paul would frequently employ the gospel image of the treasury containing things old and new (Mt 13:52) as a metaphor for the inexhaustible richness of the Church's tradition:

The treasure is the great outpouring of the Church's Tradition, which contains 'what is old' – received and passed on from the very beginning – and which enables us to interpret the 'new things' in the midst of which the life of the Church and the world unfolds<sup>14</sup>.

John Paul readily admits that, by applying insights from the Church's tradition to the social questions of the day, social teaching will break new ground as well as retain continuity with older and more familiar features of the Christian heritage<sup>15</sup>. In *Laborem exercens* (1981) "On Human Work", for instance, John Paul states that the contemporary era "calls for the discovery of the new meanings of human work" and for "the formulation of the new tasks" that face the Church and wider society. Nonetheless, John Paul indicates that his own reflections on human work

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<sup>13</sup> *Ut Unum Sint*, 1995, n. 18.

<sup>14</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* "Centesimus Annus", Vatican 1991, n. 3; cf. LG 25.

<sup>15</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical On the Twentieth Anniversary of Populorum Progressio*: "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis", Vatican 1987, n. 3.

are not intended to follow a different line, but rather to be in organic connection with the whole tradition of this teaching and activity<sup>16</sup>.

Overall, social doctrine highlights the “trend of development of the Church’s teaching”, reflecting the changing emphases of social encyclicals in each new era<sup>17</sup>

### 3. John Paul II on the development of moral doctrine

John Paul’s teaching on the historicity and development of the Catholic moral tradition is elaborated in his encyclical on fundamental moral theology, *Veritatis splendor* (1993). According to *Veritatis splendor*, over time, the Church has expanded its moral repertoire and attained a more profound understanding of the moral demands of faith:

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 the tradition of the Church and in the history of humanity, their teaching represents a constant deepening of knowledge with regard to morality<sup>18</sup>.

This advance in moral knowledge constitutes “a doctrinal development analogous to that which has taken place in the realm of the truths of faith”<sup>19</sup>. The fact that there can be a progressive deepening of humanity’s knowledge of the moral law does not mean that all norms are subject to change over time. *Veritatis splendor* strongly affirms the immutability of the natural moral law and the existence of objective moral norms that apply in every epoch and culture<sup>20</sup>. Applying John XXIII’s teaching about the presentation of doctrine to the case of moral doctrine<sup>21</sup>, *Veritatis splendor* explains that the moral teaching of the Church will fail to penetrate the minds and hearts of the faithful in their diverse historical and cultural settings if it

<sup>16</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical On Human Work “Laborem Exercens”*, Vatican 1981, n. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, note 100.

is not communicated in an appropriately contextualised manner. This applies to all moral norms, including the unchanging norms of the natural law:

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<sup>22</sup>.

*Veritatis splendor* does not offer an example of the effects of context on the formulation of exceptionless moral norms. However, it is possible to propose how this could apply in the case of the Church's prohibition of contraception for, while the prohibition has remained unchanged over time, the manner in which this teaching has been presented has changed. Various factors have influenced the presentation of this doctrine, including: new methods of studying Scripture, which led the Church to move away from understanding birth regulation through the lens of the sin of Onan (Genesis 38:8-10); new scientific study of fertility, which led to new pharmaceutical and fertility-awareness methods of regulating fertility; new questions brought about by new methods of controlling fertility (e.g., oral contraceptives versus abstinence); new teachings concerning responsible parenthood and the legitimacy of limiting family size; the emergence of an enriched theology of marriage, promoting the mutual self-giving of spouses and the importance of the unitive as well as procreative meaning of marriage; new teaching asserting an inseparable connection between the unitive and the procreative significance of each and every sexual act; and new sensitivity to contextual features such as demographic change and the changing status of women in the domestic and social sphere. Over time, teaching on contraception has been reformulated and more adequately contextualised in response to a variety of social and ecclesial developments.

Continuing the parallel between doctrinal development in faith and in morals, *Veritatis splendor* states:

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 (...) in the light of historical circumstances by the Church's Magisterium<sup>23</sup>

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*Veritatis splendor*, n. 53.

<sup>23</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, n. 53.

