

In the Aftermath of a Synod: The Sacramental Vision of the Universe and a Case for the Development of Doctrine

by Alan McGill

Catholicism's sacramental vision of the universe holds important implications for the development of doctrine, especially concerning several issues surfaced in the 2014 and 2015 Synods. The central thesis of this paper is that if God is present in and through all of creation, then human reason, experience, and processes of communication, interpretation, and development, though fallible and at times corrupted by sin, are ultimately good and holy and can mediate the divine.

The eternal truths that doctrines seek to express cannot by definition change. However, as soon as we concede a distinction between the eternal truths themselves and the doctrinal formulations that seek to express those truths in human words in a given epoch, we then admit that the doctrinal formulae must be open to the possibility of a more effective or more complete expression.

Our argument offers a prospectus for the development of doctrine in general, without invoking specific arguments regarding the admission of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to communion, teachings in relation to the LGBT community, or the post-synod discussion of the possibility of ordaining women as deacons. In relation to these contemporary debates, however, the present work proposes that an appeal to the immutability of doctrine is not an adequate resolution.

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Loisy's Intrinsicist Perspective on the Development of Doctrine

As the nineteenth century drew to a close and the Modernist Crisis simmered, Alfred Loisy, proposed what might be termed an intrinsicist model of the development of doctrine. Whereas a scholastic position might be characterized by the dictum that "grace builds on nature," and the implication that revelation builds on reason, Loisy viewed nature, reason, and the processes of doctrinal development as infused with grace.¹ Loisy implies that grace works in and through the processes of communication, interpretation, and development, rejecting a model of literal inspiration. "There is nothing to indicate, nor has the Church ever taught, that in those who are the inspired organs of revelation, the movement of thought takes a totally irregular

movement, rejecting a model of literal inspiration. "There is nothing to indicate, nor has the Church ever taught, that in those who are the inspired organs of revelation, the movement of thought takes a totally irregular

¹ Lawrence Cunningham associates the corrupted dictum, "grace builds on nature" with scholasticism. The dictum appears to be a paraphrase of Aquinas's assertion that grace "perfects" nature. See Lawrence Cunningham, "Four American Catholics and their Chronicler," *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society* 31, no. 01 (2004): 113-117. Cunningham makes this association in his abstract.

course . . .”² Loisy saw the “movement of thought” governed by its regular course, that is, by reason, as a means through which divine inspiration is mediated.

Christianity is already, in Loisy’s view, a product of development, and this merely needed to be recognized more explicitly. He wrote, “Christianity is in a very true sense a development from post-exilic Judaism, which is a development of the religion of the prophets which is a development from primitive Mosaic Yahwism.”³ Given that Christianity was already the product of development, Loisy suggested that “It is just the idea of development which is now needed, not to be created all at once, but established for a better knowledge of the past.”⁴

Loisy believed that the divine was at work in and through the processes that affected the development of scripture and Tradition. His position was analogous with that of Teilhard de Chardin, who held that the Creator works in and through the processes of evolution.⁵ If God created humanity through what science describes as the process of evolution, it might also be argued that God reveals to humankind through historical, literary, and cultural processes.

Loisy was critical of Adolf von Harnack’s assumption that the essence of a more pure Christianity had been lost as the Church developed.⁶ Harnack’s position seemed to play into the hands of a magisterium that equated development with corruption—if such development was influenced by contemporary scholarly insight. Loisy, on the other hand, argued that the tradition had always been dynamic and there had never been a static, pristine Christianity.⁷ In Loisy’s view, those who denied the possibility of a legitimate development of doctrine, in fact, corrupted the Tradition.⁸ The author defended his insistence upon the possibility and necessity of a legitimate development of doctrinal formulae by offering myriad examples as to how doctrines ranging from Trinitarian to Eucharistic had evolved.⁹

Loisy’s position that revelation is mediated in and through processes of interpretation and development might be regarded as quintessentially Catholic. His view exemplifies the sacramental vision of Catholicism whereby grace is mediated in and through creation, not an extrinsic supplement to creation. Sacramental theologian Michael Himes captures this dimension of Catholicism when he suggests that “at its best, Catholicism is shaped by the conviction that grace lies at the root of all reality. And if that conviction is true, all the humanities, as well as the sciences, become religious enterprises.”¹⁰ However, the anti-Modernist magisterium of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rejected the intrinsicist view of grace. Rather, it reflected the position of the First Vatican Council that in 1870 condemned those who viewed revelation as working in and through human processes for “utterly confusing nature and grace, human science and Divine faith.”¹¹

2 C.J.T. Talar, ed., *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis: The Firmin Articles of Alfred Loisy*, trans. Christine Thirlway (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxi.

