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The Principle of Pastorality and the Principle of Authority: Pastoral Care as a Theological Locus

During the first session of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (4-29 October 2023), a number of significant issues emerged concerning the life and mission of the church. In March 2024 Pope Francis established ten study groups to do an in-depth study of these issues at the level of the whole church, and Pope Leo XIV added two new groups following the requests contained in the *Final Document* (26 October 2024).

Study Group 9 dealt with "Theological Criteria and Synodal Methodologies for Shared Discernment of Emerging Doctrinal, Pastoral, and Ethical Issues". Its *Interim Report*, published in November 2025, clarified the paradigm shift which is emerging within the synodal experience, in continuity with Vatican II and the new phase of evangelization outlined in *Evangelii gaudium*. The study group notes a transformation that "intimately affects both the theological dimension and the anthropological-cultural sphere in a closely interrelated manner", considering "the mutual interaction between the life (of the believer) and doctrine". To express this paradigm shift, also furthered by the recent documents on ecclesiastical universities (*Veritatis gaudium*, 2017) and theology (*Ad theologiam promovendam*, 2023), the study group proposes the principle of pastorality as an interpretive horizon. Identified by Christoph Theobald in his studies on Vatican II and its reception, this principle considers sacred tradition as a living process of reception and transmission that radically involves those who engage in it.

To be properly articulated, the principle of pastorality has to be balanced against the principle of authority, which considers how the latter is recognized, for example by the believers, and understood by them. Therefore, I will examine the relationship between authority and conscience, in order to look at pastoral care as a theological locus.

1. The Principle of Pastorality

Christoph Theobald, indicating the possibilities of the Second Vatican Council for the future, asserts that Vatican II made "tradition" through a particular form of transmission of the gospel, marked by the principle of pastorality.[1] This approach

1 Christoph Theobald: "La regola è il discernimento", in: *Il Regno-attualità* 12 (2012), 389.

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can already be found in John XIII's opening speech *Gaudet mater ecclesia* (11 October 1962). On that occasion, rather than giving the council fathers an agenda, John XXIII outlined a vision, a spirit, and a method to make manifest the latent issues of the church gathered at the council, issues which were not expressed in the preparatory material. The available documentation attests that the speech was written in Italian (before the Latin translation) by John XXIII himself and belongs entirely to him.[2] Regarding contemporary methods of doctrinal development, in particular, he affirmed the church's duty not only to preserve doctrine as a precious treasure but to devote itself fearlessly to its transmission, as the age demands. He continued with an innovative and controversial statement, saying that, in serene adherence to all the teachings of the church,

> the Christian, Catholic and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciences in more faithful correspondence to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character.[3]

This translation comes from the Italian version, published the day after in the Holy See's official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, and distributed by the council's press office to enable journalists and the media to provide simultaneous translation during the opening ceremony. This text differs in some substantial points from the official Latin one but is more faithful to the pope's original text.[4] He wrote the speech in Italian, and the translators modified it in preparing the official Latin text, but he continued to cite his original version in official audiences, ignoring the corrections made in the Latin version.[5] The latter, in fact, softened the paradigm shift introduced by the text conceived by John XXIII. While the original placed the "doctrinal" in a historically situated relationship between the sender and the receivers, the Latin version ensured continuity by referencing transcultural and transhistorical truths springing from the deposit of faith itself regardless of

2 See Giuseppe Alberigo: "Formazione, contenuto e fortuna dell'allocuzione", in: Giuseppe Alberigo (ed.): *Fede tradizione profezia: Studi su Giovanni XXIII e sul Vaticano II*, Paideia, 1984, 187-222.

3 John XXIII: *Gaudet mater ecclesia*, 11 October 1962, in: Walter M. Abbott (ed.): *The Documents of Vatican II*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, 715 (slightly modified).

4 For a comparison between his manuscripts and the different Latin and Italian versions, see Alberto Melloni: "Sinossi critica dell'allocuzione di apertura del Concilio Vaticano II *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* di Giovanni XXIII", in: G. Alberigo (ed.): *Fede tradizione profezia*, 239-283.

