

Interpreting the Signs of the Times: Fostering Social Goods and Historical Transitions

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Abstract

Signs of the times are best understood as significant historical transitions, motivated by social goods, which the church must discern and respond to in the light of the Gospel. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, Charles Taylor’s interpretive understanding of historical transitions is expounded. Second, Chenu’s and Vatican II’s understandings of the signs of the times are examined, and Taylor’s approach to historical transitions is applied to Chenu’s and Vatican II’s central insights about signs of the times. The third section considers the movement for gender equality as an example of a sign of the times.

Keywords

Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Gaudium et Spes*, gender equality, historical explanation, Pierre Rosanvallon, Second Vatican Council, signs of the times, social equality, social goods, Charles Taylor

The Second Vatican Council speaks strikingly of the church’s constant “duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.”¹ The fulfilment of that duty presents challenging tasks including both

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1. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §4 (hereafter cited as *GS*), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

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a solid understanding and love of the Gospel, and the capacity to interpret historical transitions wisely. The complexity of those tasks was evident at the Second Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, in July 2022, when Decree 4, “Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men,” failed to pass the initial round of voting. That failure occasioned a widespread sense of distress among council members, with the result that a great deal of further dialogue ensued.²

In this article, I seek to clarify the second aspect of that discernment, that of interpreting historical transitions, to better understand the connection between signs of the times and the Gospel. There are three steps in the argument. First, I expound Charles Taylor’s interpretive approach to understanding historical transitions, a frame that provides insight into what is meant by the signs of the times. Second, I examine Marie-Dominique Chenu’s (1895–1990) and Vatican II’s concepts of the signs of the times, arguing that Taylor’s approach to explaining historical transitions accounts well for the fundamental dynamics of signs of the times because it seeks to identify the social goods that motivate historical transitions. In the third section I consider the movement to recognize the equal dignity of women and men as an example of a sign of the times. In summary, the article argues that signs of the times are significant historical transitions, motivated by social goods, which the church must discern and respond to in the light of the Gospel.

Charles Taylor on Interpreting History

Charles Taylor’s major works on the modern identity and on secularity—*Sources of the Self* (1989) and *A Secular Age* (2007)—feature narratives of the emergence of those realities over time.³ To chart the narratives, Taylor developed his own approach to historical explanation.⁴ The sources of that approach are evident from his earliest works, in which he identifies the late eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) as “the hinge figure who originates a fundamentally different

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2. For the text of the final decree, see Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, “Decree 4: Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men,” <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-4-Witnessing-to-the-Equal-Dignity-of-Women-and-Men.pdf>. For a response to the failure to pass the initial round of voting, see Mark Coleridge, “Interview with Geraldine Doogue,” *Plenary Matters* (July 8, 2022), <https://plenary-matters.zencast.website/episodes/plenary-matters-s3-friday-8th-july>.
 3. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
 4. On his approach to historical explanation, see especially Charles Taylor, “A Digression on Historical Explanation,” in *Sources*, 199–207; and Charles Taylor, “The Specter of Idealism,” in *Secular Age*, 212–18. Terry Pinkard offers an incisive account of Taylor’s approach in Pinkard, “Taylor, ‘History,’ and the History of Philosophy,” in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187–213.

way” of thinking about human agency.⁵ The “Herder revolution,” as Taylor calls it, foregrounds the historical embedding of human agency, including language and culture, and the trajectory of those elements over time.⁶ The fundamental insight here is, in Taylor’s celebrated phrase, that humans are “self-interpreting animals” and, therefore, that history is shaped by human meaning and action.⁷ In this article, I aim to show that Taylor’s approach to historical explanation has the capacity to inform what Vatican II and contemporary theology call the church’s task of reading the signs of the times.⁸

Yet, however extensive the arguments of *Sources of the Self* (over 500 pages) and *A Secular Age* (almost 800 pages), they do not amount to fully fleshed-out accounts of the precipitating conditions of the modern identity or of secularity. That is, they are not accounts of diachronic causation, the standard concern of historians, which focus extensively on developments in spheres such as bureaucratic, military, economic, or political endeavors. Rather, Taylor sees his works as “interpretive accounts,” which, with regard to the modern identity, respond to the questions regarding its appeal: “What drew people to it? Indeed, what draws them today? What gave it its spiritual power? . . . What this question asks for is an interpretation of the identity . . . which will show why people found (or find) it convincing/inspiring/moving, which will identify what can be called the ‘idéés-forces’ it contains.”⁹ Of course, interpretive accounts are not entirely independent of causative ones. Indeed, Taylor argues, causative and interpretive accounts are inherently related: “all historiography (and social

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5. Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79–99 at 79. For his earlier, yet related, assessment of Herder’s place in contemporary self-understanding, see Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 13–27. Pinkard traces Taylor’s approach to historical explanation back to his doctoral thesis and first book: Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964). Gadamer also sees Herder as a pivotal figure in the rise of historical consciousness. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 103–60 at 104.
 6. Taylor, “Importance of Herder,” 79. For a similar account of Herder on history, see Anik Waldow, “Between History and Nature: Herder’s Human Being and the Naturalization of Reason,” in *Herder: Philosophy and Anthropology*, ed. Anik Waldow and Nigel DeSouza (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 147–65.
 7. Among Taylor’s many works that develop this approach, see especially Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–57.
 8. This connection between mid-twentieth-century theology and Taylor’s approach to historical narrative is not surprising given the impact of the works of Chenu, de Lubac, and Congar on Taylor in the early 1950s. See Charles Taylor, *Avenues of Faith: Conversations with Jonathan Guilbault*, trans. Yvette Shalter (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 79–92.
 9. Taylor, *Sources*, 203.