3 Alfred Loisy, *L’Evangile et L’Eglise* (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1902), 161-162, quoted in *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis*, ed. by Talar, 94.

4 Talar, *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis*, xiv.

5 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), 218, 220, 223, 227, 228, 277. Pope St. John Paul II, “Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: On Evolution,” <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JJP961022.HTM>

6 Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), 234.

7 Alfred Loisy, ‘Le Développement Chrétien d’Après le Cardinal Newman,’ *Revue du clergé français* 17 (1898); Pius X, *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* (Rome: The Holy See, 1907), no. 1, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lamen.htm>

8 Jeffrey Morrow, “Alfred Loisy’s Developmental Approach to Scripture: Reading the ‘Firmin’ Articles in the Context of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Historical Biblical Criticism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15, no. 3 (2013): 328.

9 Morrow, “Alfred Loisy’s Developmental Approach to Scripture,” 329.

10 Michael Himes, “Finding God in All Things: A Sacramental Worldview and its Effects,” in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001), 102.

11 First Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* (Dei filius) (Vatican, 1870), Introduction.

In July 1907, Pope Pius X issued a decree, *Lamentabili sane exitu* that rejected the attempts of exegetes and theologians to contribute to the development of doctrine as transgressing non-negotiable boundaries and nothing short of destructive. “The fact that many Catholic writers also go beyond the limits determined by the Fathers and the Church herself is extremely regrettable. In the name of higher knowledge and historical research (they say), they are looking for that progress of dogmas which is, in reality, nothing but the corruption of dogmas.”¹² Insisting upon a clear separation of grace from human science, and regarding attempts to develop doctrine in light of modern insights as nothing less than corruption of dogma, the anti-Modernist magisterium effectively rejected an intrinsic model of the development of doctrine.

John XXIII’s Distinction between Substance and Presentation

In his inaugural speech at the opening of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII conveys a commitment to both the conservation and development of doctrine. The pontiff speaks of the importance of treasuring the deposit of faith as mediated by scripture and tradition, not by simply preserving it, but by developing it so that it may speak effectively to the modern era.

Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us, pursuing thus the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries.¹³

Pope John bestowed a mandate to go beyond antiquarianism so as to continue the development that had characterized the dynamic tradition at its best—though not consistently—for twenty centuries, hence recognizing the integral role of development in the sacred Tradition. On the eve of the Council, the pontiff sensed a widespread readiness for such development.

The whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought.¹⁴

Pope John acknowledges the capacity of modern research methods, and modes of thinking and communicating to mediate truth. John XXIII makes a distinction between the eternal truths in themselves and the doctrinal formulations that seek to express these truths through a given language for a given epoch. “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”¹⁵

While Pope St. John XXIII distinguished between the substance of doctrine and the manner in which it is presented, it is not as though some kernel of truth can be isolated and preserved while the culturally conditioned assumptions around it can be neatly sifted and discarded. If agreement could be reached as to what kernel of teaching or what articulation of principles cannot conceivably be reformulated in order to communicate more clearly to a given context or express the truth more completely in light of a new insight, then this irreformable essence of Christianity should be codified and forever conserved. Immune from the possibility of change, it would, by definition, be itself eternal truth. It would eliminate the possibility of fresh insights that offer a more complete representation of the truth, thus denigrating the sacramental potential of reason and experience.

12 Pius X, *Lamentabili sane exitu* (Rome: The Holy See, 1907), no. 1, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lamen.htm>.

13 Pope John XXIII, *Inaugural Speech at Opening of the Second Vatican Council*, October 11, 1962. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council_it.html. Cf. Walter Abbot ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press & America Press, 1966), 715.

