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Primary Source Analysis: The Catholic Church and Evolution

**Read the following excerpts from Catholic teaching. Answer the questions following each excerpt. Then, use the information you’ve read to answer the final question.**

**Excerpt #1:** LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO REVEREND GEORGE V. COYNE, S.J., DIRECTOR OF THE VATICAN OBSERVATORY (1988)

For the truth of the matter is that the Church and the scientific community will inevitably interact; their options do not include isolation. Christians will inevitably assimilate the prevailing ideas about the world, and today these are deeply shaped by science. The only question is whether they will do this critically or unreflectively, with depth and nuance or with a shallowness that debases the Gospel and leaves us ashamed before history. Scientists, like all human beings, will make decisions upon what ultimately gives meaning and value to their lives and to their work. This they will do well or poorly, with the reflective depth that theological wisdom can help them attain, or with an unconsidered absolutizing of their results beyond their reasonable and proper limits.

Both the Church and the scientific community are faced with such inescapable alternatives. We shall make our choices much better if we live in a collaborative interaction in which we are called continually to be more. Only a dynamic relationship between theology and science can reveal those limits which support the integrity of either discipline, so that theology does not profess a pseudo-science and science does not become an unconscious theology. Our knowledge of each other can lead us to be more authentically ourselves. No one can read the history of the past century and not realize that crisis is upon us both. The uses of science have on more than one occasion proved massively destructive, and the reflections on religion have too often been sterile. We need each other to be what we must be, what we are called to be.

1. For what two reasons does Pope John Paul II believe that isolation isn’t an option for the Church and scientific community?

2. What does a dynamic relationship between faith and science lead to for each discipline?

3. What is Pope John Paul II worried about if science and faith don’t work together?

**Excerpt #2:** ENCYCLICAL *HUMANI GENERIS* OF THE HOLY FATHER PIUS XII (1950)

Now Catholic theologians and philosophers . . . must come to understand these same theories [of evolution] well, both because diseases are not properly treated unless they are rightly diagnosed, and because sometimes even in these false theories a certain amount of truth is contained, and, finally, because these theories provoke more subtle discussion and evaluation of philosophical and theological truths. (9)

For these reasons the Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter - for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God. However, this must be done in such a way that the reasons for both opinions, that is, those favorable and those unfavorable to evolution, be weighed and judged with the necessary seriousness, moderation and measure, and provided that all are prepared to submit to the judgment of the Church, to whom Christ has given the mission of interpreting authentically the Sacred Scriptures and of defending the dogmas of faith. (36)

4. For what three reasons does Pope Pius XII think Catholic theologians and philosophers should work to understand the theory of evolution?

5. What is the Teaching Authority of the Church’s position on evolution?

6. What limit does Pope Pius XII put on the study of evolution?

**Excerpt #3:** ADDRESS TO THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES ON “THE ORIGINS AND EARLY EVOLUTION OF LIFE” (Pope John Paul II, 1996)

I am pleased with the first theme you have chosen, that of the origins of life and evolution, an essential subject which deeply interests the Church, since Revelation, for its part, contains teaching concerning the nature and origins of man. How do the conclusions reached by the various scientific disciplines coincide with those contained in the message of Revelation? And if, at first sight, there are apparent contradictions, in what direction do we look for their solution? (2)

Today, almost half a century after the publication of the [Pius XII’s] Encyclical, new knowledge has led to the recognition of more than one hypothesis in the theory of evolution. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favour of this theory . . . A theory’s validity depends on whether or not it can be verified; it is constantly tested against the facts; wherever it can no longer explain the latter, it shows its limitations and unsuitability. It must then be rethought.

Furthermore, while the formulation of a theory like that of evolution complies with the need for consistency with the observed data, it borrows certain notions from natural philosophy. (4)

Consideration of the method used in the various branches of knowledge makes it possible to reconcile two points of view which would seem irreconcilable. The sciences of observation describe and measure the multiple manifestations of life with increasing precision and correlate them with the timeline. The moment of transition to the spiritual cannot be the object of this kind of observation, which nevertheless can discover at the experimental level a series of very valuable signs indicating what is specific to the human being. But the experience of metaphysical knowledge, of self-awareness and self-reflection, of moral conscience, freedom, or again, of aesthetic and religious experience, falls within the competence of philosophical analysis and reflection, while theology brings out its ultimate meaning according to the Creator’s plans. (6)

7. Why is the Church concerned with the origins of life and evolution?

8. What does Pope John Paul II say is a significant argument in favor of the theory of evolution?

9. What does Pope John Paul II say a theory needs in order to be valid?

10. What can evolution, through the science of observation, explain? What does theology explain?

11. In your own words, explain the Catholic faith’s position on the theory of evolution.