While there are eternal moral truths or principles that apply everywhere, always and to all, the norms expressing these truths must be specified according to concrete historical circumstances. The role of the magisterium is to specify moral norms in such a manner that in their concrete historical expression they “remain valid in their substance” by continuing to communicate the objective and eternal moral truth that justifies and provides the basis and meaning of the norm<sup>24</sup>. As new moral questions arise for humanity in its progress through history, the Church seeks to identify what is a moral advance towards the fullness of truth, and what is morally retrograde. History shows that this process is not always successful. However, changing historical and cultural contexts can and do lead to advances in moral knowledge, greater insight into the concrete conditions of life that best promote the moral truth and, therefore, to improvements in the formulation of specific moral norms.

To summarise, John Paul shared with the Council an acute sense of God’s plan for humanity and saw it taking effect in the Church’s dynamic progress through history. He recognised that the study of Scripture and the Church’s tradition in light of historical and cultural circumstances would produce a deeper understanding of the meaning and requirements of faith, and allow the Church to advance and apply theological and moral insight. John Paul did not articulate a fully-fledged theory of doctrinal development. Rather, he undertook to further the doctrinal renewal in faith and morals initiated by the Council. His teaching sought to: read the signs of the times and identify the appropriate Christian response; offer guidance on new medical and scientific possibilities and pressing social and political questions; better connect existing moral teachings to scripture and tradition and better align concrete moral norms to the Christian vision and its values. In so doing, John Paul amplified and augmented under-developed themes, proposed stronger arguments and better reasons for certain teachings, and updated, revised and reformulated earlier doctrines found wanting. It is clear that, for John Paul, the development of the Church’s moral doctrine that “unfolds down the centuries” is a complex and multi-faceted process involving more than the dressing up of old understandings in new language. However, there are limits to doctrinal development: doctrine must always cohere with and never depart from the moral and theological truths of the faith. Development, yes; distortion, no.

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<sup>24</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, n. 53.



#### 4. John Paul's development of Church teaching on women

How does John Paul's approach to doctrinal development influence his doctrinal teaching? This will be explored in relation to his statements on women's dignity and rights.

Spurred by the social changes taking place in industrialised societies, including the second wave of feminism, the Church responded positively, though not in any thoroughgoing way, to the movement to advance women's social and political participation and rights, adding its voice to a chorus of others. By the time of the Council, the Church was on the right side of history. Yet, over many centuries, the Church had taught that Scripture revealed and natural law confirmed the inequality of the sexes. Even over the lifetime of John Paul (1920–2005), the Church's teaching changed. How should such change be understood? Was this merely the random process of history in operation, evidence of Rome's susceptibility to the pervasive cultural values of the West, or something theologically and morally more profound? What justified the change in the Church's teaching? Why should the Church now regard as a development what previously was regarded as a deformation of Christian truth?

The teachings of John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council and Paul VI had characterised the women's movement as one of the positive signs of the times. However, the theological basis for the Church's new understanding of women remained undeveloped in the documents of the Church. John Paul's treatment of the issue was far more extensive and theologically penetrating. He took this relatively new moral story of women's dignity and rights and showed it cohered with the older and larger Christian moral story and the scriptural narratives on which it is based. Building, in particular, on the doctrinal legacy of Vatican II and the papal teachings of John XXIII and Paul VI<sup>25</sup>, John Paul expanded and amplified Church teaching on women's dignity and rights, providing scriptural and theological justifications which contradicted centuries of prior Christian argument about the status of women. Emphasising women's vital role in the family and society, and their long-standing contribution to education and evangelisation in service of the Church, John Paul invoked new terminology, praising the feminine and maternal "genius of women" and urging a "new feminism" – a sanitised, lady-like and pro-life off-shoot of its

<sup>25</sup> Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* "Apostolicam Actuositatem", Vatican 1965, n. 9; GS 9, 29, 52, 60; JOHN XXIII, *Encyclical On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty* "Pacem in Terris", Vatican 1963, nn. 19, 41; PAUL VI, *Encyclical On the Regulation of Birth* "Humanae Vitae", Vatican 1968, n. 2; PAUL VI, *Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Maurice Roy On the Occasion of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Encyclical Rerum Novarum: "Octogesima Adventiens"*, Vatican 1971, n. 13.

radical cousin underpinned by the complementarity of the sexes – which John Paul regarded as authentically reflecting both the biblical witness concerning the nature of man and woman and the will of the Creator written into the natural moral law<sup>26</sup>. In so doing, he would steer a course for the barque of Peter which has been duly followed by his papal successors, Benedict XVI and Francis.

