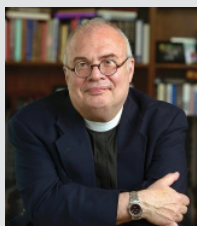


BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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MARK MASSA, S.J. is the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and Public Life and professor of theology at Boston College. He spoke with Boisi Center interim assistant to the director, Jack Nuelle, following the Boisi Center's November 5, 2018 panel discussion entitled, "How the Debate Over Birth Control Changed Catholic Theology." The following conversation touches on: Massa's new book, *The Structure of Theological Revolutions: How the Fight Over Birth Control Transformed American Catholicism*; how to apply the model of paradigm shift to Catholic theology; and self-doubt as salutary for Catholic theologians. It has been edited for clarity and content.

NUELLE: For folks who haven't read the book: can you give a brief overture of what the book is about?

MASSA: I started a writing project in the fall of 2016. I was on sabbatical. And I decided that I wanted to do some sort of historical overview of how Catholic theology developed after the reception of the pope's encyclical on birth control, which is called *Humanae Vitae*, and came out in the summer of 1968.

More specifically than that, because that is a very big topic, I wanted to do a study of how arguments about natural law had developed or changed. My suspicion with regard to that latter project – that is, how natural law discourse has changed – my suspicion about how it changed was abetted by re-reading Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I had read it as a sophomore in college, and it really changed my mind about a bunch of things. I spent my final year as dean, which was the '15-'16 academic year, reading it slowly and underlining – I still have my dog-eared college copy of it. So going back and crossing out my stupid college sophomore observations and putting in, hopefully, smarter dean observations.

I started writing it in earnest in September of 2016, and what the monograph is, is a study of *Humanae Vitae* itself and its immediate reception in 1968, then how Catholics read it, critiqued it, and



came up with our own alternative models of natural law.

I belong to the Boston faculty church history group. It meets at Boston University. Some people from Harvard's history of science colloquium are also part of that. I got involved in a couple of serious conversations about how historians of science perceive their discipline and the changes that take place within physical science. I think I became pretty convinced, actually, at the very beginning of my project that Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and the smart physical scientists I was talking to had it right, and this was directly applicable to Catholic theology, and more specifically, directly applicable to models of natural law.

NUELLE: The idea that you further in your book borrows from Kuhn's understanding of paradigm shifts. He was always frustrated, as you write, by people

co-opting that phrase to mean all sorts of things. What it really refers to is a disjunctive leap from one standard way of thinking to another, related, but new way of thinking. I'm right in saying that is what you saw happening with *Humanae Vitae*?

MASSA: I read Kuhn for a history of science course. This was way back in the '70s as an undergraduate. I was surprised to learn that physical scientists don't conceive of their discipline as "advancing," or as an evolution. Science doesn't "develop," in the sense that Y builds on X, and Z in turn builds on X and Y. That is not how physical scientists understand the development of science.

Rather, the overall model of how the real world works and how scientists understand it – let's call that X. X works until there are so many exceptions, what Kuhn calls anomalies, that build up so that X isn't believable anymore. Physical scien-

tists don't build another structure on top of X. They completely get rid of X and replace it with Y, with a whole different model, a different paradigm.

The classic example is falling bodies. Why do falling bodies fall? Well, when I was a high school student in physics, I remember the argument of my physics teacher was: Aristotle first raised this question, and then Galileo built on Aristotle and so forth, until you end up with Einstein and then with Heisenberg. Heisenberg in the mid-20th century is still building on Aristotle. What I learned is that is not how scientists understand why falling bodies fall. Aristotle's explanation worked until it didn't work anymore, and he was completely replaced by Galileo.

Kuhn's argument is that the older paradigms of science don't provide the foundation or the structure on which the newer paradigms rest. The older paradigms are destroyed, and a whole new paradigm is put into place. It stays in place until so many anomalies accumulate that scientists realize they have to come up with a different model. My theory is that that is precisely right, and it applies to how Catholic theology works.

Now, take Cardinal John Henry Newman, famous for an essay called *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. I think most Catholics, especially Catholic theologians, think development here means this slow evolution whereby things become clearer – that older formulations become clearer and we elucidate and extrapolate on those and simply bring out what was there from the beginning. It is a slow evolution, and things get better, more clean of line, more concise.

