

Address to the Participants of the International Conference on Moral Theology, Organized by the Pontifical Gregorian University and the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for the Study of Marriage and the Family*

13 May 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning and welcome!

I would like to thank Father da Silva Gonçalves for his words of introduction. I welcome Cardinal Farrell, Msgr. Paglia, and Msgr. Bordeyne, along with all those who worked on this conference and all of you who participated. This initiative takes place within the framework of the “*Amoris Laetitia* Family” year, which was named to promote understanding of the apostolic exhortation and to help guide the pastoral practices of the Church, which always seeks to be more and more fully synodal and missionary.

Amoris laetitia gathers the fruits of the two synodal assemblies on the family: the extraordinary one of 2014 and the ordinary one of 2015. They are fruits that have ripened through listening to the people of God, made up in large part of families, which are the first place we live our faith in Jesus Christ and in mutual love.

It is good, therefore, for moral theology to draw from the rich spirituality that takes root in the family. The family is the domestic church (see LG 11 and AL 67). In it, spouses and children are called to cooperate in living the mystery of Christ through prayer and the love made real in the concreteness of daily life and situations, in the mutual care that allows us to accompany one another so that none are excluded or abandoned. “Let us never forget...that by virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, Jesus is present in that boat”, the boat that is the family.¹

Familial life, however, is today more than ever under duress. First of all, for some time now, “the family [has been] experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds” (EG 66). Also, so many families are suffering from a lack of work, of decent housing, or a land where they can live in peace in this age of vast and rapid changes. These difficulties have an impact

* The official version of this address is available in various languages other than English at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2022/may/documents/20220513-convegno-teologia-morale.html. We offer here an English version, translated by Susan Dawson Vásquez.

1 FRANCIS: *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Married Couples for the “Amoris Laetitia Family” Year, 2021-2022*, 26 December 2021, available at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20211226-lettera-sposi-anno-famiglia-amorislaetitia.html.

on family life, creating relationship problems. There are many “difficult situations and wounded families” (AL 79). The very possibility of establishing a family today is often arduous, and young people encounter many difficulties in getting married and having children. The epochal changes we are living through compel moral theology to take up the challenges of our times and to speak a language that is understandable to all – not just “insiders” – and to thus help “overcome adversity and conflict” and to nurture “a new creativity...to express, amid today’s challenges, the values that constitute us as a people, both in our societies and in the Church, the People of God”.² Let me emphasize: a new creativity.

In this regard, the family today plays a decisive role “in the paths of the ‘pastoral conversion’ of our communities and the ‘missionary transformation of the Church’”. For this to happen, theological reflection is necessary – “also at the level of academic formation” – which must be truly attentive to “the wounds of humanity”.³ In this sense, it is important that the Gregorian University and the John Paul II Institute, together, have brought about this event, with the participation of theologians from five continents. It has brought together lay persons, clergy, and religious of various languages and cultures to meet and dialogue with one another in an interchange between generations that is also open to young scholars.

Regarding this, I would like in a special way to recall the need for inter- and trans-disciplinarity, already conducted within theology, as well as between theology, the human sciences, and philosophy. Such a method can only encourage the deepening of theological reflection on marriage and the family. It can show the reciprocal connection between ecclesiological and sacramentary reflection and liturgical rituals, between these and pastoral practices, between the major anthropological questions and the moral questions tied to the marital covenant, to procreation, and to the complex network of familial relationships. Indeed, the various theological approaches should not simply be lumped together or juxtaposed, but brought into dialogue so that they, in turn, may be of guidance in a symphonic, choral way, in service of the one, great goal summed up in this question: how can the Christian family, in the joy and struggles of conjugal, filial, and fraternal love, bear witness today to the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The church, in her synodal journey, is established in the listening to one another of those who make up the People of God. In this case, “how could we speak about the family without engaging families themselves, listening to their joys and their hopes, their sorrows and their anguish?”⁴ This is precisely why the

2 Ibid.

3 FRANCIS: *Summa familiae cura*, 8 September 2017, available at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20170908_summa-familiae-cura.html.

4 FRANCIS: *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015, available at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

burning need for dialogue emerges: certainly not as a “mere tactical approach, but as an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more fully its meaning and practical implications” (*Veritatis gaudium*, 4b). The dialogical method asks us to overcome an abstract idea of truth, divorced from the lived experience of people, cultures, or religions. The truth of revelation unfolds in history – it is historical! – for those to whom it is destined, who are called to make it real with the “flesh” of their witness. What a wealth of good there is in the lives of so many families, all over the world! The gift of the gospel, beyond a Giver, presupposes a recipient, who must be taken seriously, must be listened to.

