**“THE CHURCH CONSTANTLY MOVES FORWARD”**

**Paul Fahey, 27 February 2024**

How does the Church’s understanding of Revelation grow? How does doctrine develop, and who develops it?

*Dei Verbum*is the key text for engaging with these questions. It affirms that Tradition develops with and through the whole Church: from the prayers and lives of laypeople to the study of theologians, and, ultimately, the teaching authority of the pope and bishops in communion with him (cf. DV 8).

In other words, as [Pope Paul VI said to Archbishop Lefebvre](https://www.wordonfire.org/paul-vi-lefebvre/), Tradition “is inseparable from the living Magisterium of the Church.” It is ultimately the Magisterium, and only the Magisterium, that definitively resolves any apparent contradictions between past and present teachings, because “the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church” (DV 10).

Further, *Dei Verbum* states that “the Church constantly moves forward” until “the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her” (DV 8).

Rather than seeing what is ancient as the greatest understanding of Revelation, the Council Fathers understood that as time progresses, the Church “moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth.” We have a greater understanding of Revelation now than we had in the 400s, 1200s, or 1500s.

Here, the organic images of rivers and trees that St John Henry Newman used can be helpful. A river is greater and more powerful at its mouth than in the small mountain spring that is its source. Likewise, a mighty oak tree is grander and stronger than a sapling.

Pope Francis captures this growth in understanding, even to the point of correcting past teachings, in his [response to the *dubia*](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/pope-francis-responds-to-dubia-of-five-cardinals.html) submitted by five cardinals, including Cardinal Burke, in the lead-up to the 2023 meeting for the Synod on Synodality:

“On the one hand, it is true that the Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but it is also true that both the texts of the Scripture and the testimonies of Tradition require interpretation in order to distinguish their perennial substance from cultural conditioning. This is evident, for example, in biblical texts (such as Exodus 21:20-21) and in some magisterial interventions that tolerated slavery (Cf. Pope Nicholas V, Bull *Dum* *diversas,* 1452). This is not a minor issue, given its intimate connection with the perennial truth of the inalienable dignity of the human person. These texts need interpretation. The same applies to certain considerations in the New Testament regarding women (1 Corinthians 11:3-1; 1 Timothy 2:11-14) and other texts of Scripture and testimonies of Tradition that cannot be materially repeated today.”

In other words, the living Magisterium is our theological interpreter of historical texts, not the other way around.

We cannot appropriately use our understanding of past texts to judge the living Magisterium, otherwise, we end up severely misunderstanding and misrepresenting the Catholic faith. The living Magisterium is our only sure guide and interpreter of Scripture, Tradition, and historic documents and Councils (cf. DV 10).

There is also danger in accepting an historic teaching as binding if it has not been repeated in generations because “frequent repetition” of a doctrine is one of the ways for us to know the importance of a magisterial teaching (*Lumen Gentium* 25). This danger becomes clear if we try to imagine the following scenarios:

* A catechist telling a new convert to Catholicism that “none of those who are outside of the Catholic Church” including “Jews, heretics, and schismatics” can be saved and all of them are damned to Hell (Council of Florence, 1442 AD)
* A pastor telling his congregation that receiving any interest on a loan is gravely evil (*Vix Pervenit*, 1745 AD), but that slavery “considered in itself and all alone, is by no means repugnant to the natural and divine law” (Instruction of the Holy Office, June 20, 1866).
* A Catholic school principal writing a bulletin article asserting that Catholic parents are forbidden to send their kids to public school without the permission of their bishop (*Divini Illius Magistri*, 1929 AD).

We must avoid reading past magisterial documents the way that Fundamentalists read Scripture.

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