



Navigating Moral Relativism: The Catholic Church's Response in Contemporary America

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to show how moral relativism has become a defining feature of contemporary American culture, influencing individuals' attitudes toward ethics, marriage, family, and social order. Additionally, the article aims to highlight the challenges facing the Catholic Church in fulfilling its mission in a society immersed in moral relativism. The problem of this study can be expressed through the following questions: What impact does moral relativism have on the moral beliefs of the people of the United States? What challenges does it pose to the Catholic Church in the 21st century? How is the Church to fulfill its mission in American society? The answers to these questions will be based on an analysis of the content of the documents of the universal Church and the Church in the United States, as well as publications by American theologians and sociologists. After a short introduction, the impact of moral relativism in the sphere of sexual ethics will be analyzed. Subsequently, the effects of moral relativism on marriage and family will be examined, along with relativism in the sphere of social order and organization. The final section of the article will analyze proposals for the pastoral activity of the Church in the United States in response to the challenges posed by moral relativism. The conclusion of this study is as follows: the more a society moves away from traditional norms and belief in God, the less happy individuals become. The Church must navigate the moral complexity of modern society while offering a compelling vision of human life rooted in the Truth.

Keywords: moral relativism, Catholic Church, 21st century, ethics of sexual life, marriage, family, organization of social life, common good

Moral relativism is the meta-ethical view that moral principles are shaped by cultural, historical, and individual contexts rather than being universally binding. It asserts that morality is fluid, with no absolute right or wrong, and that ethical beliefs are justified only within specific social frameworks (Gowans 2021). This contrasts sharply with the Catholic Church's teachings, which uphold a universal moral law rooted in divine truth and natural law. The Church affirms that moral principles transcend cultural boundaries, grounded in the eternal wisdom of God as revealed through scripture and tradition.

In contemporary American society—marked by pluralism, individualism, and secularism—moral relativism poses significant challenges to the Church. The rise of postmodern thought and the decline in religious affiliation have led to widespread rejection of objective moral standards. The Church must respond with pastoral strategies that reaffirm universal moral truths and engage a culture increasingly shaped by relativistic narratives.

While relativism acknowledges that values differ across cultures, it does not deny internal consistency within societies. This differs from moral individualism, which centers morality on personal choice. The Church, by contrast, maintains its mission to interpret moral law for all people, beyond cultural and personal preferences (Abun, Galat, and Guzon 2022, 102–11).

This tension is evident in American history. In 1978, Billy Joel's song "Only the Good Die Young" sparked backlash for its portrayal of Catholic sexual ethics. Though Joel later clarified the song was about lust, not anti-Catholic sentiment, it highlighted how Catholics were perceived as morally distinct from mainstream society. Yet over time, even Catholics have felt the influence of moral relativism.

The Church continues to teach that moral truths are objective and unchanging, grounded in natural and divine law. The Catechism emphasizes that moral law presupposes a rational order, guiding individuals toward their final end through God's wisdom (CCC 1951–52). This stands in contrast to a society that increasingly values freedom of thought and moral pluralism. A 12% decline in Christian affiliation and a drop in Catholic identification from 23% to 20% reflect this shift (Pew Research Center 2019).

Pope Benedict XVI identified moral relativism as a defining issue of our time, warning that it reduces morality to opinion and undermines truth (*Civ* 2). Its roots lie in thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, who rejected universal truth and emphasized the role of power and culture in shaping values. These ideas gained traction in the United States amid cultural revolutions and movements that challenged traditional norms.

This paper explores the challenges moral relativism poses to the Catholic Church in the United States, focusing on three areas: sexual ethics, marriage and family life, and social organization. Through theological, sociological, and philosophical analysis, it examines how relativism contrasts with Church teachings and proposes pastoral strategies to engage the faithful and uphold universal moral truths.

1. Sexual Ethics Under Scrutiny: The Catholic Church's Stand Against Relativism

Sexual ethics have become one of the most contested societal spheres affected by moral relativism, which directly challenges the teachings of the Catholic Church. Moral relativism, rejecting absolute norms, confronts the Church's positions on issues such as premarital sex, contraception, same-sex relationships, and pornography. Over time, human sexuality has come to be viewed through a relativistic lens—considered a personal choice rather than subject to universal moral laws. This marks a significant divergence from Catholic teaching, which upholds sexuality as a sacred

gift intended exclusively within marriage, ordered toward both procreation and the deepening of the marital bond (CCC 2366).