I think that is completely wrong. I think that is not how it works at all. I think that Catholic theology “develops” with a model until the model simply doesn't work anymore. Our model of natural law, it is called neo-scholastic natural law, comes out of the late 18th and early 19th century. Let's say that *Humanae Vitae* used to condemn the taking of artificial

birth control, which was basically an old neo-scholastic thought that worked up to and including 1968. Then Catholic theologians just said, no, that isn't right. It is not true. It is unreasonable. It is

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unscientific. And we have to come up with a different model. So my book is an examination of models.

NUELLE: That is really helpful. I think when people see *Humanae Vitae* in the title of something, they automatically assume that what is to follow is either a screed against birth control or a ringing endorsement of it.

MASSA: Part of the reason I started this project is I always give my students, especially my graduate students, the text of *Humanae Vitae*, and we read it together in class. My sense is you can see them thinking thumbs up or thumbs down. It is like, well, no. It is more complicated than that.

One of Kuhn's favorite axioms that repeats again and again and again is that reality is more complex than any model we can construct to explain it. So natural law, just like scientific formulae, are human explanations for something that remains finally a mystery. We do our best to take in more and more of the mystery and explain it better and more clearly, but finally no model, however perfect, no matter how brilliant, can explain the whole thing, and the model works until it doesn't anymore, and then you have to come up with another model.

NUELLE: Your book is not a history of natural law. There are many studies which digest that.

MASSA: There's an absolutely hysterical condemnation of it saying: 'Massa writes a very bad history of natural law.' Well, that is right. It is a very bad history of natural law. That is not my book. There are many fine histories of natural law. My book is not that.

NUELLE: You use the language of anomaly like Kuhn uses, but it seems that it could be difficult to fit that neatly over a messy humanistic process, because you're not so much doing experiments as you are observing the messy process of history. Could you speak to that?

MASSA: That is a good question, because what I try to impress upon my students, especially my undergraduates, is the reason why theology and philosophy are two different disciplines. Philosophy is about the smartest speculation about what the good person should be or what the good society should be or the smartest way of organizing good, legal processes. Theology is an experimental discipline. Catholic theology has always understood itself to be the effort to explain as clearly as possible the human experience of religion. Especially the human experience of worship and what that experience is: the encountering of the Holy in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the sacraments.

To that extent, theology is a science. In the Middle Ages, theology was called the queen of the disciplines. It is called the queen of the disciplines because just like physical science, engineering or any other science, it is an intellectual effort to explain as clearly as possible real human experience. So if a theological explanation or a theorem is offered that doesn't make sense of human experience, or if the faithful read such a theological argument and say this really rings false, this doesn't seem true, my experience is not that – it could be that they're not smart enough to understand the theological formulation, or it could be that the

formulation is not as clear as it should be, or it could be that the theological formulation is wrong.

What happened in 1968 is that the vast majority of moral theologians, all of whom were priests, (so presumably they didn't have a pony in the race of birth control), they read *Humanae Vitae* and said this doesn't seem true at all. It flies in the face of all the experience that married couples talk about. And indeed the married couples who were even on the *Humanae Vitae* commission that was formed by Pope John XXIII said the way that *Humanae Vitae* is condemning this and the way *Humanae Vitae* talks about the theological meanings of sex isn't reflected in our bedroom experiences.

Therefore, theologians took that to mean there's something seriously flawed with the way the encyclical presents the arguments about natural law. Whatever else it is, natural law has to be reasonable. Now, it doesn't have to be rational – that is, it can't be reduced to reason – but natural law has to be reasonable. One of the reasons why in the 13th century the Church accepted natural law is because it was a reasonable way of talking about things with people you didn't agree with. Thomas Aquinas, of course, wrote the classic high medieval document explaining natural law, the *Summa Theologiae*. Thomas was originally condemned in 1277, because the church felt that he was heterodox in baptizing Aristotle. Basically, Thomas was taking the newly discovered corpus of Aristotle's work, which had been brought into Europe through Spain by Muslim scholars, and trying to build a Christian theology on that Aristotelian basis.