science as well) relies on a (largely implicit) understanding of human motivation: how people respond, what they generally aspire to, the relative importance of given ends and the like.”¹⁰

Integral to an interpretive account, therefore, is a grasp of the self-understandings of a particular people, culture, or age. Terry Pinkard summarizes Taylor’s stance here: “In any adequate historical explanation, one must understand people’s self-interpretations and their visions of the good if one is to explain how they arise; that is, historical explanation cannot do without an understanding of what *mattered* to people during the period and the transitions that the historian is explaining.”¹¹ Here, Taylor’s argument about historicity intersects with his philosophical argument in Part I of *Sources of the Self*, “Identity and the Good,” in which he argues that human subjects are inextricably intertwined with the good. When people articulate what *matters* to them, they identify some things as “higher” than others, and those things provide the means by which those people are able to evaluate their various experiences.¹² For Taylor, to be human is necessarily to be oriented to a good or set of goods—to be located in moral space.

The explanations offered in *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, therefore, are accounts of how and why certain types of goods came into view in a particular period. The type of reasoning Taylor has in mind here is what he calls “reasoning in transitions,” whereby we “can sometimes arbitrate between positions by portraying *transitions* as gains or losses, even where what we normally understand as decision through criteria—qua externally defined standards—is impossible.”¹³ The narratives offered by Taylor, and those that I am proposing are entailed in reading the signs of the times, are those that chart a deepening understanding of social goods emerging through history.

Yet, Taylor is at pains to point out that his is not an idealist approach to history, one that regards ideas as independent causative factors.¹⁴ Rather, he charts the interdependent relationship between the self-understandings and goods that inform human existence and the practices in which those understandings are embodied: the understandings make sense of the practices, and the practices largely carry the understandings. In an article on social theory, Taylor spells out the relationship between intersubjective meanings and social practices in these terms: “The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there

10. Taylor, 203.

11. Pinkard, “Taylor, ‘History,’” 197 (emphasis in original). Taylor’s hermeneutical and phenomenological approach to human agency has been evident from his early work. See especially the groundbreaking essay, written in 1977, Charles Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” in Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45–76.

12. See especially Charles Taylor, “The Self in Moral Space,” in *Sources*, chap. 2.

13. Charles Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reason,” in *Philosophical Arguments*, 34–60 at 42 (emphasis in original).

14. Taylor deals with this criticism at length in Taylor, “The Specter of Idealism,” in *Secular Age*, 212–18.

in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action."¹⁵

The relationship that Taylor conceives between self-understandings, goods, and practices is clear in his account of the rise of secularity in *A Secular Age*. He narrates the story from the sixteenth century, with a major transition in the eighteenth century as what he calls the "modern social imaginary" emerges. With this term he seeks to capture the background and often unarticulated set of understandings that make sense of modern institutions and practices. In his words: "I am thinking . . . of the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations."¹⁶ Taylor argues extensively that the modern social imaginary is embodied in three principal practices: the modern economy, the public sphere, and the practice of popular sovereignty. He sees that at the heart of this transition, an ethic is at work—an understanding of the good—which he names the "order of mutual benefit."¹⁷ In the modern moral order, individuals—no longer embedded in the medieval hierarchical order—come together and through the pursuit of their own legitimate individual goals serve to benefit the good of the whole society.

While the above paragraph offers the barest outline of a historical transition that Taylor portrays over fifty pages, and my paragraph relies on the detail of his argument to establish its credibility, the purpose of my sketch is simply to highlight the connections that he sees between background understandings, practices, and notions of the good. Each of these is essential to interpreting the eighteenth-century transition: the background understandings or social imaginary, the practices in which the imaginary is embodied, and the sense of the good that motivates the whole movement.

In what follows, I will show that Taylor's interpretive approach to historical explanation can shed light on the church's task, as Vatican II conceives of it, of "scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*GS*, §4). In the central section, I will point out that the council's phrase "the signs of the times" was integral to its embrace of the historicity of human existence; the phrase can be seen as the council's pastoral approach to historicity. Interpreting history, however, is not a straightforward matter; it requires both an insightful grasp of a people's journey through time, and the wisdom to discern the sense of the good emerging in a society. For example, in both *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that post-1960s Western culture is a "culture of authenticity," and he regards that cultural transition as, on balance, an advance. Not that the emerging culture is unrelievedly good. Taylor delineates three malaises, features of the culture experienced as loss or decline: an excessive individualism that has lost connection with larger social and cosmic

15. Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 32–37 at 36.

16. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 171.

17. Taylor, 165–71.

horizons; an overemphasis on instrumental reason; and an atomistic approach to significant issues at the political level.¹⁸ While these malaises are significant, they cannot be seen to condemn outright the culture of modernity, Taylor argues, since when they are judged as such, their essential nature is misunderstood and the real choices facing societies are obscured.¹⁹

In his overall judgement about the culture of authenticity, Taylor sides neither with those who see it as an unrelieved good, whom he calls the “boosters” of modernity, nor with those who describe it in terms like the “culture of narcissism”—the “knockers.” He sets out a better approach in these terms:

The right path to take is neither that recommended by the straight boosters nor that favoured by outright knockers. Nor will a simple trade-off between the advantages and costs of, say, individualism, technology, and bureaucratic management provide the answer. The nature of modern culture is more subtle and complex than this. I want to claim that both boosters and knockers are right, but in a way that can't be done justice to by a simple trade-off between advantages and costs. There is in fact both much that is admirable and much that is debased and frightening in all the developments I have been describing, but to understand the relation between the two is to see that the issue is not how much of a price in bad consequences you have to pay for the positive fruits, but rather how to steer these developments towards their greatest promise and avoid the slide into the debased forms.²⁰

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor shows that the moral ideal of authenticity has roots in Plato and Augustine, and undergoes complex modifications through time, especially in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The picture Taylor advances of the culture of authenticity is of a degraded ideal that is both “worthwhile in itself, and . . . unrepudiable by moderns.”²¹

So, the task of evaluating historical transitions will require both a keen knowledge of history and the wisdom of Solomon. My argument is that Taylor's approach to reading history can greatly assist the church in its effort to faithfully articulate the Christian tradition in a way that can be best understood today because it aims for the most incisive grasp of the present. Reading the signs of the times necessarily engages believers in interpreting history, since human self-understanding is historical. Taylor's approach seeks to identify the social goods that motivate historical transitions. In the light of the Gospel, the Christian community can then discern whether a particular transition is a gain or a loss, how its promise might best be fostered, and, in turn, what such a development demands of the church's self-understanding.