5 See John XXIII: "Omelia, Solenne Pontificale per l'Anniversario dell'Incoronazione del Sommo Pontefice", 4 November 1962; available at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/homilies/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_hom_19621104_anniversario-incoronazione.html; and John XXIII: "Discorso al Sacro Collegio e alla Prelatura Romana in Occasione della Solennità del Santo Natale", 23 December 1962; available at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621223_prelatura-romana.html.

form,[6] thus bringing the text in line with Vatican I's concept of the immutability of revelation. The addition of the principle of Vincent of Lérins mentioned by Vatican I in *Dei Filius*: "eodem sensu eademque sententia", which was absent in John XXIII's manuscripts, is emblematic of this.

Unlike an application that comes after a theoretical elaboration, it is plausible to think that John XXIII was considering pastorality as a constitutive dimension of doctrine, along with other concepts such as the "signs of the times" and *aggiornamento* (better understandable in the active sense of "turning night into day"). In this approach, which developed during the council and its reception, Theobald identifies the principle of pastorality, which he expresses with these words: "There is no proclamation of the gospel of God without taking responsibility for the person to whom it is addressed, and, to clarify the role of the latter, it must be added that 'what' is proclaimed is already at work in that person, so that he or she can accept it in complete freedom."[7]

This happens in a "pastoral or kerygmatic relationship", always historically or culturally situated, between those who proclaim the gospel of God and those who receive it according to an uninterrupted process of "tradition". Theobald affirms that the event and the texts of the council can be understood as an "extratextual experience" of listening to the Word of God, one involving a true encounter with the intended addressees of the conciliar assembly, in a mutuality made possible by the Spirit.[8] This, I believe, is Vatican II's approach to the Magisterium, one which is quite different from the purely doctrinal approach adopted by previous ecumenical councils, in particular after the conflict between the papacy and Conciliarism in the 1400s, and the development of a canonical notion of "the Magisterium" in early modernity. We still struggle to understand this paradigm shift and put it into practice today.

In fact, the principle of pastorality, observes Stella Morra, does not consist in the search for a kind and tolerant communication that does not change the given premises, leaving a one-way movement from those who know to those who do not know. Rather, it is a true hermeneutical principle that assumes historicity within and not outside ecclesial subjectivity.[9] In other words, this means moving from the question "What do I have to explain to you, that you still don't know?" (and pastoral theory tells me how), to this: "What word is God saying to me through you, so I can better understand the Gospel that I proclaim?".

6 See Christoph Theobald: *L'avvenire del Concilio: Nuovi approcci al Vaticano II*, EDB, 2016, 87-88.

7 Christoph Theobald: "Nodi ermeneutici dei dibattiti sulla storia del Vaticano II", in: Alberto Melloni/Giuseppe Alberigo (ed.): *Chi ha paura del Vaticano II?*, Carocci, 2009, 56.

8 See C. Theobald: *L'avvenire del Concilio*, 52-53.

9 See Stella Morra: "La misericordia, (ri-)forma della Chiesa: Una prospettiva strutturale", in: *Concilium* 53/4 (2017), 61.

1.1. From a Pastoral Council

Some scholars who still struggle with the notion of pastorality described above tend to consider the authority of Vatican II as inferior to that of previous councils. They qualify its teaching as "pastoral" but understand this term to denote something "catechetically" oriented, or primarily adapted to concrete and changeable ministerial needs, and hence lacking theological rigor and doctrinal permanence. The debate that followed Benedict XVI's distinction between a "hermeneutic of continuity" and a "hermeneutic of reform" did not think that Vatican II, with the principle of pastorality, placed itself beyond this dichotomy. The model of communication adopted by the council, in the economy of revelation "realized by deeds and words having an inner unity" (*Dei verbum* 2), prevents any separation between the gospel and its interpretation on the one hand, and its authorized bearers or interpreters on the other.[10] The pastoral relationship is not a place to *apply or adapt* tradition but rather is a *truly theological* place which, as the most recent step in this tradition, allows a better understanding of the gospel.

