

MEDIA RELEASE

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Does Newman’s doctrinal development theory explain The Francis Effect?

One of the most studied essays on Christian doctrine could provide an answer to the controversies surrounding Pope Francis’ leadership, according to one of the world’s leading experts on St John Henry Newman.

Professor Stephen Morgan said during a recent visit to Australia that the Catholic Church needed to re-embrace Newman’s seminal work on doctrinal development.

The theory of doctrinal development, coined by Newman in the 19th Century and thought to have influenced his decision to convert to Catholicism, is one of the most analysed concepts on Christian doctrine. This includes a [2021 book by Professor Morgan](#), a Welsh deacon and rector of the University of St Joseph in Macao.

Speaking at the third annual Newman Symposium on October 9, a joint initiative of Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) to mark the saint’s feast day, Professor Morgan said the English Cardinal’s insights into the challenge of tradition and development were still relevant today.

Importantly, some of the controversies surrounding Pope Francis’ papal documents - which some observers have called ‘The Francis Effect’ – showed the need for “a theological framework that can reconcile with the ongoing struggle of theological change and continuity”.

Newman’s concept of doctrinal development, as outlined in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* published 179 years ago, was the perfect blueprint for this challenge, Professor Morgan argued.

“John Henry Newman’s insights on organic development provide a valuable guide for navigating these challenges,” Professor Morgan said.

“By embracing Newman’s vision, the Church can maintain doctrinal coherence and continuity, fostering unity and clarity in its teachings and practices, and effectively addressing the evolving needs of the modern world.

“Newman’s principles ensure that doctrinal development remains true to the original deposit of faith while allowing for growth and adaptation in response to new circumstances.”

At the centre of Newman’s theory was the idea that doctrine, or the Church’s teachings on faith and morals, must govern practice. That is, doctrine provides a framework for how Catholic’s practice their faith.

“(Newman) insisted that any development in doctrine must be coherent with the original deposit of faith, reflecting a continuity with the apostolic tradition,” Professor Morgan said.

“This ensures that the Church's teachings remain true to the core truths of Christianity while allowing for organic growth and adaptation over time.”

As well as leading a private Catholic Jesuit university in Macao, Professor Morgan is the president of the Association of Southeast and East Asian Catholics Colleges and Universities (ASEACCU). He was in Australia in August for the Association’s 30th Conference hosted by ACU North Sydney.

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis noted that Professor Morgan’s expertise on the life and work of St John Henry Newman made him an exceptional guest for the annual Newman Symposium.

“Professor Morgan, rector of the University of Saint Joseph in Macao, is arguably one of the world’s foremost authorities on St John Henry Newman,” Professor Skrbis said.

“Our annual symposium - which is a joint initiative of ACU and UNDA – has as its aim the desire to celebrate the life and work of St John Henry Newman.

“Cardinal Newman was instrumental in shaping the understanding of higher education, especially Catholic higher education, within both the Church and the broader community.

“His seminal work – The Idea of a University - is compulsory reading for all of us who work in Catholic higher education.”

Additional photos are available on request.