

HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH CHANGES ITS DOCTRINES

By Gabriel Moran

One problem that makes discussion of change in the church almost impossible is the connotations of “doctrine.” The word is simply a synonym for teachings. Discussion of change would be clearer if the church talked about teachings rather than doctrines. There is often an assumption when doctrines of the Catholic Church are referred to that “doctrine” is exemplified by the articles of the Creed: Beliefs about God, Christ, Holy Spirit, redemption, communion of saints and the rest. There is also a much larger collection of “defined doctrines” that have come from ecumenical councils and papal pronouncements. There are about twenty-two hundred such defined doctrines or dogmas in the Catholic Church.

“Teachings,” however, obviously cover other matters than these defined doctrines which, whatever their origin, are untouchable now. There will be no fourth person added to God, no inclusion of a new book in the New Testament, no redemption without the cross and resurrection, no replacement for the mother of God. Most Catholics do not trouble themselves much with these doctrines; they simply accept the Apostles Creed. A Catholic might find the doctrine of an eternal hell for one stumble to be outrageous and immoral, but there is no requirement to believe that anyone is actually in hell.

The teachings that do affect all Catholics who take their religion seriously pertain to practices and application of principles. The official church teaching on matters of economic, political, artistic policies requires a knowledge of the constantly changing world in which the church exists. The documents of Pope Francis on economics and the environment draw from principles of peace, justice, and personal responsibility. The teachings themselves, however, are in many places controversial. As the situation changes, some change in the teaching will undoubtedly be necessary.

On sexual matters the church’s teaching throughout the centuries has been hampered by the human race’s ignorance of basic facts. Church officials might wish to claim that the Catholic Church has been consistent in upholding certain principles of a sexual life but it would be ridiculous to claim that its teaching on homosexuality, masturbation, control of birth, or abortion has been unchanging.

On homosexuality, for example, the Catholic Church only began to develop a language to address the question in 1975. That is not surprising; most of the world was doing something similar. But today Catholic Church officials still do not have an adequate language about homosexuality. They should at least stop talking about “the homosexuals,” as if that were an alien species. The use of “homosexual tendency” or “homosexual tendencies” (they cannot decide which it is) means that official teaching is not even engaging the question. They reject the idea of “orientation” and substitute (sinful) “tendencies.” The world has undeniably changed whether one thinks it is mainly for good or ill. The Catholic Church can and should change its teachings on sexual matters in order for those teachings to be intelligible.

A distinction that is relevant to how doctrine changes is to distinguish between doctrine and “pastoral practice.” This distinction seems to be a favorite of Pope Francis. A change of practice

is proposed in the name of mercy and compassion, together with an insistence that no doctrine is being changed. The fiction can be maintained for years or decades but eventually something has to give. Either homosexual behavior is a grave sin or homosexual people should be treated with pastoral care, respect, and understanding. The Catholic Church has been saying these two incompatible things for several decades now. Most likely, the practice will eventually bring about a change in the theory which is embodied in doctrine.

On the control of birth, the Catholic Church has unnecessarily painted itself into a corner during the last eight decades. It has appropriately tried to preserve the connection between sexual practice, loving partners, and the birth of children. When it became obvious early in the twentieth century that the human race had to exercise more control over population growth, better methods were needed for couples to limit the number of children. In the 1930s the church endorsed a method of birth control based on knowledge of the menstrual cycle. That one form of birth control that the church calls natural family planning is not a solution for most people. The idea of “responsible parenting” requires a response to the contemporary situation.

By 1960 the church was reaching a crisis point when a solution arrived in the form of a pill. All that Catholic Church leaders had to do was pronounce that the pill fit within the guidelines of natural family planning and responsible parenthood. The Catholic Church could have joined in the call for a better pill, one safer for women. Instead, there was total condemnation. That reaction only allowed the problem to get worse until 1968 when leading figures in the church recognized that a disaster was brewing unless the pope made a move. Pope Paul VI could have resolved the problem – not without strong opposition it is true – by simply saying that the key principle that concerns Catholic teaching is that violence to the body is to be avoided and non-violent forms of birth control are not only allowed but encouraged as natural family planning. That is also the most effective way to reduce abortions. Instead, the pope’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* split the church in two, a split from which it has not recovered. The synod could not admit this most obvious problem that the Catholic Church has so that the pronouncements of a synod or pope on family life are not likely to go far.

Central to the Synod discussions was whether divorced and remarried Roman Catholics are still members of the church (the surface issue was the reception of Holy Communion). The question that the officials of the church have to face is how to allow divorce when it sometimes makes perfectly good sense. Their solution, unacknowledged on both sides, is to make “annulment” much easier. That process was introduced years ago to deal with a few exceptions when it was declared that there was never a marriage. The application slowly spread to cases where the judgment was pretty obviously a fiction to cover the need for divorce. But the obtaining of an annulment was restricted to people who had the money and the patience to get through the Vatican bureaucracy.

The Synod and Pope Francis have now endorsed a process of local (cheaper and faster) annulments. For decades to come there will remain a supposed difference between divorce and annulment but it will be irrelevant for most people. The Catholic Church will have accepted what it has long resisted, namely, that some marriages are a bad fit, other marriages die. If Catholic Church officials were imaginative, the acceptance of divorce could be put forward as a positive step in recognizing that the permanence of the marriage bond is not something that happens with

a verbal promise in one's twenties but something that people grow into. The Catholic Church could continue to defend the permanence of marriage while accepting the fact that not all people reach that state quickly or in their first try.

The religious orders almost had it right in having their members take a series of temporary vows before "being professed in" perpetual vows. The drawback is that permanence was supposedly possible at age 25. Whether that was ever true in the past, it is clearly not the case now. In the taking of a marriage vow, annual vows might be followed by vows of three years, five years, and ten years. Perhaps when most people reach age 50 they are ready to realistically promise permanence. Some people might need more time. Some couples might decide on their fiftieth wedding anniversary that their marriage is now finished or their marriage is now indissoluble.

At the Synod meeting in 2015, the German language group said things quite close to this view of marriage. Their position did not make the cut for the final report of the Synod but their document is now available for the Pope. The position they state is, "Just as the historical development of the Church's teaching on marriage took time, so must the Church's pastoral development towards sacramental marriage today allow people time to mature along the path towards sacramental marriage and must not act on the principle of 'all or nothing'." Pastoral practice is what is talked about but there is an underlying admission that the church's teaching on marriage has changed throughout the centuries and that the Catholic Church's practice might help people to gradually move toward the ideal of a permanent relation.

Ultimately, the Catholic Church will have to examine its assumptions about the terms revelation and faith. Bishops have not been challenged by theologians on the assumption that their job is to "transmit" truths that have been "divinely revealed." The examination of the ideas of faith and revelation can only be done by stepping outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church to converse with other religious leaders and with philosophers who are not closed to the possibilities of religion's value. Asking people to believe in revealed truths shuts down the exploration of how the divine is revealed in all creation. That exploration sounds good to many people. However, what has to be admitted – and this also goes for Protestants, Jews and Muslims – is that it is frightening to let go of a collection of truths that are the absolutely certain basis of one's life. It is not just Catholic bishops who rely on propositions that are the basis of one's life. But the change from a set of truths that are certain to finding certainty in the encounter of one's body with the environment and in dialogue with other people, helped by the richness of a religious tradition, is a journey that increasingly is a challenge for every person.