18. This argument is elaborated in Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Chapter 1 is entitled “Three Malaises.” See also Pinkard, “Taylor, ‘History,’” 188.

19. Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 11.

20. Taylor, 11–12, see also 22–23.

21. Taylor, 23.

Chenu and Vatican II on Historicity and the Signs of the Times

Through the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church came to grips at an institutional level with what Taylor calls the “Herder revolution.” The council adopted a more situated understanding of human agency, recognizing the variety of historical, social, cultural, and linguistic contexts of ecclesial communities. It also taught that the church itself—including its scriptures and doctrinal tradition—is historically situated. I will return to the council’s articulation of these matters below but, for the moment, it is worth noting again that this understanding of the historicity of human existence is foundational for the concept of the church reading the signs of the times. It is, then, to Chenu’s and Vatican II’s approaches to reading history that we turn.

Chenu on Historicity and the Signs of the Times

The council’s conversion to historicity has an intricate backstory, beginning in the nineteenth century during which “historical methods transformed all branches of sacred learning and made scholars keenly aware of the many discrepancies in the Christian tradition between past and present.”²² Yet the path to appropriating the historicity of existence and faith was not straightforward. The Modernist crisis of the early twentieth century struggled with the issue of historicism, which regarded history as an absolute, and faith as entirely relative to historical expression.²³

In the mid-twentieth century, the most influential, historically conscious theological contribution to the council emerged from the *ressourcement* movement (or *nouvelle théologie* to its critics). Prominent figures included Dominicans Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar (1904–95), and Jesuits Jean Daniélou (1905–74) and Henri de Lubac (1896–1991).²⁴ Their theologies are diverse, yet each is characterized by both a deep dissatisfaction with the ahistorical approach of the neo-scholastic theology prevalent at that time, and an “endeavour to ascribe a worthy place to history within

22. John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 299. Rush outlines this history in his account of the council’s “faith/history principle.” See Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Academic, 2019), 165–87.

23. See Marie-Dominique Chenu, *A School of Theology: Le Saulchoir*, trans. and ed. Joseph Komonchak and Mary Kate Holman (Adelaide, SA: ATF, 2023), 61–62; and Rush, *Vision of Vatican II*, 169–70.

24. See Gerald O’Collins, “*Ressourcement* and Vatican II,” in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 372–91. Richard Lennan argues that Karl Rahner’s theology should not be neglected in dealing with *ressourcement* concerns. See Richard Lennan, “The Theology of Karl Rahner: An Alternative to the *Ressourcement* Movement?,” in Flynn and Murray, *Ressourcement*, 405–22. Rahner argues for the centrality of historicity in Karl Rahner, “The Prospects for Dogmatic Theology,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1 (New York: Seabury, 1974), 1–18.

Catholic theology.”²⁵ That “worthy place” comprised both historically informed study of biblical, patristic, and medieval sources,²⁶ and a strong engagement with the social and political questions of the time.²⁷

While Congar and de Lubac embrace the turn to historical consciousness,²⁸ Chenu’s essays offer the most extensive consideration by a *ressourcement* theologian of the condition of historicity and its impact on Catholic theology. Of particular interest here are four features of Chenu’s approach to historicity. First, he grasps the significance of historical consciousness as a major shift in human self-understanding. As Christophe Potworowski puts it:

For Chenu, this awareness of human historicity, indeed this discovery (*prise de conscience*) of a fundamental human characteristic, was a cultural phenomenon that Christianity could not ignore. An encounter between Christianity and the historical world-view was inevitable. Any major shift within the cultural matrix, such as a reorientation or deepening in human consciousness of its situation in space and time, provokes a new understanding of faith.²⁹

Second, Chenu’s approach to historicity is, at heart, theological—it looks at history in terms of God’s active and providential presence and is, thus, incarnational. While earlier he employed the historical method to study the twelfth century and Aquinas in the thirteenth,³⁰ he was led, as Potworowski says, “to the progressive realization of historicity as an intrinsic dimension of the Word of God by virtue of the concrete character of the Christ event.”³¹ Since the Word of God has been born in history, theology’s fundamental concern must be with the meaning of this “revealed given” (as Chenu

25. Jürgen Mettepenningen, “*Nouvelle Théologie*: Four Historical Stages of Theological Reform towards *Ressourcement* (1935–1965),” in Flynn and Murray, *Ressourcement*, 172–84 at 173.

26. For example, Mary Kate Holman outlines Chenu’s contextual approach to the study of Aquinas. See Mary Kate Holman, “The Signs of the Times in the Life and Thought of Marie-Dominique Chenu” (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2020), chap. 1.

27. For a history of the movement, see Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021). Holman argues that Chenu’s historically informed approach to Aquinas “laid the foundation for his socially engaged theology.” Holman, “Signs of the Times,” 22.

28. On Congar’s approach to historicity see Gabriel Flynn, *Yves Congar’s Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2016), 70–74; on de Lubac’s approach see Jordan Hillebert, “Being in History,” in Hillebert, *Henri de Lubac and the Drama of Human Existence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 131–68.