14 Pope John XXIII, *Inaugural Speech at Opening of the Second Vatican Council*.

15 Pope John XXIII, *Inaugural Speech at Opening of the Second Vatican Council*.

The immutable substance of doctrine is not some distillation of essential teaching that transcends the possibility of change, a “creed within the creed” or “catechism within the catechism” but, rather, the eternal truths that doctrine imperfectly expresses. It is the Church’s task in every age to strive to express the eternal truths in the most clear and complete way possible, taking full account of the Church’s current teachings on the responsible interpretation of scripture.¹⁶

The Second Vatican Council’s Openness to Dialogue with Diverse Perspectives

Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* expresses the Council’s desire for dialogue with the contemporary world, including those who are not explicitly followers of Christ. “This council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation” and again, specifically with regard to non-Catholics, “We want frank conversation to compel us all to receive the impulses of the Spirit faithfully and to act on them energetically.”¹⁷ The implication is that dialogue between diverse perspectives can mediate the “impulses of the Spirit.”¹⁸ Unless the human family beyond the confines of the magisterium is capable of mediating the eternal truths, the development of doctrine in light of its insights would indeed be a corruption of doctrine.

The Council’s dominant model of Church as the People of God serves to subvert any simplistic assumption that the institutional church has a monopoly on God and on truth.¹⁹ This broad and inclusive ecclesiology means that dialogue between the Church and the modern world need not be understood as a conversation between the magisterium and extra-ecclesial perspectives so much as a grace-filled sharing of wisdom among the People of God.

Lumen gentium employs the adjective “pilgrim” so as to speak of the pilgrim People of God, with overtones of the realized futuristic eschatology detected by Lindbeck, and suggesting a Church that is still making its way, and open to progress.²⁰ The Council recognized the capacity of scientific progress and of culture to reveal truth for the benefit of the Church. “The experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, by all of which the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened, these profit the Church, too.”²¹

Leo O’Donovan detects in *Gaudium et spes* not only an openness to dialogue with the modern world, but an affirmation that modernity’s efforts for human development are in continuity with the divine plan. O’Donovan notes that the constitution suggests that modern humans can, in this regard, “justly consider that by their own efforts they are unfolding the creator’s work.”²² This suggests an intrinsicist model of the development whereby grace works in and through human processes.

O’Donovan remarks that several theologians have detected in *Gaudium et spes* an optimistic, evolutionary perspective such as that advanced by Teilhard de Chardin.²³ Henri de Lubac considers that de Chardin’s evolutionary

16 Second Vatican Council, *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (1965), no.12, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

17 Second Vatican Council, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), no. 3, 92, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

18 Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 218.

19 *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican: 1964), chap. 2.

20 *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, chap. 7; George Lindbeck, “Vision of a World Renewed,” in *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology: Vatican Two—Catalyst for Change* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 4.

21 Second Vatican Council, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 44.

22 Leo J. O’Donovan, “Was Vatican II Evolutionary? A Note on Conciliar Language,” *Theological Studies* 36, no. 3 (September 1975): 497.

23 O’Donovan, “Was Vatican II Evolutionary?” 495.

theology exerted “a certain influence, at least indirect and diffuse on some orientations of the Council.”²⁴ Otto Spülbeck recalls four occasions on which the Council fathers, while deliberating on *Gaudium et spes*, discussed de Chardin’s theology, and regards chapter three of that pastoral constitution as particularly informed by de Chardin’s view that all of creation will ultimately say “Yes” to the divine invitation.²⁵ These undertones of de Chardin are reminiscent of Loisy’s emphasis on the evolving nature of the Tradition.

Historical Consciousness and the Development of Doctrine

George Lindbeck, a Lutheran observer at the Council, believes that the Council recognized the riches of a 2,000-year-old evolving tradition.²⁶ The Council moved beyond those strands of the tradition that had reacted at the Council of Trent to the Reformation, and in the Modernist crisis to modernity. Lindbeck recalls, “The renewers argued circles around the traditionalists. They unmasked their opponents as mistaking the post-Tridentine developments, not least the Marian and papal advances of the nineteenth century, for the total Catholic heritage.”²⁷