John Paul did not work against the grain of Christianity. Rather, he sought to make the case for women's dignity and rights on the basis of Scripture. As John Paul stated in one of his discourses on the theology of the body:

Development, that is, progress in theology, takes place in fact through a continual restudying of the deposit of Revelation<sup>27</sup>.

Undeterred by the androcentric and patriarchal record of Scripture that denied the inherent equality of the sexes, John Paul conducted his own re-reading of the Genesis narratives and the Gospel accounts of Jesus' attitude to women. He portrays Jesus as a new man and moral visionary, unconstrained by the cultural mores of his social location and historical period:

When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love<sup>28</sup>.

John Paul praised the female moral visionaries who, despite social and religious opposition, saw beyond conventional morality and campaigned for women's rights at a time before they were widely recognised as in keeping with the demands of justice<sup>29</sup>. In 1930, in reaction to the emancipation campaigns of such female trail-blazers, Pope Pius XI had rejected claims that "the rights of husband and wife are equal", and that "the emancipation of women (...) ought to be effected"; evidence, if such were needed, that with respect to its beliefs and practices, the Church is not

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Letter On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year "Mulieris Dignitatem"*, Vatican 1988; JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Women*, Vatican 1995.

<sup>27</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *The Redemption of the Body and the Sacramentality of Marriage*, General Audience, 28 November 1984, n. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Letter to Women*, n. 3; cf. *Mulieris dignitatem* nn. 13–15.

<sup>29</sup> *Letter to Women*, n. 6.

always in the vanguard of moral progress<sup>30</sup>. Following his predecessor Leo XIII, Pius XI had taught that the subordination of wife to husband was divinely ordained and entirely compatible with women's dignity<sup>31</sup>.

A half century later, John Paul taught that the subjection of wives to husbands is not God's design but a consequence of sin, and he spoke of

the rightful opposition of women to what is expressed in the biblical words "He shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16)<sup>32</sup>.

The existence of doctrinal disparities, such as that which occurs in relation to papal teaching on the submission of wives to husbands, presents a hermeneutical challenge for Catholicism, one of considerable relevance for theories of doctrinal development. John Paul does not address this issue in any direct manner. In *Mulieris dignitatem* his remarks on the status of wives to husbands make no reference to *Arcanum* and *Casti connubii*, which also invoke Scripture to discuss this question but which reach a different conclusion about God's will for spousal roles and relations; nor does John Paul attempt to explain the difference between his own teaching and that of Leo and Pius.

Moreover, despite John Paul's extensive teaching on marriage, sexuality and fertility, and his vehement opposition to all methods of regulating birth other than sexual abstinence, references to Pius XI's *Casti connubii* are absent from John Paul's treatment of these subjects<sup>33</sup>. John Paul's *Familiaris consortio*, *Mulieris dignitatem*, Letter to Women, and his 129 discourses on the theology of the body, delivered during his Wednesday audiences between 5 September 1979 and 28 November 1984, all concern the same subject matter as Pius's encyclical, yet they lack references to *Casti connubii*. Why might this be? It cannot be denied that there are striking differences in content, reasoning and tone between the Augustinian approach of *Casti connubii* and the personalist approach to marriage and sexuality adopted since the Council, and these aspects of *Casti connubii* jar with the more positive post-conciliar theological vision of sexuality that John Paul was so deter-

<sup>30</sup> PIUS XI, *Encyclical On Christian Marriage "Casti Connubii"*, Vatican 1930, n. 74.

<sup>31</sup> *Casti connubii*, nn. 26–29; cf. LEO XIII, *Encyclical on Christian Marriage "Arcanum divinae sapientiae"*, Vatican 1880, n. 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n. 10.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul twice cites *Casti connubii*: on abortion in *Evangelium vitae*, n. 62 (cf. PIUS XI, *Casti connubii*, nn. 63–67); on the Christian calling to holiness and perfection in his *Apostolic Exhortation On the Vocation and Mission of the Lay faithful in the Church and the World "Christifideles Laici"*, Vatican 1988, n. 16 note 44 (cf. PIUS XI, *Casti connubii*, n. 23).

