



A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching (ND Erasmus Institute Books)

John T. Noonan Jr.

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Using concrete examples, John T. Noonan, Jr., demonstrates that the moral teaching of the Catholic Church has changed and continues to change without abandoning its foundational commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Specifically, Noonan looks at the profound changes that have occurred over the centuries in Catholic moral teaching on freedom of conscience, lending for a profit, and slavery. He also offers a close examination of the change now in progress concerning divorce.

In these changes Noonan perceives the Catholic Church to be a vigorous, living organism answering new questions with new answers, and enlarging the capacity of believers to learn through experience and empathy what love demands. He contends that the impetus to change comes from a variety of sources, including prayer, meditation on Scripture, new theological insights and analyses, the evolution of human institutions, and the examples and instruction given by persons of good will.

Noonan also states that the Church cannot change its commitment to preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Given this absolute, how can the moral teaching of the Church change? Noonan finds this question unanswerable when asked in the abstract. But in the context of the specific facts and events he discusses in this book, an answer becomes clear. As our capacity to grasp the Gospel grows, so too, our understanding and compassion, which give life to the Gospel commandments of love, grow.

"Having been an office neighbor of Judge John Noonan at the Kluge Center of the Library of Congress while this book was developing, I am delighted to see it in print. It is a careful and yet bold application of the concept of 'development of doctrine' to morals rather than to dogma, and a brilliant taxonomy of Christian attitudes toward slavery. The result of Judge Noonan's research is a deeper, if more complex, understanding of just what the continuity of the Orthodox-Catholic tradition implies. I look forward to discussing it with the author at greater length, and I cannot imagine any serious person who would not benefit from reading it."

—**Jaroslav Pelikan, Yale University**

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