29. Christophe F. Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation: The Theology of Marie-Dominique Chenu* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University, 2001), 98.

30. See, e.g., Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, ed. and trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

31. Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, 102–103.

calls the Incarnation) through history.³² I will spell out below some implications of this approach when discussing what Chenu means by reading the signs of the times.

A third feature of Chenu's approach is particularly germane to my argument about readings of history: his deep interest in historiography. Chenu was strongly influenced by the *Annales* school of historiography, which read history in terms of the *longue durée*.³³ Rather than turning their attention to the great figures of history or major events, as their forebears had, members of the *Annales* school studied slowly evolving historical transformations (hence, the *longue durée*), attending especially to cultural, social, political, and economic conditions. And while, as Janette Gray notes, Chenu, contrary to the *Annales* approach, adopted the category of "events,"³⁴ he reinterprets that term in an *Annales* mode. In his essay "The Signs of the Times," written in the later years of the council, he defines "events" thus:

By events we do not mean isolated actions. We mean phenomena which are spread over a certain period of the community's life and which start out with some event of profound impact that gradually takes hold of a generation, a people or a civilization. The progressive socialization of various areas of human life (from the economic to the cultural and spiritual), one of the most striking signs of the times, is obviously made up of a whole web of realities: technical progress, economic innovations, social conditions, political regimes, cultural exchanges, psychological attitudes and the rest.³⁵

This notion of movements in history as events provides Chenu with the sociological basis for the church's task of reading the signs of the times.³⁶ He makes that connection in this passage, which follows the paragraph just quoted:

Thus "signs of the times" are generalized phenomena enveloping an entire sphere of activity and expressing the needs and hopes of present-day humanity. But these general phenomena are "signs" only because they bring about a new sense of awareness in history: betterment of the working class, the social role of women, the formation of an international conscience, liberation from colonialism. All these are signs only insofar as they represent a new leap forward for humanity.³⁷

32. See Chenu, *A School of Theology*, chap. 3.

33. See Holman, "Signs of the Times," 35–37; and Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, 109.

34. Janette Gray, "Marie-Dominique Chenu and *Le Saulchoir*: A Stream of Catholic Renewal," in Flynn and Murray, *Ressourcement*, 204–18 at 214. See also Jannette Gray, *M-D Chenu's Christian Anthropology: Nature and Grace in Society and Church* (Adelaide, SA: ATF Theology, 2019), 109–13 and 129–44.

35. Marie-Dominique Chenu, "The Signs of the Times," in *The Church Today: Commentaries on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, ed. Group 2000, trans. John Drury (New York: Newman, 1967), 43–59 at 52.

36. "Sociological" is Chenu's term. See Chenu, "Signs of the Times," 50–54.

37. Chenu, 52.

Chenu cautions that when believers interpret these signs, it is essential that they do not superadd to or spiritualize them since, “it is as earthly events—with everything that implies—that they are signs.”³⁸ The events themselves or, as I am arguing, the historical transitions are what the ecclesial community needs to interpret in the light of the Gospel; it is those transitions that may reveal new dimensions of the meaning of the incarnation. Spiritual discernment is historically mediated the whole way through.

I have spelled out Chenu’s connection between events and signs of the times in order to propose that Taylor’s understanding of transitions in history may allow a finer-grained and more accurate analysis of those transitions than does Chenu’s notion of events—an analysis that can facilitate the interpretation of signs of the times. There is both an ambiguity and an imprecision in Chenu’s use of the term “events.” He says that by events, he does “not mean isolated actions” or occurrences, since events always occur within contexts, which provide the background and means for understanding them.³⁹ Yet, he says that by the term “events” he means general phenomena that bring about a new sense of awareness in human history and start out with a significant event. In my reading, his central concern here is not the event itself, but the shift in awareness in human history. And further, not all significant historical transitions find a symbolic focus in an originating event—the example in the final section of this article makes that clear, as do Chenu’s examples toward the conclusion of the above quote—“betterment of the working class, the social role of women, the formation of an international conscience, liberation from colonialism.”⁴⁰ He names no originating event for any of those examples; indeed, their emergence through history is multifaceted. My argument is, therefore, that Taylor’s framework for analyzing historical transitions—shifts in the background self-understanding of a people (a social imaginary), embodied in institutions and practices, and the whole movement motivated by some sense of the good—captures the key elements of Chenu’s description of signs of the times: “generalized phenomena enveloping an entire sphere of activity and expressing the needs and hopes of present-day humanity.”⁴¹

Taylor’s analysis also provides the means with which to better consider the Gospel’s relationship with historical transformations. It provides the framework with which to identify the social goods central to historical transitions, and to judge how those goods are embodied in cultural self-understandings and practices. By way of example, in the final section of this article, I aim to show that Taylor’s approach to interpreting historical transitions offers the church a discerning way of interpreting one of the major

38. Chenu, 53.

39. Chenu, 52.

40. Chenu, 52. For a similar view of the relationship between event and interpretation to that advanced here see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). See also William H. Sewell Jr., *The Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Sewell, “Response to Steinmetz, Riley, and Pedersen,” *Social Science History* 32, no. 4 (2008): 579–93. In the latter work, Sewell acknowledges that not all historical change occurs in concentrated transformations such as events.

41. Chenu, 52.

transitions of recent centuries—that of the recognition of the equality of women and men. Taylor’s categories provide the means of reading history on its own terms, as Chenu requires, while allowing the church to discern how this shift is open to the Gospel and, therefore, how the church can best respond to this movement in history.