mined to promote and champion. Following the traditional Augustinian ranking of the “ends of marriage” and citing the 1917 Code of Canon Law, *Casti connubii* states: “The primary end of marriage is the procreation and the education of children”<sup>34</sup>. The cultivation of spousal love is regarded as one of a number of secondary ends subordinate to the primary end of *proles*<sup>35</sup>. At Vatican II, however, spousal love is promoted to centre stage, such that the unitive and procreative meanings of marriage are held to be of equal significance in the doctrinal teaching of the Council and subsequent papacies, including that of John Paul II. Though many aspects of the Church’s teaching on marriage, family life and procreation remain unchanged from the time of *Casti connubii*, the theological framing of that teaching – such as the presentation of marriage as a covenant of life and love – has moved on. For doctrine to perform its role it must convey the truths of faith using the best available, rather than obsolete, theology. Whether or not the omission of *Casti connubii* from John Paul’s teaching on women, marriage, the family and human sexuality was an intentional strategy, the effect has been to initiate the gradual onset of an ecclesial amnesia, which will wipe from the collective memory, if not the doctrinal record, that somewhat outdated text and its mixed legacy.

Catholicism’s published statements of doctrinal teaching over the last 150 years provide widely available documentary evidence of the continuity and also the changes in teaching style and content between papacies. Studying these shifts in emphasis affords insights into the explicit and implicit processes by which doctrinal development occurs. All teachers tend to cite documents that support rather than detract from their argumentation and agenda. The same can be said of the Church’s teachers. Intentionally or otherwise, outmoded Church statements tend to fall into doctrinal obscurity. Over time, typically covertly, new, superior insights replace outdated or flawed conceptions, and doctrinal understanding and expression evolves. In the history of the Church it is rare indeed for the magisterium to broadcast the fact that what is being taught today knowingly supersedes, or in certain respects contrasts with what was taught yesterday. One of the notable occasions when this occurred was in Vatican II’s Declaration on Religious Freedom, which admitted:

the council intends to develop the doctrine of recent popes on the inviolable rights of the human person and the constitutional order of society<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Casti connubii*, n. 17; cf. *Code of Canon Law*, 1917, Canon 1013.

<sup>35</sup> *Casti connubii*, n. 59.

<sup>36</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Declaration on Religious Liberty “Dignitatis humanae”*, Vatican 1965, n. 1.

Today it is possible to see how Church support for a cultural norm promoting the submission of wives to husbands could perpetuate a social climate that hindered or even harmed women. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. In his *Letter to Women*, John Paul argues that historical and cultural “conditioning” have “shaped ways of thinking and acting” that have been “an obstacle to the progress of women” He concedes that such conditioning makes it difficult to “assign the blame” for attitudes and behaviour adjudged, retrospectively, to be harmful. In other words, a person’s historical location or social context may absolve or to some degree mitigate personal (and thereby institutional) responsibility for wrongdoing. Nonetheless, John Paul acknowledges that, in the past, members of the Church may have been part of the problem rather than part of the solution: “I am truly sorry”, John Paul stated, “if objective blame (...) has belonged to not just a few members of the Church”<sup>37</sup>. John Paul’s admission of the possibility of past failings by Catholics was an important symbolic gesture. It highlighted the Church’s duty to critically assess its own past, it extended a hand in hope of reconciliation, and it witnessed to a Church of sinners on its pilgrim journey in search of, rather than in possession of, the truth.

In 1930, Pius XI’s views on women reflected widely held social norms. Decades later they were widely regarded as morally unsupportable. How are we to distinguish the enduring truths about humanity from historically contingent attitudes and flawed assumptions? History shows that the Church’s moral teaching is not always a sure guide. We are only just beginning to learn how a person’s moral horizons can be affected by culture and history. The lessons of history suggest that contemporary culture must also play a role in shaping moral attitudes and behaviours, and that we too may be blind to moral imperatives that will appear transparently obvious to future generations. On this basis, it seems certain that at least some papal statements on morality in our own era will be subject to doctrinal revision at some future date.

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**Abstract:** John Paul’s doctrinal output in faith and morals was prolific and its scope wide-ranging. In his role as pontiff, John Paul was concerned to protect and promote the truths of the faith. Yet in doctrinal terms he was also an innovator, introducing new teachings, new language, and new ways of thinking about old certainties into the Catholic moral tradition. Notwithstanding his strong avowal of the existence of absolute and unchanging moral norms, John Paul contributed more than any other pope to the Church’s thinking about

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<sup>37</sup> *Letter to Women*, n. 3.

the historicity of morality and the historicity of doctrine. This study will outline John Paul's approach to doctrine and its development and discuss how this was put into effect, especially in relation to his teaching on women's dignity and rights.