Marriage and the family can constitute a *kairos* for moral theology to reconsider the interpretive categories of moral experience in light of what happens within the family setting. It is necessary to establish, always anew, a virtuous circularity between theology and pastoral outreach. Pastoral practice cannot be deduced from abstract theological principles, just as theological reflection cannot limit itself to restating the practice. How many times is marriage presented as “a lifelong burden” rather than “as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment” (AL 37)? This is not to say that evangelical morality should give up proclaiming God’s gift, from which its task and dedication flow. Theology has a critical function, that of the understanding of the faith, but its reflection starts from lived experience and the *sensus fidei fidelium*. It is only in this way that the theological understanding of the faith performs its necessary service to the Church.

This is precisely why the practice of discernment becomes more necessary than ever, opening the field to “the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations” (AL 37).

Dear brothers and sisters, at the heart of our commitment, as pastors and as theologians, lies the recognition – despite the dramas and hardships of life – of the inseparable relationship between conscience and the good. The morality of the Gospel is as far removed from moralism, which makes a literal observance of norms the guarantee of one’s justice before God, as it is from idealism, which discourages and turns away from a possible good in the name of an ideal good (see AL 308; EG 44). At the heart of Christian life is the grace of the Holy Spirit, received in lived faith, which prompts acts of charity. Goodness, then, is a call; it is a “voice”⁵ that liberates and stimulates consciences, as the text of *Gaudium et spes* says: “In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience... Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths.” (GS 16)

5 “Let your conscience bear you witness that your love is of God”, AUGUSTINE: *Homily 6 on the First Epistle of John*, 3, trans. H. Browne, in: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 7, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1888, revised version available at www.newadvent.org/fathers/170206.htm.

Today, all of you are asked to rethink the categories of moral theology in their mutual connection: the relationship between grace and freedom, between conscience, the good, the virtues, the norm, and Aristotelian *phrónesis*, Thomistic *prudentia*, and spiritual discernment, the relationship between nature and culture, between the plurality of languages and the oneness of *agape*. On this last aspect, in particular, I would like to emphasize that the difference of cultures is a precious opportunity that helps us understand better how much the gospel can enrich and purify human moral experience in its cultural plurality.

This is how we will help families rediscover the meaning of love, a word that “is commonly used and often misused” (AL 89) today. Love “is more than a mere feeling”. It is the choice of the person deciding “to do good...unstintingly, without asking to be repaid, purely for the pleasure of giving and serving” (AL 94). The concrete experience of the family is an extraordinary school of the good life. I therefore invite you, moral theologians, to continue your rigorous and valuable work with creative fidelity to the gospel and to the experience of the men and women of our time, especially the vital experience of believers. The *sensus fidei fidelium*, in the plurality of cultures, enriches the church so that today she may be a sign of our merciful God, who does not tire of us. In this light, your reflections fit very well into the current synodal process: this international conference is fully part of it and offers its own original contribution.

I would like to add one thing, which is hurting the church so much right now: this is a kind of “sliding backward”, either out of fear, a lack of imagination, or a lack of courage. It is true that we theologians, even we Christians, have to return to our roots. That is true. Without roots we cannot move forward. We take inspiration from our roots, but in order to go forward. This is different from going back. Going backwards is not Christian. In fact, I think it is the author of the Letter to the Hebrews who says, “we are not among those who shrink back” (Heb 10,39). The Christian cannot turn back. We return to our roots, yes, to take inspiration in order to keep going forward. But turning back is a defensive measure, seeking a security that avoids the risk of moving forward, the Christian risk of carrying the faith, the Christian risk of making the journey with Jesus Christ. And that is a risk. Today, this going backwards is seen in many ecclesiastical figures – not ecclesial, ecclesiastical – that spring up like mushrooms here and there, presenting themselves as models for the Christian life. In moral theology there is also a turning back with casuistic proposals. The casuistry that I thought was buried six feet under is resurrected as the proposition, disguised a bit, of “up to this point you can, up to there you cannot; this way yes, that way no.” Reducing moral theology to casuistry is the sin of going backwards. Casuistry has been outmoded. It was a staple for me and my generation in studying moral theology. But it belongs to a Thomism in decline. The true Thomism is that of *Amoris laetitia*, the one that is developed there, well explained in the synod, and accepted by all. It is the living doctrine of St. Thomas, which makes us move forward risking, but in obedience. This is not easy. Please beware of this turning backward that is currently a temptation, even for you theologians of moral theology.

May the joy of love, which finds an exemplary witness in the family, become the effective sign of the joy of God who is mercy and the joy of those who receive this mercy as a gift! Joy. Thank you, and please do not forget to pray for me, I need it! Thank you.