The fourth feature of Chenu’s approach to historicity is his theological basis for the church’s call to read the signs of the times. While, as I have indicated in discussing the previous feature, reading the signs of the times must not mean spiritualizing them, Chenu argues that Christians can attend to historical transitions and, while recognizing their autonomy, discern God’s presence and call within them. What grounds the possibility of that discernment, in Chenu’s theology, is the inherent relationship between creation and incarnation. Since all things have been created through the Word of God (Col 1:15–17) and that same Word has dwelt in history in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 1:14), it is possible to attend to history, seeking, as Chenu puts it, “seeds of the creating Word as pledge of the incarnate Word.”⁴² Potworowski spells out that rich connection:

The doctrine of creation, as a home for human values, becomes truly manifest only in light of the God-[incarnate]. Christ reveals human nature to itself not by means of a superimposed grace, but by the fulfilment of humanity’s inner capacities. Humanity possesses these potential capacities by virtue of being created in God’s image. In other words, it is through Christ that the signs of the times are deciphered.⁴³

Further, the inner capacities belong not only to individuals but also to societies, since humanity is inherently social. In Chenu’s words, “there is a social dimension to obedi- ential potency.”⁴⁴

So, reading the signs of the times involves the church in, first, attending to the movement of history, seeking out created works and values—or “goods”—that have the capacity to be fulfilled in Christ, and then expressing and embodying the word of the Gospel in that context. The church is the bearer of the Gospel in each unique time: “she is *in actu* the theological ground where the truth of the Gospel dwells today; she is *in actu* the one who bears witness to the economy of salvation in history.”⁴⁵ The task of seeking out created goods and values, will, in turn, challenge the church to find richer, fuller expression for the Gospel in the new context.

Vatican II on Historicity and the Signs of the Times

Recent scholarship of the Second Vatican Council details how deeply the Herder revolution made an impact on its theological outlook. Ormond Rush argues that the

42. Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Orthodoxie-orthopraxie,” cited in Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, 171–72.

43. Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, 172.

44. Chenu, “Signs of the Times,” 57.

45. Chenu, 54.

historical conditioning of faith is one of the council's fundamental ecclesiological principles. Summarizing the council's position, he says, "human beings' loving response to the revealing and saving God always takes place within the constraints of historical situatedness. Likewise, formulation of expressions of 'the faith' (in Scripture, doctrine, practices) are necessarily and inevitably conditioned by the particularities of time and space."⁴⁶

The council's documents articulate theologies of the church, revelation, the scriptures, tradition, and humanity as historically situated. *Lumen Gentium's* chapter on the church as the People of God portrays the transcendent dimension of the church occurring in that people's journey through time, so that the assembly of those who look to Jesus "is destined to extend to all regions of the earth and so enters into the history of [humanity]."⁴⁷ *Dei Verbum* advances dynamic, historically-located theologies of revelation, scripture, and tradition. On tradition, the council says, "this tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down."⁴⁸ The Dogmatic Constitution continues, spelling out the role of prayer and the experience of believers along with the role of the episcopacy in discerning the call of God in history. On *Dei Verbum's* theology of tradition, Chenu says: "tradition is not an arrested history in a preserved past; it is the 'authentic' emanation of this 'definitive' truth [of Christ and of his Gospel], by the help of the events of the world, according to the rhythm of the civilizations in which the Church implants herself in the course of the centuries."⁴⁹ In his authoritative history of the council, John O'Malley argues that the council's grasp of the historicity of human existence resulted in one of what, to his mind, are the three "issues-under-the-issues."⁵⁰ Pervading the council's reflection is the issue of change in the church, which the council expressed in the categories of *aggiornamento*, development, and *ressourcement*. Historical consciousness ran deep at Vatican II.

While the council's general theological approach is historically informed, its concept of reading the signs of the times is a major step forward because it establishes for

46. Rush, *Vision of Vatican II*, 174.

47. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §9, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

48. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), §8, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

49. Marie-Dominique Chenu, "The History of Salvation and the Historicity of Man in the Renewal of Theology," in *Renewal of Religious Thought: Proceedings of the Congress on the Theology of the Renewal of the Church Centenary of Canada, 1867–1967*, ed. L. K. Shook (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 153–66 at 159–60.

50. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?*, 298–302. In an earlier essay, O'Malley explores at length the connection between historical consciousness and Vatican II's understanding of change. See John O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," *Theological Studies* 32, no. 4 (1971): 573–601, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056397103200401>.

the Roman Catholic community an approach to the renewal of faith in an historically conscious age.⁵¹ Chenu describes the concept as “the basis” of *Gaudium et Spes*,⁵² although perhaps it may be more accurate to view it as one of two key metaphors with which the council conceives the church’s relationship with modernity, the other being that of a *dialogue* between church and world.⁵³

Gaudium et Spes does not adopt Chenu’s terminology of “events” to frame its analysis of the modern world.⁵⁴ The term is used at most once in his sense (*GS*, §11). Yet in a 2,500-word introduction, the Pastoral Constitution sketches the condition of humanity at this “new stage of history,” seeking to “recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often-dramatic characteristics” (*GS*, §4). To this end, the document details changes in the social order as well as the impact of the sciences on human self-understanding. Chapters 1 to 3 offer accounts of both transformations in human self-understanding and the church’s interpretation of them in the light of the Gospel: chapter 1 deals with the modern experience of human existence; chapter 2 with social and political life; and chapter 3 with the meaning of human activity.

The document adopts two theological approaches to the interpretation of these phenomena: the relationship between creation and incarnation (following Chenu and others), and the action of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit. Concerning the first approach, *Gaudium et Spes*, in each of the first three chapters, acknowledges the created goodness and autonomy of human existence, society, and human action, and then professes how each can be fulfilled in Christ. For example, in discussing the contemporary contours of human agency, including the excellence of freedom and the forms of atheism, chapter 1 recognizes the goodness of human existence because humanity was “created ‘to the image of God,’ [and] is capable of knowing and loving [its]

51. Rush argues that the signs of the times is “the key leitmotif revealing the council’s emerging historical consciousness.” Rush, *Vision of Vatican II*, 175.