But eventually the church accepted Thomas and the larger natural law project, because they realized the utility of natural law. Its chief utility is it has to be a way of talking about human and moral actions in a way that even people who aren't believers in your faith tradition can understand and accept. So if natural law becomes a language game in which



only one group can play – that is, that only Catholics can understand – you're betraying the very root reason why the Church accepted natural law in the first place, which was it was a way of talking to people who didn't believe in the gods or God at all, but you could reach some basic foundational understanding of moral goodness and badness and what actions help human flourishing and what actions hinder human flourishing.

So I think my book is an attempt to explain the work within the theological guild, specifically the work within the moral theology guild, to come up with better and better paradigms of what natural law might mean in explaining Christian teaching.

NUELLE: You work through four specific paradigms in your book, and it seems that your main issue with discussions of natural law is this kind of solidification or calcification of what it must be which arises and dominates the discussion.

MASSA: The problem is that everybody, all Catholic moral theologians, like to call themselves Thomists. Just like all Americans like to say they're middle class. Middle class extends from making \$20,000 to \$120,000 a year. Well, all these people are Thomists, but what I discovered when I started reading these various people is they were Thomists in very different ways, and St. Thomas Aquinas, after whom they are named, would have a hard time recognizing his own agenda in the models that some of these people present.

What I wanted to present is an argument about the development of Catholic theology in which disjunction plays a bigger role than continuity. That is an old argument. It is an argument that to some extent was resolved by John Henry Newman in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. I think that was an altogether too sanguine explanation and final version of how Catholic theology develops. I think that Catholics, maybe not Catholic theologians so much, but Catholics are overly sanguine in believing that Catholic theology develops in a continuous developmental way without serious disjunction, and indeed without replacing whole systems with a different system.

Therefore, I think what would be salutary is a more fragile process of explaining how Catholic Christians come to explain the meaning of the world and their experience in it from a distinctly Christian way. That is not developmental in a linear way. Catholic theology is not linear. And I think that is precisely what most Catholics think.

As I say in my book, in 1968 when all this explodes on the scene, most Catholics would say what they did on Sunday mornings at Mass is pretty much what the apostles did on Sunday mornings in the first century. Well, no, something completely different was happening, as a matter of fact. I think for a lot of Catholic Christians, that is a very scary prospect.

NUELLE: The idea of tradition as inviolable or unassailable is everywhere right now. I think it is kind of the basis of our political situation, where people are scared of the rug being pulled out from underneath them.

MASSA: For me, the foundational insight of the book is the insight offered by Bernard Lonergan. Bernard Lonergan is a very famous Canadian Jesuit. In 1967, he gave a very famous talk which was entitled "The Move from a Classicist to a Historicist Universe." What Lonergan, said in seven pages was that for people who live in a classical universe, everything stays the same. Truth, which is

always with a capital T, stays the same. Human nature stays the same. The meanings of human actions stay the same. Over against that, Lonergan says, there is a historicist which recognizes that everything, even the Gospel, is in the stream of history. So everything changes. God's revelation in Jesus Christ comes to us in the midst of history, and it is inflected by history, and it is influenced by the first-century Palestine that Jesus preached in. Therefore, everything is in history, and therefore nothing is exempt from historical change.

What happens is, I think, the older neo-scholastic model of natural law was a typical classicist understanding, where everything stays the same. But as Lonergan and everybody since him has pointed out, it is just generally accepted in the academy and elsewhere that to be modern is to be historical-minded. When people come to the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College, they're not presented with the Bible as the word of God that never changes. They start studying historical criticism. They are studying redaction criticism and source criticism explaining the concrete influences that led to the writing of those specific books. For instance, how the Gospel of Mark, was written in a different way, to answer a different set of questions, than the Gospel of Matthew, which was written for a different community. So historical context plays a major role.

I think that Lonergan's insight of the move from a classicist to one of historical-mindedness provides the foundation for understanding how Catholic theology developed. So I would say Lonergan and Kuhn are the two big players that influenced me and also influenced how the book argues its story.

NUELLE: Is there a paradigm that you see coming that hasn't come yet?

MASSA: Well, that is a good question. But of course, as I always tell my students, historians make lousy prognosticators, so they usually get it completely wrong. So I'm not going to predict.

