The Magisterium of the Church has been challenged over the centuries by shifting paradigms of knowledge, those articulated by academia, as well as those structured by popular opinion. The Church has negotiated these historical trends primarily by means of careful distinctions, and by establishing, if you will, a “hierarchy” of truths. Although uneasy about the language of the “evolution” of doctrine, it is clear that even basic dogmas of the faith can admit various expressions; and the Church’s understanding of “Tradition” as the ongoing, historical interpretation of Scripture by the believing community (sensus fidelium) indicates an acknowledgement of the possibility for “contextualized” doctrine.

The gradual definition of the “orthodox” theological position concerning the fundamental dogmas about the nature of the Trinity, or the divinity of Christ, for example, occupied a preeminent place in the early Ecumenical Councils; and the definitions permitted a fairly wide spectrum of diverse expressions (that accommodated, in the main, cultural and linguistic differences), as legitimate “boundaries” of orthodoxy were formed by counter-positions of heterodoxy.

This is not an embrace of relativism, by any means. The Church maintains its fundamental belief that the Revelation of Jesus Christ embodies the “Truth.” Still, in relation to the “truths” of other
churches and faiths, the Roman Catholic Church will speak of the “fullness of religious life” from which its own members benefit (see, e.g., Austin Vatican Council II, October 28, 1965, §2). Such language is the fruit of many centuries of reflection: encountering important philosophical shifts in the language of truth and knowledge outside, and even within, its own tradition.

The rise of scientific knowledge in the age of modernity for several hundred years, for example, created a polarization of truths. It provided the conditions, however, for the development of scriptural interpretation that in turn had an influence on the interpretation of scientific facts. Today there is little need for the diametric opposition of science and faith: on the one hand, the understanding of scientific paradigms (see especially, Kuhn 1962) have called into question the absolute “objectivity” of science; and likewise, Scripture is less vulnerable to the literalism that presumes itself to be a scientific or historical text. Scripture provides us with the “truths necessary for salvation.” The encounter between theology and science sometimes remains awkward and complicated. Linguistic theory and contemporary hermeneutics, however, have provided useful tools for theologians to speak of the networks of meaning that do not necessarily compromise the possibility of “Truth” while still distinguishing its contextual nuances.

These opening remarks are an important preface to the consideration of the Antilles Episcopal Conference’s (AEC’s) Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment, since it proposes a teaching that may appear to some as inconsistent with Church teaching and practice in the past. There is an abundance of negative reactions to the abolition of the death penalty, some of which refer to the apparent inconsistency of the Church’s position (Amnesty International, 1989; Benka-Coker, 1989; Chuck, 1980; Espeut, 2000, 2001; Govt of Jamaica, 1981; Gutzmore, 2000; Knight, 2001; Stone, 1982; Thwaites, 2001; Vasciannie, 2001; Henry, 2001, Vermont, 1982; Williams, 2000; Woodburn, 2002, McKoy, 2001; Edwards, 2001).

Particularly in premodern times, the Church clearly advocated in favor of the death penalty and commonly supported the civil judicial structures in which this penalty was even promoted as socially acceptable (Dulles, 2001). Like all social issues that have a cultural and historical context, however, Church teaching too allows for the possibility of further reflection and dialogue. An obvious example of this process of reconsideration and dialogue would be slavery: a social structure that was not condemned in absolute terms even in the apostolic era, but which would be rejected most vigorously in our present context.