52. Chenu, “Signs of the Times,” 46.

53. See *GS*, §40: “Everything we have said [in chs. 1–3] . . . lays the foundation for the relationship between the Church and the world, and provides the basis for dialogue between them.” Walter Kasper advances such an analysis of *Gaudium et Spes*’s view of the church–world relationship in Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 321–28. I have argued for a similar view in James Gerard McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church–World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014), chap. 3.

54. Chenu was practically excluded from the final stages of the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes* although he did take part in the meeting of the sub-commission dealing with the signs of the times. See Gilles Routhier, “Finishing the Work Begun: The Trying Experience of the Fourth Period,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition: The Fourth Period and the End of the Council September 1965–December 1965*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 49–184 at 130 and 143–47. See also Giovanni Turbanti, *Un concilio per il mondo moderno: La redazione della costituzione pastorale “Gaudium et spes” del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), 643–51.

Creator” (*GS*, §12).⁵⁵ The chapter concludes by professing that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of [humanity] take on light” (*GS*, §22).⁵⁶

The second theological approach focuses on the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit transforming the world. Thus, chapter 3 argues for the autonomy of societies and the sciences because they have their origin in the creator (*GS*, §36), yet sees these realities brought to perfection in the paschal mystery. This is so because “Christ is now at work in the hearts of [humanity] through the energy of His Holy Spirit, arousing not only a desire for the age to come, but by that very fact animating, purifying and strengthening those noble longings too by which the human family makes its life more human and strives to render the whole earth submissive to this goal” (*GS*, §38).

Walter Kasper seeks a stronger focus on the Holy Spirit in *Gaudium et Spes*. He claims that “what is missing in the pastoral constitution is a pneumatology. It is for the Holy Spirit to make the singular, for the relation to the world decisive, Christ-reality present in the Church and in the history of the world.”⁵⁷ While the role of the Spirit in the church and the world is certainly underdeveloped in the document, it is not entirely absent, as cited above and in other places.⁵⁸ A stronger pneumatological approach to the church–world relationship, however, would highlight the active presence of the risen Christ and the Spirit in history, and the newness that the Spirit can bring. Rush articulates this well: “The signs of the times can be indicators for what God is doing and saying anew (always in Christ through the Spirit) *in the present*. These signs reveal the meaning of the Christian Gospel in these new contexts.”⁵⁹

This article’s principal argument is that Taylor’s approach to historical explanation accounts for the nuanced dynamics of historical transitions in a way that is open to *Gaudium et Spes*’s incarnational and pneumatological readings of the church’s task. Interpreting transitions in social imaginaries, their embodiment in practices and institutions, and the sense of the good motivating them enables believers to identify the created goods of the modern social movement, and to consider them in the transforming light of the Gospel. Further, the council’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in history calls the church to be open to “what God is doing and saying anew . . . *in the present*.”⁶⁰ The newness brought by the Spirit, however, is always in Christ; the action

55. Interior quote refers to Genesis 1:26.

56. Cf. also *GS*, §42: “The Church recognizes that worthy elements are found in today’s social movements, especially an evolution toward unity, a process of wholesome socialization and of association in civic and economic realms. . . . With great respect, therefore, this council regards all the true, good and just elements inherent in the very wide variety of institutions which the human race has established for itself and constantly continues to establish.”

57. Kasper, *Catholic Church*, 322.

58. See *GS*, §26, which discusses social development and the common good: “God’s Spirit, Who with a marvelous providence directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth, is not absent from this development.” See also *GS*, §41: the church is also aware that humanity “is constantly worked upon by God’s spirit.”

59. Rush, *Vision of Vatican II*, 178 (emphasis in original).

60. Rush, 178 (emphasis in original).

of the Spirit must be understood in the light of the Gospel. In the next section, I show that that must be so for the church's understanding of the equality of women and men.

The Social Equality of Women and Men: A Sign of the Times

From the mid-1960s, Roman Catholic authoritative teaching has considered the social equality of women and men as one of the signs of the times. In 1963, Pope John XXIII described the movement for gender equality as one of the three “significant characteristics of the present age,” explaining that “women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.”⁶¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, in discussing the “wider aspirations” of the day, notes that “where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact” (*GS*, §9).⁶² Addressing women at the closing of the council, Pope Paul VI asserted that “the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.”⁶³ Whatever the pope's evaluation of the movement's achievements, the ideal of gender equality was only beginning to transform social understandings and practices at that time. A cultural shift of such major proportions has taken centuries and remains a work in progress today at both societal and ecclesial levels.

In an illuminating study of social equality in the West, historian and political philosopher Pierre Rosanvallon argues that the language of gender equality has its origin in the broader movement for social equality that emerged from the late eighteenth-century revolutions.⁶⁴ Rosanvallon's account of this development begins with the “visceral rejection of privilege” in the revolutionary context.⁶⁵ Yet the development required a “conceptual revolution . . . the advent of the individual, the transition from *homo hierarchicus* to *homo aequalis*, to borrow Louis Dumont's categories.”⁶⁶ Here, “the advent of the individual” should not be understood in individualistic terms as the

61. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (April 11, 1963), §41, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

62. See also Vatican II, *GS*, §§52 and 60.

63. Paul VI, “Address to Women at the Closing of the Second Vatican Council” (December 8, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne.html.

64. Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Rosanvallon discusses both the French and American revolutions. For a political and economic study see also Thomas Piketty, *A Brief History of Equality*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2022).