A commitment to the entirety of Church teaching, beyond the emphases of Trent and Vatican I, is evident in the theological endeavor known as *ressourcement*. The Council welcomed among its *periti* theologians who advocated a return to the scriptural and Patristic sources of theology that has been all but obscured by scholasticism. During the decade before the Council, *ressourcement* theologians, including John Courtney Murray, Edward Schillebeeckx, Henri de Lubac, and Karl Rahner, had been held in suspicion by the magisterium while endeavoring to recover the riches of Christian antiquity. Now, in the environs of St. Peter’s Basilica, they brushed shoulders with their former detractors. As James Carroll remarks, “Formally censored and censured scholars were all at once the darlings of Catholic thought.”²⁸ Still, the return to early sources would pose a significant challenge to the Neo-Scholasticism that had all but eclipsed other perspectives within the Tradition.

The Council would revive ancient practices and ways of thinking as much, if not more, than it inaugurated new ones. As Daniel Donovan observes, “Although Vatican Two has seemed to many people to represent something new, in many ways what it said . . . was quite traditional. It represented a return to values and insights that in many cases had been widely held in the early Church.”²⁹ The Council was more friend than foe to ancient Christianity.

Lindbeck regards the Council’s historical consciousness as distinguishing it from previous councils. The author argues that the Council adopted a new view of the world, seeing the Church and the broader world as works in progress, evolving towards the fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.³⁰ Lindbeck describes this perspective as “realized futuristic eschatology.”³¹ By this term, the author refers to an evolutionary view of the Church and the world, in which the Kingdom of God is a reality experienced as “already” and as “not yet,” a tension to which Walter Kasper, Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, and JB Metz have been attentive.³² Lindbeck argues that this perspective is closer to the Hebraic perspective held by many of the biblical authors than to more static views of the world

24 Henri de Lubac, *Athéisme et sens de l’homme: Une double requête de ‘Gaudium et spes’* (Paris, 1968), 130. Quoted in O’Donovan, 495.

25 Otto Spülbeck, “Teilhard de Chardin und die Pastoralkonstitution,” in *Die Autorität der Freiheit* 3, ed. Johann Christoph Hampe (Munich, 1967), 86-97 at 86-87. Cf. Spülbeck’s essay ‘Fortschrittsglaube und Evolution’ in *Der Fortschrittsglaube—Sinn und Gefahren*, edited by Ulrich Schöndorfer (Graz, 1965), 85-107. Giovanni Caprile notes seven references to Teilhard in the Council aula: *Il Concilio Vaticano II* 4 (Rome, 1966), 257, 263, 265, 278; (Rome, 1966), 76, 105, 153. Quoted in O’Donovan, 494.

26 George Lindbeck, “How a Lutheran Saw It: a Different Kind of Reformation,” *Commonweal* 129, no.20 (November 22, 2002): 16.

27 Lindbeck, “How a Lutheran Saw It,” 16.

28 James Carroll, *Practicing Catholic* (New York: Houghton Miffler Harcourt, 2009), 163.

29 Daniel Donovan, *Distinctly Catholic: An Exploration of Catholic Identity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 25.

30 Lindbeck, “Vision of a World Renewed,” 4. Cf. Walter Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1965), 36 quoted in Francis Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 37.

31 Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes*, 9.

32 Lindbeck, “Vision of a World Renewed,” 4. Cf. Walter Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes*, 36 quoted in Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity*, 37.

held by Hellenistic perspectives.³³ Insofar as it reflects the “already,” a realized futuristic eschatology is conducive to an understanding of doctrine as authoritative. Insofar as it reflects the “not yet,” a realized futuristic eschatology is conducive to an understanding of doctrine as provisional, reflecting the “not yet” status of a pilgrim Church. Hence, realized eschatology can suggest an understanding of doctrinal formulae as provisionally, rather than eternally, authoritative.

Mysterium Ecclesiae: Affirming the Need for Change in Doctrinal Formulae

In 1973, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a declaration, *In Defense of the Catholic Doctrines of the Church against Certain Errors of the Present Day (Mysterium ecclesiae)*.³⁴ The declaration candidly admits “during her earthly pilgrimage the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified.”³⁵ A Church that is always in need of being purified is a Church that had better be open to the possibility of change.