The principle of pastorality, even though not formulated with these identical words, can be found throughout the conciliar documents, starting from the liturgical constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* (1963), which promotes the active participation of Christians in the liturgy, on the grounds that that they share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Consider, furthermore, a parallel reading of two of the other major documents *Lumen gentium* (LG) and *Gaudium et spes* (GS). Some passages of the latter were crucial for the renewal of moral theology, such as the remarks on the dignity of conscience (GS 16) and the criterion of reflection "in the light of the Gospel and of human experience" (GS 46). Particularly related to the principle of pastorality is the primacy of the concept of person rather than that of moral order.[11] In fact, it is precisely the understanding of humans as persons that allows them to respond to Christ's call, which is the focus of the invitation to perfect moral theology expressed in *Optatam totius* 16: "special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world."[12]

According to Theobald, the main place where we see the intra-conciliar reception of the principle of pastorality is the dogmatic constitution *Dei verbum* (DV) on divine revelation and its transmission.[13] From the outset, the document

10 See Christoph Theobald: "Le opzioni teologiche del concilio Vaticano II: alla ricerca di un principio 'interno' di interpretazione", in: *Concilium* 41/4 (2005), 133.

11 See Enrico Chiavacci: "La nozione di persona nella 'Gaudium et spes'", in: *Studia Moralia* 24 (1986), 93-114.

12 Second Vatican Council: *Optatam totius*, 28 October 1965, 16. On personalism, see John S. Grabowski: "Person or Nature? Rival Personalisms in 20th Century Catholic Sexual Ethics", in: *Studia Moralia* 35 (1997), 283-312.

13 See C. Theobald: "Nodi ermeneutici dei dibattiti", 56.

approaches revelation not as a set of truths to be believed in obedience to God's authority but as an act of self-communication of God, which invites a human response (DV 2). In no. 8 it also introduces the term "experience" into the linguistic field of faith.

This change follows a renewed self-awareness of the Catholic church, which, in *Lumen gentium* (LG), sees herself as a reality that concretely manifests the church of Christ (*subsistit in*, LG 8) while not exhausting this grander reality. Furthermore, the Catholic church now understands herself in a more communal rather than pyramidal way, enhancing the baptismal priesthood of all the people of God (LG 8, 10, 11). The gift of the *sensus fidei* allows us to recognize that the laity have a competence and qualities which allow them to share in Christ's prophetic mission of bearing witness to the truth. Pastors have the duty to verify this, while being mindful of the fact that lay Christians have a specific competence (and knowledge) regarding secular realities.[14] For this reason, LG 32 states that "the distinction which the Lord made between sacred ministers and the rest of the People of God bears within it a certain union, since pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other by a mutual need". In this way, life situations become a sign of the times, and the gospel is seen not as something to possess or manage but as the criterion of verification that challenges unidirectional and self-referential tendencies within the church.

1.2. A New Chapter of Evangelization

Published after the Synod of Bishops dedicated to "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" (7-28 October 2012), the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (EG) revives the same issues concerning the principle of pastorality 50 years after the opening of Vatican II. EG describes and updates the practices and attitudes which are necessary today to put into practice the reforms of the council. The exhortation envisages evangelization as the act of transmitting the experience of the risen Christ, making it touch people's lives (EG 2, 275, 276). To achieve this aim, the document continuously calls for a "pastoral conversion" (EG 25, 27, 32), according to a model of encounter based on interpersonal relationships. It encourages a form of dialogue that allows participants to share their experience of God's love, present in community commitment and service to others.

The church is to be truly missionary and to grow "not by proselytizing" but "by attraction" (EG 14). For this to happen, EG asks the pastors and the faithful not to encumber the gospel message by placing undue emphasis on secondary aspects of God's self-revelation, so that the "core, what shines forth, is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ" (EG 34). Focusing on

14 In Francis: *Querida Amazonia*, 2 February 2020, 89, 91, 94; discussing the relation between clergy and laity, Pope Francis says that the latter is endowed with special gifts and charisms flowing from the Spirit.

this fundamental heart of the gospel proclamation, EG recalls the criterion of the hierarchy of truths in Catholic doctrine (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 11) and asks us to apply it to all church teaching, including that which concerns moral matters. Thus,

> pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing (EG 35).