The rise of these relativistic perspectives can be attributed to various social, philosophical, and scientific developments. Modern Western thought, emphasizing individualism and personal autonomy, has fostered the belief that moral decisions—particularly those concerning sexuality—should be left to individual discretion rather than dictated by universal moral principles (Catalano 2000, 217–21). Additionally, advancements in psychology and the social sciences have highlighted the fluidity and complexity of human sexuality, challenging traditional absolutist viewpoints (Hammack and Manago 2025, 375–88).

The expansion of social technologies has further reinforced these shifts by enabling individuals to shape their identities based on personal narratives of authenticity, often prioritizing lived experience over traditional moral frameworks (Hammack and Manago 2025, 375–88).

Relativism has gained traction through cultural movements that emphasize self-authorship and a rejection of rigid moral hierarchies. The legalization of same-sex marriage, the growing recognition of nonbinary gender identities, and the acceptance of diverse forms of intimate relationships—such as polyamory and asexuality—reflect broader societal trends toward sexual and gender diversity (Hammack and Manago 2025, 375–88). While some ethical systems may diverge from Christian perspectives without being strictly relativistic, the prevalence of cultural narratives advocating personal choice over traditional moral constraints underscores the ongoing influence of relativism in contemporary sexual ethics.

The Church considers these views to be rooted historically in civil law and theological principles, which both historically in Western society recognized marriage to be a sacred union between a man and a woman. In more than any other sphere of societal life, this historic definition of sexuality, in the context of marriage, has been challenged. Increasingly theologians, sociologists, psychologists, and other scholars have advocated for an inclusive definition of marriage and, by extension, expansion of the morally accepted boundaries of human sexuality considering modern cultural and social dynamics.

American theologians often engage with the Church's teaching on sexuality and offer critiques based on the cultural changes and the overall rigidity of the Church's stance. One main critique of Catholic teachings is that they are antithetical with the lived experiences of modern Catholics, failing to understand the legitimate need for responsible family planning within the modern world (Curran 2006, 135). The teachings are perceived as rigid and do not take into consideration the complex realities of marital life, including external pressures, such as economic or social, on a couple. Critics further argue that the Church lacks compassion and fails to recognize the dignity and value of committed same-sex unions, overlooking the importance of love, companionship, and mutual support in human relationships offered by these

unions (Gaillardetz 2015, 92). These critiques contrast the Church teachings with the contemporary understanding of marriage, which prioritizes emotional and relational fulfillment.

Responding to this criticism, Catholic thought leaders argue that the ethical framework developed by the Church is not merely a set of rules but a call to live in accordance with God's design for human sexuality, uphold the integrity of the marital act, and be open to life. Contraception, conversely, undermines the unitive and procreative purposes of sexual relations, which distorts the true meaning of marital love (J. E. Smith 1991, 68). Sociologists, on the other end, have explored the ethics under the broader cultural shifts and evolving norms of American society. In fact, a survey of American Catholic teens, age 15–19, conducted from 2006–2010 found that 39% were sexually active, which was similar to other Christian denominations (Ayers 2022). Clearly, this level of sexual activity among Christian denominations, including Catholics, demonstrates a volitional lack of buy-in to the Church's Teaching of ethics in sexual life.

Many American Catholics do not fully adhere to the Church's teaching on human sexuality, reflecting broader shifts toward secularization and evolving moral perspectives within American society. Individuals often prioritize personal conscience and autonomy, challenging the Church's moral authority (Massa 2010, 156). Surveys indicate that approximately 61% of Catholics disagree with the Church's stance on contraception, while 60% believe it is acceptable for teenagers to use contraception, including birth control (Kissling 2004, 12). This divergence of opinion is not necessarily a reflection of moral relativism but rather a considered disagreement with what some believers perceive as an inadequate teaching by the Magisterium.

Similarly, most Catholics in the United States support at least some access to abortion; only 23% agreed with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) position that abortion should be made illegal. Regarding restrictions on abortion, 33% felt there should be none, 75% considered it acceptable in cases of rape or incest, and 87% supported it when pregnancy threatens the health of the mother (Kissling 2004, 17). Only 11% believe that the moral authority for practicing birth control rests with Church leaders, while 61% view it as an individual choice. Furthermore, 71% of women agree decisions regarding reproductive health should be between the doctor and the patient, unimpacted by hospital religious affiliation, 64% believe that the teachings of the Church are outdated and 49% believe Church leaders are out of touch (Kissling 2004, 21–23).