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I do think that the most interesting paradigms on offer are the virtue ethics paradigm that was first sort of recovered and presented by Joe Fuchs. He was a German Jesuit who taught in Rome in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, the liberationists, especially the feminist paradigm that comes out of liberation theology that basically comes out of Christian realism. I think the postmodernist, postcolonial paradigm that asks us to question the motives of the people in power all the time. It is basically a neo-Marxian way.

Now, saying that, it is not a question of which ones are right and which ones are wrong, because all of them are smart, and all of them are deeply problematic. So the real question is not which one is right and which one is wrong. It is which one does the best job of answering all the data in front of us and does the best job of creating the smallest amount of anomalies that you cannot explain?

For now, as Lisa Cahill herself said so well, her paradigm, which is basically a feminist global paradigm, says it is not going to be true forever and ever. It is good enough for now. That is her famous line. It is not eternally true, it is good enough for now, and it is a good enough model to build an ethics on.

Cahill is a very smart person, and she avoids the false binary quite well. The false binary is it has to be true all the time. That is called foundationalism. If it is not true for all time, then we can't have a realist ethic. We can't have an ethics that really talks about real virtue and real vice. So foundationalism on one side, and the other side says, well, since we can't

have one for all time, everything is relative. So it may work for you, but it may not work for me, because I come from a different context. Cahill correctly says we have to avoid that false binary – a foundationalism on one side and relativism on the other side – and construct an ethical system that is good enough for now, that makes the most sense of most of the data that we have now, fully aware and fully confessional that it doesn't make sense of all the data, because no model does.

NUELLE: That speaks to people who say 'tradition is tradition with a capital T. It was written on stone. If you change it, you're a heretic.'

MASSA: I love it when someone raises their hand and create a trap and then very nicely walk into it and say, 'well, the Church has never changed on its important doctrine.' The phrase that the Church uses when it talks about something really bad is "intrinsically disordered". Catholic condemnation doesn't get worse than that.

Well, in the Middle Ages, the church formally taught that usury, that is, taking interest on money, was intrinsically disordered. There's all kind of Catholics working on Wall Street today, and they're not excommunicated.

In another way, for centuries, the Church said it was perfectly moral to engage in chattel slavery and to own human beings. Indeed, the whole chattel slavery system was started by Spaniards, the vast majority of whom were practicing Catholics. Well, the Church in the 19th century said it is disordered to think that human beings can own other human beings.

So the Church, in fact, has changed its teaching on very important things. When people say the Church never changes teachings, well, I actually have a long list of those things. If somebody would like to see them, I can send them to them and explain the long list of intrinsically disordered acts that the Church has changed its mind on.

NUELLE: You talk about this coalition who said that actually, the teachings of *Humanae Vitae* doesn't speak to their experience. This goes back to the idea of tradition or experience informing the development or the shift of paradigms. What are we supposed to say to those married couples for whom *Humanae Vitae* does speak to their experience?

MASSA: Well, I think the thing is that one of Kuhn's smartest insights is no paradigm ever elicits the loyalty of everyone. Even today, even with the reigning paradigm of science, there are all kinds of physical scientists who don't buy into it. He says that is a good thing, because it forces us to recognize that no model – no foundational model, no paradigm – can answer all the questions. And even the one that I think that is best, whatever that might be, can't explain certain things.

So having other people who also call themselves Catholic Christians and are devout about it – having people like that with a different model reminds me that my model is a humanly constructed provisional model that is good enough for now and will probably change. When it will change, I don't know. I'm not going to lay any money on predicting when that will happen. But it will.

There's a great Catholic scholar at Yale named Margaret Farley. Margaret Farley wrote a great essay called "Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt." It said one of the most important things that a Catholic theologian can pray for is self-doubt – not to be sort of uncertain of what you're teaching, but to always remind yourself that you could be wrong and that the people you're arguing against could be right.

As I say in my book, St. Thomas Aquinas had an abundant grace of self-doubt. He was very, very conscious of writing in a certain historical circumstance using a recently discovered corpus of thought – that is, Aristotle – that had been lost for centuries. So he was fully aware of that. Not all Thomists have been aware of that.

I think Margaret Farley's advice that theologians should pray for the grace of self-doubt, that is a salutary grace that many Catholic theologians might pray for today.

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