Therefore, as part of the proclamation of the gospel, "Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others." (EG 39) If this call, which is the core of the principle of pastorality, is not accepted, what ends up being proclaimed are "certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options", rather than the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In discussing pastoral care and theological method, it is important to examine the 2009 International Theological Commission document on natural law.[15] It affirms the need for an in-depth and renewed study of natural law understood as the capacity, "in the light of reason, of discerning the fundamental orientations of moral action in conformity with the very nature of the human subject" (ISUE 9). The intention was to leave behind the "numerous misunderstandings" aroused in the current context by the expression "natural law", caused in part by its presentation "as an objective datum that would impose itself from the outside on personal conscience, independently of the work of reason and subjectivity, [introducing] a form of heteronomy intolerable for the dignity of the free human person" (ISUE 10).

In order to promote greater consideration of historicity and subjectivity, ISUE expresses its intention to propose the traditional doctrine of natural law in ways that better take into account the personal and existential dimension of moral life. Natural law "could not, therefore, be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves *a priori* on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making a decision" (ISUE 59). And it warns that moral reflection, illuminating concrete action, must consider that it, unlike speculative reason, which deduces truths without exception in its particular conclusions, "deals with contingent realities, about which human actions are concerned. Therefore, although there is some necessity in the

15 International Theological Commission: *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*, 2009; hereafter: ISUE.

general principles, the more we descend to particular matters, the more we encounter indeterminacy." (ISUE 53)[16]

For this reason, the reception of the principle of pastorality requires that we rediscover the concept of the *sensus fidei* and the concept of experience. EG rehabilitates these concepts, which are also studied in depth in the 2014 document of the International Theological Commission.[17]

1.3. Synodality and Practices

The Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (5-19 October 2014), entitled "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization", was preceded by a Preparatory Document. This document concluded with a questionnaire addressed to local churches in order to consult them before the synodal debate. From the data and suggestions received, a difficult issue emerged, namely, that a number of the Christian faithful do not fully accept church teaching on marriage and the family (*Intrumentum laboris* 2014, 13). During the second assembly of the Synod on the Family (2015), on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis mentioned the *sensus fidei* of God's own people, stating that it "prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church".[18] In that same address Francis said that it was precisely this conviction that moved his desire for the people of God to be consulted before synodal assemblies, even though such consultation does not exhaust the listening to the *sensus fidei*.

This attention to the *sensus fidei fidelium* has characterized all synodal processes in the church during the Francis papacy, but in order for it to bear fruit, it is necessary to recognize the relevance of the practices that shape everyday life, overcoming the dichotomy between theory and practice. To begin to outline a suitable approach, crucial for the principle of pastorality, it is useful to keep in mind Alasdair MacIntyre's description of the notion of "practice" in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre, building on Wittgenstein but incorporating an Aristotelian understanding, uses this notion to signify "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions

16 Here ISUE quotes Thomas Aquinas: *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 94 a. 4. *Amoris laetitia* has the same citation in no. 304.

17 International Theological Commission: *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 2014.

18 Francis: "Address at Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops", 17 October 2015; available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended".[19] I believe it useful for the current discussion to link MacIntyre's characterization of a single "practice" to an overarching conception of practices (by placing it within a larger "field of practices"). Theodore Schatzki, reflecting contemporary trends of thought, posits that

> the field of practices is the total nexus of interconnected human practices. The "practice approach" can thus be demarcated as all analyses that (1) develop an account of practices, either the field of practices or some subdomain thereof (e.g., science), or (2) treat the field of practices as the place to study the nature and transformation of their subject matter. Note that this demarcation makes the notion of a field of practice the linchpin of the practice approach. A central core, moreover, of practice theorists conceives of practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.[20]

This requires recognizing, even in church synodality, the theoretical value expressed by practices, through appropriate tools for listening and facilitation.

2. The Principle of Authority

The principle of pastorality focuses on the persons to whom the gospel is addressed. The call for responsibility, in order to recognize how what is proclaimed is already at work in them, has many implications for those who have a teaching role in the church. For that reason, the present section shows how the principle of pastorality needs to be understood in relation to the exercise of authority and its recognition.

To promote "the subjectivity of the other, along with an attitude of hospitality and responsibility toward the interlocutor", as Study Group 9 said in its *Interim Report*, "ministry and authority must also be situated, fulfilling their role precisely insofar as they listen to and promote the Holy Spirit's activity within the People of God and individuals". The report suggests that authority in the church is authentically exercised not through the control of consciences but rather pedagogically, through their formation and by accompanying their proper growth. This also needs a choice of open language, "capable of unfolding inspiring horizons, rather than applying normative rigor".[21]

19 Alisdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame University Press, 1984, 187.

20 Theodore R. Schatzki: "Introduction: Practice Theory", in: Theodore R. Schatzki/Karin Knorr Cetina/Elke von Savigny (eds.): *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Routledge, 2005, 12.