Most young adults view sexual decisions as personal and subjective. This shift in attitude is a significant challenge to the Church, as young Americans are increasingly inclined to prioritize personal fulfillment over adherence to the teachings on chastity and marriage (C. Smith and Snell 2010, 183). While the Church's ethics are theoretically coherent, they struggle to resonate with a generation that is shaped by a culture of individualism and self-expression (C. Smith and Snell 2010, 183). In contrast, the

Church's teaching on sexuality offers a countercultural narrative to the permissive norms of contemporary society.

The sexual revolution that was fueled by the widespread availability of contraception led to many social problems, including the breakdown of the family, the rise of single-parent households, and the objectification of women (Eberstadt 2013, 102). Only 47% of all households are made up of married couples, down from 71% 50 years ago (United States Census Bureau 2024). Statistically, the rate of practicing Catholics who marry for life is higher compared to the general public: 74% have never been divorced, 25% have been divorced, and 9% are remarried. In contrast, in the general population, 69% have never been divorced, 30% have been divorced, and 13% are currently remarried (Pew Research Center 2015). These statistics suggest that adherence to the Catholic moral norms regarding marriage, while regarded as outdated by secular society, results in a higher probability of a stable nuclear family.

Psychologists are divided on the Church's sexual ethics, particularly regarding same-sex attraction, gender identity, and psychopathy. Critics argue that the Church's teaching on homosexuality as intrinsically disordered can lead to internalized shame, guilt, and distress. This view holds that sexual preference is an inherent aspect of an individual's personality and suppressing it can have harmful psychological consequences (Greenberg 1990). Similarly, psychologist Gregory M. Herek (2009, 94) argues that condemning same-sex relationships fosters social stigma and discrimination, negatively affecting emotional health. Experiencing prejudicial events, expecting rejection, and hiding one's identity can cause stress and internalized homophobia (Meyer 2003, 674–97). Conversely, some psychologists support the Church's moral teachings on sexuality, arguing that these teachings are critical for promoting psychological well-being by fostering healthy and stable relationships and encouraging individuals to lead lives based on moral convictions. They contend that the Church's teachings promote self-discipline, emotional maturity, and the development of authentic love, which might not be achievable without these teachings (Nzioka 2022, 19–40).

While the Church advocates for a traditional understanding of marriage and sexuality, there is often a lack of clarity in addressing complex moral decisions in contemporary society (Cahill 1996, 125). Critics argue that the blanket condemnation of premarital sex does not consider the social and economic realities that lead couples to cohabit or engage in relationships outside of marriage. Modern ethicists see this not as a rebellion against Christian morality but as a reflection of evolving relationship dynamics in modern society (Cahill 1996, 125).

The Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage marked a significant cultural shift, with many Americans, including Catholics, supporting same-sex unions as personal freedoms and civil rights. In the United States, nearly 61% accept same-sex marriage, and Pope Francis has voiced a willingness to extend blessings to individuals in same-sex unions (Diamant 2020). Additionally, 76% of Catholics in the

United States support societal acceptance of homosexuality without discrimination (Diamant 2020). Modern Catholic theologians, such as James Martin, SJ, encourage a more compassionate and inclusive approach to human sexuality, focusing on dignity and respect for all individuals (Martin 2017, 52). This approach, while not challenging the Church's doctrinal teachings, calls for introspection and adaptation to cultural shifts.

Another area of crisis is pornography, which the Church considers a grave sin as it violates human dignity, objectifies individuals, and distorts the purpose of human sexuality (CCC 2354). The Church views human sexuality as a sacred gift meant for love, family, and marriage. From a moral relativistic perspective, viewing and producing pornography are seen as personal choices linked to individual freedom. Technological advances have made access to pornography easier. Beyond its spiritual and moral implications, exposure to pornographic material can create guilt, internal conflicts, and psychosocial stress, potentially leading to addiction. Studies show that stressful experiences, anxiety, and depression are strongly related to pornography consumption (Privara and Bob 2023, 641). Christians who use pornography report a worsening relationship with Christ, with 20% of men and 9% of women losing interest in spiritual matters as a result (Rose 2023). These findings indicate that pornography consumption harms individuals emotionally, morally, and spiritually, contradicting the supposed benefits of moral relativism.

Regular churchgoers are less likely to view pornography, but its consumption has been increasing. Approximately 13% of all Christians watch pornography, with the largest demographic being males aged 13–24 at 41% (Rose 2023). Christians generally feel worse and more depressed about viewing pornography compared to others, exacerbating mental health problems, relationship issues, and identity challenges, which some believe is distancing them from the Church (Rose 2023). The psychological impact of pornography includes a decline in healthy relationships as individuals become desensitized to the emotional and relational aspects of human sexuality (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015, 98). The Church fundamentally critiques moral relativism by arguing that individual choices, detached from moral principles, can have far-reaching negative consequences for both individuals and society.

