LifeSiteNews interview on the ‘Death Penalty’ address of Pope Francis with John Paul Meenan, Assistant Professor of Theology and Natural Science, Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College

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LifeSiteNews: Can there ever be a "new understanding" of Christian truth that is contrary to a previous understanding?

Meenan: That all depends on what one means by 'new'. The understanding of a truth is always being made more full and explicit, and the deeper the truth (e.g., the Trinity, human sexuality), the more the truth may develop.

Of course, truth cannot contradict truth. There is a deep metaphysical mystery here, in term of the relation between words/propositions, which point to concepts, which in turn point to reality (back to propositional logic). The full depth of 'reality' can never be completely covered by any term or proposition, but there are obvious cases of contradiction, which are, by their natural, illogical and false. (As in, contraception is bad, now it is good).

LifeSiteNews: What is the deposit of faith?

Meenan: The deposit of faith is that whole body of truth revealed in its fullness by Christ, located in Scripture and Tradition, which VC II calls 'one divine wellspring'. Of course, it is difficult to visualize this, especially as we go back to its origins. Christ did not give the Apostles a catechism or book, but rather, the living truth, which would be more explicit by their successors in the Magisterium as time went on.

LifeSiteNews: Is the deposit of faith something static, or can it be added to?

Meenan: Hence, this deposit is not 'static', but it is in one sense 'immutable'. Strictly speaking, one cannot 'add' to this deposit, but the Magisterium can unpack, explain and apply these truths for each particular epoch in history until the end of time.

LifeSiteNews: What is doctrine and why do we have it?

Meenan: We have doctrine, as the CCC says, to be a 'light for our path', to guide us on the way to our eternal end, (cf., CCC, 88-90), as well as all the subsidiary ends in this life that lead thereto (moral, political, familial, social). The primary purpose of 'orthodoxy' is really 'orthopraxy', to teach us to do the right thing, which in turn makes us good, and 'apt', as Saint Thomas would say, for heaven.

LifeSiteNews: How does doctrine genuinely develop? Examples?

Meenan: The analogy given by Saint Vincent of Lerins (whose reading was providentially on the day you emailed) is that of a living body, which 'changes' as it grows, but always remains the same (cf., CCC, 94-95). As Vincent puts it, "The religion of souls should follow the law of development of bodies. Though bodies develop and unfold their component parts with the passing of years, they always remain what they were". Hence, as the understanding of this deposit grows, "it must truly be the development of faith, not the alteration of faith", going on "only along its own line of development, that is, with the same doctrine, the same meaning and the same import".

We have developed the doctrine of Our Lady , in terms of her Immaculate Conception and Assumption, on Christ, and his ontological status, on the political structure of society, on human sexuality, on the status of the unborn, on the relation between faith and reason, the role of science, the structure of the cosmos and Man's place therein, the evolution of species and of Man himself, the understanding of Scripture. The list could go on.

LifeSiteNews: Is it part of doctrine that it be tied to an interpretation that is immutable?

Meenan: Yes, as Pius XII declared in his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*, doctrine must always be understood in the sense that the Church has defined it. There are, of course, levels of clarity, in accord with the infinite depth of reality, but, as mentioned, there are obvious and clear contradictions that can never be permitted, like changing a commandment to make adultery now permissible, or to claim that Christ was not really God and such. The '*homoousios*' of Nicaea, for example, claimed that whatever it meant to be God, that Christ was and is. But this did not exhaust the reality of the Incarnation, and further Councils went on to unpack and develop this doctrine.

The same goes with family and life issues. Why is contraception wrong? Why is periodic abstinence to avoid children all right, and are there conditions for this?

LifeSiteNews: Reading between the Pope's lines, what do you think is really going on here?

Meenan: Although I hesitate to 'read' the mind of the Pope, I would posit that he is trying to tie together the various 'life issues', as we see in the restructuring of the Pontifical Academy for Life and the John Paul II Institute.

We may ponder this, and what it all means. I think it terms of the death penalty, he is developing John Paul II's doctrine in *Evangelium Vitae*, that capital punishment should be reserved only when there is no other way to defend society (and not using it for the other purposes of punishment, to remediate the wrongdoer, or as retribution for the crime).

What the Pope cannot do is to declare capital punishment 'intrinsically evil', for it is embedded within Tradition, it seems to me, that the State, and even individuals, have the right, and sometimes the duty (if they have others under their care), to inflict harm on an aggressor proportionate to the situation, even to the point of killing him, if that is the only way, under the principle of double effect (cf., CCC, 2263-2267).

What the Pope can do is limit and clarify the conditions under which this right/duty is exercised, which may be what he is attempting here. That is, the death penalty should not be used simply as a 'penalty' for wrongdoing, but only in the most extreme cases, where there is no other way to defend the lives of others.