21 See Antonio Autiero: "*Amoris laetitia* tra teologia pastorale e teologia morale", in: Antonio Autiero (ed.): *Per una nuova cultura pastorale: Il contributo di Amoris laetitia*, San Paolo, 2019, 36.

The original semantic reference of the term "authority" can help us shed some light on its more authentic meaning. The term in English comes through French from the Latin *auctoritas*, derived from root *augēre*, which means "to generate, to increase, to offer the opportunity to grow, or to create"; the latter meaning reminds us of the word "author", which has the same root. Linguists posit that the Indo-European root *aug* has two meanings; on the one hand, it refers to the notion of founding, promoting, or giving meaning to something which is not autonomous or self-sufficient; on the other hand, it also indicates the ability to recognize the authenticity of that person who, instead of simply giving orders (*potestas*), knows how to establish a connection between action and the sphere of the sacred.[22] This second sense thus indicates a process, and in this process, as Richard Sennett rightly observes, authority is more of an *interpretative procedure* than a "thing". This understanding of authority implies a tension which can be frustrating, yet necessary, if we are to "keep out [false] freedom [offered by] those masters of illusion who promise us that history is over, and that the search can come to an end".[23]

In the same line of thought, James S. Coleman in *Foundations of Social Theory* defines authority as the social relationship that arises when a person has the right to control their own actions and transfers that right to others. His concept of authority also includes the two dimensions that characterize this relationship. On the one hand, it is something that someone (a person, group, or institution) exercises over someone else; on the other hand, it is something that the person over whom it is exercised recognizes as legitimate. In order for a superior to exercise authority, it must be conferred on them by the subjects of such authority. Only when the superior possesses this right can we speak of authority.[24] The principle of authority is this attribution of authority, necessary to that particular relation, which is different from "authoritarianism".

A relationship of authority has two characteristics: *vertical asymmetry* (because the relationship is not between equals) and *reciprocity* (because those who are subject to authority do not passively suffer it but invest those who exercise it with the right to do so).[25] This principle of authority must be taken into account in moral teaching, because the latter has a full effect only when it is understood and realized through personal conscience. Otherwise, the extrinsic-authoritarian (and non-authoritative) nature of the relationship makes the norms appear arbitrary or tyrannical to the conscience and ever harder to accept, leading to an internal conflict within the consciences of the subjects.

22 See Paola B. Hezel: "Autorità", in: *Enciclopedia di bioetica e scienza giuridica*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2009, 681-682.

23 Richard Sennett: *Authority*, Knopf, 1980, 20.

24 See James S. Coleman: *Foundations of Social Theory*, Belknap, 1990, 66-67.

25 See Alessandro Cavalli: "Principio di autorità", in: *XXI Secolo: Norme e idee*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 2009, 571.

2.1. Authority and Person

As Romano Guardini warned, authority needs to have and to promote an authentic concept of personhood, because, in some cases, persons are reduced to mere individuals, or simple numbers within a systemic calculus. This happens when the character of each individual is no longer decisive in the political (or social) system, but rather the numerical weight of a multitude of persons, who might furthermore be animated by resentment against authority and hierarchical order, is what matters. This leads to a totalitarian state, which is no longer based on the idea of a group made up of individuals, each of whom is free, but on that of a mass, in the worst sense of the term, of human material.[26]

The deeply Christian category of person, which goes beyond the concept of the individual, was described in detail by *Gaudium et spes* in its first part. Persons are created in the image of God (GS 12), and sin is a diminution of themselves in the human conflict between the call to grandeur and the depths of misery (GS 13). We are constituted as a unity of body and soul (GS 14), intelligence, truth, wisdom (which is not opposed to faith but is a participation in the light of God's mind, GS 15), and moral conscience (which unites Christians with the rest of humanity in the search for the law "which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor", GS 16). Freedom is the highest sign in the human person of the divine image and a requirement for choosing the good (GS 17).