The Church has been highly critical of moral relativism, aiming to reassert its teachings while reaffirming dignity and respect for all individuals. Efforts to reconnect with disenfranchised Catholics, including divorced and LGBTQ+ individuals, have been made. To counter the challenges of moral relativism, the USCCB has played a crucial role through pastoral letters, conferences, and education programs to address the complex realities faced by American Catholics (Schroeder 2015, 5–26). At the same time, the Church understands the need for pastoral sensitivity. Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, called for a compassionate and understanding approach to those struggling with the Church's teachings (O'Collins 2016, 905). He emphasized the need for empathy and love, particularly in a culture promoting relativistic

values. The sphere of sexual ethics presents a significant challenge for the Church in American culture, where there is growing acceptance of premarital sex, contraception, pornography, and same-sex relationships due to a shift towards moral flexibility and personal autonomy. Theologians, sociologists, psychologists, and other scholars provide valuable insights into these broader cultural and social implications.

2. Marriage and Family in Flux: The Role of Moral Relativism in Contemporary Society

The impact of moral relativism on marriage and family structures poses a significant challenge for the Catholic Church. The Church views marriage as a sacramental union ordained by God, rooted in love and procreation. According to the Catechism, marriage is a covenant in which a man and woman establish a lifelong partnership, ordered by nature for the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children (CCC 1601). This emphasizes the dual purpose of marriage and underscores its indissolubility, meaning it cannot be dissolved except by death. This teaching is grounded in Scripture, specifically Jesus' words: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt 19:6).

Marriage, as perceived by the Catholic Church, is a spiritual and social institution reflecting Christ's love for His Church. This contrasts with moral relativism, which views marriage as a human construct subject to individual preferences and societal trends. The Church's defense of traditional marriage is countercultural, emphasizing sacramentality and indissolubility, in stark contrast to modern transactional or contractual conceptions of marriage (Cahill 1996, 89).

Moral relativism has led to the deinstitutionalization of marriage, transforming it from a stable social institution and religious obligation to one of many possible lifestyle choices (Cherlin 2004, 848). This trend is evident in the rise of cohabitation and the decline in sacramental marriages. Nearly 44% of United States Catholics have lived with a partner, while 55% have never cohabited. Additionally, 15% of Catholics report being remarried without Declaration of Nullity of Marriage or cohabiting (Pew Research Center 2015). Furthermore, only 68% of Catholics in the United States marry in the Church, and among ex-Catholics, only 15% do so (Pew Research Center 2015).

The understanding of traditional marriage as the foundation for family formation is at risk, with 70% of Catholics and 76% of non-Catholics expressing that it is acceptable for couples to choose not to have children. Additionally, 55% of Catholics believe cohabitation before marriage is acceptable, and 46% accept same-sex relationships. Overall, Catholics are less accepting of non-traditional relationships than non-Catholics. White Catholics and college-educated individuals tend to be more liberal than Hispanics and high school graduates (Pew Research Center 2015).

When it comes to parenting arrangements, 90% of Catholics believe that a mother and father married to each other is ideal, though single parenting is also deemed acceptable. Additionally, 43% believe that homosexual couples should not be precluded from parenting (Pew Research Center 2015). While the traditional nuclear family is still viewed as ideal, these statistics show an increasing openness to non-traditional relationships and family units among Catholics in the United States and American society.

Moral relativism has diminished the role of traditional marriage, but the acceptance and prevalence of non-traditional families do not necessarily serve the best interests of children. Children of divorced parents are more likely to experience emotional, behavioral, and academic challenges (Amato 2010, 653–64). They also tend to face issues like lower educational attainment, higher levels of depression, and difficulties in achieving stable relationships themselves (Amato 2000, 1274). The Church supports traditional families, not out of bigotry, but from the recognition that the traditional nuclear family is in the best interest of children. This moral stance is backed by science. The Church teaches the importance of marital stability for the well-being of spouses and children, though this teaching finds little resonance in a society where divorce is often seen as an acceptable solution to marital differences.