Reflecting the position endorsed by Pope John XXIII, *Mysterium ecclesiae* recognizes that the effectiveness of any doctrinal formulation is relative to its context:

...the dogmatic *formulas* of the Church’s Magisterium were from the beginning suitable for communicating revealed truth, and that as they are they remain forever suitable for communicating this truth to those who interpret them correctly. It does not however follow that every one of these formulas has always been or will always be so to the same extent.³⁶

The declaration proceeds to approve a role for theologians in the exegesis and formulation of doctrine at the service of the teaching office. “For this reason theologians seek to define exactly the intention of teaching proper to the various formulas, and in carrying out this work they are of considerable assistance to the living Magisterium of the Church, to which they remain subordinated.”³⁷ *Mysterium ecclesiae* notes that while some ancient doctrinal formulae remain effective, others need to be replaced by new ones that present the same meaning.

For this reason also it often happens that ancient dogmatic formulas and others closely connected with them remain living and fruitful in the habitual usage of the Church, but with suitable expository and explanatory additions that maintain and clarify their original meaning. In addition, it has sometimes happened that in this habitual usage of the Church certain of these formulas gave way to new expressions which, proposed and approved by the Sacred Magisterium, presented more clearly or more completely the same meaning.³⁸

The essential meaning of the formulae remains ever-true, however; the Church’s expression of the meaning may be more developed so as to be clearer and more complete.³⁹ The formulae can develop so as to communicate more clearly in the idiom of the age, and more completely so as to take account of new insights into the original deposit of faith.⁴⁰ Hence, in *Mysterium ecclesiae*, the case for the development of doctrinal formulations is vindicated. As Francis Sullivan observes, “This statement of the CDF provides official clarification of the sense in which dogmatic

33 Lindbeck, “Vision of a World Renewed,” 9.

34 The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium ecclesiae* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1973), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html.

35 *Mysterium ecclesiae*, no. 6.

36 *Mysterium ecclesiae*, no. 5.

37 *Mysterium ecclesiae*, no. 5.

38 *Mysterium ecclesiae*, no. 5.

39 *Mysterium ecclesiae*, no. 5.

40 *Mysterium ecclesiae*, no. 5.

statements can be said to be 'irreformable.' Irreformability is predicated of their meaning . . . On the other hand, the fact that this meaning can be expressed with greater clarity or more developed shows that irreformability is not predicated of dogmatic formulas as such."⁴¹

Cautioning against the equation of doctrinal formulations with revelation itself, Avery Dulles argues that a model of "revelation as doctrine" could give rise to the misunderstanding that doctrine comes directly from God.⁴² Also, Dulles notes that, if taken in isolation, a model of revelation as doctrine "forgets God's presence in one's own life and experience" and excludes "a faith that probes and questions."⁴³ Karl Rahner observes that even dogmatic formulations can become intertwined with non-binding assertions and assumptions. "In the transmission and expression of dogmas properly speaking there may be inseparably mingled ideas, interpretations etc., which are not part of the binding content of the article of faith."⁴⁴

The Challenge of Developing Discipline

Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* acknowledges that not all doctrines are equally foundational to the Christian faith. "When comparing doctrines with one another . . . there exists a 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith."⁴⁵

In terms of the hierarchy of truths, the doctrinal issues discussed at the Synod on the Family and the post-synod discussion on ordaining women to the permanent diaconate are classifiable as discipline, that is, *disciplina morum* in the language of the Council of Trent.⁴⁶ While the magisterium does not provide any list exhaustively distinguishing dogmas, discipline, or other categories of teaching, Francis Sullivan describes *disciplina morum* as moral norms, mores, and practices for various facets of life.⁴⁷

Although it may seem counterintuitive, it may be the case that the Church experiences greater difficulty in developing its teachings in the category of discipline than it does in developing its understanding of dogma. Although dogma comprises doctrines that are more central to what the Church believes, in itself dogma does not require any change in practices. In a case in point, Rahner playfully suggests that if the media were to report that a fourth person of the Trinity had been discovered, it would be perceived by many Christians as less noteworthy than a Vatican pronouncement on some sexual matter.⁴⁸ The underlying point is borne out when Andrew Greeley suggests that the teachings of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* on reproductive matters made a greater impact on married Catholics than had the entire proceedings of the Council. "The encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, issued in the summer of 1968, is the most important event of the last twenty-five years of Catholic history . . . Unlike the changes of the Vatican Council, which had only marginal impact on the lives of the Catholic laity, the encyclical endeavored to reach into the bedroom of every Catholic married couple in the world."⁴⁹ So while dogma is more foundational to the faith, it is at the level of discipline that change is more obvious and more contentious in the modern Church.