John Paul did not articulate a fully-fledged theory of doctrinal development. Rather, he undertook to further the doctrinal renewal in faith and morals initiated by Pope St John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. John Paul recognised that study of Scripture and the Church's tradition in light of historical and cultural circumstances would produce a deeper understanding of the meaning and requirements of faith, and allow the Church to advance and apply theological and moral insight. His teaching sought to: read the signs of the times and identify the appropriate Christian response; offer guidance on new medical and scientific possibilities and pressing social and political questions; better connect existing moral teachings to scripture and tradition; and better align concrete moral norms to the Christian vision and its values. In so doing, John Paul amplified and augmented under-developed themes, proposed stronger arguments and better reasons for certain teachings, and updated, revised and reformulated earlier doctrines found wanting. It is clear that, for John Paul, the development of the Church's moral doctrine that "unfolds down the centuries" is a complex and multi-faceted process. However, for John Paul there are clear limits to doctrinal reformulation: doctrine must always cohere with and never depart from the moral and theological truths of the faith. Development, yes; distortion, no.

**Keywords:** development of doctrine, moral teaching, Pope John Paul II, Vatican II, women.

**Streszczenie: Rzeczy stare i nowe: Święty Jan Paweł II o doktrynie moralnej i jej rozwoju.** Nauczanie Jana Pawła II na temat wiary i moralności jest bogate, a jego zakres wszechstronny. Jako papież Jan Paweł II był zaangażowany w ochronę i promocję prawd wiary. Jednakże był on także odnowicielem w kwestiach doktrynalnych, wprowadzając do katolickiej tradycji moralnej nowe nauczanie, nowy język i nowe sposoby myślenia o starych pewnikach. Pomimo mocnego przekonania o istnieniu absolutnych i niezmiennych norm moralnych, Jan Paweł II bardziej niż inni papieże przyczynił się do myślenia Kościoła o historyczności moralności i doktryny. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie podejścia Jana Pawła II do doktryny i jej rozwoju oraz refleksja dotycząca tego, jak zostało to wcielone w życie, szczególnie w odniesieniu do jego nauczania na temat godności i praw kobiety.

Jan Paweł II nie wyartykułował w pełni rozwiniętej teorii rozwoju doktrynalnego. Raczej kontynuował odnowę doktrynalną w kwestiach wiary i moralności zainicjowaną przez papieża Jana XXIII i Sobór Watykański II. Jan Paweł II uznał, że studium Pisma Świętego i tradycji Kościoła w świetle okoliczności historycznych i kulturowych może prowadzić do głębszego zrozumienia znaczenia i wymogów wiary oraz pozwoli Kościołowi

poszerzyć i osiągnąć teologiczne i moralne zrozumienie. Jego nauczanie dotyczyło: odczytywania znaków czasu i poszukiwania właściwych odpowiedzi chrześcijańskich; propozycji orientacji w obszarze nowych możliwości medycznych i naukowych oraz naglących kwestii społecznych i politycznych; lepsze powiązanie istniejącego nauczania moralnego z Pismem Świętym i tradycją; lepsze powiązanie konkretnych norm moralnych z wiarą chrześcijańską i jej wartościami. W ten sposób Jan Paweł II rozwinął i uzupełnił kwestie nierozwinięte, zaproponował mocne argumenty i lepsze racje dla pewnego nauczania oraz zaktualizował, zrewidował i przeformułował wcześniejsze doktryny nie spełniające wymogów. Oczywiście jest to, że dla Jana Pawła II rozwój chrześcijańskiego nauczania moralnego, które „rozwija się przez wieki” jest procesem złożonym i wielopostaciowym. Jednakże dla Jana Pawła II istniały wyraźne granice doktrynalnego przeformułowania: nauczanie musi zawsze tworzyć wspólną całość i nigdy nie może odchodzić od moralnych i teologicznych prawd wiary. Rozwój – tak, ale zniekształcenie – nie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rozwój nauczania, nauczanie moralne, Jan Paweł II, Sobór Watykański II, kobiety.