Cohabitation before marriage reflects a broader cultural shift that emphasizes individual autonomy and personal happiness over traditional moral norms. While some argue that cohabitation serves as a trial period to assess compatibility before marriage, research suggests that it may contribute to less stable unions—a phenomenon known as the “Cohabitation Effect” (Woods and Emery 2002, 101). Couples who cohabit before marriage may transition into marriage due to convenience, financial pressures, or emotional attachment rather than a deliberate commitment to its long-term implications (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006, 499–509). Moreover, cohabitation fosters a sense of impermanence, making dissolution easier and potentially carrying over into marriage, resulting in lower stability. Additionally, individuals who cohabit before marriage tend to be more accepting of divorce as a solution to marital difficulties (Kuperberg 2014, 352–69). While these findings indicate statistical correlations, they do not establish direct causation between cohabitation and marital instability.

Several factors contribute to the argument that cohabitation may reduce the likelihood of a successful marriage. One consideration is the selection effect, where individuals who choose to cohabit often hold more liberal and non-traditional views on marriage, potentially making them more open to divorce and less committed to the notion of a lifelong partnership (Lichter and Zhenchao 2008, 861–78). Additionally, cohabitation can create differing expectations regarding marriage. While one partner might see it as a step toward long-term commitment, the other may view it as a way to delay or avoid marriage, leading to tension and conflict. These mismatched

attitudes can contribute to relationship dissatisfaction and, in some cases, divorce (Manning and Smock 2002, 1065–87).

However, some argue that the presumption of marriage's indissolubility may also foster complacency or diminish mutual respect, as one partner may feel secure in the permanence of marriage regardless of their treatment of the other. Ultimately, the impact of cohabitation on marital success depends on the individuals involved and their shared understanding of commitment and communication.

The decline in marriage rates and the rise in personal freedoms have led to a shift in societal structures, where traditional milestones no longer carry the same weight. While this shift offers greater autonomy, it also coincides with an increase in mental health struggles, exacerbated by the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic intensified preexisting crises, including youth mental health issues, untreated serious illnesses, and substance use disorders, leaving many Americans feeling isolated and uncertain (Insel 2023). Relativism, with its erosion of shared values and institutions, may further contribute to this disconnection, as individuals grapple with a sense of instability in an increasingly fragmented society. As marriage rates have dropped nearly 60% over the past 50 years, the reduced social pressure to marry has altered perceptions of adulthood and stability (Pandey 2023). To address these challenges, there must be a renewed focus on strengthening social connections, ensuring access to mental health care, and fostering a sense of purpose that extends beyond individual freedoms to collective well-being.

Happiness in the United States has declined markedly over the past 50 years, with sociocultural shifts—particularly the erosion of faith and family structures—playing a significant role. In 1972, data from the General Social Survey indicated that approximately 30% of Americans described themselves as “very happy,” a figure that remained relatively stable through the late 20th century. By contrast, a 2023 Wall Street Journal and NORC at the University of Chicago (2023) poll reveals that only 12% of Americans now identify as “very happy,” representing a dramatic decline in subjective well-being over five decades. Notably, 68% of those who report being “very happy” affirm belief in God, and 67% emphasize the importance of marriage, underscoring the enduring correlation between faith, family, and personal tranquility. While happiness is not reducible to marital status alone, other contributing factors—including economic stability, community cohesion, and existential fulfillment—also shape one's overall sense of well-being. The steep decline in reported happiness reflects not merely economic or demographic shifts, but a deeper cultural transformation in which traditional sources of meaning have been relativized or displaced. This trend suggests that moral relativism, by weakening shared values and communal identity, may be a significant—though often underexamined—driver of diminished happiness in contemporary American life.

In recent years, the Church has softened its stance on the Declaration of Nullity of Marriage, which was previously perceived as a cumbersome process. In *Amoris*

Laetitia, Pope Francis encouraged the Church to show mercy and understanding to divorced and remarried Catholics, though he did not change the fundamental teachings on the Declaration of Nullity of Marriage. Despite this softening, critics argue that the Church's refusal to fully embrace divorce and remarriage continues to alienate many Catholics. Additionally, there has been a decline in religious marriages, troubling for the Catholic Church. Many Catholics perceive the sacramental nature of marriage as diminished, and the need for the Declaration of Nullity of Marriage as too intrusive. Conversely, the Church views the decline in sacramental marriage as detrimental, as it sees the sacrament as a vehicle through which married couples find God's grace.

The Church's teachings are seen as critical in maintaining societal balance and family structures, but moral relativism and individualism have spread with little hindrance. This spread has demonstrably harmed the nuclear family, familial structure, and the stability of society and mental health.

3. Social Life and Order: The Impact of Moral Relativism

The rise of moral relativism in social organization poses a significant challenge for the Catholic Church in the 21st century. The shifting nature of social, political, and economic institutions driven by relativistic attitudes has created growing inconsistencies between the Church and prevailing social ethos. Historically, the Church held moral authority to shape social institutions and promote values based on objective moral truths derived from Natural Law and Divine Revelation. However, with increasing pluralism and democracy, individual autonomy and subjective morality are now central to social organization, often opposing the Church's teaching on the common good.