41 Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity*, 35.

42 Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Orbis, 1992), 45-46.

43 Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 115.

44 Karl Rahner, "Yesterday's History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow," *Theological Investigations* 18, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 11-12.

45 The Second Vatican Council, *The Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)* (1964), no. 11. Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

46 Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 128.

47 Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 128.

48 Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 9-21.

49 Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 91.

When the Church significantly develops its understanding in relation to matters as foundational as the manner in which God relates to the world, and with issues involving salvation, it can be the case that the verbiage of the doctrinal formulae remains unchanged but reinterpreted by the Church. In a case in point, when Catholic Christians today recite the Nicene Creed at Mass, they profess belief in “God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and of earth.” If they profess the creed in Latin, then they may be uttering the same words that a tenth-century Christian would have uttered.

In a further example, it could be argued that the Church still teaches that *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* - Outside the Church, No Salvation. However, it is clear from Vatican II’s *Declaration on The Church’s Relations with the Non-Christian Religions* that this should not be taken to mean that baptism with water and initiation into full communion is absolutely required for salvation (not that such a crass interpretation was ever a fair representation of the Church’s position). Still, Vatican II challenged a prevailing understanding of this dictum, *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, so that it must now be understood in relation to an inclusive model of the Church as the People of God with whom non-Catholics can be in a degree of communion. Understood in this way, the dictum points to the communal nature of salvation and challenges individualistic soteriologies. Salvation always reflects our relationship with the People of God, that is, Christ’s Mystical Body in our time and place.

Enormous potential for equivocation and ambiguity exists when foundational beliefs undergo development that is nothing short of transformative, yet the relevant doctrinal formulae are not rephrased. However, with regard to discipline, precisely because it is concerned with concrete application, there is generally less room for equivocation and ambiguity. On the face of it, either the Church begins to allow divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to receive communion or it doesn’t. However, as we shall see, even in relation to the disciplinary matters discussed at the Synod, Pope Francis seems to be possessed of a penchant for ambiguity, what John Keats called “Negative Capabilities,” viewing ambiguity as potentially creative rather than as necessarily problematic.⁵⁰

Personal Conscience and the Development of Doctrine

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis does not directly define any doctrinal change in relation to the admission of divorced and civilly remarried persons to communion. The Holy Father does, however, exhort the magisterium to leave room for conscientious discernment.

We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.⁵¹

Francis’s remarks reflect the Church’s teaching that a person is always obliged to follow the dictates of their conscience as the voice of God resounding within their depths.⁵² The Pontiff’s remark in this regard might be construed as encouraging an approach to doctrinal development that reduces the tension between the Church’s teaching on the primacy of personal conscience and its teachings on specific issues, by incorporating more room for

50 John Keats, to Benjamin Bailey, London 1817 available at <http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/221117.htm>.

51 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

52 The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 1800, 2851, 2852, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM>.

discernment into future formulations. In lamenting that the magisterium has not encouraged an openness to grace, Francis's remarks reflect the sacramental vision of the universe in which grace infuses the human person and their decision-making.

Related to the matter of personal conscience, it might be argued that a form of collective conscience is evident in what Cardinal Newman called the *sensus fidelium*, that is, the manner in which the faithful as a body accept or reject doctrinal propositions.⁵³ Clearly, the *sensus fidelium* is not static as can be seen historically in the faithful's growing disdain for slavery, or indeed, one might argue, its reception of *Humanae vitae's* reaffirmation of the ban on artificial birth control. In 2014, the International Theological Commission acknowledged the importance of the *sensus fidei* in the history of the Church and remarked that

what is less well known, and generally receives less attention, is the role played by the laity with regard to the development of the moral teaching of the Church. It is therefore important to reflect also on the function played by the laity in discerning the Christian understanding of appropriate human behavior in accordance with the Gospel.⁵⁴

This raises the question of the status afforded to lay voices in the context of a synod and pre-synod consultations relative to input by the hierarchy. Granted, neither personal conscience nor the general consensus of the faithful should operate in a vacuum, and so we turn to the question of interpreting scripture and the broader Tradition.