65. Rosanvallon, *Society of Equals*, 12.

66. Rosanvallon, 20.

disintegration of community but rather “in terms of the way in which the social bond is constituted.”⁶⁷

Rosanvallon charts three major conceptual shifts or modes of expression of the emerging social bond. First, such a society is a “society of independent individuals,” one in which no person is subject to the will of another. Again, while such a view values individual autonomy, it also “implies a social guarantee: it can be deployed only in a society that banishes *all* forms of dependency.”⁶⁸ Ridding societies of dependency involved the overcoming of, among other things, slavery and indentured labor. Alongside those challenges, the rise of a society of independent individuals also entailed the invention of the market economy. As Rosanvallon puts it, “When individuals exchanged the fruits of their labor, they affirmed both their status as *independent equals* and their relationship as *interdependent equals*. In other words, people in the eighteenth century believed in the possibility of regenerative exchange.”⁶⁹

Second, Rosanvallon argues that the society of equals gradually found expression in a *community of citizens*. Equality here is conceived in terms of inclusion and participation: “the citizen is seen as both a subject, bearing specific rights, and as a member of a community.”⁷⁰ In this regard, Rosanvallon traces the growth in the understanding and the practice of universal suffrage, citizens’ assemblies, and even the practice of festivals, which were especially important in the French context.

Third, alongside the conceptual shifts of *independent individuals* and a *community of citizens*, there remained the question of the degree of economic *difference* that would be acceptable in a society of equals.⁷¹ Beginning at the time of the revolutions, Rosanvallon traces the various ways in which differences of situation and economic inequality have been experienced and have sought to be overcome. Three major redistributive reforms helped limit the impact of economic differences in the twentieth century: a progressive income tax, social insurance, and improvement in working conditions.⁷² A century later, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, equality is commonly conceived in terms of “equality of opportunity,” yet this view should be of great concern, Rosanvallon argues, because “equality of opportunity underwrites a theory of justice that legitimates certain kinds of inequality.”⁷³ Approaches that hold to equality of opportunity focus on the situation of the individual but neglect inequality’s societal dimension.

I hope that my rudimentary sketch of Rosanvallon’s account shows that (a) social equality is a “good” that has inspired Western societies since the late eighteenth century; (b) this social good is founded upon three conceptual shifts or modes of expression: *independent individuals*, a *community of citizens*, and the *correction of economic*

67. Rosanvallon, 21.

68. Rosanvallon, 22 (emphasis in original).

69. Rosanvallon, 27 (emphasis in original).

70. Rosanvallon, 34.

71. Rosanvallon, 47.

72. Rosanvallon, chap. 3.

73. Rosanvallon, 255–58 at 255.

differences; and (c) these modes of expression have been implemented in a series of practices, including universal suffrage, democratic governments, and progressive taxation systems. The reason for the appeal to Rosanvallon in the context of my broader argument is that, in analyzing one of the most fundamental historical transitions of our time, Rosanvallon highlights the significance of the social good that inspired that transition as it finds expression in new understandings and practices. The structure of Rosanvallon's thought here is almost identical to Taylor's.

What Rosanvallon also helps illuminate are the contours of one historical transition. The modes of expression and the practices of social equality have been variously implemented across the globe; diversity is a hallmark of this transition. The value of social equality did not begin as a blueprint, established in the late eighteenth century, which was then implemented uniformly through time, but as a social good that found expression in different historical, political, and cultural contexts, and was, in turn, influenced by these varying contexts.⁷⁴ Indeed, as the discussion of gender equality demonstrates below, some of the most significant political and institutional developments toward more equal societies have only occurred after 1945, and those have been especially effective in the European context.⁷⁵

Integral to Rosanvallon's account, and sympathetic with Chenu's understanding of the signs of the times, is Rosanvallon's argument that the invention of social equality was not the legacy of Christianity but a reaction against the *ancien régime* and the development of a new social order in that light.⁷⁶ He maintains that "although Christianity never stopped preaching the principle of natural equality, it did not derive any 'revolutionary' consequence from its teaching."⁷⁷ Hence, Rosanvallon distinguishes between human or spiritual equality and social equality. Yet while he is surely right that the late eighteenth-century breakout from the hierarchical worldview was not motivated by ecclesial concerns, it is hard to envisage the cultural transition to a society of equals without the long-term influence of the Christian vision of all people being created, and of all people being "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

74. There is insufficient space in this essay to discuss in any detail one of the fundamental dynamics of our time, that of cultural pluralism. I have explored aspects of this question in James Gerard McEvoy, "Cultural Plurality and Inculturation: Foundations for Intercultural Dialogue," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2022): 259–79.

75. On post-war democratic developments in the European context, see, for example, Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), esp. 125–43. Catholic leaders and scholars made an extraordinary contribution to the post-war reconstruction of democracy in Europe. See Giuseppe Dossetti, *La ricerca costituente (1945–1952)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994); and Alberto Melloni, "Poverty of the Church—Poverty of Culture: A Contribution of Giuseppe Dossetti to Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2014): 485–501, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563914538716>.

76. Rosanvallon rebuts Tocqueville's argument that Christianity was the social force that brought about democratic equality.

77. Rosanvallon, *Society of Equals*, 16–18 at 17.

Gender Equality as a Sign of the Times

The question of gender equality is a touchstone in the history of social equality because the struggle for gender equality has revolved around two fundamental issues: (1) the recognition of women's full humanity, with equal rights and entitlements, and (2) the recognition of women's unique identity.⁷⁸ With regard to the first issue, Rosanvallon points out what was at stake in the eighteenth century: "Sex was seen as the equivalent of a species in a physical if not moral sense. . . . During the French Revolution, women were therefore denied the right to vote because they were not authentic individuals."⁷⁹ With regard to the second issue: the movement for gender equality has also arisen from the experience that women's distinctiveness had been ignored, glossed over, and assimilated into the patriarchal culture of the old regime.⁸⁰

In the twenty-first century, the first of those issues would seem to be resolved at least at some level, since it is generally understood that women and men have equal rights and entitlements. However, the task of fully implementing gender equality remains incomplete.