Modern political systems clearly show the influence of moral relativism. Political pluralism, while fostering dialogue and development, has sometimes eroded traditional values. For example, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the United States and other countries symbolizes growing moral relativism in governance. The landmark *Obergefell vs. Hodges* case legalized same-sex marriage, affirming that individuals have a constitutional right to marry regardless of gender (Coker 2018, 35–52). This decision sparked conflicts about its impact on religious liberty in the United States.

In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, the Supreme Court upheld the right to religious liberty for closely held Christian corporations, particularly right to not be forced to comply with laws that contradict their deeply held religious convictions, in this case being compelled to pay for contraception coverage for employees (Corrigan 2016, 138–47).

Following Obergefell, many legal battles have focused on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and state-level religious freedom bills. Some religious figures argue that the acceptance of same-sex marriage, viewed through a moral relativistic lens, is detrimental to people of faith (Coker 2018, 35–52).

USCCB president Archbishop Joseph Kuntz voiced concerns about the ruling, suggesting it could harm the common good and vulnerable populations (USCCB 2015). While public opinion has shifted in favor of same-sex marriage, the Church continues to uphold its teachings on the indissolubility and complementarity of marriage. This stance diverges from societal values, highlighting the influence of relativism in political life.

The teachings emphasize the importance of the common good and the moral duty of the government to promote justice, peace, and human dignity. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI expressed that truth and the search for it are central to human dignity (*CiV* 2). When political systems adopt relativistic stances, they prioritize individual autonomy over universal good or moral principles, undermining the foundation of the common good.

Pope St. John Paul II, in his encyclical *Centesimus annus*, critiqued both communism and unrestrained capitalism for failing to respect human dignity. He warned that moral relativism in political governance could create a culture where radical individualism is prioritized (Abela 2001, 107–16). The Church maintains that democracy and pluralism are not incompatible but should be developed on objective moral truths rather than relativistic ideologies, which can erode the fabric of social life.

Abortion is a stark example of how moral relativism has influenced governance. Since the 1973 Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion in the United States, the debate over abortion rights has become a contentious political issue. Proponents argue, from a relativistic standpoint, that women should have complete autonomy over their bodies. In contrast, the Church asserts the inviolability of human life from conception to natural death, advocating for the rights of the unborn child. Pope St. John Paul II, in *Evangelium vitae*, stated that abortion is a crime against life and called for society to protect the most vulnerable, especially unborn children (*EV* 58).

Despite a recent ruling that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, returning decisions regarding abortion to individual states, the number of abortions in the United States increased in 2023 (Maddow-Zimet and Gibson 2024). Additionally, 61% of Catholics favor keeping abortion legal (Fahmy 2020). Despite the Church's teaching, a plurality of Catholics in the United States view abortion as an individual woman's autonomous choice. However, among Catholics who attend Mass regularly, 68% say abortion should be illegal in most cases (Pew Research Center 2015).

The influence of relativism extends to legal frameworks, particularly in areas like gender identity, euthanasia, and reproductive rights. Modern legal systems in the West have adopted a relativistic approach, which often conflicts with the Church's

understanding of human dignity and natural law. For example, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide have been legalized in countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, and Canada, framing it as a matter of individual choice and human dignity (Kortes-Miller and Keri-Lyn 2022).

The Church, however, considers life sacred from conception to natural death. In *Evangelium vitae*, Pope St. John Paul II stated that euthanasia is a direct violation of God's law, emphasizing that true compassion involves caring for those who suffer, not ending their lives (EV 65). This opposition is based on the belief that human dignity is inherent and cannot be diminished by suffering or illness.