From the point of view of moral theology, this personalism means an appreciation of the human being in her or his uniqueness as a free and responsible moral subject. As Goertz and Witting observe, human dignity therefore lies in the ability to shape one's own life, an ability that comes from one's inner drive.[27]

2.2. Authority and Conscience

Sometimes there are conflicts between the good expressed generically as an overarching ideal, applicable relative to the particular value being considered in isolation (as is typical of normative discussions presented in particular documents or sections of ecclesial teaching), and the moral good discerned and mandated by the personal conscience in the here-and-now, after weighing all relevant ideals and values and placing them within the historical reality of the moral agent responsible for the act being decided. Richard Gula proposes a Pastoral Moral

26 Romano Guardini: *Etica: Lezioni all'Università di Monaco (1950-1962)*, Morcelliana, 2001, 226-227.

27 Stephan Goertz/Caroline Witting: "Un punto di svolta per la teologia morale? Contesto, ricezione ed ermeneutica di *Amoris laetitia*", in: Stephan Goertz/Caroline Witting (eds.): *Amoris laetitia: Un punto di svolta per la teologia morale?*, San Paolo, 2017, 20. The alternative to this concept of person, continue Goertz and Witting, is the Catholic natural law thinking of Neo-Scholasticism.

Guidance, an approach to help people and those who guide them in these situations. Gula observes that most persons misunderstand the appeal to conscience as individual freedom against authority, as if conscience were a liberation from authority. In reality, "although no external authority can ever replace conscience, conscience cannot be properly formed without the help of authority".[28] Moral conscience, unlike the superego which measures guilt only in relation to the possible reaction of authority, promotes moral action as a response to an invitation to love rather than a command. In this interpretative framework, action is directed towards others rather than oneself, seeking new answers to what one believes in rather than repeating the same things, guided by values rather than mere submission to authority, attentive to context and process rather than just individual acts, and directed primarily towards the future rather than the past. It sees the past as a reality that will be redeemed by building the future, rather than waiting for punishment, in a proactive process capable of overcoming mistakes in a process of growth.[29] Therefore, conscience is "the only sure guide for action by a free and knowing person",[30] a concrete judgement about what to do in a given situation, based on personal perception and mastery of values. It is a decision that does not simply concern this or that choice, but this or that type of person one wants to become through his or her choice.[31]

The formation of conscience is defined by Gula as "a lifelong task and an ongoing process of conversion".[32] In the moral education of adults, imparted in the light of Scripture and the teaching of the church, formation does not mean primarily providing answers to moral problems but rather encouraging the process that leads to moral decision making.[33] Gula warns, in fact, that

> if a person spends a lifetime doing what he or she is told to do by someone in authority simply because the authority says so or because that is the kind of behavior expected by the group, then that person never really makes moral decisions that are his or her own. For moral maturity one must be one's own person. It is not enough merely to do what one has been told simply because an authority commands it. The morally mature person must be able to perceive, choose, and identify oneself with what one does. In short, we build stronger character and give our lives meaning by committing our freedom, not to abdicating it to someone in authority.[34]

28 Richard M. Gula: *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality*, Paulist, 1989, 161. Note that, when extrinsic authority becomes authoritarian, conscience is of course the ultimate mediation of moral authority, but an intrinsic one.

29 See Richard M. Gula: *Moral Discernment*, Paulist, 1997, 15.

30 Richard M. Gula: "Conscience to Examine", in: Richard M. Gula: *To Walk Together Again: The Sacrament of Reconciliation*, Paulist, 1984, 145.

31 See R.M. Gula: *Reason Informed by Faith*, 133.

32 R.M. Gula: *Moral Discernment*, 21.

33 See R.M. Gula: "Conscience to Examine", 154.

34 R.M. Gula: *Moral Discernment*, 27.

In light of this, we can better understand the weight of the following claim in *Amoris laetitia*: "we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (AL 37).[35] These words invite those who exercise authority in the church to allow the consciences of the faithful to respond to the gospel, even in complex situations. In this process, Gula emphasizes that "the tension between conscience and authority will always be with us" and the continuous emergence of new tensions is unavoidable.[36] Such tension is nonetheless necessary: the principle of authority presupposes an obedience "in conscience" and hence must be exercised with full freedom.