The Role of Exegesis

It is crucial that disputes regarding doctrine are informed by a robust exegesis of scripture and of the wider Tradition so that anachronistic assumptions are not glibly accepted so as to defend the status quo. For example, there exists a strand of scholarship that calls into question the association of the sin of Sodom with homosexuality as opposed to abuse of the stranger.⁵⁵ The Pontifical Biblical Commission has recognized the role of exegesis in the development of doctrine, in 1964 urging biblical scholars to freely exercise the best methods at their disposal:

There are still many things, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and explanation of which the Catholic exegete can and must freely exercise his skill and genius, so that each may contribute his part to the advantage of all, to the continued progress of sacred doctrine. . .⁵⁶

A sacramental model of the universe suggests that processes of communication, redaction, editing, translation, and interpretation are both graced and fallen, inherently good, yet fallible. Such a perspective on creation compels us to seriously consider exegetical insights that reflect broad (since there is hardly ever unanimous) consensus among biblical scholars.

A historical-critical approach is applicable not only to the scriptural foundations of doctrine but to the Tradition more broadly. Just as the Bible did not, as Martyn Percy remarks, arrive "by fax from heaven," neither did other

53 John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, July 1859, available at <https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/newman-faithful.asp>.

54 The International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), no. 73, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

55 Mark Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Routledge, 2004).

56 The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia; Instruction on the Historicity of the Gospels*. Latin text is at Pontificia Commissio Biblica, *De Historica Evangeliorum Veritate*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19640421_verita-vangeli_lt.html. An English translation by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, *Theological Studies* 25 (1964): 402-408, is available here: https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/pcb_gospels.htm.

facets of the Tradition, including doctrinal formulae.⁵⁷ Congar has compellingly illustrated the evolving nature of the Catholic Tradition as it came to define various dogmas.⁵⁸ Herbert McCabe proposes that Tradition may be defined in terms of a continuous engagement with questions rather than continuity in terms of particular answers. McCabe suggests “. . . we do not just have to know what people said in the past, but we have to be in continuity with their wrestling and with their problems.”⁵⁹ Doctrinal continuity may lie in an ongoing grappling with mystery rather than in imagining that our forebears had achieved a static understanding of the faith that we are obliged to preserve.

Conclusion

This article extends the Catholic vision of a sacramental universe to the question of the development of doctrine. If we truly believe that creation is infused with grace, then reason, experience, and process of communication, interpretation and development, as part of creation, are infused with potential to mediate the divine.

The Second Vatican Council mandated a dialogical stance on the part of the Church in relation to the modern world. As such, it recognizes the capacity of progress in the various sciences, and the perspective of modern people more generally to serve as conduits of truth and of grace.

In closing, it might be observed that the modes of the Risen Christ's presence in the Mass liturgically signify the conversation between various manifestations of grace that can contribute to the development of doctrine. The Church teaches that Christ becomes present in a unique way in the Eucharistic elements, and that Christ is present in the scriptures.⁶⁰ It also teaches that Christ is present in the person of the presider and in the assembly.⁶¹ In the Mass, therefore, the Word of God addresses the assembly not a profane audience but as the Mystical Body of the Risen Christ present in a particular time and place. In life as in the Mass, do not scripture and Tradition address the Mystical Body of Christ that includes lay and ordained members who have theological, exegetical, and experiential insights to offer? Is not the development of doctrine a graced dialogue between the Word of God and the People of God?

57 Martyn Percy, quoted by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231 Cf. Martyn Percy, *Thirty Nine New Articles: An Anglican Landscape of Faith* (London: Canterbury Press, 2013), 20.

58 Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1965), 16, 55.

59 Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2002), 206. Quoted in Mary McCaughey, “Reason, Reality, and the Re-personalization of Being: A Response to Taylor’s Characterization of the ‘Impersonal Order,’” *Religion, Education, and the Arts* 7(2011), <http://rea.materdei.ie/media/Issue%207/REA%20Issue%207%20-%20Mc%20Caughey.pdf>.

60 Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963), no. 7, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

61 Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican: 1963), no. 7.