Economic systems are also not immune to the influence of moral relativism. The negative effects of these economic policies and practices are shaped by relativist values, which prioritize profit over the common good, thereby increasing inequality and leading to environmental degradation, and exploitation of workers. The Church has been critical of both capitalism and communism, as well as neoliberal economic policies which emphasize the free market, deregulation, and individualism and promote a realistic view of economic justice where success is measured by profit instead of the well-being of all members of society. In the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis critiqued neoliberalism and its impact on the environment as well as on humans, emphasizing the need to stop the pursuit of profit which has led to a throwaway culture where both people and the environment are being treated as disposable (LS 2). The acceleration of wealth inequality in contemporary America cannot be attributed solely to the mechanisms of capitalism or classical liberalism; rather, it reflects a deeper cultural shift marked by moral relativism—a departure from universally binding ethical principles. This relativistic turn has transformed economic discourse by decoupling wealth acquisition from moral responsibility. Unlike capitalism in its regulated or socially-conscious forms, market relativism permits profit-maximization strategies devoid of shared ethical obligations. As normative commitments to fairness, human dignity, and the common good diminish, economic actors increasingly rationalize exploitative practices as ethically neutral or context-dependent. Consequently, the top 1% now own more than double the wealth of 6.9 billion people combined, while the middle class in the United States has shrunk from 62% to 43%, and the top 5% have outpaced others in income growth (Chancel et al. 2022; Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020, 52). These statistics are not causally reducible to relativism, but they are facilitated by a culture where ethical norms no longer exert constraining force on economic behavior. In this context, the Catholic Church's response is not merely corrective but foundational: through the doctrines of solidarity and subsidiarity, it reasserts the primacy of objective moral truths in economic life. These principles challenge the relativistic ethos by insisting that economic systems must serve the human person and the common good, not vice versa.

Moral relativism poses a significant challenge to the Church's understanding of social order. Politics, economics, and family life have been significantly influenced by

relativistic values, which often contrast starkly with the universal absolutism of Christian morality. No institution has defended universal moral laws, rooted in natural law and the common good, more steadfastly than the Catholic Church. The persistent trends toward moral relativism in the United States have proven to be a formidable challenge in this modern era. To maintain its stance as the torchbearer of universal moral laws, the Catholic Church must improve existing strategies and adopt new ones to influence social order rooted in natural law and the common good.

4. Guidelines for Enhancing Pastoral Activities in the Catholic Church

Moral relativism challenges the traditional family values upheld by the Catholic Church by promoting individualism and acceptance of alternative family structures. This trend is particularly evident among infrequent Mass attendees in the United States, contributing to reduced Church attendance and influence. The impact of relativism extends beyond individual choices, affecting broader social structures, especially in politics and economics. The Church must respond with comprehensive and multifaceted efforts to counter this shift and uphold its moral teachings.

The means by which the Church in the United States addresses moral relativism should be both structured and intentional. A feasible proposition could be accomplished by utilizing the existing network of Catholic institutions throughout the United States. Presently, there are more than 220 Catholic universities and over 2000 Catholic campus ministries at non-Catholic universities, known as Newman Centers, across the United States (Newman Ministry, n.d.). Each of these organizations, though supported by local dioceses and religious orders, lacks national-level organization.

The age group most susceptible to change, especially as it pertains to religious beliefs and practices, is late adolescence and early adulthood (Hayward and Kraus 2023, 1480–1489). Furthermore, a large proportion of this age group will become their generation's "domestic church." Because the Church's resources are limited, and this is the age group most vulnerable to the pitfalls of moral relativism, most in need of finding life's meaning and purpose, and most likely to fervently respond to social, moral, and religious causes, this age group and younger must be a primary focus of the Church's time, talent, and treasure to stem the tide of moral relativism (AL 209).

In its current state, the Catholic Church of the United States cannot effectively accomplish this mission. For this reason, in a prescriptive, strategic, and intentional manner, the Catholic Church, on a national level, must target the existing structure for adolescents and young adults at colleges and universities. More than any other parish or site, the Church should assign its most talented and capable ministers

to these existing institutions, evaluate regions in the United States that are devoid of these ministries, and deploy resources accordingly. Furthermore, the Church should learn from those campus ministries which are most successful, for the betterment of those which are not.

The Church, at a national level, should develop a pastoral plan specifically for the youth and young adults, which highlights and provides access to other relevant existing pastoral programs that are likely to foster the greatest interest and combat the expanding tendency toward moral relativism. The following is a representative list of existing programs which should be highlighted as part of a pastoral plan.

One critical initiative is Project Rachel, a post-abortion healing ministry that provides compassionate support and healing for those affected by abortion. To expand its reach and effectiveness, Project Rachel should include more online resources, virtual support groups, and partnerships with mental health professionals. By collaborating with local parishes to offer workshops and retreats focused on healing and reconciliation, the ministry can provide comprehensive care to those in need (USCCB, n.d.).