3. Pastoral Care as a Theological Locus

The principle of pastorality and the principle of authority challenge the image of pastoral care as a logistical organization of ecclesial services, or an ongoing effort to adapt immutable norms catechetically and sacramentally to the less-than-ideal circumstances of the lives of the faithful. The two principles make pastoral relationships a key locus wherein moral theology can continue to develop. Theology, if it does not allow itself to be touched by God (including through the people we encounter), or when it is reduced to an abstract exercise of reason, becomes "a desk-bound theology" (EG 33), and theological ethics, in particular, "a cold bureaucratic morality" (AL 312). Pastoral care is the place where moral teaching has developed throughout the history of the church, for example in relation to the sacrament of penance.[37] Moral norms can continue to be updated this way, especially in new issues or where the teaching seems unable to adequately challenge and illuminate consciences.

To unblock this process, in recent years, the Magisterium of the church has invited Catholics to embrace the complexity of reality, engaging moral consciences and pointing to the practice of discernment. This entails that we should consider that what is morally right goes beyond mere normative understanding, but also that we should be mindful that the process of discernment as practiced by individuals cannot replace scholarly and ecclesial ethical reflection, and therefore reference to norms and moral teaching. Through conscience and discernment in the practices of life, in the light of the gospel, human beings become, in a certain sense, co-authors with the theologians and the pastors in the formulation of doctrine, and not merely its recipients or circumstantial appliers.

35 For *Amoris laetitia* on forming consciences, see Connor Kelly: "The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*", in: *Theological Studies* 77/4 (2016), 922-948; https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0040563916666824.

36 See R.M. Gula: "Conscience to Examine", 178.

37 See John Mahoney: *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Clarendon, 1987.

Let us note, in conclusion, that the Synod on Synodality's final document[38] places precisely such an emphasis on the *practical sphere*, which, to be sure, needs to be held in close connection with the reflective moment. According to Study Group 9, this framework requires the mutual interaction between life (of the believer) and doctrine, with corresponding implications for the relationship between the anthropological and ethical dimensions.

For those who serve in the church with theological duties, this leads to a consistent approach not only to the ministry of confession or personal accompaniment but also to teaching. The chance to meet people whose lives are enlightened by their faith and the study of theology, especially in contexts with strong lay participation, provides an opportunity for ecclesial teaching to be rethought, transforming the traditional, one-way model of knowledge transmission. Moral theology professors, especially in the areas of sexuality and the family, feel that they are dealing with a theological learning process that is subject to significant social and cultural changes, one which many people are unable to fully understand and accept. Their teaching relationship with students, when dealing with such topics, can be based on reciprocity, respecting the necessary difference in roles but activating as much as possible chances for interaction, listening, and enabling a shared construction of knowledge.

Summary

The Principle of Pastorality and the Principle of Authority: Pastoral Care as a Theological Locus

The principle of pastorality, highlighted by Christoph Theobald in his studies on the Second Vatican Council and its reception, states that the proclamation of the gospel can only take place by actively involving its recipients, because it is already operating within them. This principle, which has received renewed impetus since *Evangelii gaudium*, confers the dignity of a theological locus on pastoral relationships, with a broader scope than mere application or organization. To be properly articulated, the principle of pastorality must be placed in relationship with the principle of authority, which looks at how the free and legitimate recognition of authority takes place by those to whom it is addressed. Only if this happens, in fact, can people develop authentically moral and responsible behavior. The article refers to Richard Gula's notion of Pastoral Moral Guidance when exploring this connection between pastorality and authority, particularly regarding the issue of conscience. It also engages *Amoris laetitia*, which takes the same approach, and provides tools that allow us to recognize the complexity of reality, while engaging moral consciences and pointing to the practice of discernment. The article reconstructs this path, which was also pointed out recently by Study Group 9 of the Synod on Synodality in its document *Theological Criteria and Synodal Methodologies for Shared Discernment of Emerging Doctrinal, Pastoral, and Ethical Issues*. Placing an emphasis on the practical sphere, which must be held in close connection with the reflective moment, moral teaching can continue to develop, especially concerning issues where it is formulated in a way that does not adequately guide the consciences of our contemporaries.

38 Synod on Synodality: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, 26 October 2024.

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