In the teaching of the Roman Catholic magisterium, recognition of the equal dignity of women as a sign of the times acknowledges the historical transition, and the way in which earlier assumptions of women's inferiority have shaped cultures and, indeed, ecclesial life itself. Pope John Paul II conveys this powerfully in his 1995 "Letter to Women":

Unfortunately, we are heirs to a history which has *conditioned* us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. Certainly it is no easy task to assign the blame for this, considering the many kinds of cultural conditioning which down the centuries have shaped ways of thinking and acting. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision.⁸¹

Two issues stand out here: the impact on ecclesial practice of the hierarchical, patriarchal culture of the *ancien régime*, and the pope's call back to the Gospel vision.

78. Rosanvallon describes gender equality as "the key to the history of equality." Rosanvallon, 264.

79. Rosanvallon, 264.

80. For an extensive discussion of the dimensions of equality and difference in struggles for recognition, see Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Philosophical Arguments*, 225–56, esp. 233–37.

81. John Paul II, "Letter to Women" (June 29, 1995), §3 (emphasis in original), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

While John Paul II's query about "not just a few members of the church" being implicated is, in my judgement, a significant understatement, the recognition of the equality of women and men as a sign of the times should lead the believing community to a deeper understanding of the Gospel vision—of the Christ event and the Spirit's presence in this movement. A powerful indication of this deeper understanding is found in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's groundbreaking study of the ministry of Jesus and of early Christianity.⁸² Schüssler Fiorenza argues that Jesus's circle of disciples was a "discipleship of equals," and that his preaching and practice aimed to overcome the patriarchal structures of his day. She shows that the early Christian missionary movement carried Jesus's example forward:

The Pauline literature and Acts still allow us to recognize that women were among the most prominent missionaries and leaders in the early Christian movement. They were apostles and ministers like Paul, and some were his co-workers. They were teachers, preachers, and competitors in the race for the gospel. They founded house churches and, as prominent patrons, used their influence for other missionaries and Christians.⁸³

This inclusive vision of discipleship was curbed in the later decades of the first century under the influence of the Greco-Roman patriarchal order of the house.⁸⁴

While a fuller consideration of the ecclesial impact of gender equality is far beyond the limits of this essay, I hope I have indicated that the movement for social equality and, especially, that of gender equality, have been motivated by a good—the full humanity of women and men. Further, while Christians have always held to the spiritual truth of that equality (Gen 1:27; Gal 3:28), it took the late eighteenth-century breakout from the medieval, hierarchical worldview for the Catholic Church to slowly come to a better grasp of both the social and ecclesial implications of that spiritual good. The Gospel can be lived more fully in our age because church and society have come to better understand this social good. Here, Taylor's approach to reasoning about historical transitions by "portraying *transitions* as gains or losses"⁸⁵ is pivotal. From the perspective of Christianity's deepest sources, the recognition in our age of the equal dignity of women and men must be judged a major advance, whatever the challenge of finding adequate expression for this transition in social and ecclesial practices.

Nonetheless, the journey continues; gender equality remains a work in progress in both church and society. The church's practice requires further change; the ecclesial community is not yet a discipleship of equals. At the first session of the Synod on Synodality in October 2023, the task was stated again: "Churches all over the world have expressed a clear request that the active contribution of women would be recognized and valued, and that their pastoral leadership increase in all areas of the Church's

82. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983).

83. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 183.

84. See Schüssler Fiorenza, chapters 7 and 8.

85. Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 42 (emphasis in original).

life and mission.”⁸⁶ The synod has the task of addressing assumptions of inequality and then reforming ecclesial practice accordingly. And if the church is to hold that some roles belong only to women or to men, then theological reasons for such a position are required. We must be able to distinguish between practices that have been shaped by the assumptions of a hierarchical, unequal age, and those that properly belong to the deepest truths of the Gospel. The claim that “this has been the church’s practice through history” is not enough in itself, because, as Pope John Paul II has stated unambiguously, the church too has been “conditioned to a remarkable extent” by assumptions of women’s inferiority.

The Signs of the Times and the Development of Christian Faith

In this essay, I have argued that the church’s task of reading the signs of the times requires an understanding of historical transitions. This is especially so when such transitions involve social goods. In these circumstances, the believing community must discern how to proceed by opening itself to the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit in history. I have argued that Taylor’s analysis of social imaginaries, embodied in institutions and practices, and motivated by a sense of the good offers an insightful way of understanding historical transitions. Discerning the emergence of new senses of the good, such as the social equality of women and men, can bring the ecclesial community to a fuller understanding of the implications of the Christ event at this moment in history.

The view of the signs of the times set out in this article leaves the church with a set of interrelated challenges. First, the church must develop a perceptive grasp of the historical transitions that have led to our present. To meet this challenge, the community must engage with the scholarship necessary to understand those transitions well. Second, the church must value and foster the social goods that motivate historical transitions, discerning them in the light of the Gospel. Third, that discernment should lead the church to review existing ecclesial practices, and, perhaps, to revise them in fidelity to grace—for example, by whole-heartedly ensuring that women find an equal place in ecclesial life. Addressing these challenges may enable the church to embrace fresh ways to proclaim the Gospel in the cultures of the present.

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86. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, “A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report” (October 28, 2023), §9i, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

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