Inspired by Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the Laudato Si' Movement urges parishes and schools to implement sustainable practices and educate communities about environmental stewardship not simply as a practical concern, but as a moral imperative grounded in objective truth. Developing a comprehensive environmental education curriculum for Catholic institutions—including hands-on ecological projects and community service activities—reinforces the Church's teaching that care for creation is intrinsically tied to human dignity and intergenerational justice. An online platform to share best practices and success stories enables communities to cultivate shared moral reasoning and collaborative responsibility. In its core ethos, the Laudato Si' Movement directly challenges moral relativism by rejecting the notion that ecological responsibility is contingent on individual preference, local custom, or economic expediency. Instead, it affirms the existence of universal ethical obligations derived from natural law and divine revelation. By rooting environmental action in theological anthropology and the social doctrine of the Church, the movement restores coherence to moral discourse and refutes the relativistic fragmentation that treats creation care as ideologically negotiable rather than a common and objective good (Laudato Si' Movement, n.d.).

Catholic Charities USA is actively involved in disaster relief, poverty reduction, and social services. To address community needs more effectively, the organization should strengthen partnerships with local organizations and implement data-driven approaches to track the impact of various programs. By ensuring resources are allocated efficiently, Catholic Charities can better serve vulnerable populations (Catholic Charities USA, n.d.).

The Given Institute empowers young Catholic women through leadership training, spiritual formation, and mentoring. Expanding this program to include young

men and offering co-ed leadership retreats can foster a new generation of Catholic leaders. Developing online courses and virtual mentoring opportunities will make these resources accessible to a broader audience (The Given Institute, n.d.).

The Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) engages college students in faith formation, discipleship, and evangelization. Establishing partnerships with more universities and offering online resources can support students in remote and underserved areas. Creating a mentorship program that connects college students with recent graduates will provide guidance and support in their faith journey (FOCUS, n.d.).

Each initiative mentioned does more than serve a pastoral or pragmatic function—it collectively represents the Church's strategic and incarnational response to the crisis of moral relativism and cultural individualism. Project Rachel, through its emphasis on post-abortion healing, affirms the inviolable dignity of human life and moral accountability, challenging the relativistic view that life's value is contingent upon subjective circumstances. The Catholic Mobilizing Network (n.d.) disrupts the individualistic logic of punitive justice by proposing restorative models rooted in the objective worth of every person, regardless of legal status or social utility. The Laudato Si' Movement counters the relativism of consumerist excess and environmental apathy by restoring a metaphysical understanding of creation as a shared moral responsibility. Catholic Charities USA, in prioritizing the needs of the marginalized, dismantles economic individualism by enacting the principle of solidarity—refusing the relativistic tendency to rank lives by productivity or wealth. The Given Institute reclaims the concept of vocation from the relativistic notion of identity as self-constructed autonomy, replacing it with a Christ-centered understanding of purpose rooted in truth and communion. FOCUS, finally, offers a communal model of evangelization that explicitly rejects the relativistic isolation common to secular academic environments, reorienting the search for meaning toward divine revelation and moral objectivity.

Taken together, these initiatives form a comprehensive pastoral ecosystem aimed at restoring moral coherence and resisting cultural fragmentation. They embody the Church's conviction that objective truth, communal identity, and transcendent purpose are not merely theological ideals, but existential necessities in a world increasingly shaped by relativism and atomized individualism.

A multifaceted strategy remains crucial in addressing the spread of moral relativism and its societal consequences. While pastoral initiatives play a vital role, the Church must also refine its approach to ensure that education, outreach, and community engagement effectively counter relativistic tendencies. *Evangelium vitae* underscores the importance of affirming human dignity and moral values (cf. EV 2), yet systemic organizations must be reassessed to ensure they actively work against relativism rather than inadvertently allowing it to persist. Strengthening catechesis and fostering deeper philosophical discourse within communities

can help reinforce objective moral principles and uphold the Church's mission in an increasingly relativistic world.

Conclusion

In an increasingly pluralistic and secular world, the clash between subjective notions of truth and morality and the teachings of the Catholic Church has never been more evident. The rise of relativistic ideologies has reshaped societal norms, particularly in areas such as sexual ethics, marriage, family structure, and social organization. Yet, has this shift truly enriched human existence? Statistics indicate that Americans are not happier. While the challenges posed by COVID-19 cannot be overlooked, the deeper issue may lie in the erosion of absolute moral truths. As society drifts further from traditional values and a belief in God, the emptiness of moral relativism becomes more apparent. The Catholic Church stands at a crucial crossroads—it must reaffirm its role as a guiding light, offering not just theological doctrine but a compelling vision of human flourishing rooted in Truth. Through new catechesis, meaningful engagement in public discourse, and the strategic use of digital platforms, the Church has the opportunity to counter the tide of relativism and restore a sense of purpose, identity, and lasting fulfillment in human life.

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